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Rethinking the ‘Memorable Panel’ from Pierre Sterckx to Olivier Josso Hamel

Benoît Crucifix

Abstract: This article returns to the origins of the *case mémorable* in the pages of *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée*, and revisits the debates between Pierre Sterckx and Benoît Peeters over the relationship between single panels and narrative, which were articulated around a conceptual tension between linear and tabular. It proposes that the concept of the ‘memorable panel’ pinpoints important issues concerning the recirculation of single images, isolated from their contexts, and the discourse of memory that becomes associated with them. A close reading of Olivier Josso Hamel’s *Au travail*, in which the cartoonist redraws his own set of memorable panels, further calls for a reconsideration of Sterckx’s concept in the light of a creative practice that intimately engages with the memory of such panels in a complex relationship to their original narratives.

Keywords: memorable panel, memory, Olivier Josso Hamel, Pierre Sterckx, graphiation, redrawing

In the first volume of his autobiographical series *Au travail* [At work], Olivier Josso Hamel remembers his childhood readings of Franco-Belgian comics such as *Spirou*, *Tintin*, *Lucky Luke* and *Astérix*, repurposing those remembered fragments on his own pages. By redrawing these fetishised panels into his own work, Josso Hamel seeks to understand his own fascination for these particular fragments: ‘Des images précises m’emplissent d’un souffle pénétrant. Pourquoi celles-ci, justement?’ [Certain specific images strike home to me. Why these particular ones?] (Figure 1).¹ The question raised by the author is one that has long resonated in the French comics world. This remembrance of childhood comics reading was precisely what obsessed Pierre Sterckx when he coined the concept of the *case mémorable* to designate those memorable panels that keep coming back to the adult reader.²

<FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>

Figure 1. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L’Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso

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1. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L’Association, 2012), n.p. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2. Pierre Sterckx, ‘Les Cases mémorables de Pierre Sterckx’, *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* 56 (1984), 67–69 (67).

Hamel and L'Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

The aim of this article is to revisit Sterckx's concept of the memorable panel using Josso Hamel's contemporary graphic novel *Au travail*, which invites us to rethink what seems to be a somewhat forgotten piece in the history of 'French comics theory'.³ Proposing to single out panels from their original contexts, Sterckx's idea was highly debated, and I first lay out the controversies that animated the critical discourse around the *case mémorable* at its origins in *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* in the mid-1980s. I then propose a close reading of Josso Hamel's *Au travail*, still a relatively understudied work, arguing that the redrawing practice it foregrounds helps us to reconsider the concept of the *case mémorable* by thematising a fascination for the way remembered fragments circulate out of their contexts, permeating the lives of their readers.⁴

***Les Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée* and the Origins of the Memorable Panel**

The term *case mémorable*, or 'memorable panel', was coined by art critic and Hergé scholar Pierre Sterckx in 1984 as the heading for a new column in the comics criticism magazine *Les*

3. Ann Miller and Bart Beaty, eds and trans, *The French Comics Theory Reader* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014).

4. Short but convincing insights into Josso Hamel's *Au travail* can be found in Catherine Mao, 'La Bande dessinée autobiographique francophone (1982–2013): Transgression, hybridation, lyrisme,' unpublished PhD diss., Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014, 55–57; Jacques Dürrenmatt, *Bande dessinée et littérature* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), 152–154.

Cahiers de la bande dessinée.⁵ Sterckx described these ‘memorable panels’ as ‘ces cases exceptionnelles qu’il habita dans son enfance, et au sein desquelles il nidifia . . . qui le hantent, lui revenant et revenant en mémoire, intactes, luminescentes et magiques’ [those outstanding panels that he or she (the young comics reader) ‘inhabited’ in his or her childhood, within which he or she nested . . . ; those intact, shining, and magic images that haunt him or her, coming back to him or her again and again].⁶ The column aimed at accommodating an ‘infinite inventory’ of those fetishised images, explicitly calling on the readers to send out their own collections of memorable panels. By extending out to a community of readers sharing memories of comics reading, the column simultaneously sought to invoke these memories for a theoretical reflection on the autonomy of the image. Indeed, Sterckx firmly asserted the autonomous visual quality of the drawing itself above and even against the narrative. As he (in)famously wrote in the introductory text: ‘La case, pas la séquence. Une image, pas le récit’ [The panel and not the sequence. One image and not the narrative].⁷ Sterckx’s background as an art historian underscored a pictorial understanding of the comics panel – obvious in his description of the memorable panel as some ‘tableaux de ferveur encadrés de nuit’ [ardent paintings framed by darkness] – claiming attention for the autonomy of the drawn lines against their narrativisation.

Responding to Sterckx’s call within the very same column ‘Cases mémorables’, Benoît Peeters openly challenged its theoretical premises and criticised this painterly view of the comics

5. Sterckx, ‘Les Cases mémorables’.

6. Ibid., 67.

7. Ibid.

panel.⁸ A mere year after its inception, Sterckx's concept of the 'memorable panel' was thus already in jeopardy at a theoretical level. To Peeters, who would reuse and rework this text for his influential *Case, planche, récit*, such a painterly understanding of the panel conflicted with the specificity of the image in comics.⁹ Referring back to Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, Peeters recalled that the comics panel is an 'image en déséquilibre' [unstable image], oscillating between the *récit* and the *tableau*.¹⁰ Peeters thus stresses the fundamental tension that Fresnault-Deruelle had introduced in his seminal 1976 article 'Du linéaire au tabulaire' as the tension between the linear and the tabular: on one hand, the linear temporality of panels read one after the other 'for' the narrative, and on the other hand, the spatial quality that the segmentation of the page takes when looked at in tabular, non-linear, plastic terms, superseding the linear narrative.¹¹ Fresnault-Deruelle describes them as 'deux pratiques spécifiques . . . qui sont à la fois complémentaires et antagonistes, aussi dialectiquement liées que peuvent l'être le continu et le discontinu' [two quite specific practices . . . that are both complementary and conflicting, bound up in a dialectic of continuity versus discontinuity], noting the 'hesitation' always possible between these two

8. Benoît Peeters, 'La Case mémorable de Benoît Peeters', *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* 65 (1985), 88–89.

