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RESEARCH

Witnessing Fukushima Secondhand: Collage, Archive and Travelling Memory in Jacques Ristorcelli's *Les Écrans*

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Cultural memory in comics studies mostly seems to revolve around nonfictional graphic novels tackling major historical events. Drawing on recent trends in cultural memory studies, this paper focuses on Jacques Ristorcelli's *Les Écrans* (2014) as an experimental counterpoint where memory is animated by the author's use of collage. Delving into an 'archive' of heterogeneous elements, *Les Écrans* borrows from old war comics in a way that reflexively constructs a discourse on the past of the medium and its memory. Through the analysis of Ristorcelli's book, this paper highlights how collage can function in comics as a work of memory that reaches back to appropriative practices common to both readers and fine artists.

Keywords: appropriation; archive; collage; cultural memory; Jacques Ristorcelli

In a 'videosphere,' as Debray (2000) termed our media age riddled with screens and digital images, anxieties about the dangers and delusions of the image have grown all the more widespread, as concerns raise about our critical abilities to read and decode them. Influential voices as Hirsch (2004) and Chute (2008) have suggested that graphic narratives, partly because of their word-and-image hybridity, are particularly suited to school their readers into new ways of navigating this videosphere, of reading the historical moment and the 'collateral damage' of its mass-mediation (Hirsch 2004: 1213). The specific objects that they choose as envisioning examples are the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi or Joe Sacco, canonical examples of the graphic memoir genre which has been pivotal in the legitimization of comics and their integration in the academia. This shift was based on a new

'partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them,' to put it in Jacques Rancière's terms (2010: 152).

How the data of experience is treated in aesthetic and political terms is subject to an ongoing redefinition and while cultural memory in graphic narratives seems to be primarily articulated around nonfictional and autobiographical narratives, Jacques Ristorcelli's *Les Écrans* (2014) tackles a subject that is typical for the 'usual' graphic novel but opts for a formal experimentation that contrasts with autobiographical narratives, placing us at a distance from the author's own experience. Indeed, *Les Écrans* is 'about' the Fukushima disaster of 2011, but entirely pictures the memory of that event through a collage technique, assembling scraps from old comics with other graphic and textual material, from war posters to automatic translations of online chat conversations.

Animated by an archival drive, Ristorcelli digs into forgotten past material to somehow 'make sense' of a recent event, performing a multilayered work of memory. As Erll and Rigney write, 'remembering the past' is not just a matter of recollecting events and persons, but often also a matter of recollecting earlier texts and rewriting earlier stories' (2006: 112). Tackling the Fukushima catastrophe and its media representations, *Les Écrans* remembers the past, both in matter of historical events and cultural objects, in an experimental way, where the 'meaning' mostly arises from the graphic treatment and construction of the book. In the process, Ristorcelli raises questions about the circulation of images across time and space, about how memory 'travels' (Erll 2011), and proposes alternative ways of drawing collective memory in comics in a way that is reflexive of the medium's own memory.

Memory and Experimentation in Comics

Les Écrans is entirely composed of old war comics as well as Japanese war posters: this material is collected, selected, cut out, redrawn, and combined into a new comic that seeks to evoke the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan and its mediation. This collage technique yields a highly dense and complex work, from which the reader

cannot reconstruct a clear narrative: rather, the reader gets an uninterrupted flow of images staging a formal chaos in movement metaphorically mimicking the Tsunami wave. Besides this flow of images, Ristorcelli adds three textual voices, differentiated by their graphic rendering: the voice of a woman talking to an interlocutor (whose own voice is held back) about the Tsunami, text crawls of news coverage documenting the disaster, and finally automatic translations of Japanese chat conversations (with a subtext of cybersex). Altogether, if all these elements can be related back to a chaotic experience associated with the event the book revolves around, the textual and visual channels do not complete each other to tell a unified, coherent story, but rather recollect bits and pieces of information in an extremely disjointed way, leaving it up to the reader to make sense of how these different elements relate, and whether they do.

