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Keeping an eye on things: attention, tracking and coherence-building

In the processing of narrative texts, we may assume that a significant aspect of reading is the reader's search for the elements that will enable him or her to construct a coherent sequential narrative, whether the focus is on events or mental states and emotions.

The degree to which texts have the capacity to direct our attention and consequent interpretation is demonstrated by their powers of *misdirection*, as in the well-known case of Hergé's *Les Bijoux de la Castefiore* (1963) or, indeed, in Henry James's *Purloined Letter*). In Hergé's album, an essential agent in the plot, the magpie, is presented in full view but as part of a general 'background' scene in the opening panel. Its importance is revealed only at the end of the text, and the reader is obliged to revise his or her attribution of non-salience to the bird. For this misdirection to work, there must be clear grounding signals in the text which draw the reader's attention *away* from the bird.

The issue of salience, or grounding, tends to be dealt with relatively briefly and in a variety of ways by writers on 'bande dessinée', largely because it falls under several of the generally accepted headings for analytical discussion. It is produced by a wide range of visual and narrative prompts and through the reader's responses to such cues, which activate conceptual frames, or schemata, relating to his or her experience. These cognitive schemata will be drawn from extra-textual contexts and event sequences, from the reader's knowledge of narrative structures, from more specific medium and genre-related experience of 'bande dessinée' and its protocols and, as reading progresses, from the reader's experience of the individual text itself. (see Bordwell's use of the concept of extrinsic and intrinsic information, 1985: 153). Furthermore, as will be seen, some of the reader's interpretive strategies need not be directly cued by the text but are brought as a set of default assumptions to reading.

However far our understanding and processing of narratives might incline us to create notional pairs such as figure/ground, event/background information, narration/description, the range of parameters which help us to build such concepts is such that the play between different elements of a given text and the reader's construction of relevance and signification among such elements can be far more complex than such conceptualisations allow.

When considering salience, the points at which the reader must work hardest to establish the relevance of fictional entities to his or her construction of the narrative are at the beginnings, or *incipits*, of texts or sections of text where a new configuration of time, place and protagonists (or 'frame', Emmott 1997: 121-2) is set up. Establishing who is bound into a frame, who should be tracked, and understanding when a figure has been 'bound out' of a given time-place-person configuration is essential for narrative understanding (see Emmott, 1997: 123-4. Emmott establishes these cognitive principles in her study of written narratives,

where there are no visual indicators of the continuing presence or absence of a given protagonist in a frame. In the case of 'bande dessinée', despite the availability of visual indicators of continued presence, readers must still track and maintain entities which are 'hors champs' (out of field), in a given panel or series of panels and establish patterns of focus through visual and verbal cues). Incipits are the points at which fictional worlds are least stable, where new protocols for reading must be established or earlier protocols re-established. As readers, we learn to identify frame-switches and to scan for new entities or the continued presence of established ones. And we expect that there may be a change in focus from one protagonist to another, that our interest may be obliged to shift from one experiencing centre to another. In such activities, we are heavily dependent on the cues provided by the text, in particular on those which signal that a frame-switch has occurred. Once a new frame has been established, our monitoring for salient features does not, of course, cease. Tracking entities from panel to panel and identifying the modifications which signal narrative progression are core reading practices for 'bande dessinée' which are only raised to a conscious level when such processes are impeded in some way.

The process of scanning for salient features as hooks on which to hang our construction of narrative coherence is not limited to the establishment of 'énonçable' action sequences against a notional 'descriptible' ground (Groensteen's terms. See Groensteen 1999: 143-50 for a relatively recent discussion of the narration/description issue). It is certainly the case that in reading many 'bandes dessinées', the reader's primary and sometimes only concern will be the construction of a narrative action sequence, although there may often be a more reflective return to certain panels and sequences, whether to trace out additional mini-narratives or to study the detail of panels (see Groensteen 1999: 137). But in the reading of other 'bandes dessinées', in particular those which include greater proportions of aspect-to-aspect transitions between panels and not least those influenced by Mangas, readers are also prepared to adapt their reading to focus on salient images which are not action-related, often incorporating a change of speed and rhythm of reading in the process (see McCloud 1994: 68-82 for a useful assessment of the balance of transition types in Western comics compared with Mangas). Coherence-building here moves away from the establishment of 'what happened next?' to a range of other reading preoccupations, for example the establishment of an atmosphere or fictional environment, the experience of intense emotion, a pause for contemplation whether of external or internal matters, etc. Such alternative salience patterns may occur only briefly, as a longer and more established sequence or interlude in an action, or may constitute an entire non-narrative 'bande dessinée'.

