

Documentary Comics and Visual Sociology: Archives, Bodies, and Memories in *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde*

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*The article investigates the epistemological potential of documentary comics as a language of sociological research, taking as a case study the bande dessinée *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde*, which stems from a long socio-historical inquiry based on more than 20,000 coroner's files concerning suicides in Québec (1763–1986). Adopting a purposive sampling strategy, the work is treated as a paradigmatic case within a broader set of documentary comics that engage with traumatic archives and collective memories. Drawing on the framework of graphic social sciences, the article shows how the visual-verbal sequentiality of comics makes it possible to articulate in a novel way the triad archives–bodies–memories, translating the bureaucratic seriality of the files into a constellation of embodied and situated scenes. The analysis of the work's formal strategies highlights how the passage from dossier to panel reshapes the status of the document, redistributing testimonial authority among researchers, artist and represented subjects.*

1. *From Dossier to Panel: A Social Research Trajectory*

When Isabelle Perreault, André Cellard, Patrice Corriveau, and Christian Quesnel published *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* (in some instances abbreviated as *VADLBDM*) in 2020, transforming more than 20,000 coroner's files relating to suicides in Québec (1763-1986) into a *bande dessinée*, the graphic novel performed an act that exceeds the strictly documentary dimension: it reactivates archival materials, removes them from bureaucratic opacity and cold statistical seriality, and reinscribes them within a narrative form that simultaneously interrogates the body, collective memory, and institutional violence. The very title – the last words spoken by the poet Huguette Gaulin before she set herself on fire in a public square in Montréal on 6 June 1972 – signals the constitutive tension of the work: restoring voice and existential density to lives reduced to administrative records, to names in procedural lists, to the cold impersonality of data and quantity.

It is through works such as this that an inescapable theoretical question opens up for contemporary social sciences: what does it mean to treat the visual-verbal sequentiality of comic panels not only as a representation of social phenomena, but as a specific form of sociological thinking? The proliferation over the last fifteen years of graphic social sciences (Kuttner *et al.* 2017), graphic journalism in the tradition of Joe Sacco, and graphic medicine (Green, Myers 2010; Williams 2012; Moretti *et al.* 2025) points to a methodological transformation that calls into question the very boundaries of academic writing. Documentary comics – in the form of *visual witness* (Chute 2016) – have shown how the sequence of panels makes it possible to restore narrative agency to subaltern or traumatic experiences, to give an embodied dimension to empirical materials otherwise confined to quantitative or legal registers, and to work

on the construction of memory precisely where the archive produces amnesia or erasure.

Within this epistemological framework, sociological reflection is called not only to interpret comics as cultural artifacts through the established categories of the sociology of art or cultural studies, but also to critically interrogate the heuristic possibilities that this visual-verbal language opens up for conducting empirical research, communicating findings in forms accessible to non-academic audiences, and working on the construction and transmission of collective memory (Hirsch 2012; Rothberg 2009; Moretti, Della Puppa 2025).

At the center of this *bd* is a vast corpus of coroner's files documenting cases of suicide over an extended period of time, which are reworked into graphic sequences capable of rendering visible bodies, places, objects, relationships – a broad technoscientific apparatus that intersects with the most intimate and unfathomable dimension of the social subject – as well as the words and categories through which institutions have classified voluntary death, and its perception within the social body. In doing so, the archival material is reorganized into scenes and micro-narratives that foreground the embodied and situated dimension of suicide, inscribing it within a specific historical and social landscape.

The aim of this contribution is twofold. First, it seeks to offer a theoretical reflection on the epistemological potential of comics as a device capable of articulating archives, bodies, and memories in ways that differ from the conventional textual registers of social research. While historical sociology has long problematized the relationship between document and trace (Farge 1989), and between archival series and biographical singularity (Ginzburg 1976), the comics medium introduces an additional tension: that between the bureaucratic seriality of the file and the visual-narrative restitution of embodied experience, between the administrative opacity of recorded death and the mnemonic reactivation of lived life. Comics – hereafter used as an umbrella term – thus operate on the constitutive fracture between what institutions inscribe in their recording apparatuses and what subjects traverse in the opacity of lived experience, opening up unprecedented possibilities for a public sociology (Burawoy 2005) capable of addressing in the public sphere issues deemed unspeakable, traumatic, or politically repressed (death remains, even today, the last great taboo in Western societies). Second, the article takes *VADLBDM* as a paradigmatic case (a case study compared with a purposively selected sample) in order to empirically analyse the potential of the work as an example of a comics-based translation of a massive archival compendium, allowing us to observe concretely how the shift from document to comics page produces a specific form of visual historical sociology of suicide. Through an analysis of the narrative, iconographic, and sequential strategies adopted by the work, the article aims to show that comics do not simply “illustrate” or “disseminate” archival research that has already been completed, but rather themselves constitute a research methodology that transforms the epistemological status of the materials, their public accessibility, and their affective regime.

The article is structured in three analytical movements. First, it critically reconstructs the debate on documentary comics (Sacco 2012) and on the graphic social sciences, examining it in light of the epistemological transformations affecting contemporary

forms of sociological writing and representation (Pink 2013). Second, it presents the context of genesis of *VADLBDM* and the specific archival partition on which the work is based, before analysing some of the formal and compositional choices through which this operation is carried out. Finally, it discusses the theoretical and epistemological implications that emerge from this case study for a broader reflection on the relationship between comics and sociology.

2. Documentary Comics and Graphic Social Sciences: Sociological Writing Between Text and Image

The pivotal role of comics in contemporary transformations of communication lies in their nature as a medial chimera: an epistemological creature that produces a representational short circuit in which the linguistic-verbal dimension is amplified by the symbolic code. As such, comics take shape as a misaligned mirror of the social, capable of reflecting the conflicts that traverse it and distorting them just enough to make visible its fault lines, zones of censorship, and power asymmetries that organize the visible. It is in this light that a growing part of contemporary production is mobilized as a form of social commentary, as a device capable of intervening in public debates on education, historical memory, and the contents deemed acceptable within school and media spaces. In other words, through the representation of its temporally and spatially situated narrative, comics contribute to shaping the present, making the drawn page into a laboratory where counter-narratives are experimented with, collective sensibilities are negotiated, and different ways of inhabiting conflict are tested, in figurative form, regardless of the specific story being told.

