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Gauguin and Van Gogh Meet the 9th Art: Postmodernism and Myths about Great Artists

Abstract

This article analyses how a late 20th/early 21st Century development in BDs, which combines historical novels with biographies, expresses paradoxical attitudes towards mythologies surrounding Gauguin and Van Gogh. Firstly I demonstrate that the paradox stems from a simultaneous desire for and suspicion of master narratives, identified in postmodernism by Hutcheon. Then I establish how eight graphic novels perpetuate pre-existing mythological master narratives about Gauguin and Van Gogh. Nevertheless those mythologies simultaneously arouse scepticism: myths do not express exemplary universal truths: myths are artificial and fictionalised constructs, whose status in reality is dubious. The albums convey that tension between desire and suspicion regarding myths by a variety of devices. These include sequenced panels, circular plots, unreliable witnesses, fictional insertions, parodies and mock realism.

Gauguin, graphic novels, great artists, Hutcheon, mythology, postmodernism, Van Gogh.

Introduction

Over the period spanning 1990 to 2016 Gauguin and Van Gogh inspired eight comic strip albums, none of which received much critical attention. Put briefly, they appeared in chronological order as follows. *Gauguin et Van Gogh* by Matena recounts Gauguin's final hours on the remote Polynesian island of Hiva-Oa in 1903; he has a deathbed visitation from Van Gogh, and they re-live their experiences.¹ *Vincent et Van Gogh* and *Trois lunes* by

¹ Dick Matena, *Gauguin et Van Gogh* (Brussels and Paris: Lombard, 1990).

Smudja are based on the conceit that Van Gogh's paintings were produced by a talking cat.² *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* by Li-An and Croix tells of Gauguin's journeys to Polynesia in 1891-1893 and 1895, as well as his intervening stay in France.³ *Vincent* by Stok is a biography from Van Gogh's Arles period to his death (1888-1890).⁴ *Gauguin. Loin de la route* by Le Roy, Gaultier and Galopin depicts a Gauguin aficionado named Segalen visiting Hiva-Oa in 1903.⁵ *Paysage au chien rouge* by Le Floc'h tells how Gauguin enabled a Courbet painting to be smuggled out of France in 1894, by painting one of his own over the top.⁶ *Gauguin. The Other World* by Dori is a retrospective where Gauguin discusses his life with Polynesian deities.⁷

The present article analyses how the above corpus paradoxically perpetuates yet undermines the mythology which, as critics observe, has grown up around Van Gogh and Gauguin. In the albums we discuss Van Gogh and Gauguin exemplify variations on what Pollock calls the 'mythic character of the modern artist': Van Gogh is the tormented genius

² Grandimir Smudja, *Vincent et Van Gogh* (Tournai: Delcourt, 2003); *Trois lunes* [Three Moons] (Tournai: Delcourt, 2010).

³ Li-An and Laurence Croix, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* [Gauguin. Two Journeys to Tahiti] (Grenoble: Vents d'ouest, 2010).

⁴ Barbara Stok, *Vincent*, trans. Laura Watkinson (London: Selfmadehero, 2012).

⁵ Maximilien Le Roy, Christophe Gaultier and Marie Galopin, *Gauguin. Loin de la route* [Gauguin. Far from the Road] (Brussels: Le Lombard, 2013).

⁶ Bruno Le Floc'h, *Paysage au chien rouge* [Landscape with a Red Dog] (Quimper: Locus Solus, 2015).

⁷ Fabrizio Dori, *Gauguin. The Other World*. trans. Edward Gauwin (London: Selfmadehero, 2016).

struck down in his prime identified by Sweetman; Gauguin corresponds to Thomson's wild man unbound by laws, who quests after pre-industrial utopias.⁸ Nevertheless, our corpus simultaneously betrays an awareness that the said mythical narratives are not repositories of intemporal and universal truths. The opposite is true: myths are imaginary and artificial constructs, whose status in reality is suspect. We begin by discussing how *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* and *Gauguin. Loin de la route* reconstruct yet conversely contest the collection of myths about the two artists. Next we consider how *Vincent et Van Gogh*, *Trois lunes* and *Paysage au chien rouge* subvert the prevailing myth-making by devising alternative versions. Finally we analyse how *Vincent* and *Gauguin. The Other World* preserve the mythology in an idealised form, albeit whilst gesturing towards their own artificiality.

Before investigating our corpus we must understand its publication context. Myths about great artists were rare in BDs before the albums under discussion. During the mid-1960s, strips in the series 'Les plus belles histoires de l'Oncle Paul' had occasionally broached the subject. Uncle Paul was published in the childrens' magazine *Le Journal Spirou*. He gave easily comprehensible accounts of bygone events, which led to morally stimulating conclusions; meanwhile realistic period detail (e.g. simply drawn costumes and backdrops) suggested fidelity to historical fact. Uncle Paul's realism authenticates the great

⁸ Griselda Pollock, 'Crows, Blossoms and Lust for Death – Cinema and the Myth of Van Gogh the Modern Artist', in *The Mythology of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Koderu Tsukasa (Amsterdam: TV Asahi/John Benjamins, 1993), 217-239 (226). David Sweetman, *Van Gogh. His Life and his Art* (New York: Crown, 1990), 1-2. Belinda Thomson 'Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth', in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, ed. Belinda Thomson (London: Tate, 2010), 10-23 (11-12).

artist myth as an immutable absolute. For example his account of Michelangelo ends thus: ‘Si on n’a pas vu la Chapelle Sixtine on ne peut comprendre de quoi l’homme est capable’ [if you have never seen the Sixtine Chapel you cannot understand what man is capable of].⁹

Rogerat defines the mythical view of the great artist espoused by Uncle Paul: ‘Le personnage est exceptionnel puisqu’il est artiste et qu’il est question de création’ [The character is exceptional because he is an artist and because it is a question of creating].¹⁰

The albums we discuss below are products of a different era: their paradoxical attitude towards myths reflects a contradiction in postmodernism. Hutcheon mentions ‘the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery – and master narratives’.¹¹ Postmodernism acknowledges the desire for master narratives by amongst other things, recognising the power of myths: Barthes revealed society’s unrelenting myth-making, and later critics (e.g. Doty) concur that the notion of progressing beyond myths is another myth.¹² Yet at the same time myths arouse scepticism. Barthes denounces the ‘false nature’ of myth and Hutcheon, citing art and myths as potential master narratives, remarks: ‘It

⁹ Jean-Michel Charlier and Eddy Paape, ‘Les plus belles histoires de l’Oncle Paul’ [Uncle Paul’s Finest Stories], ‘Michel Ange peint la Sixtine’ [Michael Angelo Paints the Sixtine], *Le Journal de Spirou*, 29, no.1447 (1966), 32-37 (37).