For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to discuss two texts which invite the sort of goal-directed reading in which the establishment of salient features is necessary to construct coherent narrative sequences, while at the same time they inhibit the reader's coherence-building moves. Schelle's *La Théorie du chaos* is founded on the working out of cause and effect, but along the unpredictable paths of chaos theory, whereas Trondheim and Duffour's *Gare Centrale* is founded on a quest for meaning in an environment which does not operate as it should. Each therefore raises the attribution of salience from a sub-conscious process to a conscious one.

FEATURES WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF SALIENCE

Before discussing the processing problems presented by these texts, I shall briefly outline a checklist of elements which contribute to the construction of salience by the reader.

As Eco so clearly demonstrated in his discussion of 'inferential walks' (1987: 32), readers are constantly making predictions about the texts they are processing. Such predictions may be set up by the internal processes of the text itself but they will also be founded on conventions of narrative, genre, and so on. Others are based on more general knowledge relating to the reader's experience of the world. Decisions on what to look at are influenced, then, by a perpetual interaction between the reader's expectations and the patterns of the text which themselves may either establish, confirm or conflict with such expectations.

Depth of field. This aspect of salience can most clearly be considered according to the figure/ground relationship. If perspective is employed, this produces an effect of depth of field. Conventionally, events and figures in the foreground are assumed to be more important than those in the background. In visual narrative sequences, a background element always has the potential to move into the foreground and affect foregrounded protagonists.

Degree of iconicity. Contrasts in the degree of iconicity allow the effect of a figure and background field: a more iconic figure stands out from a 'realist' ground, and vice versa. McCloud (1994: 42) suggests that backgrounds tend to be slightly more realist, while empathy is established with foregrounded figures through their greater iconicity, or their 'cartoony' nature. Equally, he shows how Japanese Mangas invite reader identification with most protagonists through a 'cartoony' style, but also use realist styles to objectify and emphasize the 'otherness' of certain protagonists. For McCloud, the degree of reader involvement with a protagonist is proportionate to the degree of iconicity.

Drawing styles (see Groensteen, '*mise en dessin*' 1999: 142). In addition to the degree of iconicity, factors of drawing style, such as contrasts in thickness of line can also create effects of salience. Groensteen suggests that this capacity is more a theoretical one than one demonstrated by general practice which exhibits a principle of 'homogénéité du style' (1999: 146).

Colour. Within a single panel, colour can be used to increase the salience of certain elements. But also, once a given protagonist or item has been established as significant, tracking the movement of this entity from panel to panel can be facilitated by simple colours associated with it (see McCloud: 1994: 188 on the symbolic association of colours with figures such as Batman, Superman and the Incredible Hulk).

Limits of panel. The limits of the panel can create effects of focus from 'close-up' to panorama. Our conventional expectation is that close-ups will designate salient entities or features.

Composition: within panel (see Groensteen, '*mise en case*' 1999: 142). The eye can

be led to a particular feature of a panel through the arrangement of its contents, especially those larger panels which exploit the standard 'S' scanning pattern from top right to bottom left.

Composition: across page. The same applies in the composition of elements on a page.

Page layout and panel size. The arrangement of panels on the page and the relative sizes of panels can produce complex attention patterns (see in particular Peeters 1991: 34-53).

Transformation and change

This is related to what Peeters describes as the 'principe de métamorphose' (1991: 17) on which sequences in 'bande dessinée' are founded and, more generally, to elementary principles of narrative.

Unsurprisingly, transformed elements are seen as those which carry the event-line, while elements which are repeated without modification from frame to frame may be seen as background. Such transformations are, of course, the equivalent of movement in film, and cognitive science emphasises the link between movement or newness and attention. Stockwell's summary of the findings of cognitive scientists suggests that the 'ground of a visual field is deselected, or characterised by *neglect*' (2002: 18). Movement and change attract attention, while the static is 'swiftly lost to attention' (2002: 18-19). In linguistic texts, one mode of marking such a distinction is through verbal aspect: where punctual and telic event-line tenses *passé simple/passé composé* are contrasted with the atelic imperfect tense.

Repetition

Although repetition is seen as the default 'static' background, it can also produce effects of salience and enable the tracking of fictional entities. Distinctive repeated figures (as in the case of repeated colour combinations) can draw the eye and enable the reader to scan quickly for a key protagonist and associated action points across a double page spread.

Repetition can also lead to the effects of 'tressage' described by Groensteen (1999: 173-186) in which non-sequential 'series' of elements in an album are linked across considerable spaces of text through, for example, their geometric similarities.

Balance between transformations and repetitions

The proportion of transformed elements to repeated elements can vary. Minimal change can produce extreme attention in the reader, for example in Franc's *Le Café de la Plage* (1989). If many elements are transformed at once, then other techniques will need to be brought into play to indicate which transformation is most salient and to enable the reader to identify who or what s/he should track across the sequence of panels.

