

Capturing life in the moment
An aesthetic approach to Joan Sfar's drawing

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Introduction

As a relatively young medium whose cultural role is often minimized, comics have long demanded intelligent criticism which would take them seriously.¹ Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear comic artists complain about the lack of interest in the *aesthetic* qualities of their drawings. For instance, Gélida Luz, in a discussion with Lefred Thouron, laments the fact that criticism focuses more often than not on ideas instead of the line.² As I will show here, the very separation of these two aspects of drawing is itself not relevant, given the close relationship between line and idea, a relationship evident in all types of visual art. Contemporary visual theorists often opt for a formal approach which focuses on art's anthropological and cultural contingencies, connecting the world of form to that of thought. Comics, however, lack such categories of analysis. Furthermore, given the specific characteristics of sequence drawing, one cannot simply apply to it the existing, classic categories of analysis. Where can one find the adequate theoretical tools to perform an aesthetic reading of comics?

Even though a critical approach, by definition, requires distancing oneself from the material analyzed, insiders are sometimes involved in the critical discussion. It is not uncommon for artists to create their own theoretical tools from a **fruitful**

1 In the second issue of *L'Éprouvette* (June 2006), Christian Rosset declares on the subject: "Criticism should be as much *in motion* as the object of its analysis; it should attempt to define itself through a dialogue with its perpetually changing subject [...]. Criticism should be at once an art and a struggle, oscillating between mimicry and vampirism to avoid the trap of beatific approval. Criticism is all the more difficult when the art in question is accomplished with unbearable ease. The graphic novel, with its blatant abuse of all manners of shortcuts, has shaped a body of criticism in its image: one that is lazy, weak-willed, cartoonishly fusional. This *other* graphic novel, which accepts confrontation, as have all self-respecting art-forms since the dawn of time, requires a *new* criticism, one which other practices have long asked for and received through a very simple, almost natural process [...], a criticism conducted by neither journalists nor academics (in other words, known, identified specialists whose discourse is flat and predictable), but which lives instead be the realm of those whom we shall call *critic-artists* (in reference to the *philosopher-artist*, a free thinker, disengaged from the academic tradition of intolerant, self-aggrandizing philosophy)." Rosset, Christian. "Avis d'orage en fin de journée." *L'Éprouvette* 2 (June 2006): 76.

2 Gélida Luz and Lefred Thouron. "Bande dessinée et dessin d'humour." *L'Éprouvette* 2 (June 2006): 219.

reading of their own work. One might imagine that the autobiographical style recently adopted by some independent comic artists (such as those belonging to the French group *L'Association*) might reveal certain useful analytical tools. In rereading Joann Sfar's autobiographical notebooks (*Harmonica*, *Ukulele*, *Parapluie*, *Piano*, and *Caravan*, collectively the *Carnets*), published by *L'Association*, one can find a few hints of his methodology and technique, scattered here and there among everyday, sometimes insignificant stories. First and foremost, I will strive to understand Sfar's distinction between “raw” and “intelligent” drawing – the latter supporting the concept of an intimate interweaving between line and idea.

The work of Quentin Blake, a professed influence on Sfar, is useful in defining the broad strokes of a new methodology. Blake is an English illustrator who specializes in drawing for children and acted as head of the Illustration Department at London's Royal College of Art from 1978 to 1986. He belongs, along with the French artist Sempé, to what has been called the “spontaneous generation,” a group of comic artists who became known for their virtuosity, their lively style, their rapid strokes, and the accuracy of expressions sketched on the spot. In 1995, Blake published (in France) *La vie de la page* (*The page's life*), edited by Gallimard Jeunesse. In this “work book,” Blake reveals some of the professional “tricks” he uses as an illustrator and documents, through a series of chosen drawings, the major steps in the development of his style.³ A comparison of this text to Sfar's notebooks leaves little doubt as to Blake's aesthetic influence on Sfar.⁴ The latter promotes a similar artistic project: an exploration of the link between drawing and movement in real time, in other words, between drawing and life as it unfolds visually, **with its incidents and changes in rhythm**. With this in mind, there are several problems that should be addressed, problems which are invariably followed by creative stylistic solutions. I will tackle four of these today: (1) fine arts education, (2) a critique of realistic drawing, (3) a defense of imaginative drawing, and (4) the “awkwardness” of color.

