

## Subjectivity and Comics Journalism in the French Magazine *XXI*

### Discrepancy between Paratexts and Texts

Comics journalism is a form of narrative journalism, but also plays a part in a much wider movement – the hybridization of cultural products – and the increasing blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. It presents itself as a way to inject new life into a profession currently in crisis by resurrecting reporter subjectivity. Based on a corpus from the magazine *XXI*, this article analyses how the alleged subjectivity is expressed in the comics journalism paratext and how it is translated into the cartoon itself – in both its graphic and its textual dimensions. One of the most interesting results is the contrast between the two parts of the analysis: while the paratext almost systematically emphasizes the authors' personal involvement, the authors make their presence fully known in slightly fewer than half of the cartoons analysed.

### 1. Introduction

Although comics journalism<sup>1</sup> can be traced back to the beginnings of press cartoons, the genre did not really make a proper appearance until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically following the pioneering work of Joe Sacco in the United States. In French-speaking Europe, it was *XXI* magazine (launched in 2008) that contributed to the growth of the genre by making it a regular feature. Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, the magazine's co-founder, describes it as one “of the ways to re-engage with readers, invite them to look and reflect”, one of *XXI*'s proposals was to “[c]ome up with another way of understanding the world when newspapers announce they no longer have the resources for in-depth news features” (cited in Van Cutsem 2018).<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon then rapidly gathered momentum to such an extent that in November 2010 there was a special issue of *Le Monde diplomatique* published entirely in cartoon format and this was followed by the launch of two new magazines given over wholly to comics journalism, *La Revue dessinée* in 2013 and *Topo* in 2016.

While comics journalism presents itself as a means of injecting new life into a profession currently in crisis, the genre still lacks a precise definition and clear boundaries. Practitioners and specialists do, however, agree on the fundamental paradox that underlines it: because it belongs to the world of journalism, it is based on the practice of information-gathering at a grassroots level – which is the basis of reportage – and has a clear aim to report objectifiable facts, yet it broadly rejects the classic concept of journalistic objectivity (cf. Dabitsch 2009; Dozo 2010; Le Foulgoc 2009; Williams 2005).

This rejection of the objectivity ideal is already obvious in the choice of drawing as the means of expression: as Philippe Marion writes (1997, 144), “[i]n the same way as, in photography, the referential effect is undeniable, the effect of the subjective interpretation of reality is every bit as intransigent in drawing.” However, the rejection of objectivity will often go beyond the subjectivity inherent in the drawing to become a form of journalistic stance, which is nicely summarized by Joe Sacco, one of the founding fathers of comics journalism: “You become part of the story if you’re a journalist. [...] I mean, you can try to write yourself out of it, but you become involved. I think it’s more honest to show that your involvement affects people” (cited in Williams 2005, 55). Séverine Bourdieu observes therefore that:

many recent studies of comics journalism have underlined that one of its key characteristics is the visual representation of the author-narrator-investigator in his story [...]. In most of the cartoons, the focus is not only the involuntary subjectivity of all representations, but also what Florence Aubenas called “assumed subjectivity,” which involves incorporating into the final story the narrator’s personal experience, his mistakes, prejudices, emotions, and the questions he has asked himself but which have remained unanswered. (Bourdieu 2012, §10)

Thierry Groensteen (2018, 98) even cites first-person narrative as a defining feature of comics journalism, “where the narrator is the witness who recounts and contextualizes events” – whereas this type of narrator was virtually absent from classic cartoons.

Although it plays a part in the very much broader movement of the hybridization of cultural products<sup>3</sup> and the increasing blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction,<sup>4</sup> comics journalism is more specifically a form of narrative journalism – which also favours the organization of events in time sequence, unlike the traditional inverted pyramid model, which is very much more prevalent in factual journalism, while (re-)prioritizing the experiential dimension of the story (cf. Hart 2011; Lallemand 2011; Stewart 1998). In the case of written narrative journalism, American practitioners tend to acknowledge the subjective nature of the story without necessarily reflecting it in their copy, whereas French practitioners are more likely to mark their subjective involvement in their stories more explicitly (cf. Vanoost 2014). In comics journalism, subjectivity appears to be a characteristic propounded in both the United States and the French-speaking world, thereby suggesting it is more important in comics journalism specifically.

This article explores subjectivity and the position of comics journalism in journalism as a whole through the systematic analysis of a corpus taken from *XXI* magazine: How do the magazine’s authors and editors describe comics journalism? Do they link it to journalism or use other references? How are the features of comics journalism (subjectivity, involvement on the ground or even in the storyboards) depicted in the paratext and how are they translated into the cartoons themselves?

## 2. Method

As our investigation relates specifically to what the cartoon genre “does” to journalism, we decided to restrict our corpus to the cartoons that have appeared in the information press – albums indeed have a more tenuous link with journalism, its conventions and constraints. Since the current popularity of comics journalism is linked with the success of *XXI*, our analysis focused on the cartoons published in this magazine. Our corpus comprises the cartoons that appeared in the first 23 issues, with the exception of the four-episode series “Des nouvelles d’Alain” published in numbers 8 to 11. Our aim was to study comics journalism as a regular “institutionalized” feature of a journalistic magazine, whereas “Des nouvelles d’Alain” was clearly a one-off project.

First, we analysed the paratext (cf. Genette 1987) of these 23 examples of comics journalism: the covers, tables of contents, editorials and texts introducing the cartoons. We examined where, and how, the cartoons were announced, and the words used to refer to the authors and their approaches. We also investigated whether or not the magazine commented on the genre itself, how it was used and its legitimacy. Thus, this part of our study was based on traditional content and discourse analysis techniques (use of vocabulary, themes presented, etc.).

The second part of the analysis focused on the cartoons themselves, in both their textual and their graphic dimensions. One question guided our investigation: How does the subjectivity claimed by the authors, and confirmed by the experts, translate concretely into the text and images of the cartoons analysed? Here, the analysis used two main categories of Genette’s narratology (1972): voice and focalization. Voice refers to the agent responsible for telling the story, in other words it answers the question “who speaks”. Focalization, on the other hand, asks “who sees”, what is the field of selection of narrative information.

