

# Strips of thruth

## Graphic reportage, between art and journalism

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ince the 2000's, graphic journalism has enjoyed growing international popularity, thanks to authors who have contribute to the renewal of a type of graphic narrative rooted in reality and offering an alternative to the dominant media.

In this perspective, the “genre” focuses generally on issues affecting dominated groups (migrants, LGBTQ+ communities, dispossessed peasant communities, etc.), and presents varying degrees of connection with related forms of writing in other fields where investigative and testimonial approaches are prevalent. It mirrors in strips what historical accounts have labelled, through a shift in point of view, the “history of the losers”. Graphic reportage, capitalizing on the reporter’s commitment (LÉVÊQUE, RUELLAN, 2010; PREYAT, TILLEUIL, 2024), is not exempt from links with the contemporary re-politicization of literature. Reading the prefaces of Italian author Igort (*Ukrainian notebooks. Memoirs from the time of the USSR*, 2010; *Russian Notebooks. The forgotten war in the Caucasus*, Futuropolis, 2012), it becomes clear that graphic reportage, while having its own specific characteristics, is considered in perpetual interaction with similar generic forms, and is at the heart of a polysemy that also encompasses the achievements of the human sciences. Based on interviews, encounters and travels, Igort’s stories draw on reportage, literary journalism and documentary, under the auspices of, for instance, Truman Capote (*In cold blood*, 1966), Pasolini (*The Scent of In-*

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dia, 1962) or Wim Wenders for non-fiction (*Tokyo-Ga*, 1985 ; *Buena Vista Social Club*, 1999). “Testimonial narratives”, “travel reports”, “notebooks”, “documentary fictions”, “true stories”, “documentary vision”, “graphic documentaries”, “chronicles”, “historical narratives” are just some of the adjectives used to describe a personal style of reportage that takes its cue from the registers of *irony*, *tragedy* and *comedy*<sup>1</sup>. These generic inflections affect the genre as a whole, to a greater or lesser extent.

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**A CONTRASTING GENEALOGY AND THE  
TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF A  
POLYMORPHIC GENRE**

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On the other side of the Atlantic, American historiography generally places the birth of graphic reportage in the mid-1950's, celebrating above all its efflorescence during the 1960's and 1970's, in convergence with emerging alternative narratives in comic books and journalism. Its beginnings are credited to a few great names such as Shel Silverstein, Will Eisner, Robert Crumb, while French-speaking critics have also highlighted Cabu's role as a “reporter-cartoonist”, especially for his work in the early 1970s (CABU, 2007). Works published in San Francisco and New York and their European counterparts have in common the fact that they emerged from a counter-culture at a time when comics were beginning to develop in the underground world of adult fiction (HATFIELD, 2005; CHANEY, 2011; EL REFAIE, 2012). While graphic reportage has some notable ancestors - dating back to the 19th century, when the art of drawing served a form of documentation (illustrated reportage, caricature, etc.) (CHUTE, 2016) - it actually accompanied, precisely at the turn of the 1970's, the growing social recognition of comics authors. It follows the generational and social renewal which went hand in hand with the creation of institutions (instances of consecration and reproduction, patrimonial authorities, etc.) in a field gradually gaining in independence. “Journalism in strips” benefited from transformations in the comics publishing industry and the consolidation of new, more culturally emancipated readerships, which were also gaining in maturity and economic power (BOLTANSKI, 1975; MAIGRET, 1994). In the course of its recent history in France, it has been squarely in line with the clear trend of the increasing popularity of comics, characterized by its new-found cultural legitimacy and the renewal of readerships in so-called “non-fiction” editorial niches (BERTHOU, 2016).

If we were to identify what comics *do* to journalism and what journalism *does* to comics, it would be fair to say that graphic reportage is first and foremost the arena for a reciprocal gain in symbolic capital.

The acknowledgement and evolution of the conditions of practice of the cartoonist's art have opened up new areas of research and discourse for the writer (MAUGER, 2009). Comics offer journalism new ways of portraying information, in line with audience expectations. Through a series of strategies, as well as features specific to the medium and inextricably linked to the author's subjectivity and its materialization in the drawing, another pathway is opened up to information and the ongoing deconstruction of the process that shapes it, where it is elsewhere erased. In return, the ethos of the reporter enables the cartoonist, script-writer or “complete author” to gain greater legitimacy, which in turn feeds the process of recognition resulting from the repositioning of comics “in the field of the factual, the credible and the verifiable” (BOURDIEU, 2012: § 5).

