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(Imagined) spaces of migration in contemporary graphic literature: from testimony and naturalism to fabulation and satire

This article deals with the multifaceted and increasingly visible topic of migration in contemporary graphic literature. Selective readings of post-2000 works by Francophone and Anglophone authors (e.g. Jean-Philippe Stassen, Joe Sacco, Shaun Tan, Zabus & Hippolyte, Yvan Alagbé, and Bill) will give a critical insight into the artistic scope, the testimonial truthfulness, and the political significance of these graphic productions. Several main narrative modes and aesthetic strategies in these works – such as realist convention and testimony, stylisation and allegory, or experimental storytelling and satire – will be discussed. Further analysis will cover two major narrative and chronotopical elements: the dreamed spaces opened up by migration (in the sense of 'imagined hostlands'); and the complex loci of the contact and (hoped for) transit zones. Examining the recurrent scenographical properties of these fictions, their sensitive effects, and their identitarian and political implications will show potentials and capacities, but also possible shortcomings and pitfalls of representing migrant subjectivities through this mode of creative expression.

...[a] consequence of the current transformation: millions of migrants wandering the routes once trodden by the 'surplus population' discharged by the greenhouses of modernity.
Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives* (2003)

Je suis morte et personne ne le sait. Pourquoi?
Vincent Zabus & Hippolyte, *Les Ombres* (2013)

The notions of displacement, transnational movement and migration have been part of graphic literature or *bande dessinée* for a long time, either from a thematic perspective or because of their creators' experiences. The exhibition "Albums: des histoires dessinées entre ici et là" (2013) in the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris shows that many American comic artists, illustrators and scriptwriters stem from European emigration (Winsor McCay or George McManus) and have diasporic Jewish origins (Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Joe Shuster, and Jerry Siegel). Also, Argentinian graphic literature (South America's most significant contribution to the medium) has been nourished by the circulation of European artists, and several pillars of classic and contemporary French *bande dessinée* (René Goscinny, Alberto Uderzo, Georges Wolinski, Enki Bilal, Baru, or Cyril Pedrosa) have foreign roots.

Looking particularly at Francophone works and France – where quite a few of my article's examples come from, transit through, or are related to –, migratory issues first appear in original forms in the 1980s, like in the case of Algerian-born Farid Boudjellal, who grants the migrant character the principal role while raising other sensitive topics, such as family reunification, mixed couples, and problems of integration. Yet the real opening came in the early 2000s when several works of the independent sector of graphic literature brought migration and related subjects to wider audiences, showing not only their political and aesthetic, but also commercial potential. The most notable example is the four-volume *Persepolis* (2000-2003) by Marjane Satrapi, adapted in 2007 into a critically acclaimed animated film. The Iranian-French artist seems to have inspired Lebanese-born Zeina Abirached whose memoirs, such as *Mourir, partir, revenir* (2007) or *Le piano oriental* (2015), deal with intercultural encounters and multidirectional memory between the West and the Middle-East. An even more successful case is the ongoing, so far four-volume, autobiographical *L'Arabe du futur* (since 2014) by Riad Sattouf, a French cartoonist of partly Syrian origin. Praised by critics and with high sales figures, these books demonstrate that independent publishing can now seduce a larger public through intercultural and transnational topics. They show migration's "effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" (Appadurai 2008: 3), exposing at the same time that modernity is experienced very unevenly.

The originality of these representations of displacement, migration and the transnational is not only thematic and enunciative, but also formal and aesthetic. Since the 1990s, it has participated in the innovative and experimental postures of independent production and alternative editorial structures like L'Association, Cornélius, Les Requins Marteaux, and FRMK. In this "nouvelle bande dessinée", the graphic approach breaks away from realist conventions and academicism; new formats and genres (autofiction, chronicle, journalism, etc.) and hybridization (e.g. photo-drawing) have widened the scenographical scope. Such output also participates in the growing economic presence of graphic literatures,¹ inciting most major literary publishers (Gallimard, Seuil, Flammarion, Actes Sud, Denoël, L'Harmattan) to integrate graphic works in their catalogue and start series related to the medium.

¹ With an increase from 1500 to 5000 new titles per year from 2000 to 2011, *bande dessinée* is the only sector in the French publishing field which is financially profitable (Mouchard 2013: 65).

Increasingly in tune with its time and more inclined to take up conflicting issues such as identity, violence, memory, social divides, and globalization, graphic literature today allows for a more complex affirmation of minority subjectivities. Recent scholarship speaks of "multicultural comics" (Aldama 2010) and a "postcolonial turn" (Mehta / Mukherji 2015, Delisle 2016) in a medium which has integrated marginal and 'peripheral' narrative identities into original enunciative and representational forms. The multifaceted topic of migration is thus part of a now relatively thriving graphic production which reaches out to politically and socially conscious adult audiences, and beyond. Unsurprisingly, the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, which gives accrued weight to the concept of the "ethnoscape" – the "landscape of persons" constituting today's ever-shifting world and "affect[ing] the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (Appadurai 2008: 33) – brought even more attention to the subject.²