Narrativity and experiencing centres

While classical structuralist narratology has emphasised sequence in time and transformation as core aspects of narrative, more recent work has offered experience as the core of narrativity. Here, emphasis is shifted from 'what happened next?' to 'how did it feel?' (see Fludernik 1996: 26, '*narrativity is a function of narrative texts and centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature*'. (her italics)). Human narratives are built around sentient beings, and as readers we conventionally expect to track either humans or animals (anthropomorphised or not) through their experiences (see, for example, Lefèvre 2000: 'a reader has no difficulties discerning the important actors from the background (décor and supernumerary figures). It is quite similar to everyday life where one for example, does not expect a house to be come a character'). Thus, while settings may change, we expect to follow a certain protagonist or group of protagonists through these shifts in time and place. We are not obliged to empathise with these experiencing centres, or to have access to their thoughts and feelings, but we expect, in some wise, to follow their experiences.

General knowledge schemas, scripts and predictability

All of the above conventions, technical and narrative, can be seen as knowledge schemas which are deployed by readers (and, before them, authors) to produce effects of salience. They relate to readers' knowledge of representation, of narratives and of texts.

Readers also bring their own extra-textual experiences and narrativisations of those experiences to the reading of any text. These allow them to go about the business of interpretation, filling in gaps in semantic information (texts do not have to spell out the contents of a kitchen, or to fill in every move in a familiar script such as 'going to bed'), and making predictions concerning possible outcomes. Ryan (1991: 48-60) proposes a 'principle of minimal departure', in which readers project their knowledge of 'reality' onto the text, only changing this where cued to do so.

Decisions concerning salience may thus concern the protocols of a given situation (in a restaurant, the person in black and white who approaches you is more likely to tell you if you can have a table than the person in red and green and you should therefore pay more attention to the former). Equally, readers measure fictional worlds and action scripts against existing schemas, so that elements which appear incongruous in a given setting may also attract attention (see also Cohen 1996: 141-2 for a discussion of work on how unexpected elements are easily recalled in memory exercises).

It might be suggested, then, that a well-made 'bande dessinée' would mobilise some or all of the above techniques in a mutually reinforcing pattern, leaving the reader in no doubt as to what is important and which figures should be tracked from panel to panel.

THE UNDOING OF THE FIGURE/GROUND DISTINCTION: LA THÉORIE DU CHAOS

Pierre Schelle's *La Théorie du chaos* (abbreviated to *Théorie*) raises questions about the processes by which we establish salience and track entities from frame to frame.

Schelle's text is in three sections of largely non-linguistic narrative, each of which has a title and a brief explanation either at the beginning or the end. The first, 'L'Effet papillon' (the butterfly effect), provides a concretisation of the premise of chaos theory that 'D'un battement d'aile, un papillon en Chine peut provoquer une tornade sur New York' (with the beat of a wing, a butterfly in China can provoke a tornado in New York). The narrative traces a series of events beginning with the butterfly and ending, unsurprisingly, in New York. The second section, 'Le Facteur humain' (the human factor), demonstrates that 'l'Homme est le plus grand propagateur de chaos de l'univers' (Man is the greatest propagator of chaos in the universe). Here, the actions of a human who is out in the New York storm begin a chain which leads back to the field in China, and the crushing of the butterfly under a boy's foot. The final section exemplifies the non-scientific Murphy's Law: 'Quelque soit le problème auquel vous êtes confronté, dites-vous que le suivant sera encore pire et ce de manière exponentielle' (whatever the problem which confronts you, tell yourself that the next will be still worse and exponentially so). Here, hundreds of butterflies rise up, disturbed by the boy, and provoke a range of catastrophes around the world.

Schelle's narrative sequences create a number of tracking problems for the reader as the text pursues its aleatoric movement towards the anticipated results. There is no single entity whose experience endures for the length of the text, nor is there even a group of linked protagonists whose lives are interwoven in a recurring set of encounters. Instead, the narrative is constructed from a series of mini-sequences which operate by a sort of relay system, moving from one experiencing centre to the next, mostly without return (two sequences include rats, but there is no way of telling whether it is the same rat which is the agent in both sequences). The agents in the opening sequences, for example, are successively a butterfly, a mouse, an owl, and a wildcat. We are thus obliged to shift our centre of interest from one entity to the next and, until the protocol of shifting agency is established, may fail to transfer our attention. Even when the protocol is established, we may still fail to identify the next agent, as will be shown.

Identifying the next agent of change is made harder by the fact that some agents are not living beings. The two agents which follow the wildcat, for example, are rocks and water. In scanning the text, then, we cannot make the simple default assumption that non-sentient elements in a panel constitute a background environment for the action. Basic patterns of prediction in narrative have to be adjusted to a new textual protocol (of course, this perturbation of patterns of prediction is essential to the thesis demonstrated in the text).