9. Benoît Peeters, *Case, planche, récit: Comment lire une bande dessinée* (Tournai: Casterman, 1991).

10. Peeters, 'La Case mémorable', 89.

11. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, 'Du linéaire au tabulaire', *Communications* 24, no. 1 (1976), 7–23; translated as 'From Linear to Tabular' in Miller and Beaty, *The French Comics Theory Reader*, 121–138.

practices.¹²

While Sterckx precisely emphasises the tabular aspect of the panel over its narrative function, the intertwined tension of linear and tabular becomes key to Peeters's response. Anticipating some of the theories about page layout that he would more fully develop in *Case, planche, récit*, extending and refining Fresnault-Deruelle's arguments, Peeters argued that the single panel could not so easily be ripped out of its context, out of the elements that surround it – the sequence, the page, and the double page – a larger frame that he would later call the 'périchamp' [perifield].¹³ Taking as his example a panel from Edgar P. Jacobs's *La Marque jaune*, he highlights how the cartoonist captures in masterly fashion a moment of narrative tension that makes it an 'incomplete' image, a fragment that fascinatingly displays its ties to a larger narrative, condensing time within one panel that both draws the reader in and propels the narrative forward. In doing so, Peeters stressed the solidarity of the panel with its context, an idea that Thierry Groensteen would ground as the 'iconic solidarity' core of the system of comics.¹⁴ As Erwin Dejasse notes in his discussion of the debate, 'montrer une case, c'est convoquer toute la mémoire du récit' [to show one panel means to invoke the entire memory of the narrative].¹⁵ Sterckx himself could not refrain from bringing the story in when invoking his

12. Fresnault-Deruelle, 'Du linéaire au tabulaire', 7; 'From Linear to Tabular', 121.

13. Peeters, *Case, planche, récit*, 15.

14. Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen as *The System of Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

15. Erwin Dejasse, 'Sacralisation et légitimation: Les hors-textes de la revue *L'Éprouvette*:

own ‘memorable’ panels, revealing how difficult it is to single out the panel and cut its ties from its periphery. Peeters’s concern was an attempt to understand more correctly how we read comics, at a point when *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* was nurturing a growing desire to develop a theory of comics that would only truly begin to thrive in the early 1990s. His text already hints at the theoretical points that he later would flesh out in *Case, planche, récit*, which precisely highlights how the two parameters of linearity and tabularity can reveal various conceptions of the page, broken down into four uses (conventional, decorative, rhetorical, productive). To consider the single panel in painterly terms only, however, unbalances the dynamic tension between linear and tabular that, for Peeters, makes comics such an innovative form: it means approaching comics as if it were painting and disregarding its specificity.

Peeters’s response, then, must also be read as a statement concerning what was then a fast-growing trend in comics production: not only were comics entering the exhibition space of museums and galleries (it suffices to think here of the decision to blow up single panels into large pictures for the 1967 exhibition *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*), but many artists were also adopting painterly techniques and a preference for lavish pictoriality as part of their cartooning practice (the *couleur directe* [direct colour] movement).¹⁶ Linked with this growing fascination for the pictoriality of comics, the Franco-Belgian comics world also increasingly developed a fetishistic relationship to its images and an obsession with collectors’ items such as

Fragments d’une histoire discriminante’, in ‘La Bande dessinée: Un “art sans mémoire”’, special issue, *Comicalités* (2012), <http://comicalites.revues.org/1093>.

16. Thierry Groensteen, *Couleur directe* (Thurn: Kunst der Comics, 1993).

the screen print.¹⁷ Interestingly, the panel that Peeters selects is not an image he remembers but one he has acquired: a screen print from *La Marque jaune*. This is precisely a panel that has been ‘isolée de son context et privée de son support habituel’ [isolated from its context and removed from its usual medium] to participate in the larger fetishistic circulation of single images in comics art.¹⁸ His argument was not only a theoretical and formal one; it was also aimed at developments in the comics world that he would question more thoroughly in his short essay *La Bande dessinée: Un exposé pour comprendre, un essai pour réfléchir* [Comics: An exposé to understand, an essay to reflect] as well as in his chapter ‘Images à la derive’ [Images adrift] in *L’Aventure des images*, a pioneering book on the intermedial challenges of comics ‘beyond’ comics.¹⁹ In opposition to the memorably pictorial panel, Peeters conspicuously stressed the modesty of these ‘images dont nul ne se souvient, sur lesquelles on passe sans s’y arrêter, entraîné par le rythme haletant de l’histoire’ [images that no one remembers, which the reader

17. On the circulation of images within the comics world beyond the print book, see Bart Beaty, ‘A Clear Line to Marcinelle: The Importance of Line in Émile Bravo’s *Spirou à Bruxelles*’, *European Comic Art* 4, no. 2 (2011), 199–211.