Comics are structurally configured as an intermedial crossroads by virtue of the co-presence, within the same enunciative space, of codes traditionally considered irreducible: the linear abstraction of alphabetic writing and the – always already stylized – mimesis of the graphic image. As both semiotics (Eco 1964; 1976) and comics-specific studies (McCloud 1993; Groensteen 1999) have noted, this co-presence is not exhausted in simple juxtaposition but generates a composite semiosis in which word and image co-determine one another, establishing a genuinely comics-specific regime of meaning. From this perspective, comics – in their multiple global declinations – reveal their status as an artifice capable of probing the demands of their audiences, both in sociological terms of target groups and as the outcome of a specific textual architecture able to condense, into a few panels, symbolic densities and visual information that mirror the syncopated rhythm of urban life.

It is no coincidence that the first modern serialized comics – such as *Monsieur Jabot* (Töpffer 1833) and *The Yellow Kid* (Outcault 1895) – consistently staged the physical and psychic landscape of the industrial metropolis, displaying the overcrowding of spaces, the verticality of architectures, the proliferation of commodities and signboards, as well as the nightmares, anxieties, and fantasies that accompanied modernization. In this sense, the strip and the page early on offered one of the most effective representations of that urban “space-time” which profoundly reshapes the logic of social relations (Brancato 1994), inscribing on the page the accelerations and discontinuities of metropolitan everyday life. Comics’ capacity to give sensible form to these socio-spatial transformations places them, from the very outset, at the crossroads between the culture industry and the mythopoeia of everyday life: a

narrative machine which, though embedded in the commercial circuits of popular print media, contributes to stabilizing figures, social types, fears, and desires that become part of a shared repertoire.

The digital transition, far from marginalizing the medium, has confirmed and intensified its epistemological relevance. The graphic and a-referential handling of comics creativity – its evasion of the indexical constraint of the photographic imprint in favour of a form of reproduction entirely mediated by the graphic gesture – has prefigured and made possible the shift in the regime of visibility that marks the passage from the photo-electronic reproducibility of analog techniques to the algorithmic production of synthetic images, which has become paradigmatic in contemporary forms of cinema and post-broadcast television. In other words, comics have functioned as a formal and phenomenological crucible in which to experiment with modes of image constitution and narrative articulation – the use of panel space, the dialectic between story time and discourse time, perspectival deformation, the sequence effect as the production of continuity within discontinuity – destined then to migrate into other media ecosystems, from video art to television seriality, through to the compositional logic of video games.

A paradigmatic case is *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (McCay 1905-1914), a seminal work that revolutionized the grammar of comics through the fragmentation of the page space and the oneiric rendering of perception, while also staging – as Roeder (1984), in his study on fantasy, mass culture, and modernism, shows – the intertwining of dream imagery and the urban landscape of modernity, making the dream a device for thinking the metropolis itself. McCay's experiments with page layout and the management of narrative time constitute one of the earliest laboratories of that complex sequential narration (Kukkonen 2011) which would become one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century comics. It is thus no surprise that the universe of *Little Nemo* literally generated an intense, intimate, and analytical video game experience: in 1990 Capcom released *Little Nemo: The Dream Master*, a platform game for the NES that translates into gameplay mechanics the logic of spatial traversal, perceptual metamorphosis, and suspension of physical laws that constituted the formal core of McCay's Sunday pages. The video game exceeds the dimension of a simple comics adaptation insofar as it inherits and reactivates the work's fundamental epistemological device: the ability to render an impossible space navigable, to give playable form to unreality, showing how the formal inventions of comics operate as a transmedial matrix for other experiential environments.

This trajectory allows us to read comics as a liminal zone, an inhabited field of confrontation, a device capable of articulating continuity and discontinuity between multiple media codifications and their hybridizations. It is precisely this transmedial flexibility, combined with its sequential structure, that makes the medium particularly well-suited not only to represent but also to think social transformations, functioning as a sort of iconic–narrative archive of modernity. Comics pages accumulate over time recurring figures, scenarios, and typical situations (from metropolitan crowds to peripheral neighbourhoods, from wars to precarious labour, from migrations to collective traumas) that can be read as sedimentations of cultural memory (Assmann 1992; Nora 1984) or as visions of possible futures (Nihei 1995; Bablet 2011). In this sense, comics operate as collective memory and archive both because they represent

historical/biographical events and because they preserve and rework the forms through which a society has become accustomed to seeing itself: its legitimate and deviant bodies, its central and marginal spaces, its institutions and its shadow zones.

It is precisely on this dual status – popular medium of the culture industry and device for the symbolic archiving of collective experiences – that contemporary documentary comics are grounded. When graphic narrative chooses to work directly with archival materials, testimonies, judicial or administrative documents, it brings to completion a vocation already inscribed in the history of the medium: making the drawn page a space in which institutional archives and lived memory meet, collide, and at times rewrite one another.

If, as McCloud (2000) has shown, comics can be defined as the deliberate juxtaposition of images in sequence intended to produce meaning and an aesthetic response, documentary comics push this sequential logic to the point where representation becomes testimony. Chute (2016) has suggested reading a significant part of contemporary comics production as a practice of *visual witnessing*: a form of visual testimony that grapples with wars, genocides, state violence, and collective traumas, developing a specific ethics of looking. From this perspective, documentary comics, through the narration of “true stories,” assume the responsibility of constructing scenes and subjects that render perceivable events otherwise erased or unspeakable. The testimonial dimension does not derive solely from the mere referentiality of the content, but finds its validity in an ensemble of formal choices: the arrangement of panels, the ellipses between one frame and another, the use of white space, the modulation of accompanying texts. It is in these thresholds that comics become a device of memory, capable of articulating what can be described as a visual archive of violence, in dialogue with – but also in tension with – “official” photographic and documentary archives.

