

Children in Graphic Novels: Intermedial Encounters and Mnemonic Layers

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This article proposes a new concept for considering intermediality in comics: media memories. Inspired by cultural historian Aby Warburg's use of the montage for his incomplete *Mnemosyne Atlas* and philosopher John Sutton's concept of porous memories, I use the concept of media memories to better understand how media remember other media and how certain images and tropes persist, over time and across media (M. Ahmed 3). Media memories are tropes, styles and images that travel from medium to medium, adapting to fit each new habitat. They are loaded images and techniques that persist in varying forms across media. In this article, I consider the media memories channeled through children and childhood "geographies." "Geographies of childhood include social imaginaries inhabited by both children and others," writes developmental psychologist Erica Burman (1). Childhood geographies, like Peter Hollindale's concept of childness, are useful in that they account for adult roles in creating, remembering and reforming ideas of children and childhood: child and adult perspectives coalesce, with the former often dominating the latter in most cultural productions, the vast majority of which is produced by adults¹. The graphic novels discussed here are no exception.

In this article, I turn to contemporary graphic novels in French and in English, focusing in particular on glimpses of childhood and the presence of children in Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* [*Pretending is Lying*], the fourth volume of Manu Larcenet's *Combat ordinaire* [*Ordinary Victories*], Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen's *It's a Bird...* and, very briefly (in order to deepen the connection between North American childhood memories and superhero comics) Jeff Lemire's *Essex County*. Published between the 1990s and 2010s, these works are situated in the move towards comics for an adult audience that do not shy away from experimentation. Belonging to a privileged state of (relative) legitimation, these comics are pseudo-autobiographical. They are imbued with the specific childhood geographies of children's image-making practices and children reading comics (the latter with a focus on the North American context). These geographies, which are intermedial in their essence, are fleshed and activated by media memories.

In focusing on media memories, I am interested in both the interaction between media and memories evoked during those interactions; I would go so far as to suggest

both are closely interlinked, especially in the case of the figure and idea of the child. Memories, in turn, are inevitably tied to affect: they both channel and evoke affects. Child figures and other elements related to childhood (elements of children's culture, manifestations of childishness) are especially laden with affects, triggering (for adult readers) nostalgia but often also wistful joy. Before turning to the close readings, I will draw connections between Warburg's and Sutton's concepts of memory to highlight their relevance for considering comics history and the workings of comics.

Porous Memories, the Mnemosyne Atlas and Comics Form

In *Wide Awake in Slumberland*, Katherine Roeder masterfully shows how Winsor McCay was influenced by at least three forms of modern popular culture: dime museums which combined circus entertainment with fair attractions; films; and advertisements. All of these forms are remediated into the comic strip and filtered through the different kinds of memories captured by comics: we encounter dream worlds but also action-packed sequences, slapstick comedy and other manifestations of modern entertainment. These elements co-exist with, or are sometimes surpassed by, more existential concerns in the comics examined here, especially of troubled familial and collective memories (*Faire semblant c'est mentir*, *Combat ordinaire*) and death (*It's a Bird...*, *Essex County*). In other words, these graphic novels interweave clashing media memories, such as those of the modern entertainment industry and historiography, as well as literary autobiography.

Such a vast scope of media memories is comparable to Aby Warburg's project to map memories across cultural production. The evolutionary biologist Richard Semon's concept of the "Engramm" had a strong influence on Aby Warburg's cultural memory work: engrams are the imprints resulting from powerful shocks. They capture Warburg's interest in the transposition of intense emotional experiences, initially "stored as 'mnemonic energy,'" engraved in collective consciousness and later channeled into art (Assmann 198, 358). According to art historian Matthew Rampley, Warburg sought "to explore the specifically *visual* forms of the engram," which he called dynamograms (104). The *Mnemosyne Atlas* turned into a broad cultural and historical project of tracing visual memories and their transformations across diverse forms of cultural production, from popular, everyday images to those ranked amongst the higher arts.

The concept of an organic transfer of memories across people, generations and objects remains influential and resurfaces in philosopher John Sutton's concept of "porous memories." Even though porous memories, which imply that memories leave physical traces on people and travel through objects, have not been validated by neurobiological research, they are related to concepts used in literary and cultural studies for capturing, for instance, the transfer and mutation of tropes. For Sutton, porous memories capture experience that is essentially bodily and sensory, based on allusions rather than logical connections.

Comics can reveal – and revel in – connections in a way that is comparable to Sutton’s “porous memories”: the exograms or “objects which embody memories and which combine in many different ways with the brain’s distributed, context-ridden ‘engrams’” (Sutton 130). If comics are likened to Sutton’s imaginary South Sea sponges from the 1630s that replayed messages recorded earlier when squeezed, we can hear the reverberations of more than a century-long practice of capturing fantasies interacting with familiar realities that is closely linked to the techniques of popular entertainment, especially illustrated magazines and moving pictures, which developed at the same time as the modern comic strip.

