

# Sartre, 'Sartre' and the biographical bande dessinée

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## **Sartre, *Sartre* and the biographical *bande dessinée***

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### **Abstract**

Biographical comics, graphic novels and *bande dessinée* (BD) are often seen as ‘stepping stones’ or points of entry into a subject, particularly those of literary or philosophical figures. This article seeks to demonstrate the ways in which this might be disproven by considering the verbo-visual works alongside the theories of their subjects, thus highlighting the former’s role as both independent of, and an extra layer upon, the latter. Building on a study of recent trends in comics and Comics Studies, specifically upon the work of Maaheen Ahmed in the idea of openness in comics, and taking into account classical explorations of comics theory (Groensteen 1987), this article will outline the relationship between Existentialism and comics through the biographical BD, specifically Sartrian theory and Mathilde Ramadier and Anaïs Depommier’s 2015 *Sartre*. Through its close analysis of verbo-visual relations and issues of representation the article will assess the possibility of using Sartre’s philosophy in conjunction with *Sartre* to assert the relevance of the medium of the (biographical) BD. Beyond this, I will use the example of Sartre and *Sartre* to posit that the creation of philosophical and literary biographical BDs can be used to inject philosophy into the medium itself, thus contributing to the notion of a ‘theory of comics’.

### **Keywords**

philosophy

comics theory

biography

*bande dessinée*

Sartre

Mathilde Ramadier

Anaïs Depommier

Telling the life story of a philosopher is always a challenge, so great is the risk of missing out on the essential which is the prestige of their books, the power of interrogation of their thought, as dry and difficult as it may be. All the more reason to draw the way, from speech bubble to speech bubble. (Marc Crépon, A Life of a Philosopher (*Sartre 2015*: n.pag.)

2015 saw the 35th anniversary of the death of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the publication of Mathilde Ramadier and Anaïs Depommier's biographical *bande dessinée* (BD) bearing his name (*Sartre 2015*: 147).<sup>1</sup> The field of biographies of the philosopher being fairly saturated, and the BD itself not presenting anything immediately radical in terms of its medium, we might doubt that there is any value to be had in this verbo-visual work, whether that be in the field of Sartrean biography, that of BD, or indeed that of biographical BD. This article will prove precisely the opposite.

*Sartre* proposes a celebration and a reimagining of the philosopher's life that realizes in images and in colour the philosopher's (hi)story while integrating extended direct quotation

from Sartre's writings (including his 'autobiography' *Les Mots* [*The Words*] [1964]), as well as those of Simone de Beauvoir. Throughout their often-ludic vignettes, Ramadier and Depommier, through the medium of BD, breathe life into the genre of biography, drawing on the imagination of the contemporary author-artists and using creative license to fill in gaps in our mental image of the past. In so doing, *Sartre* draws the historical figure out of the realm of the seasoned academic into a medium that has long been associated with youth (an association which, while contested in and of itself, has demonstrably little connection with the field of Sartre Studies). Ramadier and Depommier thus offer a creative contribution to the fields of both Sartre studies and comics studies that aligns with Sartre's own (existential) philosophy of identity as an entity that should be in a constant state of flux. Through close analysis of the BD itself alongside a discussion of its philosophical potential, the article intends to contribute to one of the central priorities of *Studies in Comics*, namely the notion of a 'theory of comics'.

Sartre himself worked within the genre of biography, writing on the lives of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Jean Genet and Stéphane Mallarmé with varying degrees of objectivity. His engagement with life writing, as well as his deliberate blurring of the boundaries between literature, philosophy and (auto)biography, cements the value of Sartre as a subject of my analysis; his own interest in the depiction and legacy of historical (literary) greats positions him as an authority in the field as well as lending an additional facet to his 'character'. His status is particularly pertinent given Ann Jefferson's statement that 'Sartre's biographical writings tend to emphasize its fictional, imaginary status' (2017: 289), Sartre's own thought that 'A writer is always a person who has to a greater or lesser degree chosen the imaginary: s/he requires a certain degree of fiction' (1972: 123), as well as his designation of the artist as 'a paradigm for authentic existence' (Morris 1993: 18). Through its natural inclusion of visual poetic licence, as well as the resulting ability for multiple interpretations

by the reader through intratextual verbal-visual interactions, the medium of BD lends itself perfectly to this balance between biography and fiction. This balance is extended by the biographical BD artist-writers because of their ability, through their medium, to propose not a summary of a life, but an assertive and distinctive view of it (cf Peras 2012: n.pag.). Through this harmonious convergence I will use the case of Sartre and *Sartre* to assess and reassert the role and value of biographical BD to the field of BD Studies, as well as the Sartrean legacy.

### **Biographical comics and the question of philosophy**

Biographical comics sit in a paradoxical position within both comics themselves and the field of Comics, Graphic Novel or *Bande Dessinée* Studies.<sup>2</sup> An older, more established trope than their autobiographical counterpart, and existing in a plenitude of titles, biographical comics have nevertheless not been treated with the same scrutiny or celebration in academia (see Miller 2007). Despite this relative dearth of attention, a study of recent publications in Comics Studies<sup>3</sup> reveals an increasing focus on the relationship of comics with philosophy, literature and theory. More broadly, academic works highlight the intermedial potential of comics works, whether this be through ‘translation’, adaptation or reinterpretation, into and out of the medium of comics. With the exception of Groensteen (1987), this article will deliberately limit its use of text to those published since the turn of the century, in order to capitalize on this simultaneous honing and opening up of the field.