Such visibility and aesthetic innovation concerning migration in contemporary graphic literature prompt the questions of the artistic scope, the testimonial truthfulness, and the political significance of these productions. This shall be discussed in two parts, based on several post-2000 works by authors from (or practising in) France, Belgium, Reunion, the United States and Australia. This corpus has been selected inductively, with regard to its critical, analytical and editorial relevance as well as its narrative and formal elaboration. The first part discusses several main narrative modes and aesthetic strategies these works subscribe to. Indeed, with regard to their general regime – either fictional or factual – they make use of naturalist or more imaginative methods, including fabulation and allegory. Their graphic treatment varies between realist convention, expressionism, stylisation, and experimentation; their mostly critical, testimonial, and memorial approaches may also fall within the scope of satire and humour – knowing that some authors move between these modes, attitudes and strategies. The second part looks more specifically at two major narrative and chronotopical elements which are particularly significant in the main corpus and other related graphic works: first, the process of picturing and fantasizing the space presumably opened up by migration, in the sense of 'imagined hostlands' – in resonance with Salman Rushdie's notion of "imagined homelands" (Rushdie 1991); second, the ambivalent and complex locus of the contact

² For an overview of migration in Francophone graphic narratives, cf. e.g. Marie / Ollivier (2013) and Hertrampf (2019).

and transit zone. Ultimately, the analysis of the recurrent narrative and formal properties of these texts, their artistic and sensitive effects, and their identitarian and political significance will show potentials and capacities, but also possible shortcomings and pitfalls of representing migrant subjectivities through this mode of artistic expression.

1 Main Narrative modes and aesthetic strategies

In the fertile production of graphic literature on migratory topics over the last years, several major strategies and properties – in terms of genre, narrative mode, aesthetic design and literary function – can be identified. These are: 1) Factual and journalistic approaches, with mostly realist or naturalist figuration, testimonial perspective and sociological investigation. 2) Scenographies which borrow from – or entirely subscribe to – fantasy genres and use the narrative and graphic conventions of the fable or the tale of enchantment. 3) Experimental propositions whose challenging narrative and stylistic features can be located at the crossroads of avant-garde or alternative graphic literature and fine arts. 4) Humorous perspectives which extend one of the medium's historically dominant modes (the comic, the funny, the playful) into postmodern irony and hyperbolic transgression.

As part of this study, several exemplary works of graphic literature will be discussed. This will provide critical insight into these general scenographical approaches, which range from testimonial realism to expressive naturalism, from oneiric stylization to postmodern play, from social / political commentary and satire to grotesque parody. These terms certainly refer to literary modes, formal properties, functions, and attitudes. Besides, they are not mutually exclusive and the very specificities of the medium may add more complexity.³ Yet, the selection seems representative for the main modes and formal properties employed to treat the subject of migration in graphic literature.

1.1 The factual and journalistic approach: Joe Sacco, Jean-Philippe Stassen

With the American Joe Sacco and the Belgian Jean-Philippe Stassen, migration is portrayed through the prism of factual and testimonial work, known as 'comic

³ Most works of graphic literature combine discourse and image. The formal part of the distinctive "form-content" interplay thus refers to linguistic *and* aesthetic elements.

journalism' (*bande dessinée de reportage*).⁴ Recording and commenting on current affairs through graphic narration, comic journalism has become increasingly prominent and developed into an original subgenre of the medium. Through the method of "immersion réstitutive" (Gefen 2017: 15), the authors testify for a concrete and incarnate *other*. Providing neither abstract reflection nor modelling, they create sensations, relations and empathy, yet describe and inform at the same time.

Sacco, a trained journalist and the founding father of the subgenre, has engaged with migration in "The Unwanted", a narrative of 50 pages first published in 2009 where he reports on the influx of African immigrants to his native Malta. As in his other graphic works, several distinctive features appear: 1) The author's presence, both discursive and visual. Next to verbatim report of interviews, his personal reflections and recurrent graphic appearances are the strong affirmation of an enunciative "I". 2) The referential caution, with maps, tables and other documentation, even including explanatory words in the paratext. 3) A relative polyphony by juxtaposing public and private locations and by creating confrontation and dialogue between the refugees, locals and intermediaries. The migratory environment thus appears as a plural context of territorial tension, negotiation and exchange. 4) Manifest character individualization, providing mostly direct speech of individuals who are shown and named. This is evidenced by the 15-page focus on an Eritrean refugee: his escape from forced labour, the journey through the desert, the exploitation by Sudanese and Ethiopian smugglers, the humiliations suffered in the Libyan transit, the sea crossing, and the difficulties upon arrival. 5) The relative impartiality of the reporter-witness, although Sacco has frequently questioned the doxa of the journalist's supposed objectivity and neutrality. In a manifesto prefacing his volume *Journalism*, he stresses the subjective nature of drawing, his testimonial role and interaction with people, not forgetting that documentary graphic methods and realistic regimes cannot escape the significant processes of selecting, framing and excluding. And the author's critical stance appears more or less subtly, like when describing a right-wing politician with hardly veiled irony as "visionary" (Sacco 2012: 117) or when nuancing a refugee's comparison between the Maltese detention centre and the infamous Guantanamo. Eventually, Sacco's dialectical approach is

⁴ On comic journalism and *bande dessinée de reportage*, cf. e.g. Tissot (2007), Le Foulgoc (2009), and Hertrampf (2016: 11–18).

unveiled in a paratextual note: despite his obvious sympathy with migrants, he respects the fears of the local population about the massive flow of refugees.

