(Un)natural Temporalities in Comics

Raphaël Baroni

Abstract

Unnatural narratology has recently focused our attention on unnatural representations of time. It is usually assumed that the 'typical *sjuzhet*' must be linear, while the 'variable *sjuzhet*' is unnatural and belongs exclusively to experimental works. Instances of time travel are also considered unnatural story elements that have been conventionalised by popular culture. In this article, these supposedly unnatural ingredients of narratives will be examined in the context of the semiotic potential and cultural tradition of European comics. I shall argue that a variable *sjuzhet* should be considered a natural quality of the medium because of its tabularity and its nonlinear organisation, and that most time travel that we find in comics is a mere extension of the motif of the 'extraordinary journey' and does not engender time paradoxes. Thus, it appears that, in the comics tradition, the graphic potential of time travel has predominated over scriptwriting complexities, highlighting the specificity of the 'graphic imagination'.

Keywords: extraordinary journey, graphic imagination, science fiction, sequence, tabularity, time travel, unnatural narratology, *Watchmen*

Unnaturalness and Transmediality as New Challenges for Narrative Theory

Contemporary narratology has evolved considerably since its formalist heyday.[1] Among the numerous new trends that we have witnessed in the past decades, Jan Christoph Meister mentions transgeneric and

1 I want to give warm thanks to Jan Alber, Brian Richardson, Jan Baetens, Benjamin Picado, and Anaïs Goudmand for their help in writing this article. My reflections are also based on my collaboration with Alain Boillat: together, we taught a master's class in the spring of 2014 on science fiction comics. My work is also linked to the activities of the Group for the Study of Comics (GrEBD) founded in 2014 at the University of Lausanne (http://wp.unil.ch/grebd/).

intermedial approaches that 'explore the relevance of narratological concepts for the study of genres and media outside the traditional object domain of text-based literary narrative'.[2] It hardly needs to be said that comics, as a medium that has produced a rich storytelling tradition, has become a privileged object for testing and renewing narratological concepts: indeed, its mixed nature (textual and iconic) offers interesting challenges for concepts like narrative voice, point of view or the temporal organisation of the story.

In addition to that evolution, a growing number of narratologists have become more and more interested in what Brian Richardson has recently labelled 'unnatural narratives'. As he states:

> Narrative theory, in order to be comprehensive, needs to be able to account for the distinctive practices of unnatural narratives: to do so, it requires a flexible definition of narrative that will be able both to include unnatural experiments and to provide a limit that allows us to articulate just how a given text challenges or plays with narrativity itself.[3]

For Richardson, 'unnatural' correlates with Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation:

> An unnatural narrative is one that contains significant antimimetic events, characters, settings, or frames. By antimimetic, I mean representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres.[4]

Thus, for Richardson, there is a distinction to be made between nonmimetic and antimimetic elements, which is based on 'the degree of unexpectedness that the text produces, whether surprise, shock, or the smile that acknowledges that a different, playful kind of representation is at work'.[5] In this conception, 'unnaturalness', defined as a quality inherent to antimimetic representations, should be restricted to postmodernist, experimental or humorous works of fiction, but as it relies on the subjective experience of the audience, this definition gives rise to an awkward question: How are we to identify the 'conventions' that

2 Jan Christoph Meister, 'Narratology', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2014), §47, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narratology (accessed 13 July 2015).

3 Brian Richardson, 'Unnatural Stories and Sequences', in *Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, ed. Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 28.

4 Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 3.

5 Ibid.

are being transgressed by unnatural narratives, especially when we are dealing with productions belonging to popular culture or to a medium that does not belong to the literary tradition? The difficulty here is to overcome the bias that incites us to consider that verbal narratives or literary conventions are the only references for a definition of the 'natural' or the 'familiar'.

Jan Alber's definition of 'unnaturalness' is slightly different because it is based on the kind of story that 'violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world'.[6] Thus, while Richardson considers that conventionalised nonmimetic elements that we find in popular culture (for example, in fairy tales, animal fables, science fiction, and so forth) are not unnatural, Alber's definition is broader:

> On the one hand, there are the physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities found in postmodernist narratives that have not yet been conventionalized, i.e. turned into basic cognitive frames, and thus still strike us as odd, strange, or defamiliarizing in the sense of Šklovskij (1917). On the other hand, there are also physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities that have over time become familiar forms of narrative representation (such as speaking animals in beast fables, magic in romances or fantasy narratives, the omnimentality of the traditional omniscient narrator, or time travel in science fiction).[7]

Based on these definitions, comics appears to offer interesting challenges for renewing some central concepts developed in unnatural narratology.[8] Indeed, at the confluence of transmedial and unnatural perspectives, new questions arise: Is it possible that what is considered to be unnatural in one medium might become natural in another, just as violations of physical laws can be 'naturalised' in a specific cultural tradition? Is it possible to generalise any natural or unnatural element of a story beyond the scope of a specific medium or a specific cultural tradition?

In this article, I shall focus on representations of time in comics, in particular on stories involving time travel, in order to discuss this convergence or clash of perspectives. First, we will see that Brian Rich-

6 Jan Alber, 'Unnatural Narrative', in Hühn et al., *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, §1, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/unnatural-narrative (accessed 1 May 2015).

