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## THE TRAVELLING CARTOONIST. REPRESENTING THE SELF AND THE WORLD IN GUY DELISLE'S GRAPHIC TRAVEL NARRATIVES

*Bitter the knowledge we get from travelling!  
The world, monotonous and mean today,  
Yesterday, tomorrow, always, lets us see our own  
Image an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom.  
Whew! That's cherry...  
(Delisle 2006:68)*

Guy Delisle's graphic travel narratives *Shenzen: A Travelogue from China*, *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*, *Burma Chronicles*, and the latest *Chroniques de Jérusalem*, are additions to the ever growing genre of autobiographical comics. Comics that, apart from everyday experiences, deal with traumas, history and travels. Moving back and forth between image, text, and context, I point to the prominent elements that constitute the author's self-representation and renderings of the places visited.

Key words: Guy Delisle, comics, autobiography, travel

From December 2006 to April 2007, Guy Delisle's work was shown at the exhibition "BD Reporters" held at the Pompidou Centre. The pages exhibited were taken from the comic book *L'Association en Inde* (2006), a collection of travel comics about India drawn by five different artists, the Québécois cartoonist Delisle being one of them.<sup>1</sup> *L'Association* is also the independent publishing house that published

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<sup>1</sup> That it is a recognised phenomena is also shown by the 2008 documentary movie *La BD s'en va t-en guerre* by Mark Daniels in which he portrays some of the major authors in the genre (Sacco, Rall, Satrapi et al.).

Delisle's graphic travel narratives *Shenzen* (2000) and *Pyongyang* (2003).<sup>2</sup> The 2003 *Pyongyang* was translated into English as *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* in 2005 and published by the Montréal based Drawn & Quarterly. Drawn & Quarterly are also responsible for the translations of *Shenzen: A Travelogue from China* in 2006 and *Burma Chronicles* in 2008, and have acquired rights and are preparing the publication of his latest work *Chroniques de Jérusalem* (2011), which won the Fauve d'Or, or Best Comic Book Award at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2012, its English title being *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2012). The *Chroniques Birmanes* and *Chroniques de Jérusalem* were issued in France by Delcourt, in their Shampooing collection edited by Lewis Trondheim, who is also one of the founders of L'Association.

Alongside the Francophone artists presented at the "BD Reporters" exhibition, the work of the Maltese-American cartoonist and comics journalist Joe Sacco was also displayed. His comics on the war in Bosnia *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* (2000) and its aftermath *The Fixer: A Story of Sarajevo* (2003) were selected for this particular exhibition. Sacco is a well-known non-fiction comics author, or, according to him, a comics journalist, whose comics on Palestine attracted the attention of Edward Said who saw a particular strength, uniqueness, and originality in Sacco's work; comics with the potential to show, with an unapologetic but also uncompromising "I" of the observer, life in the Israeli-occupied territories and the Arab-Israeli conflict (Said in Sacco 2001:i-iv). In the work of Sacco, graphic narratives and graphic memoirs have shown how comics journalism and documentaries can take on serious and demanding subjects and present them in a new and exciting manner. Joe Sacco's comics are a transposition of war correspondence to the medium of comics in which he "gives voice to the unheard, and images to the unseen" (Vanderbeke 2010:77). His political graphic narratives that deal with ethics of war and journalism, focus on the portrayal of the daily lives of the others in wartime and in extreme circumstances, by placing in the forefront the people he encounters and converses with, and their first hand testimonies and stories. In *Goražde*, for example, the main character who also provides the information and immediate accounts of the conflict is Edin, Sacco's translator and guide. He is a distinct character, as are the other inhabitants of Goražde, who are also represented as concrete others, in a realistic manner, whereas Sacco himself, remains a somewhat cartoonish character, with thick glasses and

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, in Anglophone countries, these alternative and more literary comics earned the name of "graphic novels" in order to distinguish them from "regular" comics and provided them with cultural legitimisation. A caveat regarding the English term is needed. This distinction regarding the cultural and artistic value of comics and graphic novels is in itself problematic, but what is more problematic is the term "novel". The "graphic novel" here represents not the content but rather the form of a standalone story of non-standardised length which does not form part of a series. Chute and De Koven (2006:767) considered the "graphic novel" a misnomer, and opted for the more neutral "graphic narrative" and in turn defined it as a "narrative work in the medium of comics".

thick lips. Another feature of Sacco's comics, which distinguishes them from Delisle's, are the intricate backgrounds in the panels that are saturated with details, destroyed houses, roads and other people, each distinctive and individual. The experience is all too real and concrete, but being a comic book it is always placed outside of the realistic experience. By giving a voice to the witnesses and by his unequivocal emotional involvement, the author has developed his own distinct style of comics journalism.

Guy Delisle, whose comics are also authorial in the sense of Groensteen's *bande dessinée d'auteur* is not a journalist, unlike Sacco who has a degree in journalism and a journalistic career. Delisle is an animator and cartoonist by profession, and his graphic narratives are exactly that – travel fragments from a cartoonist's life and not of an informed traveller. Whereas Sacco has access to the (private) lives and stories of others, Delisle remains on the sides, as a spectator and an outside observer. This guise of the easy-going ingenuous candid Guy who learns things along the way by simply observing, asking questions, and occasionally obtaining answers, devised in his self-referential cartoon self, is specific for Delisle's comics. These comics can be said to be "reports" but not reportages in the sense of Sacco's journalistic mode. Reports on his immediate actions and surroundings that, at times, tell the reader more about his daily routines in foreign countries than of the foreign countries themselves. To read these four comics is to read about Guy Delisle entwined in the everyday life of his existence in a foreign place. His everyday life in Shenzhen and Pyongyang, where he works as an animator supervisor for a couple of months, differs from his life in Burma and Jerusalem, where he is with his family following his wife Nadège, who is employed as an administrator for Médecins sans Frontières for a whole year. The everyday life experience, which includes working, cooking, and taking care of his children is clearly not the usual content of any travel writing or reporting, but it is of autobiographical comics.

