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*Stepping in to the Void? Examining the Political Trajectories of Cinema and Bande Dessinée in France*

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I learned a lot from Keith Reader during the twenty-year span that I knew him. He was present for every stage of my academic life – from the first year of my undergraduate degree at University of Glasgow, to acting as co-supervisor of my PhD at the same institution, to joining University of London Institute in Paris (ULIP) as Emeritus Professor in 2012, the year after I began my first lecturing post there. So consistent has Keith’s presence been as an academic mentor to me that many times during the writing of this article I have wished I could send it to him for his rapid, blunt - but always useful - feedback.

One of the key scholarly practices I learned from Keith is the importance of drawing connections between different artistic forms, both at the level of individual creations and by taking a broader perspective, examining trends and styles across various visual mediums. In his feedback on my graduate work, Keith often linked the focus of my thesis on *bande dessinée* to French cinema, his own area of academic expertise. The *bande dessinée*, with its multi-modal nature, naturally connects to several artistic mediums, from painting to caricature to literature. However, the numerous formal similarities between cinema and *bande dessinée* as visual storytelling methods, along with their long-standing histories of mutual influence (Groensteen, 2018),[[1]](#footnote-1) make exploring their connections particularly apt and useful, and I’m grateful to Keith for sharing at least a part of his encyclopaedic knowledge of French cinema with me over the years. This article continues the approach I learned from Keith; it compares recent trends in political activism in French cinema and *bande dessinée*.

*Politicised Narratives in French Cinema and Bande Dessinée*

Reflecting on the global rise in cinematic influence over the twentieth century, Frank Stern attested in 2000 that ‘[c]inema has become the modern tool of visual intervention in politics, culture, and international relations’ (p. 66). Writing specifically of French cinema in a 2015 *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial, however, Stéphane Delorme decried with no small measure of scorn the lack of political engagement in contemporary French films, stating that ‘le cinéma français de fiction fait tout pour se débarrasser de la politique’ (para. 1). Delorme’s subsequent analysis of the obtaining dominant trends of French cinema suggested an atmosphere of defeatism in the films being made, even in those works that contained ostensibly ‘political’ themes, with poor social conditions portrayed as inevitable and narratives imbued with the pervasive sense that the world is not something to fight for, or make better, but to flee. Where, he wondered, were the films that showed, in the face of undeniable economic and ecological crises, ‘la prolifération de la parole politique de la part de tous’ (para. 4) that he deemed a recent, and rather encouraging, societal development?

The use of art as a means of political expression is not constant, changing in line with artistic trends, public moods and government-imposed censorship; cinema is, of course, no different. In an article written in 1992 (the wonderfully-titled ‘How to avoid becoming a middle-aged fogey, with reference to three recent popular French films’), Keith Reader noted that French cinema had, since the mid-1980s, been dominated by big-screen literary adaptations and the ‘determinedly non-realistic’ (p. 97) films of the ‘Forum des Halles’ style favoured by directors such as Léos Carax and Luc Besson. Such trends were, he noted, reflective of ‘the massive re-emergence of consensus and the blunting or exhaustion of ideological confrontation’ (p. 100) of the Mitterrand presidency. By 2007, however, Martin O’Shaughnessy noted that the ‘revival of political opposition’ (2009, p. 1) in France, first notably seen in the mass public-sector protests against the weakening of the social security system in late 1995, was visible in French cinema. Fiction films were once again foregrounding ‘the real’ and focusing on ‘workplace oppressions, unemployment, social ‘exclusion’, racism, migration, ethnicity and social class’, heralding the rebirth of a committed cinema (2009, p. 2). Several years later, the 2015 *Cahiers* dossier, provocatively entitled *Le Vide politique du cinéma français*, would go on to take issue, in large part, with the recent crop of ‘social cinema’ films that Delorme and other *Cahiers* contributors assessed as toothless depictions of ‘inevitable’ inequalities, the films serving only to temporarily assuage the conscience of the audience rather than provoking new ideas or spurring the spectator to action.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *bande dessinée* of the 1980s, not long minted as a medium with an adult as well as juvenile focus (a process that largely began in the late 1950s in the Franco-Belgian market), generally mirrored cinema’s contemporaneous apolitical output. The dominant trends of the decade were history and heroic fantasy: evidence, according to *bande dessinée* historian Pascal Lefèvre, of a sense of ‘cultural pessimism’ (qtd. in Miller, 2007, p. 35), the belief in the future that was visible in the stylistic innovations of the 1970s no longer evident (Miller, 2007, p. 35).[[3]](#footnote-3) From the early 1990s onwards, however, the *bande dessinée* has not followed the fluctuating pattern of political engagement identified by some commentators of French cinema, and has generally appeared to incorporate increasingly politicised forms of expression into its stylistic and genre-based evolution.

