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Windows of Cognition : Contemporary French Comics and the Cultural Middlebrow

David Platten

- 1 'If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me "middlebrow" I will take my pen and stab him, dead' (Woolf, p. 119).
- 2 This parting shot from a letter that Virginia Woolf was never to send to the *New Statesman* has reverberated through the years, establishing the 'middlebrow' - as a descriptor of taste and social class, as well as literature - in the lexicon of the English language. Woolf's faux hyperbole suggests that she was ribbing those who would praise literary works for reasons that had little to do with their artistic merits. Still, the trap was sprung and since then the expression has mostly been perfumed with intellectual disdain. In recent times it has acquired positive connotations. The 'new literary middlebrow' (Driscoll) of the twenty-first century reflects a state of mind of the enthusiastic person of letters, whose passion for established and especially new literary fiction is no longer inhibited by the strictures of university dons and broadsheet reviewers on what should and shouldn't be read. It has been argued that factors such as the popularity of book clubs, as means of real and online social interaction as well as in the guise of television programmes, the increasing prominence in the media of literary awards, and the preparedness of educators to incorporate non-canonical and genre fiction into syllabuses have helped to liberate this notion of an independent, critical reading spirit and, as a corollary, attenuate the influence over cultural affairs of the purveyors of the highbrow.
- 3 If in the UK self-professed supporters of cultural elitism, such as Roger Scruton and the late Brian Sewell, have provided entertaining sideshows, in France the priests of high culture still regularly occupy the media pulpits. Here the debate is regularly intense, principally because major intellectual figures argue from different standpoints that, in order to arrest what they perceive as the decline of French civilisation, traditional values must always be protected (Fumaroli, Finkelkraut). This is a country where the literary canon has solidified within a highly centralised education system, where the acquisition

of cultural capital is regarded as instrumental in the forging of successful careers in business and the civil service, and where the divisions of high, popular (in the sense of folk) and mass are assumed to be real, almost anatomical features of something called Culture, rather than useful conceptual categories. The contrasts are particularly sharp in the field of prose fiction, where the self-conscious turn precipitated at the beginning of the last century by Proust has crystallised over recent decades into what is commonly referred to as *autofiction*, a genre in which the language of literature is explicitly designated as an instrument of self-knowledge. For practitioners and supporters such as Serge Doubrovsky, the author and critic who first used the term on the inside cover of his 1977 work *Fils*, *autofiction* makes claims on higher truths of human existence : 'Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut *autofiction*, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau' (Doubrovsky). In what is now often termed 'life writing', the exploration of the self, which is conceived as a complex, plural, fluid entity far removed from the unique, stable fusion of mind and body expressed through the Cartesian cogito, is remorselessly pursued through acts of writing, however painful the process and at whatever personal cost to the writer.

- 4 The intellectual fashion for *autofiction* countermands what we might posit as a singular feature of the literary middlebrow, which is the flight from the self and the anxieties of one's life into an imaginary world peopled by fully-fledged characters with their own desires and dilemmas. Such fictional voices are rarely heard in university lecture theatres, for *autofiction* is but one manifestation of a swing towards subjectivity that has dominated research into the humanities over the past fifty years. In France and in French studies deference to the work of deconstructionists and post-Holocaust thinkers –Derrida, Rancière and Nancy - has resulted in the hegemony of an ethical self-consciousness in the formerly demarcated disciplines of philosophy, literature and art, a self-consciousness predicated on faith in the muscles and sinews of language to drive and shape thought. A vein of solipsism runs through the intellectual brilliance, identified and pastiched years prior to the vogue for *autofiction* by one commentator, who describes how what was considered the best of French literature and thought is created and exhibited in the 'salon de l'auto' (Sirinelli, p. 14).
- 5 This *nombrilisme* (literary navel-gazing) is to a certain extent a caricature of contemporary French fiction ; the reality tells of a rich, varied and culturally mobile scene. In the modern era since the 1960s francophone, women and queer writers have constructed and inhabit different types of literary worlds. Genre fiction (especially crime) and classic popular writers are now being taken seriously ; since the turn of the millennium the ashes of Alexandre Dumas Père have been transferred to the Panthéon, final resting place for the great and the good of French history, and Simenon has appeared in the Pléiade. Many writers eschew neat classification ; Marguerite Duras and Annie Ernaux have been hailed as progenitors of *autofiction*, and Amélie Nothomb as a current proponent, though many enjoy reading their work through different lenses. Or take the case of a writer like Emmanuel Carrère, who has combined self-exploration with forays into the minds of others, for example in generating a novelistic biography from interviews conducted with Édouard Limonov, the polemical Ukrainian activist, or in honing the pitch-perfect screenplay of the first episode of the acclaimed television drama series *Les Revenants* (Episode 1). *Limonov* reveals not only panels of the life of the

eponymous protagonist but also surprising aspects of Carrère's identity, arising from these encounters with a personality he considered diametrically opposed to his own.

