

## Pop Art and Nostalgia: The New Lessons of David Vandermeulen's *Ric Remix*

Hugo Frey

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Article abstract

This article provides an original analysis of David Vandermeulen's work, *Ric Remix* (2012). It underlines how it appropriates and reimagines the classic French language comic strip detective series by Tibet & Duchateau, '*Ric Hochet*'. That work was first published in *Tintin Magazine* (starting full serializations in 1961) and has continued to the present day. The article uses Vandermeulen's work to show that it does not conform to many contemporary expectations about either the comics/Pop Art relationship, or the current fashion for nostalgia as a common contemporary theme in graphic narrative. *Ric Remix* evidences that the graphic narrative format can successfully use and recuperate Pop Art images and techniques without implying any great *ressentiment*. It informs that retro work can offer new and fascinating perspectives when shaped by a strong underlying political philosophy.

# Pop Art and Nostalgia : the New Lessons of David Vandermeulen's *Ric Remix*

Hugo Frey  
University of Chichester

Amongst American art historians it is often one work from the early career of Roy Lichtenstein that is cited as a transformative piece for the story of 'pop' (Kaprow 1977; Bader 2006; Bader 2009; Crow 2014). Thus, for many scholars, it is his 'Look Mickey', from 1961, that is the prototypical work that set in place a mode of practice that defined a wider artistic current of activity as well as an era. Understandably so, because this was the first work from Lichtenstein that evoked many of the techniques and aesthetic choices that shortly afterwards contributed to his becoming a world famous pop art figure. Let us recall that 'Look Mickey' is a painted, blow-up, reworking of an original Disney illustration by Bob Grant and Bob Totten for Carl Buettner's children's book, *Donald Duck : Lost and Found* (1960). Lichtenstein edited, and magnified, this original illustration to achieve a purer, intensified, and new representation. In addition to the visual changes, he contributed words through the insertion of a speech bubble attributed to Donald. Now, Donald exclaims, as he hooks his own tail with his fishing line, "Look Mickey I've caught a big one!!" The rest, as they say, is history... Lichtenstein continued in the direction set forth in 'Look Mickey' through his phase of Ben Day dot style appropriations and blow-ups of panels from romance and war comics. Andy Warhol, Mel Ramos and numerous other fine artists, invented their own versions of pop art, often to the infamously bitter reviews from the art press and intelligentsia, if not from those collectors who so wisely quickly invested in them. By the end of the decade which had begun with 'Look Mickey' the underlying tactics, philosophical questions, and aesthetic interventions, of that work, and the pop art that followed it, were well understood and accepted

as significant, if not quite as *avant-garde* as ten years previously (see Doris 2007). Today, scholarly contributions too numerous to mention here help us better appreciate the context for the original breakthrough of pop art, as well as the careers of its exponents. Substantially less academic thought has been devoted to the specific sub-tendency of fine art appropriation from comic strips or comparable illustrations. For example, it was only in 2013 with the Bremen Museum of Modern Art exhibition and the accompanying catalogue of the same name, *Kaboom! : Comics in Art* (Clauss 2013), that one could begin to comprehensively appreciate the extensive range of this type of practice. Although sadly it overlooked some famous names (for instance, Anton Kannemeyer's and Hervé Téliémaque's works, which I will return to later in this essay) and some thematically important minor artists (notably, Suzy Willey's re-use of *Tintin* materials, as exhibited at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK 1993).

The present article is written in the spirit of the *Kaboom!* -show, albeit from the reverse angle. The purpose of this essay is to consider in detail the feedback from pop art into the world of contemporary graphic novels (Alloway 1974 : 16; Baetens & Frey 2015 : 49-50). In particular, I want to explore the new French *bande dessinée*, David Vandermeulen's *Ric Remix*, published by Editions du Lombard in 2012. It is important precisely because it is deeply marked by the processes described above and therefore is a prototypical model of what occurs when a contemporary graphic novelist employs the tactics of a Lichtenstein or a Warhol in their *métier*. To summarize further for those unfamiliar with this source, *Ric Remix* is an experimental graphic novel inspired by a longstanding French language comic series ('*Ric Hochet*') and pop art's addiction to appropriation. Throughout the work, the self-styled 'DJ', David Vandermeulen, re-uses and re-sequences over five hundred and fifty original panels from writer, A.P. Duchateau's, and artist, Tibet's '*Ric Hochet*' albums. First published in serial form in 1961 in *Tintin Magazine*, it is one of the longest running series in Europe and, at the time of writing, it stretches to seventy-four albums.<sup>1</sup> *Ric Remix* is a meta-graphic novel composed of thematically and visually coherent panels derived from the first fifty *Ric Hochet* adventures. Thus, as readers of *Ric Remix* we are invited to follow the eponymous hero, the amateur detective/journalist, Ric Hochet, being punched or beaten across the head, fall down trap doors or other precipices, become threatened with drowning, strangulation or electrocution, and then subsequently involved in further punch ups, gun fights, followed by explosions, images of severe mental anguish, torture, and, finally, his assassination and crucifixion (See Figure 1 & Figure 2 below).