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Fine arts education

In *Caravan* (2005), Sfar describes several events which help us understand his training as a comic artist. During brief jaunts to the fine arts academy, he mixes anonymously with students. Sfar's story, as it is staged in his 2005 notebook,

3 Quentin Blake, *La vie de la page*, Paris, Gallimard Jeunesse, 1995.

4 Indeed, Sfar notes in *Caravan* that the two illustrators did actually meet.

appears at first witty and almost pretentious; the comic artist is able to illustrate his distance vis-à-vis the training received there. Furthermore, this position also enables him to engage in a critique of academic drawing which is realistic, anatomical, and deprived of life. This criticism reappears several times in his work. Sfar justifies his chronic need to return to the fine arts academy by noting that he would have “unfortunately” lost his ability to transform the human form into a lifeless object. From the distance provided by the passage of the many years since his training, Sfar sees his current style of drawing as “marred by too much compassion” (we shall see that, in his eyes, the [dessin d'amoureux] he advocates is ethically virtuous). So, because he “draws very badly,” he feels the need to return to that drawing “without love, which sees only form and light.” (*Caravan*)

In the same spirit, Sfar protests the habit of drawing from models. Even though he recognizes that his imaginative drawing is rooted in, and continues to draw upon, anatomical drawing, and while he also regularly practices sketching, Sfar persists in “disapproving of those poses, even short ones, of this concept of reading bones and muscles.” He thinks he has “wasted too much time with those.” (*Caravan*) This theme becomes a true *leitmotiv*; instead of paying attention to the quick poses taught in morphology classes, Sfar prefers to draw students in the act of drawing. In this academic setting, only those who try to translate the lines of the model onto paper are not posing, which makes them, in turn, “infinitely drawable.” The models, even while being asked to do this or that, unknowingly adopt poses that seem “to come straight out of nineteenth-century sculpture” (maybe influenced by their setting). (*Caravan*) One can understand a graphic novelist’s frustration with this tradition of “freezing”; they prevent the artist from capturing surprise, movement, awkwardness, style – all the things that make a character alive. More importantly, the morphological description advocated by academic drawing divides the body into distinct pieces, removing the model's personality. Sfar therefore challenges this traditional method:

We teach people to draw in the following way: first, they draw the model in white chalk while observing him. Then, using whatever knowledge they have acquired, they draw a skeleton, in there, in yellow chalk, and then muscles, in red chalk, and then tendons, in blue chalk. I have never dared be so blunt but this method is plain shitty. These young people never draw clothes. They are turned into baroque butchers, whether one likes it or not. What interests me the most in a model is his wristwatch, his feet on the dusty wooden platform, the way he sometimes looks at the girls around him. (*Caravan*)

Sfar prefers the less traditional idea of friendly harmony between forms to baroque

butchery. In *Parapluie*, he remembers the lessons of a former drawing teacher who compared the human frame to that of a tree. Learning about the way sap becomes wood, then wood becomes leaves is more beneficial than “ruining one's eyes on anatomical works.” To draw the human figure, one must capture the whole and should not consider the skin, the muscles, the tendons and the bones independently. Sfar retains the idea of interpenetrating elements (whether in the human form or even in a landscape) from this training. He seeks a type of drawing that emphasizes the movement and energy emanating from a situation or a character. What is at play in graphic expression is not the representation of still bodies but the gestures that these bodies perform. The problem is precisely that the stillness of the posing attitude does not convey any movement.⁵ A raised arm is not simply an anatomical member, but also the beginning of a gesture. (Blake) A drawing must strike a balance between anatomical precision and spontaneity. Blake, in a comment which undoubtedly inspired Sfar, was already insisting on the significance of this approach:

The more varied and interesting my illustrations were, the stronger my calling as an illustrator became. However, I was also becoming aware of how inexperienced I was in the field of life drawing. I therefore enrolled at Chelsea Art School in order to attend a class once or twice a week in the study of the nude. In the studio, I learned to draw from the figure, observing it and choosing various angles. At the end of the day, once home, I tried my hand at drawing from memory, thus more spontaneously. My work at the studio started to subtly affect the way I drew. I was making a conscious effort to keep a balance between what I had seen and what I imagined. At the core of the art of illustration lies the very ability to imagine the drawing, to try to approach this balance, and the gesture itself. (VP 31)

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A critique of realistic drawing

