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### **Closer Than They Seem: Graphic Narrative and the Senses**

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, there is a scene staging the frustrations of a visual bias, the resistance of objects to pure vision relieved of other bodily senses. The shop Alice enters on ocularcentric terms, with the eye as the primary sense organ, seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

It is the centrality of sight that misses the precise nature and position of the target: the large, bright shape-shifting object is always elsewhere, ungraspable, pursued in vain as long as grasping is mere metaphor for sight. Such an ocularcentric focus on the visual storytelling of graphic narrative tends to abstract it to textual and visual representation, bracketing the material object as well as the embodied practices of its production and reading. There have been recent attempts at refocusing attention on the tactile dimensions and extended sensory field of graphic narrative (Gardner 2011, Hague 2014, Thon and Wilde 2016) as part of broader efforts to rematerialize cultural practices dominated by analytic models of detached observation and visual modes of consumption (Obrador 2012, 49-50). Graphic narrative as a medium and the practice of reading are equally subject to

such efforts to ‘reveal the underlying haptic (tactile, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic) aspects of spatial experience and reinscribe them’ into a cultural history from which a visual bias has effectively erased them (Paterson 2007, 59). The narrative implication of this rematerialization is a potentially new awareness of how narrative and sensory orders are intertwined in graphic narrative thanks to its capacity for combining alternative orders, paces, scales and stimulated and simulated sensations.

Haptic visuality in graphic narrative is not limited to touching, but rather all the features of the medium that invite and sustain a ‘near view’ [*Nahsicht*] of its surface, in the sense defined by Aloïs Riegl as a tactile view from a proximity at which it is no longer idealized into the abstract two-dimensional flat plane (Riegl [1966] 2004, 187). The key potential for this haptic ‘near view’ is the interplay between the trace of the handmade and the diffuse, proximate, exploratory modes of looking fostered by the dynamic of the panels and the (double) page in a multilinear structure. As I argued elsewhere, the broad media historical context for this haptic visuality of graphic narrative and its increasing cultural prominence is the now prolonged coexistence of print and digital textuality within which multimodal graphic narrative brings together modes of hyperattention promoted by electronic textuality and a reliance on less volatile material forms (Orban 2014). Although this haptic potential plays out differently in print and in digital comics (especially as formats and haptic technologies of feedback and manipulation evolve), both are remediations of predigital graphic narrative. The transitory openness of this media historical position is captured well in Art Spiegelman’s equivocation: ‘I don’t know if we’re the vanguard of another culture or the last blacksmiths’ (Kuhlman and Ball 2010, x). Both, at least for the time being.

In the following, I will examine how the suspension or alteration of the sequential flow of time can heighten this more general haptic visuality and strengthen the emphasis on the material and embodied aspects of visual storytelling in graphic narrative. What impedes the unfolding of the plot seems to impede the unremarkable disregard of the material embodiment of textual and visual representation. The two cases discussed, which push the graphic medium to its limits, present two distinct versions of this alteration of the flow of sequential time – the elusive incremental everydayness of American middle-class

life and the violent suspension of temporal progression by war. The works counterpoint each other in many respects: in their canonical status, cultural and geopolitical positions, and medial contexts. *Building Stories* by Chris Ware is a celebrated work of a major canonical American author of the medium, a monocultural work of fiction in English that explores the limits of the medium from within. *Beyrouth Juillet-Août 2006* by Lebanese comics artist and musician Mazen Kerbaj is a multi-lingual nonfiction comics journal that addresses a multilingual and multicultural global audience and inherently traverses visual and sound-based media as well as the analogue-digital divide. Yet, they share an interest in how altered temporalities – whether under the sign of depression (slowness) or terror (blockage and interruption) or both -- foreground the multisensory potential of graphic narrative as a material object.