A paradigmatic example in this regard is the work of Keiji Nakazawa, who in *Ore wa mita (I Saw It 1972)* and in the subsequent *Barefoot Gen* saga (1973–1987) sets out and foregrounds his direct testimony as a Hiroshima survivor, articulating it through a long-running serial narrative that weaves together autobiography, historical reportage, and political allegory. From a sociological point of view, these works construct a narrative device in which individual memory is continuously renegotiated in light of conflicts over the public memory of the war, institutional silences, and hierarchies between recognized and marginalized victims. The insistent repetition of certain scene – the flash, the destruction, the burned bodies – operates as a form of visual archiving that both accompanies and opposes official photographic archives, restoring narrative agency to subjects otherwise reduced to numbers in victim statistics. Methodologically, Nakazawa’s work can be read as a form of long-term graphic auto-ethnography, in which the narrating self becomes an interface between lived experience, collective history, and the public representation of trauma, while the pages present an architecture that can be analysed using the concepts and tools of visual sociology.

A different yet equally significant register for a sociology of visual witnessing is inaugurated by Delisle’s graphic reportage. In *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2011), he constructs a drawn participant observation of everyday life in East Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, and Palestinian territories, focusing on devices of

control – checkpoints, walls, gates, guard shifts, waiting times – rather than on the spectacular events of the conflict. From a social research perspective, the effect is that of an ethnography of the everyday under occupation, in which comics make visible infrastructures of power and micro-violence that often escape media attention. In *Hostage* (2017), the kidnapping of a Médecins Sans Frontières worker becomes the pretext for a radical exploration of subjective temporality: the obsessive repetition of rooms, ropes, and bodily postures produces a graphic phenomenology of captivity that foregrounds embodied vulnerability. In both cases, the documentary force of comics does not lie in “faithful reproduction” of facts, but in shaping a situated point of view – that of the foreign observer, the prisoner, the witness – and making it analytically available, in a form closer to ethnographic description than to conventional journalistic reporting.

In the Italian context, Gipi’s works offer a further vantage point on the nexus between documentary comics, memory, and social suffering. *Appunti per una storia di guerra* (2004) stages a group of adolescents in a provincial town marked by an unnamed war, recognizable through its material and moral devastation. The choice of a deliberately undefined setting shifts attention away from geopolitical specificities toward the social dynamics of violence: the co-optation of young people into informal war economies, the circulation of weapons, the banalization of trauma. Here, comics document the social by constructing a typology of situations, figures, and languages that reconstitute a form of morphological realism of contemporary wars, in which the boundary between front and rear, civilian and combatant, is radically blurred. In *unastoria* (2013), by contrast, the overlap between letters from the front during the First World War and the story of a contemporary writer in psychological crisis produces a montage of temporalities and graphic registers that interrogates the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its translation into mental illness. Archival letters become raw material for a reflection on the continuity of forms of suffering, while the fragmentation of the page and the controlled use of colour generate a genuine visual cartography of depression and uprooting.

These cases, although heterogeneous in context, style, and authorial positioning, share several features that are particularly relevant for a sociological reading of documentary comics:

- first, they treat trauma – whether war-related, political, or psychological – not as a punctual event but as a process that traverses subjects, generations, and institutions and that requires forms of archiving different from those offered by official documents alone;
- second, they place at the centre the construction of a situated point of view, avoiding both the claim to “objectivity” and a closure in autobiographical solipsism: the voice of the survivor, the observer, or the fictive narrator is always in relation to apparatuses of power, urban landscapes, and collective memories;
- third, they turn drawing into a method in its own right: the repetition of certain framings, the choice of ellipses, and the management of rhythm from one panel to the next operate as tools of analysis no less than the explicit conceptual categories.

Mickwitz (2016) pushes this perspective further by questioning the still widespread idea that documentary work must necessarily be tied to mechanical recording technologies (photography, cinema, audio). His analyses show how comics can perform documentary functions precisely by virtue of their drawn nature. Far from being a limitation, the absence of a photographic index makes more explicit the performative and processual character of every testimonial act, shifting attention away from a technical guarantee of truthfulness toward the relationship between authors, sources, and readers. In this light, documentary comics are not “less” documentary because they do not record reality, but documentary in a different way, namely through the graphic construction of a space of co-presence between archival traces, individual memories, and interpretive intervention. The distinction between “comics that talk about the social” and “comics that document the social” hinges precisely on this terrain. In the first case, the social is a thematic content – inequalities, racism, war – that can be treated in different registers (satirical, melodramatic, realist) without necessarily entailing any particular work on sources or forms of evidence. In the second case, by contrast, the comic is explicitly constructed on the basis of documentary materials (archives, interviews, trials, reports), making its relationship to sources transparent and placing at the centre the question of how to “make visible” a social phenomenon without reducing it or turning it into spectacle. It is in this space that projects such as *VADLBDM*, which translate documentary materials into graphic sequences, are situated. It is no coincidence that, as early as the 1940s, Matsner Gruenberg (1944) was already urging us to look at comics beyond their dimension as children’s entertainment, highlighting their role as social phenomena capable of influencing attitudes, values, and collective imaginaries. Contemporary documentary comics take up and deepen this insight, according to which comics are a social force and counter-spaces in which society documents itself and stages its own fractures. If documentary comics insist on the link between representation and testimony, the graphic social sciences shift the focus further upstream: the point is no longer simply to take the social as the object of a story, but to adopt comics as a form of writing research itself. Within the broader framework of arts-based research (Leavy 2015), recourse to the graphic language is not conceived as a mere outreach tool or a “popular translation” of already established findings, but as a specific mode of inquiry, conceptualisation, and restitution that intervenes at all stages of the knowledge-production process. In this regard, the study by Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower (2017) on comics-based research has played a programmatic role: comics are described there as a device capable of making identities, artefacts, environments, and interactional dynamics simultaneously present, producing a dense weave in which the conceptual dimension is inseparable from the choice of framing, from the rhythm of panel transitions, and from the management of text within the drawn page. The latter becomes a space in which one thinks through images and sequences, and in which the distinction between “illustration” and “analysis” loses its meaning. It is no coincidence that works such as *Unflattening* (Sousanis 2015) – a doctoral dissertation produced entirely in comics form – have shown how the graphic construction of diagrams, figures, and spatial metaphors can constitute a fully fledged theoretical argument, irreducible to a text that “could have been written otherwise”.