Last, Schelle preserves the narrative momentum by initiating new sequences before the previous sequence has been closed. Such overlaps require the reader to track more than one entity or group of entities relating to what will ultimately turn out to be different conceptual frames (in Emmott's sense of the frame as a mental store of information relating to a particular configuration of participants, place and time, 1997: 121-2, see above). We are prevented from concentrating on the event sequence and protagonists currently primed and in focus by the need to monitor the text for the introduction of new entities which may turn out to be primary agents in subsequent sequences and which therefore need to be bound into the frame.

None of the above characteristics of the narrative structure of *La Théorie du chaos*

is sufficient in itself to create tracking problems for readers. Transfers of agency, non-animate agency and overlapping sequences are hardly innovative devices, although, I would contend, the downgrading of the function of the experiencing centre is a threat to the narrativity of the text as a whole (for *this* reader at least). But Schelle also mobilises his technical drawing repertoire to accentuate the metamorphic character of the narrative, producing multiple contrapuntal patterns of transformation which run counter to the establishment of singular linear salience in complete and clearly delineated blocks of text. The text demands, through its thesis, that the reader should track the causal chains from the butterfly to New York and back (it should be said that there are some weak links, most notably a lightning strike which is not caused by any previous event). But its thesis also demands that such chains exist in a complex environment, and Schelle's creation of this environment slows and inhibits a rapid 'reading for the plot'.

Depth of field fluctuates in the text, and combines with shifts in iconisation and focus to create contrasting effects. In an established sequence, such effects are not necessarily problematic for the tracking of protagonists, but at points of frame modification, they can inhibit the reader's construction of the new frame.



Figure 1

Figure 1 (*Théorie*: 11) represents the third of a five-page sequence in which an owl hunts and catches a mouse. It is the first page to show direct contact between the two, marking a key point in the action as the owl carries the mouse off in its claws. The reader's attention is therefore focused on the 'ladder' of panels in the centre of the page which depict this part of the sequence, and his or her eyes are drawn down the diagonal lines towards the falling drop of blood in the bottom two panels.

However, the two apparently marginal vertical panels do not contain only the abstract patterns of leaves which have framed previous images of the owl. They also contain close-ups of a wild cat's profile which are important in that they introduce this figure to the narrative. Here, narrative structure, page-lay-out, fragmentation, iconisation and black and white blocks combine to inhibit our identification of this new figure as a significant agent (and indeed, our identification of it at all). Only the written 'sniff', which also breaks the panel margin, attracts our attention to it. As the text progresses, we will learn to pay attention to the contents of seemingly non-salient narrow vertical panels, but at this stage, such an intrinsic protocol has not yet been established and the reader may continue to perceive the panels as borders.

In other sections of the text, extreme realist techniques can be equally confusing, and not only at points of frame modification. For example, the driving rain which lashes New York and the Eastern seaboard of the United States can obfuscate the contents of panels, especially those which also occur at night, making it hard to identify figures and their actions.

Counter-intuitively, the clearest depictions of several agents are those which act as 'sign-offs' for them, ending their role in the narrative and serving as a form of colophon. These clear images encourage the reader to keep such figures primed as active participants, and make it harder to establish the transfer of agency, especially when this is from an animate to an inanimate agent. This occurs at the end of the wild-cat sequence, where the cat is clearly depicted in silhouette in the bottom right panel of a recto page licking its paw after a rockfall, but then disappears completely from the text (rising water will be the next agent).