- 6 However, such richness and diversity obscure some truisms. Firstly, there is no clear stripe of 'middlebrow' writers in France, though there are many - from the days of Virginia Woolf to the present - who could be classified as such. One could support or dispute claims made for the likes of Colette, Françoise Sagan, Michel Tournier, Daniel Pennac, Muriel Barbery or Anna Gavalda, writers whose work is 'taken seriously by academics and critics, and also read by a large, varied audience' (Holmes and Looseley, p. 87). But these authors tend to float in their own individual quirkiness, free from categories. And, of the relatively small number of living French writers deemed to be important, a high percentage (which would include Christine Angot, Marie Darrieussecq, Annie Ernaux, and Philippe Forest) practice some form or other of self-fictionalisation. This honey pot has attracted a swarm of academic bees and they have created a buzz. Meanwhile many interesting, commercially successful writers have remained artistically anonymous, unserved by an academic idiolect. What might raise the profile of the literary middlebrow in France would be an up-to-date set of critical tools designed to probe its key features: the allure of storytelling; empathy with fictional people; literary reference; and the book as a source of human well-being.
- 7 Contrastingly, the comics industry is serviced by a talented group of theoretical practitioners and academics who have documented the history of this cultural form and developed an extensive critical methodology. The cultural stock of comics has also increased thanks to significant infrastructural investment, resulting in the openings in 1989 of the Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée in Brussels, and in 1990 of the Centre National de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image in Angoulême. The latter was extended in 2010 and re-baptised the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image. Spanning the River Charente, this spectacular site is home to a museum, a library, a cinema and extensive exhibition space. Furthermore, the abundance of comics publishing ventures in France and the US active during the 1990s - many of which were independent of mainstream publishers (Le Duc) - propelled a surge of creativity which has survived into the new millennium. Then, of course, there is a tell-tale sign of possible epistemological shift: a change in nomenclature. The term 'graphic novel' / 'roman graphique' (which was coined in 1964) has crept into the parlance of the literary press and onto the labels used by bookshops to orientate their customers. Though hotly contested by many stars of the medium, who prefer the term 'comics' (often followed by a singular verb), the emergence of the 'graphic novel' suggests that comics has been elevated into something other than an anthropological curiosity of traditional folk culture.
- 8 Whether such developments allow for the description of comics as a variant on the literary middlebrow is a moot point. One objection would be that such a view diminishes the importance of generic specificities that both distinguish the medium and set it apart from prose fiction; indeed, some commentators have preferred to explore comparisons with American and European Pop Art (Grove, pp. 208-214). A second - and this is another side to the same story - is that, irrespective of the accolades given to the monuments of the Ninth Art, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, comics should not be considered as literary texts because they are picture books, the assumption being that picture books are for children and the barely literate. A third relates to the activities of practitioners and theoreticians, who in wanting to challenge popular misconceptions about the art form persist in revisiting the

vexed question of what comics are, thereby stranding themselves on first base. In this piece I will touch upon the ontology of comics, but I will concentrate on the how (rather than the what), on analysing the aesthetic potential locked into the genre and considering to what extent prominent examples among the latest wave of successful comic narratives in France exhibit qualities that match the emergent properties of the literary middlebrow listed above, especially those concerning notions of reference and representation. And I will spotlight an interesting irony in respect of the literary fashion in France for *autofiction*, notably the conjunction in two highly regarded French-language comics of autobiography with depictions of political and social realities.

- 9 Prior to this however, let us briefly consider the issue of form, which is a significant obstacle standing in the way of any attempt to yoke the comics genre to a culture of the middlebrow. Whereas the contemporary middlebrow novel is diverse in content, it is nearly always formally conservative. In contrast, comics revel in an exuberance of forms. At root comics parade the coexistence of two different modes of communication, the visual and the verbal. Some critics emphasise its narrative qualities conveyed through the sequentiality of the comic strip, others conceive of the genre as a tabular entity and focus on the interaction of word and image. All are agreed that through its visual dimensions the genre encourages formal diversity. Comics span the length of the 'picture plane' (McCloud, pp. 52-3) - from detailed, quasi photographic drawings to minimalist Charlie Brown style figures - and artists routinely expand the size, or change the shape, of panels, breach their own borders, and use colour in a non-naturalistic fashion. The influx of Japanese Manga in recent decades has opened European eyes to the possibility of creating multiple focalisations, using space imaginatively to show different perspectives on one instant of perception, thus replacing temporal linearity with simultaneity. Formal experimentation is inherent to the world of comics and usually attractive to the consumer.

The Significance of the Icon : *Persepolis*

- 10 In the era of Virginia Woolf, European and American comics were associated primarily with children's entertainment and illicit pornography. Many illustrators who worked on children's stories moonlighted, producing erotic images for magazines that were peddled by night on the streets of Europe's capital cities (Filippini, p. 10). Though superficially unsavoury, this juxtaposition alerts us to some important aspects relating to the pictorial or iconic qualities of comics.
- 11 The longstanding prevalence of comic books and cartoons in childhood has paradoxically masked their impact on ways in which human identities are constructed and expressed. It is as children that we subconsciously internalise conventions germane to the genre. These would include the zip or motion lines that convey the dynamism of the Marvel superheroes, the wavy lines indicating the nasty smell wafting around the nostrils of Dennis the Menace, and especially the humble speech bubble that links what the protagonist sees to what he or she thinks. In his seminal comic story about comics, Scott McCloud stresses the immersive qualities of the cartoon, which he describes as 'a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled' (McCloud, p. 36). However, if the fan or consumer is sucked into the world of comics, for the producer it is a medium of expression. And in the production of the comic image or cartoon, the artist arguably taps into instincts lodged deep in the human psyche. Consider the protocol in art therapy

workshops - derived in part from the research of French psychiatrist Serge Tisseron - where images replace words and in some circumstances may enact a type of exorcism. Children numbed by the traumas of war, domestic violence or sexual abuse can sometimes relate their experiences through drawing simple sketches.