For the social sciences, this implies a rethinking of the very form of the article and the research report. Whereas in classical qualitative methodologies the passage from empirical materials to the analytical text takes place through operations of coding, abstraction, and narrative montage, the graphic social sciences introduce an additional level of transformation: analysis also passes through decisions about which bodies to draw and how, which interstices to leave blank, and what regime of proximity to establish between the reader and the represented subjects. In a graphic ethnography, for example, the gesture of choosing a high-angle or low-angle shot, of placing a character at the margins or at the centre of the panel, amounts to taking a position with respect to the power hierarchies that traverse the scene. Drawing is not an “embellishment” of the data but a form of situated interpretation that overlays a visual montage onto the textual one, as demonstrated by recent experiments in a sociology in/of comics (Barberis, Grüning 2021; Grüning, Scavarda 2025). Here, comics are used as methodological manuals, extensions of research projects, accounts of participatory inquiry, and tools for returning to vulnerable groups (migrants, psychiatric patients, young people in marginalised contexts) a degree of control over the narration of their own experiences. Ultimately, this is a graphic declension of public sociology: knowledge does not remain confined within the closed space of the journal article, but is shaped into an object that can circulate in schools, associations, and educational settings, becoming itself part of the social environment it analyses. Situated within the framework outlined above, the graphic social sciences thus offer sociology a privileged tool for working precisely on the triad archives – bodies – memories. On the one hand, they make it possible to translate documentary materials – transcripts, case files, photographs – into figural configurations that render their embodied implications visible; on the other, they allow for the recording and restitution of the mnemonic traces of the subjects involved in a way that is closer to their sensory experience, without reducing them to the solely verbal form of the interview.

In this sense, comics place at least three central dimensions of sociological practice under tension:

1. The production of data: drawing can already intervene at the collection stage, as a tool for elicitation, for co-constructing narratives, and for restituting observed scenes.
2. The writing of analysis: the page replaces – or supplements – the paragraph, arranging within the same space bodies, objects, institutional backdrops, fragments of dialogue, and concepts.
3. Public dissemination: the comics form broadens the potential publics of research, making complex themes accessible to readers who would be unlikely to engage with a traditional academic article.

This shift is not merely stylistic. It directly interrogates the construction of scientific authority: who is authorised to speak sociologically when research takes the form of a comic book? Only the academic who signs the text? The artist who draws? The subjects who appear in the panels? The graphic social sciences insist precisely on this collaborative dimension, acknowledging that the act of translating the social into images entails ethical and epistemological choices that cannot be reduced to the textual dimension alone. The centrality of the visual in contemporary social sciences – from

visual ethnography to the production of maps, graphs, and installations – has called into question how we understand the “document.” The introduction of comics adds a further layer of complexity, insofar as the document is not only read and interpreted, but is also graphically rewritten. In this latter move, the boundary between source and interpretation becomes more porous: the panel is at once quotation and commentary, a montage of documentary elements and a space of imaginative projection. Scientific authority no longer resides exclusively in the apparatus of footnotes, in statistical series, or in the argumentative rigour of the text, but is distributed across several components: transparency regarding archival work, the choices of selection and montage, the internal coherence of the graphic universe, and the capacity to render visible social relations that would otherwise remain invisible. For sociology, this implies a twofold movement. On the one hand, it is necessary to develop critical tools for analysing comics as a practice of constructing reality, without relegating them to the role of “illustrative support” for content produced elsewhere. On the other hand, we must interrogate the conditions under which comics can be recognised as a legitimate form of sociological writing, capable of contributing to disciplinary discussions on methods, evidence, and the responsibilities of representation.

3. From Archive to Drawn Body: Documentary Grammar and Scientific Strategies in Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde

3.1 Archival Ecosystem and Apparatus

The *bande dessinée Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* originates from the encounter with an institutional archive that is as imposing as it is, at least apparently, anodyne: in the *greffe de la paix du Québec* more than 20,000 coroner’s files were found relating to cases in which the authorities concluded that death by suicide had occurred in the province between 1763 and 1986. These files were produced by a medico-legal apparatus tasked with establishing the causes and circumstances of death: for each case, descriptions of the scene, testimonies from family members or witnesses, police reports, medical records and, from the twentieth century onwards, photographs of places and bodies were collected. It is this heterogeneous set of traces – texts, images, forms – that constitutes the empirical corpus underpinning the scientific project from which the BD derives.

From a sociological standpoint, these files represent a paradigmatic example of “bureaucratic seriality”: each dossier is organised according to a relatively standardised grid of information (identity of the deceased person, date, place, means employed, presumed motivations, possible notes on psychiatric history, family context), inscribed in forms that predefine which elements of life and death are deemed relevant and which remain out of frame. The repetition of categories – “*pendaison*,” “*noyade*,” “*intoxication*,” “*suicide probable*” – produces an overview of the phenomenon that privileges statistical aggregation and typological classification over biographical singularity. In other words, suicide appears here first and foremost as the object of a technology of recording and governance: each individual case is absorbed into a series that makes bodies, places, gestures, and motivations comparable, translating the irreducible event of voluntary death into an element of an administrable whole.

Perreault, Cellard, and Corriveau's operation consists precisely in treating this archive not as a simple repository of data but as a historical dispositif for problematising suicide. The choice of the BD is only one of the multiple forms taken by a long-term socio-historical research project, initiated in the mid-2000s and based on the systematic analysis of the coroner's files, from which several scientific articles and further publications have already emerged. The decision to focus on the period 1763–1986 is not only dictated by the limits of source accessibility – after 1986 the coroner's mandate changes and the files are no longer available to the public – but also makes it possible to follow, over a span of more than two centuries, the transformation of the regimes of truth through which suicide is named, explained, and judged: from the religious and moral qualifications of the early modern period to the medical-psychiatric and public health semantics of the XX century.