"The Unwanted" strongly resonates with Stassen's "Les Passages" (2015), a 30-page narrative, first published in the French quarterly *XXI* as "Les Visiteurs de Gibraltar" (2008), whose subtitle refers to the invested geographies: Ceuta, Gibraltar, El Ejido, Portbou, and the author's city of origin, Liège. The similarities with Sacco's approach are obvious: First, the referential apparatus (spatiotemporal contextualization, introductory statement, historical explanation, maps). Then, the position of Stassen himself, who, though visually always out of the frame, asserts his eyewitness status in an introductory note: "je suis toujours caché dans un coin, à boire un verre ou à allumer une cigarette" (Stassen 2015: 6). One also observes polyphony and individualization, operating here not only through a focus on various subjectivities, each with a name and a particular history, but through frequent close-ups on very expressive faces.

Yet the work's distinct features are its striking graphic design and the detached critical and ironic tone. Stassen's simple and falsely naive drawing features thick contour lines and flat uniformly applied colour, referring in the Belgian context to Hergé's classic *ligne claire* style. He uses dark and opaque hues, draws nocturnal scenes where black figures melt into darkness, and plays with morphologies, shadows and silhouettes, recalling comic artists close to illustration and printmaking (e.g. Brecht Evens or Blexbolex). Stassen thus deploys a kind of aesthetic and expressive – at times grotesque – naturalism from whose complex layers also emanates satire. It may even become an acerbic grin, like when illustrating a tourist's racist analogy between prostrating Muslim worshippers and spoiled ("pas fraîches") aubergines (Stassen 2015: 28), or when juxtaposing the words of a Malian migrant with a prohibitive panel at the beach: "Prohibido el acceso y la permanencia de cualquier tipo de animales en la playa (art. 18)" (Stassen 2015: 14).⁵ While such vignettes play on ambiguous humour, Stassen also explores the shadows and ambivalences, the double measures and ironies of history. And he makes extensive use of the ellipsis, prompting the reader to critical thinking between the lines and in the space opened by the typographical gaps.

⁵ Significantly, in its size and colour, the sign is in stark opposition to the following vignette displaying in the shadow a small welcoming panel.

To show the complexities of the migratory zones, the author mobilises the polysemy of the image and utilises a framing which both directs and disorients the gaze. This densifies the signifiers and allows dialogue, sometimes on silent panels, like in the sequence about Tarifa where human profiles and dissimilar discursive markers intersect: an old Spanish woman flowering the tombs of dead migrants and her Muslim nurse who seems "moins étrangère" (Stassen 2015: 12) than the English and Swedish kite surfers (one group overshadows in turn the other); here, a hagiographic inscription, above an Islamic arc, about the city's "heroic" past,⁶ there, billboards for water sports and the promotion of whale watching. These panels show the collision of worlds in the contact zone where the same site is, for some, a place of leisure, for the others, a place of death.

Stassen and Sacco explore the heterogeneities, shocks and mixtures in different topographies of Western Europe and North Africa related to illegal migration from Africa. They put the topos in a broad spatio-temporal perspective and end with a surprising parallel. In "Les Passages", an African migrant on the Franco-Spanish border is told about the last days of Walter Benjamin in 1940, "une histoire de frontières aussi" (Stassen 2015: 30). "The Unwanted" evokes the mythical story of the Maltese giving refuge to the apostle Saint Paul. While speaking of specific chronotopes, the topical issue is explored with a manifest humanist call, providing it with a timeless and universal note.⁷

1.2 Oneirism and fabulous story-worlds: Shaun Tan, Vincent Zabus & Hippolyte

The silent graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) by Australian illustrator Shaun Tan is a fable on exile which combines realist and futurist / abstract figuration. Next to its poetic dimension – the book cover mimics an old manuscript with mould stains and folds –, it contains clear referential connotations, opening with a photographic kaleidoscope of migrant profiles and a collage of documents including inspection cards and stamps. Despite this mixture of documentary, biographical and

⁶ Cf. "muy noble, muy leal y heroica ciudad de Tarifa ganada a los moros" (Stassen 2015: 12).

⁷ This posture of de-particularising and universalizing forced migration through analogies beyond specific time-space frames is reminiscent of Christian Petzold's drama film *Transit* (2018) which, by freely adapting Anna Segher's novel *Transit* (1944), transfers the WWII refugee destinies to contemporary Marseille.

memorialist codes,⁸ the absence of speech, the lack of pagination, and the sepia filter emphasize the story's timeless aspect. Blending silent comics, old pictorial tradition, and cinematographic strategies such as close-ups, zooms, and transitions, *The Arrival's* hybrid scenography also shows fantasy features and focuses on plasticity. Notably the eponymous arrival is portrayed through striking visual distortion and otherness: surrealistic cityscapes, strange creatures, linguistic signs and objects become the signifiers of a new universe which challenges the migrant's perception and turn drawing into a universal language. The new contact zone also leads to the significant encounter with other migrant subjectivities. Indeed, while the dystopian images of their stories of slavery, totalitarianism and war recall the fictions of George Orwell, Ray Bradbury or Aldous Huxley, the shared memory creates solidarity and allows them to "perlaborate" (in the sense of Freud and Paul Ricœur) the traumatizing past. It opens to a narrative of progress and success which is accomplished by the final family reunification. Without text, but loaded with imaginary motifs and decorative elements, *The Arrival* offers a humanist and universal dimension about the migratory experience and perception.