¹⁰ Marie-Claude Rogerat, *Les biographies d’artistes. Auteurs, personnages, public* [Biographies of Artists. Authors, Characters, Public] (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010), 242.

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989; repr., London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 64.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972). William Doty, *Mythography. The Study of Myths and Rituals* (1986; repr., Tuscaloosa and London: UAP, 2000), 96.

[postmodernism] argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory'.¹³

Our corpus also differs from 'Les plus belles histoires de l'Oncle Paul' because of its form. The albums are not short, didactic strips aimed at children: they epitomize full length graphic novels, which became popular from the mid-1980s. Graphic novels sought to introduce subtleties of plot, characterisation and scene setting associated with adult literary genres. Our corpus, for instance, combines biography with historical fiction. Such biographical fiction has become widespread in films and in books as well as in graphic novels: Madélnat notes the rise of a hybrid genre 'sur les frontières de la biographie (...) et du roman' [on the borders of biography and the novel]; Hutcheon comments that the 'separation of the literary and the historical (...) is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art'.¹⁴

If biographical fiction has flourished, then arguably that is because it expresses Hutcheon's paradoxical desire and suspicion regarding master narratives. Madélnat observes how biographies construct myths once the subject embodies a general truth about humanity within the collective memory; Bozzetto discerns a similar process with historical novels if the past is simplified into a plausible and exemplary story, which shapes the public's understanding.¹⁵ Nevertheless, biographical fiction also does the opposite and evinces

¹³ Barthes, *Ibid.*, 126. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 6.

¹⁴ Daniel Madélnat, *La biographie* (Paris: PUF, 1984), 28. Linda Hutcheon, *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁵ Madélnat, *Ibid.*, 192-193. Lucienne Bozzetto, "'Alejandro Carpentier". Le siècle des lumières. Mythe(s) and histoire(s)' [The Century of the Enlightenment. Myth(s) and Historie(s)], in *Le roman de l'histoire dans l'histoire du roman* [The Historical Novel in the

suspicion about myths: De Groot points out that fictionalising history implicitly questions whether permanent and reliable master narratives about the past are obtainable: after all if history is fictionalised, then so are myths about history; McHale asserts that in such a climate ‘mythological entities can (...) lose their status of *superior* reality, “realer” than the real world, and deteriorate to the status of “mere” fictions’.¹⁶ Having introduced our corpus and provided its context let us turn to the individual albums, in order to ascertain how they express the postmodern paradox detected by Hutcheon.

Constructing and Contesting

The Introduction to our first graphic novel, *Gauguin et Van Gogh* by Matena, conforms to the postmodernist paratextual practises Hutcheon defines: it ‘asserts the fictionalizing of a historical event’; we learn that the album contains ‘des faits imaginaires, qui ne se seraient pas passés en réalité’ [imaginary events, which would not have happened in reality]; to emphasise that Van Gogh will be returning from beyond the grave, a date chart states that he passed away on 29 July 1890 in France.¹⁷ Matena proceeds to employ techniques which, critics note, recur in text based historical novels and biographies as well as

History of the Novel], ed. Aleksander Ablamowicz (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Slaskiego, 2000), 54-63 (54, 58).

¹⁶ Jérôme De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2010), 110. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 36.

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 83. Matena, *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, 4, 5.

in films. These include: flashbacks;¹⁸ fictional characters co-existing with genuinely existing people;¹⁹ and imaginary reconstructions interspersed among real events.²⁰ *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, like our other albums, implements such techniques with a device specific to comics: sequenced panels. Groensteen studies the possibilities which panels make available to artists: readers see the whole page as well as the individual panels; panels come in different shapes and sizes; panels depict the subject from various angles, distances and viewpoints; repeated motifs influence the reader's perception.²¹

The possibilities panels offer are apparent from the opening of *Gauguin et Van Gogh*. A caption grounds the action in geographical and historical reality: we are on Hiva-Oa and the date is 8 May 1903, i.e. the day Gauguin died.²² A geometrical layout divides the page vertically into two equal halves, and the repeated visual motif of tropical decor provides continuity. On the left, two elongated panels with slightly different dimensions establish the overall setting: a narrower panel gives a distant glimpse of the island; a broader panel zooms in on Gauguin's house. On the right, four smaller panels of unequal size are stacked in two rows to form a mini-grid. The first and fourth panels of the grid are narrower than the second

¹⁸ Sarah Johnson, *Historical Fiction. A Guide to the Genre* (Westport, Conn. and London: Libraries Unlimited, 2005), 465. Madelénat, *Biographie*, 168

¹⁹ Johnson, *Ibid.*, 4. Sjraar Van Heugten, 'Vincent Van Gogh as a Hero of Fiction', in *The Mythology of Vincent Van Gogh*, 161-173 (169).

²⁰ Madelénat, *Biographie*, 28. Van Heugten, *Ibid.*, 162.

²¹ Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*. trans. Ann Miller (Jackson: UPM, 2013), 43, 82-85, 151-153.

²² Matena, *Ibid.*, 11.

and third panels, thereby creating what Groensteen calls ‘an off center cross’.²³ The grid reduces our field of vision by focusing attention on the moribund Gauguin: panels one to three zoom in on Gauguin at home; the fourth draws back and changes the angle of vision as he staggers outside.

When Van Gogh appears on the following page, the information available to readers is restricted in order to generate mystery. See Figure 1. In a wide panel at the top Gauguin seems to recognise his unexpected guest; however Van Gogh’s identity is not apparent as he is in the distance. The rest of the page is divided vertically into two unequal parts, and the angles of vision shift again: a large panel on the left maintains suspense by showing Van Gogh from behind, his head covered by a straw hat; a smaller horizontal panel on the right zooms in on Gauguin’s bewildered face. The last two panels beneath are a shot/counter-shot: the shot zooms in closer on Gauguin to intensify his astonishment; the counter-shot pans back to reveal Van Gogh’s identity. Placing the revelatory shot/counter shot at the bottom right arouses curiosity as to what will happen on the next page. The studiously geometrical aesthetic underpinning Matena’s layouts is not gratuitous: his meticulous organisation strengthens the impression, already created by the paratexts, that Gauguin’s final moments are being reconstructed as a fictional artifice. Similarly elaborate arrangements recur throughout the album, to the extent that the same layout is never repeated consecutively.