Georges Didi-Huberman sees the montage practice of the incomplete *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927-1929) as an expression of the chaos and ruptures of its time as well as its maker: Warburg began the Atlas three years after his breakdown (a result of the First World War) and two years before his death. There is, then, a strong emotional element in Warburg’s concept of cultural memory. Moreover, there is an underlying assumption of cyclical and recurrence in cultural memory, which assures the continuation of collective memory while also being indicative of traumatic memory (Roth 133). The universal trauma of growing up, which implies giving up childhood and complying with adult constraints is a central tension anchored in the practice of reading, making, and, ultimately, judging comics (cf. Pizzino, *Arresting Comics* and “Comics” and Gordon for insights on how critique and graphic novels themselves have internalized the notion of comics’ “growing up.” I turn to these concerns further below).

The montage or collage work of comics, which is to a certain extent a given in every comic, evokes the ruptures and fragments associated with the modern age (and traumatic memories). Hillary Chute reads the collage work of Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons* as “a literal re-collection, visuali[...zing] a process of recollection and re-narrativization that well figures the assimilation of traumatizing experience” (292, my modification in parentheses). But, as Alan Gibbs has shown, fragmentation and collage are not necessarily an expression of traumatizing experience but are more about modernity itself. What Barry calls “bumpiness,” or the materiality of the collage is not only an expression of “trouble” – a recurrent theme in Barry’s work which made it difficult to sell in the late 1970s (Chute 282) – but more a means of expression, since most of Barry’s books on comics making, such as *Syllabus* and *What It Is*, retain the technique but not the trauma. This in turn can be tied to the “ordinariness” observed by Chute: in combining “the amusing with the appalling, insisting on both as the lived reality of girlhood,” Barry, “the author-subject makes political, collective claims by testifying to the very ordinariness of her trauma” (289).

The relatability of such ordinariness, which contains the seeds of empathic connections with readers, precedes (and paves the way) for its political implications. The impact and affects of ordinariness are activated by another kind of publication that plays a key – albeit often overlooked – role in comics history: fanzines, which regularly use

collages and maintain a degree of directness or unconventionality of tone and roughness of production that reappear in some comics autobiographies and convey a sheen of authenticity. Brian Cremins brings out another aspect of fanzines, which was mentioned by none other than Frederic Wertham. Wertham “tells the story of ‘a little goblin’ that swaps ‘all the solemn church bells’ in Rotterdam ‘with tinkling sleigh bells’”: the goblin is the mischievous outsider, the one who effects small but joyful changes in consciousness. If fanzines, often filled with stories of favorite childhood characters and comic books, are these “tinkling sleigh bells,” then their creators are the “little goblins” who produce the vital, exuberant tinkling (133). Here, Wertham suggests that the revolutionary potential of these amateur magazines lies in their sense of childlike mischief and entertainment. This also exemplifies one of those slippery, hard to grasp instances when child and childhood remain stuck (in the sense of Sara Ahmed’s concept of stickiness, cf. S. Ahmed 89-92) to comics and even determine their intermedial connections to memories of childhood readings and childlike modes of visualization, for instance.

The ways in which comics instrumentalize the memories concretized through other media and memories of other media themselves reveal media awareness while affirming the necessary role played by the imagination in construing information, be it personal or collective, stemming from the here and now or from an only vicariously experienced past. If “cinematic memory was a world of affronted senses and collapsed time” (Matsuda 174), comics memory is a collage of visual experiences reflecting the confluence of the personal and the collective, the perceived and the imaginary.

Thierry Smolderen’s concept of “polygraphy,” through its emphasis on the allusions ingrained in the often conflicting drawing techniques feeding into comics (9), can be read as a materialization of Sutton’s porous memories, which in turn have strong connections with Warburg’s interest in the power and transfer of images. In a related vein, Gert Meesters has shown how the multiple styles in Dominique Goblet’s *Faire semblant c’est mentir* and Olivier Schrauwen’s *Mon fiston* evoke diverse references to the world of comics as well as the fine arts. Meesters turns to two linguistic concepts, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theorization of associative connections between words to the more contemporary notion of “conceptual blending spaces” suggested by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, which are activated through references. Given the dependence on a reader for the activation of such references and the associative manner through which references are triggered and the amorphous forms they ultimately acquire, it is perhaps more useful to talk about *memories* in order to capture the blurry, fuzzy manner in which references and inclinations travel and mutate.

Media Memories Around Children and Comics

In the editorial for the “Comics and Childhood” special issue of *ImageText*, Charles Hatfield paraphrases essayist Adam Gopnik’s observation that “caricature [...] is a modern form associated as much with the learned and politically factious as it is with the ingenuous doodling of children.” While Gopnik was writing about Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Hatfield goes on to point out the close connections between children and comics, whereby “many of the best – the most stimulating, most troubling, most psychologically questing, ideologically fraught, and artistically vital – comics for adults have as their subject matter *childhood* and its possibilities: its potential for tenderness, awe, terror, and social critique.”

Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray and Zack Whalen note that the exaggerations in *Little Nemo* reflect a child’s view of the world (3). As mentioned by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in the foreword to the same volume, exaggeration is also a recurrent characteristic of comics (xii). Comics, therefore, can be said to embody a playful imagination, which is childish in its liberties. This is comparable to the easy, taken-for-granted transitions between reality and fantasy, a recurrent feature of children’s literature (Nodelman). Writing about the cartoonish style and its affective hold on readers in Alison Bechdel’s work, Vera Camden draws connections with medieval art and its disregard for academic perspective and forms. According to Camden, “it is perhaps more accurate to observe that comics are childlike in that even when their content is adult and profoundly disturbing, their images remain transfixing, even regressive in their magnetism, and drawn to the depiction of the child’s perspective and childhood memory” (95). I agree with Camden about the underlying impact of childhood memory in graphic novels with autobiographical and nostalgic inclinations (cf. Baetens and Frey) but not comics at large. While Camden does not unpack the childish element of such drawing – perhaps because it risks only stating the obvious? – her discussion of the affective hold of seemingly unschooled drawing is pertinent and at least partially indebted to the Romantic associations stuck to childhood. In a similar vein, Daniel Worden considers both children and melancholy to be an inevitable part of comics. He, too, makes this claim with reference to graphic novels rather than mainstream comics.

Writing about Chris Ware’s edited issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* (no. 13), Worden suggests a certain melancholy is endemic to comics as is the presence of children. He adds that “[t]he hallmark of this ‘language’ [of comics] is a direct access to emotion” (896, my insertion in parentheses). As in Camden’s article, the role of children and childishness in facilitating and even forming such emotionality calls for further unpacking. Many of the emotions in the graphic novels discussed here are generated from media memories of childhood: from children, child versions of protagonists, childish protagonists to objects of childhood and, of course, childish drawing styles. Correspondingly comics artists’ autobiographical accounts and

remembrances often go back to their love, as children, for stories and drawing and usually comics: in *L'Ascension du Haut Mal [Epileptic]* David B.'s younger self, Pierre-François is highly imaginative, loves stories and drawing. The children we encounter in the graphic novels discussed here are no different in their eagerness to draw and even to make and read comics. Such children combine the media memories of the arts and comics, as well as ideals of imaginative and creative childhoods. Perhaps most crucial in the light of graphic novels and comics legitimization is the bridge drawn between the early twentieth century avant-garde movements' acceptance of children's art and childlike drawing styles and the graphic novel's sometimes shy references to such drawings.

Unsurprisingly, the first question in Lynda Barry's *What It Is* is about the image and it opens with her childhood memories (5-12). Barry returns to her childhood experiences and memories repeatedly throughout the text (25-28, 37-40, 51-54, 63-66, 89-92). While these earlier references are usually about her use of imagination to counter stark, everyday realities, we later see Barry drawing and making collages often in the face of adult adversity (75-80). After a hiatus of a few years, Barry starts drawing again, this time concentrating on copying (100-105), copying comics (105) but also old children's books (111), discovering underground comics and eventually enrolling in a painting course; we follow Lynda growing up through her encounters with and processing of different kinds of image-making (114-122). Finally, in the narrative within a narrative "Two Questions" (123-135), we see how Barry's childhood and adolescent anxieties haunt her adult self: it is here that the younger and older personas of Barry become inextricable. As foreshadowed by Barry's art, however, the two were always interconnected since Barry does not shy away from "childish" images. On the contrary, she activates them to make her points about comics creation and visual storytelling in general: sometimes adult standards, ways of judging and looking have to be shunned in order to create.

The two questions – "Is this good? Does this suck?" (123) – are intended to weed out "bad drawings" from the "good" ones, Lynda's child self explains (128). This imposition of adult standards contributes to the potential stigma of comics drawing, comics reading, and comics themselves (especially, and even today, those that strive to entertain through tried and tested formulas and shun literary and artistic aspirations). Barry asks another question that is similar to the title of Dominique Goblet's book discussed below: "What is the difference between lying and pretending?" (72). While Barry affirms that "[t]here is no lie in pretending," the question captures the anxieties of potential artists as well as media like comics that are not recognized as art. Of the books we see Barry reading, the inclusion of Marion Milner's *On Not Being Able to Paint* is particularly significant because of its pioneering role in art therapy and its insistence on encouraging adults to channel their feelings through free drawing (133). Such "free" drawing and art therapy are at the heart of Barry's work. She frequently evokes children's ability to draw without restraint. This scruple-free image-making is seen as a form of play: "At the center of everything we call 'the arts' and children call 'play' is something which

seems very alive [...] the way memory is alive” (14). This “something” is the image for Barry.

The importance of retaining some childish qualities into adulthood is reinforced by the recurrent presence of playing, appearing in the beginning but also at the very end of *What It Is* (208). This playing is closely tied to role playing and exercising the imagination. Correspondingly, much of the latter half of *What It Is* takes the form of an “activity book” (137-213). The activity book combines DIY aesthetics with a familiar childhood practice and educational tool with which adults are rarely confronted.

