

Abrasive melancholy

On Benjamin Monti

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In the first decade of the 21st century, Benjamin Monti produces several graphic novels that compose different parts of a singular autobiographical oeuvre. In each of these works, the author rethinks the enunciative and figurative modalities of comics and elaborates original reading experiences that challenge as much the apparatus of comics as that of writing in itself. Art historian Erwin Dejasse even sees him as one of the most radical experimental artists within comics because of the way the author, through a kind of expressive frugality, situates the narrative on another reading plane and imposes a new way of looking at images. And so, Monti's work 'cannot hide its reflexivity: to tell one's life is also to explain in what circumstances it is being told.' (Dejasse 2005:29) Having worked the autobiographical to an end, and worn out by the evident narrativity of comics, Monti now considers both drawings on walls and connected drawings - here understood in terms of mediation. If Benjamin Monti seems to stray away from sequential narrative, leaving aside many of comics' common motifs and formats, his images preserve traces of a singular poetics that was already underlying in his comics page. A partial description of his contemporary production will sketch some of their salient traits, bringing out the various aesthetic and enunciative characteristics that have brought Benjamin Monti to rethink the notion of narrative in comics.

Material frictions

Discovering Benjamin Monti's drawings is experiencing an ambiguous encounter. Their interpretation, or at least their reading, sends one down forking paths, the ramifications and junctions of which all fully participate in a logic of the **uncertain**. Their ambiguous nature is a challenge to the eye, which accumulates inferences without succeeding to bring them into a steady readable focus. These various assumptions supplement without ever undermining each other, and this freedom - a truthfulness that disseminates without losing its intensity - confers lyricism to their compositions. In a concrete manner, to produce those images, the artist copies old engravings borrowed from various iconographic sources. Monti is a seasoned bibliophile and his resources are plentiful, from illustrated books to handbooks of anatomy or encyclopedias. But the author is not simply transcribing them in minute details, he also *reframes* them so as to situate them alongside other reproductions. In some compositions, he directly draws next to or on top of the used doodles sketched and words written down on paper decades ago by the anonymous owners of these booklets, which now provided the creative basis for the contemporary artist Monti. He thus produces new forms by associating portions of different engravings, and/or by reproducing fragments of engravings mixed with native drawings. In the process, the author redraws at two levels: he draws anew the preexisting images, and he realizes

new drawings by moving them onto a paper stage, revealing their materiality and producing visual dialogues.

This fascination for figurative confrontations and fusions is reminiscent of Max Ernst's collages. Those were made from meticulously cut-up engravings taken from a vast array of sources: popular illustrated novels, journals of natural sciences or nineteenth-century sales catalogs. Ernst assembled those together to create new surrealist compositions. The painter thus brought together heterogeneous figures and objects, infringing any norms and conventions of realistic representation. Proportions were constantly transgressed, and these new connections produced fantastical and delirious images. The consistency of the engraving technique, used for all the source images, allowed for a strange adhesion of the heterogeneous elements within images that originally seemed homogeneous. If this way of inventing new forms and generating surprising visual dialogues seems similar, Benjamin Monti's approach differs from Max Ernst's in that he redraws engravings or parts of engravings and hence fuses them into a single *graphic* trace. Retracing pre-drawn elements with ink (on a light table) is a conventional comics practice, which Monti adds to the legacy of Ernsts collage making. The fragments of redrawn and assembled images are thus embedded within a common creative dynamic that unites them, gives them a *plastic* harmony and sustains their adhesion to a *collective* phenomenology, thus glossing the term 'plastic' as stressed by Group μ . (Group μ 1992) The figurative distortion or dissemblance finds a kind of diegetic consistence. The continuity of the graphic trace reveals the logic of an intellectual dynamic. When the artist intervenes on pages already covered with signs, writings or graphic marks, he preserves the **materiality** of each drawing, setting out his own intervention from past inscriptions. Different types of graphiation can thus be measured in his pages: the ingenious and conscientious inscriptions of pupil schoolbooks and Benjamin Monti's own, which can be recognized by the use of a nib, inky traces imposed onto graphite sketches. The author does not get carried away in staging fantastical, immersive or integrating scenes by dissimulating the creative process; and the various parts of the engravings can be distinguished by cautiously scrutinizing the images. He does not seek to recreate a fictional illusion from heterogeneous iconographic materials. On the contrary, his dispositive preserves, or rather exposes, the marks of the figurative simulacra: he stages the indexical marks of his own appropriative enterprise, which is itself part and parcel of the image reading. He recomposes images into new ironical images that interrogate their original figurative representation, unsettling them and reforming into new compositions.