### **Autobiography, Memoirs, Travel, and Graphic Narratives**

The autobiographical mode is the starting point of Delisle's comics. In the last two decades, scholars of comics have stressed the importance of autobiographical discourse in comics, be it autobiographical graphic narratives, or more narrowly defined journals, memoirs, and reportages (Beatens 2004; Miller 2007; Beaty 2008; Chute 2010). The turn to non-fiction and especially to the autobiography in comics can be traced back to a number of American authors of the 1970s such as Justin Green, Robert Crumb or Art Spiegelman. In France, on the other hand, the development of the non-fictional potential of comics can be dated back to the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the late 1980s and the early

1990s, when the comics medium, which had long been viewed as an escapist genre, in the hands of small independent comics publishers amongst which L'Association features prominently, was being substantially transformed. Thus, the autobiography became a genre which defined independent comics publishers (L'Association, *Ego comme X*) who put autobiography and reportage at the forefront of their production (Miller 2007:54; Beaty 2008:140). Discussions on autobiographical elements in comics have often pointed to the function of the legitimisation of the genre by applying this realistic mode (Beaty 2008:144). Chute and De Koven alongside confirming the prevalence of the realistic mode, identify in these graphic narratives “an autobiographical form in which the mark of handwriting is an important part of the rich extra-semantic information a reader receives” (2006:767). Lately, some scholars of life writing chose comics to explore the possibilities of self-representation and, in particular, representation of trauma and cultural differences, by concentrating on this mark of handwriting in the autobiographical form and the presumed visual-verbal amalgam of comics. Gillian Whitlock, a life writing scholar who has written numerous articles on women's autobiographies also entered the field of comics and added her own term of “autographics” for “self-rendering” graphic memoirs to it, which she considers to be the visual-verbal texts in which the narrator negotiates subject positions (Whitlock 2006; Whitlock and Poletti 2008). Although “autographics” is also reminiscent of the cartoonist Lynda Barry's “autobiofictionalography” as she termed her graphic narrative *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002). What I find problematic with Whitlock's definition is the use of the common definition of comics in which she defines them as a “visual-verbal conjunction”, and focuses on their multimodality or “cross-discursive practices” (Whitlock 2006:965; Whitlock and Poletti 2008:vii; cf. Groensteen 2009 for the indefinable comics genre). I agree that comics are mostly that, but not exclusively. Delisle, however is a master of mute comics, especially in his two comic books *Aline et les autres* (1999) and *Albert et les autres* (2001) in which he silently but clearly questions the issues of femininity and masculinity, but also in a number of mute chapters in his travel comics, such a definition is not always appropriate. Unlike Delisle, whose comics have not been subject to scholarly scrutiny, except for Rifkind's insightful article (2010), Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Sacco's comics have so far been the key texts for exploring the first person self-reflexive graphic narrative and the pervasive subjects of trauma, political events, and history as the centre point of analysis (Scanera 2008:73-103). The complicated reference to the subject that exists in autobiographical comic books lets the reader, in particular in Delisle's case, see his image as a trademark and with no natural and essential connection between the cartoonist/cartoonish image and the reference subject. This allows the cartoonist to devise a(n) (inter)play between himself as the author, himself as the narrator, and himself as the character. In travel comics, the author sets up another

type of relation, a relation with the other drawn. Rob Nixon's vision of travel writing as oscillating between "an autobiographical, emotionally tangled mode" and a "semi-ethnographic, distanced, analytical mode" is a suitable starting point for the discussion of Delisle's comics as travel comics (as cited in Thompson 2011:87). These travel comics, not unlike travelogues (in the sense of travel writing) are, to use Todorov's elegant definition (1995:67), narratives in a constant pursuit of difference in which a "certain tension (or a certain balance) between the observing subject and the observed object" is present. The observing subject is Guy Delisle, the author and the cartoonish protagonist, whilst the observed objects are the Chinese, Burmese, etc. drawn, as well as North Korean culture, Israeli-Palestine politics, but also Delisle as the travelling protagonist. In the comics medium, which does not work in the realistic mode aimed at resemblance, however it may seem on the surface, the effects of the realism of autobiographical narratives are shaken and travel narratives are even more exposed as "personal narration and not objective description". Having put boundaries on travel narratives "on the one side [...] science; on the other, autobiography", Todorov adds a stipulation that "if an author speaks only about himself, we once again find ourselves outside the genre" (Todorov 1995:68). Delisle always oscillates towards autobiography, but nowhere more so than in *Burma Chronicles*, which has been criticised for the abundance of gags and "banalities".<sup>3</sup> How these banalities and the less banal and more engaging and serious matters are translated through the author's aesthetic and textual practices is what I will discuss. By moving back and forth between texts and context, I will point to, in somewhat pointillist *modus operandi*, the more prominent and marked practices present in Delisle's travelogues with which the author tackles auto representation and the representation of the other and others.