If Barry’s child self appears only intermittently, her collages almost always contain some references to the world of childhood. This fits Barry’s regular evocation of children’s art-making to understand how images and, eventually, comics images can work. Collages themselves can be seen as counter-artistic and even childish practices. To bolster the latter impression, Barry incorporates images that evoke childhood such as cartoon figures and animal drawings. The simple text complements the “childish” element. That the pages are drawn on yellow notebook pages (like many of Barry’s works) further strengthens the connection to childhood and children’s practices.

In *What It Is*, the young Lynda starts as an imaginative child and eventually turns into a comics maker. This trajectory is similar to the one found in David B’s *Eplipetic* and Jean-Christophe Menu’s *Krollebüches*. In Menu’s memoir, subtitled “Souvenirs même pas en bande dessinée” [Memories not even in comics], we encounter a similar kind of child as in Barry’s *What it is*: a child comics reader, nascent comics fan who also starts drawing and eventually making his own comics – a passion which, in rejection of acceptable grown up behavior, the artist sticks to in his adult life. Mark McKinney discusses a similar episode in Farid Boudjellal’s *Petit Polio*, where the child protagonist is shown reading and eventually entering a comic in an effort to better understand his identity in the real world (197-198).

Yasco Horsman’s concluding claim about “maintaining a relation to an embarrassing infantile comic enjoyment may be the source of the comics’ ‘exuberant’ creative energy, a force that only lives on in its refusal to grow up” is only part of the complex attachment to comics (333). As suggested by the graphic novels discussed here, this attachment is embodied by the child but also refracted by it through the media memories it interweaves.

The role of the child in graphic novels is imbued with personal and collective media memories of, and around, childhood. Decades before the counter cultural movement, the avant-garde had embraced childish forms of drawing and even bricolage, dragging it from the realms of outsider art to the mainstream of fine arts (Kunzle 85). In illustration, this incorporation of childish drawing styles goes even further, to Cham and even Hogarth and later Töpffer (Kunzle 85; Smolderen 8, 25). Media memories channeled through childlike drawing styles and other indicators of children’s worlds and childishness, such as toys, play, or childish modes of narration encapsulate, on one hand,

affects such as nostalgia and, on the other hand, a curious legitimizing impulse that conjures the media memories of both modern art and the DIY, untutored culture of fanzines, or *édition sauvage* [wild publishing] that resists institutionalized and established publishing (for the application of Jacques Dubois' concept of *littérature sauvage* to fanzines see Crucifix and Moura). The confluence of (goblinesque) "wildness" and childish drawing – which is not too far from the "primitivity" that was once the goal of the modernist avant-garde – structures crucial moments in Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir*.

Faire semblant c'est mentir : *Childishness and the Drawn Line*

Begun in 1995, Dominique Goblet's pseudo-autobiographical graphic novel famously took twelve years to complete. In his preface, Menu sees time as the "raw material" of this book. Given the centrality of time, the presence of child figures is particularly loaded since child characters are in many ways figurations of temporality: they are inevitably caught up in the process of "growing up," physically but also socially. Unsurprisingly, Dominique's daughter, Nikita, is the character the reader encounters the most when the first chapter opens. The last panel on this page even offers a partially cut off, full frontal view of the smiling girl, drawn as if by a child.

Jan Baetens describes the first of the many destabilizing elements in Goblet's art as stemming from the blending of adult and childish styles "to the extent of becoming indistinguishable and generating a friction between past and present within the images" [« au point de devenir indissociables et de provoquer une friction entre passé et présent au cœur même des images »] ("Goblet" 173). Goblet also incorporates a collage aesthetic since her style is often a collage of different techniques.

Pretending is Lying is preceded by a prologue that recounts what we realize later are Dominique's – pet-named Nikske or "little nothing" – memories. Drawn with smudged red pen, which makes the drawing seem old, almost neglected, the prologue recalls how Dominique fell and tore her leggings on her way to school. It captures a tender moment between the mother and the daughter that has a bittersweet edge since Dominique's mother addresses the source of the child's chagrin – her torn leggings – by magically making them disappear, when in reality she reverses the leggings so that the holes are at the back and not in the front. Nikske however believes her mother can work magic. This very personal (fictional or non-fictional) moment foreshadows the issue of pretending as equivalent to lying, an indispensable component of the media memories of image-making, as suggested above. The episode also evokes another emotion channeled through child figures in the comics discussed here, which constitutes the media memories of childhood: emotional attachment, more specifically, parent-child love. Each square panel is cut out and pasted, evoking the collage and, ironically, the practice of making disparate elements connect. This in itself figures memory work.