Other comic strip devices become apparent over the following pages. As Groensteen argues ‘discontinuity (...) is the basis of the language of comics’:²⁴ That aspect is brought to bear when Gauguin and Van Gogh relive their experiences: panels jump between Hiva-Oa and 1880s France. Matena’s artwork has more thoroughly researched period detail than ‘Les

²³Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 151.

²⁴Groensteen, *Ibid.*, 154

plus belles histoires de l'Oncle Paul'. Furthermore such imitations of reality, which Hutcheon calls 'the apparatus of novelistic realism', neither imply fidelity to history nor lend credibility to a myth.²⁵ Again the comic strip affords specific possibilities: Groensteen observes that drawing 'is by its nature a codification and a stylization of reality'; McGrath states that 'no matter how far the graphic novel verges towards realism, its basic idiom is always (...) cartoonish'.²⁶ Matena accentuates those stylised and cartoonish qualities: his gaudy, overly glossy surfaces evoke an ersatz-looking vision of the past. We shall see how authentication by realism's 'apparatus' matters across our corpus; that is because historical novels and biographies operate at the interface between reality and fiction.²⁷

As Groensteen states, "graphic novels" lend themselves particularly well to (...) the intervention of multiple narrative "voices";²⁸ that potential is exploited when Van Gogh and Gauguin reminisce in the first person, sharing the narrative with Toulouse-Lautrec; their voices appear in captions, and the pictures summon up their memories. Groensteen remarks too that comics have 'the unique capacity to be able to illustrate with the same force of conviction the "real" [and] the "imagined"'.²⁹ Again that possibility is manifested: for example Gauguin is arrested following a fracas in a Paris bar, and Van Gogh sets fire to his

²⁵ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 91.

²⁶ Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 85. Charles McGrath, qtd. in Baetens and Frey, *Graphic Novel*, 178.

²⁷ For more on the interface between reality and fiction see: Sarah Johnson, *Historical Fiction*, 15; Rogerat, *Biographies d'artistes*, 235.

²⁸ Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 117.

²⁹ Groensteen, *Ibid.*, 131.

brother Theo's flat.³⁰ Such unsubstantiated developments emphasise the difference between virile, pugnacious Gauguin and vulnerable, unstable Van Gogh. As Pollock remarks, that reductive opposition is recurrent in the mythology.³¹

When the action shifts to Arles, certain features of the location are verifiable: the Langlois draw bridge forms part of the scenery; Van Gogh and Gauguin share a house overlooking a square and adjoining a food shop.³² However a new narrator takes over in the shape of a brothel pianist. The pianist problematises what did/did not happen because, as he is fictional, we cannot be certain whether anything he says is true. The pianist says he saw Van Gogh chasing Gauguin down the street wielding a razor; Sweetman mentions that the episode is integral to the mythology, even though Gauguin may have invented the whole thing; no witnesses were present, and Gauguin only mentioned it years later in his unreliable memoirs *Avant et après*.³³ Dramatic effects eclipse facts when the pianist glimpses Van Gogh through the window about to cut his ear off: the pianist breaks down the door, and during the ensuing struggle he accidentally severs Van Gogh's ear. Readers are assumed to recognise the pianist's account as false, not least because the Introduction has reminded us

³⁰ Matena, *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, 23,37.

³¹ Pollock, 'Cinema and the Myth of Van Gogh', in *The Mythology of Vincent Van Gogh*, 226.

³² Matena, *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, 44, 47. Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers. *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The Studio of the South* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 141, 102, 107.

³³ Matena, *Ibid.*, 50. Sweetman, *Van Gogh*, 2. Paul Gauguin, *Avant et après* [Before and After]. ed. Jean-Marie Dallet (1923; repr., Paris : Table ronde, 1994), 29.

that in reality Van Gogh severed his own ear.³⁴ The pianist's account is dramatised by panels which depict the action from different viewpoints. For example Van Gogh struggling with the pianist is viewed from behind, as though by a third party. Then in the bottom right panel the ear falls onto the floor; it is seen from above, as if by both of the protagonists. As Gauguin erroneously recalls the whole ear is severed, rather than the lower part of the lobe.³⁵

Gauguin et Van Gogh ends by deploying the literary device of a circular plot: the action returns to Hiva-Oa, where Van Gogh bids Gauguin farewell.

Gauguin et Van Gogh expresses the paradoxical desire for and suspicion of myths which we mentioned in our Introduction. Matena recounts the two artists' relationship thus defined by Wood and Leighton: 'Pieced together from fragmentary sources, exaggerated in the telling, it is a saga that has at times taken on the quality of myth'.³⁶ However Matena does not merely re-state that master narrative. Unlike Uncle Paul, he simultaneously contests the truthfulness of the myth he perpetuates: paratexts, page layouts, panels and the graphic style all intimate that *Gauguin et Van Gogh* is fictional; to strengthen the perception of an imaginary tale Matena's (sometimes made up) narrators are unreliable, and his circular plot suggests that what happens is a fleeting thought in the dying Gauguin's mind.

The second album from our corpus, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* by Li-An and Croix, deploys another circular plot: Gauguin falls into a hole, the rest of the album being a flashback leading up to that moment.³⁷ As in *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, the opening page has long narrow vertical panels. The upper tier has four panels, the lower tier has three. The

³⁴ Matena, *Ibid.*, 53, 4.

³⁵ Gauguin, *Avant et après*, 29. Sweetman, *Van Gogh*, 293.

³⁶ James Wood, and John Leighton, 'Directors' Preface', in *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, ix.