Generally speaking, *Ric Remix* is a beautiful exercise in style, and a statement of admiration from one artist to another, as well as a very humorous satire that points up the violence of the original series. In an interview with the writer of this article Vandermeulen explains :



Fig. 1 - *Ric Remix*, page 28.

*Je ne me suis rien empêché du tout dans mes choix. Au contraire, je suis allé chercher les images de Ric Hochet les plus dérangeantes qui soient. L'une de mes préférées étant probablement celle où il écrase une vieille dame avec sa Porsche pour l'achever à coups de poings (see Figure 1).*

Taken at face value the work is therefore an amusing example of a nostalgic meta-graphic novel that is witty and pleasurable to read. *Ric Remix* is also a significant site that helps us to better understand the current fashion for all things retro. Certainly, *Ric Remix* gives the lie to the idea that works of appropriation are inauthentic or somehow less 'true' than those works of art that privilege an original authorial-creative voice. It is true that one tends to think of graphic novel encounters with

Fig. 2 - *Ric Remix*, page 24

history through a representation of a classic reflexive voice of a single creative writer-artist, weaving panels seamlessly between past and present; historical reconstruction and its contemporary after-effects – in short the model that was made classic by Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) and has been re-deployed in different ways on numerous subsequent occasions by other artists. *Ric Remix* does not follow any of these precepts but nonetheless still achieves a reflexive, new and independent work that is quite as authentic as any other independent graphic novel I know. Discussing *Remix* in some detail also sheds a fresh sidelight on themes raised in relation to historical memory of pop art and nostalgia by two of the pre-eminent scholars working in the field today, Jared Gardner (2012) and Bart Beaty (2012). On the one hand, Jared Gardner (149-179) posits that nostalgia, archives and collecting, are the thematic core

of contemporary graphic narrative. Discussing titles from for example Seth (1996) and Kim Deitch (2007), Gardner underlines the disposition for autobiographical works on obsessive collecting, introspective love of the old classic comics, and insider appreciation for lost sites of popular culture. He notes that these are the stories that matter in the early years of the twenty-first century, not least because they overlap with internet database culture. On the other hand, Beaty (2012 : 51-69) has underlined the extensive 'culture war' between comic artists and fine art in North America, notably fought around the rights and wrongs of 1960s pop art's appropriations of panels from romance and war comics. Here Beaty has underlined how creators such as Clowes, Chris Ware and Peter Bagge continue a critical response to the fine art world through satire and mockery, prototypically captured in Clowes's *Art School Confidential* strip (2006 [first published 1991]) and its subsequent film adaptation (2006). Beaty contextualizes this critical tradition through a historical emphasis on the comic world's longstanding resentment at the Pop Art world's downgrading of their work as another site of moribund mass culture, while then next reselling it as hugely profitable fine art. My reading of *Ric Remix* indicates that nostalgia culture need not at all be overtly autobiographical to achieve an authentic and thoughtful new intervention. It provides a distinctive approach from those tropes Gardner astutely discerns as being commonplace on the North American graphic narrative scene. Moreover, Vandermeulen's work intimates that comics and fine art/pop art need not be fixed in a relationship of *ressentiment*. On the contrary, *Remix* demonstrates an open, productive, encounter between the two fields. It is a position that I will suggest has its roots in the original 1960s French Pop Art and comic strip inter-plays, which were quite distinctive from the frustration with appropriation that was felt in New York.