### **The everyday in a box**

*Building Stories* by Chris Ware is a boxed collection of fourteen paper and cardboard objects, predominantly in recognizable print publication formats such as broadsheets, hardcover books, pamphlets, and posters. As announced in the title, the work sets up a parallel between narrative (stories) and architectural/material constructs (building, stories), and the progressive verb form promises an emphasis on their processual quality, an openness to ‘intuitive bricolage’ (Samson 2010, 30). It takes extreme measures to shift the abstracted visual reception of the comics format to an engagement with three-dimensional material objects collected in a three-dimensional container rather than flattened to a plane. This two-level structure puts the work at the borderline of the medium: the individual volumes conform to the basic panel-page relationships, but the fourteen-item collection in its entirety abandons the logic of the page as a stable, if multilinear arrangement of panels. Through the attempt to ‘get at that non-beginning/non-end of every story that we have within our minds’ (Larimer 2012), the set also effectively abandons the complex *spatial* arrangement of constituent parts that is key to graphic narrative. In other words, if the expansion of the panel into the autonomous object of each volume extends the box into a metacomic or supracomic, where the gutters across which

readers must reconstruct the time of narrative action on a page are repeated as the gaps between the self-standing artifacts as 'superpanels' of the box, the complex, dynamic yet stable spatial order of the page is loosened into the bare minimum of association in the box.

The unpaginated, unnumbered and frequently untitled components are interrelated stories of mostly unnamed characters. A hierarchical and ordered reconstruction of the fragments yields a coherent, if lacunar story of an unnamed female protagonist who lives, at one stage of her life, on the top floor of a Chicago brownstone, and stories of minor characters -- human (such as the downstairs neighbours, friends, boyfriends, teachers), animal (Branford, the Bee), and inanimate (household objects, toys, buildings) -- are both integrated into hers and get their separate volumes. Although time usually does not flow either within the episodes (it stands) or between them (it breaks), there are contiguities, intersections and metaleptic relations between the components; for example, a book within one story materializes as an object of our reading, and the box itself is revealed to be a text dreamed by the protagonist.

Haptic visuality is not limited to the actual tactile handling of the boxed objects in their serial or recursive exploration, but also extends to the exploratory approach to pages in individual volumes. The multiple open associative possibilities of this intricate structure both at the level of the box and at the level of volumes are reflected in pages that complicate sequentiality in a multilinear order and guided – even elaborately guided – sequences. The more diagrammatic and complex such groups of panels are, the more they fold out into spatial or textural patterns, where the panel-level focus with its clear line style, isometric representation of space and homogeneity of colouring alternates with and often transforms into a rhythmic, textural quality on the multi-panel or page level. One of the four-page broadsheets, for example, includes two pages of conventionally arranged panel sequences with conventional captions and speech bubbles, one of which recounts the illness and subsequent death of the protagonist's father (4 by 5 panels) and the other covers events before and after her last visit in three similarly arranged shorter segments (4 by 3, 3 by 2, 2 by 3). These sequences of conventional comics narration employ no unusually small or large words as spatial typographic objects to remove narrative details from a sequential logic or, what Bukatman calls its 'linear momentum'. As he observes in reference to another work by Ware, the 'emphasis on text as a pictorial form arrests the gaze and transfers

language from the plane of transparent narration to a constituent element of a world that demands, above all, to be read' (Bukatman 2016, 155). These outside pages envelop a double-page spread containing an intricate layout of numerous panels of wide-ranging sizes arranged around an enormous central floating image of an infant with closed eyes. Groups of panels with their own rhythmic arrangement of size and colour form a non-hierarchical landscape thematically tied to the exterior through the child – the child desired by the protagonist, herself as a child at the time of her accident and an adult child of her dying and grieving parents. The organic arrangement of this enclosure – literally the underside of the sequential exterior pages -- is centred on the exposure of skin, the non-use of the eyes and can only be explored by alternating between distant and proximate looking. Each object in the box fosters such interplay between optical and haptic visuality in a unique way depending on its size, shape and content, and their focal points are not necessarily central, established in diverse ways by the relative size and relationship of objects, and often prominent typography. Ware explains that the process of production is, in fact, governed by unforeseen associations, accidents, and the material characteristics of the given format as much as a predetermined, scripted sequential logic. 'I just start at the upper left-hand corner or the center of the page and see what happens', he explains (Larimer 2012), where 'happening' is not theoretical possibility, but the contingencies of praxis, including accidents of material production such as a drawn line forming in a particular way, the qualities of the space at hand, as well as inspiration – like Töppfer's notion of possible stories emerging from a drawing through improvisation that he finds appealing (Peeters 2010, 48). Ware himself identifies this as a strangely tactile illumination of mental processes -- 'Organically produced comic strips illuminate [the mind's] structures in a strange and very tangible way ...' (Larimer 2012) – hopefully mirrored by the reading process.

