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History at a Child's Eye Level: Pedagogical Mediation of the Colonial Past in the Documentary Graphic Novel *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* (Lumni, 2023)

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Abstract

This article examines the documentary graphic novel *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* (Lumni, 2023) to assess its ability to represent the complexity of Algeria's colonial past and to transmit a plural memory to a young audience. The research question addresses how the series renders the diversity of Algerian memories while respecting the pedagogical requirements of its broadcaster, together with the narrative and visual devices it mobilizes to avoid simplifying a conflictual past. Drawing on a semiotic methodology grounded in the work of Barthes, Groensteen, Chion, and McCloud, the analysis addresses simultaneously the visual signs, the sound devices suggested by the drawing, and the narrative construction across the series' six episodes. The study is further situated within the theoretical frameworks of Halbwachs, Stora, and the postcolonial approaches of Bancel and Blanchard, so as to position the work at the crossroads of history and memory. The results show that the graphic novel deploys a rich formal hybridity that portrays the Casbah as a multicultural space while giving voice to historically marginalized communities, particularly the Jews of Algeria. The child narrators embody a "history at a child's eye level" that fosters both emotional identification and critical understanding. The article nonetheless highlights the limitations imposed by the short format required by Lumni's pedagogical mission, which leads to certain simplifications of identity. In conclusion, *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* emerges as a tool of historical mediation capable of reconciling documentary rigor, accessibility, and narrative sensitivity, thereby contributing to the decolonization of imaginaries and to the renewal of educational practices concerning the colonial past.



Keywords: Casbah, colonial memory, documentary comics, pedagogical mediation, young audience.

Introduction

There are places where history is not told in a straight line: it murmurs with overlapping voices, curls through narrow alleyways, and passes in hushed tones from one generation to the next. The Casbah of Algiers in the 1950s is one such place, a complex site of memory where individual narratives intersect with collective historical stakes, bearing, as Benjamin Stora reminds us, “a torn memory, pulled between several allegiances” (1991, p. 15), composed of fragments that coexist without always converging.

It is into this tangle that the documentary series *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* (Lumni, 2023), directed by Antoine Colomb, ventures. Across six brief yet dense episodes, it restores a voice to the Berber, Jewish, Arab, and European communities that once populated this emblematic neighborhood, offering a nuanced rereading of a history too often reduced to binary oppositions, colonizers versus colonized, victors versus vanquished.

This work belongs to what Marc Ferro (2004) calls *docufiction*: a hybrid genre, situated between archive and narrative, that blends authentic documents, animated sequences, and fictional voices in order to, in Lumni’s own words (2023), “make history palpable to a young audience.” Palpable, yet not simplified: it is precisely this tension that commands our attention, at a time when postcolonial approaches call for the deconstruction of dominant narratives and for giving voice to long-silenced memories (Bancel & Blanchard, 2018).

Two concepts will guide this reading. The first, borrowed from Maurice Halbwachs, distinguishes collective memory, a living, ceaselessly reinterpreted reconstruction of the past by the groups who carry it (1950, p. 78), from history, a critical reconstitution grounded in verifiable sources: *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* resolutely opts for the former register, that of private notebooks and whispered recollections, rather than factual chronology. The second, drawn from postcolonial studies, sheds light on how the series decenters the historical narrative by granting equal voice to the Jewish, Berber, Arab, and European communities, thereby challenging the silences of the colonial archive; the episode devoted to the Jews of Algeria, in particular, responds to what Joshua Schreier calls the post-independence “erasure of memory” (2017), turning the graphic novel into an instrument of polyphonic restitution akin to what Michel Foucault termed “counter-histories.”

From this intersection of living memory and documentary rigor arise our two guiding questions: how does the series manage to convey the diversity of Algerian memories while respecting the pedagogical requirements of its broadcaster? And through what narrative and visual devices does it avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification or concealment? Having outlined our methodological approach, we will present the results of the semiotic analysis of the six episodes before discussing the work’s scope and limitations.