### **Delisle Draws Himself (In): Shenzen, Pyongyang, Burma and Jerusalem**

#### **Chronicling "The Author's Trade"**

The status of the narrating autobiographer has been problematic, and even though we accept (and accepting has become standard when reading autobiographical comics) that in Delisle's texts, the autobiographical pact and identification of the

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<sup>3</sup> On an important web site dedicated to bande dessinée [www.du9.org](http://www.du9.org), in the review of the *Chroniques Birmanes*, Jeanine Floreani, after extolling *Shenzen* for its innovative and visionary approach and describing *Pyongyang* as a solid work, defines the majority of panels in *Burma Chronicles* "banalités dignes d'un JT de treize heures, entrecoupées de tranches de vie d'épanchement familial dont on se demande bien comment on puisse, un instant, concevoir d'en faire un livre". (<http://www.du9.org/Chroniques-birmanes>)

author, narrator, and protagonist are both respected and upheld (Lejeune 1988:12-13)<sup>4</sup>, the nature of comics as a visual genre and their high level of iconicity, as the American comics theorist McCloud dubbed the less realistic and simplified images (1993:30), as well as their fragmented nature and subjective drawings confound the truthfulness of the narrative. There is no claim to authenticity of the self-image and the images of others. What happens, then, in autobiographical comics, to borrow Rugg's succinct view of the autobiography, is "an exertion of control over self-image" (Rugg 1997:4) and in travel comics, which build upon the material of self-representation, the exertion of control over the image of others. How does Delisle go about constructing his self-image in noting and translating his stay in the language of comics? This is also the first point I want to engage in, the very act of working in the comics medium (and animation).

A staple in contemporary autobiographical comics, as identified by Groensteen, has been the focus "on the chronicle of the professional life, the *mise-en-scène* of the author's trade in comics" (as cited in Beaty 2007:149). This chronicling also serves to authenticate and authorise the artist and the narrative. More so, what is chronicled is not just the professional life, but the making of a particular work in a self-reflexive fashion. In two sequential panels at the very beginning of *Shenzen*, Delisle draws himself sitting at the desk in his hotel room with the narrative voice-over reading:

Like I'd planned before leaving, I take notes about my stay, but the original idea of turning them into a comic seems increasingly vague. I keep at it without any real conviction, going in circles in a hotel room, even if it is China, it doesn't seem like the kind of trip anybody would want to read about. But since there's nothing else to do, I write a page every evening. (Delisle 2006:33-34)

Only to conclude at the very end of the book: "If I draw all these anecdotes one day, it will probably look like I had a great time here" (Delisle 2006:145). Which is exactly what he did. In 1997, Delisle worked for three months as an animation supervisor in Shenzen, situated in the Special Economic Zone in the south of China, and four years later, in 2001 he was called to North Korea, to work in the Scientific and Educational Film studio of Korea (SEK) for two months, so it is no surprise that the author allocates a number of panels to the issue of outsourcing animation, which are also the panels in which we see the protagonist interacting with the Chinese and North Koreans. Delisle, a professional animator at the time, is concerned with these new trends in animation, and is very clear on and unabashedly dissatisfied with a number of issues, including the lack of basic materials and technical equipment, problems in communication which lead to unsatisfying drawings, leading to awkward situations which he depicts in a bemusing way. Dissatisfaction with the state of affairs is also connected to his

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<sup>4</sup> Rifkind (2010:288, endnote 2) does the same and also identifies the author as Guy Delisle, narrator as Delisle, and protagonist as Guy.

view of the world and the problems of cheap labour. He does not need much to poignantly show what is going on; by drawing a mincer stuffed with a book on which it reads “comic book classics” behind a TV and a child sitting in front of the TV, he manages to point to the problems of children’s education today. In the next panel Guy somewhat dejectedly says: “Great, that way, kids don’t have to bother reading books. They’ll just think everything started on TV, like Tintin” (Delisle 2007:16). Obviously, not just animation is problematic, but even the television’s relationship towards the comics genre, especially the transference of the classics in children’s television shows. Ironically, Tintin, as the classic of comics, is under the threat of being forgotten as such and merely being associated with an animated television show. Delisle considers animation of this sort a commercial product, and his own work a service (2005:175, 2006:148). In *Burma Chronicles*, he is no longer the employed animator, but the stay at home husband and father who takes care of little Louis (who is the protagonist of two of Delisle’s mute comic books: *Louis au ski* and *Louis à la plage*). In *Burma*, Delisle manages to gather a small informal group of animators and conduct animation classes. By dedicating substantial panels to these classes, Delisle chooses to speak about the state of comics production and animation in Burma. In *Chroniques de Jérusalem*, Delisle no longer gives lessons in animation, but lectures on his adult comics, as he visually reiterates excerpts from *Aline et les Autres* (2011:229, 255). The situation in Palestine and Israel is very different from the one encountered in his previous trips. He is the father of two children now, but also Israel and Palestine, although conflict zones, are not military dictatorships. These Palestinian and Israeli lectures and classes are prominently featured in the book. By chronicling these classes, Delisle cleverly divulges many social, political, and cultural issues. The Arab students, mostly veiled females, do not know any recent comics productions, which is a consequence of the forced isolation they have to live in. On the other hand, Israeli students are knowledgeable, and one student is even acquainted with Delisle’s own work. This conflation of personal, professional, and political brings to the forefront issues that might otherwise go unnoticed. The same is valid when Delisle is commissioned to do comics work for the MSF-Holland in Burma and MSF-Spain in Palestine. In Burma, he was asked to draw a short instructional comic strip on the regular taking of HIV medication, which he did, and which was distributed among Burmese children in afflicted areas (2008:205-206). His personal involvement correspondingly includes the reader more than if Delisle was just an observer in such a matter. In *Chroniques de Jérusalem*, while doing a BD-reportage on MSF-Spain’s work in Hebron (2011:113), Guy is seen working on the comics reportage, taking photos, and conducting interviews with the help of the people at MSF. But in a panel in which Guy is depicted lying in bed in the dark with a blanket firmly held and lifted up to his chin, with a frightened look on his face, there appears a doubt in the form of a narrative voice-over, “J’ai

comme l'impression de pas faire le poids comme grand reporter" (I had a feeling I wasn't cutting it as a great reporter)<sup>5</sup> (2011:120). What is at question, are not his cartoonist abilities but his reporting abilities. He knows he can draw, but whether he can produce a report that is objective and informative enough is his main concern. I have presented his work on animation and comics as being fragments of the narratives, fragments that can be read in isolation. By placing the accounts of his work in the narrative, Delisle only reinforces his status as a comics author.

