

Jochen Gerner – the work of quotation

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An anecdote from the early years of Jochen Gerner's apprenticeship provides us with a useful introduction. The highly cinematographic setting is the Château du Montet, a neo-Gothic building dating from the nineteenth century and situated in a wood overlooking part of the built-up area of Nancy. In the 1970s and 80s, it was home to a number of institutions linked to the development of informatics in Lorraine. In 1988, it became the seat of what was to become INIST – the Institut de l'Information Scientifique et Technique (Institute of Scientific and Technical Information) – part of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – National Center for Scientific Research) devoted to the collection and diffusion of the results of scientific and technical research, pioneering the computer processing of content. It was here that Jochen Gerner, at that time a student at the School of Fine Art in Nancy, was, thanks to his mother who was engaged in work there on the *Trésor de la Langue Français* [Dictionary of the French Language], was taken on to carry out research into the frequency of certain keywords – in this case “table” – that provided the jumping-off point for research into classification and illustration. We take so much for granted nowadays that we need to remember this was at a time before the emergence of the internet and the large-scale production of digital books. This experience, which took the form of a slowly unfolding list of quotations recorded on punched cards, with its magic and revelatory power, had a profound effect on Jochen Gerner.

It is tempting to see in this anecdote a pivotal moment for the work of Jochen Gerner. It crystallizes important aspects of his working methods and reveals the

characteristics underlying the many-sided nature of his work, from that of an author-illustrator/designer – as he likes to describe himself in the first instance – to his projects that belong more obviously to the world of contemporary art, and taking in his commissioned illustrations, newspaper work and regular incursions into areas as varied as opera or architecture. No matter what the work, we see running through all his creations the essential role given to language, to documents and quotations, the potential of constraints, the incorporation of the works of other authors, or the use of words or details leading to underlying layers of further meanings. Convergence lines running through a work that is both protean and coherent, the whole animated by the exploration of complex links, each time unique, that emerge, inextricably interwoven, between the image and the text.

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“Things read and heard”: This modest phrase is the subtitle of one of his most ambitious works, *Contre la bande dessinée* (Against Comics 2008), a work that is typical of the reflective, critical and conceptual direction he has pursued from the outset, particularly through his involvement with *OuBaPo* (*Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle*, or Potential Comics Workshop), a movement that he joined shortly after its creation in 1992. This working group bringing together artists and theoreticians is modelled on François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau's *OuLiPo* (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* or Workshop of Potential Literature). Arranged in some twenty chapters with titles such as “Decors and Colors”, “Young Readers”, “Mediocrity”, “Sex and Violence” and “Literature”, the book takes the form of a collage of

expressions and quotations relating to comics, collected over the years from media sources, everyday spaces and literature. In this kaleidoscope of fragments, a mixture of clichéd expressions, received ideas, biting criticism, censure, sociological data and metaphorical words, comics appear as a “kind of sub-literature”, something at best entertaining and inoffensive – “a comic book brings a bit of color to the library shelves” – but more often puerile and naïve, depicting stereotypical characters – “the pretty secretary was straight out of a comic strip...” – obsessed with violence and pornography – “an unhealthy morass emerging from adult fantasies” – a world of caricature and crude drawing. Distributed over the pages, these “found” words enter into a dialogue with an equally dense network of drawings – graphic commentaries, visual statements, subjective responses to the scraps of text – as deliberately chosen in their concision and their schematic nature as the words.

With its implicit nod to Marcel Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954), a book that, as Jochen Gerner points out, represents the first critical work on literary criticism, the title *Contre la bande dessinée* suggests as much opposition as a certain proximity, or even touching: “up against comics¹”, as he puts it. Turning the pages of the book, these two contradictory aspects alternate, combine, merge, the two sides of a similar work of deconstruction. True to his approach to the document and his use of observation, Jochen Gerner casts an eye that is at one and the same time critical, analytic and attentive over an area where he finds himself both on the inside and the exterior². His approach does not describe; he works instead by juxtaposition, “placing images next to one

¹ Christian Rosset, “En ligne(s) – suite d'échanges avec Jochen Gerner”, *Neuvième Art*, No. 15, January 2009, p. 176.

