Immersion, stratification, critique

Some aspects of the work of Sébastien Conard

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Quotation, style

Only those who are aware of it or those who let their distracted, inexpectant gaze skim over the last black pages of the magazine *Aambacht #2* (edited by Sébastien Conard, among others) will be able to suddenly discern a kind of movement. A tad lighter and barely perceptible, a few lines across the black surface suggest a cartoon character, which immediately entails movement. It is Wiske, Willy Vandersteen's main female character, that should have been hiding on the edge of appearance here in the margin of this artist's magazine, but the print is a little too dark and merely shows the features of some figure or element from (American, Flemish, ...) commercial children's comic strips. Slightly unhinged, the comic character appears as a drawn, dynamic cloud, as a loose amalgam of wavy and curved outlines and some details resembling the typical comic lines indicating movement and speed. The commercial comic character is suspended in the **tension** between the contingency of graphic rummaging and attempting (swift lines, shooting strokes, hectic, nervous scratches – abounding in the sketches of Tex Avery or in the early work of *underground cartoonist* Robert Crumb) and the abstraction of the disciplined model ('that's how you draw ...'). In addition to the furtive, shifting style, the comic strip appears to be both entirely in motion – the characters, the fence, the grass, the buildings are minimally searching and shaky, they sway and shimmer – and at a standstill, frozen, finalised, planned and executed. In such comics, in which there is always something urgent going on and contemplation is largely a way of reading against the grain, the controlled graphic style and the limited suggestion of meaning reinforce one another.

The dimension of discipline can be understood by the affinity and frequent slippage between the historical Western art-pedagogical context of pupils under masters and the economic context of creative workers in the service of a studio, among other things. And those who run the studio, or those who make everything themselves – as Marc Sleen, for instance, did for a long time – and don't work for a specific superior, have internalised an impersonal artistic/economic master: 'Full competence is achieved when the artist's hand and mind are exhaustively colonised by the sanctioned corpus of schemata. Drawing is a **machine** to which the hand and brain of the artist become *adjunct*. Who operates the machine? The artist, of course. But once set in motion the machine goes by itself.' (Bryson 2004) As colour is

historically and especially aesthetically secondary ('coloured in'), that which is between the lines remains a kind of hole, a gap. The experience of the holes could be the figure of the places where the individual reader's fantasy weaves its sticky web, breathing life into the scenes, enclosed by the discipline of the model, bordered and punctuated by ritual stylistic repetition. So much restrained passion is of course about to explode: explosions, crashes, clouds of dust and visualised shots, blows and other onomatopoeias (POW! ZZAP! CHNNK!) are momentary, largely metaphorically simulated releases.

If the work involves the pluriform and abyssal character of fantasy a little too nonchalantly, for example in a graphic articulation beyond the already bursting identification, it will *sociologically* stop functioning as a 'comic strip'. In Conard's publication *Hoe was de toekomst vandaag?* [*How was the future today?*] (2016), the clean lines used in comics to form the frame structure or to indicate outlines (separations between inside and outside) are imported into the graphic, plastic centre, e.g. on the opening page referring to Dan Van Severen's minimalism. Washed ink, stains and splashes, 'voids', all kinds of wet and dry brushing, prints, *indefinite* elements serving as shadows, details, ornaments or disinterested stuffing all form ambiguous, mutually articulated signs. Gradually introduced comic strip-like elements acquire a stylistic **resonance** with the brutalist, precise elements and therefore an abstract overtone. The book forms a diptych with the simultaneous gem *Degré zéro*, a compact *livre de poche* for those who, once in a while, want to contemplate or commemorate the comic strip but also want to do other things. *Degré zéro* develops a Magrittean 'oblique view' of the frame structure (and the inside-outside boundaries), in this case of the comic strip. Step by step and reminiscent of so-called 'fundamental painting' (e.g. Robert Mangold), a graphic game is put into play by means of viewing holes and surfaces, suggestions of depth and substance, opacity, part and whole, space, texture and scale. Not only does the representation of an indefinite, distant comic strip pop up time and again, but what also appears is, for example, an unsteady cube tilting into part of a pattern, a window or an object in bird's-eye view, a grid or a bored, automatic drawing by a contemporary artist. 'To keep on deterritorialising by means of... sparingness. Given that the vocabulary runs dry, to make its density vibrate: to set a purely intensive use of language against any symbolic or even meaningful or just meaning use. To arrive at a perfect, non-formed expression; an intense, material expression.' This is how Conard comments on his colleague (and former supervisor) Olivier Deprez, using a free translation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*. (Conard 2019) But this excerpt might be even more valid when read in the light of Conard's own works.

