A breach in the social imaginary – *Le Bug* and the prospective science fiction of Enki Bilal

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Abstract

This essay aims to contribute to the study of social imaginaries by looking at how the imaginal, the imaginary, the discursive and the political co-operate in creating social meaning. Through a reading of the work of the French graphic artist and political thinker Enki Bilal, and more specifically in his latest, yet unfinished, work *Le Bug* [The Bug], I will explore how the social imaginary dimension currently works, how it politically affects our ways of thinking and of acting. My assumption is that Bilal can, perhaps, help us see and concretise both possibilities and risks saturating the present-day social universes. I will substantiate my arguments by looking at the processes of creating meaning activated by both writers and readers of comics.

Keywords

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A breach in the social imaginary

Bats are both rowdy and beautiful creatures.
Soft and full of meaning they live
in the land between nature and culture.
Their fluttering blades rotate back and forth
across this invisible border.
Nature bares its teeth.
Dracula goes draconian.
There is no Batman to save the world.
Someone eats bats in China and coughs
stocks tumble in Wall Street
and nature smiles.
It smiles exposing its teeth
the smile boils over and spills into the blood
of the humans.
It sucks up their movements
it sucks up their kisses
and gives them fear
and poverty
and death in return.
It inserts infection between humans,
so they keep six feet from each other.
The world is not itself.
The world has changed.
We will never forget what we are living
through now.
The world is new and now.

Morten Söndergaard (2020)

Since 2020 it has been more difficult than usual to tell fact from fiction[1]. Not so that the world has become more fairylike, or the fictions more realistic. No, it has to do with something more elusive, perhaps frightening, yet promising: The corona pandemic created a breach, a bug in the system of social imaginary significations, producing insecurities and fears, but also offering a window and a possibility of something new and different. Before that window closes completely and, if possible, to prevent such a closure, a deepened investigation is needed of how the social imaginary dimension currently works, how it affects our ways of thinking and of acting.

My aim here is to contribute to such a political reflection by studying how the imaginal, the imaginary and the discursive co-operate in creating social meaning. I have chosen to anchor my reflections in the work of the French graphic artist and political thinker Enki Bilal, and more specifically in his latest, yet unfinished, work *Le Bug* [The Bug]. Why I make this choice will, I hope, become clear as I go along.

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[1] The present text is a reworked, updated and expanded translation of an earlier Swedish text, that was published in 2022 as "En bugg i systemet–Enki Bilals prospektiva science fiction" (Rosengren, 2022).

However, as a preliminary, introductory reason, I just want to mention that Bilal's configurations and uses of the Western magma of social imaginary significations have, at several occasions in the past, proven to contain a prospective vision of sorts, explaining and enlightening the present. The assumption is that Bilal can, perhaps, help us see and concretise both possibilities and risks saturating contemporary social universes. To specify some of the tangible ways in which the social imaginary works, I will thus base my arguments in a reading of *Le Bug* and in the processes of creating meaning activated by both writers and readers of comics.

From at least 2001, if not before, people in the West have become accustomed to living in a fictionalized world, where real disasters get their shape and meaning from the (often dystopian) world of fiction[2]. 9/11 was immediately compared to disaster movies (prominently *The Towering inferno* by John Guillermin from 1974) and the dramaturgy in the news reporting on the terror attack, as on the subsequent *War on terrorism*, seemed to follow the standard Hollywood manuscript: the enormous, exceptional event was inscribed in a familiar pattern with a clear distribution of roles and prefab models for action. The predictability and clarity of the following political polarization, as catastrophic and bloody as it was, consequently had a soothing effect on most opinions. At least up until the Lehman Brothers collapse in 2008, and the global economic chaos it sparked. Then came 2011, when the *Arab Spring*, that some earnestly called 'a Facebook-revolution', showed both that deviations from the standard script were possible, as well as how humanly costly they could be. Social media turned out not to be the unambiguous tool for democracy and freedom so much hoped for, but more of an oppressive weapon in the hands of totalitarian regimes and propagandists. After 2011, the dramaturgical deviances followed in rapid succession; the distribution of roles between 'the good' and 'the bad' became unclear and started to dissolve. And with the war in Syria, the increase of refugees seeking asylum in Europe in 2015, the democratic farce around the Brexit vote and the presidential election in the USA in 2016, the relative predictability afforded by the fictional models was finally broken. The perhaps stifling, but at least stable, political order of left against right became muddled; unprecedented alliances were formed, such as the social movement *Les Gilets Jaunes* in France in 2018 and the manifestations against corona restrictions a couple of years later that assembled nationalistic right-wingers, new age followers and activists from the left in the same ranks. The political agency was transformed and displaced and the foundations of liberal democracies – which in the best of worlds would be the citizens' fair and free deliberative choices between clear and honestly debating political alternatives – started to crack, *also* as ideological, imaginary foundations. Identity understood as

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[2] When I talk about 'people in the West' in different iterations in this text, I refer to those who recognize, and may or may not identify with, the social imaginary universe that is sometimes called 'the western world'. This universe is not limited to certain places or countries; rather, those who recognize the validity of the following, very sketchy historical account, will in one way or another be related to this 'western world'.

special interest became more important than taking care of what is common for us all – the welfare state, the climate, our common world.

However, when Covid-19 started to spread across the world in the spring of 2020, it suddenly seemed to be humanly possible to come together in global political action for the common good. All over the world *lock downs* were initiated to protect the weakest in society, and to stop the ravages of the virus. Something seemed to have happened, something that might turn the development; perhaps also the climate crisis could be handled as effectively?

Soon this proved to be a naive expectation. Concerted actions were quickly swapped for fierce competition and suspicion between nations. In Scandinavia, as in the rest of Europe, almost forgotten borders were restored and became most palpable again. Xenophobia grew under the cover of virus protection. In the face of rising infection even a country like Sweden, which in the beginning of the pandemic saw each citizen as capable of following the governments recommendation to "ställ in, håll ut, håll avstånd" [cancel, persevere, keep your distance; this alludes to a recurrent formulation in many of Sweden's former prime minister Stefan Löfven's speeches during 2020], was transformed in a more authoritarian direction. A special pandemic law was installed, expanding the possibility of actions concerning the use of face masks, travel restrictions, online teaching, etcetera[3]. Similar reactions and restrictions were seen all across the world in the northern autumn of 2020 – often instead of focusing on collaboration or on helping or getting support also from those who do not happen to live within the borders of a specific country.

And yet – the vaccines, that were developed through formerly unseen collaborations, and in record time, promised to save us all. At least some time during 2021, or 2022. And at least if you were lucky enough to live in one of the rich countries of the world. The vaccines, which finally seem to have stopped the pandemic, have also proven to be a possibility for the pharmaceutical industry to make massive profit out of essential human needs, again.

Then, just as the pandemic phased out, another breach – the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Suddenly, European states seemed to come together as one, again, facing a new common enemy. Formerly non-aligned countries such as Finland and Sweden discarded years of policies of neutrality and hastened to apply for NATO membership. The imageries of the Cold War seemed pertinent again – the fear, the warmongering, the nuclear threat. Nothing is post-war anymore, and the unity, as well as the conviction and willingness to act of the first months of 2022 are

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[3] The law came into force on January 10 2021. In an earlier press release from the Swedish government, the law is said to be an "outline law, where the parliament, if it accepts the law, temporarily will give the government authority to, through ordinance, decide about more binding actions regarding communicable diseases than is currently the case". [Translated by the author]. See https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2021/01/tillfallig-pandemilag-ger-fler-befogenheter-for-atgarder-om-smittskydd/ Last visited August 10, 2021, 22.06.) The democratic intention that was at least discernible in the government's actions in Mars and April 2020, appeared in the autumn more and more as a random taking of positions: face masks/no face masks; prohibition to enter the country/ no prohibition to enter the country; open businesses/closed businesses and so on.

now, in 2023, threatening to crumble into petty promotions of particular national interests, again.