It is through a number of paratextual devices that Vandermeulen suggests how to interpret *Ric Remix*. For example, the front cover is far closer to a reproduction of a work of a Roy Lichtenstein picture than to an illustration intended for a standard re-booted series of a pre-existing strip. Here, the eponymous hero takes center-stage in a maximum size blow up and is portrayed through a series of red, yellow, pink and blue colored Ben Day dots (a style never used in the real *Ric Hochet* books). On the same cover no single creator or even creative team is named very clearly. Instead, a small, but neat, text is presented to the bottom right of the main cover image. It informs that this is "A Tibet & A. P. Duchateau Story Remixed by DJ Vandermeulen". Turning inside, a substantial foreword reproduces quotations from the Situationist, Guy Debord, on a '*Théorie du Détournement*'. This quotation lists three substantial criteria :

1. *Au sens large du terme, le détournement est une remise en jeu globale.*
2. *Les deux loi fondamentales du détournement sont la perte d'importance, allant jusqu'à la déperdition de son sens premier, de chaque élément autonome*

détourné, et en même temps, l'organisation d'un autre ensemble signifiant qui confère à chaque élément sa nouvelle portée. 3. Le détournement est un jeu dû à la capacité de dévalorisation. Tous les éléments du passé culturel doivent être réinvestis ou disparaître. (2012)

Opposite these words there is a panoramic-style enlargement of *Ric Hochet*, who is shown waiting in line outside of a cinema. In magnified speech bubbles Ric remarks, “*Tu vas voir, Nadine, c’est très rigolo, très 2e degré...*” and she replies “*Rigolo?! Ça m’étonnerait!*” Next, on the standard page for dealing with copyright and other detailed publishing information, there is a further announcement stating that the work is derived from the original Duchateau and Tibet *Ric Hochet* books and that with the exception of reframing, nothing has been changed. To paraphrase further, the work has been produced under the constraints of the experimental school of graphic narrative, OuBaPo. On this same page, printed in similarly small text, there is also Vandermeulen’s Acknowledgements where he states that his focus is on the ‘comico-violence’ of *Ric Hochet*.<sup>2</sup>

Vandermeulen’s magnification of the extreme violence from the *Ric Hochet* series is a powerful authorial statement freighted with political implications. Through *Remix* Vandermeulen rewrites the original series away from its foundations in detective genre fiction and in so doing provides a new, critically aware, work in its own right. First, a brief historical digression is helpful to better understand how *Ric Remix* changes, critiques, and forgets the detective fiction aspect of the original works. Thus, throughout the original works, Duchateau’s writing provided tale after tale of classic detective fiction. Moreover, the series as a whole was first conceived as such being inspired by a television mystery series in which viewers and the on screen detective ‘solved’ the crime simultaneously (*Les Cinq dernières minutes* – series one 1958-1973). The *Ric Hochet* albums were loyal to this procedure and throughout their hey day they were paced using the standard plot conventions of the genre. In addition, they also shared the classical detective story’s balance of character parts whereby Ric is the amateur detective who ably assists the official police authority, the side-kick character, Detective Bourdon (here the set up follows Arthur Conan Doyle and Hergé). It is also the case that the backdrop to the albums was the classic milieu for detective fiction: the upper bourgeoisie community, peopled with industrialists, scientists, and business-people, of which Hochet is also a member, straightaway from the first page of his adventures he is fashionably dressed and driving a high performance sports car. In other words, the storyworld of the original series was essentially politically conservative and it fulfilled many of the ideological subtexts of its genre. Luc Boltanski explains in his study, *Énigmes et Complots* (2012) how such works fulfilled a substantial number of conservative political fantasies. Generally speaking, they reassured their readers that when the amateur detective solved the crime that the established bourgeois order had been defended. They also circulated a vision of reality in which law, state apparatus, courts and

police, and associated elites, were the only reality for the readers – the cultural depiction of the real, or in Boltanski's terms, the real of the real. Moreover, in the figure of the amateur detective, Ric, they asserted a powerful role for a trusted member of the elite class to intervene in some circumstances above and beyond the standard legal framework (a good example of this being found in for instance, Duchateau and Tibet's, *Alias Ric Hochet*, 1978). And, that is a trope that mimics and prepares the way for the politics of *raison d'état*.