## 3. Analysis of the Paratext

G rard Genette defines paratext as those elements that accompany the text and extend it, “precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make the text present, to ensure its presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption” (Genette 1987, 7). It is an area of transition and transaction in which the pragmatics and strategy of the work are confirmed. Genette (1987, 10) calls peritext the elements that are found within the same volume as the text. The components studied here fall mainly into what the theoretician calls the “editorial peritext,” for which the editor is responsible. However, Genette (1987, 20) strictly limits the editorial peritext to the cover, the title page and the appendices. The page that introduces the cartoons published by the magazine is more like a “preface”: “any type of introductory text (preliminary or postliminary), auctorial or allographic, which talks about the text that

follows or precedes” (Genette 1987, 150). Prefaces, whether written by the author or someone else, can be used for different purposes, for instance make reading recommendations, praise the text, provide information on its origins or its author, comment on the title etc. (ibid., 182-253). Genette (ibid., 207) singles out the declaration of intent, in which the author states what he intended to do and provides a generic description.

### 3.1. Comics Takes Precedence over Journalism

From our analysis of the paratexts, we can clearly see that comics journalism is important and held in high regard by the magazine’s editors. Although the magazine’s cover features only four to five topics every quarter, the cartoon is always mentioned on the cover and, as such, appears to be one of the content highlights. The table of contents always refers to it in the same way (“a graphic narrative”). The cartoon invariably appears in the same part of the magazine in the same format: a text signed “XXI”, followed by a storyboard setting in motion a story that is always 30 pages long. The cartoon is therefore presented as a clearly identified and identifiable regular feature.

The genre is referred to as either “comics reportage” (on the cover) or, more frequently, “graphic narrative” (inside). Even though it is not systematically mentioned in the magazine, the use of the phrase “graphic narrative” places XXI in the context of the legacy of Joe Sacco. This is underlined in issue 13, which features a work by this author.

“Joe Sacco [...] is considered to have invented immersion journalism in comics form. *Palestine*, a text on which he worked for several years in the 1990s, received the prestigious American Book Award in 1996. Sacco had just legitimized a genre – the graphic narrative, or nonfiction graphic novel – that was about to blossom. When we created XXI three years ago, we firmly believed that Joe belonged in our midst” (13, p. 167<sup>5</sup>).

Yet, because this reference largely remains implicit, there is no clear link with a certain journalistic tradition.

The editors may be fairly ambiguous about the genre, but the way in which they describe the authors is clearer: most of them are not journalists.

Number of contributions	Issues	Names
3	1, 11, 20	Jean-Philippe Stassen
2	8, 10 14, 23 6, 17 12, 19 15, 21	Olivier Balez Renaud de Heyn Hippolyte Olivier Kugler Didier Tronchet
1	18 8 3 4 22 2 2 5 16 7 9 9 18 13 4	Ugo Bertotti Pierre Christin Cmax Denis Deprez Marie Dubois Jacques Ferrandez Pierre Ferrandez Jean Harambat Jeroen Janssen Maximilien Le Roy Erwan Manac'h Gwenaël Manac'h Agnès Montanari Joe Sacco Jia Yi

Chart 1: List of authors published in XXI magazine<sup>6</sup>

Although these authors' names may already be familiar to those in the know, the terms used to describe them are particularly revealing. They are not established information media professionals. The only two actually belonging to the world of journalism are described by the editors as an illustrator who "became a journalist" (1, p. 156) and a student (9, p. 169).

Profession given	Occurrences	Issues <sup>7</sup>
<b>Illustration</b>	<b>20</b>	
Author (of cartoons)	2	14, 15
Cartoon scriptwriter	1	8
Author / graphic artist	1	23
Graphic artist	8	2, 2, 4, 7, 12, 13, 17, 18
Graphic artist with a penchant for reality	1	3
The presentation relates to the author's "drawing"	4	6, 19, 20, 22
"He loves to take his pencils all round the world"	1	8
Illustrator	1	5
Illustration student	1	9
<b>Journalism</b>	<b>2</b>	
The illustrator who became a journalist	1	1
Aspiring journalist	1	9
<b>Not specified</b>	<b>6</b>	4, 10, 11, 16, 18, 21

Chart 2: List of expressions used to describe the XXI authors

### 3.2. First-Hand Account

The *editorials* describe the magazine as belonging to the field of journalism, particularly referring to the legacy of Albert Londres – probably the most famous French author of *grand reportage*. The editors specify that *XXI* offers a different type of journalism to other media that have been drawn into fast news (cf. 6). What differentiates them is the reporting because it has “the force of reality” (1, p. 3). “To start grasping this profound reality, we believe in the power of observation. I was there, I saw it, I am telling the story. It is very simple but the effect is considerable” (6, p. 3). “Reporting comes from the centre of the action, from grassroots level, but it is not a futile genre [...]. It is another way to understand politics, right at the heart of the matter and not from the sidelines” (18, p. 3). The grassroots focus is what sets *XXI* apart, and we shall see how this also applies to the graphic narrative.

The *introductory texts* are always structured in exactly the same way: the lead presents the subject of the story and the body of the text introduces the author and describes the approach they took. It very quickly becomes clear that the editors of *XXI* set great store in spending time on the ground. The authors have remained in the field for between 12 days and two years (cf. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 17, 18, 19), they have made several trips (cf. 2, 4, 12, 16, 20), it is a place close to their home where they are permanently based (cf. 5, 10, 15) or it is a country “they know well” (11, p. 169). Importance is placed on the fact that they have witnessed the events themselves (cf. 6, 11) or explored the place little by little (cf. 3, 11, 13, 17, 20). Emphasis is also given to total immersion (cf. 5, 9, 10, 14, 15, 22): the authors pick apricots with seasonal workers, are holiday camp representatives, or live in the street they are writing about. However, it is the human factor that dominates in these introductions. It is through informers and discussion that the reporting moves forward (cf. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 22, 23). Only once does the text emphasize the documentation gathered (cf. 23).