Post-medium

Nothing is more foreign to Conard's oeuvre than the easy assumption of freedom. Neither the contemporary artist of the Kantian lineage of artistic autonomy, nor the self-aware (neo-)avant-garde artist rightly working within a horizon in which aesthetic/social freedom is permanently at stake, nor the comic artist happily hiding in the margins can wallow in freedom without experiencing and conveying **friction**. Whoever, in whatever way, embarks upon the singularity of the subjective will run aground by irrevocably being marked by the Other – and therefore by the social – beyond identification, self-relation or intimacy. An analysis of the world must be concerned with the way in which that world so blindly-gloriously manages to take root in the subject, and with the way in which the subject arises as utterly ideological.

Conard's starting point is not the typical dichotomy 'comic vs. art' with its usual combativeness. He explores a wider field of word and image practices, sometimes clearly historically related (e.g. the cartoon and the comic strip), sometimes very different at first sight or deceptively similar (abstract comics and abstraction in the historical avant-gardes) or just stuck in a tiring conflict (comics and contemporary art); sometimes seeking each other's company (graphic novel and novel), sometimes taking leave of each other or leaving in high dudgeon. Respectable practices (e.g. bourgeois and modernist novels) are juxtaposed with minor genres (cartoons, part of the photo novel and of novelisation). Some stem from centuries-old **traditions**, others appeared more recently, which doesn't mean they came out of nowhere (photo publication, film). Conard not only involves a wide field of artistic work, but also a variety of everyday word and image practices: productions of the creative and knowledge industry such as encyclopaedias, catalogues, children's books, cookbooks, manuals, advertisements, explanatory publications such as *Van boom tot schip. De bouw van een houten vissersvaartuig te Oostende in woord en beeld* [*From tree to ship. The construction of a wooden fishing vessel in Ostend in words and pictures*]. Conard explores how they are and can be linked more intensely than one suspects in different ways of making and reading. Such an approach, with its impure understanding of the medium, is of course only possible from a post-structuralist-inspired position of contemporary art.

In the post-medium age or the post-medium condition, according to Rosalind Krauss, we have, along various artistic and theoretical lines, arrived at an understanding of 'medium' that is indebted to, but also informed by and subtly critical of Clement Greenberg's notion of medium specificity. (Krauss 1999) An influential tendency in Greenberg's work understands the self-reflection and self-referential nature of modernist art both in terms of its 'material'

and 'technical' medium and qualities and as graspable in a unified, totalising expression. For example, the self-referential essence of the modernist painting is its depthless and illusionless 'flatness' and monochromy – this is what painting *is* and therefore *must* and *will be*, and concrete paintings can testify to this. This view was problematised by, for example, Robert Rauschenberg's hybrid *combine paintings* (in the 1950s) and by the multiform, hybrid, and textual Concept Art. Krauss maintains and shifts the notion of 'medium specificity'. She paints a picture of our **post-medium condition** based on the work and theorisations of Donald Judd and Joseph Kosuth, Broodthaers' exemplary work, structuralist film thought concerning film's composite character (apparatus), the ambiguity in Walter Benjamin's philosophy of the collector, post-structuralist problematisations of identity and purity, and capitalism (not the artist) as the ultimate master of *détournement*, of appropriation and recontextualisation. Medium specificity is now understood as 'internal plurality', as different in itself: we cannot, therefore, directly, unambiguously and positively determine what a medium *is*. We are far from able to use it freely – a medium stores layers of historical conventions. We are always already up to our ears in the Other, who is the medium.

Krauss formulates it in Derridean fashion: for Broodthaers, *fiction*, in its suspensive, temporalising-spatialising quality, functions as a master medium and is paradigmatic for the postmodern conception of medium. Broodthaers' calling his *Musée* (1968-72) 'a fiction', his publications and his films are an outstanding example of how fiction disperses the illusion of autonomy and unity into a temporal and spatial effect around a void. Broodthaers' film *A voyage on the North Sea* (1974) holds our attention between the modalities of modernist painting, book and film, respectively. The flatness' contemplative, supposed illusionlessness, for example, resonates in the cinematographic surface. Cinema's luminosity carries the anti-illusionist canvas – an object on which light falls – to distant, shadowy places. The interrupted and irregular nature of the handling of pages charges each element with potential repeatability – book time is superimposed on cinematic time and vice versa. And fiction – introduced in this work through the combinatorial, juxtaposing media of book and film – is the very productive impossibility of unifying this **stratification**. 'What is at issue in the context of a medium, however, is not just this possibility of exploiting the fictional to unmask reality's lies, but of producing an analysis of fiction itself in relation to a specific structure of experience. (...) Broodthaers' recourse to fiction tells of the impossibility of this story in the enactment of a kind of layering that can itself stand for, or allegorize, the self-differential condition of mediums themselves.' (Krauss 1999) Exploring a medium is tantamount to intensifying its fictionality, which is an inherent difference-in-itself.