*The Rise of Graphic Activism*

The incorporation of political themes into the *bande dessinée* is not a recent development. Mark McKinney traces references in the art form to French imperialism, for example, back to one of the first recognised examples of *bande dessinée*, Rodolphe Topffer’s *Histoire du Monsieur Cryptogramme*, first drafted in 1830 (2008, p. 17). However, as the *Cahiers* writers’ assessment of recent French cinema indicated, the inclusion of politically-relevant content does not necessarily make an artwork politically engaged, nor does it make it oppositionally-engaged: as O’Shaughnessy has said of cinema, ‘films only become political in a real sense when they inscribe disagreement within their narratives, soundtracks and *mise-en-scène’* (2009, p. 180). Indeed, much of the political content present in *bande dessinée* strips, particularly in the earlier, child-focused history of the form, served to defend, rather than challenge, dominant ideologies (Hergé’s *Tintin au Congo* (1930) is perhaps the most well-known example).[[4]](#footnote-4) French government investment in the form today, particularly when oriented towards promoting francophone *bande dessinée* creation in African countries – both the French and Belgian governments have provided grant support for *bande dessinée* publications by African creators and helped finance artistic training and the establishment of *bande dessinée* festivals in countries such as Congo and Gabon (McKinney, 2008, p. 16) – suggests that the medium itself continues to be used politically in ways that might be deemed self-serving to the status quo.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nevertheless, following the dominance of escapist historical and fantasy narratives in the 1980s, *bande dessinée* narratives featuring political opposition, rather than support, began to appear with increasing frequency. A new trend that developed in the 1990s – *bande dessinée reportage*, or ‘graphic journalism’ – became a first key home for such content, but politicised expression soon extended across other notable genres and themes that developed around the turn of the millennium such as autobiography (Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000 – 2004) is a key example of a politicised *bande dessinée* life narrative) and post-colonial history (for example, Baru’s *L’Autoroute du soleil* (1995) or Manu Larcenet’s *Le Combat ordinaire* (2003-2008)).

Around the beginning of the 2010s a trend then emerged in the *bande dessinée* that centred politics in a very literal sense, with albums documenting election campaigns and the lives of prominent politicians increasingly visible in the market. The commercial successes of *La Face karchée de Sarkozy* (2006) by Philippe Cohen, Richard Malka and Riss, and, particularly, the two-part *Quai d’Orsay. Chroniques diplomatiques* (2010-11) by Christophe Blain and Abel Lanzac may be credited as the impetus for this trend. *La Face karchée de Sarkozy*’s biting satire of the soon-to-be French president reminded readers, whose numbers included then-French prime minister and Sarkozy rival Dominique de Villepin, of the *bande dessinée*’s close kinship with political caricature, an art form which exerted considerable influence on France’s revolutionary history. [[6]](#footnote-6) In turn, Blain and Lanzac’s fictionalised depiction of the latter’s real-life experiences working under Dominique de Villepin during his tenure as Minister of the Interior included no small measure of critique of the Minister (renamed Alexandre Taillard de Worms in the story) and of the realities of French bureaucracy.

However, other *bandes dessinées* belonging to this trend again underline the difference between political and politicised, or politically-engaged, content. The *bandes dessinées* of Matthieu Sapin, who has emerged as the most well-known creator of the ‘political personality’ trend, have been noted for their lack of position-taking and focus on the ‘banalities’ of the campaign-based and presidential lives of both François Hollande (featured in Sapin’s *Campagne présidentielle* (2012) and *Le Château : une année dans les coulisses de l’Élysée* (2015)) and Emmanuelle Macron (focus of *Comédie française : voyages dans l’antichambre du pouvoir* (2020)and *Douze Voyages présidentiels* (2022)) (see Brethes, 2015). It is interesting to note that, in the preparation of the albums in question, Sapin was accorded extensive personal access to both Hollande and Macron, spending more than a year observing and sketching at the Elysee for *Le Chateau* and accompanying Macron all over the world for *Douze Voyages présidentiels*. At the 2022 Angouleme festival *Le Monde* journalist Gérard Davet expressed concern that Sapin, a *bande dessinée* artist, was being permitted much more close contact with President Macron than any journalist, before suggesting that Sapin’s light-handed approach to his visual documentation of the presidency was precisely the reason: ‘Il ouvre ses portes à Mathieu Sapin, qui m'est extrêmement sympathique, qui pose un regard ironique, toujours drôlatique sur le monde politique, mais bienveillant, moins critique*’* (Le Figaro avec AFP, 2022). Sapin’s work is perhaps evidence of the survival of the tendency, dominant earlier in the *bande dessinée*’s history, of the use of the medium as a means of defending the existing political status quo.