In this sense, Ristorcelli's graphic novel must be read alongside recent developments in the comics world. Since the 1990s, European comics have increasingly incorporated techniques from the fine arts, reemphasizing the visual and pictorial aspects of the medium (Beaty 2007). There has been an influx of intermedial exchanges, of other techniques and concepts into the work of cartoonists, which is not limited to the book trade but also moves into the white cube of museums and galleries. In this context, there has been a growing body of artists, such as Jochen Gerner, Ilan Manouach or Pascal Matthey, who have used appropriation, *détournement*, and collage to explore the threshold between the worlds of comics and art. In fact, Ristorcelli's publisher, Éditions Matière, hones these tendencies, developing a distinct identity within the field of French alternative comics: besides fostering cross-exchanges with Japan, their publications often emerge from collaborations between the comics and art worlds, and they have put out several books that are based on a highly consistent use of appropriation and *détournement*, reaching back to French artistic collectives of the 1960s and 1970s as the Situationists and the Bazooka group.

Borrowing from popular comic books and addressing the Fukushima disaster, Ristorcelli's work embodies very well these salient aspects and further reveals how the author positions himself in the continuity of Pop artists as Roy Lichtenstein, whose paintings, however, are usually resented by a comics world that has felt

betrayed by Pop Art (Beaty 2012). As Kim Thompson once put it, 'one of its unfortunate side-effects has been to relegate comics art to the same cultural compost heap as urinals, bricks, and Campbell's soup cans' (qtd. Beaty 2012: 58). By contrast, Ristorcelli self-professedly reclaims this influence in his work, reconfiguring another relationship to the fine arts.

Les Écrans is furthermore aligned with the recent, fast-growing trend of 'abstract comics' (Molotiu 2009). Abstraction in comics, as Baetens (2011) insightfully argues, is not only a question of figuration, but also one of narration, insofar as the sequential arrangement of abstract, non-figurative panels can be read narratively: our propensity for storytelling invites us to read formal patterns as the rhythm and pulse of a story. This means that abstraction and narration are not fixed qualities of individual works, but are constructed by the reader, whose drive can fluctuate between reading for abstraction and reading for narration. *Les Écrans* plays up this tension: while several panel sequences might build up narrative meaning, others question it and at times actively resist it. A very telling example is a sequence that moves from representing two men walking in the snow, toward an abstracted representation of snow that highlights the materiality of the drawings (**Figure 1**), and eventually to a collage of crashing automobiles. In this process, Ristorcelli's book privileges the logic of montage, playing up imaginative associations over narrative construction. Ultimately, there are indeed no characters, settings or actions that can provide enough grounding for building a coherent storyworld.

By downplaying traditional narrative patterns and relying on the artistic techniques of collage and montage, *Les Écrans* invites the reader to reflect on the travels of images: that is, how they impact and affect us, how they circulate and carry memory, how their meanings and uses can change. Relying on the logic of montage, the effectiveness of which 'is entirely based on an art of memory,' Ristorcelli constructs a memory of the visual medium he works into by re-using its 'dumped' images (Didi-Huberman 2009: 35).

From this perspective, Ristorcelli's book explores an innovative way of performing memory work in comics, different from the more dominant autobiographical mode that is core to the graphic novel (Baetens and Frey 2015: 179–180). Under