- 12 So, as the illustrator looks out, the comics reader looks in, forming a conversation that 'follows a path from **mind** to **hand** to **paper** to **eye** to **mind**' (McCloud, p. 195). This delineation of a process is helpful when comparing the ways in which the readers of comics and prose fiction absorb information. Whereas the writer of a literary text draws on a common resource - the language of a people or nation - the comic image is more tangibly the expression of an artist. It is also exogamous, in that the act of producing the trace or picture inscribes a movement from inside to out ; literary discourse arguably takes us in the opposite direction, as we home into the mind of the subject or character. The significant elements in McCloud's formulation are therefore the bodily features of the hand and the eye. Literature and poetry may facilitate mental communion, from **mind** to **mind**, but the icon of the comics, drawn by the **hand** and captured by the **eye**, stresses the physics of the creative act, suggesting the existence of a referential function that the literary middlebrow can only simulate.
- 13 However, just as prose fiction can be exquisitely evocative - of a railway station, a battle, or a country fair - so comics may not necessarily seem to be referential. Ann Miller has identified a strong postmodern current in francophone comics characterised by the 'loss of the referent' (Miller, p. 127). This might be expected of the experimentalist practitioners of the Oubapo (Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle) Group, who, following the example of their illustrious literary cousins in Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), engage in complex, ludic, anti-realist pastiche, but Miller also cites the work of Bruno Lecigne, who claims that Hergé's later creations exhibited distinctive anti-mimetic traits, to the extent that Miller speaks of the 'decreasing credibility of Hergé's fictional world' (Ibid.) Another counter-example would be one of France's most celebrated exponents of the post-war *bande dessinée*, Moebius, who employed radical discontinuities between the pictorial and verbal diegeses thereby blocking attempts to relate his vision to anything the reader might have encountered in life or art. The result is a series of unique impressions that are antipathetic to analogy and resemblance.
- 14 The claim for 'a loss of the referent' is a clue to a type of academic thinking, whereby meta-critical tropes are plucked from one field of cultural experience and replanted elsewhere. The results can be revelatory ; Serge Tisseron's recourse to psychoanalytical theory to illuminate the life and work of Hergé produces a stunning outcome (Tisseron, 2004). However, it is a mistake to think of **representation**, which invokes notions of imitation and resemblance, as **referentiality**, which is conceptually grounded and has greater scope. The representational value of a work of art is determined by its degree of mimesis, or the likeness sustained by the work to one or more aspects of reality. Yet it is a given in art and literary criticism that the relationship between the work of art and reality will always be problematic, however high the degree of mimesis might be. In Emmanuel Guibert's *Le Photographe* exquisite black-and-white photographs are garlanded with comics illustrations (in colour). The effect of this unusual juxtaposition is to enhance the beauty of the photographs, whilst at the same time diminishing their representational value. Why append comics drawings, some of which hang beneath their own captions, to beautiful photographs, unless the drawings are intended to add meaning

to the photographs ? The answer in this case is : to tell the story of Didier Lefèvre, a photographer who accompanied a Médecins Sans Frontières team working in Afghanistan in 1986. Here the purpose of the comic strip, as both a tabular and narrative entity, is to provide a referential frame for Lefèvre's photographs, which, through their re-inscription in a comics narrative, now commemorate publicly (in published form) the life and work of the photographer.

- 15 At the other end of the mimetic scale, Moebius's work boasts a small, even negligible degree of likeness to any feature external to the art, but though it may not refer to anything that we perceive exists in our own worlds, it still points unerringly at a referent, which is of course Moebius himself. He, the artist, is at the heart of the work, 'la signature est partout, dans chaque trait, dans le moindre détail' (Groensteen, p. 88). However, Moebius's self-referentiality is a decoy. Working with the grain of popular opinion we might surmise that most readers of middlebrow novels and comic narratives are drawn to making analogies between these fictional worlds and their own lives, dreams and fantasies. What distinguishes comics is the visual information, which, in the words of Anne Marie Seward, is 'holistic, immediate and experientially rooted' (Varnum and Gibbons, p. 17). So, the presumption is that comics foreground the means by which we visually navigate our paths through the world, in ways that arguably neither literature nor film can do, though other media such as video games certainly showcase.
- 16 Cognitive neuroscientists have demonstrated that the process by which we apprehend the world is ever so slightly lagged. Put crudely, our brain computes the constant bombardment of sensory impressions by plugging them into what we already know. At its simplest the oak tree is recognised as an oak tree because we saw it in the same place yesterday or because it resembles another tree that we have seen somewhere else, in a wood or perhaps in a picture book. However, the miraculous instantaneity of this process is on one level illusory because we only ever apprehend a fraction of what is there, just as we miss many things that happen in a motion picture ; the American term for 'film' alerts us to the process of cognition. Our perceptual understanding is limited to the, or rather to our, *umwelt*, what we perceive to be our environment, which is no more than a 'thin slice' of a much greater reality (Eagleman, pp. 76-82). In common with other static works of visual art, the comic strip takes our optical limitations into account. We can gaze at individual panels for as long as we want and of course we can return to them. As such, the comics icon invites us to search for a referent, which may not be immediately apparent and may require decoding, but is nearly always there. This invitation to reference is a defining characteristic of the genre, an intrinsic part of its narrative progression : '...la bande dessinée apparaît comme la seule littérature dont chaque fragment constitutif est bel et bien conservé, à mesure qu'on progresse dans le récit' (Groensteen, p. 203). And it explains why the reader of comics is more likely to think of the combination of pictures and words not as a text existing in relation to a world outside of the text, but as the prospect of an adventure into a world which may or may not form part of his or her actual world but which is also always in some small measure a pleasant regression into childhood.
- 17 To return momentarily to the alternative activities of the graphic artists who produced children's picture books in the early decades of the last century, a useful way of thinking about the referential qualities of comics is in terms of the mildly discomfiting relation between the viewer and the sexual or erotic image. Well-known comics artists such as Hugo Pratt, Guido Crépax and Wolinski drew figures of naked women with care and