18. Peeters, ‘La Case mémorable’, 88.

19. Benoît Peeters, *La Bande dessinée: Un exposé pour comprendre, un essai pour réfléchir* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters, *L’Aventure des images: De la bande dessinée au multimédia* (Paris: Autrement, 1996). It should also be noted that, despite their different views, Pierre Sterckx and Benoît Peeters were friends and notably collaborated on the exhibition *Hergé dessinateur* and its catalogue, *Hergé dessinateur: 60 ans d’aventure* (Tournai: Casterman, 1989).

passes over without stopping, drawn into the story by its breathless rhythm]. He embraced their fleetingness in the distinct reading experience provided by the form, and, in his final words, gave a deadly blow to Sterckx's concept: 'Il n'y a pas de cases mémorables' [There is no such thing as a memorable panel].²⁰

From Fetish to Quotation

Perhaps as a result of this early critique, the concept of the memorable panel never gained currency in the theory of comics that firmly established itself in the 1990s. Within this approach to comics, Sterckx's idea that one could detach a panel from its context equated to an iconoclastic gesture, shattering what made the specificity of comics as a 'spatio-topical system'.²¹ Yet, I want to argue that comics scholarship, as it tests some of the limitations of this model, could productively recover the concept of the memorable panel to account for readers' relationships and engagements with comics that differ from the reading implied by semiotic-structuralist approaches to comics. While very attentive to the reading process, these theories often assume the text to be a cohesive whole that the reader reconstructs by filling in the gaps and linking the fragments together, thereby recovering its fundamental textual unity. As Groensteen writes, 'Comics exist only as a satisfying narrative form under the condition that, despite the discontinuous enunciation and the intermittent monstration, the resultant story forms an uninterrupted and intelligible totality.'²² This view was in part supported by the newfound

20. Peeters, 'La Case mémorable', 89.

21. Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 114.

dominance of the album as the standard reading format in francophone comics, a format allowing the reader to glance over page, double pages and the entire book in ways hitherto much harder to accomplish in serialised narratives.²³ As Jan Baetens has argued, French comics theory has carefully studied the temporality of the reading process as it navigates the space of the page, double page and book. In so doing, it assumes a spatiality of the text available as a whole, sidestepping other temporal dimensions of comics reading that are marked by a ‘caractère fragmenté, désuni, saccadé’ [fragmented, divided, jolting character] and that ‘échappent à la description de l’œuvre offerte à la vue et à l’analyse comme un ensemble clos’ [elude the description of the work as readily visible and its analysis as an enclosed whole].²⁴

Although Baetens identifies serial practices of reading here, Sterckx’s concept of the memorable panel similarly hints at reading processes that parcel and fragment the ‘text’ over

23. On the emergence of the album as a dominant format, see Sylvain Lesage, ‘Mutation des supports, mutation des publics: La bande dessinée de la presse au livre’, *Belphegor* 13, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.4000/belphegor.628.

24. Jan Baetens, ‘Strip, série, sequence’, *Transatlantica* 1 (2010), <http://transatlantica.revues.org/4921>, §9. See also Jan Baetens’s rereading of linearity and tabularity in the light of comic strip serials, ‘Hommage à Pierre Fresnault-Desruelle: Pour relire “Du linéaire au tabulaire”’, *Les Cahiers du GRIT* 1 (2011), 122–128. French comics theory is increasingly taking these serial dynamics into account, thanks notably to the research done by the Lausanne-based GrEBD. See for instance Alain Boillat, Françoise Revaz, Marine Borel and Raphaël Oesterlé, eds, *Case, strip, action! Les Feuilletons en bandes dessinées dans les magazines pour la jeunesse (1946–1959)* (Geneva: Infolio, 2016).

time, in this case breaking a fragment away from its spatial coordinates within the album. It foregrounds a whole array of questions and issues that are now resurfacing as part of a more general interest in reading mechanisms that ‘resist’ the narrative. Looking at the memorable panel can help us to respond to the ‘importance of exploring, in graphic narratives, the antinarrative tendencies that have been diagnosed in the study of other visual genres and media’, as Baetens called for in his analysis of abstraction in comics.²⁵ Such tendencies are manifest in the reader’s desire to rip an image out of its narrative context and ‘possess’ it, which emerges in the various practices of reproduction of comics fragments that characterise the comics world: isolated comics images will frequently appear in magazines and anthologies, museums and merchandising, silk screen prints and scrapbooks.²⁶

This wider recirculation of single images opens them up to the time of memory as they become memorable, remembered, redrawn. Praising a scopophilic (male) gaze, Sterckx certainly invoked the fetishistic qualities that such panels took on for readers when he described his attraction to a panel by Mœbius portraying a woman undressing, with Arzach looking at her from the background. ‘Cette femme qui ôte sa chemise, c’est l’image de bédé qui ôte sa chemise, c’est l’image de bédé qui dit qu’elle est d’abord et essentiellement dessin, que son tracé doit faire surface, et qu’il reprendra le terrain que lui avaient conquis, depuis le début, la narrativité et le texte’ [This woman taking off her shirt, it is the comics image taking off its shirt, telling us that it is primarily and essentially a drawing, that its tracing of line onto paper has to re-emerge, and

25. Jan Baetens, ‘Abstraction in Comics’, *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (2011), 94–113 (109).

26. Dejasse touches on some of these practices in ‘Sacralisation et légitimation’. See also Beaty, ‘A Clear Line to Marcinelle’.