7 Ibid., §2.

8 For an overview of transmedial and unnatural challenges for narrative theory, see Jan Alber and Per Krogh Hansen, eds, *Beyond Classical Narratology: Transmedial and Unnatural Challenges* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

ardson's discussion of the unnaturalness of the variable *sjuzhet* can hardly be extended beyond the literary tradition, because in graphic media such as narrative paintings, photographs or comics, this 'variability' can be considered as the natural experience of any competent and cooperative 'reader'. Second, I shall argue that time travel in science fiction comics can be considered as 'unnatural' only if we agree, like Jan Alber, to broaden this concept to highly conventionalised forms of popular narratives. Even then, the nonmimetic quality of most time travel can be questioned if we look more closely at their actual diegetic realisations, because in the graphic imagination of many authors of comics, the motif seems to be a mere extension of the classical scenario of the 'extraordinary journey': namely, a relatively natural exploration of an exotic world, rather than an opportunity for exploring unnatural timelines or paradoxical scenarios.

Variable *Sjuzhet*: A Natural Feature of the Medium?

The semiotic nature of comics should encourage us to question one of the most basic properties that is supposed to be natural to the *sjuzhet*. As stated by Richardson:

> In a typical work, the *sjuzhet* is the narrative in the sequence that it appears in the text: it is usually co-extensive with its presentation, whether page by page or, in an oral narrative, word by word. It is widely affirmed that narrative and its reception are sequential processes and that simultaneous events must therefore be presented and processed sequentially, not simultaneously.[9]

Even though, for Scott McCloud or Will Eisner, comics is described as 'sequential art', Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle[10] has more accurately defined the medium as a complex combination of the linear organisation of the panels in the strip and the tabular configuration of the page. Moreover, the succession of the panels in a strip is not necessarily entirely sequential. As illustrated by the strip by Pascal Jousselin seen in Figure 1, the copresence of the panels is one of the most salient differences between literature and comics, and it allows the production of metaleptic effects that could not be achieved in another medium.[11] We see that,

9 Brian Richardson, 'Unusual and Unnatural Narrative Sequences', in *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology*, ed. Raphaël Baroni and Françoise Revaz (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 167.

10 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, 'Du Linéaire au tabulaire', *Communications* 24 (1976), 7–23.

11 The image was published in the journal *Fluide Glacial* in April 2014. It appears on the author's blog, http://cestdelareclame2.blogspot.fr/ (accessed 13 July 2015).

for instance, the unnaturalness of this narrative involves the levels of both *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, but it is actualised in the conventional genre of the comic strip. The chronology of the story is unnatural, because the characters can interact between two different time frames, but the medium seems to naturalise this very strange property, because, in a strip, there are two levels of organisation for the *sjuzhet*: first, the sequential organisation of the four panels, and second, the whole strip apprehended as one single picture. While Richardson uses the notion of variable *sjuzhet* in order to discuss the organisation of some postmodern or experimental novels, he wisely mentions the case of other media that can achieve similar effects:

> Other forms of narrative may have unfixed *sjuzhets*. Narrative paintings, in which several scenes of the life of an individual are depicted on a single canvas, can be read in several possible sequences. Graphic novels can employ several different reading progressions, including top to bottom, left to right, and right to left, as well as unmoored sequences. As Thomas A. Bredehoft explains, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, presents a page of images delineating crucial backstory of the *fabula* that can be read in different ways.[12]

It is interesting to notice that Richardson mentions Chris Ware,[13] an author well-known for being one of the most creative artists in contemporary alternative comics (Fig. 2). Thus, the variable *sjuzhet* might seem to belong to avant-garde graphic novels, just as they are a specificity of experimental literary works. However, we could find similar examples in popular comics from all periods and belonging to all genres. Every

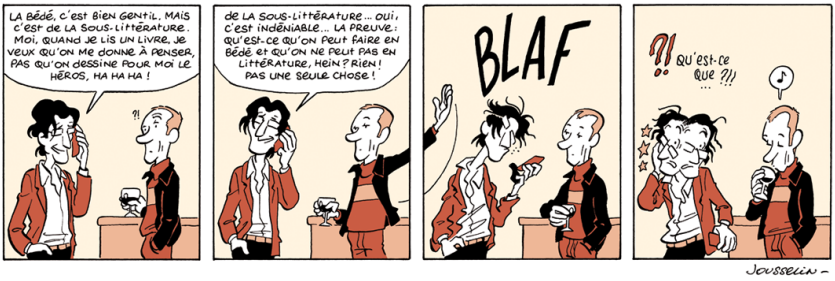

Figure 1: Metaleptic effects exclusive to comics. Pascal Jousselin, blog, http://cestdelareclame2.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/BD%20-%20Imbattable (22 April 2014). © Pascal Jousselin. Reproduced with kind permission of the author.

