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## Heteroglossia and Polyphony in *Le Chat du Rabbin* by Joann Sfar

Brian Boomhower  
*University of South Carolina*

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Heteroglossia and Polyphony in *Le Chat du Rabbin* by Joann Sfar

by

Brian Boomhower

Bachelor of Arts  
University of South Carolina, 2011

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Accepted by:

Jeanne Garane, Director of Thesis

Federica Clementi, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

According to Will Eisner, “comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience. Modern readers can be expected to have an easy understanding of the image-word mix and the traditional deciphering of text. Comics can be ‘read’ in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied” (Eisner, 1). In this research, I examine Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia and polyphony within Joann Sfar’s *Le Chat du Rabbin* (2002-2006). By taking a closer look at ‘language’ in *Le Chat du Rabbin*, both textually and visually, I apply Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia and visual polyphony in order to analyze the role of the image-word mix that Eisner mentions above in *Le Chat du Rabbin*. In this research I plan to ‘read’ *Le Chat du Rabbin* using a similar approach to that of Will Eisner, attempting to use a wider and more analytical approach of the ‘language’ in the text. I will apply Bakhtin’s terms in order to explain how to better analyze a comic, or *bande dessinée*.

In the first chapter, I provide a brief historical overview of the *bande dessinée*. The French language equivalent of a comic, the *bande dessinée* is a popular literary choice for all ages in the Francophone world. In addition, I analyze what it means for a *bande dessinée* to be Jewish in content. Joann Sfar, having both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish parents, is known for publishing works that address Judaism. In the last section of this chapter I address this theme by analyzing what makes a *bande dessinée* Jewish.

In the second chapter, I apply Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia to *Le Chat du Rabbin*. Analyzing textual elements such as the role of the narrator, the author and

characters within the story, this chapter demonstrates how heteroglossia indeed plays a role in the *bande dessinée* medium. This disproves Bakhtin's claim in his *Discourse in the Novel* (1941) that the novel is the best literary medium to use to represent heteroglossia.

The third chapter analyzes visual elements of the *bande dessinée* and how these illustrative components, similar to Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, present different *visual* points of view. Eisner says, "In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a distinct language – a literary form, if you will" (Eisner, 1). It is through careful analysis of both text (heteroglossia) and images (visual polyphony) that this research analyzes how Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and polyphony are equally identifiable in the *bande dessinée* medium as they are in the novel.

The fourth chapter analyzes examples of heteroglossia and polyphony in the animated film, *Le Chat du Rabbin*. In analyzing the film, this research will show how the text progressed into animation and includes new elements such as sounds, movement and other various elements.

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## CHAPTER I: La Bande Dessinée: History of a Genre

### 1.1 - Introduction

Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that does not mean they are second-rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw, it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both.

– Marjane Satrapi

This thesis has a total of four chapters. The objective of the first chapter is to provide a brief historical overview of the *bande dessinée*. Starting with Rodolphe Töpffer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and ending with recent developments with online comics, the first chapter provides a foundation for understanding the medium and how it developed throughout history. The first chapter also analyzes the definition of a Jewish *bande dessinée* and how it functions within the genre as a whole. In the second chapter, an analysis of heteroglossia will be taken into consideration. The third chapter applies Bakhtin's theories of polyphony to the non-linguistic elements of *Le Chat du Rabbín*. However, in this chapter I also focus on the so-called visual text, or visual polyphony, and how it serves as an alternative to the traditional literary text. The fourth and final chapter explores the animated film version of the *bande dessinée*.

### 1.2 - The *Bande Dessinée* (BD) and the Roman Graphique

The study of comics and graphic novels in academia is a relatively recent phenomenon. "The first article published by a major scholarly journal in English with BD as a genre as its central subject appears to be Hugh Starkey's 'Is the BD "à bout de soufflé"?' of 1990" (Grove 78-87). Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the study of



French comics and graphic novels has only continued to increase in the United States. According to Lawrence Grove, “Research-led university-level options on the BD have been available since the late 1980s and early 1990s, one of the first being Cécile Danehy’s at Middlebury College (Vermont), where the winter term system allowed for experimental offerings” (Grove 78-87). Many people have begun to appreciate and accept comics and graphic novels as viable pieces of literature. These works containing graphic art and literature that were once considered appropriate only for children are now admitted into the realm of adult literature. Nearly twenty-five years after the first colleges offered experimental courses on the *bande dessinée*, colleges and universities all over the United States now offer courses related to both comics and graphic novels.