At the level of the division of scientific labour, the project takes the form of a structured collaboration between three criminologists at the University of Ottawa and a *bédéiste*: the former are responsible for constructing the research dispositif (sample selection, development of analytical categories, historical-sociological interpretation of transformations over time); the latter translates this work into a visual-sequential language, assuming responsibility for the “narration in images” on the basis of scripts and dialogues provided by the research team. This is not, however, a mere technical division of tasks – as Corriveau stated to the present author in an interview on the project in July 2024 – since the collaboration entails a continuous back-and-forth between archive and page, between the demands of documentary rigour and stylistic choices aimed at making highly sensitive material both bearable and intelligible.

In this sense, the coroner's archive can be described as a dispositif that holds, on the one hand, a historical-institutional dimension, insofar as it records the outcome of inquiries that seek to establish the causes of death and, implicitly, to distribute responsibilities and blame (it is a state archive that speaks with the voice of the medical examiner, the justice of the peace, the police), and, on the other, a dimension of scientific and graphic reappropriation, since this same archive is reorganised as material for a historical sociology of suicide. The latter does not limit itself to counting cases but attempts to reconstruct the “stagings” of voluntary death: the way bodies are found, the arrangement of objects, the letters left behind, the social spaces traversed (bridge, prison, farm, bedroom, forest).

VADLBDM is situated precisely on this threshold: on the one hand, it makes explicit from the very first pages the scientific character of the project, introducing, in the form of a *mise en abyme*, the genealogy of the research, the nature of the discursive complex, and the role of each member of the team; on the other hand, it uses the language of comics to remove the files from their bureaucratic opacity, bringing out – through the drawn body – the embodied and situated dimension of the lives recorded in those documents. It is in this passage from archive to drawing that the BD begins to function as a laboratory for a visual sociology of suicide, a theme that will be developed in the following sections.

3.2 *Transforming the Archive into Pages: Scenes and Temporalities*

In *VADLBDM*, the translation of the archive into drawn sequences does not take place as a simple illustration of already established results, but rather through a work

of selection, condensation, and montage that is, in itself, a sociological operation. The book explicitly opens inside the research laboratory: in the first pages we see Isabelle on the phone with André, as they discuss the initial illustrations and the difficulties of “putting into images” the final moments of suicides on the basis of judicial files characterised by technical descriptions and “very raw clinical photographs” that do not convey the “final impression” the individuals wished to leave. The decision to involve an artist in order to “recreate the scenes,” instead of reproducing the coroner’s photographs, makes it clear that the BD does not simply extract content from the archive, but constructs a genuine visual grammar of the *mise en scène suicidaire*, capable of bringing out the scenic and relational dimension of the act where the institutional document records only the cause and modality of death.

The construction of scenes from the files first of all entails a narrative choice: out of nearly 20,000 dossiers, the authors single out case types that condense recurring configurations – “ordinary” and “exceptional” suicides, invisible acts and gestures marked by strong spectacular intentionality – and articulate them into micro-narratives. The passage from file to page is thus not a neutral translation but an act of composition: scattered descriptive elements (place, time, objects found, relatives’ testimonies, any letters) are reordered into a scene with a beginning, climax, and coda, with a precise organisation of space and time. The archive, structured around standardised entries and legal categories, is “reopened” into narrative configurations that reassert the presence of bodies, gestures, and environments, restoring the situated density of the suicidal situation.

This work also clearly emerges at the level of the page. The BD alternates panels in which explanatory discourse predominates – long blocks of text that present the corpus, explain the function of the coroner, introduce concepts such as “staging” or the imitation effect – with sequences in which words recede and images bear the weight of enunciation. The page thus becomes the place where the bureaucratic lexicon of the files intertwines with a careful framing: domestic interiors, urban spaces, and transit zones (bridges, railways, hotel rooms) are drawn not as neutral backdrops but as true actants, scenic devices that participate in the construction of the suicidal act.

The management of page space also makes it possible to visualise the dual scalar regime that runs through the corpus. On the one hand, the BD insists on the exemplarity of individual cases, making specific biographical situations and relational configurations recognisable; on the other, certain pages work on seriality: rows of archive boxes, sequences of file numbers, repetitions of administrative formulas constantly remind the reader that each singular scene is extracted from a mass of cases, from a statistical repetition that constitutes suicide as a social problem and not only as an individual tragedy. In this sense, the comic gives visual form precisely to that tension between series and singularity that historiography and historical sociology have long discussed, but which have rarely found an equally effective iconic translation.

The temporal dimension is also profoundly reworked. The corpus covers a span from 1763 to the late twentieth century, yet the BD does not adopt a linear chronology or a rigid periodisation. The narrative proceeds by leaps, juxtaposing episodes distant in time that share scenic configurations or interpretive categories: suicides with farewell letters and silent suicides, overtly theatrical acts and gestures that seek to erase all

traces, cases in which the coroner can reach a confident conclusion and cases in which the verdict remains uncertain. These assemblages produce controlled anachronisms: events separated by decades are placed on the same page in order to show the persistence of certain forms of staging and, at the same time, the transformations in the institutional grammars that qualify them – from the language of sin and guilt to that of mental pathology, and finally to public health concerns. In this way, the comics sequence becomes a privileged tool for thinking together diachrony and recurrence, the historicity of classifications and the continuity of forms of social suffering. Finally, the decision to include the researchers themselves, their methodological discussions, and their ethical hesitations within the narrative performs a crucial meta-documentary function. The conversations between members of the research team – who comment on the initial illustrations, discuss the possibility of publishing “the entire research in the form of a *bande dessinée*”, and reflect on the risks of aestheticising death – stage the reflexive dimension of sociological work. The archive never appears as a neutral repository of facts, but as a set of traces that must be continuously interpreted, selected, and assembled, making the very process of translation visible and transforming the page into a piece of “equipment for the imagination” – to recall the notion of *technologies of the imagination* developed by Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen (2009) – that enables an exploration of the social and affective effects of the forms through which we think and represent voluntary death.