² See Agathe Guilhem, “Les Bédéistes contemporains”, *Arts Magazine*, Special Issue No. 2, “Art & BD”, p. 76: “In the world of comics, he is held to

be an artist, in contemporary art circles he is thought of an illustrator of comics who dabbles in art. Gerner's reaction is: “I like this status, I like not being in a fixed, fossilized place. I would not like this territory to become a well-defined form because that might

tie it down or turn it into something more classic. I find it interesting to travel towards somewhere that has no precise form, that has not yet been exploited. There is so much to be discovered at the frontier between contemporary art and comics. I live on a tightrope between the

two”.

another³”, in a kind of inventory or enumeration. He believes in the potential of constraints, echoing Georges Perec who has said: “Basically I give myself rules so as to be totally free⁴.” A visual transcription of the sound of the world, the accumulation of signs on an empty page results in what Umberto Eco has called – on the occasion of an exhibition and a publication bringing together not only Homer, Montaigne, Rabelais and Borges, but also Hieronymus Bosch, Filippo Lippi, René Magritte and Daniel Spoerri – “the infinity of lists⁵”. “On looking at the lists drawn up by Joyce or Borges it is clear that they did not make lists because they did not know what to say, but because they wanted to say things out of a love of excess, hubris and a greed for words, for the joyous [...] science of the plural and the unlimited⁶.” *Contre la bande dessinée* is marked by such a joyous science.

Many works by Jochen Gerner seem carried away by a similar vertige (“dizziness”, as in the original title of Eco’s book), as, for example, *Berlin (Jochenplatz)* (2000), a book conceived as a “subjective inventory⁷” bringing together sketches made in Berlin of signs, hair styles, animals and objects, or the double page spread inserted in the middle of his *Saint Patron* (2004), showing some fifty heads of St Nicholas and a similar number of St Nicholas’s whip-wielding helper Père Fouettard as seen in the towns of Lorraine. In an even more pronounced way, it invades Gerner’s “telephonic drawings”, the project that he has been developing since 1993 and which has resulted to date in the publication of two works, *En Ligne(s)* (2002) and *Branchages* (2009). Doodles sketched while on the phone, “absent-mindedly⁸”, and fragments of conversations noted down at random are collected together forming a kind of multilayered palimpsest, such as Gérard Genette sees characterizing all writing. In *En Ligne(s)*, for example, practical matters – “Tuesday 7pm Place d’Italie outside McDonalds” – snatches of informal speech – “I couldn’t decide what to buy in the BHV store” –, conversations at work – “within the frame of the back cover” – and telephonic idioms – “Hang on. I’ll catch him” – are combined with innumerable sketches of people and objects that a directory at the end of the book attempts to list. Hats, chairs,

bottles, bicycles, flower pots, etc.: we also see in these “telephonic drawings” the author’s obsessions, obsessions that are sometimes brief – suddenly invading one or more pages – sometimes more insistent. Among the latter, some – the most obvious – return again and again through the pages of the book like a leitmotiv, taking on an entirely metaphorical dimension. In *En Ligne(s)* they are networks, cables, circuits, tracks, pipes, tubes and veins; in *Branchages* they are branches, trees, leaves, foliage and bushes; in the current notebook entitled *Chantiers*, scaffolding. Three categories of objects that can easily be adapted to infinite variations and proliferation and which seem to embody the interlaced meanings and networks of relationships, obvious or more deeply buried, that emerge from the drawings. In these telephonic drawings we see “the writing of the present” that Roland Barthes saw in notation and the intimate relationship it weaves between the sketch, the note, the branding and the flux of the world. Barthes writes: “*Notatio* instantly appears as the problematic intersection between a river of language, of uninterrupted language – *life*, both a continuous, ongoing, sequenced text and a layered text, a histology of cut-up texts, a palimpsest – and a sacred gesture: to mark life⁹.”

It is the meeting of this river and this gesture that Jochen Gerner’s work ceaselessly seeks to explore, whether in his commissioned illustrations or newspaper cartoons. The latter are often based on networks of signs or “chaotic enumeration¹⁰”, on the constant oscillation between the apparently simple drawings and the proliferation of signs. As he puts it: “The way I see it, I’m permanently switching between minimalism and abundance. My lines and figures are simple, but the way these elements work next to each other forms a more complex whole¹¹.”