Vandermeulen's appropriation removes the underlying detective storyworld of *Ric Hochet* and so with it the associated conservative ideological substructure. Notably, in his work no clearly defined 'enigma' is set up to be resolved, no list of suspects is presented and finally nothing in the conclusion to *Ric Remix* provides any sense of conventional narrative closure. In fact, *Ric Remix* ends on a surrealistic note with an image of Ric tied to a wooden cross with a young scantily clad woman falling towards him. It is a scene that is evocative of an adult B-movie and not a youth oriented detective story. Moreover, all reference to the state legal apparatus represented in the original series by Detective Bourdon and his police colleagues is minimized. Thus, Vandermeulen's surrealistic nightmare of comico-violence removes the pseudo-realism and genre conventions of the original strips. Instead of a traditional narrative of enigma and resolution the work as a whole is a study in the repetitive nature of violence in a mainstream comic. This is genuinely funny, reflexive, mode, but it is also an arresting new political suggestion, questioning as it does how mass entertainment is so associated with enjoying pictures of extreme violence. The new work's obsessive focus on Ric's movement, his body, his pain and suffering, means also that the general bourgeois setting of the original works is also mainly negated as these backdrops no longer matter (only in a very restricted number of images in *Ric Remix* is there an image of Ric's bright yellow Porsche). Moreover, the typical upper middle class suspects that fill the original works are entirely removed, and gone with them are the consumer objects, houses, grassy lawns, flying clubs, management board rooms, and so forth, that was the quintessential social setting of a *Ric Hochet* story. The selection of so many images of Ric's body, especially the blow ups of his face and golden hair (Tibet used the film star Gérard Blain as a model) even lend the work an implicitly homoerotic aspect, if not to say also an overtly sado-masochistic suggestiveness.

The deliberately repetitive content of *Ric Remix* also forces us as readers to reflect on our engagements with genre fiction *tout court*. It seems to me that an important questions posed by the work is how and why such repetitious cultural forms remain so popular. Thereby *Ric Remix* is not only making a satirical statement on the old Duchateau detective plots but also one about the fashion for serialization, rebooting and continuity narrative in contemporary *bande dessinée*. The work is therefore the anti-thesis of the so many upgraded, nostalgically re-made



serials that have in recent times in France seen continuity series such as new EP Jacobs 'Blake and Mortimer' books become almost as popular as the first publications from the 1950s and 1960s (maybe even more so). Through so many similar panels being repeated *Remix* works as a meta-satire on the very form of serialization itself.

*En passant*, the appropriation that establishes *Ric Remix* overlooks *Ric Hochet's* first home, *Tintin Magazine*. In its first printing the *Ric Hochet* series appeared therein alongside not only other comparable strips but also journalism and photographs aimed to inform and to educate both younger readers and adults. For example, reading the magazine for the sample year of 1964 its implicit ideological slant was conservative, federal European, and Catholic. Thus, in that period *Tintin Magazine* included a very serious and even devout strip narrating the story Saint Fatima (*Tintin Magazine* no 43, 1964, Yves Duval & F. Cheneval). In addition, in the same year the magazine published a news report on children from different Western European countries becoming friends and recognizing that a group-visit to the Berlin Wall confirmed their new fraternity as Europeans. And, this value judgment is followed shortly afterward with a more equivocal comment on the Berlin Olympic stadium of 1936 ("*Les enfants silencieux considèrent rêveusement ce vestige grandiose d'un régime honni, mais aussi d'une époque où Berlin était une grande et belle capitale*"). In another issue from the same period, the magazine's editorial page warned its readers against the fashion for youth gangs and guided that to be a 'copain' ('good friend'; 'cool kid') was not to act like a menacing teenager. When we enjoy and laugh at *Ric Remix* through its selected appropriations we are also losing sight of its very first public incarnation in *Tintin Magazine*. I am not suggesting that Vandermeulen could have fully integrated a satire on that publication into his new collage of the old panels. Instead, I am evidencing that his selection is unique and partial, and that it is *not* intended to be a detailed museum or a systematic archive.