I. Reading the Image, Hearing the Silence

Our methodological approach combines a fine-grained semiotic analysis of graphic devices with attention to creative intentions, following the dual paradigm that Jullier and Leveratto (2012) distinguish between “textual” and “contextual” reading. The corpus consists of the series’ six episodes, treated as so many communal tableaux organized around a single neighborhood and a single temporal frame.

For the textual analysis, we draw on the framework proposed by Roland Barthes (1964) and his three levels of signification, denoted, connoted, and symbolic, systematically applied to three dimensions of the work: visual choices (framing, color, editing), the sound elements suggested by the drawing (voice, music, sound effects), and narrative devices (temporal structure, focalization). Particular attention is paid to the shifts from one image regime to another, from archive to animation, which McCloud (1993) and Metz (1968) allow us to read as plays of “differential iconicity,” as well as to the child’s voice-over, which Bonitzer (1985) describes as a device for the “subjectivization of historical narrative.”

This internal reading would ideally have benefited from a complementary contextual analysis: semi-structured interviews with the production team, conducted according to the method advocated by Vanoye (1992) for grasping “creative intentions,” would have shed light on the choices of historical mediation, the constraints imposed by Lumni, and the trade-offs between rigor and accessibility. Such a device, in keeping with the requirement of an “integrated media analysis” (Esquenazi, 2009), could not, however, be implemented: the difficulty of accessing the series’ creators and the absence of data on its actual reception by young audiences constitute the main limitations of our approach, which we take into account in interpreting the results, bearing in mind, following Umberto Eco (1979), that the intention of the work can always diverge from that of its author as much as from that of its reader.

II. The Semiotic Analysis: What the Panels Say

1. A Boundary Object Between History and Memory

The analysis first reveals *Raconte-moi l’Algérie* as a boundary object, woven at the crossroads of regimes of historicization and constructions of memory. Paul Ricoeur had already summed up this oscillation: “the representation of the past always oscillates between historical reconstruction and the work of memory” (2000, p. 45). The series embodies this in its very substance: on the one hand, its precise anchoring in the 1955 Casbah and its reliance on authentic visual archives attest to a will toward rigorous restitution; on the other, its fictional characters and animation partake of a genuine “aestheticization of memory” (Rousso, 2016, p. 112), a hallmark of contemporary docufictions.

This tension permeates the treatment of the communities represented. Through its six portraits, the series accomplishes what Halbwachs (1950, p. 42) called the “narrativization of marginalized voices,” giving substance to what Bancel and Blanchard (2018) term the “subaltern memories” of the colonial period. The episode devoted to the Jews of Algeria offers the most striking example of this: it fills what Valensi (1986, p. 78) described as a

"structural amnesia." The choice to address a school-age audience is far from incidental, school, as Lantheaume reminds us, remains "the privileged site for the transmission of national narratives" (2007, p. 34), thereby granting the series an active role in reshaping the historical imaginaries of younger generations.

Formally, this same tension resurfaces in the grain of the image and the timbre of the voices. The child narration, by producing what Jost (1999) calls a "reality effect," forges an emotional identification without relinquishing critical distance; the photographic archives, brought back to life through color, give substance to Ferro's idea that "the historical film must make one feel in order to make one understand" (2004, p. 56). It is this fragile balance between memorial ambition and the constraints of the short format that makes the series such a fertile field of study, a balance whose concrete workings the following results make explicit.

2. The Voices of the Casbah: Communal Representations

To descend into the alleyways of the Casbah as the series depicts them is to discover a "laboratory of coexistence, but also of colonial tensions," to borrow Kateb's image (1998, p. 145). Each community finds a face there, though the series does not entirely yield to the temptation of the ethnographic catalogue, a point to which we will return.

The representation of Algerian Jews constitutes the work's most significant contribution, filling what Schreier (2010, p. 87) called a "historiographical blind spot." The episode devoted to them shows characters rooted in the urban fabric of the Casbah, frequenting the same markets as their Muslim neighbors, that "secular rootedness" described by Attal (1996, p. 63). Yet the series refrains from any idealization: it lets surface, as Bahloul notes (1996, p. 112), "the early warning signs of rupture," in a wary glance, a whispered conversation.