It additionally invites a complementary reading of *Les Ombres* (2013), a dense and complex tale of exile and persecution by scriptwriter Vincent Zabus and cartoonist Hippolyte. This story of a young refugee, who recounts his flight to the authorities of the country of destination and who is haunted by the memory of his dead companions (metaphorized in the shape of ghostly shadows), does indeed bear major resemblances to *The Arrival*, notably the motifs of displacement (flight, persecution, smugglers, exploitation, the boat travel) and scenographical correspondences (play on plasticity, the fabulous time-space, oneiric components). Yet the differences are significant. *Les Ombres* deploys an even more fairy-tale and timeless universe rendered in dynamic and expressive figuration. Its pencil drawings and colourful aquarelles are energetic and non-academic, often stylized and childish in appearance, displaying human forms with simplified morphologies, exaggerated proportions, or animal physiognomies. And the shadow motif deploys its distinct plasticity through the play with silhouettes and chiaroscuro, contrasts of colours and shapes. Ultimately, the polysemic trope metaphorizes the migrant's fluid, evasive,

⁸ The archival and photographic sources are unveiled in Tan's companion meta-book, *Sketches from a Nameless Land* (2010).

unstable identity; the shadow as "une forme qui erre" (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 60), like the spectral "invisible man" in Ralph Ellison's eponymous 1952 novel.

The work's treatment of memory also proves original. "Tu ne vois pas qu'il veut à tout prix que son dossier soit accepté! Alors il va mentir..." (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 7) says one of the ghosts in the interrogation room. Unlocks here the Pandora's Box of the past's psychological and ethical burden, but also the possible abuse of memory. Indeed, Zabus and Hippolyte reflect on the *present* responsibility about *past* victims, on the "devoir de mémoire" to avoid another symbolic death: "Si tu mens, nous mourrons une deuxième fois" (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 10). Respect for transmission, historic and testimonial truth is placed above a victim's self-profitable manipulation. Against the backdrop of negativist realpolitik, this may be discredited as idealistic, contrasting for example with Stassen's pessimistic naturalism where migrants under existential constraints lie to survive. Concerning such moral dilemmas, *Les Ombres* opts for an appeasement of conscience through the principle of veracity, respect for others and recognition of their suffering. Yet, this moral triumph won't prevent final disillusionment, confining the hero to indeterminate isolation in a colossal fortress.

1.3 Alternative narratives, formal experimentation: Yvan Alagbé

Of French and Beninese origins, Yvan Alagbé is an alternative author and co-founder in 1994 of the publishing house Amok.⁹ Close to fine arts, he creates works with low print-runs that deal with exile, ethnic and racial confrontation, and issues pertaining to "*Françafrique*".

If migrant subjectivities are central to his stories, he focuses on the difficulties in the countries of destination rather than on travel and displacement, depicting the legal, economic, social and psychological precariousness his interstitial heroes are facing. This can be seen in the collection *Nègres jaunes et autres créatures imaginaires* (2011). With dark brushstrokes evocative of Edmond Baudoin, Aristophane, José Muñoz and Carlos Sampayo (or a certain Lorenzo Mattotti), the author calls upon colonial and post / neo-colonial spectres and takes the reader into the depths of the suffering human soul. The central story "Nègres jaunes" offers an intertwined

⁹ Amok merged in 2002 with the Belgian association Fréon, hence constituting FRMK, a collective of independent cartoonists.

plot about a young illegal African, his French mistress, his sister, and an old disabled French-Algerian detective desirous to expiate his 'sins' and surmount his loneliness by fathering the black hero. At the end, the homophile policeman commits suicide and the protagonist faces deportation after being arrested (cf. fig. 1).

In its narrative economy and visual distinctiveness – between ellipses, fragmented discourse and evanescent silhouettes – Alagbé's work is demanding, provocative and confrontational. Entangled subplots, discrepancy between word and image, unclear character identification, and stream-of-consciousness are challenges for the reader. Such singular aesthetics creates an uneasy and troubled atmosphere where instability, disintegration and symbolism dominate. The raw depiction, the suggestive and agitated figures, and the disjointed plotlines thus 'reflect' the erratic and tense identities of the illegal immigrants who become the ultimate object of the author's humanist awareness. Through his alternative narratives and formal experimentation, Alagbé transforms black and white drawing – and the act of telling itself – into both a poetic and political question.

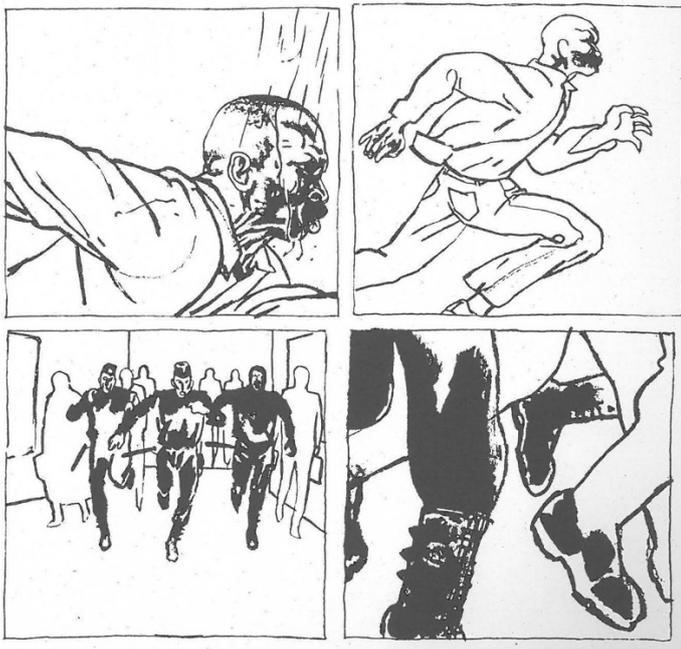


Figure 1: "Nègres jaunes" (2011: np., extract) © FRMK.¹⁰

¹⁰ The author thanks the artists and the different publishers – FRMK, Rollin Publications and Libella (Phébus) – for their kind permission to reproduce the images in this article.