Nevertheless, whilst politically-focused *bandes dessinées* were published which, as Delorme lamented of social cinema in 2015, ‘ne mangent pas de pain’, the politi*cised* landscape of the *bande dessinée* medium over the 2010s continued to develop as key genres intersected to create new expressive approaches and opportunities for political critique. The evolution of the ‘graphic medicine’ genre (defined by Ian Williams as the ‘intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare’ (Williams, n.d.)[[7]](#footnote-7) and the continued popularity of autobiographical bandes dessinées (particularly amongst the growing cohort of women artists present in the Franco-Belgian industry), for example, combined to set the stage for the emergence of albums critical of healthcare practices and related issues such as abortion access in France.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, the vogue for graphic journalism, already linked to autobiographical expression by the self-representational practices of key creators Joe Sacco and Guy Delisle, overlapped with such trends as graphic medicine, postcolonial history and, more recently, ‘eco-comix’ (strips with an environmental focus) to produce a wealth of albums that overtly took an oppositional political stance on a specific issue. Some of these works, such as the aforementioned Le Quai d’Orsay, appeared to focus on expressing the critical opinion of their creators and/or on educating their readership on a particular issue. Increasingly, however, politicised albums were published which, in addition to these aims, employed various textual and visual techniques across their narratives that evidenced a specific intention to engage the reader in the issue depicted in the hope of spurring them to real-world action. British creator Kate Davies spoke of this audience-engagement approach in her own work in the 2017 interview that would essentially coin the term ‘graphic activism’, saying ‘I probably see myself more as an activist than as a journalist or an artist […] I like my comics to do something, I have an axe to grind, I will use every tool in my toolkit to engage the reader with the story’ (para. 14). The use of the bande dessinée as a means by which to galvanise active support for a political issue was increasingly visible over the 2010s in the Franco-Belgian market, and has continued to be prevalent up to the time of writing.

Cinema and Bande Dessinée – Changing Contexts

Thus far, this article has sketched out in broad terms the apparently fluctuating political engagement of French cinema identified by certain commentators prior to, and especially during, the 2010s, and the increasing engagement that seems evident of the bande dessinée during the same time period. The second half of the article will consider a specific example of bande dessinée activism from the mid-2010s – La Fantaisie des dieux. Rwanda 1994 (2015) by Patrick de Saint-Exupéry and Hippolyte – in order to examine the techniques that may be employed in a work of graphic activism to spur the reader to act. Prior to this analysis, the final part of this comparative introduction will now lay out some contextual factors which may help explain the differing trajectories of the two mediums in relation to their recent patterns of political engagement.

In 1990, the Centre national de la bande dessinée et de l’image was inaugurated in Angoulême, ostensibly a symbol of the bande dessinée form’s entry into ‘official’ French culture (Miller, 2007, p. 48) after a lifetime restricted to the cultural ‘kiddie table’. Reflecting on the quality of bande dessinée publications over the 1980s, however, which saw the market saturated with escapist strips containing often overlapping content, Thierry Groensteen would wonder by the following year if this Jack Lang-initiated, publicly-financed project was to become ‘the graveyard of a defunct form’ (ref to be provided). Several detailed histories of the bande dessinée’s subsequent reinvention over the 1990s exist which outline the varying factors that contributed to the sizeable changes visible within the medium over this decade; reproducing the full context is beyond the scope of this article.[[9]](#footnote-9) One change important to explaining the initial emergence of politicised bandes dessinées during the 1990s was the (re-)emergence of the independent publishing sector which created a ‘forum for a bande dessinée d’auteur which [had] had little space for expression since the 1970s’ (Miller, 2007, p. 53). The shift from the profit-driven focus of large publishing houses to the innovative spirit embraced by newly created indie publishers like L'Association and Ego comme X was, in very general terms, the impetus for the development of the genres mentioned above, particularly autobiography, which would go on to become key vehicles for political expression. Although the independent sector remained small in comparison to the outputs of the large publishing houses such as Dargaud and Casterman – in 2000, Groensteen estimated that 5% of sales in specialist BD bookshops came from independent publishers (Miller, 2007, p. 53) – the commercial success of certain publications from the independent sector, such as *Persepolis*, considerably increased its visibility, resulting in the adoption by the larger companies of ‘independent’-style genres and new artistic approaches (p.56).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Certain changes in the French cinematic industry also begun in the 1990s may have had an opposite effect on filmic content. Amidst a complex set of changes influenced by the wider contexts of neoliberalist economic policies, an increasingly-globalised cinematic landscape and the significant commercial threat posed by the dominance of Hollywood,[[11]](#footnote-11) Charlie Michael points to two industry shifts of the mid-1990s in France that influenced a general move towards big-budget ‘blockbuster’-style films and away from smaller, independent productions. One was the expansion of big film companies such as Pathé, Gaumont and UGC and, in particular, their creation of partnerships with TV companies such as Canal+, with the effect that ‘all sorts of big budget offerings became a permanent feature of both institutional rhetoric and theatre marquees’ (2015, p. 83). This development mirrored industry changes happening elsewhere in Europe and, notably, in Hollywood over the 1990s. Molloy and Tzioumakis state that opportunities for producing politically-engaged films were lessened considerably by the acquiring of independent companies by larger American studios at this time, pointing to ‘an effacement of political engagement by the Hollywood entertainment product, certainly in the form of critique or challenge to dominant ideology’ (2016, p. 8).