The segments that slow sequential time with a numbing, yet mesmerizing immersion in everydayness are exceptional even within this mode of tangible illumination, heightening the sense of haptic visuality to an extreme as the sequential logic of narrative progression diminishes. Such scenes involve the reader in a present that is microscopically, proximately experienced with limited opportunity to structure it and to condense it into significant actions or details. 'Moment-to-moment transitions are indulged to an almost

parodic degree. Stasis becomes an existential condition; time seems to expand infinitely, as does the time it takes for every incident to unfold' (Bukatman 2016). This is the habitual, semi-conscious everyday as a blindspot of consciousness – once everydayness is subjected to reflection, registered and accounted for, it has been transported out of its ordinariness into noteworthy specificity. The time an incident takes 'to unfold' is an external measure drawn from and applied to a delimited incident. Habit, however, 'describes not simply an action but an attitude: habits are often carried out in a semiautomatic, distracted, or involuntary manner. Certain forms of behavior are inscribed upon the body, part of a deeply ingrained somatic memory' (Felski 1999, 25). One of the most illuminating examples in this respect is a page recounting micro-events and non-events of an hour (2-3 a.m.) spent by a security guard, which appears in the hardcover volume reminiscent of Little Golden Books. With nearly each chapter accounting for a single hour of a day, the entire volume seems to emphasise standardized time as the framework of routine, the clockwork of modernity, and the clock is visible eleven times in the 2 a.m. chapter. Yet, the security guard's hour offers a more complex sense of routine. It includes habitual actions such as buying a soft drink and later a candy bar from a vending machine and taking out the trash, listening to water dripping from a leak into a bucket, but also watching a security camera feed on a screen, and waiting (the latter two also performed extra-diegetically by the readers). This boring routine of alertness, straddling the boundaries of attention and inattention, models the way everyday micro-events enveloped in the inattention of routine are transformed into incidents by the attention manifested in the mere fact of the image (showing, seeing). The significance conferred on them by being shown and seen similarly hovers at the borders of the diegetic world.

The work takes the greatest risk in this respect with the diegetic ordinariness of the disabled body (Fink Berman 2010) -- the protagonist is an amputee as a result of a childhood accident -- and the attention it receives in reading. It has been asserted at times that disability functions as a problematic dramatic device, demanding an explanatory narrative, and that its origin functions as the Event in a sea of numbing non-events, compensating for boredom (Comer 2016, Schneider 2016). It actually receives no more attention than other ordinary practicalities and emotional concerns and is routinely included in groups of panels that create an immersive present through the increasingly

meaningless slicing of actions. The absence of dialogue and narration and the use of occasional repetitious sound effects (FF FF; TAK TAK) often aid this by helping eliminate a key guide to pace. This hum of everydayness that returns regularly between more traditionally plot-driven segments relies on a non-hierarchical presentation – no detail is insignificant – that shifts the otherwise meaningful spatial relationships of the comics (especially the way panels and gutters signify temporal progression) towards browsable patterns, a search for significance through proximate, haptic exploration not unlike the security guard’s extreme close-up view of a detail of a girl’s yellow bikini bottom in an office wall calendar (panel 32) which dissolves the potential meaning of a colour correspondence between a ‘For Sale’ sign, the woman in the ad, and the bucket placed under the leak (an identical shade of yellow) into an enigmatic landscape of colour or flesh.