1.4 (The limits of) humour: Bill

A wholly different approach is French illustrator Bill's two-volume *Krrpk* (2012, 2014), a science-fiction story about a young immigrant to the planet Grook. Despite its stylized 'childish' *kawaii* graphics (pastels and pink colour, round shapes, animated objects, and expressive typography), *Krrpk* is aimed at adults, for xenophobia, scatology and political incorrectness reign supreme. And every possible stereotype about migration is exploited: the new world's ridiculous regulations make immigration almost impossible, the naive stranger is mugged by cynical locals and fooled into losing his money, and hence must look for work to survive. With this 'classically' tragic starting situation, a colourful plot unfolds featuring absurd exaggeration, ironic diversion, and often dark and dubious humour, sprinkled with vulgarities of all kinds: the hero's parents suggest they stop eating and prostitute his sisters to send him money, and the employment agency enquires about his reaction to radiation and his experience in humiliation. In the end, he literally works in excrement since the planet's main resources are the faeces of a big foul beast.

In its hyperbolic use of cliché and uninhibited style, *Krrpk* exploits several issues related to migration, foreignness and (non-)integration in a rather quirky and raw fashion. Amongst these features a trade union with the acronym "SBD" ("Syndicat des Boulots de Merde", vol.1: 95), a museum of xenophobia and the sham marriage with his old libidinous landlord. For sure, the comic is not devoid of efficient humour, witty jibes and word plays.¹¹ However, its grotesque and monstrous universe – where foreigners star in documentaries about animals, where random killings are organized to get spectacular images on TV, where refugees are smashed to bloody bits by former migrants because they fear for their jobs – turns into doubtful excess and the obscene. Thus, contrary to Stassen's ambiguous notes,¹² such a gloomy and offbeat carnival raises critical questions, not the least about moral and ethical limits. Is it a case of "On peut rire de tout mais pas avec n'importe qui", attributed to French humourist Pierre Desproges? Should we put this coarse humour on the side of satirists like Jean-Marc Reiser and the late Georges Wolinski, or the polemical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*? And yet, should one really evoke the reader's sensitivity or

¹¹ Cf. e.g. the chapter title "La faim justifie les machins" (distorting the saying "La fin justifie les moyens") or the congratulatory letter from the authorities inviting the hero to leave the planet (vol. 2: 12).

¹² Stassen's testimonial caution, his use of polyphony, polysemic signifiers and the ellipsis contrast with Bill's explicit, hyperbolic and sensational fiction.

political conscience concerning an openly humourist plot of an extra-terrestrial story-world, published in the series "Shampooing", edited by Lewis Trondheim, champion of postmodern play and often stupefying entertainment? In its most bizarre parade, Bill takes the idea of the migrants' otherness literally – after all, doesn't 'alien' denote 'extraterritorial', 'foreign' and 'strange'? No doubt that humour around sensitive topics eventually becomes a question of degrees. Therefore *Krrpk's* aesthetic and critical relevance will remain in the judgment of each reader. But if such a comic approach remains rare and is far from previously discussed modes, it is nourished by a specific political context and part of an ever-growing graphic production on migratory issues.

Discussing these graphic narratives unveils a diversity of styles, ranging from 'realist' recording to formal inventiveness through stylization or experimental drawing, from black and white portrayal to the use of the whole colour palette. This echoes the relative diversity of narrative modes, with testimonial methods and referential contexts on the one hand, fabulation and imaginary universes on the other. And these approaches may intertwine: naturalist narrative does not exclude satire (Stassen) and allegory (Alagbé); photographic realism can coexist with fantasy and the abstract (Tan); stylized rendering can support testimonial veracity (Stassen); marvellous figures can explicitly relate to topical locations (Zabus / Hippolyte). These texts also bear various common denominators, above all their mostly critical stance and their recurrent referentiality, often underlined by the paratextual apparatus such as forewords, glossaries, author's statements and institutional comments. Yet, beyond their distinctive features, the analysed comics seem to be paradigmatic – in their generic, narrative, and aesthetic spectrum – with regards to their treatment of migration in the medium. They thus resonate with other books. Sacco's and Stassen's journalistic approach is echoed by Troubs and Edmond Baudoin's Mexican enquiries in *Viva la vida* (2011), while the latter's expressionist brushstrokes resonate with Alagbé's experimental style. Humour and stereotype are provided in the 'classic' double-album format *La vie de Pahé* (2006, 2008) by the Gabonese Pahé, as well as the forth tome of *Aya de Yopougan* (2012) by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie. Satire and stylization are present in the fifth volume of Grégory Jarry and Otto T.'s *Petite histoire des colonies françaises* (2012). Stassen's and Alagbé's determinist naturalism find correspondences with Charles Masson's

sociological investigation about Mayotte in *Droit du sol* (2009). Tan's supernatural elements and Zabus and Hippolyte's fable prism relate to Jérôme Ruillier's humanist *L'étrange* (2016). And even if illegal migration may be a mere subplot, as in Baru's crime fiction *Fais péter les basses, Bruno!* (2010), it structures the narrative and draws on recurrent motifs of the subject.

In the following part, specific attention will be given to the portrayal of two major tropes and chronotopical features of migration narratives, both in the main corpus and in other related works.