attention. Are their readers turned on, referentially, by these images ? Matthew Kieran argues that great artists such as Rodin and Klimt developed new techniques of drawing, possibly with the purpose of exploring the power of representational art to elicit sexual arousal (Neil and Ridley, pp. 373-375). Our criteria for the referentiality of the comics icon are less demanding. The images do not refer to real people but are simply traces. However, since they are processed in terms of the reader's previous exposure to analogous images (and experiences), they may produce a commemorative tumescence, which would be tangible proof of the existence of the referent.

- 18 Marjane Satrapi, author of one the most influential works of comic art in modern times, explicitly rejects a naturalistic, or representational approach :

I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal – that is to say that everybody thinks it normal. But it's not normal. To draw and put it in colour – the colour of flesh and the red of blood, and so forth – reduces it by making it realistic (Copley).

- 19 In constructing *Persepolis* Satrapi implemented a careful aesthetic strategy via the development of a distinctive visual mode designed to capture the impressions of a narrator whose childhood straddled the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Rejecting the temptation to create a multi-layered world with perspectival depth around the subject of her young self, she produced minimalist, black-and-white, often two-dimensional sketches that were inevitably dismissed as naïve and technically mediocre. However, as Hilary Chute has shown, Satrapi's flattened images, evoking Ancient Persian miniatures and German Expressionist cinema, are at one and the same time a translation of lived experience and a reification of the history of the period. The most striking aspect of this graphic style is the depiction not of the self as child but of groups of people and things : panels showing mass protests, mass slaughter, and mass burials ; but also Persian soldiers in history books, cars in traffic jams, carousing party-goers, and (on the first page of Volume 1) schoolgirls in a playground using their veils as skipping ropes, reins, and hoods. The direction is always from the subject outwards. In 'La Bicyclette', Volume 1, the precocious Marji overhears her parents discussing the burning of the Cinéma Rex, resulting in the demise of hundreds of cinema-goers who were trapped inside. She imagines the event as flames with flickering human arms tapering into skull-like, 'Munch' faces, stretching diagonally across a large panel from a clutch of cinema seats in the bottom left corner to the closed exit door in the top right (Fig 1). In 'Persepolis', Volume 1, the depiction of horror is transmuted into one of apprehension. Marji's father has not returned from photographing a demonstration, and she imagines that he has died. Head in hands, staring mournfully down at a table, she, as a young girl, features in a panel that replicates in miniature the disaster at the cinema, showing the detached heads of God and her father being wafted diagonally towards the heavens.

Figure 1

- 20 These panels refer to two major historical events that occurred immediately prior to the deposition of the Shah of Iran. On 19 August 1978 approximately 470 people perished in a fire inside the Cinéma Rex at Abadan. Although members of the Shah's Intelligence Service were later tried and executed for setting fire to the building, confirming the popular perceptions at the time which are recorded in *Persepolis*, evidence was later unearthed suggesting that the real culprits, who may have been Islamist revolutionaries, escaped justice. Marji's father would have been taking photographs of street protests culminating in the mass demonstrations of 8 September 1978 against the imposition of martial law, which occurred in Jaleh Square, Tehran and at other sites. On this 'Black Friday' it is estimated that as many as 15,000 protestors were killed, 4,000 in Jaleh Square alone, as the Iranian army acted against the insurrections. *Persepolis* illustrates how this political tumult encroached on family life and significantly oriented Marji's sense of self. And, for this is a feature so prominent that it should be reiterated, it is a self which is frequently shown among and in relation to others. From the opening page, in which there is a panel depicting a row of six Islamist demonstrators crooking their elbows in unison, the reader is struck by the multitude of human forms, like figures in the ancient Persian paintings arranged in linear sequences, or sometimes plucked out of their physical environments and dropped into circular, swirling patterns. All four volumes of *Persepolis* depict the subject in history, but in the first especially, Marji's burgeoning identity is entwined with the fate of her people.
- 21 *Persepolis* exhibits the fundamental difference between representation and reference in comics. In trying to process the information that a family friend has been tortured and dismembered, Marji reaches the limits of her imagination. The panel, in 'Les Héros' (Volume 1), depicts a prone body, neatly sectioned at the knees, waist and shoulders, looking more like a dislocated doll than a dismembered human being. This reminder of the subject's immaturity is equally an example of the inadequacies of comics as representational art. Yet Satrapi's graphic style succeeds in recreating the urgency and drama of her life as a child; the impression of 'thereness', which Teresa Bridgeman sees

as peculiar to the genre (Forsdick, Grove and McQuillan, pp. 115-136), emanates from this densely referential dimension of comics. With *Persepolis*, the simplicity of style belies a forest of references. The first chapter entitled 'Le Foulard' must have tantalised those many French readers for whom the prohibition of the wearing of the niqab in public spaces has become almost a synecdoche of the Republic. However, the historical context of *Persepolis* points the reader towards other historically specific considerations. The drawing of the veil, as a black shadow across the face, will replicate the drawing of the Islamist's beard, smudging gender distinctions and signifying the looming theocracy.