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“Reading a text cited by Stendhal [...], I find Proust in one minute detail. I savor the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one¹².” These words from Barthes’s *Plaisir du texte* find a disturbing echo in the series *Relecture* (2011–2012). Published over the period of a year as a

monthly chronicle in the *Arts Magazine*, the series consists of plates devoted to the most significant works in the history of the comic, beginning with Alain Saint-Ogan’s *Zig et Puce millionnaires* (1928), taking in names such as Jacques Martin’s *La Grande Menace* (1954) and Edgar P. Jacobs’s *La Marque jaune* (1956) and ending with Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000). In the nine square panels that make up each of these plates, Jochen Gerner reproduces in black and white a number of “minute details” gleaned from various parts of the work in question. Close to the edges of the lines. As clearly as possible, the drawing reproduces every detail of the printing process, emphasizing in this way the process of appropriation and enlargement that he uses. Each panel has a title referring not to its provenance – which, being common to all nine panels, is placed at the top of the plate – but to its destination: the title of another work – a painting, a film a novel, a comic or a building – which has arisen, like Proust for Barthes, through the “reversal of origins” in the course of reading. The drawing of an explosion in *Zig et Puce millionnaires* becomes an image from the video *Der Lauf der Dinge* (1987) made by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, a detail from Morris et René Goscinny’s *Pied-Tendre* (1967) a painting by Kasimir Malevitch ([*Black*] *Cross*, 1915), a scene from *La Marque jaune* a photograph from Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), an interior view from *Jimmy Corrigan*, Thomas Demand’s photograph *Kitchen* (2004) and so on.

What these superimposed juxtapositions reveal is the infinite potential that is contained within any kind of reading. There is also the possibility of a visual intertextuality, which is to say, as Michael Riffaterre put it when speaking of literature, “the perception, by the reader, of relationships between one work and others that have preceded or followed it¹³”. This temporal dimension, of which the manifestation of Proust in the Stendhal text is an example, is decisive in Jochen Gerner’s work. “Working for several hours on an initial image, I enter wholly inside its construction and sometimes even into the body of the artist who drew it. I look for the flaw, the crack through which I can really or otherwise penetrate the image¹⁴”. The “minute detail” becomes a crossing point, both

³ Jochen Gerner quoted in Xavier Guilbert, “Jochen Gerner” (interview), *du9*, on-line magazine, February 2013: <http://www.du9.org/entretien/jochen-gerner/>.

⁴ Georges Perec, *Entretiens et conférences, volume I, 1965–1978*, Dominique Bertelli,

Mireille Ribière (eds.), Joseph K., Nantes, 2003, p. 208.

⁵ Umberto Eco, *Vertigine della Lista*, Bompiani, Milan, 2009, published on the occasion of the event *Vertige de la liste*, Musée du Louvre, November 2009). Eng. Translation by A. McEwen, *The Infinity*

of Lists, Raclehose Press, 2009, p. 327.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁷ Jochen Gerner, *Berlin (Jochenplatz)*, Le Rouergue, Rodez, 2000, n. p. [?]

⁸ *En ligne(s) - carnet de dessins téléphoniques (1994–2002)*, L’Ampoule, Paris, 2003, n. p. [?]

⁹ Roland Barthes, *La*

Préparation du Roman I et II – Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980), Seuil,

Paris, 2003, p. 46. Eng. trans. By Kate Briggs, *The Preparation of the Novel (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)*, Columbia University Press,

2011, p. 18

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 321. Eco borrows the phrase from Leo Spitzer, cf. Leo Spitzer, *La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna*, Buenos Aires, Instituto de Filología, 1945.

¹¹ Jochen Gerner quoted in Hans Lijklema, “Jochen

temporal and spatial, into the work; it uncovers a sense that was latent within, a reserve of meaning, a “visual unconscious”.

As illustrated by two recent drawings, *Desdémone 252* and *Desdémone 253* (2014), these crossing points can also be embodied in words. Invited to take part in an exhibition based around Eugène Delacroix's *Othello and Desdemona* (1849)¹⁵, Jochen Gerner found, in the most unlikely place imaginable – two pages of an Ikea catalogue – “the whole tragic synthesis of this drama: pillow, mattress (bed), a young woman asleep (Desdemona), Sultan (Othello)¹⁶”. The two drawings reproduce the page layout, the interwoven fabric of the mattresses and that of the text. The only actual signifiers to be retained are the repeated uses of the word “Sultan”, the name of the mattresses sold by Ikea.