³⁷ Li-An and Croix, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* 7-8.

seven elongated panels dramatise Gauguin's headlong downward plunge. On the next page a large picture shows Gauguin lying barely visible amid tropical undergrowth. A thin horizontal panel underneath then zooms in on him. After that arresting opening, the rest of *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* is somewhat conservative: it barely deviates from three to four rows of panels per page which, says Groensteen, are 'the most frequent options in a book with a French-style format'; there are however occasional 'expansive layouts, favoring wide open spaces and emphasizing decors and atmospheres'.³⁸

The earlier pages of *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* follow Gauguin's *Noa Noa*; that work is another collection of untrustworthy memoirs where, as Thomson states, the artist assumes 'the pose, carefully crafted, of the Frenchman progressively going native'.³⁹ Quotations from Gauguin's letters to his wife appear in captions; but as they are not in the definitive edition of his correspondence, they simulate genuine documents.⁴⁰ Readers may initially be persuaded to accept *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* as true: realistic details, drawn with sober colours and orderly lines, combine with believable dialogues and captions. Versimilitude is enhanced because (as in Uncle Paul's stories and in other albums from our corpus) developments are generally depicted on the level, rather than from above or below; as Duc remarks, that viewpoint corresponds to '... notre vision **naturelle** et **objective** des

³⁸ Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 44-45.

³⁹ Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa. Séjour à Tahiti* [A Stay in Tahiti] (1893-1897; repr., Paris: Complexe, 1989); Thomson, 'Gauguin: Navigating the Myth', in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth* 12.

⁴⁰ Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis* [Letters to his Wife and Friends], ed. Maurice Malingue (1946; repr., Paris: Grasset, 1949).

choses dans la plupart des circonstances' [our natural and objective vision of things in most circumstances].⁴¹

In *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* Gauguin arrives at Tahiti during June 1891; he sets off explore, and he is offered a thirteen year old girl called Teha'amana; such practices were not unknown although, as Thomson suggests, Gauguin may have exaggerated her age to add titillating exoticism.⁴² Gauguin rides off with Teh'amana, and soon afterwards he befriends an Australian named Groovemore; Gauguin, appalled to learn that Groovemore is a smuggler, sets fire to his house; Groovemore corners Gauguin but Teha'amana ambushes the Australian; Teha'amana saves Gauguin's life although she and Groovemore tumble into the flames.⁴³ The entire episode is make-believe: in fact Gauguin made Teha'amana pregnant, and he abandoned her to return to France in August 1893.⁴⁴ As the development reaches its climax *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* suddenly resembles an action-packed adventure comic: realism gives way to combat scenes drawn in bright reds and oranges with onomatopoeia and minimal dialogue. Baetens and Frey point out that stylistic shifts are useful storytelling tools.⁴⁵ In *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti*, the shift to adventure comics heightens suspicions that the sequence is invented: Groovemore absolves Gauguin from

⁴¹ Bernard Duc, *L'Art de la BD*, vol. I (Grenoble: Glénat, 1982), 50. Duc's emphasis.

⁴² Li-An and Croix, *Ibid.*, 14-51. Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 23-28, 62-63. Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin by Himself* (Boston/London: Little and Brown, 1993), 191.

⁴³ Li-An and Croix, *Ibid.*, 58-81.

⁴⁴ Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 123. Richard Brettell, *The Art of Paul Gauguin* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1988), 211-213. David Sweetman, *Paul Gauguin. A Complete Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 348.

⁴⁵ Baetens and Frey, *Graphic Novel*, 139.

accusations of paedophilia too conveniently; righteous indignation about smuggling turns the artist into a hero, whose adoring fiancée lays down her life for him; in truth, Li-An and Croix are mimicking Gauguin's writings by making events reflect favourably on him.⁴⁶ Lest there be any doubt about the episode, an Introduction by a geographer from Geneva university specifies that 'elle n'a pas eu lieu' [it did not take place]; however the insertion echoes Gauguin, as he 'savait s'affranchir de la vérité' [knew how to free himself from the truth].⁴⁷

Gauguin. Deux Voyages à Tahiti jumps forward to France. The graphic style reverts to realism but deviations from fact proliferate. Gauguin allegedly breaks his leg brawling at Concarneau in December 1894, although he did so in May.⁴⁸ Annah la Javanese, another under-aged foreign mistress, plunders Gauguin's studio. Li-An and Croix add a fictional twist: Annah leaves a taunting note from Groovemore, who inexplicably survived the fire and was in cahoots with her.⁴⁹ During Gauguin's second Tahitian trip in the BD (1895) his behaviour is irreconcilable with his first: he treats the locals contemptuously, having been respectful previously. The inconsistency reminds readers that Gauguin's attitude towards the

⁴⁶ For more on Gauguin's self-justificatory tendencies see Druick and Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 2, 327. Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Paul Gauguin. An Erotic Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), x, 248. Sweetman, *Van Gogh*, 238. Belinda Thomson, 'A Teller of Tales', in *Gauguin. The Maker of Myth*, 191-193 (193).

⁴⁷ Jean-François Staszak, in Li-An and Croix, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti*, 4.

⁴⁸ Li-An and Croix, *Ibid.*, 90. Brettell, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, 293. Druick and Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh et Gauguin*, 34-35. Mowll Mathews, *Paul Gauguin*, 201. Henri Perruchot, *Gauguin : a Biography* .trans. H. Hare (London: Perpetua, 1965), 257. David Sweetman, *Paul Gauguin. A Complete Life*, 389-391. Thomson, *Gauguin by Himself*, 165.

⁴⁹ Li-An and Croix, *Ibid.*, 92.

Tahitians divides opinion. Gauguin presented himself as a champion of indigenous peoples' rights, and some critics agree.⁵⁰ Others counter that Gauguin was complicit in colonialist abuses.⁵¹ The conclusion emphasises the negative view: in another departure from realism Gauguin has a vision of a priest-like figure, who reproaches him for exploiting indigenous people; Gauguin falls away into a hole, and the story ends where it began. The circular plot, by sending Gauguin back where he started, condemns his quest to perpetual failure.

Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti is the second work to re-state the paradoxical attitude to myths identified by Hutcheon. The album abounds with realistic elements. Nevertheless, attentive readers notice that any resulting air of truthfulness is false: untrustworthy recollections from *Noa Noa*, the concocted Groovemore story, the Introduction, the chronological error in Concarneau, Gauguin's conflicting attitudes towards Tahitians, and the circular plot, all provoke uncertainty about what Gauguin did. In the absence of hard data, *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* perpetuates what Thomson calls 'P[ro]bably the most persistent myth surrounding Gauguin's Polynesian exile', - the artist who left Western society for a pre-lapsarian paradise.⁵² Yet conversely the album also complicates that simplified tale, by endorsing the more nuanced interpretation put forward by Druick and Kort Zegers: 'The complexity Gauguin's self-styled mythic quest (...) cannot be contained within a single narrative – his own account least of all'.⁵³ *Gauguin. Deux voyages*

⁵⁰ Gauguin, *Avant et après*, 158. Olivier Apert, *Gauguin. Le dandy sauvage* [The Wild Dandy] (Paris: Infolio, 2012), 168.