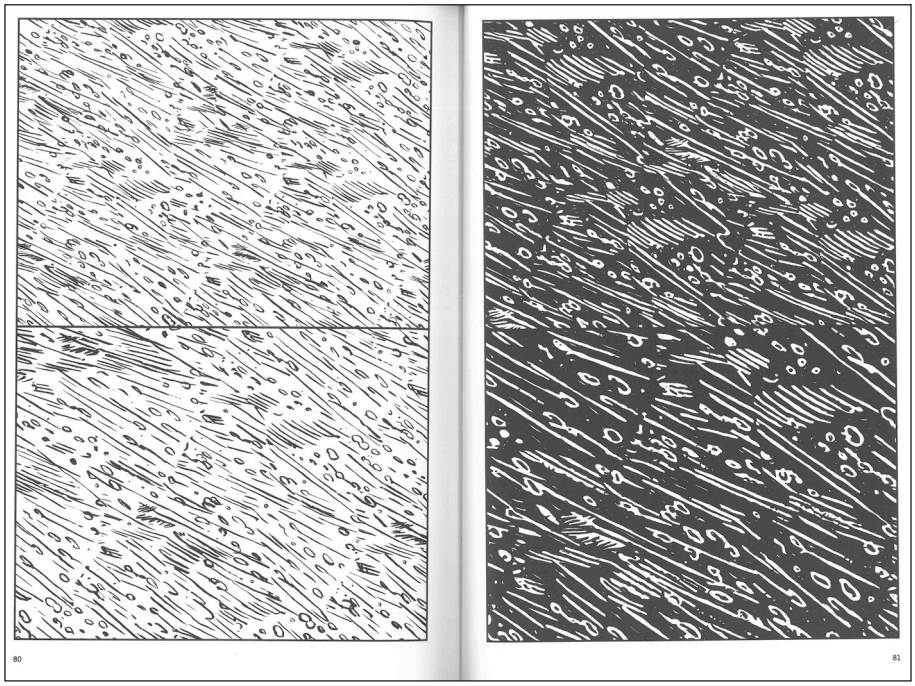

Figure 1: Ristorcelli, J. *Les Écrans.* (Montreuil: Matière, 2014: 80–81). © Éditions Matière, 2014.

the aegis of Spiegelman's groundbreaking *Maus* (1986), the graphic memoir has become the most culturally legitimate genre of comics, accepted into the literary world, museums, and academia. Spiegelman's graphic novel has been a cornerstone in memory studies, with memory scholars as Hirsch (1992) and LaCapra (1998) using *Maus* to elaborate their theories. And so, the graphic narratives that most explicitly confront us with collective memory are also those that are most visible in the public sphere: graphic novels as Satrapi's memoir of growing up in Iran or Sacco's reportages in Gaza. Given this focus on graphic nonfiction, and especially the memoir genre, the scale implicit in this scholarly attention is that of the 'intersection of collective histories and life stories' (Chute 2008: 459). The canonization of this specific subset of comics, as Worden recently argued, implies an ideological focus that prioritizes an understanding of the form as a 'predominantly ethical medium' (2015: 69). Perhaps boldly, Worden goes on to suggest that 'the meaning of abstract comics – and even looking at and thinking of comics as abstractions – requires us

to think politically, about how we and our social world produce meaning, identity, and value' (2015: 65). Given its formal experimentation, Ristorcelli's *Les Écrans* offers interesting ground for considering cultural memory in comics beyond the intimate scale of autobiography.

Reanimating Informational Waste

Les Écrans is originally based on Ristorcelli's personal experience of witnessing the Fukushima disaster at a distance, from France, while being in contact with acquaintances in Japan. This biographical layer, however, is not directly relevant to the understanding of the comic: on the contrary, the first-person witness narrative recedes to the background, as the narration itself is always on the brink of collapsing into abstraction. This very formal experimentation underwrites an acute reflexion on the globalized circulation of images, information, media, and memory.

The discourse on information technologies and the intermedial reference to television programming are announced from the outset by the paratext of *Les Écrans*: its very title, the promotional banner and the detailed presentation on the publisher's website, which offers a wealth of images documenting the archival material appropriated in the book. Moreover, *Les Écrans* opens up with a quote by Baudrillard who, investigating the relationship between real and referent, original and copy, posited that new technologies and visual media occasioned a perceptual experience increasingly decoupled from reality ('the death of the real') and ruled by what he termed 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard 1981). In line with these theories, and particularly with Baudrillard's thoughts on information media, the quote that Ristorcelli borrows from a 1993 interview specifically highlights the idea of 'informational waste:'

> We have the feeling that information is fluid, that it goes through networks, that it circulates: that is how we define it. But it actually falls down and stays where it landed, because it is not further transfigured or metabolized. We talk of industrial or material waste, but there is also a huge waste of information, communication, which is an inert mass; it is in some ways a

> force of inertia, weighing on the event itself. And so, either by acceleration or by inertia, history can difficultly come through, in the sense that it can only exist if there is, at the same time of course, an energy and a historical drive, a possibility to represent history, and it is precisely that which we are somewhat lacking today. The pieces that compose history – including the narrative that we can construct out of them since there is no history without story, without the possibility to tell, to recount it – are slipping out of our hands also because the news seize what is happening too quickly, it increasingly goes through the image and not the text, or through written memories, or not much and it is too fleeting, too volatile, that it dilutes itself within a space that is not completely ours anymore. (*Baudrillard qtd.* in Ristorcelli 2014: 7; author's translation).