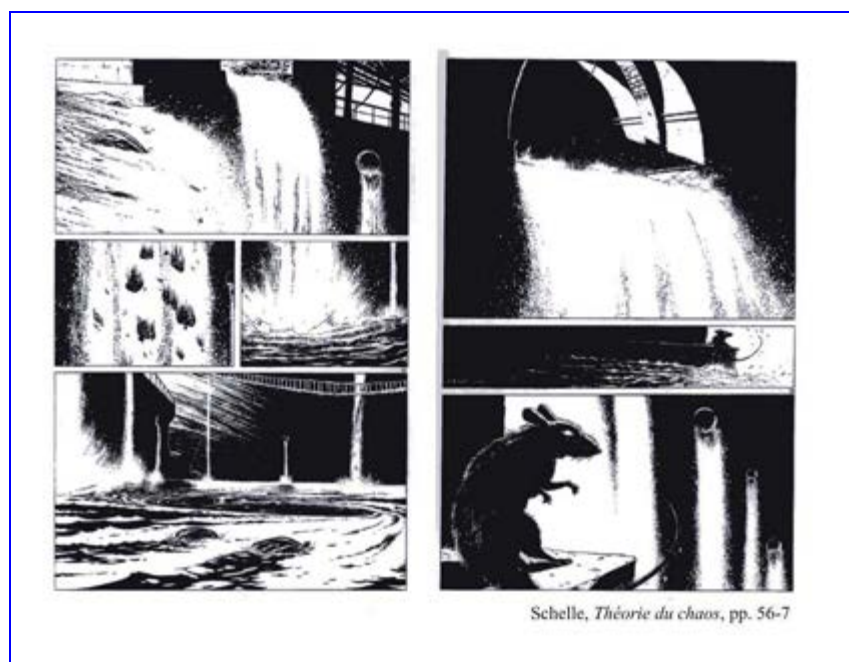


Figure 2

The pattern is repeated the second section when a rat is swimming through the sewers of New York (Figure 2, *Théorie*: 56-7). Here, the rat narrative has come to an end, and it is the movement of the refuse sacks which can be seen in the water

which will produce the next sequence. However, the layout and content of these pages, with the immediately visible and instantly recognisable figure of the rat at the end, encourage the reader to continue to keep the rat primed as an agent. In this instance, we might be expected to have learned from the earlier cat sequence, but the gap between the two sequences is significant, and old habits die hard.

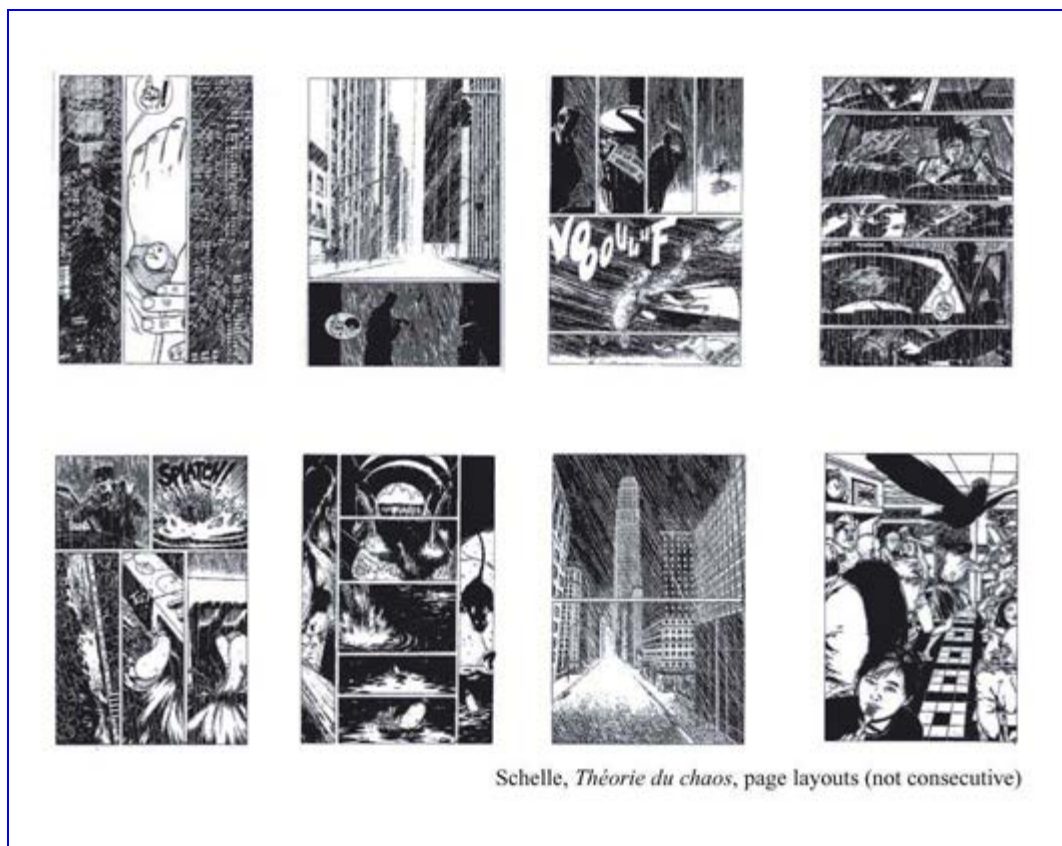


Figure 3

In this text, the visual disruption of iconicity, depth of field and focus is accompanied by extreme variety of page layout (see Figure 3, *Théorie*, various). The variation in layout from page to page requires constant monitoring, and while there can be a strong internal logic to the pattern, some of the extreme formal devices employed can reinforce its status as pattern. This is confirmed if the layouts of the three sections are compared. Section 1 is constituted by a sequence of 37 different page layouts. Section 2 repeats this sequence exactly and then reverses the sequence in mirror-form after the 35th image creating a palindrome within the section. The brief final section repeats the layout of the first three pages of the previous sequences before ending with two double-page spreads.