reclaim the territory that, since the beginning, narrativity and text had conquered from it].²⁷ Peeters took issue with the nature of the memorable panel as a fetish, both in its one-sided celebration of the visual and in order to underline its constructedness. One year before Peeters's text, Marc-Henri Wajnberg's contribution had highlighted this composite nature of the memorable panel. Wajnberg, a filmmaker, started out by describing the striking differences between the memorable panel and its actual iteration in the album.²⁸ To Peeters, this was clear evidence that the memory of the panel never actually coincided with the actual panel and hence implied a distorted view of its function in comics: 'la case mémorable est un pur ectoplasme, un objet hallucinatoire produit par le fantasme rétrospectif du lecteur davantage que par le dessinateur' [the memorable panel is a mere ghost, a hallucinatory object produced by the retrospective fantasy of the reader rather than by the artist].²⁹

The fetish here implies, to borrow from Bruno Latour, that 'what the naïve believers are doing with objects is simply a projection of their wishes onto a material entity that does nothing at all by itself'.³⁰ Yet, the constructedness of comics memories does not necessarily make them less valid, as these memories have a deep impact on how readers build their own identities.³¹ As

27. Sterckx, 'Les Cases mémorables', 69.

28. Marc-Henri Wajnberg, 'La Case mémorable de Marc-Henri Wajnberg', *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* 59 (1984), 70–71.

29. Peeters, 'La Case mémorable', 88.

30. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004), 225–248 (237).

31. On the fact-fetish divide, see also Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*

Mel Gibson fascinatingly observed in the case of readers of girls' comics, such reading memories denote a relationship to comics in the way they are used: 'Readers' stories were centred more often on their relationship to these texts than on actual content.'³² Similarly, although with a greater focus on the visual dimension, readers writing in the 'Cases mémorables' column of *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* constantly highlight a very specific relationship with the panels they remember, often disconnecting them from their immediate context. Moreover, as in Gibson's framework, what matters most is the way readers reactivate those memories in the present; the memorable panel, as Sterckx himself was conceiving it, is inseparable from 'un travail de l'écriture' [a work of writing], a retrospective reflection that unfolds in the pages of a comics magazine: what was essentially a collective writing project, then, emerged to a larger view of the memorable panel as 'un atome de l'histoire de la bédé' [an atom of comics history].³³

After Peeters expertly spotlighted the theoretical shortcomings and pitfalls of a one-sided, painterly understanding of the comics panel, a reconceptualisation of the memorable panel thus needs to bear those limitations in mind by always examining the complex relationships between a single panel and its narrative, the fragment and its larger whole, even when the 'memory' of those panels acts counter-narratively. Acknowledging its necessarily retrospective quality, the memorable panel could nonetheless gain from being precisely rethought as a concept highlighting the dynamics of a 'memory of comics', the circulation of 'old' images into new

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

32. Mel Gibson, *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-war Constructions of British Girlhood* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 34.

33. Sterckx, 'Les Cases mémorables', 67.

contexts, as well as the formal and medial strategies for such quotations.

As a form of quotation, the memorable panel performs a kind of ‘metonymic canonization’.³⁴ It gives the panel a second life, turns it into an iconic image that performs a history of comics by bringing its memory into the present. It participates in shaping what Erwin Dejasse has called ‘discriminatory’ histories of comics: when readers share their memorable panels, in a sense, they produce a history of the medium aligned with their own personal memories.³⁵ That is also obviously true of cartoonists who frequently redraw these memorable panels: alongside Olivier Josso Hamel’s *Au travail*, Blutch redraws panels from *Lucky Luke*, *Pif* and others in his two-volume autobiographical project, *Le Petit Christian*, while Pascal Matthey either redraws or reproduces panels from *Tintin* and *Boule et Bill* in small narratives of childhood memories that draw their title from comics phrases as *Pascal est enfoncé* or *Du shimmy dans la vision*.³⁶ In each case, the redrawn panels are intertwined with personal childhood memories; yet, as Sylvain Lesage noted in his reading of Blutch’s work, it also partakes of a ‘patrimonial approach to comics’ that hinges on a larger, shared, collective form of memory.³⁷

34. Antoine Compagnon, *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 29.

35. Dejasse, ‘Sacralisation et légitimation’, §53.

36. Blutch, *Le Petit Christian*, vols 1 and 2 (Paris: L’Association, 1998 and 2008); Pascal Matthey, *Pascal est enfoncé* (Brussels: L’Employé du Moi, 2007) and *Du shimmy dans la vision* (Brussels: L’Employé du Moi, 2011).

37. Sylvain Lesage, ‘La Bande dessinée en son miroir: Images et usages de l’album dans la bande dessinée française’, *Mémoires du livre/Studies in Book Culture* 2, no. 2 (2011), doi:10.7202/1001764ar, §27.

Even more so than Blutch's work, Josso Hamel's *Au travail* offers by far the most self-reflexive example with which to rethink the *case mémorable* as a form of quotation that reads the original panels against their grain, disrupting them from their original narrative contexts to reinvest them as memories. Blutch, on his part, uses comics heroes as stand-ins for identity role models that the 'petit Christian' borrows from his comics readings: he is essentially interested in the larger narratives of masculinity that they articulate and symbolise, rather than in the dynamics of memory and narrative – two aspects with which *Au travail* engages more deeply. Moreover, where Blutch draws these heroes in his own style, *Au travail* also offers a reflexion *through* its drawings, which become the site of a dialogue with the original cartoonists' graphic lines. In this way, Josso Hamel always invites us to replace the memorable panel within the framework of what Peeters has elsewhere described as 'redrawing'. Peeters focuses mostly on the 'complex and unending mechanism or repetition' core to the creative process of comics, where the same cartoonist needs to redraw his own work various times (from sketch to rough, inking to colouring, and so on).³⁸ In Josso Hamel's case, it is remembering his 'fetish' panels that goes with redrawing them, and in the process, retrospectively re-creating his own reading of those panels.

