Reading Comics with Aby Warburg: Collaging Memories

Abstract

This chapter takes the pioneering visual epistemology of the art historian Aby Warburg as the starting point for a guide to reading comics. It transposes Warburg’s montage of images in the incomplete *Mnemosyne Atlas* to comics along two axes: it treats comics pages as collages and examines the symbolic and emotional charge of comics images. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* acquires special relevance through reading comics as collages of words, images, panels and of different media or imitations thereof. Combining the ideas propelling the *Mnemosyne Atlas* with the concept of media memories, or the ways in which media remember and reference each other, this chapter reads two French-language comics (Hugo Pratt’s *Les Celtiques* and Manu Larcenet’s *Le Combat ordinaire*), to show how these ideas can be applied to a spectrum of comics ranging from genre fiction to personal stories.

Keywords

Aby Warburg, Hugo Pratt, Manu Larcenet, memory, collage, montage
The German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) can be credited with introducing a new, modern method of visual analysis that moved beyond artistic canons to understand human expression across diverse image-making activities. He founded the Warburg Institute in Hamburg, which moved to London in 1933 with the rise of the National Socialism in Germany. Together with colleagues such as Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, Warburg honed a new methodology for analysing images, first called iconography and later expanded into iconology: as elaborated by Panofsky, iconography is the description of images based on their content and their context, whereas iconology adds an additional level of meaning by focusing on the symbolism activated by the artwork (Panofsky 2019). This chapter focuses on the related but more intuitive methodology that Warburg honed through his incomplete Bilderatlas Mnemosyne [Mnemosyne Picture Atlas]: “[w]hereas iconology encourages detailed paraphrase, Mnemosyne embraces the concision, ambiguity, and instability of metaphoric expression” (Johnson 2012, p. xi). Warburg’s project shares similarities with Walter Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk [Arcades Project], for which the method was “literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show” (Benjamin quoted in Johnson 2012, p. 18). Based on juxtapositions and associations, this methodology is productive for the often sequential and frequently syncopated art of comics. Building on the collage-like aspects of comics and the emotional expressivity of images, this chapter elaborates on how Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, composed of montaged images with shared tropes, paves possibilities for reading comics.

The Bilderatlas Mnemosyne

Warburg worked on the Mnemosyne Atlas from 1927 until his sudden death from heart failure in 1929. At the time of his death, the Atlas comprised of 63 plates, measuring around 200 x 150 cm (with notes permitting the reconstruction of up to 79 plates).¹ To fulfill his aim of mapping the transfer of images and the recurrence of similar themes across centuries of European and global visual culture, spanning antiquity to the early decades of the twentieth century, Warburg would have needed an indefinite number of plates. Themes covered by the existing plates include cosmologies, pathos, figures such as the Muses, the nymph and Fortuna.²

Georges Didi-Huberman considers the Mnemosyne Atlas as a reflection of contemporaneous methods in the humanities, especially those established by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, founders of the Annales School, which propelled the study of mentalities (psychology of an epoch) and a transdisciplinary, de-centered approach to history and historiography (Didi-Huberman 2011). Matthew Rampley draws a similar connection between Walter Benjamin, Warburg and contemporaneous developments in psychoanalysis: both Benjamin and Warburg
sought to explore collective memory’s "proximity to the process of repetition-compulsion outlined by Freud" (1999, p.112). To fulfill this aim of reconstructing connections and bridging individual and collective experience, both turned to montage (Didi-Huberman 2003b, p.191). The *Mnemosyne Atlas*, despite its vastness, offers some lessons that can be useful for reading comics. Two components in Warburg’s iconographical project seem especially pertinent: the emotional charge of images and the technique of montage or collage.

The evolutionary biologist Richard Semon’s concept of the *Engramm* had a strong influence on Aby Warburg’s cultural memory work: engrams are psychic imprints resulting from powerful shocks. They reflect Warburg’s interest in the transposition of intense emotional experiences, initially “stored as ‘mnemonic energy’,” engraved in collective consciousness and channeled into art (Assmann 2011, p. 198, 358). Warburg sought “to explore the specifically visual forms of the engram,” which he called dynamograms (Rampley 1999, p.104). Dynamograms underpin Warburg’s cultural history project of tracing visual memories and their transformations across diverse forms of cultural production, from popular, everyday images to paintings and sculptures. They capture the expressive affordances of images and their ability to move their viewers. Warburg’s cultural history was a form of psychohistory, based on emotions and their expression, seeking to construct a historical archive of intensities [*archive historique des intensités*] (Didi-Huberman 2001). Dynamograms precede the *Pathosformel* and can be seen as the graphic containers of those formulae, as in the case of ornamental lines indicating movement (Schankweiler and Wüschner 2019, p. 110).