- 22 The potential didacticism of Satrapi's work is attenuated by the narrative trajectory of *Persepolis*, which endows her flat, two-dimensional drawings with a symbolic plenitude. There is a further chapter entitled 'Le Foulard' concluding Volume 3, which may be read as a withering critique of the individualism and weak kinship ties associated with the West. Marji's sojourn as a student in Austria sees her betrayed by her lover, homeless, lonely and eventually admitted to hospital with bronchitis. As she prepares to return to Iran, she ceremonially veils her face once more. In Volume 4 the possibilities of cultural assimilation are entertained. Marji goes ski-ing in the mountains north of Tehran with some girlfriends; the oblong panel depicting her with Ray-Bans and cigarette in mouth, reclining in the sunshine, suggests that such leisure pursuits in the Islamic Republic of Iran are not so different from western custom. She also attends aerobics classes and returns to university, where her frank speaking is tolerated. Later she marries, then quickly divorces. However, Marji still complains of the debilitation occasioned by the different codes of behaviour required of her and her associates in the public and private spheres; their lives are blighted by what she describes as a collective schizophrenia. A pivotal event occurs when the Moral Guardians bust a private, adult party. The host, whom the Guards want to arrest, escapes onto the roof and is depicted as a white stick man silhouetted against the dark skyline, a tragic 'Mario' figure tracking left to right across a page of rooftops, with the Guards in pursuit, until he falls off ('Les Chaussettes', Fig.2). Marji's definitive exile, on the orders of her mother, is sealed.

Figure 2

- 23 The middlebrow suggests the existence of a set of conventions that the consumer, who would normally be a reader, has already naturalised, or with which he or she is familiar. These conventions are not usually explicit. However, though it is often hard to define what they are, it is easier to say what they are not. The middlebrow eschews the kind of radical narrative or pictorial discontinuities that would prevent the reader from being able to imagine the world depicted in the text ; self-conscious poetics in a middlebrow text tend to be restrained. By the same token the middlebrow rejects the formulaic and the prescriptive ; on the contrary it gives pride of place to the aesthetic impulse, to the creative subject with something different or original to say, who desires urgently to communicate his or her vision. So the eclectic, the quirky, that which is not run-of-the-mill, finds its home in middlebrow culture. But most importantly, since it is the guarantor of these assets, the middlebrow seeks meaningful connections with its audience ; it presupposes a strategy of reference.
- 24 *Persepolis* tells the arresting story of a young girl growing into a woman during a turbulent period in the history of her country. The images are contextualised by written text in the form of the *récitatif*, a narrative voiceover contained in a separate caption which locates the time and place of the action. The child's involvement with reports of events during the Islamic Revolution in Tehran stresses both the reality of what is happening, the dramatic impact of politics on the lives of ordinary citizens, and the confusion and chaos the events engender, which is shown through the limitations of the child's perspective and understanding. The text is strongly empathic. Marji's imaginings foreshadow the workings of the reader's imagination : what must it have been like ? The historicisation of the story and the sharp delineations of the *trait* are a helpful guide ; moreover, the oscillation of the settings – between Iran and the West – encourages the reader to consider the issues confronted by Marji in a broader cultural context. In summary, the *graphiation* – to use Philippe Marion's term for the combined impact of the graphic and verbal enunciation (Varnum and Gibbons, p. 147) – in *Persepolis* exists as a kind of referential immanence ; it is simply not possible to talk about the beauty of the images in isolation from the events they depict. In our second example, interpretation of the political significance of the comics icon comes under a spotlight that puts all other considerations in the shade.

The Politics of Discomfort : *L'Arabe du futur*

- 25 The history of caricature, political cartoons published in satirical magazines or the mainstream press, runs parallel with changing attitudes to questions of political power and freedom of expression. In France the 1881 law on the freedom of the press gave the caricaturist 'le droit de persifler' ('the right to mock'), since when, it has been argued, the caricature may be used as a barometer for freedom of expression in any given society at any moment of history (Delporte, pp. 21-2). It occupies this role thanks to its penchant for the grotesque, the propensity for exaggeration and distortion, which is its defining characteristic but which also means that the caricaturist is impelled always to push at the boundaries of taste and decency, thereby implicitly or explicitly raising questions concerning freedom of expression.
- 26 During the 1960s and the decades that followed, the work of caricaturists in France was infused with sexual and scatological illustrations and references. The sketchers at

satirical magazines such as *Hari-Kiri* (which later became *Charlie Hebdo*), whose work also appeared in the daily broadsheets, delivered cutting-edge, liberal perspectives on current affairs and lifestyles into the homes of the bourgeoisie. Political and social comment for middle-class French citizens (possibly with middlebrow proclivities) was thus dispensed through the (at times breathtakingly) provocative drawings of household names such as Wolinski, Cavanna, Reiser and Brétécher. So, to some extent, liberal, state-sanctioned Republican values became conflated with the freedom to ridicule authority figures in the form of demeaning, graphic representations, and these authority figures included religious leaders and prophets. The conditions of the debate changed when the satirists' focus switched from lampooning the Vatican to challenging the aniconism of Islam. In February 2007, during the hearings for the 'caricatures de Mahomet' case brought by various Muslim associations in France against *Charlie Hebdo*, the then Président Sarkozy, himself a frequent target of satirists, declared, 'Je préfère l'excès de caricature à l'absence de caricature' (Delporte, p. 56). Rarely had the sense of the caricature as a touchstone for freedom of expression been so sharply defined.

