Elizabeth Benjamin, *Existentialist Comics:* Bande Dessinée *and the Art of Ethics.* Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. xvi + 216 pp. 1 fig. col., 15 fig. b/w. $63.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781800792739; $63.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781800792753.

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In the gutter space between comic book frames, time can be compressed or accelerated, the reader may shift trajectories, and new perspectives begin and end. Like our roving eye, meaning can also become unfixed in a comic book. Comics may be absurd, but in the overlay of text and image, often broken up by bands of spatial abstraction, they are not simple. Elizabeth Benjamin's *Existentialist Comics:* Bande Dessinée *and the Art of Ethics* takes seriously the philosophical potential of French-language comics known as *bande dessinée*. She argues that the *bande dessinée* is responsive to the ideas of Existentialist philosophers and well-suited for representing their lives. In her analysis of recent biographical comic books on Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, she examines what is gained by constructing biographies of Existentialist philosophers in comic-book form and how the medium amplifies their ideas.

In comics, changes in text, typography, tone, and design of planches and frames signal self-reflexive acknowledgements of their own construction. We are aware of formal decision-making because it is always shifting. Tethering word and image together can of course emphasize ideas, but it can also complicate, contradict, distract, and open layers of meaning in ways that dovetail with Existentialist philosophies of ambiguity and freedom. The *bande dessinée* has been given scholarly attention in the francophone world since the 1960s, but significant strides in developing comic theory have taken place in the last fifteen years or so. Benjamin is engaged with contemporary scholarship on comic theory and uses Maaheen Ahmed and Ann Miller for some of her most important theoretical underpinnings and key insights into the philosophical potential of the form.

The author approaches comics from a Modern Languages perspective and performs a kind of syntactical analysis of panels and page structures. Benjamin's consideration of how the *bande dessinée* articulates Existentialist philosophy is laid out with particular technical precision in the chapter titled "Sartre: Une existence, des libertés" after the 2015 book by Mathilde Ramadier and Anaïs Depommier.[1] She unveils the potential of comic panels to open themselves up to playful narrative constructions, flexible temporalities, and meaning determined by the individual reader in ways that underscore Sartre's theoretical positions. In one passage on *Sartre*, Benjamin describes a page picturing the aftermath of Beauvoir's publication of *Le deuxième sexe*. It is arranged in two vertical columns with frames of Sartre at left on a balcony and Beauvoir at a

book signing at right.[2] The panel construction offers both a linear horizontal reading and also vertical strips that one can read downwards like a film reel. In one approach, the scenes move back and forth like jump cuts, and in the other, two scenes unspool one after the other. Instead of a strictly linear narrative relaying a series of biographical facts, this structure activates Sartrean ideas about interpretive possibility, reinvention, contingency, simultaneous temporalities, and self-determination.

Absurdity arises from conflict. For Existentialists, human rationality and the desire for meaning are at odds with the irrational and uncaring universe. Comic books are well-adapted to grapple with Existentialist descriptions of absurdity and the quest for meaning in part because of the tension between the perceived rationality of text and the interpretive potential of images. A two-page spread from *Camus: entre justice et mère* by José Lenzini and Laurent Gnoni reproduced in Benjamin's fourth chapter sets a bust of Camus at his typewriter above scenes of the 1945 Algerian massacre at Sétif and the detonation of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[3] Camus's typed pages bleed into a horizontal line of Algerian bodies. Sections of his texts, quoted at length in typescript, are forced to skirt fallen bodies and piles of skulls. At center, a greedy tendril of the mushroom cloud reaches for a corner of Camus's typewriter. The graphic images contextualize Camus's larger opposition to state violence with his experience growing up in Algeria, but they also establish a contrast between the emotive potential of visual imagery and the clarity of the written word, suggesting that order (moral, literary, social) will always be under threat from the creep of irrational forces.

This is not the only instance where Benjamin's book grapples with the politics of Existentialist philosophers. She examines the connections between aesthetics and politics in the careers of Sartre and Beauvoir as well, arguing that the very form of the comic book embeds a history of political engagement that mirrors the careers of these philosophers. She rightly connects the comic tradition to caricature's long history of subversive political speech in France. In the nineteenth century, laws censoring cartoons and caricatures were consistently harsher than censorship of the written word. Government officials acknowledged the power of images to reach mass audiences without the precondition or patience literacy requires and believed printed images were much more likely than any book or brochure to sway public opinion or incite action against the state.[4] Comic books drew on the same technological advancements that spurred the Golden Age of Caricature in France in the nineteenth century and proliferated thanks to improvements to literacy that led to the wider explosion of book culture. They remain a popular medium that, in spite of their reputation of artistic excellence and cultural significance in France and Belgium, carry some caricatural connotations of rebellion and democratic appeal. Biographical comics of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus make their lives and ideas more accessible and, in their very form, point to positionalities of opposition and experimentation.