A key work in Jochen Gerner's output is *TNT en Amérique* (2002) where these crossing points are extended to the entirety of a book, *Tintin en Amérique* (1932). Working directly on the cover and 62 pages of Hergé's comic book, Jochen Gerner covered them almost entirely with black ink, leaving just a few isolated words and small colored patches – “quotations” of colors – which he formed into pictograms in negative. “Revolver”, “rogue”, “threats”, “hotels”, “gangsters”, “police”, “automobile”, “whisky”, “menaces”, “revenge”, “darkness”, “explosion”, etc.: the words act as elements of an open-ended scenario, to which are added the pictograms: silhouettes, vehicles, weapons, tools, skull and crossbones, stars, arrows, lines, brackets, etc. As Jochen Gerner explains, *TNT en Amérique* brings to the surface of the page a violence that underlies both Hergé's comic books and America itself. Gerner points out that “both these worlds – Hergé's simple outlines and American society – can be interpreted in a similar way: two rich worlds, handsome and smooth in appearance, troubled and violent beneath the surface¹⁷”. *Tintin en Amérique* has been made dark and sinister. In the comic book we read the prophetic words: “*Tout de même, ce n'est pas très rassurant, tout ce noir*,” [lit. “All the same, all this darkness is not very reassuring”]. Published English translation. “You know something.... It gives me

the creeps out here in the dark...”]. It is this phrase that Jochen Gerner has chosen as the epigraph for his book.

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Published in 2002, *TNT en Amérique* represented a turning point in Jochen Gerner's work. It marked the beginning of an investigation into the possibilities of “covering” that he continues to this day, making use of an ever wider range of printed material: post cards (*Panorama du froid*, 2009, *Mehr Licht!*, 2010...), photographs taken from magazines (*Pantoum Phantom*, 2014), maps (*Mer*, 2008, *Terre*, 2008, *Bassin de Paris (carte politique)*, 2013...), maps of military positions (25 août 1914, 2012, 26 mars 1918, 2012, 29 août 1914, 2013), educational images (*Le Maquis*, 2009, *Le Plateau*, 2009), cinema posters (*Technicolor*, 2011, *L'Argent de poche*, 2013...), comics (*Panorama du feu*, 2009, *Mazout*, 2012...), electoral posters (*Plantation de campagne*, 2007-2013), images of Épinal, etc. He says: “Each original image leads to a new graphical code of coverage. It is an artistic and conceptual search at the same time¹⁸.” The pages of his books uncover the possibility of a kind of art by subtraction, by “retreat¹⁹”, by means of which the very operation of quotation, be it visual or textual, seems to be turned upside down: the process is not so much one of extraction as of hiding – the effect of which is to reveal. A good example is the work he has done on old school geography maps: covered in acrylic paint, the map becomes a space where the fragments of the names of towns, rivers and seas allowed to remain visible call up other signifiers – in *Bassin de Paris (carte politique)*, “Thierry”, “dog”, “money”, “eagle”, “path”, “bell tower”, “egg”, “coal”, “woodlands”, “meadow”, “wind”, “stone”..., in *Amérique du Nord (politique)* (2013), “new”, “Indian”, “ok”, “round”, “miss”, “real”, “eat”, “legend”.... Bursts of meaning which, associated with other visual fragments – sections of roads and rivers for *Bassin de Paris*, simple colored circles in negative for *Amérique du Nord* – now seem to delineate not a map but a constellation.

In an interview discussing his interest in methods of coverage, Jochen Gerner referred to the famous work by Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). To make this picture, the artist asked Willem de Kooning, the major

representative of abstract impressionism then dominating the American art scene, to give him one of his works for him to erase. Of this Jochen Gerner comments: “An image half erased, absent or disappeared may have more force than any other²⁰.” The plates making up *Abstraction (1941-1968)* (2010), based on an anonymous comic series published in 1968 in the magazine *Navy*, telling the story of a naval battle during the Second World War, explore the revelatory power of this kind of erasure. Nothing remains of the images making up this small book – consisting mainly of action scenes at sea – but a few graphic motifs – lines, circles, dots, hatching, etc. – that now look like nothing so much as abstract art. These become the site of juxtapositions similar to those found in *Relecture*. Jochen Gerner has said of this work: “What interested me was to make the link between the things that were going on simultaneously in the United States, with modern art, abstraction, abstract expressionism, and this comic which had nothing strictly to do with it²¹.”

In describing *Abstraction (1941-1968)*, where a presence reminiscent, in its light transparency, of some of the initial drawings behind the curtains of black ink covering them is apparent, Gerner says: “Sometimes you can see the ghost of the previous image”. Ghosts of this kind seem to haunt the ambitious series *Home* (2008), a work where the artist has taken the pages of an Ikea catalogue showing interior scenes and covered them with areas of white and different grays so as to empty the interior spaces, preserving only the “architecture”. The objects – sets of chairs, sofas, furniture, vases, etc. – have been isolated and “dressed” with black silhouettes, as if covered with a dustsheet or cardboard box. Emptied of their iconographic content and displayed on the wall like a newspaper flatplan or mockup, the pages of *Home* evoke a kind of abstraction, through which the bare bones of the structure of the catalogue can be seen. In some of the images, there survive faint hints – “ghosts” – of the original photographs. They leave an impression that wavers between disappearance, distancing, loss and, in a striking inversion, the threshold, the original crossing point of the apparition.