Children and childhood memories are, in many ways, central to the story since Dominique's memories of her own unhappy childhood and tensions with her father, Jean-Pierre, are a recurrent theme. We encounter Nikske again in the third chapter as Dominique recalls how disconnected Jean-Pierre was from his wife and daughter: while Dominique and her mother fall out and make up, the father only drinks and raves about the 1973 Grand Prix in Zandvoort where Roger Williamson had a fatal accident. At the beginning of the mother-daughter quarrel, Dominique's mother tries to occupy her fidgety daughter by encouraging her to draw and then to paint. The act that leads to her being briefly locked up in the attic are the watercolor stains Dominique leaves on the table and the freshly ironed laundry. This is an avant-gardist rebellion comparable to the rebelliousness of graffiti. It is also a comicsy stain on acceptable, comfortably categorized academic drawing. The recollection ends with the mother and daughter playing a "popular" game titled "Don't worry!" (« Ne t'en fais pas! ») – this game serves as the transition into the narrative's present, where Jean-Pierre's partner, Cécile has unpredictable and hysterical reactions that lead to an abrupt, dramatic break in the dinner with the grown-up Dominique and her daughter. In what can be read as a typical twist for the comic, the joyful, collective (familial and communal) act of boardgame playing acquires a painful tinge.

Adults and children are, significantly, not very different in *Pretending is Lying*. Jean-Pierre is a megalomaniac who stretches the truth and loves to tell stories with himself as the hero. His partner Cécile clings to her past grandeur, or illusion thereof, and has an unpredictably volatile temperament. Cécile's hysteria is already present in the early pages of the graphic novel. Her reaction to Nikita's drawing of her friend leads to two of the most fascinating pages in the graphic novel and also gives its title: "Pretending is lying!" Cécile shouts out when Nikita says that her friend does not have long hair, unlike the picture she drew of her. "What is it then?" Cécile insists, her stick figure towering over a tiny, flabbergasted Nikita. "Pretending is LYING, it's LYING. PRETENDING is lying!" (Fig. 1). Cécile accuses Nikita of lying several times even though, for the child, the drawing was only pretend or play. The contrast of opinions and Cécile's demagogic reaction suggest that this is not only a dramatic moment in the comic. The drawing style conjures up media memories of childhood drawing and its recuperation by the fine arts. All this is framed in a system of comics that is stretched to its limits: during Cécile's tirade, words no longer remain confined to word balloons but spill all over the panel; figures lose all sense of proportion and the space is deliberately confused as Nikita becomes interchangeable with her imaginary friend's drawing.

The childish drawing expresses the chaos of the situation and gives form to the childish, unpredictable adults. Baetens considers such blurring of lines between adult and child and similar absolute categories as characteristic of Goblet's work ("Goblet" 176). Such deliberate garbling of categories re-evokes the issues of both temporality and the relationships between time and space and writing and drawing (*ibid.*). Cécile's equating

of unrealistic art with “false” art or non-art evokes the legitimization issues of comics as a popular medium for the masses and not for those who set and apply the standards of art.



Fig. 1. Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir*: Cécile explodes and accuses Nikita of lying.
 ©Dominique Goblet & L'Association, 2007. Reprinted by kind permission of the author and publisher.

Combat ordinaire: Planter des clous: *Poetry and the Stuff of Childhood*

The next graphic novel I turn to also has a bone or two to pick with the notion of art, which is again connected, loosely but significantly, to the child, childhood and childish drawing. Manu Larcenet's four-volume *Combat ordinaire* juxtaposes personal issues, the "extreme nervousness" of the protagonist, Marco, a photographer (whose name and appearance bear a close resemblance to Manu) and collective memory (particularly that of the Algerian War), with a focus on the daily business of living, telling and remembering. This ordinariness is reinforced by the comic's obsession with everyday moments and objects. In *Combat ordinaire*, which is characterized by its playful cartoony style and often cheerful pastel colors, the moments of self-insight are expressed through black and white panels maintaining an allusive relationship between words and images, which in turn echo psychoanalytical methods of associative thinking (18).

While the third volume, *Ce qui est précieux* [*That Which Is Precious*] traces the stages of Marco's grief after his father's death, the fourth volume, *Planter des clous* [literally: Nailing] takes on a different tone with the birth of Marco's daughter, Maude. This volume taps into the media memories surrounding the concept of childhood and, inevitably, the relationship between children and comics; the most of prominent of these elements are the exaggerated emotions, which are already evident in the young child's tantrums (10), the playfulness, spontaneity and brashness associated with children's drawings as well as their simplicity and directness. In this final album, the sequences of reflection, which usually unfold across panels of still lifes drawn in a realistic style, show Maude's stuffed animals (9, 24). The first sequence is about the love and fascination Marco feels for his daughter. Each panel shows a different stuffed animal from a different perspective, as Marco admiringly adds how his child has taught him about re-considering and questioning everything from different angles. The child, as well as the child's point of view, is partially equated with the smiling stuffed animals, which provide unconditional comfort and companionship to their young owners, just like Marco's daughter does for him. In the second sequence however, the stuffed animals accompany a reflection on how Maude makes him see the world in a different way and helps him accept that there is nothing logical about the world (9). Such insights build on connections between the child, toy, play and the consequent disruption of adult logic.