An illustrated newspaper actually emerges in Sophie Carquain and Olivier Grojnowski's *Simone de Beauvoir: une jeune fille qui dérange*; Benjamin shows us a panel of the comic book where the viewer inhabits the position of Beauvoir, looking down at a copy of *La Minerve* to an article about the philosopher and feminist Léotine Zanta.[5] Zanta's portrait is reproduced in an illusionistic oval just beneath Beauvoir's cartoonish finger. The text of the newspaper is set against thought bubbles which tell us that Beauvoir identifies with Madame Zanta even as the narrator's voice in the text block at top, the *récitatif*, describes Beauvoir's alienation. The subjective, artistic oval containing Zanta's portrait contrasts with the more assured rectangle (of science, newspapers, objective information). These two stylistic and epistemological systems are then layered over the

more conventional graphic drawing style outlining Beauvoir's hand. Benjamin tells us in one of the most persuasive passages in the book that while the newspaper is represented with a degree of realism, the date and headlines are fabricated, placing the playful potential of comic nonsense into tension with illusionism and biographical fact. Through Benjamin's close consideration of *Beauvoir*'s canny adaptation of Existentialist theory, the reader comes to see how the comic book medium helps us better understand ideas of self-estrangement, liberation through the recognition of the Other, and the fragility of social constructions, crucial ideas in Beauvoir's philosophy.

Benjamin identifies the frame as a key site for innovation and Existentialist meaning. In the chapters on Sartre and Beauvoir, she argues that the "loss of edges breaks down reality, meaning, and structure to give freedom to the reader to interpret the change in pace and support" (p. 19). The authors of *Sartre* also use all-black and all-white panels, most with text, offering pauses in the rhythm of the narrative and anti-narrative moments open to interpretation. These monochromatic panels, Benjamin tells us, embody Existentialist themes of death, angst, and malaise. As powerful as this argument is connecting all-black and all-white panels to linguistic strategies of ambiguous meaning and textual ellipses, the analysis could have been deepened by contextualizing these formal choices within the history of comics. Rodolphe Töpffer's first comic book appeared in 1833, and as soon as the first adaptations of comic books appeared in France, artists were already doing away with the boxed format, varying the number of tiers and frames on a page, and playing with style and points of view.[6] Patricia Mainardi details how monochromatic panels were an early innovation of the French caricaturist Cham (Amédée de Noé), who included all-black and all-white vignettes quite early, in 1839's *Histoire de Mᵣ Lajaunisse* and *Deux vieilles filles vaccinées à marier*. Modern in their appearance and groundbreaking in their use, these comic book panels represented a darkened room after a protagonist blew out a candle, and the other, with a wink, claimed to spare the reader from disturbing content.[7] These playful elisions rewarded the reader's prolonged attention with surprises and experimentation. Borderless tiers, the variation of panels per page, and all-black and all-white vignettes are all mentioned by Benjamin as being significant decisions by the authors of *Sartre*, aligning Satrean theory and the comic medium. The discussions about formatting and structure explored at length in this excellent book would have been even further enriched by considering the possible layers of citation that are likely deeply rooted in French comic history.

Building on the growing English-language theorization of the French-language comic strip, *Existentialist Comics* carves out three major case studies of biographical *bande dessinée* to illuminate the responsiveness of the form to Existentialism and to complex philosophical ideas more broadly. Keenly attuned to the medium-specific qualities of the visual narrative art, Benjamin demonstrates the ways in which comics are exciting sites of experimental artistic practice. In the interstices and interactions between text and picture, Existentialist ideas are given new life.

NOTES

[1] Mathilde Ramadier and Anaïs Depommier, *Sartre: Une existence, des libertés* (Paris: Dargaud, 2015).

[2] Ibid., p. 199.

[3] José Lenzini and Laurent Gnoni, *Camus: entre justice et mère* (Toulon: Soleil, 2013), pp. 90-91.

[4] See Robert Justin Goldstein, *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth Century France* (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 1989) and David S. Kerr. *Caricature and French Political Culture 1830-1848: Charles Philipon and the Illustrated Press* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

[5] Sophie Carquain and Olivier Grojnowski, *Simone de Beauvoir: une jeune fille qui dérange* (Vanves: Marabout, 2016), p. 86.

[6] Patricia Mainardi, *Another World: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Print Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 140. See also: Mainardi, "The Invention of Comics," *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* 6 (2007), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring07/145-the-invention-of-comics (last accessed February 3, 2023; David Kunzle, *History of the Comic Strip* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Thierry Smolderen, *Origin of Comics* (Jackson, Miss.: The University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

[7] Mainardi, *Another World*, pp. 137-138. Mainardi also links this strategy to Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767).

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