3.3 Suicidal Bodies and Institutional Environments

From the very pages in which we see the researchers discussing the “*photos prises sur les lieux d’un suicide*” described as “*particulièrement gores*” (p.10), the text insists that the “*crue*” lighting and the medico-legal intent “*de bien illustrer les causes et circonstances immédiates du décès*” do not do



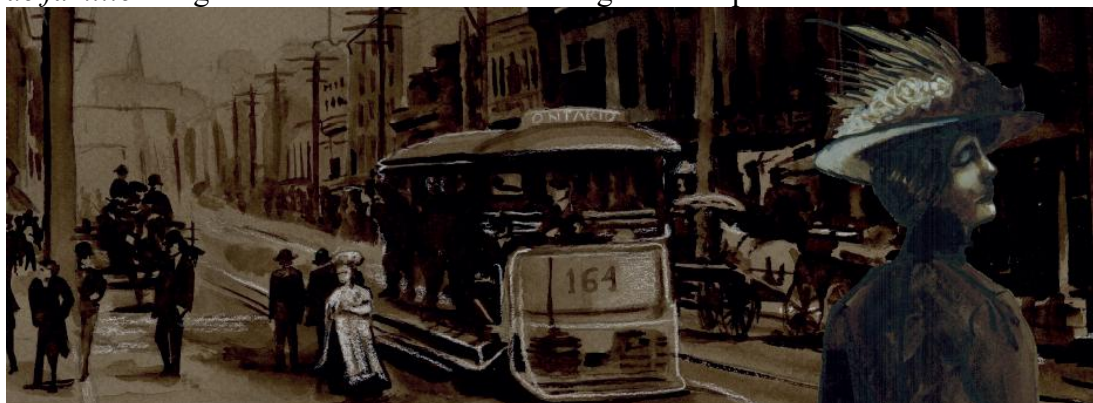
“*justice à la dernière image*” the person wished to leave of themselves (pp.10–11). It is precisely here that the criterion guiding Quesnel’s work is formulated: to reconstruct the scenes “*sans voyeurisme ou sensationnalisme*”, replacing the raw indexicality of the photographs with a mode of visualisation capable of conveying

the subject’s own will to stage their death, while at the same time avoiding the pornography of suffering.

This choice is translated into a series of graphic strategies of distance and modesty. In the narrative sequences, the suicidal body is often present but rarely displayed frontally: it is shown in partial view, partially concealed by the surrounding space (a shadow in a doorway, a figure glimpsed from afar, a suspended silhouette), or evoked through the objects that surround it—the rope, the bottle of poison, the bridge railing, the overturned chair. Whereas the medico-legal file describes in detail the position of the corpse, the injuries, the condition of the site, the comics page prefers to insist on posture and on the relationship between body and environment rather than on anatomical detail. At a sociological level, this shift means that the body is treated not

as a mere object of observation, but as a node in a network of relations: what matters is not only “how they died,” but where, with what gestures the environment was prepared, which traces—letters, arrangements, money left in plain sight—were set in place for those who remain.

The case of Marie, the young clerk involved in a minor theft and lodged in a *pension de famille* for “*jeunes femmes célibataires*,” offers a particularly clear example of this intertwining of body and institutions (pp.48–53). The pages that reconstruct her story are framed by textual elements that point to a dense institutional landscape: the «Département de police de la cité», the reporting procedures, the «maison Seroggie» in Sainte-Catherine as a supervised space in which young women are placed «sous la supervision d’une ‘maîtresse de chambre’» (p. 48). Marie’s body does not appear primarily as a medical specimen, but rather as a body regulated by moral and disciplinary dispositifs: the theft, the summons by the detective, the visit to the boarding house, the exchanges between the *gérant*, the police officers, and the *pension de famille* bring to the surface a dense web of gazes that precedes the suicidal act.



The letters Marie leaves – addressed to the *logeuse*, to a lawyer, to the *gérant* of the hotel – are extensively quoted in the text and embedded in the pages that depict their locations: the rented room, the suitcase, the passage from the supervised lodging to the hotel room chosen as the place to die (pp. 51–52). In the explanatory commentary we read that the young woman «règle dans tous les détails le rapatriement de son corps et de ses affaires à Prescott» and that she ensures that the body will be «découvert immédiatement» and in such a condition as not to bring discredit upon the *maison de pension* (p. 52). Here, the body is literally administered by the future suicide: not only the object of a post-mortem bureaucracy, but the object of a meticulous self-bureaucratisation that concerns the way in which it will be seen, transported, preserved. The page visualises this work of pre-mortem ordering by arranging in space the material elements evoked in the letters (suitcase, linen, notes), thereby inscribing the body within a “project” of death that holds together domestic space, institutions, and family memory.

Institutional environments appear not merely as background, but as full-fledged scenic actors. The pages devoted to archival work – shelves, boxes, reading desks at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (p.18) – give form to the transformation of the body into a file; those on Marie and the other young women show the interweaving of boarding houses, municipal police, justices of the peace, and institutions for *filles-mères*, where the prospect of giving birth outside marriage is equivalent to a “social putting to death” and to a life under the sign of exile (pp.53–54, 56). When the text recalls that, had Marie carried the pregnancy to term, she would have had to give birth in an «institution pour ‘filles-mères’, se voir enlever son enfant et vivre le reste de ses jours avec le statut d’exilée sociale» (p.56),

pages translate this condition into enclosed environments, corridors, neutral rooms: spaces that do not appear in the files, but that exist as the institutional implication of moral and medico-legal classification.

In parallel, the family is present more as a normative and affective horizon than as a directly represented scene. In the pages devoted to Marie's case, familial shame is explicitly evoked: «Tomber enceinte hors mariage équivalait pratiquement à une mise à mort sociale pour une jeune femme désormais considérée comme 'perdue'. Honte et opprobre pour elle et sa famille» (p.55). The comic gives body to this discourse by bringing into dialogue the words of the archive (statements, letters, the coroner's comments) with the representation of the spaces through which the young woman moves: boarding house, shop, hotel, street. The family, although not always visible on the page, operates as a latent institution that defines what can be said and what must remain unsaid, what may be hidden and what must be erased through death. In all these configurations, the BD shifts the focus from the "statistics of suicide" to its corpor(e)ality. Whereas the original archival dispositif tends to produce numbers, categories, and comparable series—rates by age, sex, means employed—the comic continually redirects attention to the situated body: a body that travels in order to escape the gaze of its loved ones (p.44), a body that is prepared so as to be found "in good shape" and quickly identifiable (pp.52–53), a body that undergoes a *mise à mort sociale* even before it becomes the object of a death certificate (pp.55–56). In sociological terms, this means that the BD renders visible the embodied dimension of suicide not as a mere "individual case" within a series, but as a point of intersection between institutional regimes (police, medicine, welfare, family), material spaces, and practices of self-staging.