To sum up – and now I come back to the elusive and frightening: All these events suggest that we today lack the parameters for orienting ourselves towards the future. The demarcation between fact and fiction seems ever dissolving and random. Once clear positions and contrasts fade. All predictions seem credible, the most totalitarian and dystopic as well as the most egalitarian and democratic. For better or for worse, we do no longer have customary oppositions or entrenched loyalties to guide us. The future is muted. Covid-19 might still be the best image of this condition – omnipresent, it can affect everyone; it may be transmitted without the infected person even knowing; the infected may get terminally ill, or get away with a mild cold; nobody knows anything for sure. All are threatened, everybody can be stricken, but not in equal proportions, not as bad or as fatally.

What we need today is an idea about what we are facing, what we can expect. We need an idea of a future that does not simply repeat the deeply entrenched catastrophic scenarios of the Western magma of social imaginary significations that have been prominent ever since the post-war anti-nuclear movement, since the eye-opening environmental critique in Rachel Carson's *Silent spring* (1961) and, obviously, since the War on terror after 9/11.[4] That is, scenarios that do not necessarily follow the sadly predictable inevitability of dystopias, or economism's blind faith in the benevolence of the market, or the divisive ideological fictions of the so called 'Realpolitik'.
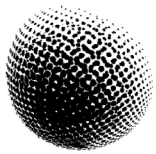
Exploring possibilities - Enki Bilal's *Le Bug*

The possibility of possibilities of other social imaginary universes are explored in the work of the French artist, comic book creator and film director Enki Bilal. He has for a long time now (Bilal began to write comics already in the mid-seventies) reflected on politics, humanity, consciousness and technology in a series of publications in different genres and media, ranging from SF-surrealism to (almost) social realism, communicated through exhibitions, comics and films[5]. A common theme in the multifaceted work of Bilal is the staging of a simultaneously imaginary

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[4] *Social Imaginary Significations* (SIS)*:* Theses significations are, according to Cornelius Castoriadis, *social*, because they are shared by a group, a society or even a whole culture; *imaginary*, not because they would in any way be fictional or non-real, but because they are the results of the workings of our human imagination and *significations*, because it is in and through them that humans understand and give sense and meaning to their world. Together they form an everchanging 'magma' in and through which a society takes form and reshapes itself.

For a presentation of the concept magma and the idea of SIS, two concepts central in the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis, see Rosengren (2014).

[5] French Wikipedia has a very good page about Enki Bilal, with a short biography and an extensive bibliography. (last visited 24/3 2023: 15.38) : https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/EnkiBilal

and *imaginal*[6] political reflection, where the discursive and visual aspects interdependently support, determine, complicate and deepen each other. Bilal's work is saturated by a complex and thoroughly worked out social visual imaginary rhetoric.

This also applies to his most recent work *Le Bug*, today available in three of five, or six, planned volumes (Bilal, 2017, 2019, 2022)[7]. It tells the story of a global phenomenon, multi layered and ambiguous: A bug that on December 13 2041 erases all data on hard-drives, servers and electronic memories all over the globe. Programs, applications, codes – all is gone; only ancient analogue technologies work, and, somewhat surprisingly, email[8]. This bug is furthermore somehow related to the bug-like creature that has penetrated the neck of cosmonaut and returning Mars-traveller K Obb and installed itself next to his spine. The creature gives, inexplicably, Obb access to all the world's disappeared data. Obb remembers everything – not least the codes needed to restart the digitally dependent machines that suddenly grinded to halt, as well as the digital implants in human bodies that have stopped working. Moreover, the parasite gives Obb the ability of telecommunication with specific persons, communications that are no doubt listened in to, bugged, however unclear by whom. Lastly, the bug is also an infection, a virus, that has contaminated Obb, who unwillingly transmits the ailment. The infectious symptoms appear as blue spots on the skin and through a fever, but seem to cause no other effects, at least not in the first three volumes. Apart from offering some kind of immunity (unclear however against what).

Hardly surprising, all power groups of the world – from states and multinational firms to political and religious factions, organised crime syndicates and desperate implant dependent individuals – want to get hold of, get help from and to control Obb. He has at once become the way to power, to restoring the world order as well as a revolutionary potential to redo just about everything. Hence, Obb is a hunted man.

However, interesting as they are, I will not focus on the details of Obb's story in this essay. My attention will be on how Bilal presents a social characteristic and a political critique in and through this fictional scenario. So let me briefly present Bilal's work and methods and say something about how the reading of comics interact with social imaginaries on a more general level, before I come back *The Bug* and what can be learned from its portrayal of the contemporary world.

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[6]I borrow this expression from the political philosopher Chiara Bottici (2019a; 2019b). I will soon come back to the meaning of the distinction between *imaginary* and *imaginal*.
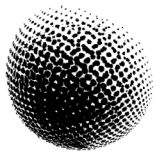
[7]The possibility of another two or three volumes of *Le Bug* is mentioned by Bilal himself in many interviews.

[8] It is of course doubtful if even email would work… Bilal has commented on this and said that he is not and does not try to be realist in all details. The main point is that the collected *memory* of the world is lost.

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On Bilal's work

Over the years, Bilal has established and worked out a singular social imaginary universe functioning as a distorting and, sometimes, horror mirror of (primarily) the western, European contemporary world. Within this universe, he has, among other things, staged the dissolution of the subject[9]; the ill-logic of war (principally the war in former Yugoslavia);[10] the ever-dissolving borders between man-animal-machine as well as the obsessions with scales and measuring – from Celsius, Fahrenheit and Richter to completely fictive scales for measuring just about everything[11]. In his universe memory, power and autonomy are always on the verge of evaporating, transforming, eroding, distorting. You can never be sure that you are you and not your avatar, not sure that the decisions you make or the love you live really are your own; every feeling, every conviction is wavering. It is a universe of permeable borders, of parasites taking over their host organisms[12]. The colour-shade keeping this world together, its foundation, is the grey – *le couleur indicible* ['the unutterable colour'][13]. *The Bug* is set in this universe, but this time with a muted mauve with a tinge of violet as keynote. Besides the grey in its different shades, the blue, in specific grey-blue shades, is a recurring important visual and imaginary element in all Bilal's work. So also in *Le Bug* (Fig. 1).

In later years, Bilal has developed his work on the comic form and complicated the interplay between image, text and frames. In his early work, he deploys a fairly conventional form, where each frame is determined as to its meaning and role primarily by the place it occupies in the sequence of frames on the page, that is by its relations to the other frames on the same page and/or spread and by how the individual frame brings the general story forward[14]. The scenarist and theoretician of comics Benoît Peeters labels this mutual dependence between story and image (Peeters uses the term *tableau* here) a *rhetorical* use. He distinguishes *rhetorical* use from *conventional* use, where the story completely dominates the image (that is, when the image only illustrates the story); *decorative use*, where the image dominates, at the same time as the story and the image remain relatively

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[9] Obvious in, for example, La *Trilogie Nikopol* (1980-1992; in a single volume 2005).