*Pathosformel* capture the visualization of emotions in images: “models of sense” or the emotive gestures embedded in image (Didi-Huberman 2003b p. 626), “[p]athos formulae are the visible symptoms—corporeal, gestural, presented, figured—of a psychic time irreducible to a simple thread of rhetorical, sentimental or individual turns” (p. 622). The *Pathosformel* are situated at the crossroads where visual heritage—accepted means of visualizing and transmitting emotions—and individual artistic style meet. These “formulas” have a broad scope; they can be as specific as the loaded expression or pose of a specific character or they can be present across groups of images that speak, for instance, of a specific era or period style as in the case of the hyperexpressive, corpulent bodies of baroque art. Anchored in the figurative, the *Pathosformel* are an invitation to consider how images convey emotions, following certain conventions and, in a manifestation of individual style, breaking away from others. They lie at the heart of the *Mnesmosyne* project, “the images of which are intended, most immediately, to present nothing but a traceable inventory of pre-coined expressions, which demanded that the individual artist either ignore or absorb this mass of inherited impressions surging forward in this dual manner” (Warburg and Rampley 2009, p. 280). The emotionality of comics images is encoded through the styles and forms of their stories, which are in turn informed by a history of image making. Consequently, *Pathosformel* in comics are
often tempered with a certain distance in keeping with the exaggeration and irony of caricature that pervades most comics drawing.

Writing on Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Johnson points out that “the mediation of memory, be it personal or cultural, still functions metaphorically” (Johnson 2012, p. 4). Correspondingly, the many monsters encountered in comics—Frankenstein’s creatures, or the Swamp Thing, which give form to collective anxieties (rapid technological and scientific progress, human encroachment on and alienation from the natural world)—function as mnemonic metaphors, laden with emotional and historical import.

**Reading Comics as Collage**

Art and memory have a filial, affective relationship: Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was the mother of the nine Muses. Memories—of the maker, of the reader and the viewer, of overlapping contexts—breathe life into the arts. Elaborating on scholarship on memory and Warburg, Karin Kukkonen (2008) has argued for the importance of context knowledge in comics such as Bill Willingham et al.’s *Fables*, which rework popular fairy tales. Taking inspiration from the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, it is possible to visualize the functioning of memory in popular culture as a collage of images and, by extension, contexts. As a form and practice the collage is echoed by comics pages, with their orchestration of diverse verbal-visual elements and images, and by images that mix media (see also Ahmed 2016a, pp. 53–74; Dittmer 2010, pp. 228-233). In both situations, the collage reflects the imbrication—and intervention—of memories and associations within the comics story.

“Every medium,” writes Aleida Assmann, “opens up its own access to cultural memory” (2011, p. 11). Comics offer access to an essentially visual cultural memory comprising of both still and moving pictures, experimental narrative temporalities and fantastic tropes, that is transposed into a distinctive comics idiom. This idiom is a child of modernity, a “sponge” of iconic images but also techniques, such as sequence, ellipses and the materialities of production and reproduction.

Emphasizing the anarchic, fragmentary nature of early comics—a fragmentation generated by seriality as well as panels—Jared Gardner suggests that comics “was dedicated to diagramming the serial complexities of modern life and fixing the fragments of modernity on the page” (2012, p. 7). In an earlier piece, Gardner also links the interaction of memories to create a visual archive in comics:

> The comics form is forever troubled by that which cannot be reconciled, synthesized, unified, contained within the frame [...]. The excess data—the remains of the everyday—is
always left behind (even as the narrative progresses forward in time), a visual archive for the reader’s necessary work of rereading, resorting and reframing (2006, pp. 801-802).

The collage form of comics—the arrangement of panels on a page, the juxtaposition of words and images within panels and on pages—coexists with different levels of memory, of associations channeled by drawing styles but also representations and compositions. Collage, established in aesthetic discourse through modern art, “is not just a loss of order—it shatters order” (Assmann 2011, pp. 270-271). However, collage also goes further since “[p]resenting history as montage involved ‘telescoping the past via the present,’ whereby the linear notion of history was replaced by the idea of the dialectical image” (Rampley 1999, p. 102). The image is caught in a diachronic dialogue, looking towards the past and the future, just like Benjamin’s Angel of History.

Collaging can be seen as the practice structuring both the Mnemosyne Atlas and comics. It is also the act performed by the comics reader in piecing together different elements, but this performance does not necessarily result in closure. The connections in comics are more constructed and less reader-dependent and intuitive but they remain a way of communicating and generating knowledge through images while channeling cultural memory. Needless to say, the worlds of comics are vast: we encounter dream worlds, action-packed sequences, slapstick comedy and other pillars of “light” entertainment. These elements co-exist with more existential concerns—mortality, solitude, human relationships—that are treated with different degrees of intensity in the two comics discussed below.