During the kindergartners' Picasso exhibition (16), Marco is the only one who seems interested in the children's drawings (including but not limited to Maude's) while the other parents chat and eat. This exhibition not only pokes fun at the recuperation of infantile styles by high art but also prefigures a certain levelling of artistic practices. This levelling becomes more evident when Marco reflects, over images of Maude's stuffed animals, about "what is precious," poetry (24; Fig. 2). He expands his concept of poetry to include popular singers, cartoonists, comedians, painters and photographs to conclude that "poetry redeems everything". Just like the Picasso exhibition, the

juxtaposition of these thoughts to different kinds of stuffed animals is not merely an act of irreverence against the hierarchies of art; it is an affirmation, much like Barry's encouragement, to celebrate creativity without judgment, to see and appreciate in a childlike way.

Having tracked down a few media memories at the intersection of children's image-making practices and comics, I will now focus on the media memories attached to children's comics reading, especially in the North American context.

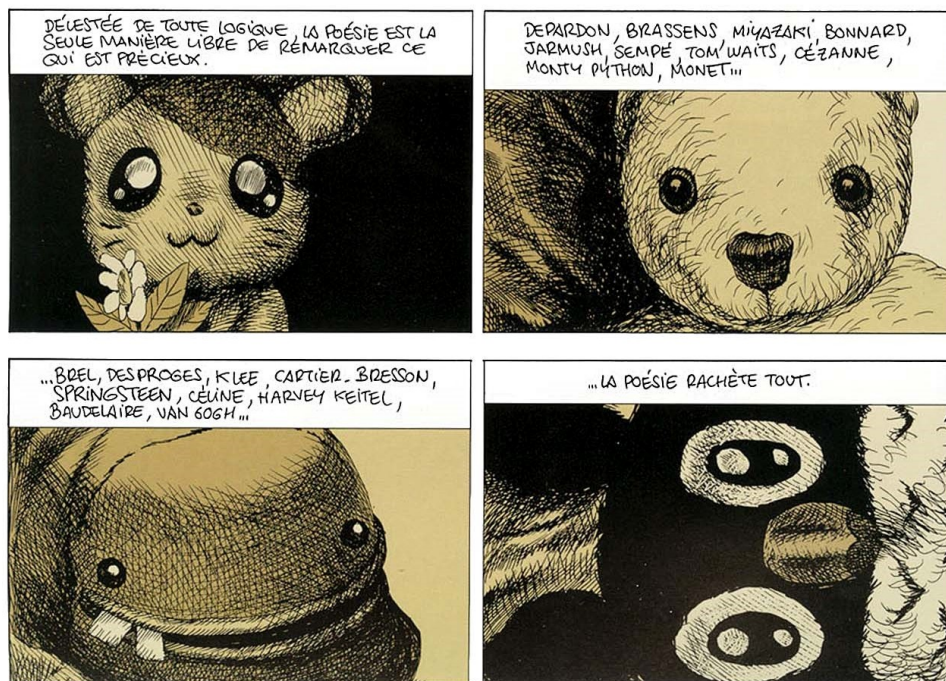


Fig. 2. Marco's reflections on the redemptive power of poetry.

Le Combat ordinaire 4 – Planter des clous (30).

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It's a Bird... and Essex County: *Growing up with Superhero Comics*

It's a Bird... interweaves personal engagement through the autofictional protagonist with the superhero figure. Tellingly enough, the comic begins with a childhood memory, one of the protagonist and his brother's rare moments of comics reading. The two brothers initially quarrel over holding the comic which emphasizes the precious materiality of the book for the young readers, the desire for ownership and control over comics reading (5). The materiality and magic of the comic book are further emphasized by the book's brightness, which contrasts with the bland colors of the hospital scene (5-6). And while neither of the two brothers read many comics during their childhood, Steve read vociferously and "consumed stories" (8), enacting the connection between the figure of the child and imagination already seen above. As historian Carolyn Steedman has shown, the child became a figuration of interiority from the end of the 18th century onward and into the 20th century when the concept was theorized by Freud under "another name as 'the unconscious', or 'the unconscious mind'" (4). "The idea of the child", Steedman continues, "provided the largest number of people living in the recent past of Western societies with the means of thinking about and creating a self: something grasped and understood: a shape, moving in the body... something *inside*: an interiority" (20).

In contrast to the previous two comics, the relationship between children and adolescents and comics in *It's a Bird...* is more prominent and closely tied to the figure of the superhero. For Cremins, "[t]he tropes and obsessions of even the most sophisticated, experimental comic narratives still draw on a lineage which, if mapped, will bring the curious reader back to the characters present at the inception of the form, heroes like Superman and Batman, those apocalyptic pulp fantasies of the Great Depression" ("Bodies," 303). Even though they appear only briefly, the children in *It's a Bird...* are always associated with comics, and of course, Superman, who in many ways embodies the media memory of American comics. The actual story quickly establishes a link with childhood, and the child comics reader: "baby-sat by half a *Superman* comic" (19), even though he is unable to read, Steve remains fascinated by the red S and the story he constructs through the pictures.