[10] The tetralogy Monsters *(*1998-2007*).*

[11] For example, the last volume in the Nikopol-trilogy, *Froid Équateur* (1992), Les Humanoides Associés, and the trilogy *Coup de Sang* (2009-2011), Editions Casterman.

[12] All these themes are salient already in Bilal's first own work, *La Foire aux Immortels* (volume 1 of *The Nikopol-trilogy*) where the main character Nikopol in his body and mind is forced to accommodate the Egyptian god Horus. This theme is later developed into a surrealist horror-vision in the tetralogy *Monstres*, where Bilal aims to describe the consequences of nationalism, religious fanatism and hunger for power, taking the conflict in the Balkans 1991-1994 as his point of departure.

[13] Another possible English translation of 'indicible' would be 'unspeakable', but the negative connotations of this latter expression seem to strong – Bilal likes his Grey.

[14] See for example the three volumes that Bilal made together with Pierre Christin– *La Croisière des oubliés* (1975*), Le Vaisseau de pierre* (1976) and *Partie de Chasse* (1983), where one also can follow how he, during these years, shaped and finetuned his specific style of drawing/painting.

autonomous; and lastly *productive use*, where the image dominates while the story and image depend more closely on each other (Peeters, 1998/2003: 49 ff)[15].

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FIG. 1 - *Obb caught by progressive neo-marxists* (Excerpt from the work *Le Bug* by Enki Bilal, volume 2, p 69. © Casterman. Courtesy of the author and Editions Casterman)

[15] A paradigmatic and well-known example of a rhetorical use is Hergé's *Tintin*.

Bilal's development from the mid-nineties onward does not, however, fit easily within the somewhat square fourfold structuralism of Peeters. On the artistic level Bilal moves away from drawing, "le code de la ligne clair" [the code of the clear line] and the subsequent colouring, in favour of painting (France Culture, 2020, Episode 4: 10.50)[16]. He increasingly starts to paint the frames directly, and only thereafter digitally crops, refocuses and organises them in sequence which, among other things, means that he works out his stories visually and discursively in one and the same process. In the case of Bilal, it would be wrong to talk of either visual or discursive dominance or autonomy. Rather, then, of an integrated visual-conceptual-imaginary process that generates his work. Consequently, it is fair to speak of this work as simultaneously *imaginal* and imaginary. In the words of the philosopher Chiara Bottici, the imaginal
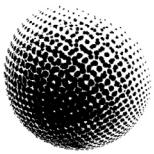
> …means simply that which is made of images and can therefore be the product both of an individual faculty and of the social context as well as of a complex interaction between the two. /…/ In contrast to imagination and imaginary, the concept of the imaginal emphasizes the centrality of images, rather than the faculty or the context that produces them; therefore, it does not make any assumptions about the individual or social character of such a faculty. (Bottici, 2019a: 5)

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What Bottici says, as I understand her, is that the imaginal and the imaginary together, and at the same time, both precede, produce and work out the social imaginary significations that shape us as subjects and make it possible for us to experience and to think differences, as for example the difference between text and context. And she leaves open the question of what is most fundamental for the imaginary process, the individual or the social. As the concepts of the individual as well as of the social are made possible by this very process, choosing between them is more a question of preferences than of facts. The visual work of Bilal contains the imaginal as well as the imaginary. It is as generative of concepts and meaning as ever the discursive and narrative aspects of his work. Consequently, to follow Peeters and try to distinguish between narration and image in the work of Bilal will, at best, be misleading.

The social imaginary

The complex relations between the imaginal, the imaginary and the social imaginary, as well as the question regarding what Bottici really means when talking about "the imaginary as a given social context" (Bottici, 2019b: 437) requires a far

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[16] In this episode, Bilal talks about, among other things, his artistic practice.
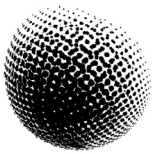
more extensive and in detail treatment than there is room for here. However, there is still need for being a bit more specific about the social imaginary in order to see and understand how it works, for example as exemplified in the comics of Bilal. So let us turn to one of Bottici's main references for discussing and problematising the imaginary, the Greek-French philosopher and political activist Cornelius Castoriadis and his exploration of the magma of social imaginary significations.

All through his work, Castoriadis constantly returns to how the social imaginary and politics interact and shape the conception of the political, specific for each given society. When he describes the results of humanity's imaginary creations, he speaks of these as a magma of social imaginary significations. The term magma is, for Castoriadis, originally both a mathematical and geological term. When he first, in 1975, presented his thoughts on *magma*, in the seminal work *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, he did so from a resolutely logico-mathematical perspective[17]. However, the relative failure of his first idea of constructing a formal logic of magmas did not affect the fruitful exploration he made of the metaphor all through his work[18]. As a geological term, magma denotes the constantly moving, layered mass of various molten rocks and minerals that from time to time penetrates the earth's crust in violent eruptions. In short, what is called lava on the Earth's surface used to be magma. All these meanings are essential to Castoriadis - the different strata (layers) that fold in and out of each other without completely mixing; that exist frictionally together without tracing back to one single origin; that are in constant motion, but at different speeds (the different layers of a magma are of different temperature, density and inertia); that can break through a solidified crust, only to cool, solidify and create new formations in their turn. Castoriadis thus chooses the metaphor of a magma of social imaginary significations to emphasize the simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness of the different strata in our world – such as the natural stratum, the biological, the social-historical etcetera. He conceives of being as a stratified magma, in a state of constant flux. And this magma is born and instituted, as well as transformed, by us human beings in our different specific social situations.

On a general level then, Castoriadis's comments regarding the social imaginary and its institution points to well known, yet and strangely enough often ignored phenomena. We will come back to Castoriadis below, as to some of the details of this institution.

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[17] "A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations." (Castoriadis, 1987: 343). *Ensemblist logic* or *organization* is short for 'ensemblistic-identitary logic', a term Castoriadis coined to denote the logic and causal thinking that explains phenomena by assigning them to, or deriving them from, a specific set (ensemble) or a specific identity. A typical example would be the idea that everything that now exists in the universe can ultimately be traced back to the big bang. See the clarifying article "Ensemblistic Identitary Logic (Ensidic logic)" by Jeff Klooger in Adams S. (2014).

[18] Thanks to Paula Diehl for reminding me of the double origin of *magma* in Castoriadis's work.

The meaning-making processes in the reading of comics

Bilal's work is eminently magmatic. Consequently, the aim to find specific codes for comics that some of the early theoreticians supported is insufficient when discussing his work. Instead, we need to describe and understand how visual works (such as Bilal's, but also many other contemporary writers of comics) interact with and activates social imaginary conceptions and cognitive abilities among its readers. Here we can look to Karin Kukkonen, and her *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* (2013) for guidance, not least since her main focus is on "processes of meaning-making" (Kukkonen 2013: 7). This means, more precisely, that...

> at stake is not a vocabulary or a grammar of comics storytelling but rather a pragmatic account of how comics awaken their readers' imagination, how they elicit meaning-making processes, and how they thereby tell their story [...]. I consider the clues, gaps and inferences that shape the encounter between readers minds and textual features (Kukkonen, 2013: 7).

Thus, in Kukkonen's type of cognitive pragmatic interpretative work, the aim is to use the clues provided in the visual text rather than to try to find or understand the code or codes[19]. For Kukkonen, the goal is to look into the meaning-making both in and through the act of reading. She says: "On my cognitive account, comics dynamically play into our cognitive predilections and put them to particular narrative and literary use" (Kukkonen, 2013: 13).