Conspicuously missing on the plastic homogeneity that is otherwise expected from this kind of exercise, the author draws attention to the connections that he operates between fragments of drawings. He initiates figurative, conceptual or formal dialogues that animate the compositions and sometimes echo other compositions. Benjamin Monti engages in graphic games and warns his readers of this ludic and poetic approach ahead of their plunging in it. By accommodating spaces for **dissemblance**, he delivers a note on how to look, on the contemplative mode that is to be adopted. He

stimulates the participation of the reader and invites them to dive into the plastic and figurative resources of his images. The attentive gaze at the images brings out a wide range of subtle dialogues, mostly formulated by the reader's interpretation. Meanings conjure up, sometimes obscure, and others are held together by the tenuous, absurd, or sometimes simply plastic links that emerge from these confrontations. Some interventions clearly cast themselves as openly humorous or ironical, as if to remind the reader that these compositions are not accidental but result from a creative process that is both sensible and sensitive, engaging the eye to rediscover the links that the author has anticipated as well as to draw new and unexpected links. Contemplation becomes active and folds onto a reading process attentive to the qualities of the image. Referential and plastic connections emerge between different pages that form homogeneous series. The artist thus liberates the image from its univocal enunciative function, essential for comics. Breaking with the narrative rigor traditional to the comics, Monti does not simply abandon narrative but rather makes it shift according to the various graphic densities of the image and the links that can be operated between the figures. His pages, though, are not uniquely directed by an intellectual process of conceptual or formal associations. Rather they are more subtly, but hegemonically, inhabited by a *poetics of absence* emanating from a graphic ontology of representation that endows his images with a profound melancholia.

Absence and melancholia of the image

A kind of melancholia thus haunts Benjamin Monti's pages, taking its roots in a poetics of absence that manifests itself at different levels. The idea of absence is first found in the aesthetic nature of the image and in the mimetic relationship that a drawing elaborates with a real object. Through interlinking lines that follow precise paths, the drawing tends towards a graphic and schematic reproduction of the visual stimulations perceived when observing an object in real life. The stake of *mimesis* is thus understood as a way of conjuring up in the spectator's mind the idea of an object without needing that object to be verifiably present in what they look at. Mimesis is not the most trustworthy image of an object, nor its most perfect formal imitation, but is rather thought of as a new conception of that object through its drawing: it produces a new form that cannot be the real object, but which makes it perceptible by following some of its visual characteristics. Mimesis is not a graphic surrogate but a creative machine, a system for engendering a reality conceptualized in the graphic trace. Nevertheless, if the drawing renders the real object perceptible, it cannot make it present, and this is where the power of the image resides: it does not present but *represent* the object, it presents it anew and in a new form, an empty husk that allows the mind to reconstruct the object from the appearance of that husk. The object is thus only *indirectly* present, and the drawing bears in itself the mark of its absence. Images are thus read as almost ghostly (or phantasmagorical) apparitions. What emerges, is the real, which disappears just as quickly, and what remains is the projective force of the graphic trace. Patrick Vauday thus describes a 'paradox of representation: even though it is only possible at the cost of the very thing it condemns itself to be a mere image of, it is

from this loss or absence that it draws its force of presentation by borrowing to the image its source of visibility and its affective power.' (Vaudoay 2001:35) This poetics of absence only functions once a process of **fulfilment** is set on: we could even speak of a politics of satisfaction that initiates the transaction leading to the fictional illusion. The eye follows the mold of the drawing so that the mind can adapt and take shape in it. Bringing back these representations to fragments of figures, minutely redrawn in a realistic manner, Benjamin Monti brings this very *absence* back, this call for the real object, this illusion whose efficiency lies in the desire for reality's texture.