This quote concisely outlines Baudrillard's main arguments in *The Illusion of the End* (1994), in which the French philosopher takes up the idea of the 'end of history.' He suggests that information technologies are caught up in a double movement of acceleration and inertia, enforcing the ephemerality of the events that prevent them from being reconstructed into historical narratives. Information seems to 'cannibalize' events in a way that prevents them from becoming memories, reducing them to the state of inert waste (Zelizer 2011).

Albeit steeped in a specific postmodern moment, Baudrillard's thoughts continue to find resonance in the twenty-first century, as postmodernism has intensified under the 'cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism' (Nealon 2012). Perpetuating an iconoclastic rhetoric, Baudrillard decries the growing dominance of the image and visual media, which he sees as jeopardizing the perception of a very sense of history. The French theorist thereby contributes to a widespread discourse on the disappearance of history and memory, fully in line with an Adornean denunciation of 'late capitalist amnesia' (Huyssen 2000: 31). It is not only that the fleetingness of mass media induces a perpetual cultivation of the present but also that the 'memory boom,' which is enmeshed with this ubiquitous fear of amnesia (Huyssen 2000), is itself integrated to the same logic of commodification: Baudrillard indeed discards

this obsession with memory as mere spectacle, as a shift 'from historical space into the sphere of advertising' (1994: 23).

Under the light of this Baudrillardian thought, Ristorcelli's *Les Écrans* can be read not as an attempt to get to the event of the Fukushima disaster itself 'beyond' its media representation, but precisely as one to seize this 'waste' and to animate it, so to speak, to open up a dialogue with a reconstructed archive of sorts by means of collage. In that sense, and as metaphorically illustrated by the flow of images it stages, Ristorcelli's book is about the circulation, movement, and dynamic of memory. In fact, Baudrillard's quote indirectly suggests that for the past to exist for us, it needs to move, to flow, and to be somehow transfigured, appropriated. This is an important dynamic for cultural memory, described by Erll as 'travelling memory:' 'all cultural memory must "travel," be kept in motion, in order to "stay alive," to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations' (2011: 12). Conceiving of cultural memory as mobile, however, might not be self-evident, given the long-worn emphasis of memory studies on how stable *lieux de mémoire* construct the contingent identities of national 'container-cultures.' As memory studies increasingly turn away from the nation-state as the 'natural container, curator, and telos of collective memory' (De Cesari and Rigney 2014: 1), adopting a transnational or transcultural perspective, a renewed attention is given to how memory might be set in motion across territorial borders, but also across time.

Erll (2011: 11) interestingly places her approach in the continuity of Warburg, a major forerunner of cultural memory studies who strived to reconstruct the 'afterlife' (*Nachleben*) of classical antiquity throughout art history, showing how the image functions as a carrier of memory and unravelling how symbols and motifs speak to each other across time and space. Warburg did not highlight the causal succession of genres and styles, but rather the haunting coming-back, anachronistic recurrence and '*survivance*' of forms (Didi-Huberman 2002). It is a similar process – reconstructing a certain memory of images – that seems to drive Ristorcelli in his work when he assembles comic book images together with propaganda posters, digital media, and photographies. The graphic novelist turns to the 'archive' – in ways comparable to contemporary art and film (Foster 2004; Thonon 2009) – in order to recover

images representing other traumatic events that are thereby associated to the 'flow' of media images streaming from 2011 Japan.