*David B's Rue des rosiers, Guy Delisle's Shenzhen or Jochen Gerner's New York share the same exoticism and proximity. [...] Little by little, these comics are reinventing a whole Geography, indeed a whole History, as a counterpoint to the overproduction of pseudo-objective media images. Often infused by critical and subjective qualities, such works are upheld as lasting, credible testimonies. (MENU, 2002)*

In just a few years, graphic reportage has spread exponentially, across nations and genres. Much like comics, which moved “from being *underground* to being everywhere”, it has gone from depicting superheroes stories to questioning political, socio-cultural and natural phenomena, from describing disasters to analyzing mass crimes, delving into topics such as wars and disabilities, examining the emergence of punk, vulgarizing queer studies or exploring the crisis of the suburbs (CHUTE, 2016).

In terms of professional identities, graphic reportage, sitting at the intersection of the fields of journalism and comics, fosters feelings of belonging that are, to say the least, diffuse, even paradoxical. While Joe Sacco has a degree in journalism from an American university and can use his press card, others, like Jean-Philippe Stassen, consider themselves to be journalists but do not seek institutional recognition (MAUGER, 2009), while Frédéric Boilet's excursions into Japan benefit from a press card granted by a French administration which is unable to recognize the status of a comic book artist (BOILET, 2006: 34). In *L'Émission dessinée*, Étienne Davodeau, co-author with Benoît Collombat of “The troubled waters of the Vth Republic. Death of a judge.”<sup>2</sup>, explains that he does not claim having a “journalistic approach” while recognizing that his stories are “very well documented”. His co-author, however, admits that the medium somehow “forces”

the investigative journalist to “adopt the posture of a comic strip artist”...

Alongside the diversification of formats, from classic press media to mooks, from albums to graphic novels, the publishing industry has also considerably influenced the sensitive, even sensory, relationship to reportage, surrendering to the “temptation” of the book and the artialization of information, symptomatic of a period that Gilles Lipovetsky has pinpointed as the age of “artist capitalism” (LIPOVETSKY, SERROY, 2013; DUBUISSON, NAHON, 2015). Against a backdrop of economic fragility in the written press, and in line with the growing popularity of comics, a number of media outlets (*Libération*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Le Temps*, *Le Courrier international*,...) have also resorted (and still do) to graphic reportage as a means of editorial promotion, a loss leader aimed at capturing new categories of readers whose cultural consumption has diversified, to the point of relativizing the *economy of the distinction* once codified by Luc Boltanski for the field of comics in the first issue of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (1975), in the immediate wake of Pierre Bourdieu (COULANGEON, 2011 ; LAHIRE, 2006). Finally, the development of graphic reportage is also the result of the convergence between industrial strategies of publishers and authors’ commitment to practicing journalism “differently”.

Indeed, if graphic reportage draws on the long-standing program and productions of literary or narrative journalism (MEURET, 2013), it particularly integrates the motivations of *new journalism* (WORDEN, 2015) or *gonzo journalism*, which focus on in-depth investigation, long-term immersion, the everyday versus the exceptional, the ordinary versus the elite, and literary writing, which comes in reaction to the professional injunctions to “objectivity” or practices associated with *churnalism* or *binge journalism* encouraged in some editorial newsrooms. In this respect, the stance of the magazine *XXI* is unambiguous: since 2013, its prides itself in offering “reportages to be devoured like novels”<sup>3</sup>. In the French-speaking world, this posture was honed and brought to a climax in the harnessing of the comics medium by *La Revue dessinée* and, for a time, by the explanatory discourses knitted around the magazine’s issues on their web channel *L’Émission dessinée* (2014).