Thierry Smolderen has proposed the concept of polygraphy to account for the diverse drawing styles and techniques coexisting in comics (see, for instance, 2014 pp. 53-58). This can be extended to the presence of different media—from novels and films to popular entertainment and folk rituals such as the carnival—that influence and inform comics images and stories through direct references but also indirectly, through structural, generic similarities. Comics collage memories of different kinds of media. These memories travel through evocations of other media, styles and images and often activate different degrees of narrative weight and emotional power. The concept of media memories offers a means of expanding on the collage-like aspects inherent in comics. Approaching Warburg’s Mnemosyne project through media memories enables mapping the vast network of visual influences, the meaning-making processes connected to those images and the related emotional charge layering comics.

I will trace the media memories conveying and entangling personal and collective memories in two very different comics: Hugo Pratt’s Les Celtiques [Celtic Tales] and Manu Larcenet’s Le Combat ordinaire [Ordinary Victories]. These comics are separated by almost three decades of French-language comics production that reflect different degrees of interaction with the emergence and importation (from the English-language context) of the graphic novel, which
privileges experimental and self-contained stories (see Baetens and Frey 2014). They are particularly intriguing to discuss in tandem because of their respective proximity to genre fiction (Les Celtiques) and graphic memoir (Combat ordinaire). For examining them more closely, I propose a Warburgian comics reading hinged on two questions:

1. What kinds of connections are enforced through images? I focus on the connections with media that are activated by images and the genres they inhabit.

2. How do visual style and textual narration converge to generate and manage emotions?

In contrast to Warburg’s project, the starting point for the atlas of images I work with below is located within each comic rather than without. Further, through the notion of media memories, I attune this reading to allusions generated and references to other media. The mapping of cultural memory is consequently a mapping of both (popular) cultural memories and of the vista of memories that comics create for themselves and that are channeled primarily through images, style, characterization and storytelling. This is, of course, only one possible means of reading comics with Warburg. Other potential readings could focus more on style and specific Pathosformel or work with a bigger corpus and a database of images to draw connections with images within comics.

**Les Celtiques: Genre fiction and mythological dreaming**

Many of the short stories collected in the Casterman editions of Les Celtiques first appeared in the magazine, Pif Gadget in the early 1970s. A reformatting and rebranding of the periodical Vaillant (1945-1969), Pif Gadget (1969-1993) stood out from other comics magazines through rejecting the practice of serializing stories and offering instead as announced by its subtitle, “tout en récits complets” [all as complete stories]. One of the publication’s main attractions, Pratt’s Corto Maltese adventures, combine the media memories of genre fiction (adventure, romance, fantasy) with references to myth, literature and historical contexts. The stories collected in Les Celtiques unfold during the last two years of the First World War. Casterman published the Les Celtiques stories in a new series, “Les grands romans de la bande dessinée,” in 1980 and would continue to republish (occasionally in colors) at least four or all of the six stories.

The title of the third story in Les Celtiques “Concert en O Mineur pour Harpe et Nitroglycérine” [“Concert in O minor for Harp and Nitroglycerin”] reflects the short story's confluence, or even blending, of the individual and the collective, since nitroglycerine is used for heart medication as well as explosives. A confluence of music and chemistry, the title also reflects the combination of romance and adventure. In this story, Pratt’s iconic, solitary sailor, Corto Maltese, finds
himself in Ireland to avenge the death of his friend and fictional Sinn Féin leader, Pat Finnucan. The year is 1917, a year after the Easter Rising, with pro-British militias fighting Sinn Féin. Unsurprisingly, the narrative opens with an encounter between an armoured car of the militia and the Sinn Féin fighters, placing Corto in the centre of the conflict, while also leaving him detached and unharmed since Corto is the archetype of the eternal foreigner, mysterious and without ties. In “Concert” he helps Sinn Féin procure weapons, avenges his friend’s death and then goes his own, solitary way. This solitude is reinforced by interludes of silent panels portraying Corto, often only a shadow, in a deserted town or the windy shore (Pratt 2000, pp. 60, 71, 73). Corto, like many comics heroes, is an amalgam of media memories bringing together influences ranging from the adventurer, the noir hero and even something of the superhero owing to his ability to always transcend death and danger (see Eco 1972). Pat Finnucan’s widow, Sinn Féin militant and one of Corto’s many love interests (which change with each new story and setting), Moira (Banshee) O’Dannan, calls him, not without irony, a “superhomme” (Pratt 2000, p. 66).