Apparatus

This division is, of course, that of the subject, in the sense that one is always already taken by the *historical stratification of the medium*, that one is always already excessively 'mediated'. At the same time, the medium is a way of dealing with this excess/lack of immediate experience; it organises *desire* in a specific way and thus produces a reality. The artist is someone who does not take for granted this ideological reality effect and promise of the medium's capacity, who *forces through* the medium's desire (*his* desire) to the dazzling point of its division, of its incapacity as an actual condition of possibility. In his introduction to the work of the photographer Dirk Braeckman, the philosopher Frank Vande Veire calls the medium an historically layered **apparatus of desire**: 'The medium the artist lays hands on has its history, or rather its histories, which are inevitably always "illness histories". (...) What's more, a medium is never pure, contrary to what Greenberg stated. Painting and photography, for instance, are not just completely different mediums, each with their own history and internal logic. They are fundamentally contaminated by each other. (...) In that sense, no medium is ever just itself. It is an overdetermined apparatus of desire. Thus, the "transcendental" photographer would be the one who "knows" this, who "knows" that his own desire is entangled in the historically grown desire of an always impure apparatus, who "knows" that one cannot get out of this – that it is rather a matter of getting *into* it with a certain lucidity so as to detect the desire of the apparatus. Only within this "objective" desire, which is perforce *his*, the photographer can try and occupy a position of his own.' (Vande Veire 1999)

The 'apparatus' is an expanded conception of medium. As suggested above, it is not strictly artistic, but also social. It conceptualises how a specific Other, in its minimal conception as a network of relations between heterogeneous elements, precedes us and has immersed us, makes us rise as desiring subjects, and produces ideological effects. The heart of an apparatus is riddled with an unconscious **phantasma** circling an unbearable excess, which forms the mise-en-scène of desire in, for example, a walk along the beach, a political climate, or a walk along the beach in a certain political climate. An apparatus plots the coordinates within which one does not know but *act* – for example, in a political meeting in a house on the sea front. Or in a video installation, as the critical content of a work does not follow automatically from what the apparatus promises. Important theorisations include Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: The Will to Knowledge* (1976), Gilles Deleuze's *What is a dispositive?* (1988) and Giorgio Agamben's *What is an apparatus?* (2006). Filmmakers of *structuralist film* (Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton) and *materialist film* (Peter Gidal) analysed the film medium as a complex composition, forming a figure for each medium's *coagulated* character.

The apparatus was the subject of extensive reflection by ideology-critical, psychoanalytically inspired film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Teresa de Lauretis, and it was a central concept in a couple of anthologies on critical film theory, such as *The Cinematic Apparatus* (1980) and *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology - A Film Theory Reader* (1986). These last sentences, which would take the form of a footnote in an academic text, are a sign of the stuck desire of an essayist who wants none of the hierarchical secondary elements, who wants to weave even the most informative elements into the text and charge them with a surplus of meaning, who dreams of endlessly resonating, assembled sentences and paragraphs.

There is a great awareness in Conard's work of how specific word and image arrangements evoke certain apparatuses and therefore certain ways of experiencing, reading, and looking. *In* the subjective making and in the reading/looking, one tracks down how the artistic artefact (e.g. a page) is always already traversed by different apparatuses. Through repetitions, variations or sudden breaks a line can be explored; through often subtle interventions a nearly solidified modality can topple into many others. In every modality a reflective **restlessness** is tossing and turning. In its inquiring agitation, desire probes the impurity at the heart of the Law and gives weight to the historical. To analyse the world is to trace its historical stratification, which is here: to be haunted. In every detail, the whole world is possibly at stake, since the universal is formed from and permanently ironised and haunted by the negativity of the particular. (Žižek 1994)