The genealogy of graphic reportage brings together authors such as Justin Green, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco and Sarah Glidden, among many others. Although Joe Sacco contributed on a global scale to its circulation, its internationalization inevitably led to cross-pollination with national graphic design and publishing traditions. In France, it accompanied the first developments in alternative publishing and, from the 1990’s onwards, followed the trend for auto-

biographic narratives and their corollaries - the exploration of intimate territories, testimonies, travelogues, close-up reportages, etc. - by increasing the porosity of generic boundaries around which *L’Association*, for example, structured part of its catalog ahead of contributions from other publishing houses such as Futuropolis, Les Humanoïdes Associés, La Boîte à Bulles, Vertige Graphic, Cornélius, Delcourt, etc. These preceded or accompanied digital experimentation on the web and what some have seen as a *recuperation* by mainstream comics publishers, gradually caught up in a well-documented phenomenon of editorial concentration (MENU, 2005; HABRAND, 2010).

In context of Latin America, the development of graphic journalism can be understood in the same way as in France or the United States. It is a new “expressive modality” driven by the desire to diversify the traditional press and new ways to practice the craft (PÉREZ PEREIRO 2007: 22). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, new experimental forms of comics began to emerge, linked to the use of blogs and, later, social networks. Examples such as the Peruvian magazine *Carboncito* (2001-2017), edited by brothers Amadeo and Renso Gonzáles, the *Historietas Reales* blog launched in Argentina at the end of 2004, and festivals such as *Viñetas Seltas* (Buenos Aires), *Viñetas con Altura* (Bolivia) and *Entreviñetas* (Colombia) have bolstered and built a community of authors. They have given the autobiographical and testimonial genre an unprecedented place in the history of Latin American comics. Both creatively and academically, the narrative models of the global North have an undeniable influence in Latin America.

However, the meaning of “graphic journalism” has not yet been firmly and definitively established. As illustrated by Igor’s praxis, the diversity of nomenclatures used to designate graphic reportage, as well as efforts to define it in the academic sphere, are at once a sign of its richness and its hybridity, symptomatic of a genre in constant state of construction across various narrative forms and investigative practices.

Inspired by Sacco’s work, this type of journalism has often been described in reference to autobiographical documentary comics. In such works, the authors represent themselves in interaction with the protagonists of the story unfolding, thus staging the uncertainties of information collection. They portray themselves questioning the accounts given by the protagonists, they point out how their presence might influence these testimonies and statements, and highlight the possibility of forgetting to mention parts of information, or other memory biases. The technique of documentary comics, with its recourse to autobiography, thus contributes to the creation of fluid and fragile boundaries between definitions, with no possibility of distinguishing exactly where one genre begins and

the other ends. In this perspective, Romero-Jódar includes in the same generic *continuum* “graphic journalism”, “comics journalism”, for which definitions have been respectively proposed by Charles Hatfield, Ted Rall and Jeff Adams, to which he appends the “documentary graphic novel” (ROMERO-JÓDAR, 2017:71). Johannes Schmid, however, prefers to speak of “documentary comics” when, as in the works of Sacco or Glidden, reportages are published in large format and created to last, in opposition to a journalistic practice strictly limited to spectacular or institutional “hot news” (SCHMID, 2020: 318-319). This extended period of reportage is understood in relation to memory work. Aimed at the revelation and the communicability of trauma, it has been suggested that “documentary comics” have in fact the power of reconstructing and describing traumatic events (DAVIES, 2020), to the point of being, *in fine*, instituted as a “place of traumatic memory” (ROMERO-JÓDAR, 2017: 82).

Arguably, these definitions do not take sufficiently into account a very significant segment of graphic journalism production which does not resort to autobiography. Contrary to Espiña Barros’s (2014) assertion that self-referentiality is one of the characteristics of what he calls “new journalism”, this dimension is far from being always present in so-called “non-fictional” comics. In addition, we can legitimately doubt that the experience of a first-person narration alone makes it possible to distinguish graphic reportage from biographies or historical accounts based on secondary sources (MICKWITZ, 2016: 9). It would be just as legitimate to question the scope of the concept of graphic *memoir*, coined by Thomas Couser, when it comes to defining any narrative based on real experiences (COUSER, 2012: 16). However, it has to be acknowledged that these definitions do not objectify the work of classification itself, that is, the work of distinction carried out by authors in relation to a production associated with a degradation of the journalistic profession, or with information that misinforms or simply no longer informs. In this respect, the terms “journalism”, “reportage” and “autobiography” would certainly benefit from being subsumed under the concept of “non-fiction” (MICKWITZ, 2016: 2).