⁵¹ Druick and Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 344. Mowll Mathews, *Paul Gauguin*, 178-179.

⁵² Thomson, 'Earthly Paradise', in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, 205-208 (205).

⁵³ Druick and Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 333.

à *Tahiti* reiterates Gauguin's myth, even as it highlights his distasteful and frequently overlooked aspects.

The third album from our corpus, *Gauguin. Loin de la route* by Le Roy, Gaultier and Galopin, is chiefly based around one Victor Segalen, a naval doctor and Gauguin enthusiast, who visited Hiva-Oa soon after Gauguin died in 1903. As Forsdick comments, Segalen's writings 'played a central role in the more general mythologisation to which he [Gauguin] has been subject': *Gauguin dans son dernier décor* evokes Gauguin as a great man amid exotic surroundings; in *Le maître du jour* Gauguin is a visionary miracle-worker who communicates with Polynesian gods; *Hommage à Gauguin* extols Gauguin as an anti-colonialist defender of indigenous rights; *Journal des îles* describes Segalen following his artist-hero's traces on Hiva-Oa.⁵⁴ Forsdick explains how Segalen sifted through Gauguin's papers at a local administrator's office; consequently, his initial contact with Gauguin was 'not so much through his painting as through his writing and thought'.⁵⁵ The reliance on Gauguin's and Segalen's writings in *Gauguin. Loin de la route* is typical of postmodern novels where, says Hutcheon, 'we know the past (...) only through its textualized remains'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Charles Forsdick, 'Gauguin and Segalen: Exoticism, Myth and the Aesthetics of Diversity', in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, 56-63 (61). Victor Segalen, *Œuvres complètes* [Complete Works]. vol I. ed. Henry Bouillier (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995); *Gauguin dans son dernier décor* [Gauguin in his Final Setting], 287-291; *Le maître du jour* [The Master of Pleasure], 293-348; *Hommage à Gauguin* [Tribute to Gauguin], 349-373; *Journal des îles* [Island Diary], 395-479 (424-433).

⁵⁵ Forsdick, *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁶ Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 119.

In *Gauguin. Loin de la route* the conservative panel arrangements resemble *Gauguin. Deux Voyages à Tahiti*, albeit with more texts. However, despite the emphasis on words, the visual language of comics is not neglected. Warm colours, luxuriant vegetation, pristine beaches and bare-breasted women conjure up Gauguin's ideal. Moreover the aforementioned discontinuity between panels is essential: panels jump between Gauguin and Segalen, as the latter conducts his investigations and speaks to Gauguin's associates.

Some of what we glean conforms to proven fact: Gauguin arrives in September 1901; he refuses to pay taxes and he encourages indigenous children not to attend school, which leads to a court summons.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Gauguin's mythological persona emerges from his self-aggrandising writings. For instance an anti-colonial diatribe amalgamates paraphrasings and quotations from *Avant et après* with a letter Gauguin wrote to the colonial authorities.⁵⁸ Later Gauguin harangues the court with passages from *Avant et après*, the aforementioned letter, and a letter to Morice.⁵⁹ References to Segalen are also legion. For example Segalen meets a woman called Sara, who gives him letters from Gauguin. Sara was invented by Segalen. Her reminiscences, quoting *Le maître du jour*, promote Gauguin as a superior being adored by the Polynesians.⁶⁰ There are occasional allusions to fabricated nature of Gauguin's nascent mythology. A Vietnamese named Ky Dong paraphrases a letter

⁵⁷ Brettell, *Art of Paul Gauguin*, 385-386. Perruchot, *Gauguin*, 316, 324, 328, 340.

Thomson, *Gauguin by Himself*, 244.

⁵⁸ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Gauguin*, 60. Gauguin, *Avant et après*, 158, 213, 237.

Gauguin, CLXXIX, February 1903, in *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis*, 313.

⁵⁹ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Ibid.*, 76-78. Gauguin, *Avant et après*, 162, 257. Gauguin, CLXXXI, April 1903, in *Lettres*, 318-9.

⁶⁰ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Ibid.*, 47. Segalen, *OC.*, vol I, 337-338.

where Monfried advises Gauguin to avoid returning to Europe, so as not to shatter his myth.⁶¹ See Figure 2 anti-penultimate panel. Ky Dong's words are accompanied by a subtle visual hint at the myth's artificiality: Ky Dong is placed near the panel's centre, his face almost exactly divided by the vertical axis of symmetry. As Masson remarks artists normally avoid any symmetry because 'toute image trop bien construite apparaît comme figée et artificielle' [any picture which is too well constructed appears to be fixed and artificial].⁶²

When Gauguin dies his Polynesian friend and neighbour says: 'Maintenant, il n'y a plus d'homme' [Now, there is no more man]; Segalen records that apocryphal phrase three times, and Forsdick translates it as 'N[n]ow, there are no more men'.⁶³ Those words strengthen Gauguin's mythology, by endowing the artist's passing with enduring exemplary significance. Forsdick comments: 'By recording this mournful observation, Segalen signals the sense that Gauguin's death constitutes the premature conclusion of an aesthetic project (...) the aim of which was to capture traces of a culture in decline before its distinctiveness was lost to the entropic effects of colonialism and Westernisation'.⁶⁴

The conclusion of *Gauguin. Loin de la route* underlines Segalen's contribution to the Gauguin myth, which Bouillier summarises thus: 'Segalen le présente d'abord comme un monstre, c'est-à-dire quelqu'un qui échappe totalement à toute classification sociale'.

⁶¹ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Ibid.*, 55. See also Thomson, 'Earthly Paradise' in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth* 205-207 (205).

⁶² Pierre Masson, *Lire la bande dessinée* [Reading Comics] (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1985), 31.

⁶³ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Ibid.*, 83. Segalen, *Ibid.*, 291, 370, 432. Forsdick, 'Gauguin and Segalen', in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, 61.

⁶⁴ Forsdick, *Ibid.*, 61.

