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## **Transgressive Bodies in the work of Julie Doucet, Fabrice Neaud and Jean-Christophe Menu: Towards a Theory of the 'AutobioBD'**

As the comic book, and more precisely its exceptionally francophone doppelganger, *la bande dessinée*, begins to fulfil its potential as 'the Ninth Art', the range of styles, reading contexts, and genres which constitute the form as a signifying practice has consequently expanded. Consideration of 'what a comic is', such as is found in the works of Thierry Groensteen and Benoît Peeters<sup>1</sup> needs therefore to be complemented by a range of subsidiary questions addressing not only 'what kinds of comics there are', but, as an integral part of those inquiries, how different comic genres signify, and how the enunciative and representational functions deployed by each might be conceptualised.

This paper considers the work of three Francophone comic artists, Fabrice Neaud and Jean-Christophe Menu, both French, and the Québécoise Julie Doucet, all of whom could be considered as proponents of the genre of BD we will call 'autobiocomics'. It will be argued that Neaud and Doucet, through their exploration of ontologies of presence and self-representation, work against the visual order of the phallogentric and heteronormative, an order which Menu appears to replicate but ultimately calls into question.

Perhaps what effectively defines the genre in its comic form is something akin to a self-consciousness which the character-protagonists embody, and which, equally, is their principal message. A consciousness, that is, not so much of being a cartoon character - mainstays from comic history from Achille Talon to Tintin and Felix the Cat have consistently 'interfered' with the illusion of diegesis through their intermittent awareness of 'being drawn', indeed it may be even argued that it is the metaleptic interplay of the diegetic and the non-diegetic, most insistently visible in the co-presence of frames and their content, which marks the specificity of 'BD' as a medium. Instead, the ontologies of both Doucet and Neaud could be seen as verging on a further confusion: it is not so much that the constructedness of the artefact is given rein within its diegesis - but more a of blurring the properties of the categories themselves. Both merged (in an operation similar to the autobiographical pact proposed by Philippe Lejeune<sup>2</sup> whereby narrator, character and author are co-identified), and curiously severed, the component parts of the 'autobioBD' world are marked

by the look which passes between them, a look which may be characterized as much by exile and melancholy as by any kind of *jouissance* or desire. The revamped Pinocchio myth advanced in *AI* (Spielberg 2001), where creators and their creatures are each doomed to live uniquely as either the organic or the mechanical, while knowing their other, is perhaps the most readily available model, with characters and artists forever doomed to their respective functions, and the work on which they collaborate, which they dedicate to their readers, akin to a wish made to some Blue Fairy.



Figure 1

Whilst there is no doubt that the permeability of the boundaries between the positions of author, narrator and character is indeed a source of *jouissance* in Doucet's work, the ease with which she inhabits these different positions will occasionally be troubled: this is emphasized by a metatextual incident in *Changements d'adresse* (1998)<sup>3</sup>. Julie complains about the quality of the American paper she is having to use to draw her life in New York: 'C'est de la merde, ce papier: Il est pas bon, j'veux dire, je trace une ligne et l'encre fait ..euh ... pssst partout', but her American boyfriend suggests that it is her Canadian ink which is at fault: the crossing of frontiers, whether between countries or

ontological orders, between drawing and being, may not, then, always be so effortless. In quite a different set of worlds, Fabrice Neaud's *Journaux* are marked by the ethics and aesthetics of personal responsibility, as the diegetic simulacrum of his drawn life goes beyond representing, and begins to encroach upon the lived version. More than autobiography, the autobiocomic is a genre which works through a series of disidentifications, jolts even, as the spaces from one frame to the next serve to stop us short, for readers as much as for artists, dislodging any illusion of a seamless narrative of a lived life. The lived moments of the autobiocomic have no duration, and the moments of a life can never be as fully captured in reality. Although, in the texts themselves, there can be no movement (without cessation of movement), in the latticework of space-time disruption which marks each page there is a form of permanent questioning and mobility, between the formlessness of living and the life-forms through which we know it.

Menu, Doucet and Neaud are not the first to use the medium of the comic to depict aspects of their lives, nor to touch upon controversial areas in doing so - perhaps one of the best known early examples of the genre would be Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a personal account of the Holocaust. Importantly, however, the human characters in *Maus* are 'played' by the mice indicated in the title of the album, resulting in a clear species-demarcation of the plane of the representational from its lived counterpart, perhaps as an ongoing effect of the traumatic nature of the remembrance involved. By 'bracketing out' the human, the likelihood of the characters acquiring autonomy, through their contingency - or an 'excess' produced by the inevitable discontinuities between one representation and its successor, is reduced. The narrative therefore emerges as dominant, with a strong sense of testimony and associated sentiment, precisely because the intercommunication between character and author outlined above is effectively blocked, perhaps, in itself, both a defence measure against and an indication of the inherent slipperiness between these positions in the genre. A similar strategy is at work in the autobiography of Jean-Christophe Menu. Although Menu does not use animal characters, unlike Spiegelman or his own close associate Lewis Trondheim (who appears in Menu's album), he draws himself, with very occasional exceptions, only as a cartoon character, whereas his wife and family are depicted predominantly in realist style. That this is a defence mechanism becomes apparent at the end of the album, where the return of repressed childhood trauma breaks down the dominance of the narrating position.