Vandermeulen's strategy of using *Ric Hochet* materials to critically rethink *Ric Hochet* is unique. One is familiar with the longstanding re-drawings of Tintin strips into something rather crude and violent: the tactic taken up on the underground comix scene for some years and also more recently being a part of the mainstream world of graphic narrative (see Winschluss 2012) and fine art (see Kannemeyer 2010). However, such works have always involved new original art work made 'in the style of' the material being mocked. For example, Anton Kannemeyer appropriates images associated with the Tintin comics but in so doing he creates new pastiche pictures of his own that he blends further into contexts that speak to the politics of post-apartheid South Africa. Vandermeulen rejects this option of adding new inter-textual materials or re-drawings of his own making and relies entirely on his creative re-use of the existing corpus. Here, then, the closest comparisons are to be found in fine art's appropriations from cinema and not satirical or pas-

tiche graphic novels or underground comix. It is on this cultural ground that a comparable zero modification of content has been previously deployed to great effect. Think for example of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) in which Alfred Hitchcock's original film was re-screened at a speed slow enough to run for the period of a day. Perhaps nearer to Vandermeulen's treatment, there is Charlie Lyne's 'online' Youtube re-composition of typical scenes from Hollywood teenage melodramas – *Beyond Clueless* (2014). What each of these works has in common with *Ric Remix* is that they make an interpretation on their subjects by exclusively re-using the same original content.

Nonetheless, it would be a reductive interpretation to understand *Ric Remix* simply as a powerful satire, an experiment in appropriation and nostalgia with politically satirical teeth. The removal of any clear formal narrative/enigma, as well as the inclusion of a high number of panels without words, means that the work emphasizes the visual qualities of Tibet's contribution over the writing of Duchateau. (After all, it is plausible to treat *Ric Remix* as a silent comic, in the style of the famous wordless novels of the 1930s [e.g. from Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward] wherein the pictures related all of the narrative information). While this aspect contributes to the critical reworking of ideological subtext that is described in the above paragraphs, the same insistence on Tibet's art has a more celebratory and much less sarcastic effect. Panel after panel of dynamic pictures of Ric's suffering, spliced between close ups of his sweat filled brow, remind us as readers of the power of the original art work from the *Ric Hochet* series. It is Vandermeulen's emphases on the image that asserts the status of Tibet as a significant artist in his own right.<sup>3</sup> This intervention is quite as transformative of the source material as the work's satirical undertones. For let us recall that the celebration of Tibet was never the point of the original titles from which *Remix* is derived, therein words and images functioned together to disseminate detective stories to mass readerships who wanted that aspect foregrounded. Moreover, it introduces a powerful ambiguity to Vandermeulen's amalgamation of panels. The tension between satire and commemoration that results is one of the work's most powerful achievements.

Writing of the fashion for appropriation in fine art in the 1980s, art critic Eleanor Heartney underlined that it mostly left her cold, it was an "empty game". And, specifically on a nostalgic appropriation she notes: "unhealthy infatuation [...] mindless complacency", a space where "individuality was lost" (1985 : 26-30). Vandermeulen's politics in *Ric Remix* prove that the contrary effect is possible even when using similar means. It is a work that demonstrates how significant independent authorial political commitment can be developed through appropriation after all. Furthermore, it is the scale of Vandermeulen's knowledge of his material, his ability to re-pattern from such a vast corpus of existing imagery that insures that the reader understands and appreciates his presence.

The work is the creation of an “*organisateur conscient*” (Didi-Huberman citing Jean-Luc Godard 2015 : 30) who controls the material of the old comic to author a new work, shaped by the values discussed above. Moreover, it also goes to show that a knowing, self-created, historical argumentation is achievable without any overt autobiographical narrator as typically found in contemporary graphic novels of Seth or Deitch, or as Spiegelman established. Indeed no intra-diegetic narrator is needed at all because the organizational control of the cited old comics panels makes this presence always deeply felt. Certainly such a tactic is refreshing when compared with the now long running US graphic novel trend for quasi-autobiographical, mannered, treatments on the history of Pop Culture. Needless to say, works from Seth, Deitch, and others have their own qualities in abundance (see Baetens and Frey 2015 : 226-227). My point is simply that the current of work that they represent, and that Gardner neatly dissects (2012), is not frozen in time or by any means the only mode through which to constitute a knowing, funny, radical, reading of pop culture’s history.