12 Richardson, 'Unusual and Unnatural Narrative Sequences', 169–170.

13 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

time that a page organisation offers meaningful alternatives to the linear progression, it produces a kind of unfixed *sjuzhet*, because the reader is invited to read or view the panels several times and in different orders. Moreover, the tension between the tabular and the sequential dimensions is not just a possible effect achieved on rare occasions by a few comics, but is instead a very basic, and even the most specific, property of the medium. Consequently, the reader of a comic who skips ahead (or below) to later panels cannot be compared to the reader of a novel who flips a few pages ahead, because to look at the whole (double) page before reading the linear sequence of the panels is not a transgression of the standard progression; it is exactly what is expected from a cooperative and competent reader, even in popular comics.

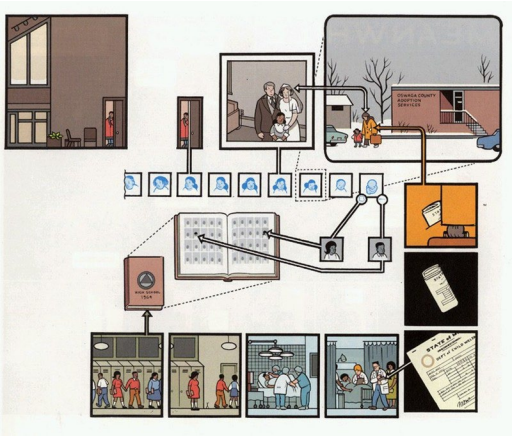

Figure 2: Progression need not be linear. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). © Pantheon Books.

Hence, during the construction of the page, all serious authors have to deal with this constraint. For example, in the most basic formula, the last panel is often used as a cliffhanger,[14] and the first or central panels, which occupy a hierarchical position in the page, can play specific roles. The author can also play with the size or shape of the panels, in order to catch the eye of the reader and build a hierarchy beyond a strict linear progression. As highlighted by Groensteen,[15] we find in comics a specific nonlinear articulation between images through the repetition of page layout or the reiteration of motifs, thereby creating a form of 'braiding', an effect that alters the progression of the reader. So, even the regular organisation of the page can be viewed as a way of encouraging the reader to weave between different images, like regular

14 For a discussion about suspense and narrative tension in comics, see Raphaël Baroni, *La Tension narrative: Suspense, curiosité, surprise* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), chap. 13, 91–160.

15 Thierry Groensteen, 'Le Réseau et le lieu: Pour une analyse des procédures de tressage iconique' [The network and the site: Towards an analysis of the procedures of iconic braiding], in *Time, Narrative & the Fixed Image / Temps, narration & image fixe*, ed. Jan Baetens and Mireille Ribière (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 117–129.

meters, rhymes, repetitions or variations in a poem. Therefore, more than in any other narrative medium, comics are designed to promote travel back and forth between the panels and throughout the book.

So, we should consider types of fixed *sjuzhet* as qualities inherent to movies or to most verbal or musical narratives, while the tabular organisation of the page in comics is, by definition, and quite naturally, a more or less unfixed *sjuzhet*, with multilinear paths, more or less preconfigured by the layout. Thus we could come to a first conclusion: that comics usually involve a variable *sjuzhet*. In fact, it is their natural form of expression, while it is only in some 'unnatural comics' (or for incompetent or uncooperative readers) that the story is processed as a linear progression. *Bludzee* (Fig. 3) is a typical case of an unnatural linear comic: published by Lewis Trondheim in 2009, it became the first French comic strip specifically designed to fit the screen of a smartphone, thus taking the logical option of showing only one panel at a time.[16] In digital comics of this kind, because of the size of the device used to access them, readers must scroll from one panel to another, and therefore, they are never able to grasp the sequence as a whole. In this case, narrative tension is increased and suspense and surprises are easier to process, but this quasi cartoon loses some of the essential qualities inherent to comics and all potential effects associated with the tabular organisation of the page.[17] On the one hand, we can consider this form of linear comics as

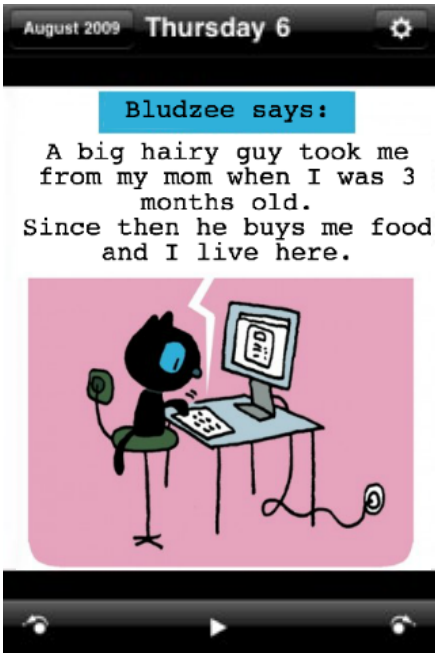

Figure 3: When the reader has to scroll one panel at a time. Lewis Trondheim, *Bludzee* http://www.bludzee.com/en/ (6 August 2009). © Editions Delcourt.

16 Image published Thursday, 6 August 2009. The whole story is available online at http://www.bludzee.com/fr/ and in English at http://www.bludzee.com/en/.