Thierry Groensteen’s (*Bande Dessinée: Récit et Modernité*, 1987), engagement with the Francophone BD sphere is key to this article’s analysis of narrative and its theoretical implications. Most notably, his notion of the ‘diversification of narrative strategies’ (Groensteen 1987: 46) underpins my application of Sartrean theory to the BD that bears the philosopher’s name and image. More recently authors have sought to draw out comics beyond their stereotype as explanation or simplification of more complex texts. For example,

Ian Gordon's 2010 retrospective review of comics in their role as biography and/or history, 'Let us not call them graphic novels', draws out the importance of these types of works as more than mere illustrations of events or lives. Issue 5.1 of *Studies in Comics* (2014) takes this desire further to illustrate clearly the journal's aim to assert the importance of comics and the theory thereof. The issue addresses questions such as the pedagogical value of comics (McNicol 2014: 135–54), and possible improvements to comics theory in a context of criticism of previous academia (Cohn 2014: 57–75). These will inform my own contribution to comics theory. Supplying context to my proposal to combine Sartrean philosophy with the *bande dessinée*, David Carrier's 2000 *The Aesthetics of Comics* represents an important landmark in the possibility of combining art and/or art history, philosophy and comics. Carrier's work touches upon elements of philosophy that are useful to this study; predominantly his sections on connections and causality, and the 'problem of representing other minds' (2000: 27), as well as his development of the relationship between comic, creator, audience, and philosophical experience thereof. Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (2012) add to and update Carrier's ideas in their *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach*. This text proposes that comics are inherently translatable (intermedial), a concept that is confirmed by Madeline Gangnes in her comparative analysis of manga and film, in the aforementioned issue of *Studies in Comics* (2014: 155–85). *European Comic Art's* 2013 editorial 'Comics adaptations of literary works' cements the increasing interest in both representing literary figures in comics, and academic work thereon. But it is Maaheen Ahmed's 2016 *Openness of Comics*, which discusses, in her chapter on 'Fictionalised memories and biographies', biographical comics of literary and philosophical figures while taking into consideration their own theories, all the while relating her analysis to Umberto Eco's concept of openness, that aligns most closely with the present article's thesis. Ahmed's choices of comics include both fictionalized elements and direct incorporation of their

subjects' material, a choice shared by Ramadier and Depommier in *Sartre*. Ahmed additionally highlights the fruitful nature of combining biography with comics, through the 'potential of abstracted drawing for narrating and visualising profound ideas, opening up interpretational possibilities while creating distinctive aesthetic atmospheres' (2016: 36–37).

In terms of the primary works themselves, one need only consult the catalogue of BDtheque.com – an online community seeking to encourage interest in, knowledge of, and access to BDs, mangas and comics – to find that the biographical francophone BD has a rich and diverse tradition. With over 200 titles, dating as far back as 1944 and covering a plethora of personalities, the population of this category is illustrative of its importance in the field, even if sales have been described as 'fragile' (Peras 2012: n.pag.). The vast majority of these titles have appeared since the turn of the century, and over half of the total since 2010. francophone literary and philosophical figures hold a position of particularly recent relevance, with a cluster appearing within the last five years, including those taking for their subject the lives of Albert Camus (Lenzini and Gnoni 2013), Simone de Beauvoir (Carquain and Grojnowski 2016), Victor Hugo (Swysen and Hovasse 2014), Arthur Rimbaud (Coste 2013) and Charles Baudelaire (Tuot and Casanave 2006). *Sartre* therefore simultaneously sits within a long historical lineage, in terms of the genre of the biographical BD, and a more recent development, in terms of interest in the comics representation of literary and philosophical figures. Ramadier and Depommier's BD is not the first within this medium to tackle Sartre's philosophy through the medium of comics (see e.g., Donald Palmer's 2007 *Sartre for Beginners*, or the humorous treatment of Sartre's theory in a dedicated section of [existentialcomics.com](http://existentialcomics.com)), nor is it particularly radical as a BD, in terms of form or technique. Nevertheless, theirs is the first BD to lay out Sartre's life in such a directly biographical fashion.