The Europeans of Algeria, for their part, escape the monolithic figure of the colonist: Spanish shopkeeper or French administrator, they form a stratified population that echoes Prochaska's analysis of "the identity ambiguity of the *petits blancs*" (1990, p. 154), some of them developing, in Lorcín's words, "a form of paradoxical indigeneity" (1995, p. 203).

As for the Berber populations, the series spares them the folklore to which so many media representations reduce them. Following Goodman's recommendations (2005, p. 91), it portrays them as "full-fledged actors of urban modernity": Kabyle craftsmen discussing politics with customers of every origin, embodying what McDougall (2006, p. 134) calls the "plural Arabness" of colonial Algeria.

This polyphony does not, however, entirely escape the risk Silverstein points to: "any attempt to render colonial diversity risks falling into the trap of ethnographic enumeration" (2004, p. 118). Constrained by the brevity of the format, certain episodes do indeed schematize communal identities. On the whole, however, the series avoids the pitfall of the "reductive orientalism" denounced by Said (1978, p. 56), offering instead what Memmi (1957, p. 89) might have called a "contrapuntal portrait" of colonial societies.

3. The Narrative Devices of Historical Storytelling

To embody the human dimension of the colonial past, the series relies on children's voices as fictional narrators, a strategy Nicholas (2006, p. 78) describes as "testimony by proxy." This choice aligns with the notion of *postmemory* coined by Marianne Hirsch (2012): the way in which subsequent generations inherit, without having lived it, a past that continues to haunt them. The child's voice, Bosséno observes, "operates as a filter that is at once naïve and profoundly revealing" (1992, p. 112); beneath its apparent candor, the underlying tensions of colonial society surface.

Compared with other Algerian docufictions, notably Lledo's *Algérie, notre histoire* (2007), the series reveals quite distinct aesthetic choices. Where Lledo favors, according to Higbee, "an aesthetic of fragmentation and collage" (2013, p. 45), *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* opts for a linear, accessible narration consistent with the pedagogical requirements of its broadcaster — an illustration of the "multiple regimes of truth in historical cinema" that Austin discusses (2007, p. 89). Both works nonetheless share the same concern for what Stora calls "history at eye level" (2004, p. 56), which favors micro-narratives over grand frescoes.

Modest objects also circulate from one episode to another, a schoolboy's exercise book passed from hand to hand, from a Jewish child to a young Berber and then to a European, functioning as "metonymic punctuations" (Metz, 1971, p. 134): they materialize social interdependence without erasing cultural singularities, embodying what Rancière calls "the heuristic power of ordinary objects in historical narrative" (2003, p. 67).

This narrative economy finally expresses the tension that Rosenstone locates between "historical truth and dramatic necessity" (2006, p. 23). Unlike more experimental works such as Stora's *Les Années algériennes* (1991, p. 45), the series opts for a cautious balance between factual restitution and accessibility, the "perennial dilemma of the historical documentarian" that Ferro describes (2004), and in doing so manages to reach its young audience without succumbing to the Manichaeism that Branche (2005) denounced in representations of the Algerian War.

4. The Semiotic Grammar of the Six Episodes

It remains to enter into the very grain of the panels, where, image by image, the fabric of meaning is woven. Three registers intertwine here: visual signs, the sound devices suggested by the drawing, and the narrative architecture that sustains them.

a. Visual signs.