The second, related, change noted by Michael of the French context was the mid-1990s rise in the garnering of funds for French film productions by ‘pre-selling’ rights to television channels (that were then able to exclusively show the film after its initial theatre run). Michael notes that this had a notable impact on filmic content, stating that TV-friendly comedies and action films, helmed by the ‘predictable commodities’ that were popular actors and well-known directors working with big production budgets, were subsequently much more desirable than ‘auteur’ films (2015, p. 84). These changes did not restrict the French industry solely to the action and comedy genres, of course, and the ‘realist’ or ‘naturalist’ genre that would later be criticised in *Cahiers du cinéma* continued to exist. Nevertheless, it is likely that the changes to funding mechanisms for French cinema and the ensuing dominance of larger-budget, mass-appeal films had an impact on the perceived possibility of political engagement within the newly-reshaped direction of the industry. Indeed, reflecting in 2007 on funding changes within the French cinematic domain, O’Shaughnessy states that while ‘there is room within the French industry’ for a socio-politically engaged cinema, ‘it is not currently possible to imagine a radical cinema entirely free from state interference and commercial ties’ (2009, p. 15) as existed in the post-68 era of militant French cinema. The heightened pressures on film-makers to walk the line between commercial success and potentially audience-dividing political critique may, in part, explain the suggested fluctuation in French ‘oppositional’ cinema after the mid-1990s.

Parallel to changes in industry structure for both cinema and *bande dessinée* around the turn of the millennium were interconnected evolutions in audience consumption of varying forms of mass media more generally. In addition to French television’s increased influence over cinema content as noted above, from the end of the 1980s the arrival of new satellite and cable technologies resulted in a huge increase in the number of TV channels available and, thus, in the availability of audiovisual content for viewers’ consumption (O'Shaughnessy, 2009, p. 15). Political and union actors (such as the PCF and CGT) that had previously shown support and provided funding for militant film production increasingly recognised television ‘and the media more broadly’, as O’Shaughnessy notes (2009, p. 14), as more effective vehicles for reaching the public.

The *bande dessinée*, while much more comprehensively dwarfed by television in terms of audience reach than cinema, showed significant industry growth from the 1990s onwards. The number of albums published per year rose rapidly at the turn of the millennium, climbing from 1563 titles in 2000 to 5565 in 2012 (thereafter stabilising around the mid-5000 mark) (Ratier, 2016, p. 4). The monetary value of the *bande dessinée* market rose by 46% between 2010 and 2020, even while the book market as a whole declined by 11% in France over the same period (Guilbert, 2021, p. 9). The increased visibility of the medium, coupled with the general growth in its cultural capital spurred by the publication of several high profile strips not only in France but in other key national markets, particularly the US (Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (serialised between 1980 and 1991) is one such example, and was the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize), led to the emergence of graphic novel production in new geographical sectors in the 2000s, notably in North Africa and the Middle East. During the Arab Spring protests, *bandes dessinées* emerged as an effective means of political protest, with young, motivated artists taking advantage of both the relative ease of *bande dessinée* production (requiring, in its simplest form, just pencil and paper) and the rapidity of its diffusion in paper-based form - both independently, without relying on mainstream publishers, and locally - and, particularly, via social media. Scholar Nevine El Nossery has noted that the proliferation of *bande dessinée* production during the Arab Spring protests, particularly by young, up-and-coming artists, contributed to building ‘a dynamic, inventive, and very prolific Ninth Art scene’ in the MENA region (2023, p. 125). Artists such as Zainab Fasiki (a self-described ‘artivist’ from Morocco) continue to disseminate politicised messages in the form of drawings and *bande dessinée* panels to followers on Instagram, harnessing the audience reach and creative freedom of social media, while also publishing in the more traditional album format with some titles, such as Fasiki’s *Hshouma. Corps et sexualité au Maroc* (2019), published in French and in the Franco-Belgian market.