This article will lay out an initial foray into the potential of Sartrean philosophy as a contribution to ‘comics theory’, and will thus draw from a range of Sartre’s works to explore alignment of ideas between philosophy and the *bande dessinée*, from a focal point of Sartre and *Sartre*. A core of texts and concepts are useful to this alignment: *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (Sartre [1939] 2006), for its analysis of the relationship between the world and human interpretation thereof; *The Imaginary* (Sartre [1940] 2010),<sup>4</sup> for its proposed structure of the image and its constituent parts; *L’Être et le néant (Being and Nothingness)* (Sartre 1943), for its discussion of negation, nothingness, and temporality; and *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme (Existentialism is a Humanism)* (Sartre [1943] 1996), for its engagement with ethics. In terms of the BD, I will discuss the general ways in which comics might be said to align with Sartrean theory, as well as exploring selected techniques in more depth. This will be done in an assessment of comics, Sartre and *Sartre* through two main themes – narrative and the quest for meaning; time and space – before concluding on the value of *Sartre* to biographical comics, biographical comics to Sartre, and the contribution of *Sartre* and Sartrean philosophy to comics theory. As an initial study, greater weighting will be put on two of the Sartrean texts: *Being and Nothingness* and *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*. This is primarily for their focus on the fundamentals of identity and ethics, as well as so as not to overwhelm the BD with the applied theory. Furthermore, *The Imaginary* and *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* draw closer to neuroscience than the aims pursued here, so will be used sparingly, and to demonstrate continued crossover and strengthen theoretical relevance. The research will compare structural and aesthetic choices in Ramadier and Depommier’s work with the philosophical ideas of Sartre himself, drawing conclusions that I hope will contribute to the aesthetic component of comics theory, and I thus do not intend to propose them as insights into cognitive science.

### **Sartrean (comics) theory**



There are several examples by which we can begin our Sartrean analysis of the comics medium. The physical definition of comics panels as framed snapshots of characters and scenes readily recalls Sartre's theory whereby on being caught spying through a keyhole, a person (the subject) becomes aware of the possibility of becoming the object of another's 'look' (1943: 292–341). Black panels perform a crude expression of 'nothingness' on first glance, but if we ignore the temptation to see them as simple negation of the image (or the blank page), and bear in mind the involvement of the reader, we can interpret them in the full sense of the term as the *potential* or *power* to negate (Sartre 1943: 37–80). A further example of comics technique that responds in a similar way to Sartrean theory, that is, the borderless tier. Where a tier would normally be made up of a row of panels, this example (*S*: 109) proposes three very similar images in a row, which imply panel setup, but whose loss of edges breaks down reality, meaning and structure to give freedom to the reader to interpret the change in pace and support. In *Sartre* this is combined with the representation of music in this tier,<sup>5</sup> whose staves flow in wavy lines across the lack of defined edges to the gutter to unify the tier,<sup>6</sup> despite the fact that three panels are still present and thus temporal divides exist, if more abstractly.

[INSERT FIG1 HERE]

**Figure 1:** The Borderless Tier (*S*: 109) © Dargaud. Reproduced with kind permission from the publisher.

If the techniques of comics instantly align with Sartrean theory, so too does the medium, which lends itself readily to the key Sartrean concept of freedom, wherein the ability to imagine makes an individual free (*The Imaginary*), and consequently equally readily to the creation of the authentic self, whose choices are made independently of prescribed 'recipes' for life, through comics' provocation of individual interpretation. Even

the more ethical Sartre speaks to comics as an art form, in that ‘what art and morality have in common is that in both cases, we have creativity and invention’ (Sartre 1996: 66). This is of course not limited to comics art, but when linked to the fragmented and cumulative imagery of the medium of comics, this morality aligns perfectly with Sartre’s thoughts on choice and identity. An individual’s means of making choices of identity are inherently similar to the way in which the artist makes aesthetic choices, in that choice, though affected by facticity, is an active process (indeed, we cannot choose not to choose), and that these choices are composite and changing in relation to both aesthetics and identity.<sup>7</sup> Even the way in which deeper meaning is often to be found in the potentialities of the gutters of comics suits Sartre’s theory of the ‘transformation of the world’ as a means by which to grasp emotions, to live life ‘as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic’ (Sartre 2006: 39, 40). The gutters allow for deterministic processes of narrative to be dissolved, transforming spatio-temporal relations into an openly choice-based, or even magical, realm of interpretation.

As Ahmed outlines in her discussion of the 1998 comic *Salut, Deleuze!*, structural simplicity can deceive a reader in biographical comics of philosophical figures ‘due to the abstraction involved and the equally significant disjunctions or differences introduced by the narrating images’ (2016: 39). *Sartre* evokes similar surface-level simplicity, misleading the reader into considering the BD a non-radical contribution to the field. Where *Salut, Deleuze!* uses repetition to deceive, *Sartre* uses gentle pace and consistent layout to lull the reader into a false sense of simplicity. Ramadier and Depommier draw our attention to strategic points within their BD through the use of structures that break from this established normalcy, all the while maintaining a temporally straightforward narrative. This simplicity contrasted with atypical layouts put *Sartre* as a contestant for Ahmed’s ‘open’ comic, given that these techniques are carefully placed for maximum relevance to the narrative at play. *Sartre* is

well-suited for Ahmed's designation given open comics' multifaceted interpretability, particularly taking into account the philosopher's own notion that 'we must start from subjectivity' (Sartre [1943] 1996: 26). The general simplicity, combined with occasional surreal moments, makes *Sartre* able to explore complex theories around existence and identity, through its particular interaction of narrative and imagery.