Even though comics obviously use both conventional signs and codes of different kinds and types, I follow Kukkonen when she points out that many visual, verbal and interactional (i.e. how the personages in the comic relate to each other through gestures, mimics, etcetera) clues do not at all depend on codes, but rather on specific meaning-making configurations in the visual text: "much meaning-making relies on making the relevant inferences for the particular contexts we encounter codes in" (Kukkonen, 2013: 17).

I see Kukkonen's concentration on the meaning-making processes in the act of reading as one way to specify my own efforts to, as I once phrased it, 'see what is there to be seen' – i.e. how perception, not only visual, is conditioned by language, habits of thought, concepts and conceptual systems that always already shape our experience (Rosengren, 2012: 44, 63–80). So whereas my main focus has been on how concepts, stereotypes and practices generally make possible, or more difficult, meaningful perception and experience, Kukkonen is directing her interest at how

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[19] Kukkonen specifies: "[Umberto] Eco looks for codes, that is, conventionalized signs that we can read because we know, from our cultural context, what they mean. I look for clues, that is, elements on the page that prompt readers to draw particular inferences which, in turn, can be based on cultural knowledge or psychological capacities" (Kukkonen, 2013: 13) Here it is clear that conventional signs may function as clues – the opposition 'code vs pragmatics' is thus not given, absolute or imperative, but has to be fitted into the general process of making meaning.
In this essay, I use the expression 'visual text' to comprehend the indissoluble integration of discursivity and visuality in comics.

these concepts, stereotypes and notions may be used in visual texts to activate meaning-making processes in specific reading situations.

For a reader to be able to understand and interpret what Kukkonen calls clues, and to transform these into a meaningful narrative understanding, there are certain minimal conditions that needs to be fulfilled. Apart from the obvious condition of 'knowing' the language used in the work (French, Italian, Swedish etcetera), the reader must have some idea of representation, as well as at least a basic knowledge of the relevant visual, verbal and interactional stereotypes used in the work. That is, a general ability to read and decode, as well as to interpret and understand. But such abilities are neither self-evident, nor just given; they are acquired by socialization and through experience. And, of course, Kukkonen is indeed aware of this when referring to the film scholar David Bordwell, who distinguishes between three types of visual effects:

> [F]irst, "visual effects which are dependent upon cross cultural, even universal factors"; second "visual effects which depend on culturally localized skills but which can be learned easily"; and third, "visual effects which depend on culturally specific skills requiring more learning". (Kukkonen, 2013:20-21)[20]

Kukkonen maintains that even if there are examples of the third kind of visual effects in comics, such as symbols for superheroes (for example the bat-sign in Batman) that have to be learned specifically, "the majority of (visual) comics signs fall under the first two, easily accessible categories." (Kukkonen, 2013:21) This is the core of Kukkonen's convincing argument against thinking about the understanding comics in terms of simple decoding. Meaning is, she writes, not fixed but generated and transformed in and through the reader's efforts and engagement with the visual text. Moreover, she shows in minute detail, through close readings of the comics *Steve Canyon*, *Fables* and *Tom Strong*, how fruitful her inferential reading and its abductive logic really are – especially when discussing how contexts and schemata are activated through specific clues in the different works, and how these may be developed using the concepts *intertextuality, story worlds* and *fictional minds.*

The (political) role of the social imaginary

Kukkonen's approach to visual works is very rewarding. At the same time, I would she had given more than marginal attention to a dimension that, for me, stands out as crucial, specifically in relation to Bilal's work: the social imaginary. The very ability

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[20]It seems to me as if Bordwell, when making these distinctions, had in mind the much debated tristinction between icons (images that are universally understood, such as circle = sun), indexes (i.e. icons put in specific contexts, such as a circle on a weather map = fair weather) and symbols (such as words, who need familiarity with conventions such as grammar, syntax and semantics in order to be understood) when making his distinctions. The quotes from Bordwell comes from "Convention, Construction and Cinematic Vision" in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, D Bordwell and N Carrol (eds), University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1996, p. 93-96. Quoted after Kukkonen.

to identify and understand the Kukkonens's clues ultimately rests on knowledge of the magma of social imaginary significations that the visual as well as the discursive text work with. Familiarity with the social imaginary universes of the visual text is thus a precondition for readers to be able to first identify and then understand the clues. Such familiarity is gained through socialisation and through individual experience, the former often unconscious and fundamental, the latter often conscious and often intentional. The most important feature of the social imaginary is that it presents a world for us[21]; a world that appears to us as given, obvious, inescapable and stable – at least up until the moment when we, subjectively or collectively, become aware that other individuals, societies, groups or cultures consider partly or completely different significations as obvious and real. This is the moment when we confront our autonomy – that is when we realize that, had we been born into different circumstances, a different time, a different social class, we might have seen reality and the world in a slightly different, or very different way.

Following this realization, *everything* is (or at least should be) relativised, exposing our responsibility, our ambiguities and our possibilities. And at the same time, we understand that we may choose to hold on to what we were born into, on the condition that we manage to forget that this holding on to a certain reality actually is a choice. In an essay called "La crise des sociétés occidentales" [The Crise of the Western Societies], included in *La Montée de l'Insignifiance* [The Rise of Insignificance] from 1996, Cornelius Castoriadis discusses the complex issue of social institution:

> There can be no society that is not something for itself, that does not represent itself as being something /.../. 'For itself', society is never a collection of perishable and substitutable individuals living on some territory or other, speaking this or that language, practicing 'outwardly' some customs or other. On the contrary, these individuals 'belong' to this society because they participate in its social imaginary significations, its 'norms', 'values', 'myths', 'representations ' projects', 'traditions', etc., and because they share (whether they know it or not) the will to be of this society and to make it be on a continuing basis.
>
> All this evidently partakes of the institution of society in general - and of each society examined. Individuals are its sole 'real' or 'concrete' bearers, such as they have been fashioned, fabricated by its institutions - that is to say, by other individuals, who are themselves bearers of these institutions and of the correlative significations. (Castoriadis, 1996: 20-21, my translation)

Thus, the social imaginary is simultaneously the magma of significations that authors and artists like Bilal have to work with, and the fond against which a reader is able to identify visual and discursive clues. Without this background, the making of meaning will suffer or even become impossible – and here I am not only speaking in connection to the reading of comics. I talk about the preconditions as well as the conditions for human meaningful experience in general; about how the social