2 Some recurrent key narrative elements

The discussed works offer a possibly diverging narrative frame. They may have different chronotopical foci (the home country, the journey, the arrival, etc.) and some stories end at the frontier while others put emphasis on the destination. Yet, among the recurrent themes and chronotopical elements of these migration narratives (the key stages of displacement; the aquatic imaginary; the figures of the smugglers and human traffickers; police control and foreign administration; the link between colonization and migration) two seem particularly present and relevant: first, the process of imagining and fantasizing the space presumably opened up by the migratory project; and second, the ambivalent and complex locus of the contact and transit zone.

2.1 Dreamed spaces of migration: fantasized futures, 'imagined hostlands'

There are numerous notably economic, political, and social push- and pull-factors for chosen or forced migratory movements and exile. One key feature is the projection into a brighter future and the prospect of evolving in a safe and welcoming location. In the articulation between past and future, for which Reinhart Koselleck has developed the meta-historic category "horizon of expectation", there are "[n]o expectations without experience" (2004: 270). And expectations draw a future based on collective and individual experiences. In the case of migration, experience is mostly stressful and traumatic; expectation, in stark opposition to a dire past and present, is pictured in terms of fulfilment. With mass media conferring to imagination "a singular new power in social life" today, "[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they did before" (Appadurai

2008: 53). Thus, while the process of 'imagining hostlands' – to mirror the notion of "imagined homelands" (Rushdie 1991) – implies oscillating between temporalities and topographies, several graphic works portray this kind of projection in significant ways.

The dream-like character of 'the other land' can be expressed explicitly like in the opening sequence of Baru's *Fais péter les basses, Bruno!*, showing the dream of young West-African boys of reaching Europe via soccer and foreshadowing the hero's illegal emigration. Interestingly, the same motif is found more implicitly and poetically in the Moroccan scene of Baudoin's *Viva la vida*. But the 'imagined hostland' can also become an allusion, a mere discursive intertextuality, like in the epigraph of Ruillier's *L'étrange*: "Où se trouve Oz ? [...] quelque part au-delà de l'arc-en-ciel" (Ruillier 2016: 18). This *fictional* reference to the emblematic *Wizard of Oz* (1939) does not just express the migrant's possibly chimerical hopes; its significance lies in its antithesis to other *factual* paratextual citations (from conservative and right-wing politicians), stressing from the outset the opposition between dream and reality.

In the oneiric story-worlds of *The Arrival* and *Les Ombres*, the ideas of imagined future and 'hostlands' are particularly present. While Tan's fantasy universe does not feature any explicit projections towards new horizons, a future of opportunities is alluded to through symbols and composition. This shows in the repeated presence of auspicious white birds, panoramic views, and characters gazing at the firmament and gesturing towards the skyline. The oneiric also bears futurist elements (flying ships, entangled cityscapes) which signify promising times ahead. Others connote harmony and fluidity (curves, ovals, cones, spirals, mandala-like circles, and luminous spots) or symbolize growth and abundance (eggs and food baskets). They become signifiers of favourable prospects and lead to heavenly visions: hopeful individuals evolving within a luminous – almost excessively exposed – environment, a symphony of celestial bodies, rolling landscapes and providential resources. In Tan's success story where the transition from trauma to emancipation is already implied in pictorial terms, the dream of a better place elsewhere has been realized and bears much potential.

Les Ombres, on the contrary, rather corresponds to the bleak idea "Once a refugee, forever a refugee" (Bauman 2003: 79). Indeed, after their violent uprooting, the dispersed protagonists need a fantasized projection into "l'autre monde". It is

pictured as a providential "là-bas", a "pays du bonheur" (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 22) offering abundance, riches and celebrity. While such "invention"¹³ – which recalls Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997) – remains purely discursive, fantasy and hallucination are visualized later. Indeed, the final boat passage triggers a supernatural symphony of colours – "ces images qui flottent dans le ciel" (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 129) with benevolent shapes and figures – and bring along seducing mermaids whose siren song announces a shining 'autre monde' (cf. fig. 2). Yet, while *Les Ombres'* enchanted universe and striking symbolism open up narrative space for the migrant's expected and fantasized future, the search for a brighter horizon will fail or remain chimerical.

In Sacco's and Stassen's journalistic and testimonial mode, there is little space for representing a dreamed foreign territory. While "Les passages" focuses on the present and hardly evokes the migrants' past or fantasized future, "The Unwanted" is here more informative and explicit. Certainly, Sacco also remains faithful to documented facts and attested records. And beyond the individual account of the Eritrean refugee, the cause of migration is kept very general: "Africa's conflicts and poverty" (Sacco 2012: 110). Yet, the author subtly introduces visions of an imagined future via his distinctive polyphony. He visualises, on the one hand, the right-wing politician's attempt to starve the refugees (Sacco 2012: 117) or the Maltese dreaded expulsion from an island taken over by the Africans (Sacco 2012: 113); and, on the other, a fantasized jolly road trip by the refugees from Portugal to Scandinavia (Sacco 2012: 155). Even the factual mode of graphic journalism may make delicate use of imaginative elements to reflect on the complexity of the migratory issue.

¹³ Cf. "Je ne savais plus quoi faire pour calmer ma sœur. [...] Alors j'inventais" (Zabus/Hippolyte 2013: 28).



Figure 2: *Les Ombres* (2013: 135, extract) © Libella, Paris.