Olivier Josso Hamel's Memorable Panels

While writing an autobiographical narrative on his childhood and the early loss of his father, Olivier Josso Hamel appropriates the most famous of Franco-Belgian comics, such as *Astérix*,

38. Benoît Peeters, 'Between Writing and Image: A Scriptwriter's Way of Working', *European Comic Art* 3, no. 1 (2010), 105–1115 (113).

Tintin or *Spirou*, reconstructing his own memories of these albums. *Au travail* is a self-reflexive investigation into the memory of reading and produces a discourse on a history of comics that is redefined at a singular, personal, even intimate level. Josso Hamel adopts this collective sharing of memorable panels that characterised Sterckx's column in *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* but also remediates it by transposing it into graphic form, within an autobiographical comics project: Josso Hamel redraws his comics memories on the page, directly borrowing panels from the albums that marked him as a child. By reorganising these memorable panels on the page, Josso Hamel self-consciously tries to reconstruct his early reading experience in a way that records this endeavour as part of the mark making.

Next to one of his memorable panels (drawn from Morris and Goscinny's *Billy the Kid*), the author draws himself as an adult rereading an album from his panels and comments on these memorable panels that left such a mark on him: 'ces dessins me tamponnent l'esprit d'une frappe indélébile . . . Ils me cueillent lorsque j'ouvre ces mêmes livres aujourd'hui' [these drawings left an indelible imprint on my mind . . . They seize me every time I open these books today] (Figure 2).³⁹ Small blots of ink hover around him, floating 'ink ghosts' that keep haunting him into adulthood: these ink ghosts evoke the semantic and lexical field of Pierre Sterckx's writings in his description of how memorable panels 'haunt' the reader, constantly returning to him or her.⁴⁰

39. Josso Hamel, *Au travail*.

40. I am borrowing the phrase 'ink ghost' from Pedro Moura, 'Ink Ghosts: Visual Presence of Haunted Memories in Comics', presentation at the 'Traumatic and Haunting Images: Roles, Ethics, and Aesthetics' workshop, 2 October 2015, Ghent University, Belgium. Writing about autobiographical comics artists Justin Green and David B., Moura coins this concept to designate

What follows Josso Hamel's comment is an assemblage of those memorable panels, ordered on the page along themes and motifs, panels that the time of memory has loosened from their original sequences and narratives. Both the reading practice that is represented in *Au travail* and Josso's quotational technique can be described in Michel de Certeau's terms as 'poaching': an appropriation of the text that dismantles the original aims (and ideologies) of its producers, repurposing it to the everyday lives of the consumers. Through this montage-like composition, the author unravels visual associations across various series and albums, drawing analogies between the work of cartoonists who are traditionally thought of as representative of different stylistic schools. Indeed, standard histories of comics and fan discourses alike usually bring Hergé and Franquin together under the Franco-Belgian label but also picture these cartoonists as standing for different styles, most famously the 'Brussels School' of the clear line and the Marcinelle School.⁴¹ *Au travail* presents different networks that disrupt traditional historiographies as well as editorial categories.

<FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>

Figure 2. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L'Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso Hamel and L'Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

The kind of 'graphic poaching' Josso Hamel performs in *Au travail* draws its effect from

'a way of producing the past in the present', 'a visual release available in the medium of comics' often used to designate 'small traumas pervasively constituting of the same, troubled self'.

41. See Hugues Dayez, *Le Duel Tintin-Spirou* (Brussels: Luc Pire, 1997).

a type of reading that ‘resists narrative “normalization”’.⁴² The reading mechanism at the heart of *Au travail* is one that disrupts the narrative to develop a fixation on certain images, on the basis of which the author tries to read his own personal history, his own traumas and particularly the early death of his father – without necessarily reinscribing them into a clear narrative. Rather, Josso Hamel evokes non-narrative forms such as the collection, the list or the catalogue by arranging these fragments according to recurrent themes, such as violence, dissimulation, relationship to space and territory, villains and others. A panel from Uderzo and Goscinny’s *Astérix chez les Helvètes*, for instance, in which the characters are stuck in fondue cheese, is split from the cumulative sequence gag where that particular panel works as the climax of a slow crescendo. In *Au travail*, it is decontextualised from the original gag, severed from its narrative context and drawn into a fascination for distorted appearances that Josso Hamel reads in his own memorable panels: the one panel is associated with other similar panels or short sequences, such as the metamorphoses undergone by various characters from Uderzo and Goscinny’s *Le Combat des chefs* or Hergé’s *Tintin au pays de l’or noir* (Figure 3). Juxtaposed to one another, these fragments are detached from their original narrative contexts to feed into a collection of memorable panels that reflect the obsessions of their ‘collector’.

<FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE>

Figure 3. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L’Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso Hamel and L’Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

42. Baetens, ‘Abstraction’, 110.

While Josso Hamel draws alternative, non-narrative networks of meaning across various Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées* in the first chapter, he also explores the particular fascination that a single album held for him, allocating a central place to André Franquin's *La Mauvaise Tête* within the first volume of *Au travail*. Although Josso Hamel initially sums up the plot, painting it with broad strokes, he quickly shifts his focus away from the 'ressorts de l'intrigue' [ramifications of the plot] towards specific images that marked him: scenes of desolation, emptied places, abandoned buildings, ruins.⁴³ While these desolated places function as spaces of danger, suspense and narrative tension in Franquin's album, Josso Hamel diverts the original panels from their narratives by redrawing them without their characters, transforming them into 'frozen' panels. This particular panel of an abandoned villa, in which Zantafio hides out and that Spirou tries to infiltrate unnoticed, for instance, is transformed into a ruined building for the reader's eye to contemplate (Figure 4). Josso Hamel invokes readers' memories of *La Mauvaise Tête* by guiding them through the plot in the textual captions, allowing his narrative voice to situate the redrawn panels within his autobiographical project. The erasure of the characters draw attention to their absence, amplifying the sense of loss and abandonment that the cartoonist retrospectively attributes to those panels. The sites of desolation embedded within those single, memorable panels become a *case* (the word means 'panel' but also 'hut') in which to 'nest', as Pierre Sterckx originally proposed.⁴⁴ Redrawing his own collection of memorable panels as sites

43. Josso Hamel, *Au travail*.

44. Sterckx describes memorable panels as 'ces cases exceptionnelles qu'il habita dans son enfance, et au sein desquelles il nifidia (une "case", c'est une petite maison)' [those exceptional panels that he inhabited as a kid, and in which he nested (a *case*, in French, is also a hut)]. 'Les

to inhabit and revisit, Josso Hamel thus exploits the comics page and its connection with architecture as a privileged site for carrying out an ‘autoarcheology’ that retraces his own childhood experience of ‘nesting’ in comics.⁴⁵

<FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE>

Figure 4. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L’Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso Hamel and L’Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

As a result, the reading of *La Mauvaise Tête* that Josso Hamel represents strays away from a linear narrative to reorganise its remembered fragments along the lines of his personal history. As Josso Hamel writes about his poaching of *Au travail*, ‘consciemment ou non, je me sers du récit pour bifurquer vers une lecture parallèle, qu’alimentent les zones d’ombre de mon histoire personnelle’ [consciously or not, I am using the story to drift onto an alternative reading, fed by the shadowy areas of my personal history].⁴⁶ This ‘parallel reading’ invests the interstices and gaps so fundamental to comics to project the loss of the father into these desolate spaces, but also onto the doubles, masks and false friends that crop up throughout *La Mauvaise Tête*. Detached from their function within a serial cliffhanger narrative, these elements are reread by the autobiographical narrator as part of his own search for meaning when confronted as a child

Cases mémorables de Pierre Sterckx’, 67.

45. Catherine Labio, ‘The Architecture of Comics’, *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (2015), 312–343 (318).

46. Josso Hamel, *Au travail*.

with the loss of his father.⁴⁷ The climax of Franquin's album, in which Spirou tries to recover the mask (the only proof of Fantasio's innocence) as it is being blown away by the wind, comes to represent the young child's desperate search for a lost father, a lost fragment that, by contrast with the original comic, cannot be recuperated to piece everything back together. By fragmenting the original story, Josso Hamel portrays not only how a tense cliffhanger narrative like Franquin's *La Mauvaise Tête* can be read on non-narrative terms but also how such a reading implies the inability to piece things together and to unite fragments into closure.

Au travail, then, highlights the fundamental links that the memorable panel articulates between what eludes the narrative and the temporality of memory. In this sense, it might be useful to situate the memorable panel as part of a phenomenon repeatedly tackled by film studies, which have often focused on the way memory is inseparable from the experience of cinema. Stanley Cavell famously wrote his classic *The World Viewed* based on his memories of film, noting: 'We involve movies in us. They become further fragments of what happens to me, further cards in the shuffle of my memory, with no telling what place in the future. Like childhood memories, whose treasure no one else appreciates, whose content is nothing compared with their unspeakable importance for me.'⁴⁸ While Cavell was writing at a time when cinema was still largely unavailable for reviewing beyond its spectators' memories, the emergence of the

47. It should indeed be noted that *La Mauvaise Tête* was originally published in 1954 as serial instalments in *Spirou* (nos 840–869), at the height of the magazine; although Josso Hamel is redrawing from the album format that he read as a child.

48. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 154.

VCR and of digital viewing technologies have increasingly blurred the boundaries between static and moving images, allowing the reader to ‘possess’ the ephemeral image. This ‘possessive spectator’, as described by Laura Mulvey, is one who ‘commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story, the aesthetic integrity that holds it together, and the vision of its creator’.⁴⁹ As a medium of fixed images, comics have perhaps always privileged this kind of compulsive, obsessive, projective rereading.⁵⁰ It is also this kind of spectatorship that *Au travail* displays: the panels that Olivier Josso Hamel collects on his pages speak not only to the idea of ‘being possessed’ by the images but also to a desire to ‘own’ these panels, to ‘possess’ them in turn by reappropriating them. Josso Hamel thus imbricates these memorable panels within an autobiographical narrative, creating multiple associations and intersections between both sets of memories. How fragments dialogue with memory has been more specifically addressed by the film scholar and artist Victor Burgin in *The Remembered Film*, which coins the idea of a ‘cinematic heterotopia . . . constituted across the variously virtual spaces in which we encounter displaced pieces of films: the Internet, the media and so on, but also the psychological space of a spectating subject’.⁵¹ Burgin repeatedly writes about how film scenes and childhood memories get inextricably intertwined into ‘sequence-images’ that organises these memory fragments

49. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 171.