[Segalen introduces him firstly as a monster, that is to say someone who completely breaks free from all forms of social classification].⁶⁵ Segalen sails away while a caption, quoting *Gauguin dans son dernier décor*, shows Gauguin entering mythology just as Bouillier described: ‘Gauguin fut un monstre. C'est-à-dire qu'on ne peut le faire entrer dans aucune des catégories morales, intellectuelles et sociales qui suffisent à définir la plupart des individualités’ [Gauguin was a monster. That is to say he cannot be put into any of the moral, intellectual or social categories which are sufficient to define most individuals] .⁶⁶ Under Segalen’s pen, Gauguin is transformed into the behemoth we recognise today. Thus Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin maintain a time-honoured tradition. Yet discerning readers can detect Hutcheon’s postmodern paradox towards myth-making. The myth is written into *Gauguin. Loin de la route*, but not without contesting its veracity. The inference is that the myth was invented by Gauguin and subsequently amplified by Segalen.

Alternative Narratives and Conservation

In this section we consider five albums which produce different effects to those above. *Vincent et Van Gogh* and *Trois lunes* by Smudja and *Paysage au chien rouge* by Le Floc’h question whether the mythical narratives speak of immutable absolutes by constructing alternative versions; *Vincent* by Stok and *Gauguin. The Other World* by Dori conserve the mythology, despite exhibiting a degree of artifice.

In *Vincent et Van Gogh* and *Trois lunes* Van Gogh’s work is painted by a talking cat named Vincent, and the man we call Van Gogh is the artist’s brother Theo. This preposterous yarn unfolds by switching between three tiered rows of panels and larger pictures, which

⁶⁵ Henry Bouillier, *Victor Segalen* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1961), 60.

⁶⁶ Gaultier, Le Roy and Galopin, *Gauguin*, 84-85. Segalen, *OC*, vol. I. 288.

sometimes take up an entire page. Smudja's images contain richly coloured period detail, as well as beautifully reproduced paintings by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet and others. At the same time Smudja, like other postmodernists, indulges in what Hutcheon terms '[P]arodic play with what we might call the trappings of realist representation':⁶⁷ exaggerated concern for replicating observable reality makes light of the commonplace that mimetism lends credibility to fiction. Examples abound. *Vincent et Van Gogh* opens in Montmartre before Van Gogh's departure for Arles (February 1888); the scene is copied from Utrillo's *The Church of Saint Peter and the Dome of the Sacré Coeur*; as Sweetman comments, the Sacré Coeur was not completed when Van Gogh lived in Montmartre.⁶⁸ When Van Gogh takes the train to Arles (in February 1888 presumably), he passes an 1895 railway accident, and his sun-drenched landscape *The Harvest* (painted in June 1888) is visible through the carriage window.⁶⁹ Geographical disparities compound chronological disparities when Van Gogh, having befriended Vincent, happens across Monet painting *The Cliffs at Etretat* near Arles; Monet completed that Norman landscape four years earlier.⁷⁰ Smudja's panels juxtapose real people, places, events and artefacts from different historical moments; thus his narrative creates the impression of being 'teleported' back and forth in place and time, to borrow

⁶⁷ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 89

⁶⁸ Smudja, *Vincent et Van Gogh*, 3. Maurice Utrillo, *The Church of Saint Peter and the Dome of the Sacré Coeur*. Oil on canvas. Circa 1913. Private collection. Sweetman, *Van Gogh*, 215.

⁶⁹ Smudja, *Ibid.*, 7. Studio Lévy, 'Accident de la Gare Montparnasse', 22 October 1895. Van Gogh, *The Harvest*. Oil on canvas. 1888. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

⁷⁰ Smudja, *Ibid.*, 27. Claude Monet, *The Cliffs at Etretat*. Oil on canvas. 1886. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Groensteen's word.⁷¹ Vincent claws off Van Gogh's ear in a fit of madness and he is interned; he dies and is buried in Auvers sur Oise; Van Gogh dies too and is buried beside him.

In *Trois lunes*, the second album by Smudja, the two companions return from the dead for a time-travelling romp through World War 1, 1930s/1950s America, the Musée d'Orsay, and a post-apocalyptic dystopia; their escapades are still accompanied by local colour and by intertextual jesting. Vincent and Van Gogh use foreknowledge acquired on their time-travels to save the life of a girl who was injured in a road accident. The page layouts are less orthodox than previously. For example when Vincent and Van Gogh race against time to save the girl, a panel has a round handless clock face in the middle.⁷² See Figure 3. Four wavy lines radiate from the clock out to the frames, thereby creating smaller images around the dial. The smaller outer images show Vincent and Van Gogh (riding on a sculpture by Jacquemart) rushing round the dial in a clockwise direction; but in the centre they sprint round the same dial anti-clockwise.⁷³ As a result, they go backwards and forwards chronologically within one panel. Finally Vincent, Van Gogh and the girl disappear into *Wheatfield with Crows* which, according to popular mythology (if not to proven fact), was Van Gogh's last painting.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 38.

⁷² Smudja, *Trois lunes*, 41.

⁷³ Henri-Alfred Jacquemart, 'Rhinocéros'. Metal Sculpture. 1878. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

⁷⁴ Van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*. Oil on canvas. 1890. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Kodera Tsukasa, 'Introduction', *The Mythology of Van Gogh*, 15-19 (18).

Hutcheon shows how parody ‘legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies’, and her comment applies to Smudja’s treatment of Van Gogh’s mythology.⁷⁵ *Vincent et Van Gogh* and *Trois lunes* corroborate the mythology even as they overturn the master narrative. Van Gogh, like mythical exemplars since time immemorial, has superhuman powers: he understands the language of animals, he returns from the dead, he travels back and forth in space and time, he performs a life-saving miracle; and yet, his entire mythological edifice lacks any foundation in reality, – what Van Gogh does not do is paint.

Our next album, *Paysage au chien rouge* by Le Floc’h, is a variation on the myth of Gauguin the amoral and combative outlaw. The story takes place during 1894 when Gauguin was living in the little Breton port of Pont-Aven. Gauguin mythologised Brittany as untamed land remote from civilization.⁷⁶ Le Floc’h’s ships, regional architecture and costumes summon up the local ambiance. Gauguin breaks his leg brawling at Concarneau; then, while convalescing, he paints *Breton Landscape* over the top of Courbet’s *Origin of the World*; by that means, he enables Courbet’s painting to be smuggled out of France.⁷⁷ A foreword by Guille des Buttes-Fresneau, curator of the Pont-Aven museum, makes clear that Gauguin did no such thing: *The Origin of the World* and *Breton Landscape* are on public display, and Gauguin himself was immobilised; moreover other scholars (e.g. Thomson) have documented

⁷⁵ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 101.