2.2 The contact and (hoped for) transit zone

Another politically significant element, which often proves to be a major point of crystallization in the narrative 'before-during-after' scheme, is the contact zone which becomes for some a transit point to a new world. It is a locus of real and symbolic encounter and confrontation between systems, logics and people of highly dissimilar circumstances and environments. On the junction between here and a possible there, overcome past and wished-for future, this zone bears the distinctive ambivalences and complexities of the frontier. It implies both movement and fixity, manifests as anonymous space of transience – "non-lieu" (Augé 1992) –, significant crossroads, or insurmountable limit; knowing that successful geographical transit and physical arrival do often not lead to social, cultural and identitarian arrival, as several authors show (Sacco, Alagbé, Bill, Ruillier, etc.). Whether sites of becoming, conflict or regression, the contact and transit zones suggest an ongoing relevance of 'centre-periphery' paradigms. Yet, though present in most graphic literature on migration, these sites do not receive the same narrative, graphic, and discursive treatment, depending on their importance in the storylines and the nature of the migratory project.

Thus, the contact and transit zone is a secondary but significant locus in some works. In *The Arrival*, historical realist testimony (inspired by the Ellis Island gateway) meets surrealist fabulation when the protagonist is faced at destination with the paroxysmal control procedures of the authorities. In Tan's work, the plasticity of the foreign territory – whose atypical forms defamiliarize the referents and

universalize the reading – suggest the confrontation, collision and confusion of universes characteristic of the migratory transit zone. These fantastic references echo Ruillier's *L'étrange*, where the country of destination remains a precarious transit territory, notably because the language difference – visualized in hieroglyphic signs and reminiscent of Tan's surrealist alphabet – stays a permanent feature of conflict, instability and vulnerability.

The contact and transit zone also appears as producer of stereotype, as in *Aya de Yopougan* (vol. 4), whose African character meets grumpy border control officer and enters Paris under the pouring rain. A similar chilly arrival in France features in *La vie de Pahé* and Pahé's second album contains stark comic exaggeration, such as ferocious policemen who await intimidated African travellers like wild beasts. Finally, in Bill's sarcastically humorous *Krrpk*, the short arrival scene is pushed to absurdity, with immigration requiring a visa not older than three months despite the hero's seven-month travels.

In several books the transit zone also becomes a – or *the* – main locus, appears as a topos, and may be used as a marker of the contemporary human condition *per se*. Thus, the main investigated site in *Viva la vida*, the Mexican Ciudad Juarez, "la frontière des frontières" (Baudoin / Troubs 2011: 17), is introduced with the authors' embedded remembrances about Africa (Tangiers, Casablanca, Burundi). Baudoin's flashback suggests here in evocative and dynamic brushstrokes the clashes occurring on the Mediterranean in-between space, where young bodily shapes and natural fluids eventually morph into the immobilizing grip of barbed wire. These salient images of a dehumanising frontier operate as foreshadowing and visual echoes to the Mexican plot.

In "Les Passages", zones of contact, transit, and transition are all over, from the title to maps, from chapter openings to objects and figures. Beyond the mentioned clash of worlds, Stassen emphasizes the frontier as a zone for liminal, transgressive and contradictory profiles: a Malian refugee with Senegalese documents; a black bartender who supports police raids against "négro" street hawkers calling them "salopards" (Stassen 2015: 25); a Muslim drinker who is nostalgic about the past because illegal immigrants would harm the drug trade; a character who is "fier d'être marocain mais [...] bien content d'avoir un passeport espagnol" (Stassen 2015: 16). Frontier walls and fences are visually omnipresent, rhythmically structuring the human portraits, notably in the sequence about Ceuta which ends with stylisation

(stick figures and arrows) to illustrate the functioning and evolution of the border (cf. fig. 3). Stassen's relief and seemingly static drawing, as well as his specific colour palette, intensify the contrast and opposition between discursive and figurative signifiers. In order to express the complexity and ambiguity of the migrant contact zone, difference and antagonism become not only aesthetic, but ultimately political features.

Lastly, *Les Ombres* seems to evolve towards the most dismal zone of contact. Indeed the dreamed 'autre monde' proves a huge metal fortress with quarantine and dehumanizing inspection, a Kafkaesque universe confining the hero and costing his sister's life. The hoped-for space of transit to a better world becomes an oppressive "non-lieu", an indefinable limbo where everything – unlike the chimerical colours of hope during the journey – turns into an all-pervasive black. On the final page, the asylum applications pile up to scavengers attracting mountains of garbage, which recalls metonymically the notion of "hommes jetables" (Ogilvie 2012) and Bauman's observation about refugees:

Refugees, the human waste of the global frontier-land, are 'the outsiders incarnate', the absolute outsiders, outsiders everywhere and out of place everywhere except in places that are themselves out of place – the 'nowhere places' that appear on no maps used by ordinary humans on their travels. (2003: 80)