A combination of the above factors – the re-emergence of the independent sector, the growth of the medium’s visibility both in France and internationally, and the influence of specific publications, such as *Persepolis* and *Maus*, or contexts, such as the Arab Spring protests, on future artistic creation - may have contributed to the seemingly-sustained rise in political engagement in the *bande dessinée* in recent decades. A final contributing element to consider, particularly in light of the more recent development of graphic activism, may concern the average age of the *bande dessinée* reader and how this demographic has related to political activism in recent years. Statistical information published by the *Centre national du cinema* (CNC) indicates a fairly even spread of cinema attendance between the various ‘active’ adult age categories surveyed (ranging from 15 to 59 years): for example, in 2015, the year of Delorme’s protestations about the *vide politique* of French cinema, CNC figures showed that 32.9% of cinema-goers belonged to the 15-34 age groups and 29.7% to the 35-59 age group (2015, p. 7). Comparable surveys of the *bande dessinée* conducted between 1994 and 2011 consistently showed, in contrast, that readership of graphic novels progressively and markedly declined across adult age categories, with the percentage of readers in the 35-59 range (averaged at 25% of those surveyed in 2011 (the 60+ category showed an average of less than 10%)) significantly lower than the 15-34 range (averaged at 40% in the same year) (Xavier, 2014, p. 11). More recently-published data suggests that this difference in demographic between the mediums has survived the impact of the Covid pandemic and the rise of streaming services in France (although cinema attendance overall has diminished due to these factors) (see Golding, 2023 and Centre national du livre, 2021).

The younger demographic of the adult-focused *bande dessinée* may have contributed to the publication of more politicised content — and especially the recent rise of graphic activism, as indicated —when considered alongside the evolving modes of political activism (particularly amongst younger adults) over recent decades. Whilst INSEE statistics show that under-30s in France were even less likely to vote compared to those over 65 in 2022 than they were in 2002 (a year which already showed a marked difference in participation) (Algava & Bloch, 2022), there have been indications that the political activism of younger adults in other forms has risen in recent years. In 2015, a government-commissioned report stated that under-30s in France ‘privilégient de plus en plus des formes d’expressions protestataires, individuelles, ponctuelles et surtout non affiliées’ and were more likely to join a street protest or sign an online petition than older adults (Guisse & Hoibian, p. 6). Comparison with figures from a similar report in 2023 shows that the political activism of the under-30s demographic has risen in the most recent years; this is particularly true of participation in street protests, although online activism (the signing of a petition or defence of a cause online) remains the most common type of political activity. In both forms of engagement, under-30s remained in 2023 the most active of any age category.

Several features of the foregoing statistical information appears relevant to the development and continued growth of politicised and activist *bandes dessinées*. The increasing political engagement of younger adults overall renders the choice of a medium favoured by this demographic a logical choice for artistic oppositional expression. The general suitability of the *bande dessinée* medium for dissemination online, as previously indicated, further shows it to be a potentially fruitful means of visual political engagement in the face of an increasingly digital political battleground. Finally, it seems likely that the rejection by younger people of more ‘traditional’ forms of political engagement that focused on joining, acting in line with the principles of, and voting for a group such as a union or political party in favour of a more individual engagement with specific causes rendered politicised expression via the *bande dessinée* – a form that shows great capacity to engage with the (predominantly younger) reader on an individual level - an attractive prospect for creators wishing to garner active interest for a particular issue. It is to the possibilities that the *bande dessinée* medium provides for connecting directly with readers and how these possibilities are exploited in a key example of graphic activism that this article will now turn.

La Fantaisie des dieux. Rwanda 1994

In 2013, nearly twenty years after reporting on the 1994 Rwandan genocide, journalist Patrick de Saint-Exupéry returned to Rwanda with graphic artist Hippolyte. Their journey through the Kibuye region (re-)visiting significant sites related to the genocide became the basis for *La Fantaisie des dieux. Rwanda 1994*, published in 2014. The *bande dessinée* blends past and present, as Saint-Exupéry and Tutsi survivors recount their memories both through speech-bubbled dialogues set in the 2013 narrative and through captioned narration in flashback panels depicting the events of 1994. Saint-Exupéry had already published extensively on the Rwandan genocide in text prior to 2014, focusing principally on the actions of the French state in relation to the atrocities (see, in particular, *L'inavouable : La France au Rwanda* (2004)). *La Fantaisie des dieux* continues this critical stance towards French involvement, making repeated reference amidst the harrowing personal testimony of massacre survivors to the military links between the French state and the Hutu-led Rwandan government prior to, and during, the genocide, and to the refusal of French politicians to admit wrongdoing in the years following it. Timed to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the genocide, the album is both an act of commemoration in its preservation of testimony from those who lived and witnessed the events in 1994, and a call for justice and action in the present day, this politicised aim visible in both the stylistic and narrative choices made by the creators.