The graphic representation of suicidal bodies and institutional environments thus performs a twofold reconfiguration: on the one hand, it removes suicide from a purely



statistical–bureaucratic regime of truth, restoring to it a sensible density; on the other, it shows how that very density – postural, spatial, scenographic – is already anticipated and governed by the apparatuses that produce the files. *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* quite literally puts this circularity on the page: the bodies that

the archive records as cases are redrawn as subjects who have actively worked on staging their own deaths, transforming the BD into a space in which the sociological analysis of suicide passes through the ways in which a body that is no longer there is looked at, drawn, and positioned in space.

4. Memory, Social Suffering and Public Sociology: Comics as a Device for Public Working-Through

The passage from archival series to collective memory in the BD under analysis can be illuminated through two now-classic notions in trauma memory studies: Hirsch's *postmemory* (2012) and Rothberg's *multidirectional memory* (2009). Hirsch defines as postmemorial the position of those subjects who have not directly

experienced a traumatic event and yet inherit its traces through stories, photographs, documents, works of art, developing a strongly affective relationship to a past that does not belong to them in a biographical sense and yet contributes in a constitutive way to their identity. From this perspective, the BD may be read as a postmemorial device: both the researchers and the readers structurally occupy the position of “distant heirs” of the suicides recorded in the coroner’s files between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. No one has personally known the individuals whose deaths are evoked; nevertheless, the act of consulting the files, selecting them, graphically rewriting them, and reading them in sequence produces an intense familiarity with those gestures, those bodies, those social landscapes. The BD functions as an interface between a mute institutional archive – organised according to legal categories and standardised forms – and a contemporary public that discovers itself, page after page, implicated in a long history of social suffering and institutional violence.

In this sense, the visual–verbal sequentiality of comics is not merely a narrative expedient: it is the site where the archive is translated into postmemorial experience, where a series of anonymous cases becomes a constellation of presences that interrogate the viewer’s present. Rothberg’s proposal to think of memory in multidirectional terms further clarifies this movement. As an alternative to a competitive model, which imagines collective memories as struggling for a limited space of recognition, Rothberg insists that narratives of different traumas can enter into resonance, illuminating one another and generating new political and affective configurations. The BD operates precisely within this regime. Although rooted in the historical and juridical context of Québec, it does not present suicide as a closed “local dossier,” but as a prism through which to read broader forms of structural violence, exclusion, and disciplining of bodies. The stories of Marie and the other young women, of poor workers, indebted farmers, psychiatric patients, are not offered as picturesque exceptions: they are constructed so as to echo figures and situations recognisable to a contemporary reader, who finds in them recurring motifs such as material precarisation, the stigmatisation of mental distress, the moral sanctioning of non-conforming sexualities, and the selective medicalisation of suffering.

Within this framework, the work performs a crucial function of symbolic condensation by taking up the last words spoken by Gaulin before publicly immolating herself in Montréal in 1972. The album grafts an exemplary gesture that already belongs to Québec’s public memory onto the corpus of coroner’s files: a suicide made deliberately visible, conceived as an act of indictment against a society experienced as intolerable. Far from merely evoking Gaulin as an iconic figure, the BD uses her sentence as a retrospective interpretive key: the accusation “you have destroyed the beauty of the world” is implicitly addressed not only to the passers-by in that square, but to the institutions, norms, and socio-economic arrangements that, over the course of two centuries, have rendered some lives more vulnerable than others. Gaulin’s act, both well known and historically dated, is thus repositioned within a broader constellation of less visible suicides, restoring to the spectacular gesture its belonging to a long and structural history.

From this perspective, the album situates itself within a constellation of graphic novels that take suicide, or suicidal ideation, as a key node through which to articulate individual memory and social critique. In this regard, it is possible to reflect on a purposively selected sample: in *Fun Home* (2006), Bechdel rereads her father’s death – officially an accident but constantly suspended between the hypotheses of suicide and fatality – as a turning point in a family genealogy marked by secrecy, internalised

homophobia, and bourgeois respectability. The book works on a double archive, both domestic and cultural: photographs, diaries, and letters on the one hand; literary intertexts on the other. The father's possible suicide thus becomes the site where queer memory, the history of the psychiatrisation of homosexuality, and shifts in gender norms intersect, showing how the work of mourning passes through a critical renegotiation of collective imaginaries that have helped make a certain form of life impossible. In *Lighter Than My Shadow* (Green 2013), suicide attempts are inscribed within a long trajectory of eating disorder, abuse, and shame, and are represented through a recurring graphic device: the black cloud that envelops the protagonist's body and distorts its contours. Here the suicidal act is not isolated as an exceptional event, but appears as the intensification of a process of erosion of social presence, produced by the intertwining of normative discourses on the female body, the medicalisation of distress, and family silences. The comic functions as a counter-archive of a therapeutic journey, where medical records and diagnoses are placed alongside images that convey the sensory quality of suffering, offering the reader a visual grammar for thinking about the stigmatisation of mental disorders beyond diagnostic labels. Similarly, in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me*, Forney (2012) stages her own passage through bipolar disorder, including moments when suicidal ideation becomes more pronounced, intertwining notes, sketches, and quotations from art and the history of psychiatry. Here too, comics operate as a postmemorial laboratory: the author mobilises her personal archive – notebooks, prescriptions, memories of therapy sessions – to situate her story within a broader genealogy of artistic figures and therapeutic dispositifs, enabling the reader to reread their own imaginaries of madness and suicide in the light of that history.