17 We find similar examples of the 'one panel = one page' formula in Tijuana Bibles, a genre of pornographic cartoons produced between 1920 and 1960, whose format was designed to fit the pocket of the reader for more discretion. Flip books also underline the proximity of this form of comics with animated cartoons.

relatively unnatural in Richardson's sense, because it differs from the classical narrative frames or genres popularised by comics tradition, but on the other hand, the chronological presentation of events can be considered as more mimetic than classical comics, because it is closer to the natural experience of the flow of time.

Time Travel as an Extension of Extraordinary Journeys in the Comics Tradition

As we have seen, it is not easy to define the naturalness of any narrative element if we put aside the context and fail to consider not only the semiotic properties of the medium, but also its specific cultural tradition. This is also true when we deal with thematic elements of the *fabula*, such as time travel, which is supposed to be one of the most obvious cases of physical impossibility explored by popular culture. However, it is worth questioning the unnaturalness of time travel in comics, especially in the French tradition. First, we can anticipate that unnatural temporalities mostly appear, in a popular media culture like comics, in a highly conventionalised form. As stated by Rüdiger Heinze, it is usually assumed 'that unnatural temporalities are more easily conventionalized if they occur on the level of story, and that relatively clearly defined generic scripts such as in fantasy and science fiction also facilitate further conventionalization'.[18] Heinze enumerates several unnatural temporalities that have been conventionalised in popular culture:

> On the level of story, unnatural temporality most often occurs in scenarios of time travel (Wells's *The Time Machine* [2003], Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* [1985]), time loops (Vonnegut's *Timequake* [1998], Ramis's *Groundhog Day* [1993]), time reversals (Amis's *Time's Arrow* [2003], Dick's *Counter-Clock World* [2002]), and diverging/alternative timelines (Tykwer's *Lola Rennt* [*Run, Lola Run*] [1998], Howitt's *Sliding Doors* [1998]).[19]

Concerning the specific case of time travel and diverging timelines, Peter Rabinowitz has explained the difficulties it raises for narrative theory. He argues that the description of the *fabula* is made more complex because, on the one hand, we have to consider 'the order of the events as experienced by the protagonist, the Time Traveller' – an order that Rabinowitz calls 'the path of the protagonist' – and on the other

18 Rüdiger Heinze, 'The Whirligig of Time: Toward a Poetics of Unnatural Temporality', in Alber, Nielsen and Richardson, *Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, 37.

19 Ibid., 38.

hand, we must account for the chronology of the world in which the protagonist travels.[20]

Another problem arises with the possibility of changing a timeline while traveling back in the past, according to the well-known paradox of the grandfather first formulated by Barjavel. In short: if a man kills his grandfather before his parents were born, he may never live to kill him, thus, the grandfather should be alive, and so on. The solution of the paradox usually involves a loop or a theory encompassing multiple timelines: the killer may be born in one world, but after killing his grandfather, he continues to live in another world, where he was not born, and thus, two incompatible events can exist in parallel universes. In this case, diverging timelines and time travel are combined into a single motif. This virtuality has become very popular in novels and in movies, with pioneering works by Robert Heinlein (*By His Bootstraps*, 1941), René Barjavel (*Le Voyageur imprudent* [The imprudent traveller], 1943) and Chris Marker (*La Jetée*, 1962), and it was popularised by the blockbuster *Back to the Future* (1985). Here again, Brian Richardson sees an important challenge for narrative theory: 'We also badly need a greatly expanded concept of fabula. Most important is to go beyond the unilinear fabula and to add the concept of a multilinear fabula, a fabula with one or numerous forkings leading to different possible chains of events.'[21] It is interesting to notice that all examples mentioned by Rabinowitz and Heinze exclusively refer to literary works and movies, while there is no mention of the comics tradition in their reflections on time travel. Accordingly, we may question the so-called unnaturalness or nonnaturalness of time travel in the corpus of European comics, at least until the late 1980s and the apparition of time paradoxes in series like Christin and Mézières's *Valérian, agent spatio-temporel* [Valérian spatio-temporal agent].

First, we must consider that many modalities of what could be identified as 'time travel' do not in fact engender time paradoxes, like the exploration of a prehistoric sanctuary, as in *Voyage au centre de la terre* [*Journey to the Centre of the Earth*] (1864) or *The Lost World* (1912). There is also no longer a paradox when a mysterious sleep leads a character to awaken in a future world, as in Wells's *When the Sleeper Awakes* (1899). In this case, as the traveller has no way back, his only 'unnatural' attribute is that, like in *Sleeping Beauty*, he has been aging at a different

20 Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'They Shoot Tigers, Don't They? Path and Counterpoint in *The Long Goodbye*', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 183.