Like most Corto Maltese stories (and the superhero genre), romance and adventure are combined in "Concert". In order to ensure reiteration and Corto’s trademark solitude, the romances are short-lived. This is also the case with Moira who has already seen the death of Pat Finnucan and their former friend O’Sullivan. This motif is resurrected in another story of Les Celtiques, discussed below where Corto is told that Pandora Groovesnore, a young heiress he encountered in his first adventure, The Ballad of the Salty Sea, is still in love with him and is often seen sitting on the dunes of Cape Cod “à regarder l’infini” [staring into infinity] (Pratt 2000, p. 104), a gesture that Corto repeats at the end of the same page and through several other stories, expressing his status as the eternal, solitary dreamer (fig. 1). The pose in profile, the easiest to draw, and most familiar to comics because it suggests movement, also expresses his mysteriousness: we only see one side of him. This final page of “Concert” exemplifies the use of Pathosformel in comics genre fiction and in the Corto Maltese stories in particular. Within the span of this one page, Moira and Corto are united and separated. While Corto’s face remains inscrutable, his body postures betray desire, dangerous and impossible for Corto, both within the storyworld and beyond it; besides Moira’s belief that she is cursed, having suffered the death of two husbands, Corto must remain without a family if he is to have all his exotic adventures and romances. The gulls reappearing in every tier of the page symbolize Corto’s connection with the uprootedness of the sea.
Fig. 1. Final page of the short story, “Concert en O mineur pour harpe et nitroglycérine,” Les Celtiques, p. 74
On the final page of “Concert,” the Celtic harp, a symbol of Irish nationalism and portrayed early in the story through a graffiti, reestablishes itself as a media memory (Pratt 2000, p. 60). Moira evokes the harp at the end of the story and traces its inspiration to the sound of the wind passing through the bones of a whale skeleton, which appears in the foreground of the same panel, hovering between reality and imagination (Pratt 2000, p. 74). In addition to symbolising Celtic folklore and Irish nationalism, the harp also incorporates allusions to death and becomes an instrument of mourning. This symbolism is reinforced by the Celtic crosses in the graveyards which serve as meeting places for Corto and Sinn Féin militants (Pratt 2000, pp. 60-61, 71, 73). Further, while appearing only as a graffiti, albeit detailed and glorifying (the handle is an angelic figure), the harp evokes and comments on its own mediated essence as well as the inescapable silence of the comic strip – it puts to test the limits of word and image.

The role of media memories is even more pronounced in the fourth story, “Songe d’un matin d’hiver” [Dream of a Winter Morning] which, as foreshadowed by its title, evokes Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and opens with Oberon, the king of fairies and the sprite Puck, who meet after three hundred years at Stonehenge, worried that the Germans might succeed in invading Britain, bringing their own supernatural creatures with them and eradicating the remains of Celtic Britain. The two turn to Morgan Le Fay (summoned from Avalon) and Merlin (summoned from the Forest of Brocéliande), figures from the legends of King Arthur, destined to rise and defend Britain whenever needed. The opening scene is emblematic of the overlapping spaces of dream, reality and legend in the Corto Maltese stories but also comics in general, facilitated through the freedom of drawing to traverse real and imaginary spaces through the immeasurable evocativeness of the page, easily transformed by a few marks into spaces of multiple dimensions and fluid borders. This easy transition between fact and fiction enables the incorporation of media memories of fantasy and some subversion. In Merlin’s words, Corto "songe les yeux ouverts et ceux qui songent les yeux ouverts sont dangereux parce qu’ils ne savent pas quand leur songe prend fin" [dreams with his eyes open and those who dream with their eyes open are dangerous because they do not know when their dream ends] (2000, p. 81).

The comic can be read as parallel to the large panels of the Mnemosyne Atlas: it collages Oberon, Puck, Morgan and Merlin, uniting them through their connections with Celtic folklore and British literature in the comics story. They wield a nostalgic, affective hold over the story. The four figures guide Corto through a characteristically unwitting victory saving Britain from an impending attack by the Germans. The story ends where it began: with Corto sleeping at Stonehenge without knowing how he got there. The circular, serial structure of “Songe d’un matin d’hiver” mirrors the workings of both memory and remediation (Sielke 2013, p. 48). Sabine Sielke ties this claim to sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s observation that “[m]emory constructs repetition, that is, redundancy, with continued openness towards what is current,
with continually renewed iterability” (2013, p. 47). In interweaving historical events and media memories of myth and literature, this Corto Maltese story, like many others, exemplifies the processes of iteration of different memories and their renewal through a new context. It thrives on the similarities and potential connections established through different worlds of fiction.

There is an inevitable distance in comics, an implicit remove that paints everything in the second degree, while incorporating, depending on the style, a trace of the persona of the artist, or *graphiateur* (a concept introduced by Philippe Marion, see Baetens 2001). This style is a negotiation between personal expression, training and constraints imposed by trends and the limitations of the medium. In the case of Corto, the lines forming and surrounding him are distinctly lyrical and carefree, often hurried, similar to the quick stream of action and Corto's elusive mysteriousness, which is compatible with the flatness of serial, recurrent characters. Son of a gypsy sorceress and a British sailor, Corto combines magic and adventure. Adventure and fantasy, and the escapism associated with these genres, form part of the media memories of comics.