It's a Bird... (superficially) breaks down the comics form, as well as the thought processes of a writer brainstorming for a new comic book idea while grappling with the possibility of his succumbing, like his grandmother, to Huntington's disease, which becomes Steve's kryptonite in this interweaving of personal and fictional stories that are under development. Steve's girlfriend Lisa's reference to the Spin Doctors' song, "Jimmy Olsen's Blues" (35) suggests a generational shift from identifying with Superman to identifying with Jimmy Olsen, the far more ordinary, unimpressive photographer for *The Daily Planet*. The song paints Olsen as a geeky, loser type who is most likely to spend his evenings alone, reading Shakespeare in his low rent downtown apartment. The boy fan of Superman has turned into a resentful, lonely youth who does not shy away from literary

classics (that were once themselves popular entertainment). This is exactly what has happened to Steve, who finds himself unable to believe in Superman in the beginning but who eventually realizes the character's universal significance.

The deconstruction of Superman and his relationship to this world and its readers in *It's a Bird...* simulates the processes of creation by emphasizing the interaction between subjectivities (in this case, that of the writer) and popular culture memories. This interaction is materialized by the presence of the hand. The hand is both a creative part of the body and one that establishes emotional bonds. A sign of human connection that extends beyond the comic book to touch the reader, the hand is significant, especially in the world of comic books where exaggeration and expressionism are the norm and the focus on the unabashedly intimate and the personal was limited before the appearance of graphic novels and the confessional comics popularized by underground publications from the 1960s onwards. Particularly noteworthy for the affective import of media memories surrounding children and comics is the emphasis on the hands holding the comic: from the children's hands as they bicker over the only comic book their father could find in the hospital store (3), to the moment when they decide to hold the comic together (6), to Steve's own hands (35).

It's a Bird... ends on a note of affirming the role of the imagination over logic and rationality, much like *What It Is* and *Combat ordinaire*: as two children (who are identical to the child versions of Steve and his brother) try to decide whether it's a bird or a plane they see in the sky, Steve suggests they can see Superman if they really want to (124). This plays on the link between (child-like) imagination and creativity. But the child is not only linked to playful creativity; it also evokes the specter of growing up and of grown-ups. It harbors, as Steedman's notion of interiority suggests, the origins of the adult it will turn into.

When Steve obsesses about Huntington's disease and the Superman project his editor forces on him, the first "s" in Huntington's becomes the "s" symbolizing Superman (104) – these visual connections trace a train of thought linking mortality with the superhero, the presumed childhood distance from mortality and the adult realization thereof. Childhood and death similarly collide in *Essex County*, which opens with Lester's mother's death. Personal battles and fictional, even impossible Superman stories, become one, thereby emphasizing the personal value of those stories for individual readers and other comics artists. *Tales from the Farm*, the first book in Jeff Lemire's *Essex County*, captures the role of superhero comic books as both a channel of escapism for young, troubled children but also the kind of reading that "normal" adults disparage. Besides Lester, the story's young protagonist (who is a comics artist and reader), the only other avid, or once-avid reader of comics is Jimmy Lebeuf, Lester's unacknowledged father, as confirmed later in *Essex County*, a promising ice hockey player whose career ended after a head injury.

Through including rough comics drawings on notebook sheets, the stories in *Essex County* merge with Lester's comics (58-64, 435-436). Unsurprisingly, while the first one contains a traditional, straightforward superhero versus supervillain battle, the second comic, made by a slightly older Lester, begins with a battle but ends in a personal trauma: the sudden loss of the hero's father after which the hero takes his father's Captain Canada's costume and tailors it to his size. Once again, personal and collective memories are intertwined with personal elements affecting the fictional (we read the second comic just before Lester finds out that Jimmy Lebeuf is his father), and the fictional affecting the personal (most prominently through Lester's taking recourse to making comics and occasionally living in a comics-inspired alternative world) to come to terms with reality.

Children and Comics: Legitimation Hauntings and Entanglements

Comics scholar Christopher Pizzino makes a case for comics as a "traumatized medium" (*Arresting*, 17). This trauma is expressed by "autoclastic" or self-breaking images, and is, thus, to be distinguished from other traumas through the very fact that it is expressed (71). While speaking of a trauma in this context seems farfetched, as Pizzino himself suggests, it is more fruitful to consider the role of troubled memories of comics themselves, stemming from the marginal, low cultural standing of the medium, which is a recurrent reference in comics and is one of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of the self-conscious visual vocabulary in *Maus* ("Comics"). These associations are both blatant and subtle, underlying the technique of drawing, drawing style, but also the more abstract components of the story. Following Pizzino's autoclastic train of thought, it is possible to consider comics as a haunted medium, channeling media memories through their distinctive, hybrid idiom that tap into the issues of "cultural power and prestige" ("Comics"). Nowhere is this more evident than in the presence of children in graphic novels. The child in graphic novels, the preferred site of comics legitimation, is multifaceted in spite of its relatively unvarying manifestations in the works discussed here where the figure is essentially a conglomerate of interiority and pastness. It evokes the childish side of comics, interrogates and even repurposes the sometimes suppressed, embarrassing facets of comics (Worden).