Of course, these extended segments are haptic only in the immersive proximate view which is eventually always taken away – the narrative recontextualizes such everyday presents relative to other times, and the associative connections that link events both moments and generations apart rely on the general multilinear potentiality of graphic narrative to model memory and its failures both on the human scale of characters and on the transhuman scale of sentient buildings. Ware aims at such eventual withdrawal from the immersive present when readers ‘experience something as if it were happening right in front of them, but then discover later that the story actually happened in the character’s distant past’, for example (Larimer 2012). It misses the point of these scenes of radical ordinariness, however, to presume their eventual pastness and take the fully external point of view from which they constitute ‘lost memories’: the ‘sedimented record of all those everyday banalities that must go forgotten if we are to continue going about our lives’ is a self-conscious reconstruction of the everyday from the vantage-point of selective, hierarchical meaning that allows a numerical compression of the temporal dimension of experience (‘11,627 lost childhood memories’), which has already missed its ordinariness.<sup>1</sup>

In a short appreciation of Richard McGuire’s 36-panel comic *Here*, Ware writes that

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<sup>1</sup> See Banita G. (2010) for a detailed analysis of slowness in Ware’s work in relation to memory and repetition rather than the everyday.

a fundamental technical oddity of comics is that ‘space’ is sliced up into paper-thin views of experience, visually spread out in rows, tiers, or whatever compositional arrangement most clearly indicates linearity, and then life breathed back into it all by the peculiar (and rather complicated) act of reading (Ware 2014).

In the case of the increasingly indiscriminate and potentially meaningless slicing of actions, this animating of components and characters is encouraged by the habits of comics reading, yet moved out of the sphere of routine, engaging an exceptional kind of attention: ‘In practice readers will seldom linger over such questions about the temporal dimensions of individual panels. ... Only exceptionally will the temporal flexibility, or multitemporality, of an individual panel demand the reader's explicit attention’ (Lefèvre 2011, 28). This is not simply more work -- a cultivation of modernist difficulty (Ball 2010), seriousness and ‘intense readerly labor’ (Cates 2010, 90) – but an orientation towards the eventfulness of the embodied reading process (Schneider 2016, 347), an engagement with the senses and their limitations, which shifts the emphasis from representational readings to an ‘interpretative emphasis on emotive states and embodied practices’ (Dodge 2016, 7). The attention to the diegetic sensory field – to minor, mundane sounds, textures of materials, small details of the sensorium – is extended to the manipulation of the print objects, their varying modes of arresting attention and varying positions of focal elements, differences in size, folding, the limited transfer of reading methods from one to another.

This special alliance of deceleration and haptic visuality operates relative to expectations of pace not only within its own medium, but also in other media. Besides the ‘seeming immediacy of an individualised cutaneous touch’ involved in manipulating the volumes of the work (Dodge 2016, 7), the box and its contents invoke a rich, mature print culture with highly specialized, articulated formats, which do not have to be known or remembered individually to activate sense memories, with their different types of folding and unfolding, turning and flipping pages, feeling hard and soft pages and covers. The expectations of speed that produce the experience of slowness are informed by its intermedial relationships and alternatives, the evolving media ecological context of the work. Print is not a pure alternative to new media with which it exists in a relationship of mutual remediation. Diagrams and arrows quoting ‘digital linking icons’ (Banita 2010, 183)



are actually remediated from dynamic replacement to static spatialization. The reading process of the elaborate diagrammatic text is, however, closer to the practice of browsing, where zooming in on particular, otherwise illegible details pushes others beyond simultaneous access. The relationship cannot be reduced to either nostalgia or critique, as the work partakes both in a valorised slowness with a capacity for reflection that can always sink into depressive stasis and in the technologies of dynamic interconnectivity that ironically attenuate and block human connections (as in the volume *Disconnect*<sup>2</sup>), yet also prepare one for reading the extremely intricate multilinear connections of the work.

### **War notes for screen, paper and trumpet**

Instead of an intricate fictional machinery for impeding the flow of sequential time in graphic narrative, it is the brutal, non-fictional reality of war and violence that alters it in *Beyrouth Juillet-Août 2006*, Mazen Kerbaj's diary of the month-long Israel-Hezbollah conflict. In this short war Israeli forces retaliated against Hezbollah attacks, the abduction of soldiers and the demand for an exchange of prisoners with airstrikes and artillery fire on both Hezbollah and civilian targets in Lebanon, which left enormous damage on homes, roads, and commercial structures and left over 1000 dead. This diary, as originally published in the artist's personal blog, was not an isolated work, but part of an 'explosion of testimony' and 'blogging activity' (El Maizi 2016, 200; Wilson-Goldie 2007, 70) in text, images and video intended to bring international attention to the attacks and their consequences in Lebanon and to summon the audience to secondary witnessing. In this spirit, Kerbaj temporarily removed all copyright restrictions from the artwork included in the blog for the duration of the war and encouraged their duplication and broadest possible