The work's graphic strategy fully exploits the iconic resources of the medium, what Fresnault-Deruelle calls "a specific visual grammar in which every chromatic and compositional choice participates in the construction of historical meaning" (1976, p. 89). The treatment of the flashbacks (panel 5) offers a first demonstration of this: the sepia palette and the sketch-like line produce a "temporal distancing effect" (Morgan, 2005, p. 112) without

breaking graphic continuity with the main narrative. The framing, for its part, favors tight shots on symbolic objects, such as the annotated schoolbook (panel 7, frame 4), which functions as a “visual synecdoche” (Peeters, 2002, p. 67). The integration of reworked archival material, the colorized and partly faded photograph of the Place du Gouvernement (panel 9, frame 2), illustrates what Groensteen calls the “documentary dialectic” (2011, p. 134), between respect for the source and creative reappropriation; the central double-page spread (panels 10–11), where the vertical arrangement of frames materializes colonial hierarchies, applies the principle of “signifying topography” dear to Screech (2005, p. 45). Finally, the alternation between saturated colors (panel 3, market scene) and muted tones (panel 14, nocturnal scene) gives the narrative a visual rhythm that, according to McCloud, “orchestrates the emotional charge of the historical narrative” (1993, p. 78).

b. Sound devices.

Although fundamentally a visual medium, the graphic novel nonetheless deploys remarkable inventiveness in suggesting sound through line and stroke, creating what Groensteen calls a “visual polyphony” (2011, p. 78). The speech balloons come first: bubbles with irregular outlines for intimate dialogue (panel 4, frame 3), reflecting a “typography of subjectivity” (Peeters, 1998, p. 112); rectangular frames and neutral typography for historical commentary (panel 6), a register Morgan describes as “documentary authority” (2005, p. 45). Music follows: in panel 8, notes escaping from a lute morph into visual arabesques, a “graphic synesthesia” according to Fresnault-Deruelle (1976, p. 134), while the musicians’ movements, broken down into several successive images, apply McCloud’s principle of “kinetic figuration” (1993, p. 67). The sounds of the city, finally, take the form of repetitive graphic motifs (panel 2) or, as with the doughnut vendor’s cry (panel 3, frame 5), embrace “sonic dynamics” itself (Screech, 2005, p. 112) — so many devices that together compose, in Morgan’s words, “a sensory thickness of the past” (2007, p. 78).

c. Narrative architecture.

The construction of the narrative finally obeys a rigorous symbolic architecture that “orchestrates the plurality of historical voices through a specific sequential grammar” (Groensteen, 2011, p. 92). Each episode embodies a community in a young protagonist: thus Samira (panels 4–6), a figure of the Berber community, whose journey between family tradition and urban modernity illustrates the “focalizing-witness principle” dear to Blanchard (2014, p. 78). The architectural metaphor culminates in the central double-page spread (panels 12–13), where the Casbah becomes a multi-story house, each community occupying a distinct yet connected space, an image of the “spatial coexistence” theorized by Kateb (1998, p. 56), whose staircases and landings (panel 13, frame 4) trace the “narrative bridges” evoked by Peeters (2002, p. 89). Finally, the cyclical structure of the work, which opens and closes on the same schoolyard scene (panel 1, frame 1; panel 24, frame 6), produces a “historical mirror effect” (Screech, 2005, p. 112), while the schoolbook, a recurring motif in McCloud’s sense (1993, p. 67), unifies the episodes without erasing their singularities. The series thus escapes

the trap of identity fragmentation denounced by Said (1978), composing instead what Stora calls a “history in mosaic” (2004, p. 45), in which each piece retains its own grain while participating in a single overall design.

III. Between Memory and Pedagogy: The Scope and Limits of a Boundary Work

These results invite us to return to our initial question: does the series succeed in reconciling memorial restitution with pedagogical requirements? Two observations stand out.

First, the work carries out a genuine act of memorial repair by restoring visibility to groups long silenced by official history. As Schreier reminds us, “the Jews of Algeria were conspicuously absent from post-independence narratives” (2017, p. 56); the series fills this gap in its third episode (panels 10–12), where the scene at the Cohen grocery store (panel 10, frame 3) lets surface, with great economy of means, the discreet signs of a preserved identity, a menorah on a shelf, kosher products, without ever freezing the community into folklore or victimhood, thereby extending what Bahloul called “the fragile memory of minorities” (1996, p. 112). The character of David (panel 12) embodies on his own “the complexity of Algerian Jewish identities, torn between multiple allegiances” (Stora, 2007, p. 89), and the restraint with which the celebration of Shabbat is portrayed (panel 11, frame 5) materializes that “secular rootedness” evoked by Attal (1996, p. 63).