⁷⁶ Vincent Gille, ‘The Last Orientalist: Portrait of the Artist as a Mohican’, in *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, 48-55 (48).

⁷⁷ Gauguin, *Breton Landscape*. Oil on Canvas. 1894. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*. Oil on canvas. 1866. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Gauguin's output from this period, and it does not include *Breton Landscape*.⁷⁸ Guille des Buttes-Fresneau highlights an intertextual joke when Le Floc'h integrates Gauguin's painting *Good Morning, Mr Gauguin* into the decor: Gauguin referenced Courbet's painting *Good Morning, Mr Courbet*, which showed Courbet meeting a wealthy patron; in *Good Morning, Mr Gauguin* Gauguin meets a Breton peasant woman; in *Paysage au chien rouge*, Gauguin meets the smuggler.⁷⁹ See Figure 4. An afterword by the BD historian Haslé-Le Gall points out other artistic and literary references: for instance Maufra's *View of Pont-Aven Port* becomes part of the scenery; Haslé-Le Gall also reminds us that the eponymous red dog which appears at intervals, is lifted from Gauguin's Tahitian *Arearea* and *Tahitian Pastoral*.⁸⁰ The paratexts make plain that *Paysage au chien rouge* is to be enjoyed as an ingenious tall story; any effects of reality produced by genuinely existing people, places and artefacts are tongue in cheek.

Stok and Dori preserve the mythology rather than constructing alternatives. *Vincent* by Stok recounts Van Gogh's Arles period, his ill health and his death. Stok, like Smudja,

⁷⁸ Estelle Guille des Buttes-Fresneau, 'Avant-propos', in Le Floc'h, *Paysage au chien rouge*, 3-7 (7). Thomson, 'Teller of Tales', in *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, 191.

⁷⁹ Le Floc'h, *Ibid.*, 26. Guille des Buttes-Fresnault, *Ibid.*, 4. Courbet, *Good Morning, Mr Courbet*. 1854. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. Gauguin, *Good Morning, Mr Gauguin*. 1889. Oil on canvas. Los Angeles Hammer Museum.

⁸⁰ Brieg Haslé-Le Gall, in Le Floc'h, *Ibid.*, Le Floc'h, *Ibid.*, 26, 28, 30, 33, 45, 63. Maxime Maufra, *View of Pont-Aven Port*. circa 1893. Oil on canvas. Musée des beaux-arts, Quimper. Gauguin, *Arearea*. 1892. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris ; *Tahitian Pastoral*. 1892. Oil on Canvas. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

copies real paintings into the story; but intertextual mimesis no longer plays at authenticating departures from the prevailing master narrative. The reverse is true: imitations of observable reality conserve a purified version of the myth; suitably naive graphics reduce Van Gogh's paintings to simple lines; neat rows of panels depict toy-like scenery, people and vehicles; bright, happy colours predominate. Van Gogh's artworks are transformed into easily comprehensible metaphors for his mental state: as Yu-Kiener comments, Van Gogh's euphoria at Gauguin arriving corresponds to him painting sunflowers; they wilt when Gauguin leaves, symbolising despair.⁸¹ The contrast between Gauguin and Van Gogh resurfaces, but with little verbal or physical violence; drinking and brothel visits are minimised, and the razor episode is expunged. Van Gogh pours out his soul in selected paraphrasings from (undated) letters; he thanks Theo for sending money, praises the countryside, and gives his views of art; the correspondence reinforces the myth because, as Druick and Kort Zegers attest, 'Van Gogh shaped his own mythic narrative (...) in the corpus of letters'.⁸² Van Gogh's insanity is made aesthetically appealing: a large panel has stars, zig-zag lines, swirling spirals and abstract multi-coloured shapes; the self-mutilation is shown elliptically with only the knife, his bloody hand and a woman's reaction visible.⁸³ The album contrives a happy end: a text paraphrases an optimistic letter from Theo, after which

⁸¹ Tobias Yu-Kiener, 'Barbara Stok's Graphic Biography Vincent: A Transnational Campaign', *International Journal of Comic Art* 20, no.1 (2018), 170-188 (175) Stok, *Vincent*, 63, 85.

⁸² For example Stok, *Vincent*, 16-17. Van Gogh, CDLXXIV-CDLXXV, in *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, vol. II (1958; repr., London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 540-541. Druick and Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 353.

⁸³ Stok, *Ibid.*, 87.

Vincent paints *Wheatfield with Crows*; a picture of Vincent's and Theo's graves follows, but with no mention of the artist's suicide.⁸⁴

In our last album, *Gauguin. The Other World* by Dori, the myth is again preserved in a highly synthetic way. The album mostly consists of conversations between Polynesian deities and a Gauguin who embodies Segalen's mythical magus. The ability of graphic novels to unite the real and the imaginary is evident when Gauguin glosses over his less palatable aspects: Gauguin acknowledges a 20 year age difference with Teha'mana, but he maintains he loved her; Annah la Javanese becomes someone with whom he had a romantic relationship.⁸⁵ Gauguin's utopia is conveyed by exotic scenery and sensuous tropicana; meanwhile, allusions to paintings such as *Papa Moe* and *Manau Tupapau* integrate Polynesian spiritualism into the landscapes, as Gauguin did.⁸⁶

However the mythical tale is just another imaginary construct. Gauguin oscillating to and from the spirit world strains credibility. Meanwhile, some sequences emphasise the story's artificiality. A double page contains eleven panels of various sizes. On the left Gauguin converses with a deity; on the right the deity responds. Six intervening panels show Gauguin sailing between other gods emerging from the sea. The deity with whom Gauguin converses runs over three panels across by two down.⁸⁷ See Figure 5. In the first overrun across, the deity is divided by the gutter; but in the second the deity's arm remains visible by

⁸⁴ Stok, *Ibid.*, 133-141. Van Gogh, TXXXIX, 30 June 1890, in *The Complete Letters*, vol. 3, 575; *Wheatfield with Crows*, see note 74.