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[21] And in this it comes very close to the rhetorical concept of doxa. In fact, these thoughts on the social imaginary are developed as a direct prolongation and specification of rhetorical research into the notion and functions of doxa. See, in Swedish, Rosengren (2002) and, in English, Rosengren (2012)

imaginary allows us to experience and make sense in and of our world. Let me try to spell this out a bit and explain what I mean through a scrutiny of some pages from *Le Bug* (See Fig. 2).
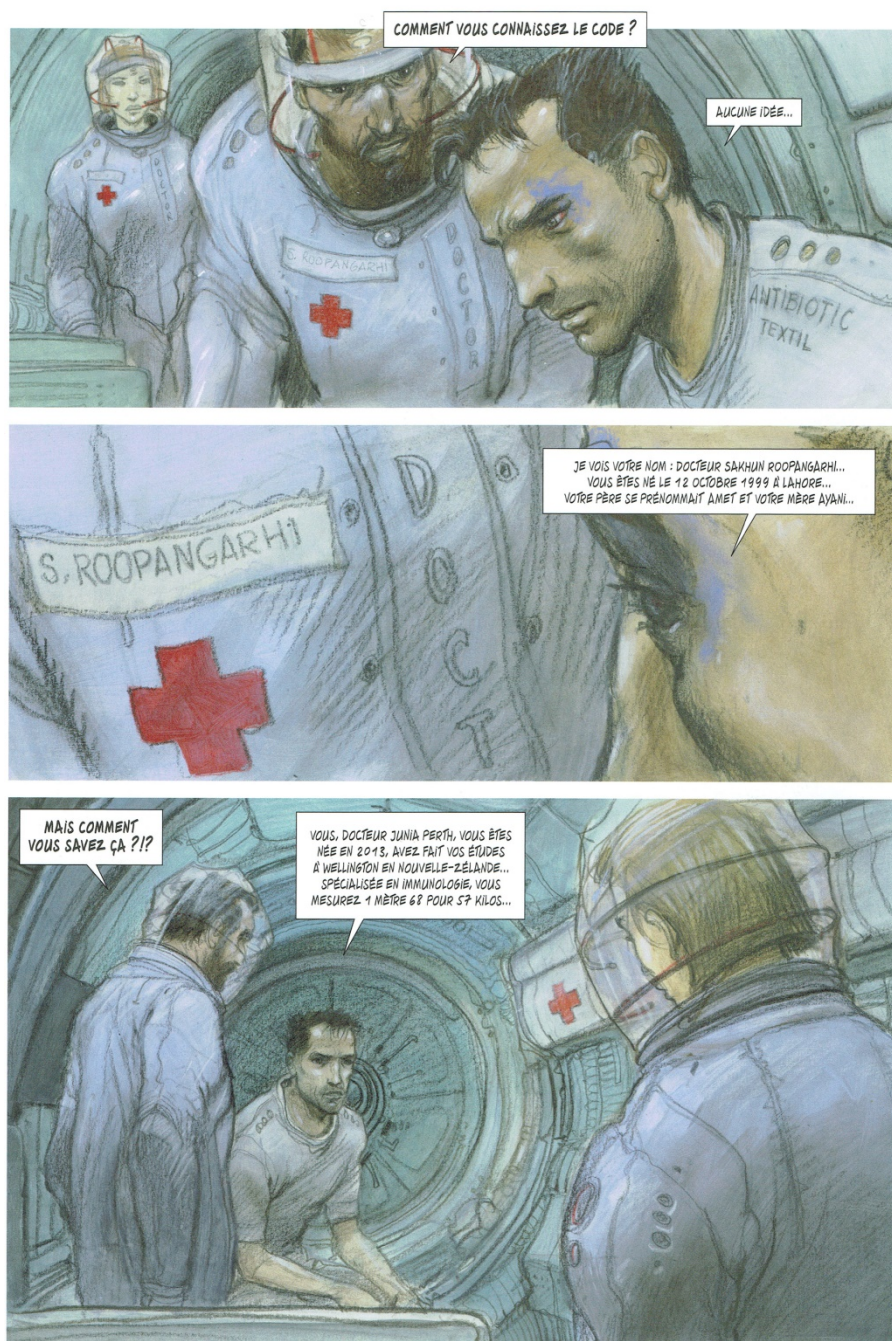
FIG.2 – (Excerpt from the work *Le Bug* by Enki Bilal, volume 1, p 24. © Casterman. Courtesy of the author and Editions Casterman).

Reading Bilal 1

I start with a comparatively simple page. Obb has just given Juna Perth the code that runs the medical equipment aboard the international space station.

The page consists of three frames that the reader, after first taking in the whole page (Kukkonen, 2013: 29) reads from top to bottom (frame 1 on top, frame 3 at the bottom) and left to right.[22]

The communication between the persons is verbal and represented in speech bubbles, straightforward questions and answers:

How do you know the code?

No idea.

Frame 1 gives an overview of the three persons – we see Obb in the foreground, Rhoopangarhi a bit further away, and Perth in the back. Frame 2 follows Obb's gaze when he reads Rhoopangarhi's name tag and suddenly knows when the doctor is born as well as his parents' names. In frame 3 the perspective is reversed – now Perth is in the foreground and Obb in the back. Obb gives further evidence of his extensive knowledge.

Rhoopangarhi and Perth wear protective suits with red crosses, identifying them as doctors; Obb is in his space traveller-underwear. In frame 1 and 2 we perceive a blue spot on Obb's left temple. We know since before that Obb has a parasite in his body, and understand that Obb is potentially carrying a virus – hence the doctor's protective suits.

This seems to sum up the content of the page, and possibly does. What I want to point out here, is how dependent this basic meaning-making is on knowledge of how visual representation works; and how knowledge is given by the (for each situation specific and situated) social imaginary[23]. The preconditions for the simple reading I just presented lies in an implicit but effective ability to (from the most fundamental to the more individually dependent and genre-related):

1) see pictures as representations;

2) understand that the persons in the different frames are the same ones (thus in total three, not six or eight);

3) understand that the three frames represent the same fictive space with the same fictive persons (understand the switch of perspective);

4) conclude from Rhoopangarhi's posture and gaze in frame 1 and 3 that he is worried and intensely interested;

5) realize that the use of bold characters in Rhoopangarhi's speech bubbles emphasizes and confirms the visual impression he makes.

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[22] Other genres of comics may follow other reading conventions – such as *manga*, which are mostly read from right to left and from top to bottom.