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<sup>2</sup> One of the fourteen objects included in the *Building Stories* box, this 20-page pamphlet focuses on ineffective, misdirected, repressed, and delayed communication, as the protagonist's interior monologue conveys her conflicted feelings about her marriage, raising her daughter, and the rediscovery of a previous boyfriend. Although the pamphlet opens with her denouncing mobile technologies as unhealthy nourishment and a waste of time, the rich array of configurations of physical distance, emotional connection, and modes of communication does not fall neatly into a nostalgic opposition between new technologies and a disappearing authentic closeness.

circulation in any form. The backbone of the diary is a series of original single-page comics artwork drawn in notebooks the author carried everywhere during the war – first in a smaller one he had at hand for the nine pages of the first day, then a slightly larger format throughout the process -- and reproduced in both publications. The book *Beyrouth Juillet-Août 2006* was published in 2007 as volume 20 of the Côtelette series of L'Association, launched in 2002 as a distinctly literary series in the 'resolutely 'book' format' of 14x19 cm to suit works of wide-ranging length requiring this smaller size and offering great latitude in image-text relations.<sup>3</sup> This edition came out in a rush only five months after the original production and blog publication of its content between 13 July and 26 August 2006.

Despite its emphatic bookness and heavy paper, the print edition preserves numerous characteristics of the electronic publication, while it transforms and abandons others. Like the blog, the book privileges the date as an organizing principle, for example, and leaves the 264 pages unnumbered with the identical date header over as many as 10-12 pages. Both versions are trilingual, alternating between English, Arabic and French in the comics and using English (in the blog) and French translation (in the book) for text-only posts and translated comics text in captions. On the other hand, the varying rhythm of posts that fit into a screen and the heterogeneous space in which links transport the reader to photo-sharing services for full size images give way to the regularity of double-page units in a uniform self-contained format. The book also establishes a decidedly more monolingual left-to-right layout unlike the blog, where the reverse chronology allowed the author to maintain an emphasis on vertical orientation both in the series and in individual drawings in order to be able to freely switch between Arabic, English, and French script directions. In other words, he opens his notepad from the top rather than from left or right for this reason, a practice also echoed in his technique of drawing with both hands.

A further important extension of this already complex international multilingual mediascape is related to the fact that Kerbaj, born in 1975 in Beirut, is both a comics artist, originally trained in graphic arts and advertising at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, and a largely self-taught player of the (prepared) trumpet and a recognized experimental and free improvised music performer. A key accompanying text of the diary is the 6:30 minute

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<sup>3</sup> L'Association website. [http://www.lassociation.fr/fr\\_FR/#!/catalogue/collection/218](http://www.lassociation.fr/fr_FR/#!/catalogue/collection/218)

long piece of music improvisation *Starry Night* referenced in the 16 July entry (uploaded three days later): a trumpet improvisation ‘vs.’ the sound of bombardment recorded on the artist’s balcony. This corresponds to the importance of sound in the sensorium of this war experience that puts – quite significantly for our purposes – the visual medium of graphic narrative under pressure from the very first shock of attacks. How does Riegl’s ‘near view’ of the image gain dominance in graphic narrative as the diary’s unique temporality meets the sensorium of massive air attacks? There is a combination of temporal, sensory, and representational factors that combine to trouble the optical distant view (*Fernsicht*) and the organization of figurative space centered on the eye.