21 Richardson, 'Unnatural Stories and Sequences', 28.

speed from his environment. An important source for time travel has been utopian narratives, like *L'An 2440: Rêve s'il en fût jamais* [The year 2440: A dream if ever there was one] (1770), a novel published by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in the eighteenth century. In this novel, the author imagines a trip into the twenty-fifth century, which appears ultimately, when he is bitten by a snake and wakes up, as a mere illusion. Here again, since the trip was only a dream, no paradoxes ensue. So, not only is time travel often conventionalised, but some instances are even naturalised and do not disturb narrative logic. Furthermore, the majority of time travel episodes have been interpreted, in the French comics tradition, as a mere extension of the classic motif of the 'extraordinary journey', as exemplified by many novels and collections since the eighteenth century until the famous Hetzel collection *Voyages extraordinaires* [*Extraordinary Journeys*]. As summarised by François Rosset, these stories follow an invariable topos:

> [L]a rencontre d'une terre imaginée se raconte le plus souvent dans le contexte d'un voyage dans le monde réel: une tempête, une attaque de pirates, un naufrage, un coup du sort quelconque détournent le voyageur de son itinéraire prévu, et le voilà jeté là où rien n'est imposé, où tout devient possible.[22]
>
> [The discovery of an imagined land is recounted most often in the context of a journey in the real world: a storm, a pirate attack, a shipwreck, a twist of fate that diverts the traveller from his or her intended route, and casts him or her into a place where there are no obligations, where anything is possible.]

Among the numerous incarnations in comics of these nonparadoxical modalities of time travel, grounded in the genre of utopia or in the topos of the 'extraordinary journey', we can mention many famous examples, like *Zig et Puce au XXIe siècle* [Zig and Puce in the twenty-first century] (1935) by Alain Saint-Ogan, which reproduces the motif of dream travel imagined by Mercier. In 1942, with *Le Rayon U* [The U ray], Edgar P. Jacobs illustrates the modality of a dinosaur sanctuary discovered after 'a twist of fate' that diverts the travellers from their intended trip; in 1957, in *L'Enigme de l'Atlantide* [*Atlantis Mystery*], the same author mixes the utopia of a futuristic world, Atlantis, with a prehistoric sanctuary hidden in a cave (Fig. 4).[23] This story is a good example of the continuity between science fiction comics and the topos of the 'extraordinary

22 François Rosset, 'Tempêtes opportunes et dragons véritables: Les Voyages imaginaires' [Opportune storms and real dragons: Imaginary journeys], in *Souvenirs du futur* [Memories of the future], ed. Marc Atallah, Frédéric Jaccaud and Francis Valéry (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2013), 46.

23 Edgar P. Jacobs, *L'Énigme de l'Atlantide* (Brussels: Editions du Lombard, 1977), 18, 21.

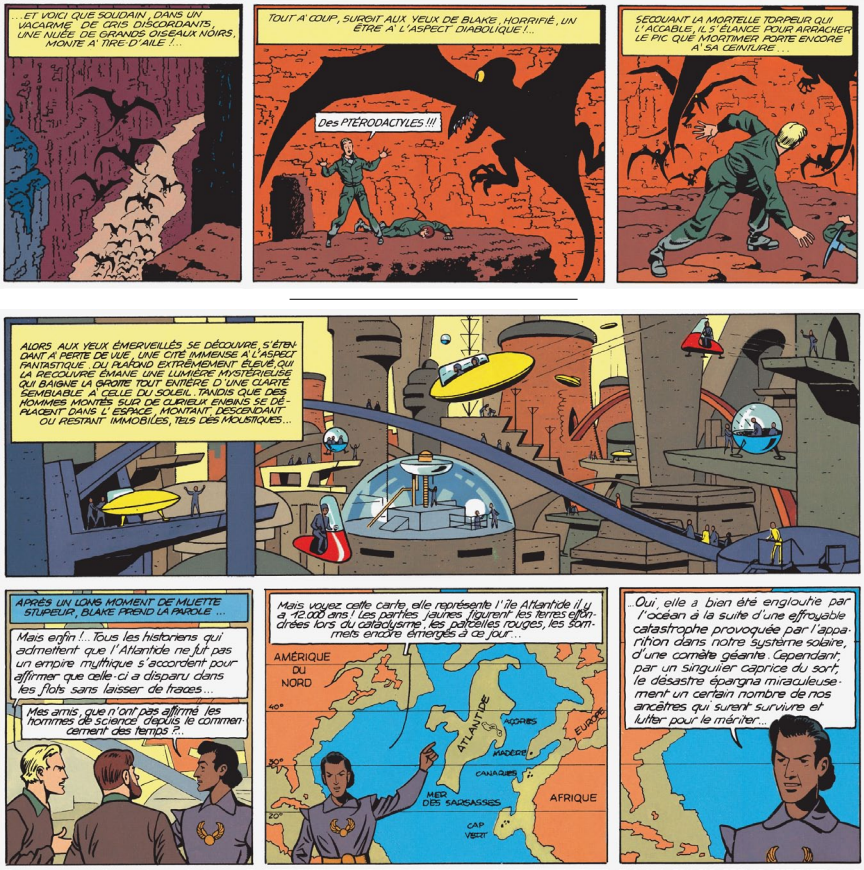

Figure 4: A prehistoric sanctuary . . . co-exists with a futuristic world. Edgar P. Jacobs, *L'Énigme de l'Atlantide* (1957), 18, 21. © Editions Blake & Mortimer / Studio Jacobs (Dargaud – Lombard s.a., 2015).

journey', since it is largely inspired by *Voyage au centre de la terre* and, even more, *Vingt mille Lieues sous les mers* [*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*], where we find the exact same combination: monstrous creatures guarding the ruins of Atlantis, here illustrated by Alphonse de Neuville for the Hetzel edition (Fig. 5).[24]

Concerning the modality of a cryogenic sleep leading to a future world, we can mention, of course, one of the first science fiction comics, *Buck Rogers in the Twenty-Fifth Century* (1928), but also, in the French tradition, the influential series *Les Naufragés du temps* [*Space Force: Shipwrecked*] by Jean-Claude Gillon and Paul Forest (1964) (Fig. 6).[25] Here

24 Jules Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (Paris: Hetzel, 1871), 296–297.

25 Jean-Claude Forest and Paul Gillon, *Les Naufragés du temps*, vol.1, *L'Étoile endormie* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1981), 7.