While the visual style of Pratt and the markers of the comics adventure genre set the tone, the references to other literary and mythological characters situate the Corto Maltese stories in a contrasting space where the protagonist meets figures from “higher” literary works and legends on his terrain. Pratt’s trademark strokes and heavy chiaroscuro subject the media memories of literature and of popular entertainment—ranging from comics to the puppetry encountered in the fifth story—to the same laws of the comic, which partakes of only as much as is needed of each media memory to tell an action-packed story.

The fifth story, "Burlesque entre Zuydcoote et Bray-Dunes" [Burlesque between Zuydcoote and Bray-Dunes], unfolds in an Allied army camp in Northwest France. The story opens with a strange shadow play in which Merlin despairingly watches Viviane fall in love with an American captain. This captain has the form of a skinny cat whose first words are those of the wartime song, “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” to which the cat sardonically adds that he will forget Viviane as soon as the war is over and he returns home (Pratt 2000, p. 92) (fig. 2). The still charmed Viviane, however, longs to hear about the fairytale world of Hollywood and hopes to make a career there. The short play ends with a dejected Merlin giving in to his mirthless sleep. The bizarreness of the story is generated through the intermingling of the brash, modern American world and the medieval world of Arthurian legends and folktales, which also represent the preponderance of the Old Continent's history. Visually, the play recalls silhouette animation, especially Lotte Reiniger’s films, and references early Hollywood cinema; media memories of both are interlaced in the medium of comics. These memories are rendered porous through the imitation of silhouette animation in “Burlesque”, which interweaves the disparate worlds. Notably, the final panel in the image below places the reader-viewer right
behind Corto: we watch the play with him. Different diegetic levels are collaged in that one panel.

Reading the comics story is a collaged experience interweaving the diverse media contexts of Reiniger’s films, WWI songs and Arthurian legends. This co-existence is facilitated by the medium-specificity of comics, which includes limited claims on realism or diegetic logic. Memories of the First World War also form part of the atlas. Caïn Groovesnore, a young boy who played a central role in the first Corto Maltese adventure, *Una ballata del mare salato* [The Ballad of the Salty Sea] (published in the Italian comics magazine *Sgt. Kirk* in 1967), reappears as an officer. His falling into shock after shooting a lieutenant evokes shell shock, even though it is caused by a spell by Mélodie (Viviane in the show). Similarly, the puppets used for the silhouette play, evoke the mechanization of bodies through their spasmodic, unnatural
movements and, by extension, the disabilities engendered by the First World War, the first large-scale mechanized war.

Corto’s participation in the war itself remains limited: he is unfazed in "Songe d’un matin d’hiver," decorated with medals from both the Germans (a parting token from a captured German spy) and the British (for helping them), and briefly puts on the latter for the amusement of himself and the crow (the form adopted by Puck to communicate with Corto) who had been his companion throughout the story (Pratt 2000, p. 93). A silent panel with the laughing crow and the posing Corto captures three main associations well-grounded in comics: that of satire and caricature, the easy sliding between dream and reality, and the relative simplicity and flatness of the characters, which bestows an aura of popular myth.

“Burlesque” ends with the following remark by Corto to Captain Rothschild, who confirms that all will be well (the war will be won, Cain’s victim will survive and Cain himself will be released from coma, spell and service): "tu ne voudrais pas toujours parler de guerre, n’est-ce pas?... Et puis nous n’avons pas grand-chose à voir dans cette histoire" [You don’t want to always talk about war, no?... After all we don’t really have much to do with this story] (Pratt 2000, p. 118). Such often ironic, but always distanced, participation bestows on Corto the status of a mediator between history and popular entertainment, dialoguing with, and reworking, established images in the idioms of comics and popular literature. The hasty succession of events, especially towards the end of the stories, is propelled by the short story format but is recurrent in most serial publications.

Although it is not the representation of history, but the representation of personal memories that occupies most contemporary graphic novels, Corto, despite his detachment, personalises history for his readers and even catalyses it through his charisma and distance. He personifies the limits of individualisation in serialised fiction as already suggested by Umberto Eco’s analysis of the superhero: the mysteriousness that shrouds most of his personality and his life is both a layer of coolness and an obstruction for the reader to be fully invested in his stories (we know that everything will be more or less all right in the end) (Eco 1972). Corto mediates the memories of the popular fiction hero and superhero while remaining a singular character with his distinctive story molded by Pratt’s trademark style.