50. See Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

51. Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 10.

without subsuming them to a single narrative logic.⁵²

Mark-Making Images

What *Au travail* undertakes is an exploration of how such ‘sequence-images’ emerge from reading comics but also from redrawing them. Here is where it is important to keep in mind the difference between comics and film, which lies not so much in their stasis but rather in their indexicality. As drawings, their indexical function is completely different from that of the camera. Philippe Marion has influentially explored the specific relationship to mark making that characterises comics by coining the theoretical concept of ‘graphiation’, referring to ‘cette instance énonciatrice particulière qui “traite” ce matériau graphique constitutif de la bande dessinée et lui insuffle, de manière réflexive, l’empreinte de sa subjectivité singulière, la marque de son style propre’ [the specific enunciating instance that is responsible for the graphic matter constitutive of comics, reflexively infusing it with the trace of a singular subjectivity, the mark of its own style].⁵³ As Marion suggests, different degrees of transparency and opacity characterise graphic style in comics: the ‘trace effect’ depends on how much the drawings are perceived to be

52. Ibid., 23–28.

53. Philippe Marion, *Traces en cases: Travail graphique, figuration narrative et participation du lecteur* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 1993). For a critical introduction in English, see Jan Baetens, ‘Revealing Traces: A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation’, in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Robbins (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 145–155; see also Jared Gardner, ‘Storylines’, *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (2011): 53–69.

drawn marks. *Au travail* navigates the multiple layers of an act of mark making that is not subsumable to a single graphic identity. By integrating a variety of homogeneous materials, Josso Hamel integrates into the graphiation other, composite sources that trouble the indexicality of his drawings.

The opaque approach to graphiation in *Au travail* primarily results from Josso Hamel's choice to work directly with ink on orange paper. That choice is itself part of the autobiographical project since, as the author explains, he decided to adopt this paper after having found a batch of the same orange paper he used to draw on when he was a child: that paper was itself originally used as sleeves for radiographs and brought over by a member of the family. The material stock of paper that constitutes the original art for *Au travail*, then, is fundamentally repurposed within a context of life writing, this time working as a different kind of revealing paper. The orange paper begs the author to draw in a very different way and to reinvent his own approach to style: redrawing, here, is not a source of exhaustion, but breathes new air into his relationship to drawing.⁵⁴ While Josso Hamel used to draw in a slow, mannered, convoluted way, heavily relying on cross-hatching and small circular patterns, the orange paper has forced him to draw in a more spontaneous and direct fashion: the coloured page leaves very little space for alteration and modification during the drawing process. Once the line is traced, the cartoonist cannot easily go back and erase it. As a result, this leaves more room for blots, stains and errors to become a fundamental part of the aesthetics of the work.⁵⁵ The orange paper thus becomes a

54. On the 'fatigue' of comics artists, see Peeters, 'Between Writing and Image', 113, as well Lewis Trondheim's comics volume *Désœuvré* (Paris: L'Association, 2005).

55. This technical constraint is further assumed by the cartoonist, who does not rely on any

revealing paper in the sense that it records and indexes the embodied act of drawing and redrawing, the physical labour of graphiation.⁵⁶

Revalorising blots and splashes of ink, *Au travail* strengthens the ‘haptic’ qualities of the drawing: borrowing the term from Alois Riegl, Marion describes the ‘engluement haptique’ [haptic stickiness] that occurs when comics overtly foreground their picturality rather than their linearity, emphasising the comingling of ocular and tactile senses.⁵⁷ This ‘haptic stickiness’ of the graphiation in *Au travail* is striking in how the black ink is not only modulated and shaped by the nib or the brush but also clearly by fingers, as the cartoonist repeatedly leaves his fingerprints all over the inked surface of the pages (Figure 5). This act not only proclaims the insertion of the author’s subjective body into the graphic matter of his work: it might indicate that, but not only that. Importantly, it also serves to foreground and represent his own haptic entanglement with

pencilling prior to inking and does not digitally retouch his pages, as the pages are scanned and cleaned up for print by L’Association. Information based on personal correspondence with Olivier Josso Hamel, May 2015.

56. When discussing indexicality in comics, we should never forget the difference between index and trace, as Simon Grennan convincingly argues: ‘In trying to make a drawing, the visible mark is two things: a trace of the activity of producing the mark and an indexical sign of the activity of producing the mark’, *A Theory of Narrative Drawing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15. In the case of Josso Hamel, the drawings are clearly both index and trace, even though the ‘trace’ is one mediated by print reproduction (something that, as Grennan underlines, does not affect the perception of the drawing as drawing).

57. Marion, *Traces en cases*, 177.

those memorable panels that *Au travail* collects and assembles. By redrawing those panels in an opaque graphic style, Josso Hamel simultaneously points back to these panels in a form of quotation and strips them of their narrative function. Quite tellingly, this haptic opacity blurs the clear lines of the narratives and muddies the ‘transparency’ of the clear line as an aesthetic designed to maximise narrative efficiency. The act of redrawing these memorable panels, in other words, emphasises the readers’ haptic entanglement with those panels outside of their narrative function; it rediscovers their ability to hold the readers’ eye, to make it ‘stick’ to the panel instead of being carried along by the narrative flow. The young child’s haptic reading of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* is repeatedly portrayed through the meandering eyes and scopic avatars that populate *Au travail*. The fingerprints modulating the ink with which the memorable panels are redrawn are marks that index the very effect of marking. If the fingerprint might seem to be the utmost expression of a mark, its ‘trace effect’ not only points to the individuality of the *graphiateur*; it is also part of an act of redrawing that integrates into that very process the memories of the panels that are redrawn. The haptic aspects of the graphiation in *Au travail* draw attention to those elements that marked Josso as a reader; they originate in the memory of an anti-narrative reading experience. In other words, the haptic graphiation translates the scopic act of reading and the memory thereof. The mark here is not only that of the artist but also the mark that the memorable panel leaves on its spectating subject.

<FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE>

Figure 5. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L’Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso Hamel & L’Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

Tellingly, the blots, stains and squiggles that Josso Hamel ‘leaves’ on his fetishised panels might recall the doodles and scribbles that children often inscribe on the pages of their favourite comics, indexing a deep reaction to particular images that French cartoonist Emmanuel Guibert described as ‘une réponse furieuse à l’électrocution que les images infligent à nos sens de bédé’ [a furious reaction to the electric shock that images inflict on our sensory reception of comics].⁵⁸ This form of haptic reading is particularly underlined in Josso Hamel’s chapters on *La Mauvaise Tête*, in which he represents himself as a child reader using a paper avatar whose head is a giant eye, compulsively on the lookout for ‘marks, traces, clues’ that might help him to understand the loss of his father. A particularly striking panel, in which Spirou is shown bludgeoned into unconsciousness, appears twice, epitomising the commingling between the haptic quality of the graphiation and the ‘marking’ of the image: the panel is first drawn in a style relatively close to the original and is then redrawn as a mirror image, covered up in a mixture of black ink and Wite-Out saturated with fingerprints (Figure 6 and Figure 7). The tactility implied by this haptic effect runs parallel to the young reader’s search for a father who remains literally out of touch: ‘Comme si en rêve, je croyais retrouver mon père . . . Et alors qu’enfin j’allais pouvoir le toucher . . . Toujours je le manquais’ [As if in a dream, I thought I was finding my father. . . And that I would finally be able to touch him . . . Every time missing].⁵⁹

<FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE>

58. Emmanuel Guibert, *Monographie premature* (Angoulême: L’An 2, 2006), 22–23.

59. Josso Hamel, *Au travail*.

Figure 6. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L'Association, 2012), half-page (© Olivier Josso Hamel and L'Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

<FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE>

Figure 7. Olivier Josso Hamel, *Au travail, tome 1* (Paris: L'Association, 2012) (© Olivier Josso Hamel and L'Association). Image used with kind permission of the artist.

In this perspective, the opacity of graphiation proceeds to an 'opening' of the fingerprints, as described by Georges Didi-Huberman: the mark appears as 'quelque chose qui nous dit aussi bien le contact (le pied qui s'enfonce dans le sable) que la perte (l'absence du pied dans son empreinte); quelque chose qui nous dit aussi bien le contact de la perte que la perte du contact' [something that speaks of contact (a foot in the sand) as well as loss (the absence of the foot in its mark); something that speaks both of the contact of loss and the loss of contact].⁶⁰ This is precisely the kind of mark with which the reader is confronted in *Au travail*, as the drawings index a physical act of redrawing, retracing memorable panels. Its index value is multiple: it simultaneously points to the original drawings of the quoted panels, to the anti-narrative reading mechanism that splits them from their contexts and to the act of redrawing these panels. Through its own mark-making activities, the graphiation in *Au travail* thus highlights, paraphrasing Burgin, 'what it means to be marked by an image'.⁶¹

60. Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact: Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Minuit, 2008), 18.

61. Burgin, *Remembered Film*, 28.

Possessing and Being Possessed

Mulvey's 'possessive spectator', as Victor Burgin suggests, might also be a 'possessed spectator' when 'the fragment that haunts me may come to usurp me'. As Burgin further remarks, 'we rarely own the memories we are sold'.⁶² This is an important lesson that Olivier Josso Hamel experienced while drawing the second volume of *Au travail*, in which he redrew multiple, selected panels from Hergé's *L'Île noire*, and was faced with legal issues as the lawyer of L'Association judged the panels to be 'too close' to the originals.⁶³ To pre-empt a potential lawsuit from Moulinsart, Josso Hamel had to revise the panels in a way that was more transformative and distant from the original. The kind of 'poaching' experiment that Josso Hamel explores thus meets severe obstacles when confronted with copyright laws. While comics images are often 'stripped from the conditions of their own manufacture [and] transformed over time into endlessly citable trademarks on t-shirts, mugs, calendars, and museum walls', this kind of circulation predominantly remains within the purview of the copyright holders.⁶⁴ By contrast, *Au travail* clearly suggests that readers too 'own' and 'possess' such images, if not legally, at least by their personal investment in these images and their memories thereof. *Au travail* takes on this sense of ownership by reinvesting these fragments within its autobiographical project, acknowledging the multi-layered index value that these quoted panels acquire: these mark-making images are not only marked by their original creators but are variously marked again

62. Ibid., 109.

63. Personal correspondence with Olivier Josso Hamel, June 2016.

64. Beaty, 'A Clear Line to Marcinelle', 211.

over time as they become embedded within the lives and memories of their readers. By sharing his own collection of memorable panels, Olivier Josso Hamel engages in the canonising act already implicit in Pierre Sterckx's article, sharing his own sense of comics history, a 'personal canon' of memorable panels as a living memory that can be reactivated within the present of comics creation.

Benoît Crucifix is an F.R.S.-FNRS doctoral fellow at the University of Liège and UCLouvain. His thesis focuses on how contemporary cartoonists reframe and mediate the history of comics both in their own works and in collaboration with other cultural actors. He is a member of the ACME group and has co-organised the international conferences 'Poetics of the Algorithm' and 'Comics and Memory'. E-mail: benoit.crucifix@ulg.ac.be