

## Non-forming post-comics

### About the WREKs of Olivier Deprez

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#### Another story: in search of a-specificity

Olivier Deprez is well-known for his woodcut graphic novels. He is also one of the primary artists to be associated with the idea of a post-comics after, but especially *beyond* comics - in the case of the Francophone Belgian artist beyond *bande dessinée*. As we will see his woodcut stories take considerable distance from comics and this text seeks to explore the post-comics notion through the looking-glass of his works. Woodcut graphic novels foreground the **materiality** of the graphic novel because they leave the production process so visible in the book. They are not at all what Bolter and Grusin have termed 'immediate' indicating media in which traces of the mediation process are almost entirely absent, such as photography which provides the impression of allowing direct access to reality (Bolter and Grusin 2000:21). Sometimes, the elaborate creation process of the woodcut graphic novels is also figuratively thematized. In *Après la mort, après la vie* Deprez and his collaborator Adolpho Avril are shown at work at the woodcut printing press foregrounding the mediation process and undermining the boundary between the level of the story and the real-world level of storytelling the latter practice a concept captured in the term metalepsis. (fig. 1) This meta-medial characteristic marks Olivier Deprez's poetics and post-comics in general, but it is not exclusive to the latter form. Certainly in Belgium, the graphic novel medium, which is distinct from post-comics as we will see below, is marked by meta-medial awareness. (fig. 2)

The metaleptic play with authorial reality provides an opening to another important aspect of Deprez's poetics: **abstraction**. As the 'author' himself confirms, his abstraction leads to a fundamental form of textual openness, epitomized in *BlackBookBlack* (2008), a book with black pages created with the actor Miles O'Shea. This can be connected to Roland Barthes's idea of the *texte scriptible* which sees the published text as a form to be written in an *emancipatory* readerly process. This readerly authority appears to contradict the idea of Deprez's work and post-comics in particular as an intellectual production that employs an aesthetic of difficulty as comics scholar Bart Beaty puts it in *Unpopular Culture* (2007). The abstract openness of Deprez's texts is an interesting challenge of abstraction's connection with difficulty in general. Post-comics and abstract comics, the latter one of the rising contemporary comics genres, are strongly connected, as the experimental, sometimes theory-driven aspect of post-comics in many cases implies a highly abstract approach in which narrativity is thoroughly questioned. Deprez's abstraction often remains figurative, as in his much-appreciated Kafka adaptation *Le Château d'après Kafka* (2003) which successfully uses the combination of the abstraction-inviting woodcut technique and figuration to

evoke the bureaucratically surreal atmosphere of Kafka's unfinished masterpiece. As part of his intentions to thematize the woodcut process itself in his books, Deprez's abstraction is achieved by a foregrounding of the rough specificity of the woodcut itself, also in the background flourishes: scratches, lines, dots. In their lesser figurative signification these marks show very directly how the gauge cuts out the material from the woodblock while at the same time leaving a grand opening for the imagination of the reader. Are the rounder cuts through which the protagonist K. wanders a snow flurry for example? (fig. 3) They certainly pair reference to the material process of woodcutting with the fantasy-stimulation of abstraction in a productive manner.

*Le Château* underlines the affinity of Deprez's poetics with literature, but his intermedial interests, shared by many of the other makers featured in this volume, continue in a more direct manner in a number of smaller projects. These different ventures pair the woodcut graphic novel with cinema, with sound and, of course, with art as Deprez himself is in fact as much an artist as a comics maker. In his *cinématogravures*, woodcuts are animated; his *noise gravures*, a concept developed in concert with Adolpho Avril, in turn feature engravings after the experimental concept of noise music. Deprez's reference to comics and animation characters, for example Wile E. Coyote and Ernie Bushmiller's Nancy (fig. 4 & 5), is particularly interesting from the perspective of post-comics's medial - and creative in this case - ties to comics. Post-comics indeed can be seen as a form related to comics in a delayed post-establishment dynamic whose existence relies to a significant extent on the institutionalizing effects of the graphic novel. The comics form, historically lowly institutionalized, was impacted by the graphic novel's acknowledgement and establishment as a medium to the point that a **post-institutional** phase could develop. Following the questioning of medial identity typical of this phase as explained by André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion in *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (2015), Deprez's intermedial view of comics's future (and perhaps also that of the graphic novel) appears almost **a-specific** and this holds true for the experimental, intermedial 'post-comics' development in general. In fact, Deprez himself already talked of having looked for a 'non-form' at the time of *Le Château*'s publication. As a corollary post-comics's explorative mode raises the question 'what are the creative advantages and disadvantages of being first and foremost "something else" rather than a specific medium?' (fig. 6)

### **From media-defiance to beyond**

The majority of Deprez's work pairs post-comics explorative intermedial experiment with a more generic dimension in which, according to his focus on the abstract also, novelistic narrativity loses any and all self-evidence. The creator's work indeed does not seem to belong to existing narrative media, certainly its comics-connections are unclear with only the very ancient progenitors of the medium, such as fellow

woodcut artists Frans Masereel (1889-1972), relevant to its medial family tree. Established comics series and makers - Hergé, Franquin, Vandersteen - are not even a pole of contrast for Deprez as they usually are for graphic novels. This difference from comics relies in large part on the woodcut technique which is uncommon to usually drawn word-image stories. The engraved and printed method brings plenty of **media-defying** consequences. One example depends on the frequent negativity of Deprez's woodcuts which achieves a sublimely indirect rendering of images on the page. This radically questions the media-specific process of graphic enunciation by which the lines drawn in comics and graphic novels refer to the hand that made them. (Marion 1993) The diminishing of the difference between the word, a highly codified practice, and the image, less systematized, in the process of engraving also influences the particularity of storytelling in Deprez's publications. Following these remarks, Deprez's graphic work is likely best described as a woodcut novel, the category to which Masereel's work belongs - note that Deprez himself also uses this term and does not speak of the graphic novel. Of course, this raises the question of the applicability of the notion of *post-comics* as implying, after all, a comics genealogy to Deprez and his work, although arguably nothing is more post-comics than this point of inquiry... Post-comics's artistic integration of comics specificities does fit Deprez's artistic orientation and the term's general lack of a clear medial identity leaves room for the woodcut novelist's experiments with sequential word-image narration.