'Ego comme x', a collective based in Angoulême in Western France, producing albums and reviews edited by Loïc Néhou, and with whom Fabrice Neaud's work is published, brings together a number of artists each interested in enlarging the traditional scope of *bande dessinée*, with the aim of opening up a space for BD to grow and tackle spheres of life not previously accounted for within the medium. While the manifesto of the group, in as much as this has been articulated by Néhou in interviews, does not specifically call for autobiographical representations, almost all of the material published in their review is either explicitly or implicitly concerned with self-representation, including theoretical deliberations on what this might mean in comic form. In *Ego comme x* No.7, for example, Laurent Marissal's '*Figures du discours*' glosses the question of anthropomorphic representation figure of 'the duck which is also a rabbit' (or 'the rabbit which is also a duck') in a bid to 'cerner l'autre en moi' (Marissal 2000, 46). Marissal figures the comic artist's difficulty with self-representation through the 'indécis' of the character, as identical duck-rabbits (rabbit-ducks) declare in turn 'Si je me vois ainsi ... ça va', and 'Mais si je me vois ainsi ça ne va

plus' (ibid., 54). The 'being okay' or not signalled by 'ça va', introduces something close to a sense of ease or unease with the process of becoming other in graphic text.

If not exactly existential doubt, a trouble about the possibility of 'being' both in comics and in life, of simultaneously occupying ontologies with such divergent 'rules', we would argue, is inherent in the project of drawing the self. Questions about the generic status of Fabrice Neaud's enterprise are raised at the outset, as *Journal I* begins not in the February of 1992 announced on the cover, but with a two-page flashback to 1975<sup>4</sup>. The first page shows a group of kids chasing another through the woods. On the second, a fight develops, with the motive clearly designated (through stereotyping and questioning masculinity) as homophobia, as the boy being chased lies in a foetal position in the final panel (Neaud 1996, 5-6). At this stage, there is no clear indication of autobiographicality, other than through the paratext of a preface by Thierry Groensteen, indicating Neaud's renouncement of fiction 'pour se placer toute entièrement sous l'autorité du "je"'. The first panel on the following page shows a man in his twenties in a similar position, waking up, perhaps from a dream. As the text continues, the use of the first person in both direct speech and commentary, the focus on drawing materials, imply that that the young man is a character representing Neaud, and shortly after, when the boy reappears hurtling from the sky into the present day (Neaud 1996, 19), the correspondence with the author's own childhood becomes clear.

What we want to suggest is that, from the outset, the generic processes used to establish the visual element of Neaud's identity are uncertain, and inscribed within the diegesis itself as constitutive of the entry of the self into comic form. While 'the young Neaud' appears in each frame of the opening page, the depictions are either partial (his shoes running and tripping), blurred, long or aerial shots, or work to obscure the features of his face behind his hand or one of his tormentor's knees. When his face does appear in the first frame of the second page, his mouth is not fully drawn. In retrospect, Neaud is here establishing a number of the stylistic elements which he will use, although to different effect, in the ensuing adult narrative of his life. Throughout the *Journaux*, representations of characters are often incomplete, partial, at times expressionistic, corresponding to the subjective viewpoints, memory filters or emotive charges which operate as interference in the reconstruction of lived events, and, equally, constitute the epistemologies and possibilities of his autobiocomic construction.

In the two-page establishing narrative, the devices do somewhat more than the generic 'si j'ai bonne mémoire' of written autobiography - not only are the childhood events signalled as differentially accessible, they also figure the process of coming into comic as a difficult labour, an accommodation with the physicality of the new mode of being with which their (auto-)progenitor must come to terms. The foetal position adopted by the young Neaud in the final frame of the sequence, again in the first frame of the adult narrative, and recurring frequently thereafter, serves, at once, as a defence (against the childhood bullying, against the world, against the transition from the lived to the constructed plane); a form of disidentification, or defacement, in its refusal, or inability, to instantaneously and unproblematically offer a face to the readers, its appeal to the commonality of birth; but also as the entry into the comic plane or universe which Neaud will go on to inhabit, and, importantly, reterritorialize in configurations which challenge or transgress the orders of its lived pre-simulacrum.