This layout allows for a multiplicity of 'tressage' effects throughout the text. The wild-cat and rat sequences described above are extreme examples of repetition, including similar actions at matching points in the sequence and matching vectorisations (the fall of rocks and the fall of the refuse sacks). Other effects can be produced by the echoic repetition of the positions of a tree and a tall building, for example (*Théorie*: 27 and 67) setting up an opposition between nature and man, or the use of a small vertical panel to depict the sun (and time passing) in section 1, and the moon (and time passing) in section 2 (indeed, the geometric

repetition of circles, in particular, operates a running interference in the text). Last, the return at the end of section 2 to the three vertical panels of the opening page, as the text completes its layout palindrome and the fictional-world events bring us back to the field in China where the narrative began, provides the opportunity for a set of visual comparisons to be made between the two scenes (Figure 4, *Théorie*: 5 and 112).

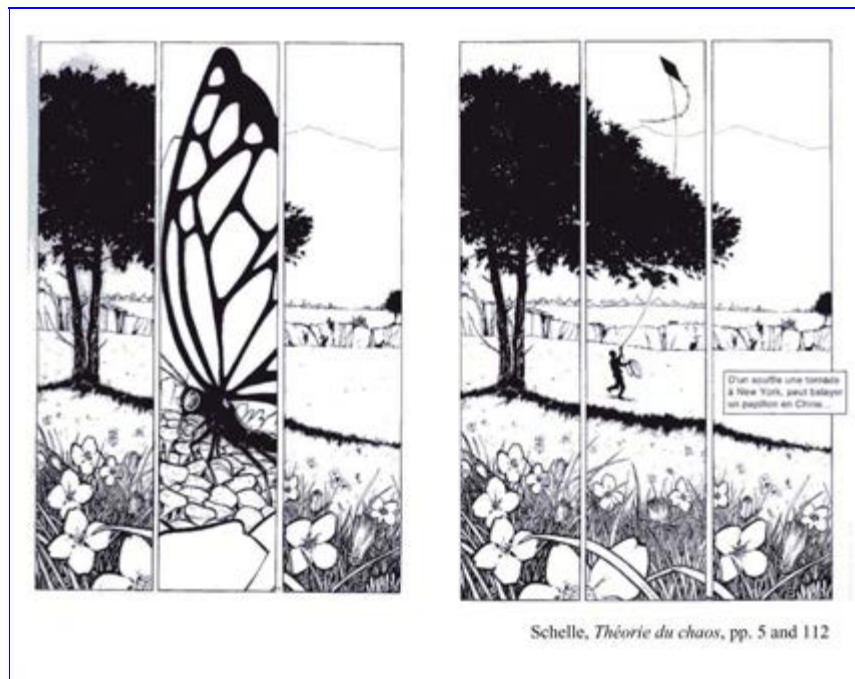


Figure 4

The outer panels remain identical, while the central panel changes. On the opening page this panel contains a close-up of the butterfly, contrasting in focus with the 'continuous' panoramic background of the outer panels. On the last page of section 2, the butterfly is replaced by the figure of the boy whose foot has crushed it. These panels exemplify the titles of the sections which contain them: 'L'Effet papillon' and 'Le Facteur humain'. But in the second case it is interesting that there is no contrast in focus between the panels, no looming giant butterfly. Instead, the middle panel depicting the boy fits in precisely with those which flank it, allowing a continuous horizon across the panels which was lacking on the opening page. Surprisingly, perhaps, the effect of this is to integrate man with his environment, rather than to follow the well-worn image schema which opposes man and nature.

On its own, none of these techniques is unusual in 'bande dessinée'. But the most important consequence of their combination here is that they prevent the reader from establishing the key 'action' points on the page on the basis of a rapid scan. Only a slow attentive reading allows the sequence to be built, in conjunction with the experience of what might be deemed non-narrative aspects of the text. If this is added to the problems in establishing the beginnings and ends of sequences and identifying the main protagonists for each, the combined effect on the reader is the resistance of the text to the deployment by the reader of established schemas for salience prediction. As chaos theory obliges traditional causal theories to be revised, so this text obliges traditional reader-strategies of narrativisation to be suspended.

AN UNREADABLE WORLD: *GARE CENTRALE*

In some ways, Trondheim and Duffour's *Gare centrale* (abbreviated to *Gare*) demonstrates a similar confusing variation. This is particularly marked in the framing of the panels and patterns of focus, which make it hard to select and track salient figures which might help to make sense of the fictional world. These features combine here, though, with a tonal monotony that produces a surface resistant to interpretation.