There are five main atypical layouts that provide landmarks in Ramadier and Depommier's BD. These are as follows: (1) the splash and single spread; (2) the two-, three-, and four-panel page; (3) varying use of black panels, and black panels with white text; (4) the single, borderless tier whose content crosses medial as well as physical boundaries (or lack thereof); (5) the single use of a ten-panel page that also subverts linearity, in that it is to be read vertically and in parallel rather than horizontally and sequentially. These will be considered, within the chosen thematic divisions, for their value as representative of Sartrean values, as well as their place within comics theory, with two taking centre stage for more detailed analysis (the splash pages, and the black panels). Only one of these, a splash page (*S*: 47), may be considered sensationalist, simply because of its deliberate normalization of nudity and alternative sexualities;<sup>8</sup> the others are deliberately integrated for the way in which they 'work figuratively for the story' (Ahmed 2016: 154), and in our case, the alignment of theory. In all cases they follow Ahmed's designation of having a potentially disorienting function (in her case through specific comics), and certainly 'forc[e] the reader to make sense of the material on [their] own, consequently rendering the precise construal of the events unique for each reading' (2016: 153).

### **Narrative and the quest for meaning**

Writing on the history of BD narrative and its analysis, Thierry Groensteen recounts that while the medium of BD in the late twentieth century 'is characterised by a

multiplication of means of alternative narrating, a diversification of narrative strategies', no BD artist has explicitly 'chosen the path of radical suspension of meaning' (Groensteen 1987: 46). Groensteen does not rule out the possibility of non-narrative, however, and notes that such a theory could prove productive (1987: 47). This 'diversification of narrative strategies' is crucial to analysis of Ramadier and Depommier's BD, in the way that it undermines Sartre's own aim to break from traditional narrative structures. In his writings in general, Sartre forwards the idea of the individual's responsibility to create meaning through their choices (and in so doing, making choices that, though individual, could be applicable on a universal level),<sup>9</sup> and perhaps most notably imposes this in his autobiography, *Les Mots* in two ways. First, his text is semi-fictional. Several elements are invented, or distorted, to reflect Sartre's desire to inject creativity and choice into a past that he cannot change. Secondly, in writing about his whole life as a discussion of his childhood, Sartre not only condenses and compacts the timeframe but also manipulates the order of events to suit his constructed narrative. While Sartre's autobiography is not of central focus in this article, given that *Sartre's* narrative is heavily based on *Les Mots*, this condensing of a life is clearly reflected in its *bande dessinée* version, which naturally omits a large percentage of Sartre's life (as any representational scheme would necessitate) but opens up interpretational possibilities through the visual format. In terms of specific relevance to *Sartre*, the BD, as a more obviously constructed version of Sartre's life, meticulously unpicks and 'corrects' Sartre's own 'diversification of narrative strategies'. This might be argued to paradoxically simultaneously un- and re-diversify the life story of the philosopher. Furthermore, in its opposition of intended narrative order, Ramadier and Depommier's BD presents as a potential candidate for Groensteen's 'non-narrative'. This is particularly the case given that although there are conventions for reading order comics panels, the layout of *Sartre* varies, inviting individual choice of directionality, most notably through a page (S: 119) that contains

two vertical strips mimicking film reels and their associated narrative constructs. The significant reduction in pace and resulting close similarity of the series of images change our perception of movement both in terms of left-right dominance in the reading of western texts (replacing it with a provocation to read in a top-bottom fashion), and the desire to compact these images into one, as in a film strip or a flip book but without the ability to activate the motion.

[INSERT FIG2 HERE]

**Figure 2:** The ‘Film Strips’ (*S*: 119) © Dargaud. Reproduced with kind permission from the publisher.

The most immediate way that comics respond to the question of narrative, in combination with the Sartrean question of meaning, is Sartre’s theory that ‘before you live, life is nothing; it is up to you to give it meaning’ (Sartre [1943] 1996: 74). Furthermore, that the universality of the individual is ‘not given, but perpetually constructed’ (Sartre [1943] 1996: 61). This builds on both the cumulative nature of comics imagery and Sartre’s theory of the construction of meaning through choice. If, from what we have seen so far, the building and manipulation of narrative and meaning is particularly effectively applied to the structural integrity of comics, what happens when there are blanks (in this case, black panels) in the series? These are used strategically in *Sartre* for their relevance to the narrative flow and, I suggest, to build in metaphors for Sartre’s own theory.<sup>10</sup> Beyond a simple visual analogy for nothingness, or negation, these panels introduce other existentialist themes like death, angst, and *malaise* through their placement in the work. Though multiple, they are not numerous (only six occurrences, four with white text on),<sup>11</sup> and through this sparing use lend an effective gloom to the BD, as well as playing into Sartre’s statement that ‘nothingness introduces a quasi-multiplicity at the heart of being’ (1943: 172). The blank spaces create

extra possibility for meaning precisely through their absence thereof, possibly because of the human inability to perceive nothing, particularly of their own non-existence, reminding us that ‘all consciousness is consciousness *of* something’ (Sartre 2010: 11, original emphasis). The inanimate object of the BD, through its black panels, renders the individual reader more conscious of their individuality.