Montages

In publications such as *Souvenirs d'échecs, Lama China, Lamaree – een beeldfabel* and *Eclipticon*, the 'comic strip image' as a shape, with its panels and boxes, regular grids, asymmetries and occasional blank frame edges, is appropriated and displaced. The gutters of the comic strip are commonly supposed to behave like small children and only make themselves heard to a limited extent, to barely even speak and, like good employees, be at the service of the production line, of linearity and of the coherence of meaning. In Conard's *détournement*, the different elements ('panels') cannot be connected in an obvious way: the **heterogeneity** of the elements requires imaginative labour, intellectual effort and the affirmation of a residue that can be put into play over and over again. The gutters have become white spaces that, as punctual figures of the negativity, of the difference-in-itself of the image, flood the visible and drench it in its own polymorphic shadows. The interpretative violence stopping the gaps and making them invisible is complicated and nourished by a carefree imagination that, in common comics, had to know its place again and again. The operation of meaning should not be understood here as (forced) linearity, nor as

(metaphysical) simultaneity, but rather as a multidirectional imagining and re-imagining of relations between the elements. The operation extends more or less over the page and the spread and – often unexpectedly – throughout the publication: a general kind of reach. The work is organised through varying rhythms, relative units ('paragraphs', sections, chapters), temporary conglomerates, groupings and series. Meanings coagulate and disperse. Different montages focus on different aspects of images and text.

So, while the work is suspended between suggestion and opacity in terms of organisation, there is essentially no indication of an absolute starting or ending point in terms of the reading. The indicated strength of the forward- and backward-pointing forces differs in these publications by Conard, but their impulse was inevitably or fully admitted by the author. Throughout the publication, the elements are in a metonymic relationship of proximity and juxtaposition: they do not fully cancel each other out, they do not work together in the service of an effect of totality but are autonomously and therefore **discordantly** related to one another. The appropriated conventional comic structure becomes a play of surfaces that, unruly as they are, always also refer to themselves – to the meanings sedimented in their specific 'material' production. Of course, a linear tunnel reading is also *always already* exposed to what happens in the corners of the eye and the phantasmatic margins of heated children and serious, relaxing adults. In Conard's work, conventional arrangements, connections, motifs and images are deployed as a pleasant diversion that is immediately complicated, used as a commented quotation – as that which is inevitably part of the historical material but does not pass without being displaced and contemplated.

'Souvenirs d'échecs. Vogelvrij naar Stefan Zweigs *Schaaknovelle*' ['Chess/failure memories. Stefan Zweig's *Chess Novel* outlawed'] opens with an incatenation of arrangements and apparatuses of comics, film(strips), and chess. The respective experiences cannot be isolated: they do not exist on their own but echo each other. Each apparatus refers to other apparatuses and to their different histories, image contexts, theorisations, breaks and controversies, places and communities, preferences for other drinks and snacks, and so on. A game (for instance a game of chess, *jeu d'échecs*) is always co-ordinated by a certain order; in the aesthetic game – making and looking/reading – each movement marks a failure (*échec*) of a definitive meaning and order. More precisely: **the aesthetic** shows how, in life, the orders themselves are always already playing, and how they equally intensify our being affected by them. In 'Souvenirs d'échecs' the apparatuses take this game to the stage. An image of a flying condor glides across the work: it takes on associations of supposedly innocent biological classification, (national and nationalistic) power and (political and military) strategy, and it points back more wryly than ever on the last page, portrayed on a larger scale and associated with a beach

resort and men who seem to be sealing a deal over a drink. The main thing – both the worst and the most important – that the social game produces are its failures.