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#### GRAPHIATION, MÉDIAGÉNIE, MEDIACULTURE

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While the power of documentary is certainly not exclusive to any particular medium, some media would nonetheless be more conducive to documentary development than others to the degree that they are capable of presenting a stronger “truth” status, as suggested by Mickwitz (2016: 7). In the case of comics, it could be argued that the polyphony that enables readers to deconstruct the information presented to them is consubstantial with the medium itself. Understanding

graphic reportage would thus involve simultaneously summoning up concepts developed at the intersection of narrative mediatics or media narratology and media analysis: *graphiation, médiagénie, mediaculture*.

The first term, coined by Philippe Marion, refers to the level of visual enunciation that is added to verbal enunciation in the comic strip: “the reader-spectator of comics is called upon”, indeed, “to align their gaze with the gesture of the graphic artist; by embracing the artist’s graphic imprint, they can become part of the message”. Graphiation is defined as the “self-transcription of one’s subjective graphic identity which is recognizable through subjective specificities of the imprint.” (MARION : 1993), or, as Jan Baetens has rephrased it, it corresponds “to the mode of physical recording of the image or text which, at the same time, reveals the instance of enunciation behind this imprint” (BAETENS, 2001). This “duplication” between narration and graphiation has enabled Romero-Jódar to demonstrate the comparative advantage of comics over other media when it comes to the act of documenting (ROMERO-JÓDAR, 2017: 85). In addition, “unlike the three instances (author, narrator, character) of the autobiographical pact, it is [...] not possible to define the relationship between narration and graphiation in terms of identity or non-identity” (BAETENS, 2009: 19). Of course, “one can always try to draw like one writes, or think one does, but when it comes to reading, there’s often a feeling of discrepancy that has nothing to do with questions of civil identity : even when the drawer and the writer are the same person, that is, the author, it’s not certain that the reader will perceive in the same way the information provided by the narrative and that provided by the graphiation, so that the narrative instance of a graphic novel will (almost) always be read in a more ‘polyphonic’ way than the narrative instance of a non-visual literary text” (BAETENS, 2009: 19). Hillary Chute defends a position similar to Romero-Jódar’s and recalls these notions, demonstrating that comics, in their grammar and historical development, were naturally predisposed to becoming a documentary medium and insists that documentary allow comics to deploy the full power of their graphic narrative (CHUTE, 2016: 16). The intersection of reportage narratives and comics creates a special place of encounter and “cross-fertilization”, or, according to the neologism *médiagénie*, modeled by Marion on the terms *photogenia* and *telegenia*, the evaluation of an “amplitude”: that of the reaction manifesting the “more or less successful fusion of narration[s] with [their] mediatization[s], and this in the context - also interacting - of the horizons of expectation of a given genre” (MARION, 1997: 86). Every form of representation involves “negotiating with the specific force of inertia of the chosen system of expression” as well as “the opacity of the expressive material constitutes a constraint on the relative transparency of



representation". The same is true of mediated narratives: "narration blooms as mediativity and narrativity interact". But some encounters are more intense than others:

Each narrative project can therefore be considered in terms of its *mediagenic characteristics*. The most mediagenic narratives seem to be able to achieve their full potential by choosing the media partner that suits them best, and by intensely negotiating their "*mise en intrigue*" with all the devices inherent to that medium. (MARION, 1997: 86)