The temporal order of the war diary is rooted in an extremely limited present. Despite the applicability of the autobiographical pact to this diary as non-fiction (El Maizi 2006, 202), it is important to recall Philip Lejeune’s distinction between the temporalities of autobiography and the diary. The temporal order of autobiography hinges on the problem of beginning, as the beginning of writing and the life formed within it both require commentary and interpretation, while the destination is a given. The diary, however, is written toward the openness of an uncertain tomorrow, which makes the end far from evident (Lejeune 2009, 188). The focus of the diary’s temporality – determined by chronological order, repetition, and the limitations of its retrospective structuring -- is the present as a past-to-be open toward the future. Unlike other diaries and even other chronologically and thematically delimited partial diaries ‘devoted to a single phase and organized around a particular area of experience’ like pregnancy or travel diaries [Lejeune 2009, 189], a war diary is special in that its uncertain tomorrow is not an open field of possibility, but a threat of violent interruption. The present of the war diary that opens towards a severely imperiled future is therefore a radically contracted, restricted present. Thus, instead of the deceleration into the minutiae of the everyday that limits temporal flow through pace, this is a case of interruption, extremely short-term prospects, a looming threat of discontinuity, the ever-present danger of no continuation in the conditions of uncertainty and day to day survival.

These conditions, which involve the frequent interruption of services, mobility, and the flow of information in Kerbaj’s war diary, also constitute the danger of narrative interruption and annihilation, where entries are suspended and each entry may be the last

(‘one bad trick with this blog is that i receive tons of messages when i do not update it for a while. people must think i died or something. nothing like that can happen.’ Kerbaj 2006, 18 July). The war diary is confined to this contracted living present of limited knowledge, and its delay in recording the events integrates the unpredictable rhythms of the war, the dangers and interruptions structuring the times of recording and publishing (‘it’s 3:30 am. there is no electricity. i cannot upload yesterday’s and today’s drawings.’ Kerbaj 2006, 17 August). Interestingly, this temporal structure is largely preserved in the self-contained pages of the book, even though once the entries are collected and printed, this sense of constricted present and acute danger is no longer a reality of access shared by the blog reader waiting for new posts and wondering if the diarist is alive. Despite the new, left-to-right arrangement of the book, each self-contained one-page tableau is tied more firmly to the day it happened than to its neighbours, and the alternating languages of the comics pages keep shifting the dominant direction of internal organization between the pages.

Time is short, the time of electricity even shorter, so the drawings are often sketches that capture the moment – in private or public events of the day (‘real news from Beirut’), consciousness (‘real news from my brain’) or visual inventories of objects and people. Instead of the sequential flow of time, there is containment and pressure, which the drawings capture in two very different ways. The state of acting under such time pressure is recorded in the wild, frantic mental notes of procedure to accomplish everything in five minutes in *Electricity cut!* (Kerbaj 2006, 2 August) are a dense maze of thin pen lines of edited, repeatedly amended to-do-lists and loosely hatched areas of darkness. Read in the order of numbered tasks and arrows, this is a race against the clock through ‘Stay calm stay calm you have time’ to the inevitable ‘NO! Later’. This is buried, however, in a tense, agitated field of hatching, intersecting lines, circles that record stress and anxiety primarily in a texture. The almost illegible scribbling of details and the contours of objects like the candle or computer dissolve their meaning in the affective surface. The eerily calm counterparts to these wild textures are the inventories that attest to the constriction of time by completely replacing the unfolding processes of life with object arrangements, the evidence of such life ‘in a bag’. (Figure 1) These arrangements also tend to be measures of the time available for buying or retrieving necessities, as in the inventory of essential items carried every time he leaves the apartment, half of which serve observation,

documentation and dissemination (binoculars, camera, sound recorder, notebook and pens, pen drive, and batteries). Their eeriness is partly due to the fact that the prospective shopping list or the contents of the emergency bag are also potentially the retrospective personal belongings of the injured or deceased – still life and *nature morte*. There is also a different evidence of life in the near view of the image, however: the personality and small inconsistencies of the line in the organic, Protozoa-like balloons and their touching and interconnecting little hairy outlines that surround the simple, neutral icons (recalling a textbook, manual, or language lesson) and in the handwriting of tiny captions naming the objects. In their quiet way, they are also primarily textures and patterns, in which calligraphic shapes alternate with a rhythm of repeated objects (two passports, three pens, four batteries) in a structure that keeps dissolving between loose rows and concentric circles. The flow of sequential time that usually balances the characteristic dual dynamic of seeing graphic narrative -- following paths and relating components to potential alternative paths and to the visible context of the page – is arrested, the remnants of this dynamic are increasingly moved from the level of clearly delineated panels to tenuously meaningful components of the page that need to be rediscovered each time.