- 27 In the aftermath of the murderous attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices on 7 January 2015, many French citizens were attracted to a graphic memoir recounting the early childhood (spent in Libya, then substantially in Syria) of former *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist Riad Sattouf. To date, three volumes of *L'Arabe du futur* have appeared, though the third appeared too late to be considered in this essay. The first, in May 2014, preceded the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, but the second, in June 2015, punctuated the fractious public debate on the nature of French republicanism which had been stoked by the 'Je suis Charlie' protests. In a book published in July 2015, middle-class, urban French protestors found themselves decried as 'catholiques zombies' (Todd) for their hypocrisy in demonstrating in favour of freedom of expression for satirical cartoonists but against it for women wishing to wear veils in public. Given the unique status of its French-Syrian author, *L'Arabe du futur* held the promise of badly needed intellectual succour.
- 28 The first volume divided academic opinion. In a scathing review by a CNRS researcher, published on-line sixteen days after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* (though a full eight months after the publication of *L'Arabe du futur*), Sattouf is pilloried for feeding a progressive readership with negative images of the Arab and the Arab world, stereotypes which are all the more damaging for their being presented as the truthful recollections of an innocent child (Bonney). Others have defended him against accusations of orientalism, arguing that it is possible to address the politics of the Middle East without necessarily being an activist, and that a comics book should not be read as an all-encompassing representation of life in Arab countries. As Elias Sanbar, Palestinian envoy to UNESCO, remarks: 'The problem isn't Sattouf, who has written a funny and sympathetic book. It's the readers who think they've understood a society as complex as Syria because they've read a single comic book' (Shatz). Sattouf's own response to criticism frames him within the cultural middlebrow. The charge of orientalism is neatly deflected – 'My work is not an idealized vision' (Skafidas) – as he evokes a lineage of artists (Mérimée, Mark Twain, Pagnol and Truffaut) who specialised in providing angular representations of difficult childhoods.
- 29 The rejection of orientalism is, in rhetorical terms, a refutation of the text's status as allegory, as a fully motivated, conscious depiction of the Other in negative terms. However, neither the author's political ambivalence nor the fog swirling around the reception of *L'Arabe du futur* should obscure the deeply political tenor of this work. In this

debate the stakes are high and judgements can be hasty, so context is very important. The assumption that a cartoonist reflecting on his early life in two autocratic Arab countries, where he was raised in part as a Muslim, should present an interesting perspective on topical issues is fair ; the notion that such a project might incubate a deep knowledge of the history and politics of the Middle East less so. Even more pervasive is the idea that the identity and career of the author imparts an a priori authenticity to the project that must bear down upon the debate, when questions over truth and reliability are innate to the genre of the graphic memoir.

- 30 Comparisons with *Persepolis* are inevitable given the latter's episodic, almost tangible process of selecting, dramatising, and elaborating on memories of childhood, but *L'Arabe du futur* is a story told differently. The most obvious feature of the two volumes is the colour symbolism. The different phases of young Riad's life are colour-coded : yellow for the deserts of Libya ; pinkish-red for the iron in the soil of Syria ; and bluish grey for the cliffs and drizzle of Brittany. Sattouf has suggested that these transitions from one colour to the next are intended to convey the disorientating impact on a young child of moving between different cultures. However, these are not garish, fairground colours but sketches washed in pastel shades, evoking the indistinctness of early childhood. In contrast to the punchiness of *Persepolis*, in which events succeed each other rapidly in sharply delineated chapters, these coloured slabs of existence flatten the passage of time. But it is an existence that is moulded by the *récitatif*, the verbal instructions in the captions that orchestrate the narrative. In both volumes of *L'Arabe du futur* the *récitatif* is unusually dominant, its function of ensuring that the story coheres enhanced further by the technique of labelling certain images through the use of signposting arrows. And, although the narrative voice in the captions is identified with Riad as a child, the adult overseer hovers in the background and is at times an obtrusive presence.
- 31 The result is a complex patchwork of observations and experiences in which the universes of the young child and dispassionate adult merge. For the child it is a world apprehended through sight, smell and sound, sensory impressions that may be vivid but not necessarily politically encoded : his father's talismanic plastic bull sitting atop the television ; the stale sweat of his grandmother ; a topless woman in a window frame ; dictators' faces on posters ; the mighty calves of his mini-skirted, high-heeled teacher ; the gibbets hanging from a crane in Homs ; and the comforting rhythms of koranic recitation. For the dominant adult, Riad's father Abdel-Razak, it is a world which must conform to an ideological conviction rooted in the pan-Arab nationalist movement that formed behind Gamal Abdel (Colonel) Nasser, President of Egypt (1956-70). From the outset there are disjunctions. Thanks to the 'progressive' edict in Libya which abolished private property, this aspirational academic discovers one evening that some strangers have moved in to share their spacious home. This disconcerting development sets in train a sequence of discrepancies, between his unshakeable political vision and the realities of daily life, that runs through the narrative. Riad is distanced though not immune from his father's politicisation of their world. Indeed politics, or rather political and cultural figures, exert a subliminal influence over him. The first human face he draws as a toddler astonishes adult relatives because the drawing, which he then replicates, looks like Georges Pompidou. As a consequence of an argument between his parents about music when his mother champions Georges Brassens – 'c'est un vrai dieu en France' (Sattouf, Vol 1, p. 25) – Riad imagines (and repeatedly draws) God in the likeness of George Brassens, and when his father launches into an intemperate, racially motivated tirade