To better understand the conscious organization of the panels in *Remix* let us briefly sketch in Vandermeulen’s tactics. For it is precisely these processes that further signal the originality of the work. First, considerable forethought on panel selection insures a temporal consistency to the remix. Thus the pictures selected work together as if they had been drawn at one time and in one place. Therefore nothing that deeply signifies a decade and its fashions (e.g. car style; architecture, interior design; clothes; Ric’s personal housemaid from the earliest albums) is included. Especially important here is the eradication of most background details that for example could have evoked the design style of the decade of original publication. It is also the case that while one can identify some evolutions in the drawing style of Ric himself, Vandermeulen’s editing limits this variation. Second, it is also important to return to the silence of the work. In selecting panels with few words, and by editing out text altogether from some of the panels that are used, the visual qualities of the page are quite profoundly magnified when compared to those that featured in the original. When one compares ‘authentic’ *Hochet* pages and ‘new’ one’s by Vandermeulen, it is ultimately the new emphasis on the image rather than the word that makes *Ric Remix* so successful (though certainly those words that are used are deployed effectively to generate a dialogue that functions). This is a game of mirrors, but it is one in which Vandermeulen’s pages are not straightforward reflections. The new work is a visually much stronger exercise than any of the early *Ric Hochet* books that were, ‘written all over’, with speech bubbles, contextual narration, and so forth. To publicly note this very subtle re-designing, and the primacy of the image over the word, Vandermeulen also includes a full page that utterly transgresses the standard twelve-panel grid of classic *Ric Hochet* (2012 : 40). Here he presents six panels, layered out diagonally across

the page, with increasing white space beneath and between them. It is a subtle but powerful signal of Vandermeulen's presence in the appropriation process. Third, the panel selections, arrangements on the page and their organization through runs of thematically similar images across sets of pages, is not *exclusively* based on the subject matter of action and violence. Thus, Vandermeulen guarantees that the visual content of the panels he places on a page functions to provide a look of the page that is comparable to a traditional comic. Thus, the positioning of Ric inside the frame, the establishment of perspective and point of view inside sequences of panels, are all managed to establish coherence between the panels and through the pages. This strategy to control the visual content of each panel and its relation to the next one is evidenced clearly in Figure 1 (see above). Here it is easy to identify how the images selected for the car chase sequence work together to achieve a functional sequential story, and produce a unified tabular 'look' to the page as a whole. In addition, the underlying shapes and symbols found in Tibet's original artwork are also magnified through the panel selections to gain another level of visual coherence and therefore readability. As can be seen in Figure 2 (above) it is the recurrent motif of the circle – found in swish lines, but also whirlpools, psychedelic bubbles, traffic lights, shattered windows, that adds a further level of cohesion to the finished appropriation. The exaggerated presence of these more abstract motifs lends a psychedelic quality to the work that supports its narrative intervention against the conservatism of mid twentieth century detective fiction. It is also a device that evokes Op Art styling with its comparable employment of complex patterning and visual symmetry.

The above rhetorical devices shape *Ric Remix* and they signify Vandermeulen's status as its conscious organizer. However before we may conclude, it is important to return to one final facet of the work that thus far has remained overlooked – the appropriation of pop art itself. After all, the first appropriation of *Remix*, that is signaled by the cover art, is not really from Tibet and the *Ric Hochet* series at all, but is instead from the world of pop art itself. For it is here that Vandermeulen deploys the magnification or blow up techniques of Lichtenstein, including the insertion of the Ben-Day dot motif. Just as *Ric Hochet* changes in *Ric Remix* so too does the borrowed Lichtenstein and Warhol. In a reversal of the original pop art gambit of taking from the mass culture to make fine art, now it is fine art imagery that is incorporated into a graphic novel. Such a deployment is essentially of a democratizing nature. It repositions an elite high art aesthetic into the hands of readers who are generally speaking interested in popular culture, and, in particular, *Ric Hochet*. This strategy further boosts the reputation of Tibet for now he is no longer an artist working on a mass consumer serialization but is exhibited in *Remix* alongside and through the aesthetics we associate with a Lichtenstein or a Warhol. Here then is a dramatic correction of the feelings of anger felt by the original comic strip illustrators who in

the 1960s had felt wronged by Lichtenstein's appropriations of their works (see Beaty 2012 : 56-59). In addition, the blending of Pop Art into a traditional French language serial comic alters cultural geography. Through *Remix* the implication is that the localized European popular cultural product, *Ric Hochet*, can take the stage alongside American high art aesthetics and contexts. Nonetheless, these implications are smuggled into the work with great nuance. Vandermeulen is not participating in a turf war with the fine art world and as such his work is distinctive from the more overt satires against the fine art world such as in Daniel Clowes's strip and film, *Art School Confidential*, and particularly in his film version of *Ghost World*.