In each case the black panels highlight endings (sometimes containing an element of beginnings), or of uncertain passage, and always implying that a picture would not suffice to encapsulate the sentiment of the words. The gaps created are spatio-temporal in each case, and two of them are presented side by side as a pair, adding extra weight as well as an ethical element through the particular choice of writing included on them: Ramadier’s paraphrasing of Sartrean philosophy. If, as Miller writes, ‘the narrative process of the medium [of BD] is founded on ellipsis’ (2007: 88), the use of black panels, especially in the case of *Sartre*, represents an active interruption of the work that redoubles the dramatic effect of the indeterminate nature of the inter-frame space. In the first instance (*S*: 42), the black panel begins with the French word ‘Bref’ (‘anyway’, or ‘in short’, sometimes used quite informally), after a written ellipsis (‘[...]’) in the previous panel, making the change linguistically as well as physically abrupt, with its placement on the page turn, from bottom right corner to top left. This change is additionally paired with a sudden chromatic shift, from bilious yellow tones to pastoral greens. This complements the obvious black and white binary of the black panel and the white frame. Nevertheless, *Sartre*’s use of colour between panels can be contrasted with his use within panels. The consistent lack of chromatic distinction seems to reflect his own thought that ‘no object, no group of objects is particularly designed to be organised as foreground or background: everything depends on the direction of my attention’ (Sartre 1943: 44). Even human characters are given no special foregrounding. This suits Groensteen’s notes on the manipulation and ‘diversification of narrative strategies’

(1987: 46): if no particular element is designated most important, (anti-)narrative structures are opened up fully to reader interpretation.

In the next case (*S*: 43), there are not even any words in the entirely black frame. Instead, the anti-frame stands as a marker point, a significant pause despite its diminutive size. It is only at this point that we are incited to reflect back on the preceding panels and tiers (changing the directionality of our reading), as we realize that these two first black panels form a meta-ellipsis: the black panels perform the role of bookends around a memory sequence. This realization also makes the reader metaphorically step back from the work, to look at the double page set-up as a whole, again distorting the narrative by pausing to take in the wider implications. The final example (*S*: 130) fulfils a self-referential role, since it describes visual deficiency in the form of interruptions to Sartre's eyesight. It also centres on words of anxiety or panic, including 'urgency' (or 'crisis'), 'limits' and 'uneasiness'. This technique, possible in part due to the events of Sartre's life, creates a means of 'mediating realities and imaginaries' (Ahmed 2016: 11). The physical description hides a philosophical point, where the text reads 'un malaise en cache toujours un autre' ('one malaise always hides another'), where 'malaise' can mean both 'dizzy spell', or the quintessential existentialist predicament of the same name, incorporating anxiety, despair, and meaninglessness. The text colour is also important in this respect: the simple use of white provides a reversal that is particularly effective at drawing the reader/viewer's attention. This panel is placed at the end of the page, bringing with it obvious effects of finality, even though the narrative picks up its pace immediately afterwards, and the geography is re-set to Sartre's native Paris, reflecting his own actions of carrying on with his stressful lifestyle despite his degrading health. Both of these black panels (*S*: 43, 130) take place within a stretch of text entirely written by the author-artists of the BD, highlighting perhaps a lack of original narrative texts on the sections, and relying on the verbal as well as visual imagination of the BD's creators. The

black panel forms a sort of anti-inter-frame space, given that it is itself framed by regular, white inter-frame spaces, yet through its negation of the coloured panel, this blackout demonstrates how ellipsis can be used to its full potential for creating ambiguity and multi-faceted meaning.

### **Time and space**

If gaps in the narrative add dimensions to the meaning(s) presented in comics, what is the particular impact of the fragments in between? Ahmed notes that

fragmentation lies at the heart of comics because of their reliance on dividing space to create a continuous narrative. Furthermore, each division uses scraps of both words and images that are, to varying extents, dependent on each other for meaning (2016: 151)

This flitting process of mutual dependence reveals a resulting temporality in line with Sartre's theory that 'le passé n'est plus, l'avenir n'est pas encore, quant au présent instantané, chacun sait bien qu'il n'est pas du tout, il est la limite d'une division infinie, comme le point sans dimension' ('the past is no longer, the future is not yet; as for the immediate present, it is well known that it *is* not at all, it is the limit of infinite division, like a point without dimension') (1943: 142). Sartre's choice of word 'instantané' is crucial to our comparison with visual media and comics, given its dual meaning of 'instantaneous' in its adjectival form (temporal instantaneity being an aim of the presentation of the visual component in a given frame in comics), and 'snapshot' in its nominal form (with obvious links to photography and visual representation). Sartre continues to develop this sense of perpetual presence (i.e., physicality), claiming that 'everything is present', 'the present is a perpetual flight in the face



of being’, and that ‘being is everywhere and nowhere: wherever one tries to seize it, it is opposite, it escapes’ (1943: 143, 158, 177). Sartre’s manipulation of language clearly brings out the close relationship between time and space, particularly taking into account the dual spatio-temporal signification of ‘present’. Furthermore, he notes that ‘everything happens as if the present were a perpetual hole in being, no sooner filled is it constantly being reborn’ (Sartre 1943: 182), recalling the use in comics in general, and in *Sartre* in particular, of the black panel as gap, ellipsis or ‘hole in being’. In application to comics, the word ‘present’ is particularly pertinent in terms of its capacity to (re)present, both literally and metaphorically. Finally, as a medium, comics respond to Sartre’s designation of the future as the ‘perpetual possibilisation of possibles [*sic*]’ (1943: 164), given their aforementioned multifaceted interpretability. As Ann Miller notes, ellipsis in comics is ‘the gap in the signifying chain through which temporal and spatial transitions are managed’ (2007: 88–89), which certainly could be described as the ‘possibilisation of possibles’. Miller’s discussion of the inter-frame space is extended in *Sartre* to the *intra*-frame, in that the black panels remain panels, even if they simultaneously stand in as ‘gaps’.