Figure 5: The extraordinary journey . . . where monstrous creatures guard the ruins of Atlantis. Alphonse de Neuville, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1871).

again, the title of the series highlights the continuity between the topos of the shipwreck and that of time travel, but it adds a melancholic tone, because those 'shipwrecked by time' (the literal meaning of the title) are characters living with no hope of return.

In all these cases, not only does time travel seem to belong to a tradition much older than the newer genre of science fiction, but the modality of the trip entails no special challenges to narrative logic. It is even natural in the sense that it does not transgress any essential physical rule, nor does it open a multilinear *fabula*. In the real world, we can dream of a future and then wake up, just as Zig and Puce do. And when Jules Verne invented *Voyage au centre de la terre*, the hypothesis of a dinosaur sanctuary was not considered to be completely irrational. The Galapagos Islands explored by Darwin can, indeed, be considered a sanctuary of this kind. With the evolution of technology and science, we can even consider cryogenic sleep to be a realistic possibility that will probably be realised in a near future, and relativist theories in physics also consider realistic the possibility that a protagonist could age at a different speed from the world out of which s/he originates, at least if s/he travels fast enough. This latter possibility was explored in the

Figure 6: Time travel with no hope of return. P. Gillon and J.-C. Forest, *Les Naufragés du temps* vol 1, *L'Étoile endormie* (1964), 7. © Glénat

1970s and 1980s in comics like *La Guerre éternelle*[26] – an adaptation of the novel *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman – or the adaptations of *La Planète des singes* [*Planet of the Apes*].[27]

Even in adventures involving real *time machines*, time paradoxes are often reduced to the strict minimum in the comics tradition, while the representation of dinosaurs or of futuristic worlds, utopian or dystopian, continue to play the leading role, as we see in Jacobs's *Le Piège diabolique* [*The Time Trap*] (1962) (Fig. 7).[28] The cover from Yoko Tsuno's adventure *Le Matin du monde* [*The Morning of the World*] (1988) even shows a weird blending between a journey back to the fourteenth century and the motif of a prehistoric sanctuary hidden in Sumatra, with no explanation or diegetic motivation for the overlapping of the two motifs (Figs 8 and 9).[29]

We can come to the conclusion that in French comics, at least until the middle of the 1980s, the graphic potential of time travel predominated over the narrative complexities involved in the recounting of unnatural temporalities, which were more often explored by literature and movies. As explained by Groensteen: 'L'imaginaire spécifique de

26 The story was adapted by Joe Haldeman for the script, drawn by Marvano and coloured by Bruno Marchand. Dupuis published the story in three volumes between November 1988 and November 1989.

27 The story by Pierre Boule, published in 1963, was first adapted for the screen by Franklin Shaffner in 1968. Marvel published a comic adaptation of the movies between February 1977 and August 1978. It was translated into French and published in Europe by LUG.

28 Edgar P. Jacobs, *Le Piège diabolique* (Brussels: Editions du Lombard, 1972), 9, 28.

29 Roger Leloup, *La Spirale du temps* (Charleroi: Dupuis, 1980), cover; Roger Leloup, *Le Matin du monde* (Charleroi: Dupuis, 1988), cover.