In this text, a commuter cat wanders around a station in which nothing functions as it should, trying to find a train to catch. *Gare centrale* thus frustrates the reader's anticipation of the goal-directed sequence which should occur in a station. And while the cat seems concerned only with a limited set of questions concerning the 'when' and 'where' of his train, the reader is also interested in 'why'. These questions shape the reader's attention patterns while reading.

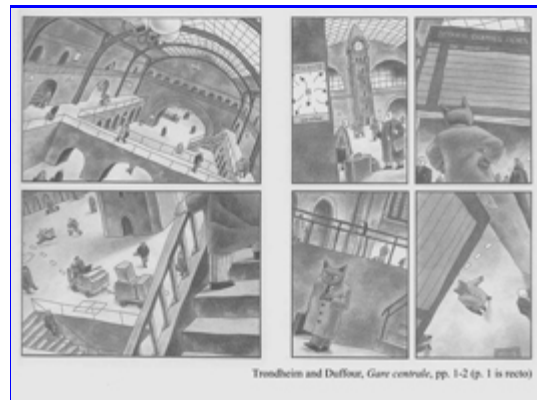


Figure 5

The cat is not present in the initial panels (see Figure 5, *Gare*: 1-2), but repetition in panels 3 to 6 allows him to emerge as an experiencing centre. These panels also establish the maze-like nature of the station. The non-horizontal alignment of the contents of some panels combines with multiple lines of sight to resist the construction of a single goal-directed path. Arrows on walls and posters and lines on the floor point in every direction, but they establish no point at all.

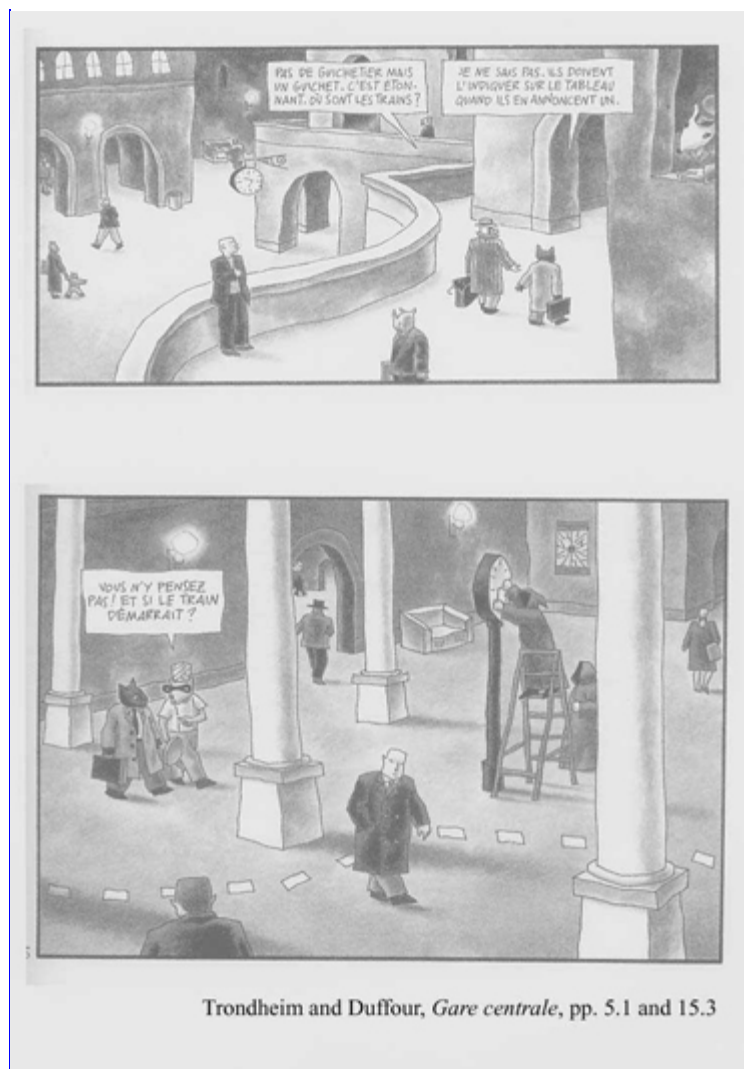


Figure 6

Although we track the cat around the station, his point of view is not consistently adopted, and due to the monochrome tones, he can be hard to detect in panoramic panels where we must sometimes depend on speech bubbles to locate him (Figure 6, *Gare*: 5.1 and 15.3. The number after the decimal point indicates the panel number on the page). As we scan each panel we are therefore engaged in a double search, one for the cat himself, and one for anyone else in the panel who might be of help in unravelling the mystery.