Second, this memorial repair rests on a deliberately embraced formal hybridity: period photographs and illustrations enter into dialogue, confirming Honess Roe’s intuition that “documentary animation creates an emotional proximity with the past” (2013, p. 89). Panel 5, where drawn characters are superimposed onto a colorized photograph of the Casbah, offers the clearest example of this — a “temporal stratification” in Ferro’s sense (2004, p. 67), as does the fluid transition between photograph and drawing (panel 14) or the insertion of an authentic newspaper excerpt (panel 17), which produces that “reality effect” dear to Barthes (1964, p. 45). Panel 8, where black-and-white archival material serves as the backdrop to an animated scene in color, encapsulates on its own the dialectic between memory and history that Ricœur analyzed (2000).

These qualities do not exempt us from measuring their limits. The brevity of the episodes and the broadcaster’s pedagogical mission impose simplifications that Perego summarizes thus: they “can sometimes reify the very identities they claim to nuance” (2021, p. 67). This tension, already noted with respect to the Berber and European populations, stems less from a flaw in conception than from a structural constraint of the short format, a constraint that any historical mediation aimed at young people must negotiate. To this must be added the limitations specific to our method, noted above: for lack of an interview with Antoine Colomb, the creative intentions, the choice to “show history at a child’s eye level” (preliminary interview, 2023), and the trade-offs between historical rigor and collaboration with historians remain interpretive hypotheses rather than documented certainties; and for

lack of reception data, the series' actual effect on its young audience remains to be established.

These limitations point to several avenues for extending this work: a systematic comparison with Lledo's *Algérie, notre histoire* (2007) would make it possible to assess how different media negotiate the same memorial issues; a study of actual reception, in line with De Cock's (2018) work on the pedagogical uses of historical graphic novels, would measure the real impact of this mediation effort; and an interview with the creative team would, finally, confront our interpretive hypotheses with the authors' stated intentions.

Conclusion

At the close of this analysis, *Raconte-moi l'Algérie* reveals the heuristic potential of the documentary graphic novel as a tool for decolonizing historical narratives. As Mbembe stresses (2010, p. 34), "the decolonization of imaginaries requires a reconfiguration of regimes of representation," and the work under study contributes significantly to this through its polyphonic restitution of the Algiers Casbah. The graphic novel indeed manages to "give voice to the voiceless of official history" (Stora, 2004, p. 78), notably through its innovative treatment of the Jewish community and other marginalized groups. Nevertheless, as Perego notes (2021, p. 67), "the constraints inherent in the short format and the young audience impose simplifications that can sometimes reify the very identities they claim to nuance." The brevity of the episodes (six panels each) and the pedagogical necessity indeed lead to a degree of schematization, limiting the complexity of the representations.

This analysis opens up several promising avenues of research. A systematic comparison with Lledo's *Algérie, notre histoire* (2007, p. 45), analyzed by Higbee (2013) as an example of "fragmented postcolonial cinema," would make it possible to assess how different media approach the same memorial issues. Likewise, a study of actual reception among young readers, in line with De Cock's work (2018, p. 112) on "the pedagogical uses of historical graphic novels," would prove crucial for measuring the real impact of this decolonial endeavor. As Bancel concludes (2018, p. 156), "popular media, when they acknowledge their limitations while questioning dominant narratives, can constitute valuable laboratories for rethinking our relationship to the colonial past." *Raconte-moi l'Algérie*, through its balance between historical rigor and narrative creativity, thus offers a suggestive model for future experiments in historical mediation. It is precisely this fruitful tension between memorial ambition and pedagogical constraint that makes the work such a valuable case study for rethinking the mediation of the colonial past for new generations.

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