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In his book *La Seconde Main*, an important

Gerner” (interview), *Pictographic: Index 1*, Pepin Press, Amsterdam, 2009, p. 21.
¹² Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, précédé de *Variations sur l'écriture*, Seuil, Paris, p. 107.
 Eng. Trans. by R. Millar, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hill and Wang, New York,

1975, pp. 35-36.

¹³ Michael Riffaterre, “La Trace de l'intertexte”, *La Pensée*, No. 215, October 1980, p. 4.

¹⁴ Jochen Gerner quoted in Adrien Bugari and Olivier Sécardin, “La Possibilité du retrait”, *Mouvement*, No. 54, January-March 2010,

p. 150.

¹⁵ *Desdémone, entre désir et désespoir*, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, March-July 2015.

¹⁶ Jochen Gerner in an email to the author, December 2014.

¹⁷ Jochen Gerner, “TNT en Amérique”, text available on the website of the Galerie Anne Barrault: http://www.galerieanne-barrault.com/jochen_gerner/tnt.html.

¹⁸ Jochen Gerner quoted in Hans Lijklema, *art. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ See Adrien Bugari and Olivier Sécardin, *art. cit.*

²⁰ Jochen Gerner quoted in Christian Rosset, *art. cit.*, p. 181.

²¹ Jochen Gerner quoted in Xavier Guilbert, *art. cit.*

theoretical contribution to the notion of quotation, Antoine Compagnon writes: “If we take it in its fullest meaning (of operations and objects) and take full cognizance of all that which it sets in motion in writing and reading [...], it is no longer possible to speak of quotation by itself but only of its work, of the work of quotation²².” The work of Jochen Gerner is deeply imbued with this “work of quotation”, anticipated by his experience described at the beginning of this essay. Manifesting itself in different ways, in the form of collection, notation, accumulation, the “infinity of lists”, as in *Contre la bande dessinée*, or, going in a different direction, in the form of covering and erasing as in *TNT en Amérique* and *Home*, it is always the case with his work that, before being a reference, a note, an extract, quotation is displacement, operation, setting in motion, swerve, short-circuit, passage.

Asked in 2009 about his reasons for working in the field of illustration – “Why do you illustrate²³?” – Jochen Gerner answered laconically: “In order to immerse myself in words”. The originality of his work can perhaps be understood in the light of this immersion and of the gap he opens up between image and word. It lies in having taken quotation into fields beyond those where it is usually confined – that of literature on the one hand and that of art or images on the other – in order to explore other “adjacent” spaces, where text and image coexist. It is for this reason that comic books are an important area of investigation for Jochen Gerner. He writes: “For me, the chief interest of comics lies in the infinite possibility of relationships between word and image: a system of representation where word and image are forever being brought together, in a kind of alchemy²⁴.” It is in this sense too that he is always looking elsewhere, at other objects, minute details, in the vast continent that is the printed world.

Through this exploration of the gaps between image and text, traditional notions of writing and reading are given a new energy. Like the networks of signs that many of his works display, each one of them assumes a unique space, that is neither precisely that of text nor of image. It is a field, an “active area and flow of presence²⁵”, traversed simultaneously by two dynamics, two phenomena of

appearance of meaning: crossing through and covering, detail and breadth, point and extent, verticality and horizontality. In *Variations sur l'écriture*, Barthes distinguished two types of writing, two types of “*scription*”: that of the “punch” and that of the “brush”; that “of notching, carving, scoring” and that of “*de-scription*, the relaxed hand, the downward line, poised”. He continues: “Two gestures (two civilizations): to pierce the secret, rationalize, or use the signifier, to make it come back: eternity or return, definitive singular or recurrent plural²⁶.”. To pierce the secret, set out the significant: these are the two handwritings, the two poles that attract the work of Jochen Gerner.

²² Antoine Compagnon, *La Seconde Main ou le Travail de la citation*, Seuil, Paris, 1979, p. 36.

²³ “Jochen Gerner – interview”, *Le Mook – L'univers des illustrateurs pour la jeunesse*, Patricia Perdrizet (ed.), Autrement, Paris, 2009, p. 58.

²⁴ Jochen Gerner, “TNT en Amérique”, *art. cit.*

²⁵ Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Champ mimétique*, Seuil, Paris, 2005, p. 13.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, preceded by *Variations sur l'écriture*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.