If a genre such as reporting, because of its universality, tends to extend across several media, *médiagenie* constitutes "a principle of global evaluation" that can be applied to "different and specific media narratives". Depending on the intensity of the interaction between a medium and a story, *médiagenie* can oscillate from one extreme to the other, from strong to weak: "strong *médiagenie* is based on a kind of love at first sight between a story and its medium" (MARION, 1997: 87). Journalism and comics thus regularly establish a strong relationship of complicity, which in some cases take place under different media regimes. For instance, the *Algues vertes. L'histoire interdite* (Green Algae. The Forbidden Story), whose field research spanned across several years, was first published by Inès Léraud and Pierre Van Hove in *La Revue dessinée* (2017), then as a graphic novel (La Revue Dessinée-Delcourt, 2019) before being made into a film directed by Pierre Jolivet (2023) under the title *Algues vertes. L'enquête interdite* (Green Algae. The Forbidden Investigation): its "multi-media starring" can be described as *trans-médiagenie*, particularly widespread among contemporary media and major press narratives. It invites us to consider "the mediagenics of its various media treatments" (MARION, 1997: 87). The choice of the comic strip, in addition to its familiarity with storytelling, also makes it possible, according to the qualities identified by Benoît Collombat throughout the enterprise of the *Revue dessinée*, to give room to a form of "augmented journalism". Inès Léraud, a radio journalist, believes on her part it allows to distance oneself from radio reporting in order to reach a different audience, as well as to break away from the "image of connivance with power" that frequently accompanies the figure of the journalist (Rocher, 2019). Based on multiple testimonies and scientific, journalistic and legal documents, a selection of which can be found in the book's appendix, Léraud's investigation, in this revised version, ultimately acknowledges the use of irony "inherent to the genre of caricature as an instrument of social and political criticism" (LÉRAUD, VAN HOVE, 2019). Through a singular story, the genre inevitably reconnects with part of the origins of comics and the tradition of covering the news in strips. And while

some of the narratives have a strong autobiographical angle, more often than not, these stories have a universal reach, as demonstrated by the approach adopted by Didier Lefèvre, Emmanuel Guibert and Frédéric Lemerrier in *Le Photographe* (The photographer, Dupuis, 2003-2006), and the closely related approach adopted by Alain Keller, Emmanuel Guibert and Frédéric Lemerrier in *Les Nouvelles d'Alain* (News from Alain, XXI, 2009-2010). In both cases, the three graphic artists opt for a "human's-eye view" that allows us to slide imperceptibly from the individual to the collective, to "epic-izing" the world by staging the subjective relationship to veracity (GUIBERT, 2003: 58-61). In both cases, the interweaving of drawing and photography, often itself the object of regraphiation or remediation, enables "a homogenization of the imprint conducive for mediagenic narration" (MARION, 2011:299). Paradoxically, the very use of photography, contrary to a simple indicial function, takes part in the "memoration" of both individual and collective history. As Isabelle Delorme points out, "when this technique is used in an album, it reinforces the memorial function and enhances the relationship of the story with the intimate and the past". Allowing the reader to glimpse at the author's "photographic representation" is equivalent to "sharing with others the reality of this existence and increasing its memorial surface":

Moreover, as these individual stories tell part of our contemporary history, the insertion of photographic snapshots that provide testimony of events related to the twentieth century increases our ability to memorate them. (DELORME, 2015)

The use of drawing therefore not only offers an alternative to the "saturation" of the use of photography in 1940's France, phenomenon pinpointed by André Bazin as a process which then gradually unfolded on a global scale in a world increasingly saturated with audiovisual images (CHUTE, 2016: 20). One medium does not replace the other, but drawing displaces its perception within documentary works, where the function of the different visual regimes (text, drawing, photography) fulfill other functions and operate "in tension", going beyond the simple willingness to authenticate information, or act as testimonial validation. In a hybrid language, comics and documentary meet in a fundamentally intermedial relationship (FLINN, 2018: 140). As a result, reportage is endowed with a new identity through the disruption of its media devices, in the wake of those specific to comics.

## NOTES

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<sup>1.</sup> <http://backstage.futuropolis.fr/debat/blog/a-propos-des-chaiers-ukrainiens-quelques-mots-d-igort>. A similar assessment can be found in the ActuaBD website's review of the book, which describes it as a "facsimile of a notebook", praising the "wealth of testimonies" collected by the author, the cohabitation of "comic strips", "free drawings" and "long narratives" that "faithfully transcribe" conversations and encounters, and place the author as "close to reality as possible" (<http://www.actuabd.com/Les-Cahiers-ukrainiens-Par-Igort>).

<sup>2.</sup> *L'Émission dessinée* (05/11/2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgTsApPULSs&t=908s>), the investigation was republished in album form, under the title *Cher pays de notre enfance. Enquête sur les années de plomb de la V<sup>e</sup> République* (Dear country of our childhood. An investigation into the leaden years of the Fifth Republic, Paris, Futuropolis, 2015).

<sup>3.</sup> [https://www.revue21.fr/wpcontent/uploads/2014/07/XXI21\\_Manifeste.pdf](https://www.revue21.fr/wpcontent/uploads/2014/07/XXI21_Manifeste.pdf)

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