In addition to setting the stylistic tone of the narrative to follow, the opening pages also anticipate its subject matter through a constitutive mytheme. The birth is also a rape, and the inoperational mouth of the first frontal self-representation both in the establishing story and repeated on the following page in the adult narrative conform to the ways in which rape is an act which relies on the silencing of its victim. The young Neaud is caught by his persecutors, beaten up, and left with his trousers round his knees in order to 'montre(r)-nous que t'es pas une gonzesse' (Neaud 1996, 6). The birth-rape, then, is also a challenge to gender, and sexuality. In *Réflexions sur la question gay*, published in 1999, Didier Eribon offers a reading of the insult as constitutive of homosexual identity, and in particular of the relations between gays and the world. Admitting that such a notion might appear exaggerated to heterosexuals (Eribon, 74), he goes on to explain that the insult functions in a similar way to Althusserian interpellation, producing socio-sexual subjects, as always already subjected, or subjugated, within an existing order. Homosexuals, in a sense, are named as such, much in the way that Neaud's diaries open, through the homophobic practices which define, police and attribute value, often on the level of the microsocial, to the identities available to them. Eribon explains,

Ainsi l'homosexualité ne désigne pas seulement une classe d'individus définis par des préférences et des pratiques sexuelles, mais aussi un ensemble de processus d'« assujettissement » qui sont autant collectifs qu'individuels dans la mesure où une structure commune d'infériorisation est à l'oeuvre et qu'elle a d'autant plus de force qu'elle est la même pour tous et pourtant toujours

spécifique à chaque individu qui peut même croire, à un moment donné de sa vie, qu'il est le seul à en être victime (Eribon 1999, 91-2).

Consequently, since the strength of the homophobic insult lies in its recourse to stereotypes, its effect is to perturb the self-identification of its victims, who seek to dissociate themselves from the pejorative identity already marked out for them by the dominant order (Eribon, 112). As Eribon's argument develops, however, a further reading of Neaud's diaries suggests itself, one which addresses the constraints on the visibility, or presence, of homosexuality as this is delimited by the homophobic insult. For Eribon,

[C'est] la puissance d'intimidation de l'injure qui fixe la frontière entre public et privé pour les gays et les lesbiennes. Par conséquent, les sphères publique et privée ne sont pas, pour les homosexuels, des espaces matériellement ou physiquement distincts (la rue, le travail, la politique pour la première, la maison et les relations personnelles pour la seconde) (Eribon 1999, 152).

Instead, the public/private dichotomy replicates itself, in terms of the visibility of homosexuality, in each of these spheres, to the extent that any breach of the protocol results in accusations of exhibitionism and politicking. The publication of Neaud's diaries, then, is an act which poses a challenge to the heteronormative order as it is manifested in the visual order. Where Neaud's persona, in the opening scene of *Journal I*, could be seen as quite literally submitting to the blows of homophobic attack, a model of policing visible gay identity in the public sphere which replicates itself throughout his work - even within the so-called gay spaces of the bar and the park at night, his self-presentation, by contrast, can be considered as a counter-reaction to the prohibitions on speaking out, and, drawing on the possibilities unique to the medium, the development of a critique of homophobia which the albums go on to discover constitutes what might be considered as not only a positive assertion of homosexual presence, but also an effective counter-attack on the self-evidence of heteronormativity.



Figure 2

Responding to a questionnaire about self-representation aimed at practitioners of autobiographies in comics, Neaud points out that he tries to avoid directly depicting himself as much as possible. 'Dans une autobiographie', he contends, 'il est logique de n'être, de facto, qu'en "caméra subjective" (Baudoin et. al 1996, 73). to be, in fact, a kind of subjective camera'. To use the terminology of reception theory, the *Journaux* construct their 'inscribed reader' in the image of the persona of their narrator. In as much as Neaud's gaze is characterised by a homosexual sensibility, including a homoerotics', his readers too are manoeuvred into seeing the world in this light. Not that this dynamic is without its resistances, but rather each of these local resistances (a straight male reader objecting to the sexualisation of another man, an interviewer from *Têtu* disclaiming the representation of the gay scene<sup>5</sup>) are occasioned by the fact of occupying Neaud's subjective viewpoint.

Indeed, the notion of a subjective camera, far from being metaphoric, describes one of Neaud's techniques in recording material for his diary, and one which, reflexively, comes to figure in their narration. In *Journal III*, for instance, chapter eight tells of Neaud's attempts to capture images of one of the main characters in the album. The character in question, Dominique, or Doumé, is straight, and involved in a problematic relationship with Neaud, one which develops from friendship and flirtation through to rejection. Here (Neaud 1999, 86), the consecutive images of Dominique walking along the street resemble a series of snapshots, taken almost furtively, as if he were attempting to guard his image against an implicitly homoerotic gaze. His own gaze only meets Neaud's (and the reader's) in reflection. A few pages later, a further play of mirrors during a more formal photo shoot extends the same play of assent and refusal of the returned gaze, with here, Neaud's own face obscured by the camera which finally results in a frontal shot of Dominique's face (Neaud 1999, 89). What is being recorded here, through the repeated act of looking at, fixing, and looking at again, is a moment of discomfort, arising from perturbation of the homophobic order, according to which, the gay gaze itself carries the threat of an erosion of virility, a gaying of the object. *Journal III* cites a passage from Elisabeth Badinter's *XY. De l'identité masculine (Masculine Identity)* (Neaud 1999, 272) indicating that the final test of masculinity is a dissociation from homosexuality, neither desiring other men or being desired by them. To the extent that each of Neaud's *Journaux* captures straight, or masculine men as the object of his gaze, they can be seen as impertinent, a violation of the proscription against gay desire manifesting itself, and doubly so in that readers in turn collaborate in the process.