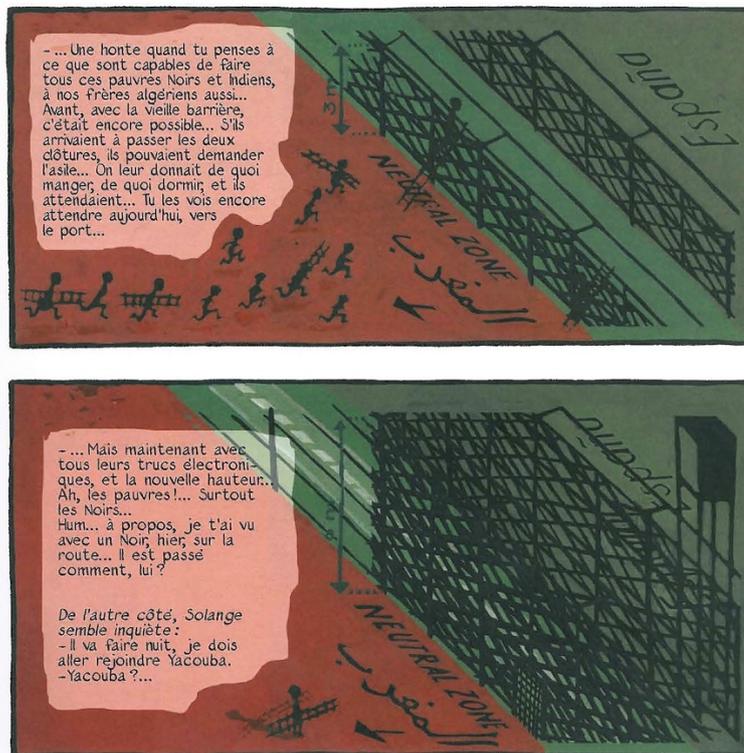


Figure 3: "Les visiteurs de Gibraltar" (2008: 170, extract) © Rollin Publications

3 Conclusion

No doubt graphic literature has numerous means to provide a significant reflection on the issue of migration, to invest in the intimate personal dimension of dislocation and displacement, and to account for the material and symbolic complexities of the migratory zones of contact and transit. The graphic spaces of migration oscillate between referentiality (via realist, journalistic and testimonial codes) and imagination (via formal stylization, abstraction, allegory and fantasy worlds), and yet show an increasing blend of narrative and aesthetic modes. Interaction with other fields of knowledge production (e.g. history and the archive) and other media (e.g. newspaper and photography) is on the rise and new hypertextual formats broaden the artistic, political and sensitive horizon, like in Ève Grimbert's sound creation "L'étrange-sonore" (2016) inspired by Ruillier's *L'étrange*.

The multiplication of graphic literature about migration thus participates in the opening up, inclusiveness and hybridization of the medium, where notably journalistic and testimonial narratives are enjoying rising popularity. More specifically – and politically –, this development is related to the ongoing migration crisis in Europe since 2015, leading to all sorts of graphic and narrative elaborations, like Lisa Mandel's funny chronicles *Les nouvelles de la jungle (de Calais)* (2017), co-authored – and cautioned – by sociologist Yasmine Bouagga.¹⁴

Part of this new production falls under the controversial label 'littérature de l'urgence', with its pragmatic, political and content-based dimension, its 'duty to write', arguably less formalist and less challenging in the 'literary' sense. Beyond possible correspondences to 'littérature engagée', 'counter-literature', postcolonial ethnographic fiction, or the distinction between "écrivain" and "écrivain" (Barthes 1964), one should not forget that the comic medium has always had important pedagogical components. These didactic modes of graphic representation remain very present for example in works produced in Africa, often addressed at local audiences and with particular agendas and aesthetics, as shown in the section "Stories of migration" of the project *Africa Comics* (Federici / Marchesini Reggiani 2006). This said, even in the Western field, much of today's graphic literature on migration is certainly not concerned by the "ratification" (Heinich / Shapiro 2015) found in some sectors of the medium.

¹⁴ Cf. nevertheless Mandel's short testimonial strip about refugees in Marseille (2010).

Beyond the addressed leitmotifs and formal recurrences, there is of course no coherent narrative of migration in these works, although they generally draw a sinister and disillusioned picture. At the end of *Les Ombres*, the hero's sister, just turned into a shadow, wonders: "Je suis morte et personne ne le sait. Pourquoi?" (Zabus / Hippolyte 2013: 169). It seems clear that most of the discussed graphic narratives, by focusing on the heterogeneity and subjectivity of displaced identities, allow us to reflect on – if not provide answers to – this question. Most of them show commitment to refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants – "the waste products of globalization" (Bauman 2003: 66) – and call for a sensitive reception. These literary universes encourage a form of "relationality" conceived as an ethical "tie" (Butler 2004: 22) to humanize the migrants, make them more visible and "real" (Butler 2004: 33) – in life and death – so they can matter socially and politically. Raising awareness about the world and the *other*, they participate in the restorative dimension of contemporary literary production: "la littérature est non une fin en soi, mais un dispositif social ou symbolique puissant opérant sur les consciences et les cœurs" (Gefen 2017: 17). And with imagination now being "central to all forms of agency", they may contribute to "contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind" (Appadurai 2008: 31, 33) about migration's causes and effects. The artistic scope, the testimonial truthfulness and the critical relevance of these productions vary, as do the affective and emotional responses they trigger. Representing migration in the comic medium – like with any artistic figuration of controversial and complex political subjects – may then also encounter problematic shortcomings and pitfalls, as Bill's example shows. Undeniably, appreciation always remains in part subjective and one should not amalgamate research and criticism, analytical posture and value judgment. However, I argue that in the case at hand, the investment in certain graphic genres as well as the use of certain codes and formal approaches proves more appropriate – from a sensitive, ethical and critical perspective – than others. And yet, the quality of any artistic production is not measured by the good intentions, the 'authenticity' of the subject or even its historical importance, but by the interpretive range it deploys, generated above all by formal work, stylistic endeavour and narrative complexity.

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