Collage and Archive: an Aesthetic Work of Memory

As Assmann argues, the archive 'can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage' (Assmann 2008: 103). *Les Écrans* reanimates those stagnant items, it performs 'a work of redeployment of the documentary mass' stored in the archive (Thonon 2009: 138). Inscribed in this fundamental dynamic of forgetting and remembrance, the 'archive' that Ristorcelli taps into is, however, a difficult one to describe. This archive of comics is precisely one that has been for so long excluded from institutional archives, and even from the very idea of cultural memory. If culture is the 'nonhereditary memory of the community' (Lotman and Uspensky 1978: 213), comics have traditionally been considered, in Lotman's model, as nonculture (simply outside the realm of culture) or even as anticulture (when they were decried as bringing about the downfall of civilization). The comic digests and pulps that provide the basic visual material for *Les Écrans* were part of 'the same cultural compost heap as urinals, bricks, and Campbell's soup cans,' to recall Thompson's words.

Nevertheless, this status of comics as ephemeral waste products has induced other ways of archiving on the part of their readers. As Gardner describes them, '[t]hese are archives in the loosest, messiest sense of the word [. . .] items that were never meant to be collected. [. . .] These are collections organized by invisible grids, by individual desires, by the accident of geography or inheritance' (2012: 150). These practices are non-institutional, heterogeneous, but they also sketch other means of keeping and transmitting collective memory, circulating among local, grassroots communities of fans and collectors. To some extent, this form of collecting arguably anticipates the radical transformation of the archive by digital media (Ernst 2013), whereby, according to Pinchevsky, 'archiving can now be viewed as a form of social intervention, a participatory social practice, which turns the archive as a whole into a collective project' (Pinchevsky 2011: 256). Such a view could also be supported by

Gardner's larger argument that 'the comics form is ideally suited to this "[digital] revolution"' (2012: 149) because it has featured from its beginnings core characteristics of new media forms, such as the breakdown between producer and consumer, participatory culture, and reliance on a database logic.

The memory work performed by the collage technique of *Les Écrans* can be related to the practice of scrapbooking – a mode of preservation at the margins of institutional archives – used early on by readers to preserve ephemeral newspaper comic strips (Gardner 2013). While many collected the daily instalment of an open-ended serialized story, some readers – and aspiring cartoonists in particular – used to cut out favorite panels and to assemble them in various categories. Comics have always enticed their readers to pick up the pencil themselves (Gardner 2012: 72–77), and these scrapbooks crucially functioned as collections of material to be appropriated, reused, redeployed in new contexts. As such, they also provided the basis for copying, swiping and plagiarizing, standard practices in a comics industry that did not make a strong case of individual authorship. Moreover, there are deep analogies and perhaps exchanges between this practice and the work of Pop artists. Ray Yoshida of the Chicago Imagists, for instance, would cut and paste comic strip fragments into scrapbooks and organize them along various themes and motifs that would later on deliver the basis for his famous collages (see the Ray Yoshida Papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art).

Ristorcelli sets forth this cut-and-paste aesthetics in his account of the Fukushima disaster, drawing on the image as a carrier of memory. Moreover, his blog *Théâtre de papier électrique* documents the process and catalogues pages from his own scrapbook, directly illustrating how concrete panels are appropriated in the book (**Figure 2**). By doing so, he is reclaiming the appropriative practices of fine arts, be it Pop Art or Chicago Imagism, for the comics medium, despite the enduring resentment against these movements in the comics world. Moreover, the comics he appropriates are those where imitation and plagiarism have arguably been the most widespread: small comics digests, known in French as *petits formats* or *pockets.* These small, cheap pocket books were printed in black and white on pulp paper accommodating serials in various popular genres (science-fiction, western, romance, funny animals,

Figure 2: Ristorcelli, J., sketchbook page of collaged panels, *Théâtre de papier électrique*, 16 September 2014 [Accessed 9 November 2015].

etcetera). These *petits formats* epitomize the mass industrialized comics production: Massively produced in the 1960s and 1970s, these petits formats . . . : publishers would buy microfilms mostly from American and Italian comics publishers or syndicates, and have their cartoonists and artisans anonymously reassemble the material. The process involved writing the dialogues, cutting 'sensitive' panels or elements liable to censorship, redrawing the backgrounds, and so on. Despite their enormous proliferation, these *petits formats* are relegated to a footnote in histories of comics, which privilege the adult comics of the 60s and 70s, often inscribing the past into national comics traditions where the *petits formats* emerged out of transnational exchanges.[1] Ristorcelli's collage undoubtedly reads as an homage to this forgotten production. Like scrapbooks were meant to preserve preferred comics images, *Les Écrans* combines these 'visual possessions' into a long sequence that mimics the aesthetics of the *petits formats* – realistic drawing style, strong black and white contrasts, grey zip-a-tone – only reanimating their collected fragments into another context (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Ristorcelli, J. *Les Écrans*. (Montreuil: Matière, 2014: 28–29). (c) Editions Matière, 2014.