According to this schema, Neaud's entry into the autobiocomic plane can be seen as a violation of the one of the key homophobic codes of his local lived plane, a disregard for the 'No entry' signs which bar homosexual access, through the foundational insult, to a range of heteronormed practices and experiences (fig. 1). Rather than confining himself to a simple construction of an alternative universe with different rules, however, Neaud, in the *Journaux*, persistently shifts between the world of diegesis and the existing order, operating a form of transgressive reinscription which secures the possibility of identity for him in both planes. Present throughout the comics as voiceover, extra-diegetic and enunciative indications, the processes through which Neaud uses his work to reconceptualise the homophobic order can be seen in the form of a *mise en abyme* in *Journal III* (Neaud 1999, 34), which refers back to the foetal inception of his enterprise. During an exhibition held in his flat, with the bed still in place, Neaud decides to take up the position in which he had depicted himself in an earlier drawing. The experience, he indicates, is both reassuring and troubling; 'bâtissant ma forteresse, je creuse aussi mon tombeau'. The embodiment as comic, giving form to the intimate, a trope emerging again in the early pages of the adult narrative (Neaud 1996, 12-13), impacts fundamentally on Neaud's own affectivity. But paradoxically, offering himself up as art, rather than giving the other the final say on his identity, provides spaces for both being and non-being which defy the constitutive insults through which identification is made. For Neaud, the autobiocomic undoes and reterritorializes the socio-sexual grounds of heteronormativity.

Neaud's incarnation into cartoon format is clearly undergone with some anguish: the figuration of his enunciating presence above all as the seeing eye or the drawing hand may engage the reader in a transgressive gaze but it also implies his resistance to narrative embodiment. There is no such resistance in the work of Julie Doucet, who embraces embodiment from the outset. In her critique of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler alludes to the 'radical gender asymmetry' whereby the abstract universal subject is assumed to be not only masculine but disembodied, and, where, moreover, 'that subject (...) projects that disavowed and disparaged embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female' (Butler 1990, 11). Sidonie Smith, writing specifically on autobiography, considers social meanings of the body in relation to accounts of subjectivity, contrasting the disembodied, unitary, rational self of the traditional subject of autobiography, whose occupation of the dominant cultural terrain is founded on various practices of exclusion, with the material, embodied selves of those who inhabit the cultural margins (Smith 1993, 9). The borders between the centre and the margins are well policed through



discourses which normalize certain bodies (white, male, heterosexual, property-owning) and render others abnormal and even grotesque. Certain female autobiographers may themselves resist embodiment and restrict their presence in the text to a disembodied rationality, aspiring to take up a position of the universal subject. Watson and Smith suggest that such women may aim to achieve cultural empowerment (Watson and Smith 1992, xix). Others, though, prefer to inscribe their gendered bodies into the text, allowing free play to any disruptive effects that may ensue.

On the first page of *Ciboire de Criss !* (fig.2) the link between narrative (through the title of the episode, '*Dirty Plotte*', taken from Doucet's comic of the same name) and the female body is asserted: standing by a blackboard in pedagogical mode, Julie explains the meaning of 'plotte' in Québécois French by means of a Chinese-labelled medical diagram of female genitals: 'Ceci est une plotte'. At the same time, a link is explicitly made between the body and the territory of Québec: a map of Québec is held up by two high-heeled and suspender-clad versions of Julie herself. The female body, is, however, going to be reterritorialized by Julie. In his book on Québec national cinema, Bill Marshall describes the Québec national project in the Deleuzian terms of territorialization and reterritorialization, the constant conflict between the will towards the fixing of identity and the contrary impulse towards movement, process and multiplicity. Mapping, both physical and mental, plays a key role in discourses of nation-building: there must be a 'delineation of borders to mark what is inside and outside of the territory of the community' (Marshall 2001, 7). The cultural mapping of the female body, whereby 'social taboos institute and maintain the boundaries of the body as such' (Butler 1990, 131) is evoked by the two scantily-clad versions of Julie, the more disreputable of whom announces 'Tu peux m'appeler Zizi', emphasizing that woman as spectacle is a male construction, with fetishized accoutrements standing in for the absent phallus.

An alternative mapping is offered below this, as Julie appears, in ordinary clothes, displaying the diagram of female genitals. This asserts the existence of female sexual organs against the notion of 'castration', by its angle of vision which allows for what is thought to be on the inside to be made visible on the outside. Doucet's project is not to delineate borders, but to cross them and to blur them. Linguistic and cultural boundaries are crossed by her exposition of the meaning of the Québécois French word 'plotte', by the very appearance on the page of a word which, like the part of the body which it signifies, is taboo, and by the play on words through which it simultaneously refers to the narrative itself.