### Chronicling Comics and Books

Embedded in the autobiographical perspective of these graphic travel narratives are allusions to various other works of popular culture: other comics, music, paintings, works of fiction, television shows, and newspapers. The transmedial references and highly intertextual nature of comics, as well as transgressions in narrative levels, that is, between "the fictional and the real world" (Kukkonen 2009:214), are also major elements in the contemporary graphic narrative and they directly relate to the cartoonist profession. Scholars of comics have dedicated a number of texts to the issue of metareferentiality in comics (Groensteen 1990; Kukkonen 2009; Atkinson 2010). Ann Miller, in *Reading Bande Dessinée*, locates these procedures in the development of postmodernist narratives and divides these characteristic procedures that appear in comics into a number of elements including metafiction, metalepsis, intertextuality, and display of the codes of the medium (2007:125-150). What appears on the pages of the comics, only as a reference or as drawn artefacts, are a number of books Delisle brings with himself on his travels, "a pile of books" for Shenzhen, and a lesser number for Pyongyang, amongst which is a book that is also crucial for the reading of Delisle's *Pyongyang*, and that is George Orwell's *1984*. In Shenzhen,<sup>6</sup> he spends a lot of time alone in his hotel room, thinking, reading, and drawing. He reads Jules Renard's *Carrot Top*, an autobiographical novel about growing up and the life of a red-haired boy (2006:13), as well as the comic book *Spirou* which is incorporated into the body of text by the narrative procedure of metalepsis. Delisle violates narrative levels (Genette in Miller 2007:134) when Spirou, the character, appears on top of his head annoying him while he reads *Spirou* the book (2006:26, 27-28). Another comic book character makes an appearance in *Shenzhen*, Snowy (Milou) Tintin's faithful companion, but not next to Tintin himself, but instead next to Guy dressed as Tintin in a full-page silent panel (2006:100. Fig. 1). This panel was inspired by Hergé's *The Blue Lotus*, in which the adventurous reporter finds himself in China

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from French are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Rifkind calls Delisle a creature of comics, and provides an in-depth analysis of self-reflexivity in *Shenzhen* (2010:279-281) by focusing on the Tintin panel.



solving a drug trafficking affair. *The Blue Lotus* is known as a turning point in the history of Tintin comic books (Rifkind 2010:281), which were, up until then, characterised by stereotypes and strong imperialistic attitudes. Tintin is important for the reading of Delisle's *Shenzen*, as is Orwell's *1984* for *Pyongyang*. *1984* and George Orwell have multiple appearances in *Pyongyang* and a cameo role in *Burma*. Besides intertextual references, Delisle inserts, but also recreates, pages from different comics by various artists, including a two page spread drawn by another artist, Fabrice Fouquet, in *Pyongyang* (2005:166-167), visually reiterates panels from Jochen Gerner's comic book on his trip to New York (2006:34). He also copies interesting illustrations and drawings he comes across in China

(2006:33) and in *Burma* he devotes a chapter titled "Comics" to Burmese comics, where he, apart from reproducing these images, hierarchies them according to their quality in an almost edifying way (2008:174-175). By including a number of allusions to other comics as well as direct reproductions, Delisle points to the cultural history of comics and popular culture in general. He does not deploy the complex overturning of tradition, but instead, presents a positive acceptance of connecting links in the art of comics.



Figure 1. From *Shenzen*. Image copyright Guy Delisle. With permission of Drawn & Quarterly

## **Delisle Draws Others (In): Shenzen, Pyongyang, Burma and Jerusalem**

### **The Fleeting Exotic and the Laughing Cow**

Born in the milieu of autobiographical comics, these texts are the artist's self-reflexive rendering of a place, be it a developing city, a military dictatorship or a conflict zone. The premise behind them is simple, the reader sees the figure that represents Delisle, a cartoonish and non-realistic character, and in turn, sees things through his eyes. What Delisle decides to show is not through exoticist

aesthetics and the search for an authentic Chinese, Korean or Burmese culture, but by presenting the actual, the present, and the immediate. Rifkind (2010:270) has poignantly pointed out that Delisle in *Shenzhen* substitutes the exotic with the quotidian, adventure with boredom, and leisure with labour. The exotic which he searches for, first in *Shenzhen* in the shape of an old wooden Chinese house in comparison to the ever present concrete building of the growing city, escapes him and in the course of his stays, goes through a process of de-exoticisation. At the end of his stay, the most exotic thing to do in China “besides watching ads on local TV channels” is to eat random Chinese food from the supermarket (2006:115). Supermarkets as exotic places are also present in Burma. Delisle writes: “Ah! Food aisles in foreign countries! I’ve got to admit, I find them totally exotic” (2008:10). At the same time, supermarkets are in direct link with the processes of globalisation, and can offer the “global menu” even in places such as Burma (Lawrence and Burch 2007:5). In a Burmese supermarket, Delisle finds both Nescafe and the Laughing Cow cheese: “Here, this is the real face of globalisation. A grinning red cow” (2008:11). A trademark that can be found everywhere in the world is what epitomises the homogenisation of late capitalist society as Delisle sees it. This is why he finds it more important to focus his observations on what he can see, hear, reach, touch, and feel, instead of searching for what travellers see as authentic cultures. His *pseudoethnographic* (Holland and Huggan 1998) interest, which characterises much of travel writing, withers slowly with the appearance of the Laughing Cow.