The very possibility of continuation beyond the day of writing is probed in a list of questions in the 29 July entry (Figure 2). The questions push against the barrier of closure: ‘and my life tomorrow? and after tomorrow? and after after tomorrow? and after after after tomorrow? and etc? and after etc? and after?’ The thick lines in ink are dynamic and expressive in their irregularity, vividly attesting to the drawing of the line then and there, serving as dual traces – not only of the creative work, but also the aliveness of the diarist *today*. The transformation of the handwriting into an opaque visual object due to the large size that fills the entire page and the multiple repetitions of ‘and’, ‘after’, ‘tomorrow’, and ‘etc’ move the lettering towards a less directional decorative design, a tapestry of uncertainty, rivalling the script as text in the vertical and right-to-left orientation of the stacked questions. By the logic of the script, the largest question mark at the left edge of the page is a repetition of all the question marks in the list, but it also doubles as a minimalist self-portrait (the dual dots for the eyes and nostrils echoing the diacritics of the script). As a comics rendition of the diary’s hero as an anthropomorphic punctuation mark, the self-portrait also reverses the movement into a confrontation: now that it has a face, the

enormous question mark literally faces the open-ended list of questions that almost crowd it out of the frame. While the meaning of the list items moves further and further from the present in its fragile and ineffectual projection of the future ('and after etc?'), the visually present shape of the lettering dwindles, its undulating pattern ending in a small, cornered fragment of a question, unable to break through the frame.

This combination of interrupted flow and a tactile near view of patterns and surfaces, which intensifies the more general haptic visibility of comics, is further assisted in some pages by the emphasis on the materiality of making the drawing – the page being a material imprint of circumstances, the location of writing, or the mental or physical state of the artist. Writing in a moving car en route to the mountains is traced in shaky letters confirming that 'The car moves too fast to draw' (18 July), and drawing by candlelight while cut off from electricity is captured in a page that shows the blankness of the diarist's exhaustion (too tired to 'fill the page background in black') instead of the darkness of night (17 July). Numerous pages are made at the Torino Express Café -- 'I am in Torino (again & again)' on 6 August -- and several are designed around coffee spills and stains spreading on and through the pages (21 July, 2 and 14 August). The stain is evidence of on-site writing, a way for the diarist's position here and now writing itself into the text (Figure 3). It is also evidence of the writing surface being a material object rather than an ideal plane – the shrinking outlines of the stain show the pages of the notebook as layers of a three-dimensional object. The stain and the spill are simultaneously images and effects of an overstimulated nervous system, the 'daily coffee overdose' manifesting itself in the spills and splashes of ink, but also standing for the war experience as 'overdose', an excess of intense sensations without adequate processing and response.

The most important such sensations – sound and silence -- pose a crucial medial problem for graphic narrative. In fact, the diary is formulated in the very first entry as set off by a 'war soundscape' central to many other immediate artistic and documentary responses to the war even in audiovisual media. 'More than images, it seems, the sounds of bombardment best documented the experience of the July-August war in Lebanon... the soundscapes of the attacks were recorded in the open air -- from rooftops, terraces, and balconies' (Wilson-Goldie 2007, 74) From the very first word ('**BANG?**') and image (of airplanes above and falling bombs in the distance), sound and its alternation with silence

are a defining experience in this graphic diary. The early entries unapologetically use the available representational repertoire of the medium to translate sound: verbal descriptions, comics sound effects with visual signals for the character and volume of sound, and visual representations replacing the absence of sound with a blank surface or the sound of shots with dotted lines of bullet trajectories. As the inadequacy of these methods and the disparity between stimulated and simulated aural sensation becomes central to the work, however, it foregrounds and denaturalizes conventions of sensory order in the comics, especially their subsumption in the optical view. Two days into the diary, a drawing of an enormous, expressive cloud of smoke rising and expanding to nearly the top half of the page overshadows not only the skyline and the burning buildings from which the smoke is billowing, but also a small speech balloon asking 'how can I show sound in a drawing?' (Figure 4) The voice, speaking from one of the undamaged buildings in the background, is disproportionately small and clearly upstaged (a precursor to the black humor and self-irony that lines many of the darkest moments, especially when they involve self-representation). More importantly, when the question how to show sound is asked in a speech balloon -- one of the eminent means of 'showing sound' in comics -- the self-questioning speech balloon fundamentally undercuts the visual transcription and translation of sound. Sound thus becomes an ongoing problematization of the dominance of the eye in a visual medium, because we keep 'seeing sound' throughout the rest of the graphic diary.