Pratt’s lines, materialize and adapt the mnemonic energia of both the First World War and Celtic folklore. The rapprochement between the two is rendered possible by the playful essence of comics themselves, which can afford to unite or collage disparate worlds, liberally and capriciously. This remains a recurrent characteristic and media memory of comics that can traced back to its connections to caricature. Each page can function as a collage of historical events with mythical figures and media such as theatre and animation. Viewing the comic from
such a meta-perspective unveils the potential atlas of images and memories propelling the comics narrative.

**Le Combat ordinaire: Drawn photographs, anxiety and ordinariness**

Appearing more than thirty years after *Les Celtiques*, the four volumes of Manu Larcenet's *Le Combat ordinaire* [*Ordinary Victories*] were published from 2003 to 2008. In complete contrast to the charismatic Corto, Larcenet's protagonist, Marco, is puerile, blundering and a few pills away from an anxiety attack. His story is likewise understated: not so much an adventure through exotic places but a constant struggle to deal with issues most adult readers will easily recognize (self-doubt, death, parenthood). Larcenet's drawing styles and narrative techniques, and Marco’s characterisation are indicative of a new way of manipulating media memories—and ultimately a new set of media memories—associated with comics as they move away from the realm of genre fiction, often for young readers, to graphic novels for adults (in practice such distinction between readerships is increasingly less binary, given the increasing popularity of graphic novels for children and young adults and crossover fiction). As with *Les Celtiques*, the media memories involved bridge comics with the higher arts. While in *Les Celtiques* such media memories are related to literature, in *Combat ordinaire*, these memories are essentially those of image-making.

Larcenet’s *Combat ordinaire* exemplifies the personal, confessional comics story that is simultaneously moving and humorous, while remaining embedded in a context in which making and holding on to images, and thus indulging in a storytelling process serving to preserve and convey memories, remains central. *Combat ordinaire* juxtaposes the personal issues and the anxieties of the protagonist, Marco, a photographer, with collective memory (the Algerian War, deindustrialised France). It focuses on the daily business of living, telling and remembering. This ordinariness is reinforced by the comic’s obsession with everyday moments and objects. Instead of collaging fantastic elements and historical backgrounds as in *Les Celtiques*, *Combat ordinaire* juxtaposes the protagonist’s struggle to overcome his anxiety and depression to drawn photographs, usually portraits and scenes from Marco’s everyday life.

Marco’s sessions with his psychoanalyst, his disclosure of his most intimate fears and details of his life, inscribe the comic in a confessional space. Psychological issues (the first book opens with Marco on his psychoanalyst's couch) and physical degradation (Marco’s father has Alzheimer's and eventually kills himself) coexist against the background of past wars—the Algerian War, in which Marco’s father and Marco’s neighbour fought, as well the many wars Marco photographed. These wars form a haunting, painful, but also vague and fragmentary, presence.
Writing about American artist Jules Feiffer in the catalogue accompanying the 1967 comics exhibition *Bande Dessinée et figuration narrative* [Comics and Narrative Figuration], Maurice Horn describes the depressing tones of his works as part of the “rejuvenation” of comics (1967, p. 109). Incongruent as depression might seem with the notion of comics, it plays a prominent role in recent comics focusing on individual, often autobiographical, struggles of ordinary—not typically comicsy (blundering slapstick protagonists, superheroes)—people. Most of *Combat ordinaire*, barring Marco’s photographs and moments of anxiety, unfolds in a cartoony style, abstracting both figures and settings through a playful line that is reinforced by cheerful colours. The atlas of images for *Combat ordinaire* saddles comics traditions, photography and a personalized narrative that also extends to the kinds of *Pathosformel* employed: Marco’s anxiety attacks interweave familiar comics clues (exaggerated postures, lines indicating shaking) with visual elements that enhance the anxiousness of the act (warped space, a distinctive shade of red). Writing on comics with documentary impulses Nina Mickwitz elaborates on observations about the processual and indexical nature of drawing to conclude that “drawing occupies a space comprising both representation and ideation” (2016, p. 32). “The cartoon, selective and deliberate, is [...] oppositional to the photograph” (p. 35). This tension permeates the photographic moments in *Combat ordinaire* and, ultimately, questions “the hegemony of photographic realism as the privileged model for visually depicting reality” (ibid.).