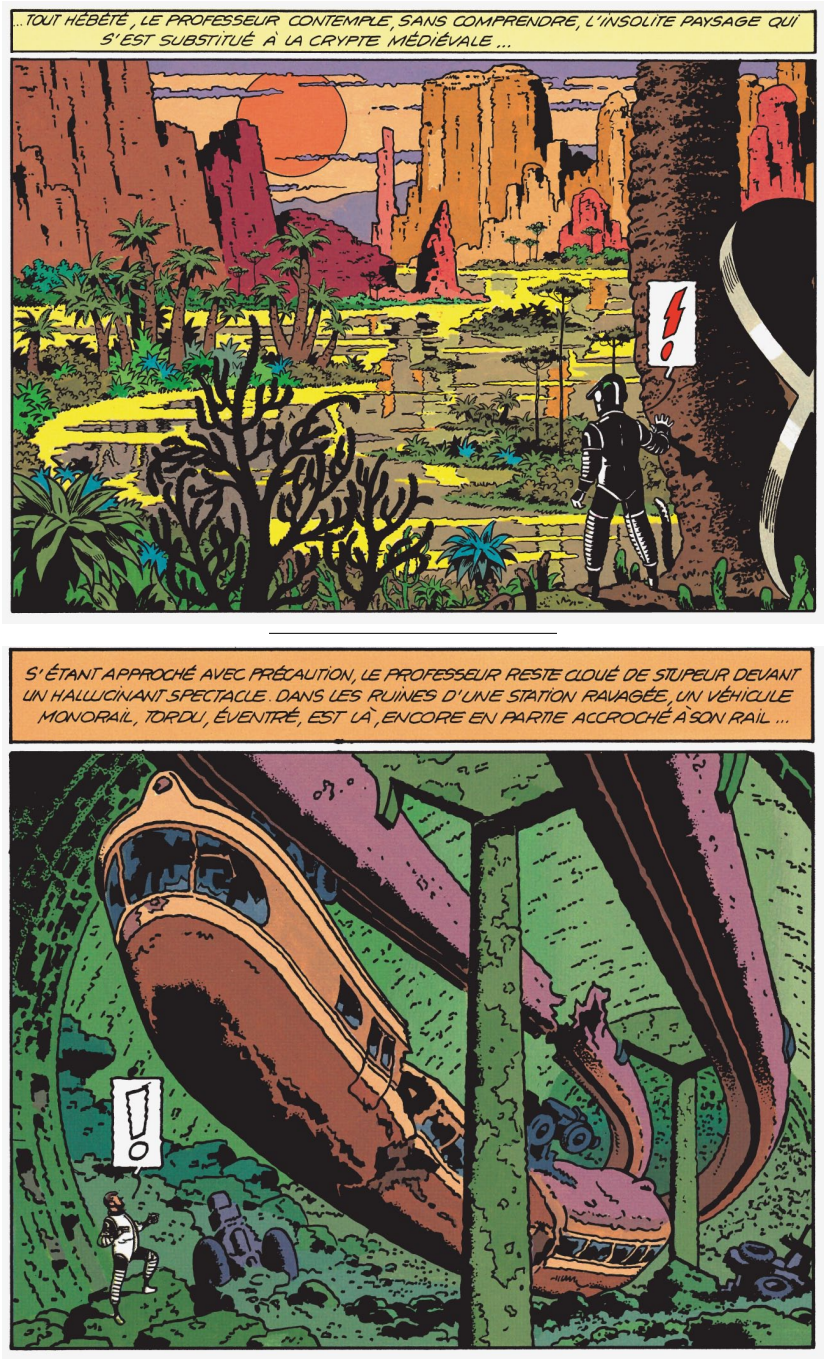

Figure 7: Time travel . . . becomes dystopia. Edgar P. Jacobs, *Le Piège diabolique* (1962), 9, 28. © Editions Blake & Mortimer / Studio Jacobs (Dargaud – Lombard s.a., 2015).

Figure 8: Time travel . . .
Roger Leloup, *La Spirale du temps* (1980). © Dupuis.

Figure 9: . . . with overlapping time frames. Roger Leloup, *Le matin du monde* (1988), cover. © Dupuis.

la BD est un imaginaire graphique. Mais il faut postuler que chaque média a le sien et qu'il existe par conséquent aussi un imaginaire filmique, un imaginaire littéraire, etc.' [The specific imaginary in comics is a graphic imaginary. But we must assume that each medium has its own imaginary, and therefore, that a filmic imaginary, a literary imaginary, etc. also exist].[30] Groensteen adds:

> La bande dessinée a engendré de nombreux mondes imaginaires. Pour un dessinateur, en effet, quelle tentation que de se faire démiurge et de donner forme à un monde cohérent, inventant tout à la fois des lieux géographiques, des organisations sociales, des décors, des costumes, des moyens de locomotion, etc., sans contrainte technique ou financière, sans autre limitations que celles du talent!
>
> [Comics spawned many imaginary worlds. For an illustrator, indeed, it is tempting to become a demiurge and to shape a coherent world, inventing geographical locations, social organisations, sets, costumes, means of locomotion, etc. with no technical or financial constraints, with no other limitations than those of his or her own talent!][31]

30 Thierry Groensteen, 'Médiagénie et réflexivité, médiativité et imaginaire: Comment s'incarnent les fables' [Mediageneity and reflexivity, mediativity and imaginary: How the *fabula* is incarnated], *Belphégor* 4(2) (2005), n.p., http://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/47702 (accessed 24 March 2016).

31 Ibid.

By sticking to the topos of the 'extraordinary journey' instead of embracing paradox in a multilinear *fabula*, French comics underline the fact that many authors saw time travel as a mere opportunity to illustrate exotic worlds, to bring extinct species back to life or to imagine the fabulous or dystopian cities of the future. By doing so, comics authors were the direct inheritors of a long tradition initiated by illustrators such as Alphonse de Neuville or Edouard Riou, who were giving shape and flesh to the worlds invented by Jules Verne. Here again, this cultural specificity might be related to the semiotic constraints of the medium: the graphic potential and the freedom offered by drawn pictures for the exploration of exotic worlds was then unrivalled, especially at a time when digital effects did not exist in movies. We must also admit that some authors of this period cautiously avoided confronting the scriptwriting difficulties inherent to a multilinear *fabula*, either because they feared that their young audience could not follow the story, or, more probably, because they were afraid of not being able to write coherent stories involving such paradoxes, especially in the serialised forms of publications that predominated until the end of the 1960s. It is revealing that one of the first true time paradoxes in French comics appeared almost accidentally[32] in a series written by scriptwriter Pierre Christin, who was excited by this narrative challenge, while cartoonist Jean-Claude Mézières expressed great concern about this turning point in the adventures of *Valérian, agent spatio-temporel*.[33]