This sound is, in fact, captured by alternative means and presenting itself as sound in the documentary improvisational composition *Starry Night* (edited from a much longer, two-hour recording). The lack of visual orientation to sounds of bombardment at night and a lack of sufficient knowledge to correctly interpret the sounds heard replicate some aspects of the documented experience, while adding further disorientation through the original exchange between sounds heard and sounds made by the author/musician (both heard by the listener of the piece). The sounds are powerful, but confusing, as one tries to decipher natural and artificial components of the night soundscape, ground or air traffic passing by, animals and sirens, and the artificial sounds of the trumpet and the attacks crafted through the rival technologies of art and warfare, and -- with the exception of the loudest bombs -- the initial perception can never identify the sound immediately as one or

the other. The two mimic each other (the diarist wondering 'what kind of mouthpiece' pilots might be using to create their bomb sounds), rise together in an angry dialogue, and subside into a lull, and only the process, the duration endows them with meaning and identity – the very duration missing from the slices of the graphic diary entries.

How the digital and analogue versions of the medium handle this material illustrates two very different ways for the medium to trouble the ocularcentric focus of visual storytelling and to engage an extended sensory field: by opening its sensory field or by insisting on the material object as well as the embodied practices of its production and reading. The electronic diary opens up the graphic medium to integrate these aural shocks and reverberations, uncertainties and confusions through actual aural sensations. Though this access is achieved at great difficulty at the time because of the war-related limitations to the infrastructure, once the hours of uploading are over, the ease of linking to the sound file is no different from the linking of images throughout the diary. In this approach, the multimodality of the graphic medium can be enriched and extended, and the sound-amplified graphic diary can be externalized even further. This opening creates further possibilities for convergence with other media, less and less determined by unique narrative devices and modes of reading but rather strategic, shifting hybrid modes of consumption: for example, the graphic narrative is linked to the walk-in space of a sound installation the author created on the 10th anniversary of the war and the original recordings and exhibited in the semi-intimate space of an empty apartment in another city (Berlin), possibly mutating the consumption of either.

The borders of the book as a material object are, however, far more fixed and keep sound outside as a prosthetic addition: whether or not the reader listens to it, it is another medium consumed separately and according to its own rules. This sound-as-prosthesis always reflects back on the visual translation of a complex sensory experience that cannot accommodate it. Therefore, the burden of seeing differently is put on the work as an object of sensation to be recovered rather than surpassed. If the printed pages can compensate for this sensory loss, it has to be by mobilizing sense memories and inviting sensations internally, within the materiality of the graphic medium and in the embodied production and consumption. The most important resource for such recovery is the dormant and supposedly inessential tactility of the notepad pages as reconstituted in a new material



object. This attention to haptic visuality can adjust an ocularcentric bias in reading graphic narrative, including being a proxy for other senses. The transcoding of sound into specific conventional comics devices ('VVUUUU FSHHH') is a transformation of representations, whereas the mobilization of sense memories through the near sense of touch affirms a connection, however tenuous, between the total sensory situations of writing and reading.

Both *Building Stories* and *Beyrouth Juillet-Août 2006* are experimental discoveries of the medium's possibilities and limits, operating at the edges of graphic narrative and always on the verge of becoming something else – a playset, for example, or a series of drawings and sketches. In their excesses, however, they also draw attention to what remain tacit practices of making and reading in graphic narrative works that use narrative time and the senses in more conventional ways. The relations of the intertwined narrative and sensory order are distinctive in comics, even when the peculiar use of time does not make them so spectacular and narrative progresses at a more customary pace. The two cases also project different strategies for exploring the possibilities of the medium – evolving primarily within its print-based boundaries, rediscovering and remediating the rich history of print culture and graphic narrative within it or mutating and converging in a more open relationship with electronic and nonvisual media.

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