In the opening pages of *La Fantaisie des dieux,* as Saint-Exupéry’s personal testimony of what he witnessed in 1994 begins, the critical issue of how to tell the story of a genocide is raised. The mark of a genocide, Saint-Exupéry attests, is not rage, but silence: ‘[le] témoignage rendu impossible parce que tous ou presque ont été tués. Ont été tus’ (p.12). The ensuing collection of testimonies presented across the *bande dessinée* are thus conceptualised, from this opening standpoint, as acts of defiance – ways to speak aloud and therefore break the silencing intentions of genocide. The visual and narrative crafting of the work’s 1994-set flashbacks, however, is designed to underline the defining feature of genocide identified by Saint-Exupéry. Many of Hippolyte’s water-coloured panels, particularly of the Rwandan countryside as the *bande dessinée* begins, are large, static and devoid of dialogue. Furthermore, the violence of the killings that became a genocide – the rage – is, at best, understated in *La Fantaisie des dieux*: in the few sequences that exist across the narrative that depict the massacres themselves, this violence is conveyed via fragmented images of thrown objects or disembodied, bloodied arms. It is in this crafting of the album to reflect Saint-Exupéry’s conception of the essential silence of genocide, though, that the creators ensure that the reader is not spared from the sights and sounds – and, thus, the horror - of the massacres. The lack of narrative rhythm created by Hippolyte’s sequences of empty, motionless Rwandan countryside (see pp.8-10) leaves the reader to linger on these ‘noiseless’ images, gaining a sense of the endlessness of the silence created when no-one is left alive to break it. Uncompelled by any unfolding action, it is the reader that must choose, actively, when it is time to move on to the next panel. The relative lack of violent imagery in *La Fantaisie des dieux*, in turn, acts upon the reader in two ways. Firstly, considering this approach across the work as a whole, it prevents overexposure to explicit content, which could otherwise lead to desensitization (see Bumatay & Warman, 2012). Secondly, the fragmentation of Hippolyte’s depictions underlaying specific instances of survivor testimony of the massacres allows the creators to make use of the *bande dessinée*’s structural ‘vide’ – the gutter, or white, space that exists on the page between panels. This is particularly evident during the testimony of Providence, who relates memories of escaping the massacre at the Saint-Jean church in Kibuye in April 1994 when she was fifteen years old (pp.23-28). The short sequence of her narration which speaks of the killings themselves (p.26) is set over drawn ‘snapshots’ of separate, but related, images that strongly suggest the violence of the *génocidaires*’ actions but never show it directly, the panels moving from armed soldiers standing in front of the church, to a combatant with arm raised, poised to throw a grenade, to muscled forearms wielding bloodied machetes with the bodies of both *génocidaires* and victims out of sight (Figure 1). Accompanied by Providence’s narration that, like the imagery, makes clear the violence of the moment without stating it explicitly - ‘[d]es hommes, des femmes et des enfants sont tombés […] J’entendais les cris. J’entendais les gens mourir’ - the actual act of mass-killing is consigned to the gutter space between the panels and, thus, to the imagination of each individual reader as they piece together the fragmented imagery into a logically-sequential narrative. The contribution of the reader in this way to the continuous narrative of a graphic novel implicates, according to comics theorist Scott McCloud, all the senses – readers hear the sounds or smell the odours conjured within the connecting bonds that their imagination has provided (1994, p. 89). It also renders the process of reading a graphic novel essentially participatory – the reader becomes the final story-teller of the narrative as they fill in the gaps between panels with their own mental imagery (1994, p. 68). The choice to situate specific diegetic moments within the gutter space rather than a panel, therefore, can be a strategic means of encouraging personal engagement with a particular narrative instance. In a 2014 interview, Saint-Exupéry cited the experiential element of gutter space ‘closure’ as a motivator for creating a *bande dessinée* about a subject as complex as the Rwandan genocide, stating ‘c'est une expérience de lecture à part entière - à travers le dessin, le texte, et ce qu'il faut lire dans le creux des cases’ (para. 2). By consigning the violence of the Saint-Jean massacre, and other recollections of violence in the narrative, to the gutter space, Saint-Exupéry and Hippolyte ask the reader to feel it, rather than passively observe it.