The comics journalism practices revealed in the introductory texts are precisely those of journalistic reporting. “Du vécu, coco, du vécu” [experience, mate, experience] heads up the chapter on reporting in *Ecrire au quotidien* (Antoine et al. 1995, 88). Benoît Grevisse (2008, 146-149) lists several characteristics of the genre: the importance of prolonged, on-the-ground presence, reporting on the world and personal experience, narrating facts with the inevitable tension between reality and fiction, prior documentation, the use of local guides, meeting with witnesses and protagonists, and a certain immersion in the environment observed. The theory of reporting tallies almost exactly with what is depicted in the introductory texts of *XXI*'s graphic narratives.

### 3.2.1. *Author Involvement*

The topics handled – current affairs (Iran, the conflict in Congo etc.), social issues (Cuban democracy, hashish culture etc.) and discoveries that are either exotic (e.g. an observatory in the desert, the Amazonian Indians) or offbeat (local farmers, a homeless person) – lend themselves to author involvement. The issues raised are generally political (the place of women in an Islamic country, child soldiers etc.) or social (sects, the disabled etc.). The texts frequently stress the authors' passion, curiosity, deep immersion, a power of observation that goes beyond the clichés. The introductions tell us that the authors delve deep, get involved and sometimes engage in the topics.

Another form of author involvement is their large-scale presence in the introductions to the graphic narratives. Their physical appearance is described (“The first, 19 years old, is 1 metre 98 cm tall; the second, 22 years old, 1 metre 92 cm tall” [9, p. 169]) and their career path is mentioned (cf. 3, 4, 13, 15; “[...] the author of *Raymond Calbuth*, who previously worked for *Fluide Glacial* magazine” [15, p. 168]). Mention is made of their working methods (cf. 2, 8, 12, 17), sometimes their drawing techniques (cf. 1, 19, 20; “The thing is that Olivier is a perfectionist. In his drawings, to which he adds loads of details and endlessly perfects for weeks on end” [19, p. 169]), or their narrative choices (cf. 4, 18; “*For this story, the trick was to find the right distance from the events, without complacency*” [4, p. 167]). We hear them talk about the topic (cf. 5, 14; “*I was born there, I grew up there, I love this land*” [5, p. 164]), the place (“*On a good day, we picked [apricots] for 10 to 11 hours*” [9, p. 169]) or the people they met (“*He came from Saint-Etienne, having read in the newspaper that a camp was being set up at Bellecour*” [7, p. 167]). Sometimes they share their impressions (cf. 6, 10, 11, 22; “*In Congo, Jean-Philippe Stassen notes, there are ‘tender cuts and tough cuts; rubbery cuts and cuts that are rotten, too soft, delicious cuts and cuts that make you vomit*” [11, p. 169]). Their engagement is sometimes described (cf. 18, 20; “*We are a community. Childbirth is a visceral experience, it transcends culture and gives us common ground*”, said Agnès” [18, p. 169]). Finally, the introduction to the eighth graphic narrative features an illustration of the two authors as shadows (cf. figure 1).

Le jeune homme, un Français, s'appelle m Garnier et vit à Santiago depuis peu. Il upe, explique-t-il, d'un projet fantastique, able, extraordinaire... Olivier écoute avec ation, ne saisit pas bien : « William out excité. Il parlait, parlait et du mal à comprendre. J'ai une chose : plutôt que rder les étoiles, il était n de les écouter. » outer les étoiles», cela ver. Olivier n'a pu y r et s'est mis à ima- eur chant. Enflam- cidé à raconter cette e, il a une intuition : ait en parler au papa érian. » Contacté, le iste Pierre Christin s'est t porté volontaire. Pouvait- e autrement pour lui qui, des . durant, a conté à des milliers de i prodigieuses et extraordinaires aventures rian et Laureline, révéés agents du Service temporel (SST) de Galaxy? projet mûr, Olivier et Pierre sont venus à uis, très vite, ils sont partis là-bas, à Ata-



Olivier et Pierre,  
par Olivier Balez.

s'asseoir pour travailler. A XXI, nous avons et laissé dire. Et, bien sûr, cela n'a pas mané. D'un coup, le papa de Valérian a bas « J'ai vu là-bas quelque chose d'enthousias Ce chantier est une aventure qui projet loin. Ceux qui y travaillent sont je débordent d'énergie et d'une rare. » « C'était comme si nous tombait sur la tête, étions fascinés », rep Olivier. Alors oui, le cl est épouvantable. ce désert, le plus s monde, il fait 30°C le 0°C la nuit et un ve diable. Alors oui, dis avec un astrophysicien pas la chose la plus aisé monde. Pierre Christin : « J suis tapé des interviews en an en espagnol et en français – je ne prenais pas plus en français. » Olivier B « C'étaient comme des discussions entre un tien et un Jupitérien. Moi, j'écoutais la mu. des paroles sans rien comprendre, c'est un langage. » Directrice de recherche au CI

Figure 1: Balez / Christin 2009, 169.

In addition, in 14 narratives, the authors have a personal connection to the story, either because they live in the place or visit it regularly, or because they are talking about a loved one or are telling their own story.