As much as he set out on his journey to China to search for something different and unfamiliar, he quickly dismisses such ideas, and therefore he never quite engages with the other. As Holland and Huggan have pointed out, travellers, unlike their ethnographic counterparts, are “often drawn to surfaces more particularly, to bodies – onto which they project their fears and fantasies of the ethnicised cultural ‘other’” (1998:19). Surfaces are the things comics are made on. This is why the cartoonists most problematic task is how to picture a racially different other. Deciding on a non-realistically drawn image, he can easily fall into the trap of typecasts and cartoonish images that might get him accused of perpetuating racist stereotypes. Delisle, working in an already iconic mode, does not fall back on the traditions of ethnic caricatures, but portrays Asian characters in his first three comic books as equally as cartoonish, or even more so, than his own character. What he does not do, is allow them the same amount of presence on the pages of the books. *Shenzhen*, alongside *Jerusalem*, which is the most complex of his works, is only incidentally concerned with Chinese culture and he experiences what Nicholas Clifford termed, in his analysis of colonial travel texts on China, the “fed-upness of the observer with the observed” (as cited in Rifkind 2010:275). Rifkind adds that, besides being fed up with globalisation, he is also fed up with the “intrinsic qualities of the culture or people he observes” (Rifkind 2010:275). I would argue

not with the qualities but with his inability to penetrate. By portraying himself in this manner, he does ascribe a certain inscrutability to Asian characters. In Delisle's case, this inscrutability, which is a major trope of Orientalist discourse, in which the other remains culturally unintelligible and impenetrable, is a consequence not of cultural superiority but of an acknowledged ignorance.

The Shenzhen experience, where his estrangement is at its highest, is not wholly comparable to the North Korean. Whereas he had the possibility of relatively free movement in China, in Pyongyang he is assigned a guide, a translator, and a driver. The guide, Mister Kyu, and the translator, Mister Sin, are the rare North Koreans presented in the book. There are more images of members of NGOs, which will also be the case in Burma, than of North Koreans. When he draws his translator Mister Sin (or Captain Sin, which is obviously not his name) he sometimes presents him in different clothes. In one panel, the translator is dressed in regular clothes, in the next in military clothing, and in the following in a clown suit (Delisle 2005:34). The same occurs in a conversation they have on North and South Korea, where the translator is suddenly transformed into a military official (2005:63). His translator is among the few Koreans that appear on the pages of *Pyongyang*. The others are the ever present leader(s), a few employees of the museums and public sites he visits, and the girls playing the accordion at the Mangyongdae Children's Palace, who are also on the cover of the English edition (full-page silent panel 2005:145, 156). Delisle drew them with a wide artificial and strained smile, showing clenched teeth and called them "savant monkeys" on display (2005:157). These ideologically motivated assertions are mostly visible in Delisle's constant inquiries of the credulity of people when it comes to North Korean propaganda (2005:40, 62, 74, 105, 158, 169, 174, amongst others). The melancholy of *Shenzhen* and the flippancy of *Pyongyang* and *Burma* give way to a more nuanced look at the place of visit. There is already a substantial number of comics that take up the topic of Arab-Israeli conflict and travel to Israel, amongst which are the above-mentioned two comics by Joe Sacco titled *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, but also female authors such as the Israeli Rutu Modan with *Exit Wounds* (2007) or the American Sarah Glidden with the travel comic book *How to Understand Israel in 60 days or less* (2010). Delisle is living in the Arab part and mostly associates with Arabs, although he makes many trips to various Jewish parts, such as Tel Aviv as well as the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood of Mea Sharim. The unsettling anxiety which permeates *Chroniques de Jérusalem* is also present in his reluctance to go deeper into the Arab-Israeli conflict, and yet again he concentrates only on immediate events and situations that happen in the MSF quarters. His reporting on the three-week Operation Cast Lead of 2008-2009, which he experienced firsthand, is one of buying sandwiches and watching news reports. When he finds himself in what he knows, that is, in his comics classes, he also fleshes out poignant cultural portraits of the youth. He has an

exciting conversation with a completely veiled student who was “mariée a 15 ans, battue, divorcée, retour aux études, bac, et maintenant arts plastiques” (married at 15, beaten, divorced, returned to her studies, finished high school, and was now studying visual arts) (Delisle 2011:278). He is aware of the constraint of representing veiled women and the effect of exoticisation, but by placing them in the comics (lessons) setting, they are at the same time extracted from an orientalist discourse. The affirmative articulation of difference and the contextualisation present in *Jérusalem* makes Delisle an observer of the micropolitics of survival. The last contextualised image of micropolitics at work, and the final scene of Israel that he draws for the reader before heading to the airport, is a terrifying image of an Israeli coloniser (settler) who assumes what Pratt (1992) described as the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” stance, which Delisle draws with only deceptive simplicity. This image is of a man on a rooftop claiming his territory, imposing himself on the people below as their colonial master. Although only an observer, Delisle portrays himself in the last image as looking up at the man, but all the reader can see is him looking up at the wall, the wall of separation (2011:333).