The active engagement of the reader via strategic use of the gutter space assists *La Fantaisie des dieux* in its commemorative goal - a memory is more readily anchored in one’s mind if it is personalised, after all. The provocation of emotion engendered via the engagement with such shocking moments also constitutes a key step towards encouraging action on the part of the reader – particularly the younger adult reader with less, or no, prior knowledge of the Rwandan genocide – beyond the close of the narrative process. The building of affective attachments to a cause is, as scholars such Brown and Pickerill have noted, a fundamental motivator to political action (2009). Saint-Exupéry and Hippolyte seek to mobilise several emotional responses to the testimony presented in *La Fantaisie des dieux.* Horror, as noted, is evoked by their strategic representation of violence at certain moments of the narrative, as is compassion via the visualisation of the Tutsi survivors on the page in the 2013 frame narrative, linking the disembodied narrative voice of the flashback timeline to an identified, living person. The emotion that the creators most consistently seek to elicit throughout the *bande dessinée*, however, is guilt. This is most clearly seen in the repeated depiction within the 2013 narrative of artist Hippolyte’s reactions to hearing the recounted testimony of those present in 1994. Hippolyte, in many ways an in-text surrogate for the reader (young, white, French and the only figure featured in the *bande dessinée* that was not present in Rwanda in 1994), is shown over a series of sequences throughout the album swimming in Kibuye lake. The ghostly figures of survivors and of Saint-Exupéry float around him under the water, speaking to him. His imagining of direct accusations on occasion – ‘Vous avez laissé faire…Vous saviez tout…tout…tout…’ (p. 33; Figure 2) – indicates that as he has listened, a feeling of responsibility has begun to manifest, particularly in relation to the actions (and inaction) of French soldiers and politicians before, and during, the genocide. In the penultimate lake sequence (pp. 75-76), immediately following Saint-Exupéry’s harrowing recollection of a French soldier’s realisation in 1994 that he had personally been involved in training some of the now-*génocidaires* (pp. 73-74), the ghostly figures that appear under the water are not genocide-survivors but the grotesquely-drawn, puppet-like figures of Hubert Védrine and Alain Juppé (respectively, Secretary-General of the Élysée and French Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1994) who, in an absurd juxtaposition to the immediately-preceding memory, express their pride at French actions during the genocide (p. 76; Figure 3). The Védrine and Juppé figures speak not to Hippolyte as the other ghostly figures do in previous lake sequences but look out of the page to address the reader directly. The provocation to the reader to challenge their words is clear, as is the establishment of the reader, in Hippolyte’s place, as the new bearer of the guilt evoked by the unresolved question of French involvement in the genocide. This transmission of responsibility is consolidated in the final lake sequence of the album (pp. 82-83), in which the reader takes on Hippolyte’s point-of-view under the water, essentially becoming him as the first-person perspective shows arms stretching forward from the bottom of the panel, swimming.

In the few pages between these two closing lake sequences, in which the memories presented briefly reflect on the immediate aftermath of the genocide, several panels depicting the Rwandan countryside suddenly appear, in contrast to the large, complete water-colour renderings earlier in the *bande dessinée*, to be unfinished: traces of the artist’s preliminary pencil sketches are visible in places, while corners and edges of the panels appear yet to be coloured (pp. 78-79). As Baum, Bayer & Wagstaff state of the *non-finito*, various artistic goals can be associated with the intentional choice to leave a work unfinished; a unifying feature of such works, however, is that they demand the active engagement of the viewer, encouraging them to mentally complete the image and imagine the final elements that have been left out (2016, p. 14). In a sequential art form, such as the *bande dessinée*, the inclusion of unfinished elements has the added consequence of disrupting the narrative rhythm, jolting the reader out of the story to confront the constructedness of the imagery before them, made clear in the marks of creative progression left visible on the page. At the close of *La Fantaisie des dieux* Hippolyte’s unfinished imagery has this disruptive effect, encouraging readers to actively reflect on images that both expose the artist’s process and, crucially, that suggest that it is still *in* process. Where commemoration focuses on events of the past, political action with the goal of inciting change necessarily belongs to the present – one must believe, amongst other considerations, that it is not ‘too late’ to act. The incorporation of unfinished panels in *La Fantaisie des dieux* serves to position the reader at the album’s close not as an observer of a historical event, but as a witness to – and, indeed, participant in – a narrative that is not yet concluded. There is still time, Saint-Exupéry and Hippolyte seem to say to the young reader, to take up the mantle of responsibility and to demand accountability.