⁸⁵ Dori, *Ibid.*, 72, 90, 92, 111.

⁸⁶ Dori, *Ibid.*, 90,95. Gauguin, *Manau Tupapau*. Oil on canvas. 1892. Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; *Papa Moe*. Oil on canvas. 1893. Private collection.

⁸⁷ Dori, *Ibid.*, 67.

spanning the gutter; the illusion is thereby created that s/he is in front of the panels as well as behind them. The sequence resembles a conjuring trick: to appreciate it readers must suspend their disbelief, even as they recognise that there is an element of pretence. As Masson remarks when discussing the BD artist Fred, whose fantastical plots and overruns between panels likewise foreground the artificial nature of the narrative: ‘nous sommes en effet (...) obligés de croire à l’histoire tout en sachant ses artifices’ [we are in fact (...) made to believe the story, knowing all the while that it is artificial].⁸⁸ *Vincent and Gauguin. The Other World*, indicate that the two artists’ mythology remains attractive, even as they call it into question: informed adults surely realise that Stok’s Van Gogh myth is uncontroversial to the point of being aseptified; Dori’s mythologising of Gauguin is only persuasive to anyone who believes in Polynesian spirits.

Conclusion

A common thread links the biographico-historical graphic novels we have studied: they all express Hutcheon’s postmodern paradox of desire and suspicion towards master narratives. In order to do so they adopt a long-standing and widespread approach to comic strip devices, which Peeters defines thus: “‘The panel and the page (...) are subordinated to a narrative which their primary function is to serve’;”⁸⁹ in our case, the panels and pages are subordinated to perpetuating mythologising master narratives about two great artists. However our corpus is also very much a product of the late 20th/early 21st Century because, to use McHale’s phrase, those narratives are ‘mere fictions’: the constructed nature of the mythology is foregrounded; myths are not timeless and ineffable truths, as they were for

⁸⁸ Masson, *Lire la BD*, 71-72.

⁸⁹ Benoît Peeters, qtd. in Baetens and Frey, *Graphic Novel*, 112.

Uncle Paul; any authentication through realism is deliberately spurious because the myths are imaginary and artificial.

The albums employ various strategies. In *Gauguin et Van Gogh* and *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* the myth is undermined by paratexts, circular plots and unreliable testimonies. Those techniques are abetted by elaborate layouts (Matena) or by combining imaginary insertions with stylistic shifts (Li-An and Croix). As a result *Gauguin et Van Gogh* posits a myth imagined by a dying man, and *Gauguin. Deux voyages à Tahiti* contests the myth by pointing up its unsavoury aspects. Meanwhile *Gauguin. Loin de la route*, exploiting discontinuity between panels, fabricates a myth from Gauguin's and Segalen's writings. In *Vincent et Van Gogh, Trois lunes* and *Paysage au chien rouge* the approach is different. Some panels enjoy greater autonomy: playful intertextual mimetism invites readers to do what Baetens and Frey call 'abandon the narrative thread (...) to lose themselves in contemplation of the work'.⁹⁰ However those same panels still serve narratives which cast doubt on whether the myths are immutable absolutes. *Vincent* and *Gauguin. The Other World* are different again: Stok's overly sanitised simulation and Dori's luxuriant fantasmagoria preserve idealised yet conspicuously artificial versions of the mythology. Our corpus was mostly published after the zenith of postmodernism. Gibbons shows that uncertainty surrounds the date of postmodernism's demise, particularly as postmodernist impulses 'have been absorbed into mainstream (...) popular culture'.⁹¹ Whatever the date

⁹⁰ Baetens and Frey, *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹¹ Alison Gibbons, 'Postmodernism is Dead. What Comes Next?', *Times Literary Supplement* on line (12 July 2017), n.pag.

<https://www.thetls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>

postmodernism drew to a close, our corpus proves Gibbons correct: it confirms that postmodernism still informs myth-making in early 21st Century graphic novels.

A final question arises: how will Van Gogh and Gauguin inspire future BD artists? Gibbons identifies ‘a revival of mythic meaning-making that the arch-postmodernists would have abhorred’;⁹² Stok and Dori may be forerunners of such a revival. Gibbons remarks too that borrowing elements from reality ‘is intended to signal realism, rather than to foreground the artifice of the text’; however, any revival of realism has yet to filter through to our corpus.⁹³ We assume that interest in Van Gogh and Gauguin will continue, especially given the ongoing ‘popularity of historical fiction’.⁹⁴ Besides, graphic novels about great artists have added attractions for purveyors of BDs beyond mythological questions. Groensteen, Baetens and Frey show how comic strips, a frequently trivialised form, have long aspired to cultural legitimacy, and that the literary dimension of graphic novels helps achieve that ambition.⁹⁵ Bringing fine art into comics bestows still more legitimacy, by de-stabilizing the hierarchy which traditionally classed them as inferior. Mixing high with low culture by is a postmodern hallmark, as Hutcheon remarks; it is now part of the legacy, with Gibbons noting the constant coexistence of ‘high and low cultural references’.⁹⁶ One could add that biographies and historical novels were once deemed low brow but, by millennium they

⁹² Gibbons, ‘Postmodernism is Dead’, n.pag.

⁹³ Gibbons, *Ibid.*, n.pag.

⁹⁴ Gibbons, *Ibid.*, n.pag.

⁹⁵ Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 162.-166. Baetens and Frey, *Graphic Novel*, 192-201.

⁹⁶ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 18. Gibbons, ‘Postmodernism is Dead’, n.pag.

achieved cultural respectability.⁹⁷ Further engagement with such genres may therefore enable BDs to follow a similar trajectory.

Illustrations

Figure 1. ‘Van Gogh Meets Gauguin’; Matena, *Gauguin et Van Gogh*, 12.

Figure 2: ‘Segalen and Ky Dong’, Le Roy, Gaultier and Galopin, *Gauguin. Loin de la route*, 55.

Figure 3. ‘Vincent and Van Gogh Racing Against Time’, Smudja, *Trois lunes*, 41.

Figure 4. ‘An Intertextual Reference to Gauguin and Courbet’, Le Floc’h, *Paysage au chien rouge*, 26.

Figure 5. ‘Gauguin and the Polynesian God’, Dori, *Gauguin. The Other World*, 67.

⁹⁷ Rogerat, *Biographies d’artistes*, 185. Johnson, *Historical Fiction*, 2-3.