Historical context starts to explain Vandermeulen's comparatively unified approach to graphic narrative and pop art. In some quarters, Francophone pop artists were always appreciative of the *bande dessinée* tradition, notably the work of Hergé. This is especially well illustrated through reading the collected interviews of artist Hervé Télémaque (Le Thorel 2015) whose *catalogue raisonné* includes appropriations from the father of the Belgian *ligne-claire* school. Repeatedly therein Hervé acknowledges Hergé's innovation and his value, while also regularly comparing his importance to Fernand Léger. Similarly, the same interviews note that Parisian Pop Art and comic dialogues were not a binary paradigm, run for or against each other. Appropriation was not a two way street, for or against, but rather it was part of a broader cultural context in which fine art, *BD*, and also the cinema were entering into relatively free exchange and dialogue. On the borders of these disciplines there is even a directly comparable work to *Ric Remix*, the long forgotten photo-illustrated essay on the director, H.-G. Clouzot. Written by early comics specialist, Francis Lacassin, and Raymond Bellour, *Le Procès Clouzot*, (1964) assembles thematically organized film stills to capture the repeated subjects from the director's career. For example, sequences of photo plates are organized through sub-headings such as '*Clefs pour Clouzot*' and '*Décor Obsessionnel : la salle de classe*'. Double stills of actresses Brigitte Bardot and Cécile Aubry are printed side by side to show comparable expressions of fear as portrayed in Clouzot's *La Vérité* (1960) and previously *Manon* ([1949] see Figure 3). This title is a 'Clouzot Remix', combining these extensive photo-montage sequences with a structuralist analysis of the director's works. In this context, it is also necessary to underline that early French language graphic novelists already used, appropriated and recycled the very symbols of Pop Art. For instance, the contribution of Guy Peellaert who in titles such as *Pravda La Survireuse* ([1968], with text from Pascal Thomas) not only borrowed the visual style of the American Pop artists, but also recuperated their very materials. Thus, *Pravda* included numerous pop-style images of mass consumer items (e.g. Coca-Cola bottles) and even a large panel that directly re-played Andy Warhol's Campbell soup tins. Such brief remarks are not intended to be a history of the Francophone fine art/

comic art dialogue.<sup>4</sup> What they do point to is two sites of memory within that history that begin to explain the nuanced weaving of traditions that is exemplified in *Ric Remix*. Vandermeulen himself appears to read his own work and career this way, noting in interview that the techniques of Pop Art found in *Remix* are also what he has used in his major historical biography, the graphic novel, *Fritz Haber* (2005; 2007) He explains, in my opinion far too modestly : “*Quand j’écris un scénario de Fritz Haber, lorsque je mets en scène des personnages historiques, je ne fais rien d’autre que du cut-up. Je n’invente quasi rien dans mes scénarios, tout est une succession de choses puisées dans des livres d’histoire ou de sciences humaines*”. (Interview with author, 2016)



Fig. 3 - Brigitte Bardot, on the left (*La vérité* 1960); Cécile Aubry, Michel Auclair, on the right (*Manon* 1949).



Fig. 4 - Yves Montand and Charles Vanel, on the left (*Le salaire de la peur* 1953); Henri-Georges Clouzot and Paul Meurisse, on the right, during the shooting of *Les Diaboliques* (1955).