Sfar's autobiographical journals also contain a general reflection on the degree of realism drawings should exhibit. Here, the question of the relationship between realism and fiction (or, to stick to Sfar's vocabulary, between *realistic drawing* and

5 This does not mean, however, that Johann Sfar's drawings lack precision. While his strokes are quick and he has sometimes been accused of being somewhat untidy (particularly in his recent version of *The Little Prince*), he captures some more singular elements, such as the way people hold accessories (a cigarette, a phone, glasses) or fold the newspaper they are reading, making “incredible origami.” The chosen details are usually selected in relation to the action which the artist decides to display.

imaginative drawing) is approached from both theoretical and practical angles. In *Piano* (2003), for instance, even as he attempts to summarize his debate with Moebius (his “master,” as he calls him), he realizes that their discussions have affected him substantially. He notes for example that, since he met Moebius, he has been constantly “trying to push some of his drawings towards realism.” As the narrative of his notebook develops, Sfar's drawing evolves, is transformed, as his theoretical position itself matures. The debate alluded to in the pages of *Piano*, which began in a conversation between Philippe Ostermann, Christophe [Blain?], Sfar and Moebius (on April 30, 2003), is centered around the relationship between comics and reality (a core question in the field of fine arts, but one which seems not to have been transferred to the emerging medium of comics without complications). According to Moebius, *L'Association*'s comic artists should not automatically forsake realistic drawing but, on the contrary, should try from time to time to “draw a face in minute detail, down to each and every eyelash.” While not calling into question his entire range of pictorial choices, this critical suggestion will help Sfar clarify his work's central goals. According to him Sfar, if the sole goal was reproducing reality, then photography would have long ago wiped out the art of drawing. Moebius retorts that drawing is interesting precisely because it is never able to be perfectly realistic. Sfar and Moebius agree on this point: whether it is realistic or imaginative, a drawing is never able to completely reproduce what inspired it. It is always “off,” not meeting expectations – Sfar is a master in letting the awkwardness of the artist's attempts show through. In fact, the drawing's apparent “falseness” and the inevitable gap between it and reality are hints of the artist's personality. Through trial and error, artists find their own style. Reality is indeed never exposed in its entirety: “good illustrators create a falseness which cannot be reproduced.” Retracing the major stages of his career, Blake recalls that when working as an illustrator for a newspaper, the editorial staff often chose to publish his draft, preferring it to the final version, which was less expressive and less lively. (VP 25)

In the course of these questions, Sfar stages a conversation about reality between himself and (none other than) the “drawing genie.” His position in this debate becomes gradually apparent. According to the genie, Moebius's approach is “truly nonsensical”: while pretending to love reality, Moebius strips it of its essence. The things that he draws (down to “each and every eyelash”) can only be seen “if the life model agrees to stay still like a statue of salt.”⁶ However, this is not what drawing is about; drawing must capture “movement, inconsistency, and the way

6 Sfar then decides that the best thing to do is to photocopy the pages of his journal and to send them to Moebius so that he can respond. Sfar genuinely endeavors to understand the “love for stillness” which the drawing genie attributes to his “master.”

things unfold.” In comics, movement is key, which accounts for the genie's advice: “Moebius's internal clock is set on the temporality of stones. If you want to draw mountains, that's fine. But if you want to draw life figures, look to Sempé.” Just as he is about to move from this fictional conversation (with the drawing genie) to a real one with Moebius, Sfar advocates “letting things live in their own rhythm, not stopping them to observe them better, a little like Sempé.” Moebius replies that only an “innocent hand” can achieve such perfection and elegance in a drawing. Moebius admits feeling incapable of “such evanescence,” as all of his work is based on controlling the stroke.

Are we to surmise that Sfar himself has such an “innocent hand”? That the childish, sometimes rough, but never cluttered, quality of his work attains the spontaneity he advocates? It is uncertain whether Sfar would speak of innocence when referring to the artists he admires so deeply (Sempé, Blake). On the contrary, Sfar knows that quick sketching requires tremendous skill. Blake himself is aware of the skill his technique presupposes; as the leader of the “spontaneous generation” and in order to maintain his “innocent hand,” he uses entirely new techniques:

(...) I went to great pains to perfect ways to organize and maintain this impression of spontaneity In the past few years, I have been using a sort of light table, a source of light placed under a pane of frosted glass, the type of device normally used to look at negatives. I lay my sketch on this pane and, above it, a piece of fine-grained Canson or Arches watercolor paper. The next step is not transferring the sketch. Actually, the key here is for me not to be able to see my sketch clearly because, when I start to draw, I try hard to do it as if it was my first sketch. I am in deep concentration, however, because the sketch under the watercolor paper offers me a glimpse of all the elements that will eventually appear and their location. (VP 40)

One must understand things in depth in order to be able to produce an intelligent drawing. In order to improve his spontaneous drawing, Sfar regularly forces upon his own practices a return to the academic approach. He proves that he can master both – or, in any case, he reveals their complementarity. For example, his notebooks often feature, on a single page or on pages facing each other, a visual confrontation between his *realistic drawing* and his *imaginative drawing* (such stylistic oppositions are, in fact, typical of his autobiographical work). These confrontations complicate the notion of simplified drawing and enhance its humorous potential.

The plea for imaginative drawing

In sum, Sfar rejects realistic drawing because he prefers a type of drawing that is quick, full of life, and does not require posing. In other words, he prefers the drawing styles of Sempé and Blake. To create such drawings, the artist must draw from his imagination and use his intelligence in order to extract from a particular event the few features that make it dynamic or comical. Instead of exhausting himself attempting to capture all of reality's many facets, Sfar focuses his drawings on what really matters: the tensions in play, the points of imbalance, the striking details, the grimaces... The comic artist goes straight to the source of emotion. Sfar's *Carnets* contain all of his criticism of non-spontaneous drawings, the products of calculated, slow processes. For Sfar, there's no need for preparatory sketches or models, no need to erase or cover up the incidents brought forth by the concrete working conditions of the comic artist. For example, Sfar plays with the transparency of his journal's pages – whenever he has been a little too heavy-handed with ink on the *front* of the page, he integrates the stains produced on the *back* of the page into a new drawing. The underlying principle of his method can be summarized as follows: capture movement, situations, expressions as quickly as they appear, freeing yourself of any notions of aestheticism in the process (in other words, of unnecessary embellishment). This stylistic principle is wonderfully implemented in the particularly rapid rhythm of the *Carnets*. Sfar makes no secret of his admiration for Blake: some of his statements are almost direct quotations from the English illustrator. In *La vie de la page*, Blake indeed noted that:

One of the first precepts of comic drawing is to not copy nature. Turning to realism is, in my opinion, unnecessary; on the contrary, one should define a series of signs and **symbols** which, while forming simplified and emblematic images, are nonetheless infused with life. My early drawings were stiff and rigid and it took me a while develop a certain ease and fluidity. (VP 25)

For Sfar, a drawing's intelligence is measured by the level of talent with which captures everyday life events. (The question then becomes whether Sfar's drawings actually achieve that goal.) In his opinion, the way an artist sketches people or situations reflects a certain degree of sympathy and understanding of things – to such an extent, in fact, that the activity of drawing clearly becomes ethically-charged. According to Sfar, the drawings of Blake and Sempé have the power to help us tolerate our fellow human beings, even love them: “O, eternal God, help us get rid of priests but protect comic artists.” (*Caravan*) In an even more radical passage, Sfar claims that drawing might one day replace philosophy; if philosophers (whom he studied at the University of Nice) had learned how to draw, they would not treat others the way they do. The master comic artists know more

about the face than Lévinas does:⁷

I am against philosophy, after all. I have just slogged through a book of conversations between Fienkeltraut and Sloterdijk. They are very intelligent. What they say is very interesting, but, when it comes to thinking about the era, they get it wrong. Sometimes, philosophy is like... those old guys from the Muppet Show. They use the traditional philosophical tool, learned in school, to better understand our era – inventing new answers by letting old people talk to each other. I just spent two hundred pages in the company of Hegel, Nietzsche and Kant. I feel like I am taking the C.A.P.E.S. [a test required to teach in France] again. And the two speakers are just doing the same old thing, booing the youth, contenting themselves to merely observe and to deplore anyone who isn't three thousand years old. Here's the rub: unlike a lot of people my age, I actually agree with most of the points made in these conversations. But that does not mean I like the book. Even if one repeats "Lévinas, the face, Lévinas, the face," like a sad parrot, that does not make one know what a face is, even if one is a philosopher. We should just get rid of scholarly references and force these old farts from the Muppet Show to draw! (*Caravan*)