Figure 4: Author unknown. *Battler Britton*, no. 178 (Lyon: Imperia, 1967: 44–45). © Imperia, 1967.

In the selection and collection that underpins the creation of *Les Écrans*, Ristorcelli draws predominantly from war comics such as *Battler Britton* (**Figure 4**), selecting elements from these past comics that are able to speak to the present. Ristorcelli's graphic narrative is one long flow of chaotic transformations that visually echo the Tsunami disaster: explosions, tumbling objects, crashing vehicles, falling rocks, overflowing waves, burning cities, and so forth. The author thus 'represents' the Fukushima catastrophe by establishing links with presumably unrelated events in the past. Through this visual polyphony, *Les Écrans* ties the Fukushima disaster to other historical events. The civil defense posters date from the Sino-Japanese War and their imagery, featuring gas masks and nuclear mushroom clouds (**Figure 4**), strongly evoke the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an enduring topic in Japanese popular culture (from *Gojira* to *Barefoot Gen* and *Akira*). Furthermore, Ristorcelli also goes back to World War II through the American and European war comics, which bear marked historical and ideological residues. By cutting them to pieces and stripping them of their narratives, however, Ristorcelli also interrogates war comics, their representation of the conflict and their reliance on heroic figures. In *Les Écrans*, characters are barely recognizable, differentiable, and seem completely stripped of their agency, as if overwhelmed by the montage of catastrophic images. The connections between historical events that Ristorcelli's collage and montage techniques bring up are not, however, explicit or led back to a singular plane of experience: instead, they rely on a logic of association which, ultimately, remains in the hands of the reader. What it does unravel, is a Warburgian ability to recover how memory travel through images, traditions, across space and time, how American war comics translated to Europe might strangely speak to our experience of the media representation of a natural disaster in Japan.

Conclusion

Where contemporary mass media, in a more positive light than Baudrillard's, might be a channel for 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg 2004), *Les Écrans* hardly confronts us or creates a sense of relationship, or even solidarity with the victims of the Fukushima disaster. In this perspective, Ristorcelli's book is not primarily a cosmopoli-

tan and ethical memory narrative, as many graphic novels rightfully aim to be. In its montage-like flow of images, built up from scraps of salvaged comics, Ristorcelli formally reconstructs a transnational dialogue between various cultural traditions, recovering other ways of remembering. Simultaneously informed by the collector's scrapbooks and by fine artists as Lichtenstein and Yoshida, *Les Écrans* highlights the dialectics of memory, remembering and forgetting, and how they affect cultural objects in a media age. Driven by an 'archival impulse' (Foster 2004), Ristorcelli compellingly shows that revisiting the past of comics can be a complex and multilayered enterprise, strikingly different from the 'fashion for anything vintage' that characterizes a significant segment of contemporary graphic novels (Baetens and Frey 2015: 218). Ristorcelli's homage to trashy, third-rate war comics is instantiated in a cut-and-paste aesthetics that strays away from both the healthy preservation of comics into institutional archives (from which *petits formats* are usually absent) and from the development of a money-driven collector culture obsessed with 'mint condition.' This recirculation conveys a living, travelling memory, not one which is hoarded into the liminal space of the institutional archive: as such, Ristorcelli's practice is in tune with a globalized 'convergence culture' that sustains appropriation and mobility of content (Jenkins 2008). By upholding a mobile conception of memory, *Les Écrans* proposes a formal experimentation that, although tapping into the past, seems to express a strong belief in the future, in the possibility of expanding new ways to use the image as a powerful carrier of memory.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Note

[1] Although of course Tardi and Pratt are themselves examples of authors with transnational careers.

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