Type of involvement	Occurrences	Issues
Authors outside the story	8	3, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 23
Authors involved in the story	14	
Talk about a journey or holiday job	5	2, 9, 11, 20, 22
Talk about neighbours	2	5, 15
Talk about a friend	3	1, 7, 14
Talk about a family member	2	6, 10
Talk about their spouse	1	4
Wife is featured in the story	1	21
Unknown	1	18

Chart 3: Type of author involvement in XXI magazine

### 3.2.2. Editor Involvement

There are also mentions of the editorial team itself in the introductions. Nine texts describe the relationship between the authors and the editors. Some discuss the project before it is launched (cf. 2, 13, 14; “He just wrote to us because he wanted to tell a story” [14, p. 166]) or while it is underway (cf. 8, 9, 10; “As work progresses, he sends XXI instalments of the story. We’re seeing it advance at an

astonishing speed” [10, p. 167]). The editorial team contributes by adapting the text into French (cf. 19). These passages about the author / editor interaction describe the authors’ style (cf. 9), their little secrets (“Olivier and Pierre also tried to convince us that in the Atacama Desert there were scarcely any tables they could sit at to work. At *XXI*, we smiled and let them continue” [8, p. 169]), their doubts (“When Olivier called *XXI* a few months ago, his project was still vague. He knew he had to tell the story of Eric, their story, but he wasn’t totally sure, he was still pondering it” [10, p. 167]). We also observe the initial reactions of the editors-in-chief to the proposal (“Of course, we were a little envious, as you will be when you discover their work” [8 p. 169]), to the work underway (cf. 10) or the end result (“He will take us out on the road in Iran [...]” [12, p. 169]). They even reveal their own prejudices (“Let’s be clear from the start. When someone says ‘Indians’ to us, we have a natural tendency to think of ‘friendly savages:’ loincloths, blowpipes, ants, feathers on their heads and the whole shebang...” [21, p. 169]). The editorial team also accepts the narrative choices put forward as partial fictionalization (“There are several ways to talk about real life. [...] They have used parables, amalgamated the characters, incorporated things they have heard or read about. They have sometimes strayed from the facts *stricto sensu*, but always in a quest for improvement” [2, p. 168]) and the reactions of some authors (“Jean-Philippe Stassen is irritated. We are too” [20, p. 169]).

As such, the magazine offers journalistic reports. The editors highlight the time spent exploring the place and meeting the people. The authors of the graphic narratives are made present in the introductory texts (sometimes in person, sometimes through their voice). In 14 of the 23 graphic narratives, the authors have a connection with the place they are describing, so there is involvement – sometimes very strong involvement – on all levels. Furthermore, the editorial team writes itself into the introductory texts and the degree of responsibility it appears to take does make us wonder whether they can really be regarded as allographic.

### 3.3. Comics Journalism, an Uncommented Form

The *XXI editorials* take a strong stance in favour of comics journalism (cf. 1) and against fast news (cf. 6). They often stress that they are distancing themselves from hackneyed images (cf. 7). The editorial team cites this as its point of difference. “The reality that is being depicted, little by little, is different from the image of the world we get from teleprinters” (3, p. 3). They address several questions that their work raises and, most importantly, they regularly reaffirm *XXI*’s pledge to report about the world as it is. “Before they are published, the reportages go back and forth between the authors and editors several times. [...] This is absolutely essential in order to respect the implicit agreement with readers: you place your trust in us, we owe you accuracy” (4, p. 3). “The stories we publish are all

true, verifiable and meticulously cross-checked. They are based on witness accounts, facts and accurate documents that are all in our possession” (10, p. 3).

The same kind of issues can be found in the texts introducing the graphic narratives. In these, the little story that reflects a larger one appears as one of the main tools used to describe the world (cf. 3, 13). “He tells a story, the story of a small entrepreneur. It is first and foremost a living testimony of the turmoil that is spreading across India” (3, p. 168). The editors also emphasize the importance of transcending stereotypes. “This question often generates hard-line views, fear or naïve optimism. And yet reality is always more complex” (1, p. 156). This forces them to confront their own prejudices (cf. the passage quoted above about Amazonian Indians [21, p. 169]). “He immediately dispels the clichés to tell us about a country he knows and loves. However, he can’t help it: the further he progresses, the more the story of Arnold – a child soldier, a child ‘witch,’ a child who is disowned and lost – forces him to revisit the clichés” (11, p. 169).

However, telling it like it is conflicts with author subjectivity. This is also mentioned in the introductions, and no single vision of this complex issue emerges. It appears that some authors accept subjectivity, going so far as to use fiction or scriptwriting. Olivier Balez asked a science fiction author, Pierre Christin, who wrote *Valérian et Laureline*, to work with him on a project (cf. 8). The two authors who wrote about Cuba made the story theirs – more so than the other authors – insofar as they created composite characters. And yet, when they talked about the fictional father they created to a person they met, that person exclaimed: “But that’s my father you’re talking about. He was part of the system and I was constantly clashing with him” (2, p. 169). The editors claim that this fictionalization allowed them to reach some kind of truth. “Jacques and Pierre Ferrandez’s story is everybody’s story. [...] They have sometimes strayed from the facts *stricto sensu*, but always in a quest for improvement” (2, p. 3). Others, however, opt for distance (cf. 4, 6, 12): “The trick was to find the right distance” (6, p. 169). Some of them explicitly assert that they do not interfere with the field they observed. “Olivier will relate it exactly how Massih told it to him, in other words without ever including the slightest inference” (12, p. 169).

The importance of paratext in comics journalism has not escaped analysts. Julien Orsell and Philippe Sohet state that paratext “plays an important role in the legitimization process” (2005, §8). The prefaces they analysed, written by experts, gave authority to the authors and their work. Endnotes in several albums revealed the ancillary documentation process (Orsell / Sohet 2005, §8). Séverine Bourdieu also notes that most publications (*XXI*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Le Temps*) use paratext to legitimize comics journalism, that of *XXI* being “particularly substantial” (2012, §6). This paratext underlines “the similarities between the author’s research on the ground and that of a real journalist” (*ibid.*, §8). This is fully in keeping with our analysis.

For a magazine so quick to comment on modern-day journalism, one thing is still surprising: The editors of *XXI* say little about drawing as a means of expression. When they do mention it, they merely focus on a few details: an author depicts greenhouses as grey squares as on Google Earth (cf. 1), an illustrator

works fast to keep his drawing alive (cf. 5), a colourist recreates the beauty of the four seasons (cf. *ibid.*), or an author includes his own photos like Emmanuel Guibert (cf. 6). They do not discuss this particular method of depicting reality. On two rare occasions, a link is established between drawing and reporting. The editors emphasize the “observational skills” of an author, “reproduced [in] the finesse of his drawings” (20, p. 169). “Depicting Cuba through the clash between a father and son, Jacques and Pierre Ferrandez use drawings, observations and dialogue to describe the island as it is. The power of reality is impressive” (2, p. 3). This failure to actually discuss the graphic component of comics journalism, while the genre is nonetheless central to the magazine, as we have demonstrated, clearly appears as a missed opportunity.