against Jean-Bédél Bokassa, the dictator who ruled over the Central African Republic from 1966-1980, was suspected of cannibalism, and benefitted substantially from French government aid, Riad spots a likeness between the photograph of Bokassa, and his own father.

- 32 Sattouf appears even-handed in his recollections of living in these different countries. Certainly he is careful not to portray the brief interludes in France as any kind of respite from life in the Middle East and the entire story is notably void of nostalgia and sentimentality. However, the similarities and differences between their lives in Libya and Syria are marked. Although food shortages and power cuts are a feature of both, and Syria appears, like Libya, 'en état de construction', Riad is older and more observant during their time in Syria, so the details of their life there are richer. The ubiquitous antisemitism and demonisation of Israel is more intense, the drab, lifeless, fetid physical environment of Ter Maaleh, the Syrian village and birthplace of his father, more oppressive. Balancing these negatives, Riad's father succeeds partially in establishing himself in the local community, and the family benefits from a luxurious holiday at the seaside courtesy of a military general with whom he has acquainted himself.
- 33 In graphic terms such aspects are depicted conventionally. Sattouf uses a minimalist 'gros nez' style ; indeed the noses of male characters are usually bulbous whereas females' are mostly narrow and pinched. What Riad witnesses and hears may at times seem shocking to a Western reader – for example, the constant vilification of the Jews by small children – but given the context, of living under the dictatorships of Muammar Gaddafi and Hafez al-Assad, both of whom were committed to bringing about the extinction of Israel, not especially controversial. Riad is fortified at important moments by the protection of his father, and he seems quite resilient. Indeed Sattouf subtly undermines the assumption that we as readers should empathise with the child, that we should read these two comics volumes as a chronicle of how growing up in Libya and Syria might have affected his emotional development. One could argue that Riad offers no more than a perspective, a point of view on the events that affect his family, and this is especially the case with the incident that occurs at the end of Volume 2, the 'honour killing' of a female relative which is at once a cultural taboo and the key political reference in the text.
- 34 This event is predicated firstly upon an act of cruelty that concludes their first period in Syria. Riad's mother calls him to look at children outside playing with a small dog ; the reader is informed ominously that the dog, in the tradition of Islam, is considered to be 'un animal impur'. The teasing of the dog swiftly escalates before a bigger boy arrives and the animal is impaled on a garden fork. Riad watches through the window as his mother remonstrates with the children. A man lops off the dog's head with a spade, and Riad's distraught mother is led away by two women with suspiciously bulbous noses (Sattouf, Vol 1, pp. 144-45). In Volume 2 the mutilation of animals is a feature of the family's extended stay in Ter Maaleh. Riad's father hunts sparrows with an inappropriately powerful airgun, such that the bloodied corpses cannot be cooked (Sattouf, Vol 2, p. 73), and a boy in the village, described as 'gentil', bursts the frogs he has captured by attaching them to the tyre of his bicycle, which he then rides (Ibid., p. 78).
- 35 Both Riad's parents struggle with cultural estrangement at various points during his childhood, but towards the end of each volume it is his mother who is most obviously traumatised. During their stay in Ter Maaleh the position of women in Syrian society comes strongly into focus. Following an altercation with a girl in the street, Riad's cousins explain their understanding of gender roles. Women are not like men because they bleed

from between their legs and are therefore, like the dog, 'impures', obliged to wear the veil from the age of fifteen and walk at several paces behind their husbands. Women are also more fragile than men, therefore more likely to let Satan into their minds (Ibid., p. 47). One rainy evening the family is gathered in front of a television programme, in which a row of young women in military attire prepare to eat the writhing snakes coiled around their necks in front of an audience containing President Assad. The television screen is shaded blood-red. As Riad's mother leads him to bed – 'C'est pas de ton âge de voir ces horreurs !' – his father exclaims triumphantly : 'C'est pour montrer à Israël qu'on a peur de rien' / 'Aucune Française ne serait capable de faire ça !' (Ibid., p. 115)

- 36 His father's dogmatism will be tested. In the middle of the same rainy night Riad is awoken by a knock on the door and later eavesdrops on the conversation between his parents that informs him of the death of his aunt Leila, a young widow suffocated by her father and brother on the news that she had become pregnant out of wedlock. His parents' words and accompanying blood-red images re-enacting the murder are contained within large speech bubbles billowing round the corner of the wall behind which Riad is crouched (Ibid., p. 118). The family agrees to denounce the killers who are imprisoned for their crime. However, at the end of the volume Riad and his parents encounter the old man walking down the road. Riad's father explains that, under pressure from the local community expressing the view that the two men had acted solely to preserve the honour of their family, the male elders had decided to petition for the men's release from prison. The full-length panel that concludes this volume (Fig. 3), depicting the shambling patriarch muttering incomprehensibly to himself, contrasts anaphorically with the depiction earlier in the second volume of his victim, Riad's aunt Leila, a kind, attractive woman with whom he shared his love of drawing (Ibid., p. 158).