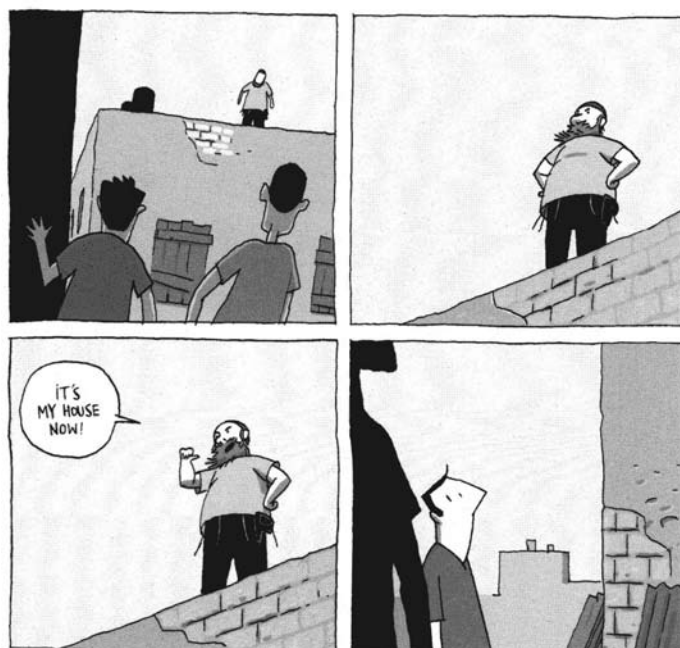
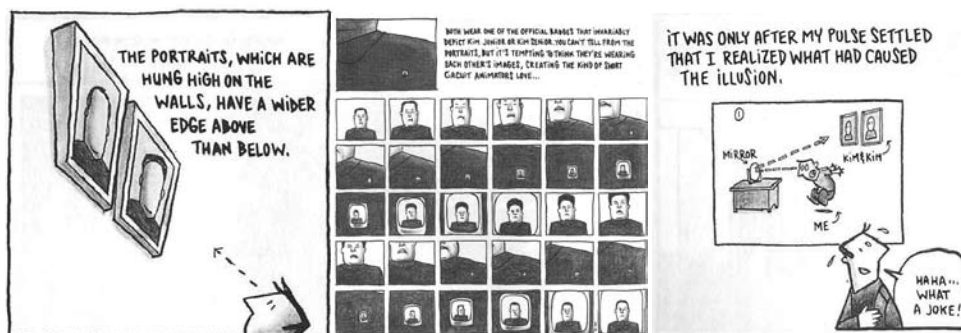


Figure 2. From *Chroniques de Jérusalem*. Image copyright Guy Delisle.  
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## Big Brothers Are Watching You

Oppressiveness is the feeling which permeates *Pyongyang*. Given the recent events in North Korea, this gains on its actuality, especially when it comes to the presence and absence of the great leader(s). *Pyongyang*, the book, is full of various images of both Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il; the author even conjures up a quiz in which the reader has to eliminate the spy or the imperialist (Delisle 2005:66, 92, 152). The quizzes are based on pins with the leaders' images on them, which Delisle never forgets to draw on any of the North Korean characters' shirts. Consecrating multiple pages and panels of the image of the leader, unambiguously and quite obviously, the author summons up the idea of Orwell's Big Brother. But the author goes one step further and explains the technical facts behind the images, how the two leaders are made to look identical or what the form of the portraits is that are hung on the wall (Fig. 3). The reader finds out, thanks to Delisle's expert cartoonist eye, that: "The angle cuts out any reflections that could prevent you from contemplating the son of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and his venerable father. It also intensifies the gaze in this face-to-face encounter" adding "a detail Orwell would like" (2005:30). On the same page, he goes even further in his musings on the pins, by creating a circuit of images which can never be broken, which is what Delisle also thinks of the "communist dynasty" in North Korea (Fig. 4). It is a self-enclosed isolated cosmos which he cannot penetrate. The same isolated cosmos the author experienced himself, having met only three North Koreans, his guide, his translator, and the chauffeur. Even if he cannot go below the surface, in an ironic twist, he can become the Big Brother himself, by seeing the leaders reflection in the mirror instead of his own. Again, it is just an optic trick which makes him conclude: "I've gotta get out of here" (2005:132. Fig. 5).



Figures 3, 4 and 5. From *Pyongyang*. Image copyright Guy Delisle. With permission of Drawn & Quarterly

The Orwellian situation continues in Burma. The colonial past of Orwell's colonial novel *Burmese Days*, in which Orwell offers a critique of imperialism in Burma as "the perpetual need to display masculine authority before a colonised population" (Nandy as cited in Spurr 1993:191) is recalled, but as a long gone period for which Delisle has only a cartoonist nostalgia, visually re-creating a number of artefacts (Delisle 2008:56, 36). Amusingly, Delisle perpetually displays the masculine authority of the Burmese officials, however, the masculine is a caricatured masculine, where the officials are actually drawn as kids with inflated heads (Fig. 6). In 2005, Emma Larkin, an American author who is fluent in Burmese, wrote an interesting book on Orwell and Burma in which she reads the Burmese situation through Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. For Larkin, *1984* epitomises the Burma of military dictatorship. And just like she wasn't able to put it down while writing her book, so Delisle couldn't put it down on his trip to Pyongyang (Larkin 2005:289-230; Delisle 2005:22).