In terms of this ‘intra-frame’ ellipsis, the most obvious examples of the ‘content between the spaces’ and, in a sense, the least fragmented part of comics, are the splash and the spread. Their comparative physical stature slows the pace, as we might expect from the comics medium, and the specific content at play in *Sartre* takes advantage of this decompression to allow for philosophical development. Ramadier and Depommier do not limit themselves to the traditional use of the splash as an opening or introductory device (in fact, the first does not come in until page 28 of the BD). Instead, they employ nine splashes across the three sections and epilogue of their work. Three of these are designed to represent place, specifically national capitals: Paris (*S*: 28), Berlin (*S*: 38), and Paris again (*S*: 64), and with them, sociocultural contexts specific to the time and the protagonists. Nevertheless, the

element of decompression gives the splashes and single spread a timelessness almost like a memory, which Sartre describes as presenting ‘the being that we were with a plenitude of being that bestows upon it a sort of poetry’ (*EN*: 154). This contrasts with the use of space, which although initially perceived as more spread through physical size, on closer inspection reveals a series of inner divisions.

In specific reference to the three ‘national capitals’ splashes, these divisions respond to Madeline Gangnes’s 2014 discussion of the architecture of the comics page and its translatability across artistic forms (or in our case, intertranslatability with philosophy). Gangnes’s use of cantilevering (2014: 157–65) can be applied to the three splash pages of *Sartre*, though in our case it is cantilevering internal to the panels rather than taking place in the guttering, in that it is the angles that provide the action within an otherwise static tableau. This ranges from the crooked streets that spider-web across the first Paris splash, to the elbow-shaped road that dominates the Berlin splash, back to the double slant created by the balcony intersecting the window, and the implicit slant of the reader, in the final Paris scene. In the first two splashes the birds-eye-view aspect gives a sense of aerial geography, which has been manipulated to change the compass points for a particular focus (in both cases churches, notably important for historio-religious reasons). In all cases, therefore, where Gangnes uses cantilevering in the proper, temporal sense, in *Sartre* the technique can be said to act as a manipulation of space. This again draws upon a sense of existential ‘malaise’, of a hidden rhythm to be found within a moment of apparent calm. This becomes particularly pertinent when taking into account the miniscule caption on the final Paris splash, which reads ‘What does Paris look like now?’ (*S*: 64) This narrative moment can be taken as a comment on the state of the city in its socio-historic context, or as a self-referential comment by the author-artists to highlight the rendering of Sartre’s Paris as BD.

[INSERT FIG3 HERE]

**Figure 3:** ‘What does Paris look like now?’ (S: 64) © Dargaud. Reproduced with kind permission from the publisher.

These moments and techniques draw back round to the close relationship between time and space as laid out by Sartre. Furthermore, he describes space and its form/background divisions as ‘neither the continuous, nor the discontinuous, but the permanent passage from the continuous to the discontinuous’ (1943: 220). This spatio-temporal blurring suits the verbo-visual blurring performed by comics. A final, and quite different, element can be found in the splash pages, if taken as a series in themselves, independent of their placement in the BD’s narrative. Despite the BD’s apparent focus, central protagonist, and general *raison d’être* being Sartre, in one way or another the philosopher himself is absent from all of them. These are as follows: Paris and its intellectual and religious epicentre beyond Sartre, with his figure present but not visible (S: 28); Sartrean philosophy and its visual representation, with Sartre present but with surreal tomato imagery superimposed, and multiple captions (S: 36); a busy street in Berlin, with Sartre entirely absent (S: 38); female sexuality with Sartre not required (S: 47); Paris as viewed from a window, with Sartre absent (S: 64); the Liberation of Paris, with Sartre absent (S: 87); Camus and his relationships with women, with Sartre present, but in a panel within the main panel (S: 100); Sartre presenting but with his back to the reader (S: 104); a letter from Sartre but without him present (S: 140), and a spread of Sartre’s funeral, from which he is demonstrably corporeally present but mentally absent (S: 146–47). That this comparative flux of splashes (and the single spread) shows a theme of its own is multiply important, in that it lends the BD a level of meta-narrative, as well as the potential for a ‘first person’ reading of sorts, identifying the reader not only with Sartre but *as* Sartre. Furthermore, the ability for the comic to make the protagonist seem absent when the character is present takes up Sartre’s theory that ‘man is always outside of himself, it is in

projecting himself and losing himself outside of himself that he makes man exist' ([1943] 1996: 76).<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion: Sketch for a theory of comics**