*Conclusion*

In Keith Reader’s aforementioned 1992 article he states that ‘[c]inema speaks, not only to and of a culture's hopes, but also to and of its fears’ (p. 104). The fears expressed within the films that exemplified - according to Stéphane Delorme and the *Cahiers* team - the widespread existence of a ‘vide politique’ in French cinema in 2015, seemed to be that individual action to make meaningful change in society had become impossible: the best the viewer could hope for was to have their conscience assuaged, temporarily, for the duration of the film. What the evolution and apparent increase in politicised expression within the *bande dessinée* medium at the same moment in time seems to suggest, however, is that this fear of the immutability of social and political conditions was not all-pervasive within the French national psyche, and that the belief in the possibility of change still existed when directed on a smaller scale, and in a more individualised manner, to younger sections of society. *Bandes dessinées* like *La Fantaisie des dieux* – and many more comparable examples exist – show how creators use the specificity of both the medium’s format and demographic to fashion visual narratives that aim to engage the younger adult reader on a personal level, creating an emotional connection to a current issue with a view to encouraging action. The impact of such works of graphic activism is not always clearly measurable; however, the continued increase in politicised expression in the *bande dessinée* medium – and the influx into the medium of creators associated primarily with other forms of expression in order, specifically, to produce politicised albums, such as journalist Saint-Exupéry, writer Leila Slimani (co-creator of *Paroles d’honneur* (2007) with Laetitia Coryn) or director Ovidie (co-creator of *Libres ! Manifeste pour s'affranchir des diktats sexuels* (2017) with artist Diglee) - indicates that the hope, for now, persists.

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1. Thierry Groensteen’s work on the connected histories of the *bande dessinée* and cinema forms reflects both on the frequent instances of adaptations existing between the two mediums, beginning with Louis Lumière’s *L’Arroseur arrosé* short (borrowed from a *bande dessinée* gag which first appeared in 1885) and on the stylistic cross-pollinations that have influenced the evolution of each form, from the *bande dessinée*’s incorporation of the cinematic close-up to film-makers such as Alain Resnais drawing influence from *bande dessinée* strips for scene-setting and blocking. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is worth noting that, as with most expressions of artistic critique, the opinions of the *Cahiers* team were not universally shared. However, the public reactions of several notable figures of the French cinema industry seemed to conclude that Delorme *et al*. had a point. At the close of a France Culture debate about the notion of the *vide politique* held between *Cahiers* deputy-editor-in-chief Jean-Philippe Tessé and film-maker and actor Vincent Lindon (winner of the ‘Best Actor’ award at Cannes in May 2015 for his performance in *La Loi du marché*, a film subsequently criticised in the September *Cahiers* issue) Lindon announced ‘je ne suis pas loin de penser comme vous parce que je sais être convaincu’ (France Culture, 2016). Critic-turned-director Nicolas Bouhkrief seemed to agree with Delorme that current French cinema was not politically engaged when asked about the *Cahiers’* position in an October 2015 interview. He further stated, however, that this was an easy position for the journal to take as ‘[L]e cinema français, contrairement à ce qu’on croit, n’a jamais été très politique’, especially when considered against the history of Italian or British filmmaking (Boukhrief, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It would be inaccurate to suggest that *bande dessinée* production in the 1980s was entirely politically disengaged. The development of *nouveau réaliste* *bandes dessinées* by artists such as Chantal Montellier saw the production of a certain number of albums with explicitly political messages (see Miller, 2007, pp. 38-39). Such *bandes dessinées* made up a distinct minority of the market, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not to say that, prior to the development of adult-oriented *bande dessinée*, there was no evidence of political disagreement across the form. The post-1945 ideological battle between communist and capitalist philosophies is visible in competing children’s *illustrés* such as *Vaillant*, sponsored by the Communist Party, and *Coeurs Vaillants*, a Catholic-oriented publication (Grove, 2010, p. 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McKinney notes that although attendance at French- or Belgian-sponsored *bande dessinée* festivals may be useful to the careers of African artists, it is also ‘riddled with pitfalls, ambiguities, and contradictions, which are related to the colonial heritage and to current economic inequalities between the participants’ (2008, p. 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In 1834, English commentator Henry Bulwer-Lytton noted the content of satirical illustrated publications *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* to be a more potent political force in France than the two legislative chambers combined (Kerr, 2000, p. 3). In the December 2006 interview in which Dominique de Villepin declared his intention not to seek the UMP candidacy for the 2007 presidential election he noted *La Face karchée de Sarkozy* to be the funniest thing he had read recently (Jeudy). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A key early example of ‘graphic medicine’ from the Franco-Belgian medium is David B’s six-volume L’Ascension du haut mal (1996-2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Notable *bandes dessinées* concerning women’s experience of abortion in France are Désirée and Alain Frappier’s *Le Choix* (2015), Aude Mermilliod’s *Il fallait que je vous le dise* (2019) and Léa Castor’s *Cher Blopblop. Lettre à mon embryon* (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Beaty (2007) and Miller (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The recognition by the larger publishers of the commercial potential of ‘independent’-style *bandes dessinées* has not been without consequence for the smaller companies and the *bande dessinée* industry more generally. See Miller, 2007, pp. 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See O'Shaughnessy, 2022 and Michael, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)