It is also interesting to notice that, with the development of digital effects, the exotic worlds first imagined in comics have spread into movies, while, in a reverse movement, contemporary comics are now favouring naturalistic stories, like reportage, autobiography or autofiction. As explained recently by Alain Boillat,[34] the digital revolution has greatly contributed to the transformation of cinema into 'une machine à mondes' [a world-building machine], thus occupying a field

32 The authors had to change the timeline of the story because, when the series began, in 1967, they imagined a cataclysm that was supposed to happen in 1986, but as the series continued beyond this date, they felt the need to explain to their readers why it did not happen. Otherwise, the science fictional anticipation would have turned into an uchrony.

33 For a more detailed survey, see Raphaël Baroni, 'L'Exploration temporelle comme modalité du voyage imaginaire dans la bande dessinée franco-belge (1930–1980)' [Temporal exploration as a mode of imaginary travel in Franco-Belgian comics (1930–1980)], *Image [&] Narrative* 16(2) (2015), 96–113.

34 Alain Boillat, *Cinéma, machine à mondes: Essai sur les films à univers multiples* [Cinema as a world-building machine: Essay on multiuniverse films] (Geneva: Georg, 2014).

that used to be dominated by comics.[35] I think that this new rivalry might be one important factor, among many others, in explaining the recent reorientation of comics towards natural or even trivial worlds, while many Hollywood blockbusters seek their inspiration in classical comics.

Dr Manhattan's Fabulous Vision of Time and the Reader's Experience of Comics

I shall conclude by briefly mentioning perhaps one of the most convincing examples of a fusion between the representation of an unnatural temporality and the natural features of the medium. On the first page of the fourth chapter of *Watchmen*, centred on Dr Manhattan (Fig. 9), Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons were able to illustrate, in a way that no other medium could do, the temporal experience of Dr Manhattan, who gained, after an accident, the fabulous power of embracing the flow of time, past and future, all grasped in a single glance. As highlighted by the authors, this almost inconceivable experience of time is actually the natural experience of any reader of comics, since, by default, the future is already visible when we begin to read the page, and what has already been read is still readable.[36]

As explained by Groensteen, the isomorphism of the panels and the repetition of colours and motifs encourage the reader to weave between different images, independently of the linear progression of the story. It is particularly obvious on this page, where we see repetitions between panels 2 and 9, or a cinematic continuity between panels 1 and 7, or simply because we find the same photograph in each panel, like an iterative embedded panel. In the second panel, Dr Manhattan looks at this picture and claims: 'In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away. It's already lying there, twelve seconds into the future. Ten seconds now.' By saying that, Dr Manhattan seems to express an unnatural experience of time, because he pretends that something situated in the future is 'already lying there'. But in fact, he only describes our own reading experience, since we can already see the photograph lying on the sand: first because, in panel 2, the image is desynchronised with the text, thus showing an anticipation (prolepsis) of what is going to happen, and second because we can see that the

35 Note that movies like *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* or *The Fifth Element* were directly inspired by the visual universe created by Mézières, or Mœbius, and the influence of Buck Rogers on the storyworld of the *Star Wars* saga is obvious.

36 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

Figure 10: Dr Manhattan's experience of time corresponds to the matural mode of reading comics. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (1986), Chapter 4, page 1. © DC Comics, courtesy of DC Comics.

exact same image is already lying ahead, in the last panel of the page, *seven panels into the future*. These two panels are also a reiteration of the cover of the chapter, and they show a footprint in the red sand of Mars and an old photograph of Dr Manhattan, both indexical references to past events, making the character simultaneously present and absent.[37] Dr Manhattan concludes by saying, 'All we ever see of stars are their old photographs', indicating that his dechronologised vision actually goes beyond the aesthetic of comics: it is merely the experience of anyone looking at a photograph or just staring at distant suns, whose images have travelled through space at the limited speed of light.

Thus, even in a comic that takes up the conventions of superhero stories, where both time travel and the unnatural powers of characters have been highly conventionalised, the authors have found a way to undermine these conventions by paradoxically showing that the vision of time of Dr Manhattan is quite natural. This supernatural power strikes us as odd, because, in this context, the capacity of the character

37 On the same semiotic basis, André Bazin describes the filmic image as a 'présence/absence'.

simply reflects our natural experience of time, especially when we read comics or when we look at an old photograph of ourselves, or at stars in the sky. We see that, in this case, the frontier between natural and unnatural, mimetic and nonmimetic, conventional and unfamiliar, is very difficult to determine and, at the very least, has to be contextualised within a specific cultural tradition and by taking into account the semiotic constraints of the medium.

Raphaël Baroni is an associate professor of French as a foreign language at the University of Lausanne. He is member and cofounder of the Groupe d'étude sur la bande dessinée (http://wp.unil.ch/grebd/) and the Réseau romand de narratologie (www.narratologie.ch). He is author of *La Tension narrative* (Seuil, 2007) and *L'Oeuvre du temps* (Seuil, 2009) and is coeditor of *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology* (Ohio State University Press, 2016).