Placed alongside the BD under discussion, these works show how the graphic novel can function as a device of public memory of suicide on different scales. In the cases of Bechdel, Green, and Forney, the point of departure is an autobiographical self that opens out toward cultural and institutional archives; in the case of Corriveau et al., it is an institutional archive that is reopened in order to restore biographical density to anonymous lives. In both cases, comics shift the gaze from the individual event to the web of relations, norms, and imaginaries that make it possible, turning the narration of suicide not into a mere exercise in exposing trauma, but into a collective interrogation of the social conditions of vulnerability. In this sense, comics function as a device for the *contemporisation* of the past: the series of cases does not remain confined to the historical time to which it belongs, but is taken up in a present in which suicide stands at the centre of new discourses on mental health, gender, and inequality. The pages do not invite the reader to judge the past with a moralising gaze, but to recognise the continuity of certain dispositifs of suffering – social isolation, shame, selective pathologisation, lack of resources – that cut across centuries. In this way, the coroner's archive ceases to be a mere instrument for retrospectively reconstructing the “causes of suicide” and becomes a social archive available to a public memory that asks how a collectivity has treated, and continues to treat, its broken lives.

As a sequential form that interweaves bodies and contexts, comics offer one of the most effective modes for carrying out this passage: transforming bureaucratic series into constellations of stories, and institutional memory into shared, critical memory, open to confrontation with the present.

Concluding Reflections: Nous avons détruit la beauté du monde?

The analysis of *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* shows, in concrete terms, how a documentary BD can become a visual historical sociology of suicide. The opening pages, in which everyday objects, decorative patterns, and a body seated at a table are arranged in discontinuous fragments (pp.7–8), immediately stage the passage from the anonymity of the archive to the sensible density of experience. The metanarrative sequences devoted to the teamwork between researchers and artist – from the vineyard in Ripon to the meetings at the Université d’Ottawa and at the BAnQ (pp.11–20) – make explicit the translation of the file into image as a methodical, debated, reflexive operation. Further on, the pages that condense into recurring figures the “commonplaces” of suicide (the Jacques Cartier Bridge, the métro, hanging in domestic spaces, vehicles adapted for carbon monoxide: pp. 22–25), or that reconstruct in detail the staging of specific cases – from the foreign traveller who takes his life in a hotel, to pregnant young women such as Marie, through to couples’ *pactes suicidaires* (pp. 42–55) – recompose the archival material into a constellation of embodied, situated, relational scenes. It is through these compositional choices – cuts, framings, sequencing rhythm, insistence on small objects and farewell letters – that the comic produces a form of intelligibility of suicidal phenomena that systematically intertwines the statistical and typological seriality of the files with their lived and scenic dimension, making visible what in the coroner’s acts alone would remain in the background.

In this movement, Gaulin’s sentence performs the function of a symbolic hinge: it is not merely the remainder of an individual, historically dated gesture, but the device that redistributes responsibility across the entire historical span covered by the files, an extreme “lyrical” act that condenses a whole history of socially produced suffering. The accusation does not strike an abstract entity such as “society”; it targets historically specific configurations of power and knowledge. The concrete forms of *prise en charge du suicide* oscillate between criminalisation, psychiatric pathologisation, and the recognition of a “right to die,” redefining each time who is regarded as responsible, deviant, ill, or a victim of intolerable circumstances. In this sense, the BD renders visible what the literature on social suffering has highlighted at a theoretical level: that suicide cannot be reduced to an aggregation of individual cases, but constitutes a point of condensation for political, economic, and institutional violences that produce differentially distributed vulnerabilities. At the same time, the operation of reopening the archive situates itself in implicit dialogue with those reflections (Mbembe 2002; Hartman 2007; Stoler 2009) that have foregrounded the violence inscribed in archives and the need for practices of *critical fabulation* capable of restoring agency and opacity to subjects recorded only as cases, files, classified bodies.



The BD takes this question seriously – how to avoid inflicting a “second violence” on the dead through representation – and translates it into formal choices: the attenuation of graphic detail, an emphasis on the social conditions preceding the act, and a careful working-through of voices and farewell letters. In this way, Gaulin’s public suicide is not isolated as an icon, but repositioned within a constellation of ordinary suicides that disclose its structural dimension: the title sentence becomes the point at which the lyrical register, the social history of suicide in Québec, and the critique of institutional regimes of classification intersect, producing a device of collective responsabilisation that administrative archives alone are not capable of activating.

For sociological work, this device foregrounds at least three elements that the archive, on its own, can scarcely make visible. First, the scenic dimension of suicide: the files record places and means in the form of variables, whereas the comic restores them as lived spaces, as scenographies in which bodies and objects are arranged according to a logic of staging that involves future spectators – family members, passers-by, institutions. Second, the institutional web that precedes and follows the act: in the pages, the intersections between police, forensic medicine, welfare, family, and spaces of female segregation emerge clearly, rendering tangible what often remains in the background of the file. Third, the work of self-archiving undertaken by the subjects themselves: letters, meticulous instructions concerning the treatment of the body, attempts to govern one’s own posthumous memory appear in the BD as practices that transform future suicides into co-authors of their own file and, retrospectively, of their own representation.

From this follows the eminently public character of the operation. *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* is not merely a by-product of an academic research project; it is a form of public sociology that adopts comics as a communicative infrastructure through which a repressed history can be recirculated in the public sphere. The choice of the graphic language enables the research to move beyond the boundaries of the disciplinary circuit without relinquishing rigour: the explanatory apparatus, the thematisation of method, and the attention to the risks of aestheticisation keep the scientific labour underpinning each page clearly in view. At the same time, the visual-verbal sequentiality makes possible a shared postmemorial experience, in which non-specialist readers are enabled to grasp the structural significance of individual cases and to situate their own perception of suicide within long genealogies of classification and stigma. From a normative standpoint, the lesson to be drawn is clear: to take comics seriously as a potential language of the discipline does not mean embracing a trend or seeking “more appealing” channels for an otherwise unchanged sociology. It means recognising that, especially when working on extreme, marginal, and traumatic experiences, the form of restitution is an integral part of the object itself.

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