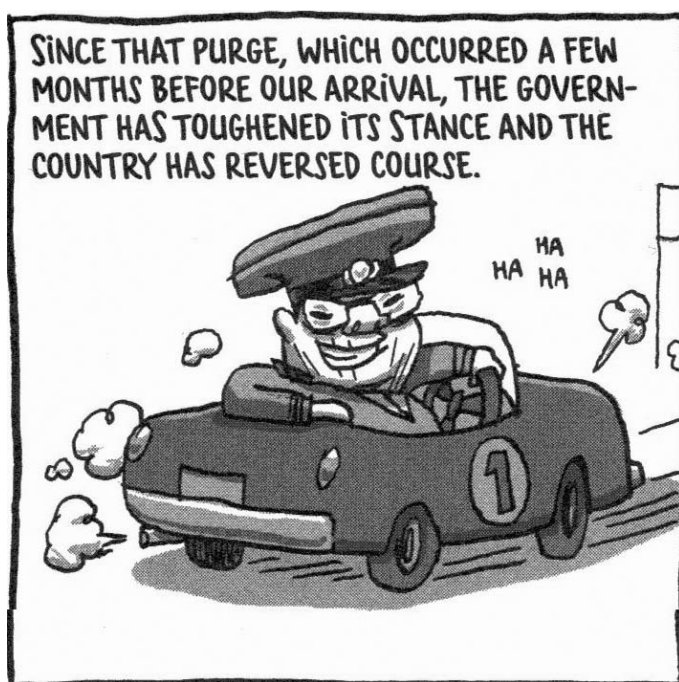


Figure 6. From *Burma Chronicles*. Image copyright Guy Delisle.  
With permission of Drawn & Quarterly

Religious figures in Jerusalem are what the leaders and officials represent for military dictatorships. They are everywhere and subsequently everywhere in

Delisle's graphic narrative. By providing images of religious figures in their full outfits and not just their faces, he dramatises their role in the everyday life of the people. The six Christian leaders in their black robes are almost identical, which makes the conflict that follows these panels comical (Delisle 2011:109). Delisle draws them as quarrelsome men who, in a childlike manner, fight over the ownership of the parts of a building. Christian religious leaders also appear aside from just Samaritans and Jewish Rabbis. These micro stories set in motion an underground narrative of the presence of religious machinery which operates behind religious conflicts.



Figure 7. From *Chroniques de Jérusalem*. Image copyright Guy Delisle. With permission of Delcourt

### Silent Panels and Tourist Practices

The politics of his daily life in an oppressive regime and conflict ridden areas are not the only topic Delisle tackles. His tourist practices also appear on the pages of the comic. Practices for whose depiction he opts for two formal methods. In *Shenzen* and *Pyongyang*, he uses full-page silent panels, that is, mute splash pages, which are embedded in the narrative and serve to draw the reader's attention to

the elements on display. At the same time, these pages stop the narrative but also function as prefigurations of later events. There are eight wordless full-page panels in *Shenzhen*, and Guy appears in only two of them: in the first one, which is also the cover page of the English edition, where he is in a crowd of Chinese people (Delisle 2006:37), while the other is the already discussed image of him as Tintin. What dominates these wordless panels, are images of concrete buildings which reveal the economic forces at work in Shenzhen in 1997 and its building development. The alienation he experiences is clearly depicted in the thick greys that satiate these standalone images. The full-page panels of *Pyongyang* are greater in number. There are eleven of them and together they function as indicators of the most famous sites in Pyongyang, such as the Tower of the Juche Idea, the Monument of the Party founding or, at the time of his visit, the unfinished Ryugyong hotel, which all loom large on the pages in complete isolation (Delisle 2005:65, 97, 113). The author, at the same time, succeeded in portraying their imposing enormity, but also the cartoonish qualities they possess. Clearly, the postcard-like quality of the panels and the framed world they represent, are directed at the reader in

a strong and direct way. The fact that they are turned *inside out* gives these images a spectacle of authenticity and touristic quality. Although the author is working in the two cities, the splash pages can be read as his touristic experiences since “tourists travel to consume experiences which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life” (Urry 1990:1). Work in animation represents his everyday life in China and North Korea, but not in Burma and Jerusalem, which is why his tourist practices also differ, as well as the way in which he visually creates them.

In *Burma* and *Jérusalem*, Delisle abandons the wordless full-page panels and decides on small wordless panels that depict his holidays and tourist excursions. There are three such multi-panel sequences in *Burma*, the first portraying tourism in Bagan, the second tourism at Lake Inlay, and the third portraying his visit to Bangkok

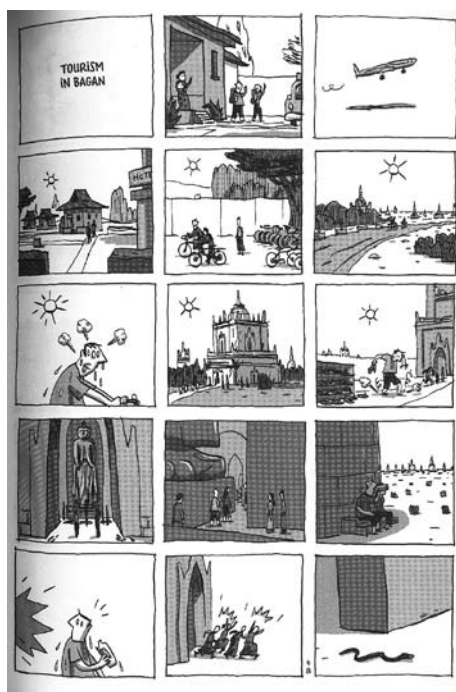


Figure 8. From *Burma Chronicles*. Image copyright Guy Delisle. With permission of Drawn & Quarterly