In conclusion, in this article I have suggested that the new nostalgia graphic novel, that uses and recalls Pop Art, *Ric Remix*, offers an original approach to themes that have perplexed creators and critics for sometime. In it Vandermeulen shows that it is possible to return to the past without being a collector or self-obsessed retro-junky whose story is just a circular encounter with the imagined autobiographical self. The relatively explicit politics of *Remix* underline that any such commemorative activity is not a neutral process but rather an opportunity to impose an informed and modern vision on the past. Giving the lie to the idea that appropriation is sterile, authorless, un-romantic, the work shows an active and engaged artist who knowingly works to create a unique interpretation of postwar European comics and indeed Pop Art as well. It is the scale, skill, and nuance of Vandermeulen's appropriation that always reminds us of his hand, the conscious organization of appropriated panels. Similarly, *Ric Remix* does not conform to expectations on the sometimes conflict filled relationships between comics and fine art worlds. As I have noted above there may be specific Francophone precedents for this. Whatever the deep long-term context, Vandermeulen's work shows that comics and fine art can be appropriated together and that when this process occurs neither is left quite the same as before.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank David Vandermeulen for giving up his time to so fully answer my questions about *Ric Remix*.
2. Vandermeulen has explained the publishing backdrop to the work. A project of the kind discussed in this article had been planned since around 2002, and was originally intended for the independent publishing house, *Cinquième Couche*. When Vandermeulen approached Lombard to gain image rights to undertake the *Remix* the then editor at Lombard, Yves Sente, invited him to bring the project to the house. Working with Lombard meant that the best possible rendition of images was essential and that while original *Ric Hochet* albums were being digitalized, Vandermeulen's work could not be completed, thereby delaying publication.
3. The commemoration of Tibet in *Remix* is an important part of the work. It is an aspect that is further underlined by the fact that Vandermeulen curated an exhibition of Tibet's work shortly after his publication – 'Planches mémorables', Brussels, (September to October 2012).
4. Culturally specific histories of comic/Pop Art inter-play in national contexts would be one useful direction for future research on these matters. For instance, a good starting point for the British tradition is John-Paul Stonard's detailed historical reconstruction of the source material for Richard Hamilton's (1956 collage) 'Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?' (2007).

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## Abstract

This article provides an original analysis of David Vandermeulen's work, *Ric Remix* (2012). It underlines how it appropriates and reimagines the classic French language comic strip detective series by Tibet & Duchateau, '*Ric Hochet*'. That work was first published in *Tintin Magazine* (starting full serializations in 1961) and has continued to the present day. The article uses Vandermeulen's work to show that it does not conform to many contemporary expectations about either the comics/Pop Art relationship, or the current fashion for nostalgia as a common contemporary theme in graphic narrative. *Ric Remix* evidences that the graphic narrative format can successfully use and recuperate Pop Art images and techniques without implying any great *ressentiment*. It informs that retro work can offer new and fascinating perspectives when shaped by a strong underlying political philosophy.

**Keywords** : Detective Fiction; European Classic Comics; Pop Art; Nostalgia; Re Mix; Ric Hochet; David Vandermeulen.



## Résumé

Dans cet article l'auteur propose une analyse originale de l'oeuvre de David Vandermeulen, *Ric Remix* (2012), en soulignant la manière dont cette bande dessinée s'approprié et réinvente la série classique réalisée par Tibet & Duchateau, "Ric Hochet". Le personnage de Ric Hochet est d'abord apparu pour la première fois dans le *Magazine Tintin* avant sa sérialisation à compter de 1961. *Les aventures de Ric Hochet* sont encore publiées de nos jours. L'article se sert de l'oeuvre de Vandermeulen pour montrer qu'elle ne correspond pas aux nombreuses attentes contemporaines concernant la relation entre bande dessinée et Pop Art, ni à la mode actuelle pour la nostalgie en tant que *topos* contemporain de la narration graphique. L'hypothèse défendue ici est que *Ric Remix* montre que le format narratif graphique peut utiliser et récupérer des images et des techniques pop art sans ressentiment. Dès lors, il appert que le travail rétro peut offrir de nouvelles perspectives fascinantes lorsqu'il est soutenu par une philosophie politique forte.

**Mots-clés** : Roman policier; bande dessinée; Pop Art; nostalgie; cultures de remix; Ric Hochet; David Vandermeulen.

HUGO FREY is Professor of Cultural and Visual History at University of Chichester, West Sussex, UK, where he is also Head of Department of History and Politics. He has published widely on French, Belgium, and North American history, literature, film, and graphic narrative. His books include *Louis Malle* (Manchester University Press 2004); *Nationalism and Cinema in France : Political Mythologies and Film Events* (Berghahn Books 2014); and he is co-author with Jan Baetens of *The Graphic Novel : An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press 2015). He has also contributed essays to *Journal of European Studies*; *Modern and Contemporary France*; *South Central Review*; and *Yale French Studies*.