The blurring of boundaries is consistent with the unfixity of Julie's subject position: to her incarnations as fetishized object of display and as tour guide to usually uncharted regions of the female body is added that of shocked victim with hair standing on end when she is interpellated by those who occupy the central cultural ground: two men call out 'Hey man, regarde moi c'te plotte là', as if her identity could be reduced to a certain form of male-determined embodiment. It is embodiment on her own terms that Julie will claim throughout the rest of the album.

Doucet never takes up a disembodied speaking position, unlike both Neaud and Menu. It will be seen that in certain sections of *Livret de phamille*, Menu is even more reticent than Neaud about drawing himself as a character within the diegesis, and prefers to manifest his presence as enunciating instance, through the *récitatif* as well as through images drawn from his optical point of view. Doucet, in contrast, is present in almost every frame. In the construction of the autobiographical 'I' in her work the graphic tends to be emphasized over the linguistic. In many episodes Julie's language is barely articulate: 'Glou gloup sssip encore ssch pluss de cafe mm sssssip'. She very rarely uses a *récitatif*, and even then does so only to give brief details of changes of time or location: '3 gallons de café plus tard'. Distance between Julie as enunciating subject and Julie within the diegetic world is diminished through her use of direct gaze and address towards the reader, who is situated with her in the here and now. The consistent use of the same frontal angle of vision and lack of variation in framing also tends to diminish any sense of narratorial distance taken up from Julie as character.

Neither are we led to intimate any further, extra-diegetic, narrating instance which would represent an authorial subject position detached from its cartoon self by retrospection or critical standpoint. The only occasion on which Julie appears outside the diegeticized space of the frame is at the very beginning, where she masquerades as the two fetishized versions of herself, a role in which she can hardly be viewed as possessing more authority than she has within the diegesis. At the beginning or end of every episode the interframe space is used simply to insist upon the identity between author and character: 'Une journée dans la vie de Julie D. by Julie Doucet herself'. Julie does on one occasion seem to take up a judgmental stance towards her diegetic self when she introduces another character representing her own conscience. This might suggest a certain Freudian structure of superego built on the repression of desire. However, her conscience indulges in much wilder and more uninhibited behaviour than Julie herself, jumping on cars and interpellating good-looking passers-by, and reproaches

her for being too timid and straight. The scene ends with an image of bonding and intimacy, as Julie and her conscience cuddle up together.

The coincidence of enunciating subject and subject of the enunciation would seem to defy Lacan's assertion of the inevitable absence on which subjectivity is constructed, so that the 'I' can come into being as speaking subject only as a result of the repression of desire for the mother and loss of imaginary identity with her. The inevitable division of the post Oedipal subject is asserted by Lacan's formula, by which he contradicts the Cartesian *cogito*: 'Je pense où je ne suis pas, donc je suis où je ne pense pas' (Lacan 1966, 277). The sense that Julie is present to herself, and situated in the 'hic et nunc' from which we are freed, according to Lacan, by the entry into language and the symbolic order (Lacan 1966, 155), along with her uncertain status in regard to language, may seem to situate her, then, not on the terrain of the symbolic but in the realm of the imaginary. The constant representation of her own body would place her at the mirror phase, where splitting has not yet fully occurred. The act of drawing herself nonetheless involves a certain identification with her own image which would allow for separation from the mother to take place. This separation is by no means complete, however. When Julie draws her image in a mirror, it is able to step through into 'reality', but as the two versions of herself (one with and one without penis) embrace, the symbolic order of representation and sexual difference gives way to the imaginary possibility of undifferentiated fusion. One episode actually shows Julie taking leave of her mother in order to go up in a space rocket, but the interior of the rocket turns out to be a welcoming and womblike space. Moreover, Julie's mother gives her some biscuits and tells her that she can use them to masturbate, so the leave-taking leads neither to definitive separation nor to a loss of *jouissance*.

Doucet would seem, in fact, to occupy the area that Kristeva has called the 'abject'. Kristeva describes how the process of breaking free from the mother's body and taking up a place in the symbolic order involves the separation of the clean body from the 'abject' body: 'L'abject nous confronte (...) à nos tentatives les plus anciennes de nous démarquer de l'entité maternelle avant même que d'ex-ister en dehors d'elle grâce à l'autonomie du langage' (Kristeva 1980, 20). The notion of abjection separates out the human and the fully constituted subject from the partially constituted subject: the abject has to be radically excluded and deposited on the other side of a border that delineates the self from whatever threatens the self (ibid., 8). The boundary between self and non-self is comprehensively transgressed by Julie through her

exuberant portrayal of bodily fluids and wastes. She announces to the reader in the last vignette of the first page 'T'sais, plotte c'est un mot très très sale'. She runs out of Tampax and her menstrual blood floods the whole city. Her cat dances to music and its movements accidentally entrap it in a cat's cradle made of her snot.