Rephotographing the many encyclopaedia illustrations in low resolution and in black and white in *Lama China* (2015) establishes a resonance between images whose experience and understanding historically refer to the eighteenth-century modality of classification, to the 'space of identities and differences'. (Foucault 2006) On the first image page, the choice and arrangement of the images especially (and to a lesser extent the text, which plays along and against) suggest a personal photo album. The universality and rational knowledge of the encyclopaedia is assembled with an apparatus of **subjectivity**, of the mutual involvement of memory and imagination, of an intimacy that is not directly communicable. Throughout the book, the organisation of image and text is a staging of – in addition to the 'encyclopaedia' – the postcard, the scientific study, the popular comic strip, the black of cinema and the slide show, and the conceptual photo publication with its conventional and casually applied strategies of isolation, ample white-spaced framing, enlargement, cutting up, obfuscation of all kinds, and so on. In 1964 – more or less simultaneously with the publication of *De Standaard Encyclopedie* on which *Lama China* drew – Roland Barthes wrote the text 'Image, raison, déraison' for the publication of a selection of plates from Diderot & d'Alembert's famous volumes. (Barthes 1964) Translated by Conard, 'The plates of the *Encyclopédie*' forms a theoretical supplement in *Lama China*. Barthes' text has been liberated from its images here, 'made independent', according to Conard, and remobilised. A so-called informative print, 'however, immediately evokes in us all sorts of "memories of the imagination" (...). This singular vibration is above all a surprise. The encyclopaedic image is most certainly a clear image, but questions arise in a deeper region of ourselves, beyond the intellect, or at least at its limits, and these questions overwhelm us.' (Barthes 1964, Conard 2015) The hysterisation – 'Who am I to the other? Am I really who the other says I am?' – keeps questioning the universal order. Out of the strange intimacy of the phantasma surrounding the image, the critique of ideology pops up; immanent too, as the critic is subjectively situated in what he's questioning. Conard's work is very much driven by this critical impulse, which is not cold or systematic, and does not start and finish with presupposed knowledge, but dares to be guided by a massive and swarming obsession that is never entirely his own. For this unfathomable dimension of the social, the ultimate responsibility, i.e. the responsibility claiming truthfulness, can only be taken in the form of a poetic game.

The frames and the tightly to relatively disciplined style provide popular comics and the bulk of *graphic novels* with a structured, repetitive look. They are governed by sustained

metaphors and an outspoken elimination of differences in repeated image and text contexts. *Lamaree – een beeldfabel* (2016) largely consists of ornaments and frames, differently punctuated surfaces such as stains and liquids, and organic, graphic, and ultimately photographic structures. Edited into this, two scattered halves of an image from the film *Snow White* become a surface, suggesting a kind of Disney substratum. The images are placed side by side and on top of each other – linked up. That which has to remain – in vain – a framework elsewhere, an 'outside' or literally a margin, is a full-on 'inside' here. In the respective elements, a play of light and shade, as if the exposure time has changed, shades of opacity, an aspect of reproduction (photocopy, photography). Opening and end pages are almost identical, enclosing this book of frequently repeated and displaced elements. Whereas that which, in comics and graphic novels, necessarily repeats itself is rather limitedly scattered, in this doubling mirror palace the metaphor is pushed to its limit: that which repeats itself has to be **metonymically** delivered and becomes impure and ambiguous. That which repeats itself both suggests minimal linearity and causality, a minimally stable meaning, and undermines itself, its singularity and origin. The repetition is a way of averting an inherent repetition-in-itself, is both crisis and dealing-with. (Derrida) 'Each pleasure covers an abject failure', 'The means to a meticulous quarantine were lacking', 'But still': sparingly plotted sentences from spoken, journalistic, theoretical... contexts start to function poetically-metaphorically and continue to be thwarted by a metonymic excess that is hard to place. Poetics shares its edifying, didactic character with fables, albeit in a far from unambiguous way. We are reminded of what the young Maurice Blanchot writes about Jorge Luis Borges, namely, that in modern literature the *same* space becomes infinite, that the writer surrenders to the *erreur* (wandering, error) of language, that this impossibility of starting or stopping condemns him to the prison of an infinite expanse, and that through this incessantness of the imaginary and of memory – structurally part of ideology – Kafka's character K. never reaches the Castle but, like all of us, continues to roam the unreal of the real. (Blanchot 2003) At the heart of this visual fable the unimaginable is raging, a dizzying swirl is unfolding – the fabulous.

Eclipticon (2017) uses a number of subtitles: '*restjesroman, roman-photocopie, photographic novel, romanzo stronzo, schmerzroman, fotonovelarte*'. The defining character of the 'subtitle' is scattered in compositions, puns, neologisms – hybrids. The book's 'credits' are contextually (including linguistically) scattered in a list of '*bronnen, bibliografie, iconography, personaggi, kunstbilder, palabras*'. It hones the imagination of the relationship between a concretely and creatively functioning element in the work and its impersonal inclusion in a general collection to draw from. The 'sources' themselves are related to each other without just merging into one another with no residue: to explore the elementary

language units (*palabras*) as art images, to represent the theoretical mass of the bibliography as troops of theoretical figures (*personaggi*), including their solidarity and dissidence, or as the description and interpretation of images that have not yet divulged their last secrets. Playing with the genres and conventions of the apparent margins, in which each definition is tilting, has a multiply eclipsing effect throughout this whole, *figurative* book.

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