The author doubles this feeling of loss by a kind of nostalgia embedded in the faithful reproduction of engravings. If representation is made possible by traces that refer to a real object, the stylistic particulars of these traces can simultaneously refer to a specific graphic tradition and, in the case of Benjamin Monti, to a particular printing technique, in the form of **redrawn** engravings. The author does not seek to modernize the drawings, or to modify them through the filter of his graphiation but rather precisely consigns to reproduce the graphic features of these antiquated images. He keeps the same linear dynamics, anatomical blunders and visual paradigms of these years, but most importantly, transcribes patterns and textures that are fundamentally yet subtly dissimilar. The slight touches of the nib make certain elements of the image either grey or black, depending on its opacifying intensity, and inscribes in the image a worldly texture, diverging according to tactic, inclination, rhythm, stroke size, and further down to the smallest scale of the point. It seems obvious that in these spots the author does not strictly redraw the engravings, line by line, but that he retains a form of authenticity that summons the original engraving within the image, both for its representational power and its materiality. Mostly based on old engravings, their redrawing introduces in Monti's pages an outmoded atmosphere that contributes to the melancholic feeling, surrendering to the always already lost.

This melancholia is also manifests in the motifs of the engravings used to sketch a past temporal framework, most of which seem to belong to the time of the original image's printing. Between clothing habits and everyday life objects and activities, the many details scattered in these images allude to a past period and thus appear as witnesses of a lost epoch. Modernity is nowhere to be seen in the various compositions: no cars or mobile phones for instance, and if the author draws guns, he represents old-time revolvers rather than automatic weapons. These pages thus convene the delicacy of faded things, resonating with echoes from the past. This **melancholic** triad brings about a singular poetics that pushes the reading of the image beyond that of a mere game of representations (or succession of representations). The author summons different times, different formats, but their linkage is resolutely contemporary. By contrast with outright postmodern or ironical reappropriations, the author declares his love for those old printed images that he hunts down at flea markets and second-hand dealers, feeding a voracious but fruitful iconophilia. The different visual regimes in

themselves already produce a strong atmosphere, it does not instill a narrative in itself, but their materiality saturates the eye with different histories of drawing.

An author's quest

Through these different iconic manipulations, Benjamin Monti seems to deconstruct the otherwise commonly accepted idea that an artist's personal stroke is perceptible in the singular movements of their brush as it interprets and reproduces the world. When Philippe Marion coined the concept of 'graphiation', he considered graphic enunciation as 'fundamentally self-referential. Before being figurative, it exposes, in its trace, a graphic identity perceptible in the subjective specificity of a mark.' (Marion 1993:36) The 'graphiator', or graphic enunciator, unveils herself through the singular trace she delivers on paper. The drawing makes thus manifest the mark of an individuality at work in the storytelling. Jan Baetens suggests that this approach 'highlights the visibility of the trace, as a residue from an individual act of creation that resists to being taken over or erased by narrative and figuration.' (Baetens 1996:231) **Graphiation**, as a graphic mark, can be understood as an opening towards the act of creation that has led to the figurative construction. It calls and responds to the reader's participation in letting the trace surface in the narrative itself. Similarly, even if he does not find the concept useful, Thierry Groensteen recognizes that 'the drawn image, as it is handmade, leads to the signature of its maker. The drawing is essentially a codification and stylization of the real, and results from an interpretation of the world. Hence, drawing is inseparable from the hand of a particular enunciator' (Groensteen 2011:92) The reader gets access to representation through a personal vision of the world as it is printed on paper. Benjamin Monti, though, introduces a fundamental subtlety by distinguishing between drawing as the mark of a gesture leaving a trace and drawing as the diagrammatization of the world through that trace.