Kristeva suggests that the area of the abject which is most surrounded by rituals and taboos is the dead body (ibid., 128-129). Julie seems untroubled by any such concern as she enjoys a convivial meal with friends (all of whom are in fact wild animals rather than people). What they are eating is the dead body of Christ, laid out on a serving plate in the middle of the table. This is not the only occasion on which Julie eats human flesh. When, in a romantic gesture, Julie's boyfriend cuts off his penis and offers it to her, her immediate reaction is to eat it, although she is struck by a mild misgiving as to whether it will grow again.

Doucet's graphic style, which recalls both that of Robert Crumb and the *ligne crade* of Vuillemin, is messy and swarms with detail, the antithesis of the boundary-reinforcing *ligne claire* of the classical *bande dessinée* of Hergé and the *École de Bruxelles*. Her representation of her body and of that which is not her body evokes the movement and flow described by Deleuze and Guattari: 'C'est que les signes ne sont pas signes de quelque chose, ils sont signes de déterritorialisation et de reterritorialization, ils marquent un certain seuil franchi dans ces mouvements' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 87). Binary oppositions between the self and other give way to flux and mobility, and Oedipal fixity of subject positioning dissolves. As Julie lies in her bath she feels that she may have become a piece of furniture or the wash basin. The clutter in her flat occupies an indeterminate ontological space between being and non-being. As Julie wakes up from a nightmare and writes in her diary 'Cher journal ... J'ai fait un sacré cauchemar la nuit dernière! .. Haa bonne vieille réalité!', her crockery and groceries dance around her, shouting abuse. Julie seems to inhabit a continuum between ontological orders which allows her, for example, to wake up in hospital and find that she has a penis. After her initial excitement a note of misgiving creeps in, however: what if she missed her vagina? This sudden apprehension at the abandonment of sexual fixity seems to testify to the persistence of other binary oppositions: perhaps the idyllic world of the imaginary and its undifferentiated *jouissance* is, after all, haunted by the spectre of representation and the symbolic. The barrier between dream and reality may not be so permeable, and a gap between signifier and signified, enunciator and subject may still open up. It is nonetheless upon the presence/absence of the vagina, not the phallus, that signification now turns.

The reterritorialization undertaken by Neaud and Doucet can be compared with a seemingly more traditional territorialization in terms of sexual fixity in the autobiography of Jean-Christophe Menu, whose title, *Livret de phamille* and whose dedication 'A ma phemme, Valérie. A mes philles Séraphine, Ophélie et Raphaëlle' suggests that this album is to be placed under the sign of the phallus. The cover of the album shows a cartoon version of Menu scribbling on his wife's pregnant stomach. It appears that a woman's body is being inscribed by a male writing/drawing practice, the opposite of Doucet's project in presenting her 'plotte' diagram. Some episodes are drawn in realist style, and in these Menu makes only very rare appearances. He is present almost exclusively as enunciating subject in the form of a disembodied voiceover in the *récitatifs*, through the metonym of the drawing hand, and through his subjective vision of his family and his surroundings. The embodiment of his wife is, however, emphasized throughout: she is often drawn naked and is usually pregnant. Menu appropriates both the landscape and his wife and daughters with his pen. Some sketches of Saint-Vaast, in Normandy, conventionally labelled 'sa mer', 'son fort', etc. are followed by sketches of his wife labelled 'sa femme', and of his child and his wife's pregnant stomach labelled 'ses enfants'. Saint-Vaast is indicated on a map of the Normandy coast, and another arrow another points to 'la future deuxième fille' in his wife's belly. Menu also carefully maps out the house in Saint-Vaast, with plans of each floor on which rooms and items of furniture are positioned. This precise mapping of geographical and living space, as well as socio-sexual terrain, may be compared not only with Julie's mapping of the female body in *Ciboire de Criss !* but also with a plan that she draws of her own flat. Here her concern is to less to show the relative positions of different areas of the flat than to plot her own trajectory through it as she levitates from bedroom to bathroom trying to limit the leakage of blood from her Tampax. Where Menu seems to be trying to suggest the fixity of topographical reference points, what Doucet maps is flow.



Figure 3

Whilst images of his wife and his daughters abound, Menu appears only fleetingly in the realist episodes. He draws himself four times in all, and on three of these occasions he is engaged in drawing, so that, arguably, these images can be categorized, with the trope of the drawing hands, as belonging to the enunciation rather than to the diegesis. In one instance he depicts himself drawing his reflection in a clothes shop window as he stands with sleeping baby in harness, waiting for his wife, who is inside buying a dress. This metarepresentative image enables him, perhaps, to affirm his occupancy of the symbolic order which might otherwise be threatened by the feminized image reflected back to him:

this includes not only the baby but the women's clothes in the window. It might, though, be argued that what is captured here is rather Menu's desire to merge into the female space of the mirror image just as Doucet's mirror image allows for a merging of male and female versions of Julie. This reading of Menu's work as less than phallogentric is supported by other elements of the album.