It is no accident that comics respond so readily to Sartre's philosophy, as I have begun to demonstrate above. The medium inherently has strong ties to issues of identity, and (Sartrean) Existentialism aims to analyse Being in such a way that highlights the very fundamentals thereof. Part of what makes this relationship work is the constructed nature of comics, presence of an awareness of this constructedness, and the resulting impact on issues of identity. Christopher Murray depicts the comic as 'a text that is very much a hall of mirrors, one that reflects, distorts and projects images of identity suggested by the text and brought by the reader' (2002: 188). Ahmed notes that 'identity crises reflect the nature of comics themselves, since they are dependent on disjointedness and the intertwining of two very different modes of expression' (2016: 162). This is a tendency that I feel aligns with Sartre's depictions of identity construction and crisis, particularly when it comes to self-coincidence, reality and representation. Sartre describes human reality as 'the perpetual passing towards a coincidence with the self that is never given' (1943: 125–26), but that 'at the limit of coincidence with the self, in fact the self disappears to make way for the identical being' (1943: 112). The disjointedness of the comics (or in our case, BD) form sets up this notion of a reality that is in 'perpetual passing', constantly overtaking itself through its anxious creation and re-creation of reality through its panels and scenes. The representation of the protagonist in particular, and in our case with reference to the idea of biographical BD, as well as biography more broadly, constantly tests the boundaries of coincidence with the 'self' being explored, leaving a multitude of 'identical' beings that take the place of the original figure, who, as we have established, is in constant 'flight outside of themselves' (Sartre 1943: 414). This implied othering of the subject as an individuation thereof refers us

back to Sartre's 'keyhole' effect and the 'look', which entirely suits the representation of identity, and particularly that of Sartre, in this verbo-visual format.

What, then, can we conclude on the value of the biographical BD, the combination with philosophy, Existentialist philosophy in particular, and through the specific example of Sartre and *Sartre*? In introducing this article, I referenced McNicol's (2014) argument that literary adaptations could and should be used as more than mere stepping-stones to the main works. The same can be said of figures represented in comics. McNichol goes so far as to propose a hierarchy of engagement with comics, suggesting that audiences identify *more* with works of literature if they are presented in comics format. In today's reception of Existentialist theory, with many seeing it as outdated, *Sartre* has pedagogical potential for allowing re-engagement with the philosopher and his thought, and in a way that builds upon, instead of replacing or leading into, this theory. Additionally, while Ahmed argues that 'subject matter like the philosophical discourse in *Salut, Deleuze!* [...] require the reader to be familiar with the ideas of several philosophers as well as their interconnections' (2016: 24), *Sartre* does not demand such an intensive extra knowledge, particularly if we consider the paratextual extras supplied, including genealogy of characters. Its style is quirky and accessible, within a muted chromatic palette that often recalls sepia tones and early colour technology that both characterized the sociocultural context to Sartre's personal timeline. Additional evidence for the continued interest in Sartre, including its surprisingly willing application to the youthful medium of the BD, is that Editions Dargaud, publisher of *Sartre* stated that the biographies they publish 'are not "marketing" books. We rarely initiate them' (in Peras 2012: n.pag.). Ramadier and Depommier, as young, emerging *bande dessinée* author-artists, as well as heralding from the French tradition (though both notably now residing outside of Sartre's homeland), have chosen this subject knowing his status in the field of education, philosophy,

and indeed the BD. In introducing Sartre to the BD market, the author-artists fundamentally change the way a whole segment of society views the philosopher, his life, and his thought.

Hermione Lee notes that biography as a ‘portrait’, can represent an ‘investigation of the subject which will shape how posterity views them’ (2009: 2). Ramadier and Depommier, through their use of the medium of BD, create a very literal (set of) portrait(s), a changing depiction of Sartre that encourages as an investigation of its subject. Lee goes on to assert that ‘as biography is always involved with the social and cultural politics of its time and place, so its assumptions change about what is major or minor, permitted or shocking, mainstream or alternative’ (2009: 126). Again the introduction of this canonical literary figure into the field of the BD entangles the figure irrevocably with a new audience, and with the sociocultural consequences thereof. This is particularly so because Sartre, perhaps foreshadowing his representation in BD format, claims that ‘back in the day, I used to represent my life with images’ (1964: 187). Given that Sartre references on several occasions throughout *Les Mots* a childhood desire to become-book, the writer’s relationship with images makes him seem a willing subject for BD. In a particularly evocative example, he claims that ‘my bones are made of leather and cardboard, my parchment-esque flesh smells of glue and mushrooms, in sixty kilos of paper I settle myself, completely at ease’ (Sartre 1964: 158). Arguably the act of rendering Sartre BD extends both his desire to become-book and his self-representation through images into becoming-BD, particularly if we apply this to verbal-visual language. Through the conversion of the person Sartre to the book and BD Sartre, and the resulting conversion to the character of Sartre, the authors are able to actively redetermine what might be considered somewhat complex philosophical development as mainstream. Lee’s comment that the assumptions of biography change over time can therefore be extended into biography’s potential power *to change* assumptions.