Figure 3

Conclusion : the Talking Cat

- 37 When life narratives are told through comics memoirs, the association of image and words facilitates the juxtaposition of intimate, personal remembrance with broader cultural and national histories. While the visual style of *Persepolis* has a symbolic directness, in *L'Arabe du futur* Sattouf practices a more oblique type of reference. Similarly, just as the comics artist develops his or own visual signature, so he or she also adopts a distinctive narrative voice, though here again Sattouf presents a conundrum. In interviews he throws out half-formed bits of information like bread to the pigeons but remains very guarded, leading some to speculate that his reticence, which translates in the comics script to a fascination with the rituals and trivia of the everyday, may be explained by a childhood spent mostly in the grip of totalitarian societies. In *Persepolis* by contrast there is scarcely an observation or event that does not explicitly draw political comment ; Satrapi's boldness reflects perhaps the finality of her ultimate liberation.
- 38 For decades French comics have been taken seriously as a unique form of artistic expression. Nearly all cartoonists draw rapidly, showing few signs of the mental effort expended by figurative or conceptual artists, so by dint of its speed of execution alone the comics strip stands outside of the world of fine art. Yet *BDistes* such as Jacques Tardi, Lewis Trondheim, Marc Larcenet, and Chloé Cruchaudet have produced complex, challenging, diverse work, so it is possible to argue that contemporary French comics are middlebrow (as opposed to simply popular) by default. However, the tragedy of January 2015 has put the political and ethical impacts of cartoons under the spotlight, thereby further accentuating the issues of text, image and reference. Although there is a distance implied in the act of recollecting events from early childhood, Sattouf's life story is transmogrified not only by the politics of the Middle East but also by the continuing debate on the place of religion in western society incited by the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.
- 39 So, I shall conclude with a different line of inquiry. A middlebrow approach would normally be positioned at one or more steps removed from the glare of the caricatural figure (that by necessity borders on the stereotype) and yet would still seek to offer perspectives on such political realities. In 2002 Joann Sfar inaugurated his series entitled *Le Chat du rabbin*, which addresses precisely issues of free speech, religious dogma, political power and aniconism, though from a greater historical and aesthetic distance. The eponymous couple - rabbi and pet cat - live together in 1920s Algiers, in a broadly tolerant, pluralistic community. In the first volume, *La Bar-mitzva*, the cat, no longer able to tolerate the squawking of the parrot in the family home, devours it and thereby acquires the power of speech. From this moment on the reader is treated to a series of adventures involving the rabbi and his cat, in which the use and abuse of language and the power (and dread) of the image in the Abrahamic religions are dominant themes. With its fantastical characters, such as Malka and his lion, and the Chagall-like painter (sole Ashkenazi in a Sephardic community) who is resurrected from a crate at the beginning of *Jérusalem d'Afrique* (Vol. 5), coupled with an evident thirst for travel and new experiences, *Le Chat du rabbin* evokes a distinctly Voltairian ambiance. These are stories designed to prompt discussion. Intriguingly, sundry artists and musicians have contributed brief prefaces to the volumes, welcoming on each occasion the return of the cat and his rabbi. The presence of these prefatory accolades indicates that Sfar may have succeeded in staging a conversation in which followers of his series are eager to

participate. In the best traditions of the Talmudic scholar, the talking cat is always open-minded and questioning, even when for long periods he imposes an appropriately bestial silence upon himself. Thus the accent is on education, on the importance of a continuing education, for Zlabya the Rabbi's daughter, for the Rabbi, for the reader and for Sfar himself, as he, through us, seeks to understand how and why religion has shaped and continues to shape human civilisations. In this, its metaphysical drive, in its constant revisiting of what it means to be human, albeit in light-touch, entertaining form, in the journey beyond the textual effects of word and image upon which its reader embarks, *Le Chat du rabbin* is fundamentally middlebrow and axiomatically a comic strip, in that here, gloriously, our guide to understanding humanity is a talking cat (Fig.4).

Figure 4

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ABSTRACTS

This chapter deliberates the merits of whether French-language comics may be construed as a salient example of a new cultural middlebrow. It argues that the comics artist introduces new ways of seeing shared worlds, stressing the referential aspects typical of the literary middlebrow, but not of the high-brow, which is characterised by a high degree of self-consciousness. Moreover, where these special cognitive windows open out onto social and political realities that trouble a middlebrow audience, they can offer alternative, sometimes challenging perspectives. These claims are tested through analyses of Marjane Satrapi's contemporary classic *Persepolis* and Riad Sattouf's on-going saga *L'Arabe du futur*. The chapter concludes with a brief digression into the colourful, metaphysical universe of Joann Sfar's *Le Chat du rabbin*.

INDEX

Mots-clés: comics, referentiality, *Persepolis*, aniconism, caricature, Sattouf

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