In guise of a conclusion, I would like to turn to Peter Blake's 1954 painting, "Children Reading Comics" to sum up the media memories stuck to child figures (fig. 3). Based on a family photograph (Grunenberg and Sillars 19), the painting shows the artist's younger self and his sister sitting on a bench reading (or displaying), not books, but *Eagle*, the British comics periodical launched in 1950. The iconic image of the (middle-class) reading child is repositioned by these working-class children: moved out of the confines of the domestic space and, given the big, ephemeral, richly illustrated and advertisement-laden comics magazine, into the fragmented, quick entertainment that characterizes modern mass culture. The intimacy of home is traded for the public space

of the park. This is the first of many “ticks” or aspects of the drawing that challenge assumptions. Another tick is the monumentality of the children: the brother and sister dominate the painting and are even too big to be fully contained by it. Such disregard of proportions evokes the so-called primitive and naïve strains of modernist art. The young Blake looks uncomfortable and somewhat dissatisfied, probably because he has been given the black-and-white pages that have more advertisements than comics, while his sister holds on to the brightly colored front page. His sister wears an eye patch that, despite being a medical device, evokes childish role playing or pretending. It could also explain why she got to hold the cover page. Given that the *Eagle* catered to boys rather than girls (as confirmed by the Mecano ad), the painting challenges the gendering of comics readership. The two children consequently queer the situation. I use queer here in the sense of « un sujet qui bouge » [a subject that moves], that resists being pinned down and raises questions (Bactens, “Goblet”, 177). These children, like the children in the graphic novels discussed here, combine memories, a personal one that activates a broad range of collective memories and that is channeled through media memories. They have an autobiographical hold as well as a sociohistorical one, invoking, simultaneously, the individual child that the artist once was and the shared image of the child. The child in comics goes off on many tangents.

In addition to the intimate, holdable size of the painting (36.7 x 41.7cm), perhaps the most noteworthy element is the way the children hold on to the periodical and the space accorded to the comics: the two hands holding the papers put the comics on display for the viewer. The pages merge with the children’s bodies and dominate them. This image embodies the close connections between children and comics that I have tried to tease out and interweave in this article. Finally, the painting is intermedial on multiple counts: based on a photograph, the painting incorporates the mass medium of comics. Another version of *Children Reading Comics* painted two years later replaces the public space with a dingy lounge with a television in the background. The strokes here are thicker, savage in their distortion of reality. The image on the television screen is blurred and even the children’s faces are almost unrecognizable. The comics pages, taking up almost two thirds of the painting, are the most dominant and lucid element. Once again, the children are not reading but displaying their comics in a manner that makes the comics substitutes for their bodies.



Fig. 3. Peter Blake, *Children Reading Comics*, 1954. From the collection of Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, UK. © SABAM Belgium 2019. Reprinted with permission.

In drawing out connections with Warburg's and Sutton's memory projects, I try to show how comics remember and layer their stories, through (a version of) their own history but also through mining a rich source of images and techniques from a wide range of media. Media memories help point towards the media historical layers guiding these intermedial exchanges. They also help trace the affective bearings of such interactions. The children's drawings in the comics discussed above are instances of intermediality that simultaneously provoke a dialogue of memories and legitimization stories. Perhaps that is what the figure of the child shows best in comics: the impossibility of separating the child, its intermedial essence as a mediator between art worlds and comics worlds, its mnemonic load that combines the personal and the collective. As Steedman suggests, it channels the formation of modern self-consciousness, doing so in a particularly affective way: "The figure of the child, released from the many texts that gave birth to it, helped shape feelings, and structure feeling into thought" (19). As already suggested by the comics examined above, childish presences capture the struggle of canonical hierarchy, but also

of expression, and hence of establishing emotional, affective and consequently powerful connections.

The multiple strands connecting children and comics stretch across media and cultural productions. While it might be impossible to disentangle all of these strands, especially in the scope of an article, media memories help trace the trajectories and uncover the workings of individual strands.

Notes

¹ Exceptions do exist: the title page of *Planter les clous* [literally: *Nailing*] includes a drawing by Larcenet's daughter of her family and herself. This is one of the rare instances in which a real child's presence is asserted. Dominique Goblet's *Chronographie* (2010), drawn with her daughter Nikita Fossoul is perhaps the strongest example of an artist's collaboration with their child: the book collects portraits Goblet and Fossoul drew of each other over a period of ten years.

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