## **4. Analysis of the Cartoons**

### **4.1. The Narrator is Far from Being Systematically Present**

In the second part of our study, we looked at the cartoons themselves, first analysing the voice – the narrative instance – in both the textual and graphic dimensions of the cartoons. In factual narratives, the narrator and the author are considered to be the same person (Genette 1991; Schaeffer 2013) – even though the former is created by the latter. Voice thus appears as one of the main means for authors to show their involvement in the narrative. Genette (1972, 252) distinguished between two main types of voice depending on whether the narrator is present as a character in the story he is telling (homodiegetic) or is absent from the narrative (heterodiegetic). Although he suggested the notion of voice in the context of literary texts, his typology can be applied to the graphic dimension of comics journalism, as the author-narrator may or may not be represented in the images.

If we focus first on the textual component of the corpus cartoons, we can identify 21 that are homodiegetic and two that are heterodiegetic. However, of the homodiegetic texts, the narrator is the author in only 16 instances. In the other homodiegetic texts, the narrator is a character other than the author. When analysing the graphic component of the narratives, the narrator appears in the images of 19 cartoons – i.e. authors are not graphically represented in four cartoons. When graphically represented, the narrator is the author in 14 cartoons and another character in five.

Type of narrator	Textual component		Graphic component	
	Occurrences	Issues	Occurrences	Issues
Author-narrator present	16	1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23	14	1, 4, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
Character-narrator present	5	2, 3, 5, 7, 19	5	2, 3, 5, 7, 19
Narrator absent	2	9, 12	4	9, 10, 11, 12

*Chart 4:* Types of narrator in the XXI cartoons

The analysis therefore indicates one possibility that, based on the considerations of Genette and Schaeffer, we did not envisage: the narrator present in the text or the images is not necessarily the author, despite the factual nature of the narrative. This option – adopted by just over one-fifth of the corpus authors – is even more surprising given the subjectivity claimed by the comics journalism genre.

Moreover, even if the two principal types of voice (narrator present or absent) appear to be clearly defined and mutually exclusive, the reality is not always so clear-cut. In four of the cartoons analysed, there is a sort of ‘unobtrusive presence’ of the narrator. In the first issue of the magazine, Jean-Philippe Stassen wrote at the end of the very first frame: “Note: from now on, I will no longer talk about myself (even if, in the scenes that follow, I am always hidden away in a corner, drinking or lighting up a cigarette)” (1, p. 157). In the following frames, he is never explicitly identified as the cartoon author (cf. figure 2).