We rapidly learn that the salience patterns of the visual text itself will offer the same kinds of resistance to interpretation as the fictional station does to the cat. Whereas this resistance is often covert, as in the panoramic panels, where the universal monochromatic mid-grey tonality is the main cause of difficulty, the arrangement of the panel contents can more overtly remind the reader that standard salience criteria cannot easily be applied (Figure 7, *Gare*: 13.4). Here, the location of the cat can



Figure 7

be deduced only from the contents of the speech bubbles behind the railway carriage. The bubble on the left is a reply to a remark by the cat in the previous panel. The most visually salient figures are those in the foreground, but they do not appear again in the narrative.

Although many background figures in this text remain firmly that, certain protagonists are bound in to the narrative as recurrent background figures which will, at a later stage in the narrative, come into focus as foreground participants by encountering and interacting with the cat. These figures are marked as potentially salient protagonists both as a result of readers' existing knowledge of scripts and schemas associated with railway stations and through the textual strategy of repetition.

The uniformed mouse in the background of Figure 7 is one such figure. The mouse has appeared twice before, first peering out of a window in the panoramic scene in Figure 6 (5.1), then in the background to another panel. Repetition alone draws our attention to this figure, as does the lighted archway which frames it here. But our attention is also drawn to it from the outset as a result of our standard knowledge of what happens in stations. We know that uniformed figures are likely to be railway employees and are therefore potential sources of information.

This prediction of salience is not ill-founded, in that the mouse will indeed appear as a speaking protagonist. However, the encounter will follow a different cultural script from that we hope for. 'Traveller meets railway employee who explains the situation to him' (always more of a hope than a prediction based on experience in the British railway system, at least) is replaced by 'mouse runs away from cat'. By the stage this occurs, we are not surprised at the failure of the encounter to shed light on the situation, as this has become a recurrent action pattern. No information has been forthcoming at an information booth, and the momentary hope provoked in the cat by the sight of a ticket window being opened in the distance has not been fulfilled. Nevertheless, the uniform continues to hold out a tantalising suggestion of resolution.

Conversely, as we scan each panel for relevant information, our attention is also drawn to certain figures because they do *not* fit in with our standard frames and scripts on stations (the fact that most of the users of the station are animals or

birds is not such an attention-drawing feature, as it simply becomes one of the standard protocols concerning the nature of the fictional world). As our standard expectations relating to the functioning of the station are gradually and repeatedly thwarted, such incongruous figures emerge as potential bearers of information. In particular, a jester's hat in the information booth (*Gare*: 4) provokes interest in the reader (the cat and the bird who is with him think that nobody is in the booth, but we wonder whether this is the case). Our interest is later shown to be justified as a jester figure indeed emerges from the booth (*Gare*: 39), but the cat fails to notice him so we never discover whether this figure might have held the solution to the mystery. The reason that the cat fails to notice the jester is that his attention is at last drawn to a group of hooded figures which will also have been noticed by the reader at a much earlier stage in the text as they have been busy in the background of a number of panels. These figures are incongruous not only in their dress but also in their activities relating to the station clocks (see Figure 6, 15.3, above). These activities hold out the lure of potentially meaningful and goal-directed action. Although this action certainly turns out to be goal-directed (the figures are members of a cult which is trying to fix the hands of all the clocks in the station to show the same time), it is not helpful in explaining what has happened in the station. So incongruity turns out to be no better an indicator of meaning than congruity.

These are not the only significant issues relating to salience in *Gare centrale* but they nicely demonstrate the cognitive aspects of salience.

To sum up the processes relating to reader attention at work in these two texts, then, the techniques deployed require a far higher degree of conscious scanning for meaningful elements than is usually the case. Reading is slowed by the combination of techniques I have described, imposing an experience of the text founded on heightened attention to visual patterns without removing the search for meaningful sequences. In both cases, any attempt at the separation of the elements of the text into the 'énonçable' and the 'descriptible', into a quickly apprehended set of figures against an undistinguished ground will fail. And as such, they demonstrate the need for an understanding of salience parameters in terms of a distinctive and complex model. In particular, the figure/ground distribution of elements in a given panel can be read only in the context of the wider textual environment. Whereas localised figure/ground salience in a single panel can produce a particular effect, this may be overridden in the context of a longer sequence by other narratological and cognitive factors. Second, salience is not only dependent on the establishing of an action sequence, even in narrative texts - as *Gare centrale* shows, we are interested not only in 'what happens next?' but also in 'why is this station not working?' The principle of relevance thus applies to a wide range of textual functions. Third, reader-prediction plays a crucial role in the construction of salience. The thwarting of such predictions in these texts exposes the assumptions on which they are based, demonstrating that, to some extent, coherence-building is an anticipatory activity, not simply a retroactive one.

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