Deprez's striking association with theory and research, in the form of personal and institutional relationships, but also content-wise, confirms the academic dimension of post-comics, including ties to art schools. His work, inspired by thinkers such as Barthes, Mitchell, Wittgenstein (amongst others), distinguishes itself in its meta-medial awareness as indicated, and is driven by the need to develop new forms of expression. In Flanders, post-comics's academic quality speaks from its strong connection to the practice-based PhD in the Arts, as the editorial constellation of this volume and its table of contents testifies to. In Francophone Belgium, the importance of the **reflection- and theory-oriented** publishing house Frémok to post-comics underlines this characteristic. As Deprez's strong connection to and collaboration with outsider artists and psychiatric patients in particular indicates, post-comics is also open to the, perhaps opposite, margin. His collaboration with artists in the sphere of the Grand Atelier La 'S', such as Adolpho Avril, co-inventor of the *noise gravure*, re-imagines the graphic novel as a venue for artistic experiment and opens it to the social concerns which it had largely left behind in its attempts to differentiate from the popular comics form. This interdisciplinarity, also evident in the research-interests discussed, complements the intermedial dimension of post-comics's identity-questioning.

As a co-founder of the alternative graphic novel publisher Frémok, Deprez's association with narrative word-image post-comics in fact extends beyond his role as a woodcut creator, to the editorial level.

Frémok (or FRMK), publishes all of Deprez's work and many more comics experimental books including Frédéric Coché's *L'Homme armée* (2019) consisting of engravings and paintings. Post-comics is a category that is particularly relevant in the French-speaking part of Belgium, where it responds to a comics tradition that can be more easily united with an artistic approach, than in Flanders where the graphic novel's need to distinguish from a popular comics tradition works through in considerable fashion. The **artistic** orientation of comics's Beyond is reflected in Deprez's substantial expositional history with *The Fair* - Olivier Deprez & Miles O'Shea at the Centre de la Gravure et de l'Image Imprimée (La Louvière, 2014) - and more recently *Serial Graveurs* - Frans Masereel & Olivier Deprez at the Musée du Dessin et de l'Estampe Originale (Gravelines, 2018) - and *WREK not work* at the Bibliotheca Wittockiana (Brussels, 2019-2020) as the most resonant examples. In the catalogue of the latter exposition Deprez recycles and mixes a whole array of semi-iconic images taken from a variety of films as 'moving images' in order to question the ideas of intellectual property and right of use as they result from the conceptions of labor that determine much of our experience. Here also (meta-)reflective, metaleptic, intermedial dynamics are present, but the emphasis is put more than ever on the way in which the diversity of the images generates connection, likely in ('scriptible') collaboration with the reader who is invited to construct relations between these images (between panels, between colors etc.). This in a way that celebrates the inherently collaborative dimension of xylography in which the wood, in the case of Olivier Deprez usually plywood, is always a material element, often of resistance, the creator 'works with'.

### **Wre(c)king the work**

Deprez's work also accompanies other artists's creations in an illustrative mode and the 'antist', as he used to call himself, also paints as in his first graphic narrative *Lenin Kino* (2009). Most recently, in a book titled *WREK les indigènes de l'abstraction* that is still to be published (with Frémok in 2020), Deprez has drawn near yet another form.<sup>1</sup> In fact he has invented the *essay gravé* or engraved essay (one notes that *Lenin Kino* already was promoted as a 'graphic meditation') that alternates the opening towards readerly imagination of the abstract and associative visual composition of WREK with the practice of authorial citation, both visual and, especially, verbal. Even when the quotes, by thinkers and writers such as W.J.T. Mitchell and Raymond Queneau and artists such as Jack King, Brueghel the elder and Ingmar Bergman, are literally reproduced incompletely or in disarray, leaving gaps for the input of the reader, the practice of citing infuses the work with a steering dynamic and authorial frame. The technique of **recyclage**, with its constant cyclical movement of materials, complements the physical effect of movement of the images and

words in the book, obtained in its almost filmic conception. It is the relation and sequence between these images created in the engagement with the book as an object and format, the turning of the pages, whereby the sequential and the compositional spatial page-internal signifying potential is almost never used that emphasizes their critical renouncement and is at the basis of the meaning(s) of WREK. (fig. 7) This filmic page-turning cycle, embodied in the transmedial Vertovian tripod camera dance that closes the book and interestingly does use the page-internal narrating prowess of comics, foregrounds the role of the reader bringing us back to the book's title and its conceptualization as a reflection on the origins of abstraction as we have also identified them in relation to *Après la mort, après la vie*. WREK's recyclage is of course also a comment on the concept of origins in the sense of originality and on the idea itself of the work, the oeuvre - where does it begin, where does it end, when is it an actual work, when is it a thoughtful wreck? Post-comics, as far as it is meta-reflexive and research-oriented, is particularly *open* to such forms as the essay, to a more argumentative and contemplative communication that questions the primacy of narrative in the comics medium. Indeed, examples such as WREK show how post-comics probe the boundaries of the comics form, sometimes moving radically beyond the idea of a genealogical tie to comics.

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<sup>1</sup> Wrek is also a collective that creates multimedia installations and exists as a fanzine by Deprez, Miles O'Shea and Marine

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