By fusing with representation forms that do not personally belong to him, the author seems to verify the suspicions that the French Surrealist Aragon formulated about the work of collage. Indeed, the latter saw in the collaged novels by Ernst, for instance, the 'indictment of personality', a 'negation of technique' that implied the disappearance of the 'mysterious physical connection' uniting the painter to his painting. (Aragon 1999:53) If we apply these words to Benjamin Monti's practice, we could easily come to the conclusion, perhaps too rapidly drawn, that there is a dissolution of the author, who disappears under the various borrowings. In fact, the author does not exactly represent the world by setting on paper the graphic paradigms that define his **authorial** identity. If style is perceptible in the distortions that representation records in its relationship to real objects (Thiellement 2006:8), the

author who does not directly engage reality and rather follow the lines already traces by another artist would not let his own style shine through. He does not materialize the world through his eye and hand but rather *appropriates* lines that make the world *appear*. The reader would be led to the issue of the artistic origin of the image she sets her eyes on: are these drawings those of the anonymous artists who natively produced them or are they those of Benjamin Monti's who copied them? The use of the nib homogenizes the compositions and underwrites Benjamin Monti's identity as the graphiator of these drawings, inasmuch as he handles the nib that has traced them, bringing his own hand to sight whenever it swerves and distorts forms. Nevertheless, in their general visual economy, the drawn lines are rather related to the figurative construction of the original images. These images become visually stronger through the ceaseless actualization of their singular, anachronic graphic techniques. This ambivalence reaches a paroxysm when the author draws on paper that is already inscribed with drawings, with which his own copies have a figurative or formal relationship, producing new compositions. With Benjamin Monti, the notion of the author, unquestionable for anyone seeing the force that moves through his images, thus develops at another level. It is not so much a question of disappearance, rather than the displacement of authorship, which is no longer read at the level of the graphiation or the narrative, but rather bears on the iconic manipulations and formal dialogues that the author establishes. His drawings, although visually diverse, become part of a common project and are brought together under the aforementioned banner of melancholia and absence, or under the mischievous sign of figurative assemblage and semiotic clash.

Conceptualized in this way, Benjamin Monti's style appears central. It imposes a new logic to the image (and the images) through the singular reading modes that chiefly move between the different layers of the visible to be grasped by the eye. The mark of the author is resolutely **sensorial** and present in each composition, each one creating a universe in itself. The author creates the narrative by moving its materiality to the foreground. He seeks to recompose the world, to save fragments from the chaos, salvaging wrecks from total nothingness or definitive loss, in a way similar to Olivier Deprez, Jochen Gerner or Ilan Manouach. He moves the reader through the sensations felt in different graphic techniques, in drawings from different origins, and in what these graphic variations imply for our reading experience. The author develops a creative process that repeals the representation of the real to investigate the representation of representation. This leads the reader to a fundamental question for drawing, as a sensorial plastic trace with graphic modulations. The eye's engagement in the trace thus brings out the poetry of these images: for Benjamin Monti, matter tells itself, in itself, inasmuch as the figurative manipulations of the image make meaning.

The author thus lays out fragments of images to produce original, ironic compositions, which challenge and unsettle the original figurative representations to produce new ones or, at least, to flesh them out otherwise. The status of the image wavers, its semantic qualities are renewed and recomposed. He explores a rich and permanent **duality** between the nature of the original image, its

meanings, and its new configurations as staged by the artist who mobilizes new ways of attending to the image. The primal notion of absence is not taken up in a negative way but becomes performative, because the absence appears as a gap to be mentally filled and as such calls the reader out, stimulates and challenges her. Similarly, if the images express a certain melancholia, they are also shimmering: the artist reactivates the look and gives these antiquated traces a renewed presence, a contemporary existence that does not erase their oldness. This melancholia and the poetry that appears in the matter of the images were already palpable in Monti's early comics. And it would not be unimaginable to consider these works meant for the gallery walls as part of the same economy of reading that Monti initiated and developed in his sequential productions.

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