This demonstrates that biographical comics may have a positive impact on philosophy, literature, difficult figures and texts, and the pedagogical potential of increased accessibility thereof. What, therefore, does *Sartre* do for the field of biographical comics, and how does it fulfil the aim of this article to contribute to the development of comics theory? Laurence Grove notes that ‘BD Studies in France have been marked by author-based criticism and the erection of pedestals, but also by a strong need for national identity’ (2014: 83), that ‘France boasts a tradition related to a long history of text-image culture’ (Grove 2014: 85), and that ‘a healthy strand of BD Studies considers the broad history of text-image culture’ (Grove 2014: 87). *Sartre*, then, sits in a strong tradition of the medium and the study thereof, in that Sartre is a clearly established figure of French national identity, through his involvement in several key events in French history (e.g., Second World War and the Resistance; May 1968), as well as his role as a ‘public intellectual’ so dear to French culture. The BD furthermore contributes to the importance of the text-image culture to which Grove refers. BD Studies’ awareness of this context means that *Sartre* can be proposed as a valuable contribution to the field.

Ramadier and Depommier’s text highlights an extra layer often present, but not always explicit, in text-image relations, that is, (Existentialist) philosophy. This article has sought to demonstrate that this layer is to be found between the boundaries of verbo-visual representation, through the fluctuating relationship between text, image and meaning, through treatments of narrative, time and space. The application of Sartrean philosophy to a BD dedicated to his life illustrates this particularly well, but it can also be applied to biographical comics more broadly, in its symbiotic relationship with issues of identity in both media. Extending further, this particular philosophy might be said to contribute to comics theory through its discussion of identity, in that ‘in creating the individual that we want to be, we create at the same time an image of the individual as we believe they should be’ (Sartre [1943] 1996: 31–32). Comics create a space for the exploration of new, alternative identities

as well as shaping wider perceptions thereof. The combination of Sartre and *Sartre* contributes to biographical comics, as well as comics theory more broadly, by offering up new perspectives in the application of philosophy of identity to a medium and its Studies that seek to redefine identity in visual form. This application thus lends weight to comics as having meaningful impact on the creation and changing of cultural reality and its assumptions, as well as comics theory as unifying and expressing this potential.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of space, in-text, parenthesized references to *Sartre* will use the abbreviation S. It is intended that this will also reduce confusion between the BD work and the philosopher.

<sup>2</sup> In the interest of accuracy, I refer to *Sartre* and works of its type as *bande dessinée* (hereafter BD); in the interest of clarity, as well as my general aim to contribute to the nascent field of comics theory, I refer to comics, graphic novels and *bande dessinée* on a broader basis as comics, as well as their academic field as Comics Studies (capitalized). This is not to conflate the various verbo-visual works into the same category, rather, to allow for a common framework for a theoretical, or philosophical, approach.

<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive *Etat présent* of BD Studies, see Laurence Grove (2014).

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<sup>4</sup> For the convenience of an anglophone audience, I quote from the published English translations of *Sketch* and *The Imaginary*, particularly as quoting is not extensive for these two texts. I include both the date of the English translation from which I quote, as well as that of the original French work, to give a sense of context, as well as to present the texts in order of their original publication and thus development of ideas. In the case of *L'Être et le néant*, I quote in my own English translation unless it is particularly linguistically relevant to do so in French, in which case I provide a translation in brackets. This is the same for *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, as well as because it has not been published in English translation. For the latter text the earlier date refers to the talk given by Sartre; the text is its published transcript.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the representation of music and 'silent sound' in comics, see Gangnes (2014).

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the use, misuse and blurring of the gutter, see Miller (2007: 86).

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the notion goes un-contested, merely that the processes can be said to align. See, for example, Jan Baetens (2001) in terms of aesthetics. Criticisms of Sartrean existentialism and individualism can be found (and addressed) in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Sartre [1943] 1996).

<sup>8</sup> We might also note that in its original French context, neither of these aspects of *Sartre* is particularly sensational.

<sup>9</sup> Sartre notes in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* that a person is not only responsible for their own existence, but also for all humans ([1943] 1996: 31).

<sup>10</sup> Though the author-artists of this BD are emerging talents, and thus the amount of information concerning them is not vast, it appears that, at least on the part of Ramadier, an active, personal and philosophical connection with Sartre is at play, even if she and her colleague are not active comics theorists. Thus even if techniques have not been constructed with Sartrean theories as a sole priority ('My aim was to make them visible by showing *the*

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*man* behind these strong ideas and inconsistencies' [Ramadier 2017: n.pag.]), awareness is certainly present.

<sup>11</sup> In only one case (57) is the black panel designed to represent a scene where characters remain present (perhaps the same scene but lacking light); this panel has a speech bubble on to show the continuation of characters and events in conflict with the sense of ending provoked by this and all of the other black panels.

<sup>12</sup> I have maintained Sartre's masculine here for the sake of clarity within this linguistically complex phrase. I suggest that these theories can be used to apply to either sex, and that generally we might replace references to 'man' with 'the individual' with little to no damage to Sartre's philosophical meaning, sociocultural stereotypes notwithstanding.