Incorporating different shades of abstraction, never acquiring the same degree of reality as a photograph or a film, comics combine mimetic elements with non-mimetic ones. Comics inevitably, but, as in the case of abstraction, to varying degrees of obviousness, situate the personal in both collective and media memories. In *Combat ordinaire*, the moments of self-insight are expressed through black and white panels maintaining an allusive relationship between words and images. This echoes both psychoanalytical methods of reading beyond superficial appearances and the practice of collaging to read comics. The second volume includes two pages of portraits that Marco takes of shipyard workers, his father’s former colleagues, in an attempt to draw attention to their disappearing labour and world. In the captions accompanying these ‘photographs’, which are realistically drawn, carefully hatched black and white drawings, Marco reflects on his emotional paralysis and his realization that taking photographs is a coping mechanism (fig. 3) (2004, p. 20). The supposedly objective photograph—already layered with some subjectivity through the presence of the drawing hand—acquires emotional import while enacting the distance that enables the protagonist’s insights (see, for instance, Mickwitz 2016 and Cook 2012). Correspondingly, in a later sequence of portraits, Marco reflects on the relationship between the artist and his work (2004, p. 46).

Marco’s interest in “ordinary” people and his own anti-heroic persona is emblematic of the trend of focusing on the ordinary and the everyday (exemplified, for instance, by Chris Ware’s comics). Unsurprisingly, for the context of the comic, and reproducing the high art-low art
binary, the “deliberate ordinariness” of Marco’s work is seen as a stain by a Parisian gallerist (2004, p. 36). This reaction evokes the media memory of comics as a belittled medium that had to struggle for its legitimation. The need to be taken seriously often, and problematically, manifests itself in seeing comics through the lens of the established arts and comics’ attempts to imitate those established arts. Marco’s portraits, belittled as an “industrial freak show” by an eminent photographer and Marco’s co-exhibitor (2004, p. 45), are an attempt to introduce the shipyard workers into a space and a discourse that alienates such realities in the quest for aesthetics. Inscribed within this constellation, and clash, of media, the drawn photographs go further: they set into motion the media memory of socially conscious photographic portraits of “ordinary” people usually not deemed worthy of being photographed and immortalized by photographers such as Jacob Riis, Dorothea Lange and August Sander.

Fig 3: Marco’s portraits of shipyard workers captioned by his thoughts on his emotional distance. Le Combat ordinaire 2 – Les Quantités négligeables, by Manu Larcenet © DARGAUD 2004 www.dargaud.com All rights reserved

In the third volume, Ce qui est précieux [That Which Is Precious], Marco photographs the tools in his recently deceased father’s shed as a means of channeling his grief. These images imitating the camera objective and mediated through drawn lines, are imbued with affect: they highlight the absence of the man who had constructed a life using those tools and alluding, like much of
Combat ordinaire, to mortality and the fragility of the human condition. They alternate with Marco’s reading of a “notebook of small things” which he discovers only after his father’s death (2006, p. 12). It recounts “rien d’extraordinaire… il n’y a que des details des moments courts […] que des petites choses” [nothing special…only details of short moments (...) nothing but small things] (p. 22). It also offers material for reflection over what constitutes a life and the possibilities of remembering and retelling a life story. Once again, it is the form of the collage that enables such reflections.

Just before his suicide, Marco’s father sends Marco a childhood picture of Marco and his brother, with a small note at the back: “Before I forget, I wanted to say I won’t forget you. Papa” (2004, p. 52) (fig. 4). In the picture we see a young Marco disguised as Zoro, posing with his toy sword next to his brother. The affective value of the photo established through the portraits is reinforced through this childhood picture, which reappears several times in the third volume. The nostalgic, monochromatic tones of the photograph and the children’s quiet joy are emotionally charged. To take the reading further, the photo also plays on the connection between children and comics, undoing the assumption of triviality and the presumed need to grow up that connect both. Like the pages from the Corto Maltese stories, this half-page from Combat ordinaire also activates a collage of media: the childhood photograph, the father’s words scribbled at the back and the drawing style.

Fig. 4. Marco receives his father’s note, inscribed behind a childhood photograph of Marco and his brother. Note the squiggle above Marco’s head in the final panel which can be read as a
This photograph also hints towards the fourth volume’s concern with childhood. Planter des clous [Driving Nails]—a reference to Marco’s father’s job and potentially the children’s nursery rhyme, Planter des choux [Planting Cabbages]—acquires a different tone with the birth of Marco's daughter, Maude. It taps into the media memories surrounding the concept of childhood and, inevitably, the relationship between children and comics: the most prominent of these is the exaggerated emotions, already evident in the child’s tantrums as well as the playfulness and spontaneity associated with children’s drawings (see Ahmed 2020).²

In Planter des clous, the sequences of reflection, which unfolded across portraits or realistically drawn scenes in the preceding volumes, show Maude’s stuffed animals (2008 pp. 3, 24). The first sequence is about Marco’s love for Maude. Each panel shows a different stuffed animal as Marco admiringly adds how his child has taught him about re-considering and questioning everything. The child and the child’s perspective are juxtaposed to the eternally smiling stuffed animals which provide unconditional comfort and companionship to their young owners just like, to a certain extent, Marco’s daughter does for him (see also Ahmed 2020, p. 139). In the second sequence however, the stuffed animals accompany a reflection on the necessity of poetry, a poetry that knows no cultural hierarchies and encompasses popular songs, animé and paintings (see also Ahmed and Tilleuil 2016, p. 29). Through the collage of images the comic establishes connections across media, spanning time and space. More importantly, it mobilises the affective hold of those connections. All of Marco’s “photographs,” of his father’s tools, his daughter’s toys and the shipyard workers are imbued with affect. Moreover, their drawn essence evokes the history of image-making and attunes us to both the mediation of the image and its affective affordances.