[23] To be completely clear on this point – I maintain that David Bordwell's three visual effects, from the interculturally universal to the more specific ones all have their basis in the social imaginary, and in the last instance in the specific *Umwelt* that all humans share just by being Homo Sapiens. For the concept *Umwelt* and its relation to what a being can perceive, see Cassirer (1996: 42ff).
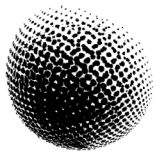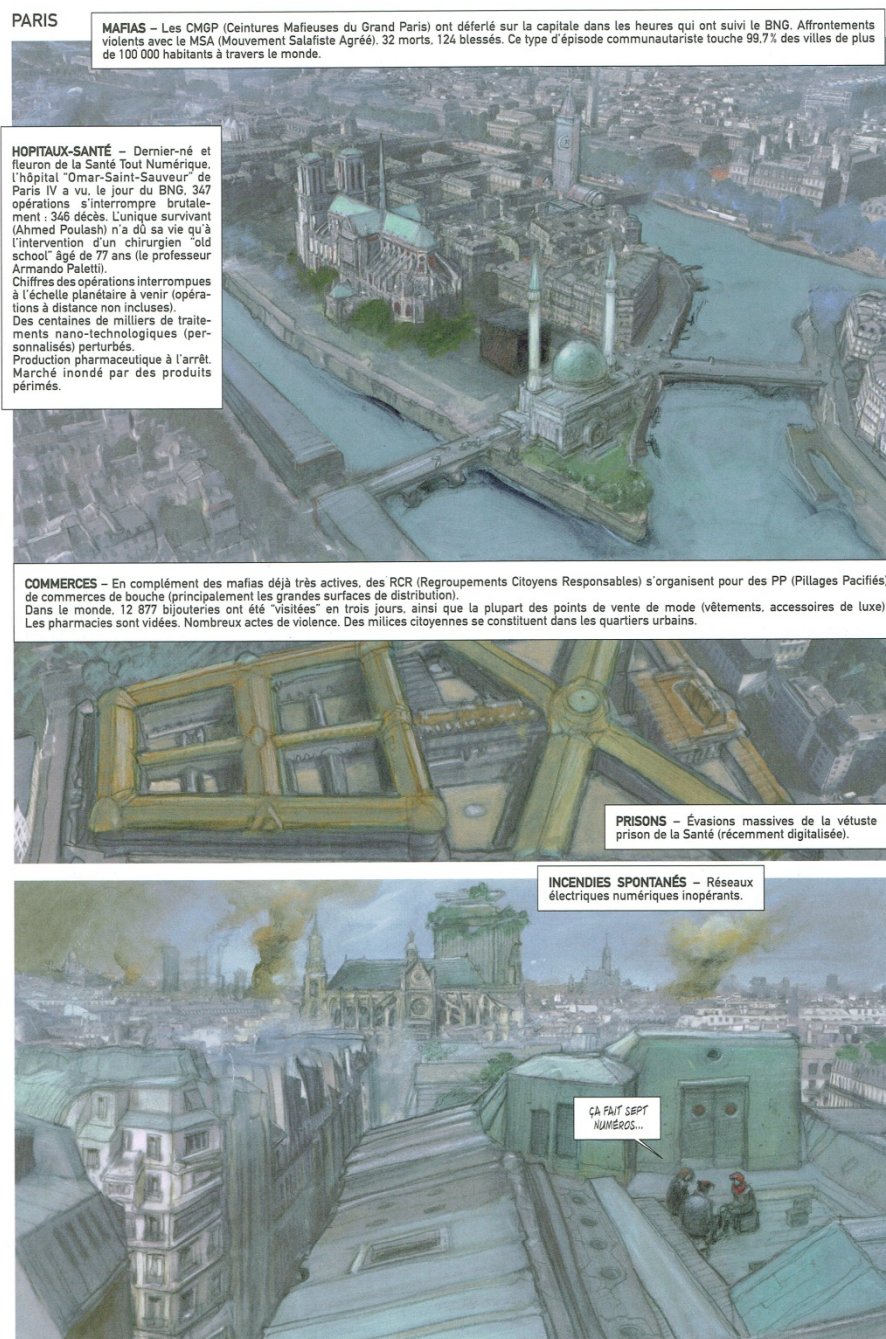
FIG. 3 - (Excerpt from the work Le Bug by Enki Bilal, volume 1, p 28. © Casterman. Courtesy of the author and Editions Casterman).

This is an example of how a reader works with what Kukkonen calls visual, verbal and interactional clues in a specific visual text – and also of how the reading in itself is conditioned by the readers familiarity with a specific magma of social imaginary

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significations. Points 1, 2 and 3 relate to the reader's understanding of visual representation, probably an acquisition at a very young age, perhaps even before learning to read verbal language, perhaps taught by a close relative or a teacher through reading and explaining picture books. As Castoriadis repeatedly claims, the social imaginary is primarily transferred between "individuals, who are themselves bearers of these institutions and of the correlative significations" (Castoriadis, 1996: 20-21).

Point 4 relates to a specific social competence, acquired through experience within a specific cultural context, to 'read' body language, and to the ability of applying this competence also to representations of humans, so as to make an, in the given fictional context, satisfactory interpretative meaning. Point 5 is about familiarity with certain codes, partly on a general level, such as that the use of bold face means emphasis; partly and specifically for the present context, that Rhoopangarhi speaks with emphasis and, based on point 4, concern.

So, while point 1 presumably is a more or less universal human competence, points 2 and 3 are clearly anchored in a specific Western imaginal and imaginary tradition of representation. Hence, the interpreter must have learnt, at some point, to 'read' representations in this specific way in order to apprehend the clues I have just pointed out. In the same way, points 4 and 5 have to do with understanding representations of cultured specific expressions, that must be identified as such in order to work as meaning makers for the reader.

Reading Bilal 2

Let me move on to my next example, where the importance of the social imaginary becomes even clearer.
This page deals with the consequences of the *Bug Numérique Géneralisé* [the Generalised Numeric Bug] – BNG (all through his work, Bilal shows a fondness for acronyms), i.e., the digital loss of memory and information that has struck the whole world. This is the third page of three – the two earlier deals with London and New York, enumerating the effects of the BNG on elevators, subways, airplanes, banks, immigration and arsenals as well causing suicides, mostly among teenagers, and kidnappings, mostly of mnemonic experts and mathematicians. This page deals with Paris and the consequences for organized crime, health care, prisons and the electric grid (spontaneous fires).

The page consists of three frames, 1 and 3 of roughly equal size, frame 2 considerably smaller. Frame 1 presents an aerial view, from the east, of Ile de la Cité; frame 2, a representation of the prison Santé also from the air; frame 3 offers a view of the rooftops of Paris, from the north with the church of St. Eustache in the distance.

Frame 1 is based on and reworks a photo, while 2 and 3 are 'realistic' renderings of surroundings in Paris, with the addendum that the church of St. Eustache has been given an as of today non-existing square, overgrown tower.

The text in the inset boxes is of newsflash character. It does not explain or describe, just state facts the background and contexts of which the reader is supposed to be familiar with. Except frame 2, no indication is given of what is seen in the images; this is also presumed to be familiar for the reader. Moreover, the texts have a typically 'printed' look – they are written in teletypewriter-font (as distinct from the block letters in the speech bubbles), using bold face for headlines.

The texts work as typical clues in Kukkonens's sense: As the reader is supposed to be familiar with the contexts and the background presupposed by the information given in the texts, the readers own meaning-making is activated to fill information gaps and create the contexts needed to produce a satisfactory narrative meaning.

The picture in frame 1 works in a similar way. In the (very) familiar image of Notre Dame and Ile de la Cité, Bilal has inserted a mosque in direct connection to, or perhaps even partly on, the space where today is located a memorial for victims of the holocaust, *Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation*. This is not mentioned in the texts (the image reoccurs once more from a similar perspective, also without comments, in volume 2, p. 28), and it has no central importance for the narrative. The mosque is simply there, just as Notre Dame. The reader who notices this is faced with a similar type of clue as in the texts, and must create the context that will explain the mosque and its location.[24]

Bilal often works in this way, both visually and discursively, when he presents radical changes (compared to today) as unproblematically given. Thus, he points to the 'possibilities of possibilities' that I asked for in the beginning of this text.[25]

A prerequisite for this to work is, this is my contention, that the reader has or acquires a certain familiarity with the social imaginary universe that Bilal departs from and transforms. Regarding the image of Notre Dame, one can probably suppose that it is part of an internationally circulated imagery, while the prison Santé (frame 2) hardly is as familiar, even to Parisians – which may explain that the information about what we see in this frame is given in the text; that it is a prison. Frame 3 presents the (presumably) internationally famous Parisian roof-tops, with a famous (at least to Parisians) church in the background, accompanied by build-ups of smoke, suggesting fires in the city – which is supported by the text-box where 'spontaneous fires' are mentioned. (The speech bubble in frame 3 points forward in the narrative).