The sense that the masculine narrator represents a disembodied rationality faced with the grotesque, embodied, female other is undermined in a number of ways. The notion of autobiography as representing a unified subject, with a coherent identity across time, is disrupted in *Livret de phamille*. This is partly a consequence of metadiscursive explanations which make it clear that some vignettes that had been drawn at a previous stage have been inserted into a later part of the journal, thereby emphasizing the work of ordering and shaping that goes into the construction of an apparently continuous experience. The point is further underlined as redrawn images emanating from different enunciating instances are included : in particular, Menu replicates one of his own adolescent works of art, an abstract, angst-ridden image of himself. This early attempt at self-portrayal is described as a 'vieille croûte' in the *récitatif*: any sense of continuity with his younger self is derisively dismissed.

The complexity of the enunciative system of the album further undoes the coherence of the subject position. The disembodied narratorial presence through the *récitatif* disappears in certain episodes of the book where realism gives way to a cartoon style. Menu represents himself in these sections as a cartoon figure,

although, unlike Doucet, he does not allow his cartoon self to emerge from the diegesis and address the reader. The cartoon self is emotive and *pulsionnel*, and certainly embodied: it has hangovers and bleeds copiously when it cuts its hand on a saw. The 'I' of the enunciating instance, no longer represented verbally, now becomes itself embodied through the violence of the drawing style, energetically expressive of the powerful emotions generated by the tensions of family life. The careful perspective and rational control of the realist sections is replaced here by the frenzied immediacy of jagged lines: these pages seem to bear the physical inscription on the paper of the fury of the artist.

Ultimately, however, it will be through the realist episodes that the sense of the narrator as a controlling consciousness will be called into question. This process begins in the middle of the album when the cartoon self intrudes into a realist episode set in Cerisy where it represents Menu's past self giving vent to unrepressed emotions of boredom, rage and frustration during certain contributions to the *Colloque* that had taken place there a few years earlier. By the end of the album the fixity of the subject positioning of the enunciating 'I', post-Oedipal and rational, will be comprehensively undone. It is the Oedipal crisis itself which will be dramatized, and this will be achieved by a particular rendering of space and geography, using the visual resources of the medium.

At the beginning of the album, in Saint-Vaast, Menu had been the sovereign subject, possessing with his pen what he surveyed with his eye. His position as culturally central is actually enhanced on his return to his Parisian flat, from which he looks out onto such iconic sights as the Sacré Coeur 'to which tourists ask the way'. He distances himself from the clutter in the flat by drawing rooms and surfaces in careful realist detail. He uses sticky paper to trap cockroaches, a clear refusal of the promiscuity with the abject that Doucet happily entertains. Moreover, unlike Doucet, who merges with her disorderly surroundings, Menu does not appear in these images, which cover eight pages, apart from one frame in which he is seen, in shadow, drawing. It is a return to his childhood home in another of the realist episodes that is the occasion for a dramatic figuration of the fragmentation and splitting which threatens his sense of a unified self (fig. 3). Menu's mother still lives in the house in which he himself grew up, and she has recently purchased, in addition, the house next door. Menu stays with his family in the next door house as he approaches his thirtieth birthday, an occasion for anxiety so acute that he seizes upon a series of numerological coincidences to convince himself that 1994 will be the year of his death. Intensely depressed, he buys an old Jijé album at a bric-à-brac market. The hero, the Catholic priest Don Bosco, is comforting

a boy: 'Je vois que si le corps est bien portant, l'âme est malade'<sup>6</sup>. In two vignettes which propose a flashback to his childhood, Menu offers images of enviable security, firstly seated at a meal table, alone with his mother, and then in his bedroom drawing *bandes dessinées* with the childish certitude that *Spirou* would publish them. As an adult, he likes to go and work 'côté maman dans mon ex-chambre'. This journey back to 'les lieux du passé' involves passing through the cellar, which is depicted as dark and womb-like: the high-angled view of the steps leading down into its shadowy depths suggest both attraction and fear. The pain of the loss which occurs when desire for the mother's body is repressed, as the cost of entry into the symbolic order, is expressed here not only through the metaphor of the house but through the white space between the frames of two vignettes: one of these shows the old part of the house with the central part of the image in shadow, and the other shows an empty chair set up in the recently-acquired part of the house, in which he is about to welcome several dozen friends to his thirtieth birthday party. The non-diegetic space, then, seems here to represent the division of Menu's subjectivity, as he is torn between the maternal house/body and the place assigned to him as an adult. Where Neaud regularly uses the white space as a site which may be occupied by certain inchoate emotions, Menu does not elsewhere draw attention to this space. Here, though, it is strikingly noticeable, the graphic correlate of his psychic schism.