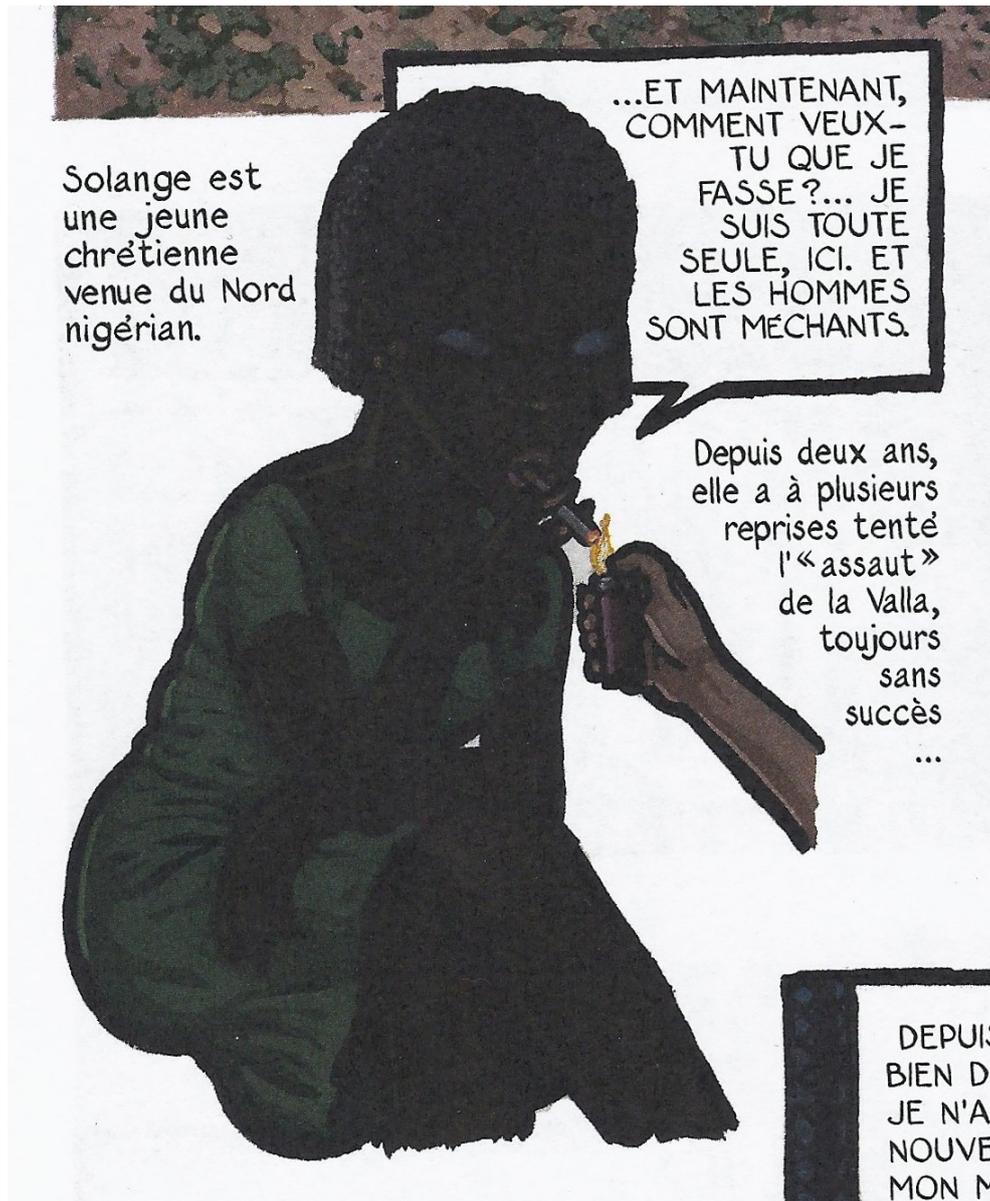


Figure 2: Stassen 2010, 186

Several times in “Mon entreprise dans un bidonville” (3), the protagonist-narrator, drawn face-on and fairly close up, seems to be answering questions asked by the author, for instance when he says, “My employees? I have between 10 and 15 people working for me” (3, p. 182), or when he exclaims, “Oh no, they have nothing to complain about, don’t worry!” (3, p. 185) This type of indirect presence of the author appears to reveal, at one and the same time, his involvement and a wish to remain in the background.

The desire to be unobtrusive can also be conveyed by the use of the impersonal *on*, which translates as “one” and is used much more frequently in French than English, as is the case in “Sous le ciel d’Atacama” (8). On only very few occasions, this narrative also uses *nous* [we], referring to the writer and the illustrator. This discreet, almost minimal, presence corresponds fairly well to the type of presence used in the graphic component of the narrative, because the cartoon

authors only appear in one frame, and are depicted merely through the hand and notebook of the illustrator (cf. figure 3).



Figure 3: Balez / Christin 2009, 198.

Lastly, even though Renaud De Heyn (cf. 14) chooses to make an appearance right from the start of the story, the reader does not realize his character is the author of the cartoon until much later. And, in the text, the voice-over he uses appears at first to be impersonal; he does not begin to use the first person until quite late in the narrative.

Of the 23 cartoons, 11 (just under half) fully and clearly identify the author as the voice of the story, in both the text and the images, with no attempt to make him unobtrusive. Moreover, even though “the visual depiction of the author-narrator-investigator in the narrative” is widely considered to be one of the main features of comics journalism (Bourdieu 2012, §10), it occurs less frequently in the corpus than the use of the first person in the text.

Although the number of homodiegetic narrators in the corpus is of course disproportionate to that in traditional factual journalism, which aims to be neutral and objective, we do, however, feel that their number is surprisingly low, considering that comics journalism is universally described as permitting the subjective engagement of the author. Although drawings, by their very nature, supposedly evoke the subjectivity of the narrative, this subjectivity is far from being systematically reaffirmed by the use of the first person and the author’s presence as a character in the drawings – as seen in our corpus, in any case.

This is not unlike the situation in written French narrative journalism (Vanoost 2014): Although several journalists and magazine editors claim that assumed subjectivity is one of the key defining features of narrative journalism, they do not simply use the first person singular to reflect this in their stories. More often than not, there is a definite presence but, alongside this, they use devices to erase or mitigate it, creating many in-between options between a clear and explicit presence and complete erasure.

#### **4.2. The Perspective is Often Personal but Often Transcended**

Next, we looked at the focalization choices made by the authors, in both the text and the images. Genette (1983, 49) defines focalization as “a restriction of ‘field,’ in other words a selection of narrative information” – which must be distinguished from narrative voice. With internal focalization, the focal point selected is a character and the narrative is constructed through what this character sees, perceives, thinks and feels. With zero focalization (or non-focalization), there is no restriction of field: the narrator “says more than any of the characters knows” (Genette 1972, 206) and may tell us what each is thinking or feeling. With external focalization, “the focus is situated at a point in the diegetic universe chosen by the narrator, outside every character, which means that all possibility of information about anyone’s thoughts is excluded” (Genette 1983, 49).

In a factual narrative, the information is, by definition, restricted to what the author “knows” – and this restriction of field cannot be transcended. However,

this restriction does not prevent authors from conveying the information in different ways. They can, for example, give the impression that they are directly relaying the thoughts of one or all of the characters. Or they can present those thoughts as the answers given during an interview, or even as a personal interpretation – all of which will not have the same effect on the reader’s perception of the author’s subjectivity in the narrative. Following Genette, focalization is therefore understood here as both the selection of the information to which the author appears to have access and the perspective through which this information is conveyed.<sup>8</sup>

Although focalization initially refers to written narrative, it appears – in theory at least – to be transferrable to the cartoon images in comics journalism. The frames might do nothing more than replicate exactly what the journalist witnessed on the ground or strictly recreate a character’s visual perspective (similar to internal focalization). The narrative information conveyed by the frames may appear to be unrestricted, given that the perspective moves freely from that of a character to an external perspective and then back to another character, perhaps even conveying their “internal images,” such as dreams or fantasies (similar to zero focalization). A third possibility might be that the perspective adopted in the images is difficult to pinpoint, while at the same time maintaining a certain distance and conveying only what can be seen (in the manner of external focalization).<sup>9</sup>

If we look first at the texts of the cartoons in the corpus, the analysis reveals that internal focalization on the author is, by far, the most common choice (in more than half of the stories analysed).

Type of focalization	Occurrences	Issues
Internal on the author	14	4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
Internal on one or more characters	4	2, 3, 7, 19
Internal on the author and one or more characters	1	10
Zero	4	1, 5, 9, 12

Chart 5: Types of focalization in the text of the XXI cartoons

Internal focalization on the journalist appears *a priori* to be the most suitable for a kind of journalism that champions the author’s subjectivity. However, as Dozo writes (2010), in comics journalism there is a fundamental tension “between an ‘I’ and an ‘other’”. It was therefore surprising to find a mere four cartoons with internal focalization on the characters and, in particular, only one in which the focalization alternates between the journalist and the characters. This is all the more surprising because the latter is a focalization choice often made by French-speaking practitioners of written narrative journalism (Vanoost 2014).

The decision to use zero focalization appears to conflict more directly with the alleged subjectivity and reminds us of the dominant model of a journalism that aspires to be objective: these are narratives without a clearly defined focal

point, in which the author's personal engagement is less directly perceptible. We should, however, point out that this is probably the most suitable focalization choice for relaying information. Moreover, it is not uncommon to find it in the written output of French-speaking narrative journalists (*ibid.*).