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[24] Bilal comments on this and says that it is up to the reader to decide if this is a sign of a future peaceful coexistence between religions, or something else. (France Culture, 2020)

[25] This is a recurring move in Bilal's prospective science fiction. Another interesting example of this practice is an uncommented reference to the Califat of Istanbul where a top-meeting "turco-russio-kurde" is held between the Kurdish president, the Russian president and the Calif of Istanbul. (Volume 1: 35) Perhaps a central characteristic of prospective SF as a genre? I will return to this below, in the section 'What is realism?'
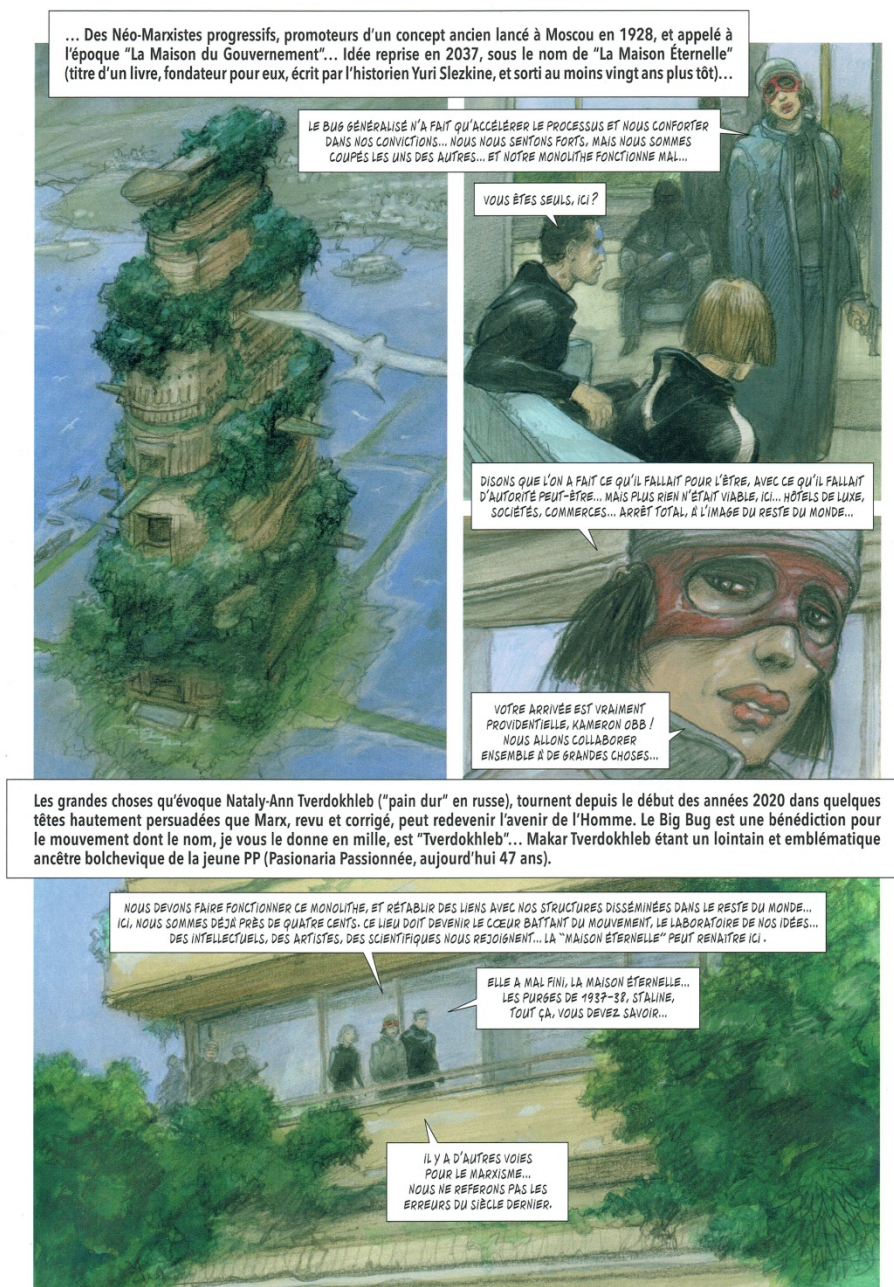
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FIG. 4 – (Excerpt from the work Le Bug by Enki Bilal, volume 2, p 221. © Casterman. Courtesy of the author and Editions Casterman).

This method allows Bilal to create open works, challenging the reader's attention and hermeneutic ability to become meaningful at all. There is not *one* clear signification in these images and texts; instead, they become points of departure for more or less well founded and informed abductive productions of meaning.

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Reading Bilal 3

I take a last and third example from volume 2 of *Le Bug.* This time I would like to show an aspect of how Bilal works with history as imaginary material.

The page is made up of four frames – frame 1 upper left; frame 2 upper right; frame 3 directly under frame 2 and frame 4 at the bottom of the page. On this page, we find a different kind of 'machine text' in the textboxes – bold face, larger letters, possibly also another font (compared to the newsflash texts), representing Obb's own thoughts and bug-induced memories. The speech bubbles represent the dialogue between Obb and Nataly-Ann Tverdokhleb.

Standing out from other sections in *Le Bug*, the parts involving the group called Neo-Marxists are characterised by a pronounced, almost dominating light green hue.

The feverish Obb has, together with Perth, manged to hijack a plane and have landed to fill up fuel on "un de ces monolithes planétophalanstéro-utopiques" [difficult to translate – an interpretation may be 'one of these monoliths (belonging to) the utopian, planet-embracing phalansteries][26] that became popular during the 2030:s. Obb and Perth have just been awakened by Nataly-Ann Tverdokhleb (whose name, we are told, means 'hard bread'), the leader of the group of progressive Neo-Marxists that live in, of and on the monolith. The first text box recounts the information that 'le bug' gives to Obb. We are told that the Neo-Marxists have revived an idea from the late 1920s Moscow, The house of Government, that they now call "The Eternal House", after the title of a book written by the historian Yuri Slezkine "at least twenty years earlier".

This information is not necessary for following the development of the narration in *Le Bug*. But for those who know about Slezkine's book[27] and are familiar with the story of the Bolshevik elite's dwelling-house, the role of the Neo-Marxists in *Le Bug* becomes at once more understandable, more sinister and more tragic: Selzkine's central idea is that the Bolsheviks are best understood as a religious apocalyptic sect, and that the story of the house, The house of Government, that was constructed for the ruling Bolsheviks in Moscow between 1928 and 1930, reflects the hopes and the utopias as well as the decay of bolshevism. In his long review of the book, Joshua Jaffa, who has lived in this house, writes:

> In Slezkine's telling, the Bolsheviks were essentially a millenarian cult, a small tribe radically opposed to a corrupt world. With Lenin's urging, they sought to bring about the promised revolution, or revelation, which would give rise to a more noble and just era. Of course, that didn't happen. Slezkine's book is a tale of "failed prophecy," and the building itself—my home for the past several

[26] Volume 2, p 7. "Phalanstery: A cooperative community based on the egalitarian principles of French socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and having shared property, possessions, etc.; a building or set of buildings occupied by such a community. Now chiefly *historical*." (OED online, updated edition 2020. Last visited Mars 24, 2023)

[27] The book was really written by the Russian-born American historian Yuri Slezkine and published by Princeton University Press in 2017, but with a slightly different title: *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*.

years—is "a place where revolutionaries came home and the revolution went to die." (Jaffa, 2017).

So, when Obb (in textbox 2, right under frame 1 and 3) observes that Tverdokhleb and her organization thinks that "an updated and corrected version of Marx may be the future for humanity" and that the bug that has struck the world "is a blessing for the movement whose name is – you would never guess, not in a thousand years – Tverdokhleb" he suggests an ominous future for the movement. But before Obb and Perth leave, Obb helps them to restart the machinery of the monolith: "You have to give those who try to change the world a second chance, right?" (Bilal, 2019:24) The next time the Neo-Marxist appear in the story, the elitist purges have begun.