**Trying to read comics with Warburg: constraints, adjustments and possibilities**

Brian Cremins likens the magic wielded by budding superhero Billy Batson (Captain Marvel) to the “magic” of comic books themselves, which "lies in its uncanny ability to document and interrogate memory itself" (2016, p. 7). The comic book is comparable to the Historama, the “super-television screen” on which Billy and the wizard Shazam watch the events of Billy’s past together. "That machine," for Cremins, "is like a comic book in miniature, a device capable of depicting past, present and future events," often simultaneously, in one panel (p. 7). Such a condensation of time is present in many comics panels and is symptomatic of media memories:
it offers a means of tracing the past and present of comics creation through indicating recurrent references and techniques. This is illustrated through the drawn photographs in *Combat ordinaire* and the intersection between fictional and historical realities in the *Corto Maltese* stories, which recur in comics belonging to related genres (autobiographical and autofictional graphic novels and adventure and fantasy).

Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* project, based on how images connect and carry with them a shared, deep history of image-making, enables us to read the relatively disparate comics of Pratt and Larcenet in the same breath, and situate them in a network of media and cultural interactions. In drawing out possible connections with Warburg’s project to map cultural memory, I have tried to show how comics remember other media and layer their stories through those memories. Both comics discussed above have imbibed a concern with the canonical hierarchy of image-making and storytelling. This struggle, like the *Pathosformel*, is also one of finding a means of expression and establishing emotional connections. This unfolds through the serial figure of Corto, who sustains a regular readership, and through the confessional, almost intimate, mode of *Combat ordinaire*.

Such a transposition of Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* project to comics encourages thinking about and beyond cultural hierarchies, focusing on interactions and influences between media. It is also an important step in shifting the focus towards image-based analyses. Further, it encourages us to rethink and productively displace the interpretative scope accorded to fragmentation and gutters. As the discussion on collage suggests, fragmentation laden with significance is not only present in the space between panels or between words and images, it unfolds across the medium, generating different levels of associations. This is the case, for instance, when comics drawing imitates other media such as photographs and silhouette animation.

In this chapter, I have worked with montages of images and associations evoked by the comics. In a more ambitious vein, such a project of reading comics with Warburg furthers the line of thinking proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell in his seminal *What do Pictures Want?*: both take the *aliveness* of images, their ability to move spectators, to travel across time and space as their point of departure in mapping the desires of images—their modes of communication, the messages they can transmit—which remain deeply embedded in the histories and techniques of image-making and collective memory.

One of the main challenges of transposing Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* project to comics comes from the almost untenable scope of the original project: it is impossible to account for diverse reading-viewing experiences and the vast historical and cultural connections each image is inscribed in. While comics reading is often discussed with reference to gutters and closure in comics, the above attempt to read comics with Warburg encourages moving beyond the spaces
between panels to thinking about how images and styles configure stories through the gamut of visual, historical and cultural connotations they mobilize.

A recent Spanish graphic novel, *Warburg & Beach* by Jorge Carrión and Javier Olivares is animated through the collaging of lives, both famous and lesser known: the leporello book places the stories of the modernist publisher and bookshop owner, Sylvia Beach and Aby Warburg on opposing sides and interweaves the lives of the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, Marcel Duchamp and his partner, art collector and book binder, Mary Reynolds and Frances Steloff, founder of the Gotham Book Mart. The comic thus sets into motion the possibilities of meaning-making opened up by collage. That Warburg becomes one of the protagonists of this unusual comic that renders symbolic interactions material is only too apt.

References


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1 The *Mnemosyne Atlas* was recently reconstituted and exhibited at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. See the catalogue by Roberto Ohrt et al. *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – the Original* (Hatje Cantz 2020).

2 The website to which Johnson 2012 is a companion volume provides an overview of the themes around which diverse plates were organized: https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/about/mnemosyne-themes

3 I am alluding to philosopher John Sutton’s discussion of spongy brains (2007).

4 The comic, conflating all differences between militant and political movements, presents Sinn Féin as a militant party.

5 Children’s drawings are accorded a more central role in Larcenet’s *Blast* comics, where they are used to visualize the protagonist’s moments of euphoria.