The enunciating 'je' and mastery of surroundings through realist drawing now give way to a cartoon-style episode, and the anxiety is displaced onto Menu's cartoon body, when he reacts hysterically on being attacked by wasps, and his wife and daughter accuse him of behaving like a child. Resolution comes through a dream. Don Bosco, the *bande dessinée* father (as a Catholic priest he is a 'father') returns in a dream to 'colmater la brèche' in a pyramid in which Menu is living. The final, realist, pages, which show friends talking, eating and drinking at the party, suggest that he has successfully taken up his place in the social order. Menu's detour back to childhood is, then, like that of Neaud, reappropriated through a *mise en abyme*, as the dream scenario offers the metaphor of a physical split in the fabric of his imagined abode, which the father succeeds in sealing up. The outcome would appear to be a restoration of a post-Oedipal masculine assurance. There is, though, a silent image which acts as a postface to the book. Menu depicts himself in a station, not drawing but simply standing. The setting suggests provisionality, and the grid formed by the windows of a train, which is either arriving or departing, provide another *mise en abyme*, this time of the medium of *bande dessinée* itself, but their complete darkness, like Menu's uncertain gaze, which does



not quite engage the look of the reader, suggests continued anxiety rather than the recovery of a secure sense of a unified self.

It may be useful to return to Deleuze to try to conceptualize the enunciative and representational functions of the autobiographical variant of *bande dessinée* as practised by Neaud, Doucet and Menu. Deleuze discusses early cinema in terms of the movement-image, which is based upon a philosophy of action, and compares it to the development in post-war cinema of the time-image, which creates a world in modulation and flux, a world of becoming rather than being (Deleuze 1983, 12). It could be argued that classic adventure *bande dessinée* of the *École de Bruxelles* embodies just such a philosophy of action: characters are propelled into motion, inter-frame spaces sutured over by a form of continuity editing, and a univocal narrating instance brings any *récitatif* into harmony with the confident conviction of the narrative line. Deleuze alludes to the complexity of which the cinematic image is capable, when the subjective vision of a character is transformed as it is taken up by another enunciating instance: 'Il s'agit [...] d'un agencement d'énonciation, opérant à la fois deux actes de subjectivation inséparables, l'un qui constitue un personnage à la première personne, mais l'autre assistant à sa naissance et le mettant en scène' (Deleuze 1983, 106).

The work of Neaud, Menu and Doucet achieves a similar complexity of enunciative instances. The 'agencement d'énonciation' in Neaud's work allows Fabrice to appear both in the diegesis and in its interstices, to bring himself into being both as 'I' and eye, and thus to refuse the place assigned to him by those who would 'other' him through their interpellation. And in the position of viewer, he can use the medium to undo Dominique as unitary subject with a fixed identity, who believes himself to inhabit the cultural centre. The very proliferation of images undoes that fixity: this is, after all, a medium made up of gaps, breaks and openings. In Menu's work, the return of repressed material, rendered visible through the literal margins that are part of the enunciatory apparatus of the medium, disturbs the effect of masculine authority which the text had seemed, elsewhere, to affirm. In Doucet's work the bounds of the diegesis are broken as Julie constantly engages the reader with her gaze, whilst still able to interact with other characters. Her self-representation is also secured against dominant signifying practices: she creates a world of becoming, transgressing the fixity of gender identity.

This article has argued that *bande dessinée* offers complex resources for giving form to the autobiographical 'I'. Embodiment may be celebrated or repressed, a repression of which the return

may be dramatized both within the diegesis and through the enunciative apparatus, which is itself capable of displaying evidence of the bodily investment of the artist. The term 'agencement d'énonciation' is peculiarly applicable to a medium which allows for the representation of varying degrees of permeability between enunciation and énoncé, from fantasized continuity to complete separation, and which also allows for the fragmentation of the enunciative instance through different combinations of verbal and iconic texts, and through variations in graphic style. The three authors discussed here destabilize the boundaries which would delimit identity, Doucet to the greater *jouissance* of herself and the reader, Menu through the hard-won breaking down of masculine security, and Neaud, who takes the reader with him onto the new socio-sexual terrain that he establishes. All exemplify the potential of the medium to contest heteronormative and phallogentric constructions of masculinity and femininity.

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## Illustrations


- Figure 1: Neaud (1999) p. 113
- Figure 2: Doucet (1996) opening page
- Figure 3: Menu (1995), unpaginated


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## Notes


<sup>1</sup>  See, for example, Groensteen 1999, and Peeters 1991/1998.

<sup>2</sup>  See, for example, Lejeune 1975.

<sup>3</sup>  Since the Menu and Doucet albums restart page numbers with each episode, or in some cases have no page numbers, page numbers are not quoted in the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup>  For further discussion of Fabrice Neaud's *Journaux*, see Pratt, Murray, "The diary of Neaud's body: approaching the subject of Heterocentricity", in *Gay and Lesbian cultures in France*, Lucille Cairns (ed), Bern: Peter Lang, 2002, pp. 257-74.

<sup>5</sup>  See Neaud 1998a.

<sup>6</sup>  Jijé's Don Bosco series dates from the 1940s and first appeared in *Spirou* magazine and then, redrawn, in *Le Moustique*. Both versions appeared in albums, in 1943 and 1951, and it is one of these that Menu buys.