Bilal activates history as well as the presumed historical knowledge of the reader in at least three ways here, again clues in Kukkonen's sense: Through explicit references to Marxism as a political system; through the specific reference to Slezkine's book and, visually, through the symbol that the Neo-Marxists have stitched on their jackets and hoodies which bears a strong resemblance to the hammer and the sickle. (See Fig. 1; the graffiti on the wall behind Obb.)

As with Notre Dame and the mosque, these clues are not commented or even emphasised, nor are the references to the political history of the twentieth century thematised – and they are not necessary, as I have already pointed out, for being able to follow the narration in *Le Bug*. But, on the other hand, the readers who do not perceive and catch these clues will miss out on the main motivation for Bilal's prospective science fiction – that is, to offer an artistic future-oriented analysis of our contemporary world.

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What is realism? Prospective science fiction

Bilal is often asked how it is that he seems to be able to predict events in the near future. And looking back on his work, there undoubtedly are reasons to ask: *Partie de Chasse* from 1983 portrays a Soviet Union falling apart; *Le Sommeil du Monstre* from 1998 tells about a fanatic religious sect, *Obscurantis Order*, that carries out a terrorist attack against a sky-scraper in New York, and in *Le Bug* from 2017 the world is put to a grinding halt by a virus.

But Bilal defends himself against being called prophetic: "I predict nothing, I am not a prophet! I speak of the contemporary world, we are in *Le Bug* today", he said in a conversation at Bouffes du Nord in Paris on October 6 2019 (Le Monde, 2029) [28]. And in the conversation at France Culture August 2020, quoted above, he explained himself further:

> It is a journalistic, artistic analysis of our time, with the freedom to create that it entails, that leads to these 'predictions'. The *Obscurantis Order* (OO) in *Le Sommeil du Monstre* was inspired by Talibanism, but since the OO collects elements from

[28]I should note that Bilal's statements are edited by me – I do not translate verbatim.

all three of the monotheistic religions, it does not point specifically to neither Christianism, Judaism or Islam. Moreover, sky-scrapers are obvious symbols for the Western world. (France Culture, 2020, Episode 4)

Thus, the present is the focus of the "*Science Fiction prospectif*", the investigating prospective science fiction that Bilal works with. Of course, this is hardly unique but has been typical for science fiction since the genre was invented. What makes Bilal's work strikingly interesting is rather the combination of how the artistic freedom to create, of the reluctance to be realistic (at least in the common sense of the term) and of the constant inclusion of surrealistic and fantastic elements succeed in creating these close-to-reality-narratives that, in retrospect, appear as anything but free fantasies or random inventions. This is, I think, due to the ways in which Bilal pays attention to and works with transformations, accentuations and shifts in the social imaginary significations of our time. Many of the central concerns of his work belong here – memory; identity; man-animal-technique, artificial versus natural intelligence. In *Le Bug,* he centres in on the contemporary dependence on it-technology and on the frailty of the human organism; and he isolates certain aspects and considers what the consequences may be. These artistic and literary reflections are demonstrably more realistic, credible and offers us a better grip on our age than most narrowly scientific or myopic political analysis.

But can Bilal, in a more concrete way, help us understand and deal with our current pandemic, muted and war-torn present? Can he help us see and use the potential social imaginary breach that the pandemic may have opened, and that the current ongoing war has perhaps not yet managed to close? In *Le Bug* we see fragments of a world where familiar conflicts have transmuted into surprising alliances, as when the Calif of Istanbul holds council with the Kurdish and the Russian presidents. We anticipate vaguely other possible world orders – perhaps not the ones that many among us hope for or would prefer, but nevertheless neither unthinkable or unrealistic. Perhaps they are already here – with the yellow vests, the anti-vaxxers, the health-fanatics, the far left and the far right who in the summer 2021 joined forces on the streets of Europe; with the feudal Reichbürger-movement emerging as a viscous political force in Germany 2022, and still so in 2023. These groups seem to be united by an idea of freedom (of speech) as well as by a mistrust in the in the establishment and its intentions to protect the population against sickness, war and climate change – perhaps this is the way that will finally lead away from the neo-liberalism that has wrought havoc in the world for the last 40 years?

But it is hard to believe that these strife-ridden movements would lead to a climate-wise new world order, (re-)establishing ecological justice and human rights. Rather, it seems as if the social imaginary significations *liberty* and *equality*, long the prerogative of left-wing politics and social liberal think tanks, are changing and are assuming other new forms and constellations. The same revolutionary spirit seems to reign today in far-right quarters as it did during the hay-day of the 1968 leftist movements, as do the dogmatism and the narrowminded group-think.

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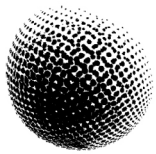
But to resist this development by returning to the old, purportedly real signification of freedom and equality is neither possible nor desirable. Bilal makes us understand, through his portrayal of the return of the phalansteries, that we can hardly expect anything good from a doctrinaire reuse of old dogmas and ideals – not even if to change the world for the better. In the trilogy, *Coup de Sang,* that immediately precedes *Le Bug,* Bilal lets the earth itself become the decisive political and climatological actor. The manipulative political agency of humans is marginalised by the globe itself, with both catastrophic and heavenly consequences.[29]

In *Le Bug* it is humanity and her omnipresent technologies – from internet more or less as we know it today to all the digital implants enhancing and prolonging human life – who again is the main actor. Bilal shows that the bug in the system is inevitable, regardless whether it comes from a Mars-traveller, a bat, a laboratory or is generated from within a system that is pictured as indestructible and completely reliable – be it electronic pay systems, the control over the techniques of surveillance, AI or nuclear arms.

Neither *Le Bug* or Bilal's other works point out a simple and straight road to a better future. They cannot, should not be read as prophecies. Which is why they open a space for a political reflection and representation where the future, how frightening it may seem, at least is not closed or simply repetitive. Even if all predictions, dystopias as well as egalitarian democratic visions, seem equally probable today, Bilal permits us to see the deceptive safety in what is fictively predictable in very real conflicts. His work gives us a possibility to understand that we are in a situation of a possible gap, a breach, a situation where we eventually may be able to reshape our world and ourselves, without safety nets but also without blinkers. At the very least, his prospective thinking shows us that the future does not follow scripts, nor is it prescribed by fictionalised repetitions of earlier utopias. On the contrary, it is dependent upon a realistic social imaginary creation that does not shows us where to go in a clear-cut way, but most definitely shows us how we can grasp our time, its ailments and its possibility of possibilities. Perhaps a real viral pandemic and an acute threat of global war was needed to allow for just that.

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[29] After the 'coup de sang' (hemorrhage, fit of rage) orchestrated by earth herself, the third volume of the trilogy, *La Coleur de l'Air*, ends with a paradisiacal epilogue, drawn in light colours and filled with happy, kind people, so atypical for Bilal that it is hard not to read it as a declaration of ironic pious hope from the author. The epilogue begins with a programmatic declaration where the purpose of the earth's fit of rage is said to be "to make possible a remoulding of new laws for our common life, beyond the current economic, financial and geopolitical dispositions that the earth has declared to be inoperative, obsolete and suicidal. This NEW DEAL concerns all forms of life still existing in the moment when the PROCESS begins." (Bilal, 2020: 283).

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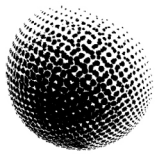
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