This is a bold move, to say the least. But what is Sfar trying to get at? In order to create true ethical relations between people, it is urgent, he says, to "learn how to look at each other," to see things as they are. Sfar considers drawing the best way of seeing possible. Through drawing, one grows and enhances one's idea of the other. While not in opposition to speech, the act of drawing nonetheless forces us to look before speaking: "A society that forgets about drawing is one that builds a blind world and condemns its citizens to restless wandering, to discursive otherness. Words push people apart, while drawings bring them together." (*Caravan*)

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The awkwardness of color

The question of color is a difficult one, which lacks illustrative examples. While color plays a crucial role in the *Carnets*, in both its thematic and its material dimensions, it is never seen as such, since *L'Association* has chosen to print the notebooks in black and white.⁸ However, because the reader's eyes cannot see

7 The concept of the "Face" plays a central role in the ethical philosophy of Lévinas, as it allows one to conceive of otherness in all of its differences.

8 The reader thus has somewhat of a distorted experience of the images. One cannot fully appreciate, for

more than shades of black and white (and variations in dilution of color), they can spend more time focusing on the lighting. Sfar explains in *Caravan* that he discovered watercolor painting through Reiser. One day, when he was around 12 years old, he saw Reiser on television drawing one of his characters (Gros Degueulasse – which one could translate by “Sleazy Bastard”) on a sheet of paper, then adding watercolor to it (before dipping his drawing in water to further dilute the colors). For Sfar, this was an aesthetic shock. Later, as Sfar himself starts experimenting with colors, he tries watercolor and realizes how many possibilities this method holds:

In watercolor, it's simple: there are two methods and a constant. Constant: in a drawing, watercolor fights with the stroke. If there are too many strokes, there's no room left for the watercolor. This is why the inking in watercolor drawings has to be light, lively, lacunar. The watercolorer must have a taste for white, for empty spaces, and for breaks. His color must not reduce the stroke to a mere contour.⁹ 1) Quentin Blake's Method: Quentin Blake has a style of drawing that is very sharp – he goes directly to the ink, without penciling first. Next, he throws color on the drawing without styling in the lines and without concern for the “real” colors [...].¹⁰ 2) Pratt's Method: Pratt starts with a very light pencil sketch. Then, he adds the color. Only one color, aside from the white paper. For Pratt, the inking comes after the coloration. **He can easily** ink with a felt-tipped pen.

While Sfar occasionally uses watercolor without the ink, he clearly prefers Blake's approach. (cf. *Klezmer*) Moreover, the often quite technical instructions in the *Carnets* (similar to those in “*Dessiner avec Joann Sfar*” / “*Drawing with Joann Sfar*”), reprinted in an appendix to *Klezmer*, again mirror Blake's: don't get stuck on the real colors, don't color in the lines, and many other esthetical principles that encourage imaginative drawing.

The advantages of watercolor, as a medium, are manifold: its fluidity, and thus its light, and the effects of transparency it permits. Watercolor also has an interesting relationship with the paper – it is soaked up immediately, making any attempt to

example, the results of Sfar testing out his new box of watercolors by putting on paper all the shades of colors he'll be able to use.

9 Blake: “Above all, the color must not just fill the shapes. On the contrary, the lightness and the fluidity of watercolor give the drawing a new charm. A discreet touch of the paintbrush adds an agreeable visual element while not compromising the dynamic quality of an ephemeral movement.” (VP, 75)

10 Blake: “Like many people, I am a victim of that well-rooted chromatic prejudice that says that leaves are green and tree trunks are brown. It took a great deal of willpower for me to rid myself of this caution and to realize (as the Impressionists taught us) that they could also be blue or purple, or that, to represent the luminosity of the sky, orange might be better than blue.” (VP, 71)

cover it with another color futile. Unlike acrylic paint which forms an opaque layer that can be painted over, watercolor soaks into the paper (which, once full, will no longer absorb anything one might add). Thus, using this technique, it is impossible to color everything. The color is applied lightly, which combines perfectly with the spontaneous, quick drawings. One of the characteristics of watercolor that stands out to Sfar is that the color sometimes spreads much more quickly than one might like, causing irreparable accidents. To say it another way, and by way of conclusion, color is a material which is risky and delicate, defying excessive mastery. Watercolor preserves the fragility of things, leaving room for things to happen. All in all, it captures beautifully the qualities of life – just like the spontaneous drawing Sfar advocates, in the wake of Quentin Blake.