When we looked at the graphic dimension of the story, we realised that the choice of perspective adopted in the images never corresponded exactly to the author's physical perspective when he was at the scene – even though, in the vast majority of the corpus cartoons, we could find at least one image that accurately reflected the author's perspective (often during discussions between the journalist and one of the characters, who is therefore drawn face on and relatively close up).

In the cartoons analysed, the visual perspective adopted seems to be very flexible: from one frame to the next, the images tend to alternate different viewing angles and variable depths of field. The authors thus appear to be able to “see” the scene from several places at once, as though they were omnipresent – as in zero focalization. Nevertheless, transcending the strict visual perspective of the author means that, in some cases, the author can be represented in the image, thereby reminding us of his involvement in the story. We therefore felt it would be useful to go beyond simply stating that the visual perspective is extremely flexible and ask ourselves what such flexibility makes representationally possible.

What is depicted in the images	Occurrences	Issues
Only what the author was able to see	5	4, 14, 16, 17, 22
Only what the author was able to see + the author himself	5	3, 5, 9, 12, 19
Some things the author could not have seen	5	2, 7, 8, 10, 11
Some things the author could not have seen + the author himself	6	13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23
Ambiguous <sup>10</sup>	2	1, 6

*Chart 5: What is depicted in the images of the XXI cartoons analysed*

In five of the corpus cartoons, the authors sometimes include themselves in the frames, but only draw scenes in which they themselves were present. Transcending their perspective appears, in these cases, to reinforce their subjectivity – compared to pure internal focalization.

We also identified five cartoons in which the authors are not in the images and draw only what they have seen – there is no graphic depiction of their subjective involvement and their visual perspective is only transcended through their choice of viewing angles and depths of field. In six corpus cartoons, the authors appear in the images and include things they could not have seen (a character's memories, for example), thereby transcending more decisively the limits of their own perspective. In five occurrences, the authors are neither depicted in the image nor restricted by what they have seen. In these different cases, therefore, the drawing becomes a way of transcending the limits of all

subjective, established perspectives. However, in many ways, some more explicit than others, the drawing can also remind us of who drew it.

### 4.3. From Revelation to Relativization of the Drawing's Subjectivity

Within the corpus, we identified two key graphic strategies that, despite the liberties taken with perspective in the images, remind us of the author's subjectivity, thereby reaffirming in a different way the subjective nature of the comics journalism genre. The first is mainly used by Olivier Kugler (cf. 12, 19). His storyboards are mostly fluid, without clearly defined frames. The drawings appear to merge together, which can give the impression of a particularly flexible visual perspective. And yet Kugler frequently reminds us of his subjectivity by choosing to depict some, but not all, elements in colour, inserting arrows pointing to specific details etc. Arrows are also used in the cartoons of Didier Tronchet (cf. 15, 21), despite the visual perspective of these being particularly volatile.

The second strategy consists in using very different graphic processes in certain frames to reflect the special status of these images. Thus, the drawing can remind us of the person who created it at the very moment the latter appears to transcend the limits of their perspective. This type of differentiation strategy can be found in five graphic narratives.

Although he normally uses colour, Maximilien Le Roy (cf. 7) switches to black and white, with some orange touches, to depict the memories of the protagonist he is interviewing – i.e. scenes that he, by definition, could not have witnessed. Olivier Balez opts for a similar strategy in “*Sous le ciel d'Atacama*” (8): he restricts himself to a blue palette to depict the spatial phenomena that the characters describe and, for the historical digression in the narrative, he uses sepias to recall the colours of old photographs. We find the same process at work in his second cartoon, “*La cordée du Mont Rose*” (10). As for Jean-Philippe Stassen, when his characters share their memories (cf. 11, 20), all the characters mentioned, without exception, are shown as black silhouettes (cf. figure 4). In these cartoons, the different graphic choices single out some parts of the narrative as different and, at the same time, remind us more explicitly that it was the author who made these choices.



Figure 4: Stassen 2008, 166.

Along a different line, we must mention another visual process that is used by several authors: inserting photographs between, or in, the sketched frames. The authors who do this seem to be using a very different approach. Compared with a drawing, the photograph reveals more directly what might be called the proof of reality register and is accompanied by an “authenticity effect” (Marion 1997, 143). It thereby appears to limit or relativize the drawing’s inherent subjectivity. Thus, “the impression of reality that, by its very nature, the photograph brings could lend authenticity to the cartoon” (Orselli / Sohet 2005, §11).

Five of the corpus cartoons incorporate one or more photographs. The process of using a photograph to lend authenticity to the cartoon is particularly apparent in “Le monsieur de la rue” (7) – which, however, also uses a graphic differentiation process, as mentioned above. There is only one photograph in this cartoon – it is of the protagonist and appears at the very end of the story, as if to confirm that he does indeed exist and, by extension, to lend credibility to his story.

A similar process can be found in the two cartoons by Hippolyte (cf. 6, 17), in which photos are suddenly incorporated into a series of sketched frames without any prelude or explanation. If, as Bourdieu suggests (2012), the juxtaposition of the drawings saturated in warm colours with the clean lines of the black-and-white photos in “L’Afrique de Papa” (6) contributes to the meaning of the cartoon itself, this juxtaposition of drawing and photo also appears to suggest they are both equal in terms of their ability to depict reality.

In “Femmes du Yémen” (18), which tells the story of a photographer’s travels in this country, a photo sometimes replaces a sketched frame or is incorporated into a drawing, for instance when the photographer is shown sending her photos to a character or selecting them with her subjects. This method of incorporating photos into the drawing reminds us that the photograph also required the author’s input and that this input was no doubt as subjective as the work that went into the drawing. Nevertheless, here again, photographs and drawings seem to be invested with the same ability to depict the world around us.