(2008:49-50, 188-190, 216-219. Fig. 8). Where the big panels with their static nature, reminiscent of postcards, serve to encapsulate an image of a foreign place, the small dynamic ones represent movement and are evocative of photographs taken on holidays. They stand in opposition to the rest of the narrative with their quick exchange, sharpness and lightness, and suggestiveness of tourist photographic practices. The Burmese sequences, a couple of pages long, are reminiscent of vacation movies and are focused on different travelling and touristic situations, from the flight to leisurely walks. In *Jérusalem*, multiframes are only a page long and include his visits to Eilat, Rome (where he went to a comics festival), Jordan, and Acre (2011:66, 89, 180, 204). Not as informative as the sequences in the *Burma Chronicles*, the Jerusalem story is only focused on what Guy and his family did – snorkelling, sightseeing, riding a donkey. However, both play into the picaresque and anecdotal mode of the comic itself. The fact that they are mute comics that can function independently shows the highly fragmented structure the author adopts in his last two comics, in particular in the comic on Burma.

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

Both travel writing and comics are genres that have been attacked either for their lack of literariness (travel writing) or lack of artistic merit (comics). Travel writing has also suffered on the grounds of its involvement in and perpetuation of colonial and imperialistic attitudes (Pratt 1992; Spurr 1993; Lisle 2006). Today, travel writing, and even more so, comics, are going through a renaissance. In their excellent study on contemporary travel writers titled *Tourists with Typewriters*, Holland and Huggan define the contemporary travel narratives as “mediating between fact and fiction, autobiography and ethnography” (1998:ix). The same definition can be used for comics journalism, reportages, memoirs, and travels. It can also be said that Delisle and the great number of artists working on graphic travelogues are tourists with a sketchbook and ink, given their predilection for the black-and-white technique (only *Chroniques de Jérusalem* are coloured). The subjective viewpoint of comics and the author’s idiosyncratic style add a new dimension to the issues of representing the world; ethnicity, nationality, and travel. Comics can, unbounded by requirements of realism, as Delisle has shown, add an aspect which might not give answers about important issues, but a dimension capable of asking questions which emotionally involve the reader. The hypertrophied heads of the Burma officials (Delisle 2008:74, 167) or military officials, who in the guise of kids, play in the sand while dividing up the country (Delisle 2011:31), carry a stronger message of the comicality of the situation and its irrationality. The unique visuality of comics and their potential for representing others in a non-stereotypical and non-hackneyed way, but instead in a fresh and

often comic manner, have shown a way of looking at North Korean propaganda or the Palestinian question, which is connected to the everyday experience of the cartoonist. A few days after his arrival to East-Jerusalem, Delisle talks to a member of the MSF, who starts to explain the local situation, and the perplexed Guy can, in the end, only say: “Bon, j’ai rien compris mais je me dis qu’avec une année entière devant moi, je devrais à y comprendre quelque chose”. (Ok, I didn’t understand anything but I told myself that I have a whole year during which I would come to understand something) (2011:13). Understanding something is what is important. *Something* means that Delisle does not offer a complete picture, or any grand and authoritative narrative of a country or a city. Instead, he offers bits and pieces of his life, of the lives of others, snapshots of himself, his wife, his son, daughter, the buildings next door, and colonies outside the window. The cultural portraits presented by Delisle and glimpses of his daily life are capable, with their bemusing stance, of offering the reader a view to which he can easily relate. It can be said that graphic travel narratives inaugurate a new line of travel books to be read by avid readers of travel writing. When Delisle’s draws himself drawing, multiple times, or the grey concrete wall that separates the Arab from the Israeli population, these wordless panels with their repetitions of drab greys show the seriousness of the situation. Delisle does not need any words to describe it. I would like to come full circle and finish with some verses from Baudelaire’s famous poem *Le Voyage*, which Delisle’s reads in the comic book *Théodore Poussin* (Delisle 2006:68). Yes, these graphic narratives are cherry and bemusing, but the knowledge we obtain from his travels is bitter, especially from the dictatorship regimes of Burma and North Korea and places of conflict such as Palestine and Israel.

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## PUTUJUĆI CRTAČ STRIPOVA. PRIKAZ SEBE I SVIJETA U PUTOPISNOM STRIPU GUYA DELISLEA

### SAŽETAK

Četiri stripa *Shenzen: Putni dnevnik iz Kine*, *Pyongyang: Putovanje u Sjevernu Koreju*, *Burmanske kronike* i *Jeruzalemske kronike* quebečkog umjetnika Guya Delislea pripadaju miljeu autobiografskih stripova. Stalan razvoj toga žanra sve od 1970-ih godina vezan je uz činjenicu da su stripovi u to vrijeme stekli kulturni status medija umjetničkog izraza kojem su umjetnici počeli pristupati na sve raznolikije i inovativnije načine. Delisleovi povijesni i reportažni stripovi snažno se oslanjaju na autorov životopis i navike, posebice one koje se odnose na njegov profesionalni život: on svoja putovanja i svoju umjetničku egzistenciju prikazuje kao neraskidivo povezane. U Shenzenu i Pyonyangu on je formalno zaposlen kao supervizor animatora crtanih filmova, dok u Burmi i Jeruzalemu daje satove animacije i stripa. Narativnim elemenatima iz kojih se sastoje njegova umjetnička prikazivanja sebe i prostora, među kojima samoreferencijalnošću, intertekstualnošću, nizanjem nijemih kadrova i kadrovima preko čitave stranice Delisle pronalazi privlačan način da predstavi sebe i svijet oko sebe.

Ključne riječi: Guy Delisle, strip, autobiografija, putovanje