The last corpus cartoon that uses a photo is “Cuba, père et fils” (2). The photograph introduced here is an advertising poster for a car (the vehicle plays

a key part in the story). Although the photo's role of lending authenticity appears to be more indirect and peripheral to the story, the inclusion of the poster in the cartoon indeed seems to be an attempt to anchor it in the real world. It is interesting to note that this cartoon is in fact the one in which the authors take the most liberties with reality because, as is explained in the magazine's introductory text, Jacques and Pierre Ferrandez used fictionalization processes. This nicely illustrates the fact that, despite the effect it can create in a cartoon, the photo in itself is by no means evidence.

Having analysed the focalization choices, we can observe that the written story is not always clearly focused on the author – just as the author does not always narrate in the first person. We also note that the sketched image, the most overtly subjective component in comics journalism, can also be used by the authors to transcend the intrinsic limits of their perspective. Furthermore, by playing on the proof of reality register, the use of both photos and drawings can relativize the subjectivity of the drawing.

Naturally, at some point or other, all journalists find themselves reporting on events that they have not themselves witnessed. In written accounts, journalists may adhere rigidly to the information they have gathered. When they have to draw these events, however, it seems inevitable that imagination will come into play. In the drawing we may see a more extreme version of the author's subjective engagement, but this type of engagement would seem questionable in journalism, if it were not pointed out in some way, in either the text or the image (using graphic strategies), or even in the paratext of the cartoon.

## 5. Conclusion

When we looked at the results of the *XXI* magazine analysis, we were surprised by several paradoxes. The first contradiction is between the paratext and the cartoons themselves and relates to the primary subject of this article: author involvement. The introductions to the graphic narratives stress the importance of being present on the ground, the topics are close to the authors' hearts, and the authors sometimes play a part in their own narrative. The editors mention themselves in the introductions and explain how they share the creative process with the authors. This is reiterated in almost every issue. However, this is not necessarily translated into the cartoons. Not all of the authors are present in the frames, not all use the first person and they do not necessarily opt for internal focalization. Considering how often involvement is mentioned in the paratext, we cannot help but be surprised that seven out of the 23 cartoons completely erase the author's presence and some even use zero focalization (not unlike traditional journalism).

The editorials as a whole refer to the prestige of grassroots journalism and place the magazine in that category, in strong contrast to other media. As such, the texts could almost serve as manifestos for slow journalism. And yet none of

the cartoon authors are professional journalists. Joe Sacco, although he is a journalist and contributes to issue 13, is presented first and foremost as an illustrator. It may seem fairly logical that the creators should come from the world of cartoons because they need to master that particular mode of expression. It is, however, more surprising that the editors, though quick to theorize about the concept of reporting or lay claim to a certain tradition of the profession, never provide any justification for this other than to affirm that a cartoonist is perfectly capable of doing what a journalist does. The presentations emphasize qualities, practices, and reflexes that could easily be considered journalistic – and are certainly part of a movement to legitimize the genre, as already mentioned by Séverine Bourdieu (2012) – though this reasoning remains broadly implicit.

There is another element missing in the magazine's paratext: the mode of expression itself. Comics journalism is a very important feature of *XXI*. It is mentioned by name, ritualized, carefully prefaced and made part of a tradition of journalistic reporting. Yet drawing as a way of depicting reality is never challenged. Once again, this omission is out of step with the provocative tone of the comments made about journalism and reporting, especially as it concerns one of the flagship components of the magazine. Our analysis of the cartoons themselves, however, demonstrates that the use of drawings creates complex situations. For example, the visual perspective used does not always correspond to the choice of focalization in the text. The authors may have to convey things they themselves did not witness, which raises questions about the role of imagination in these graphic reconstructions. Finally, drawings are sometimes used as a subtle reminder of the subjectivity of the author, even if this subjectivity is not explicitly asserted. All these elements could have provided a wealth of material for the paratext.

To conclude, although comics journalism is considered to offer subjectivity, more freedom of expression and grassroots involvement, as confirmed in the paratext, this does not always appear to be reflected in the cartoon itself. The editors may have committed to a certain kind of journalism, but they do not place their cartoon authors in this genre. And while the magazine demonstrates its commitment to comics journalism by dedicating a large part of the paratext to the genre, it does not offer any consideration of the cartoon as a journalistic language.

Our analysis, though limited, demonstrates that consideration of the latter is very much needed: drawings do much more than visually represent the author. It remains essential to think about the many specificities of comics as a language in order to offer readers a comics journalism that is both creative and responsible – providing an innovative means of relaying information while being aware of the specific questions it raises.

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<sup>1</sup> These hybrid productions are also known as graphic journalism.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are our own.

<sup>3</sup> On this topic, see Jenkins (2006), Wang / Yueh-yu Yeh (2005) or works on transmediality, adaptations or novelizations (by, for example, Lits / Baetens [2004], Migozzi [2001] and Saint Gelais [2011], to name but a few).

<sup>4</sup> On hybridization in factual texts, see, for example: Paget (1998) and Niney (2002). On ways in which fiction can recount reality, see Henderson (2007) and Esquenazi (2009). On more general hybridization between reality and fiction, see Jost (2001) or Klein / Tixhon (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The numbers in brackets denote the magazine issue in question. Direct quotations are followed by issue number and page number.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the 23 graphic narratives were created by several authors, which is why there are 28 listed.

<sup>7</sup> One issue may appear several times, since one graphic narrative can be the work of two people.

<sup>8</sup> We therefore do not go along with the critics who call for a distinction between focalization and perspective (cf. Niederhoff 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Since, in our analysis of the graphic component of comics journalism, we are interested in the selection of narrative information through images, we prefer to adhere to Genette's typology rather than apply a typology that is constructed solely on the visual perspective, one such example being Jost's ocularization (1989).

<sup>10</sup> This concerns two cases that are indeterminable when the images only are analysed. In one, the author states in the text that he will be depicted in the images, but is never identified as the author in the drawing (“Les visiteurs de Gibraltar,” 1). In the other, the author only draws scenes he himself could have witnessed but one of them, which takes place on the ground, is described in the text as happening at the same time as he was in a plane (“L’Afrique de papa,” 6).