I will now address the two terms, *bande dessinée* and *roman graphique* in order to better their meaning. Establishing two clear and distinct definitions will help us to differentiate between the terms for the purpose of this thesis. It will also help establish how the two words are to be translated into English.

*Bande dessinée* translates into English literally as “drawn strip” or “drawn band”. In English, *comic strip* is used to describe the series of illustrations that portray an often comical or juvenile story, or series of ongoing stories using both words and drawings. Both definitions are associated with each language. However, the two terms may seem slightly confusing if not properly examined. In French, nothing presupposes that a *bande dessinée* will be comical. For this reason, the English equivalent “comic strip” does not express the French language idea that is associated with *la bande dessinée*, one that does not predict a comical story. In this study I will use the term *bande dessinée* instead of

“comic strip” to refer to the French examples because the examples I use in this research are not solely humoristic in nature.

In addition to the term *bande dessinée*, another term needs to be mentioned: *roman graphique*. Considered to be more literary, the *roman graphique*, or “graphic novel” in English, is both similar to and different from a *bande dessinée*. The terms are similar in that they both contain images and text, and readers can glean as much from the images as from the text. However, the *roman graphique* is different in that it often offers readers a more literary or serious topic. As Robert Weiner writes in *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives*, “While readers may certainly appreciate both these styles, many graphic novel readers prefer the longer, more narrative style, and highly stylized artistic layout in graphic novels and narrative comics, as opposed to the daily one-line, cube-style of more traditional comic strips” (Weiner, 58). As the *bande dessinée* and *roman graphique* continue to grow in popularity amongst readers of all ages, the emergence of genres within the *bande dessinée* and *roman graphique* will also continue to expand.

### **1.3 - Rodolphe Töpffer and Other Early Artists: 1827 – 1928**

Rodolphe Töpffer, born in Geneva in 1799, is considered to be the father of the European comic strip. His combination of words and drawings portray various adventures revolving around relationships and everyday events of the time. His first publication in 1827, *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, tells the story of a man and his desperate attempts to court a young woman. Beginning with this first publication in 1827 and continuing to the publications of later artists such as Alain Saint-Ogan in 1925, this

section will take a look at the earliest examples of the Francophone *bande dessinée* in Europe.

Many early comics were published in newspapers or magazines, sometimes only making weekly or monthly appearances. Over time, a greater interest developed in the *bande dessinée* and their publications became more frequent. However, the addition of drawings to written texts was not an instantaneous phenomenon. Instead, short examples periodically begin making appearances in journals and newspapers throughout Europe. According to Lefèvre and Dierick, "...we are beginning to understand that the development of the comic strip in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was crucial, not only as regards the history of the comic itself, but also in the development of a new more democratic society in the West. It is not coincidental that the comic strip flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because it is related to larger social, scientific and artistic developments" (Lefèvre and Dierick, 22). For example, in order to facilitate the production of the *bande dessinée*, the invention of the lithograph by Alois Senefelder in 1796 helped make mass printing available throughout Europe. According to Griffiths, "Senefelder himself originally developed it as a means of printing music more cheaply than by engraving, but, realizing its potential for other uses, went into business with various partners to operate lithographic presses in the capitals of Europe" (Griffiths, 104).

As technological developments continued to revolutionize much of Europe, the practical use for inventions such as the lithograph proved that they could change the way in which the public is informed on issues. Mass printing changed how many people were able to have access to the printed word. "The new technology of the 1830s was particularly suited to popularizing the illustrated narrative: the lithograph made the

reproduction of images feasible on a wide scale (Töpffer had mastered the technique of autographie, one similar to the lithograph), and the production and distribution of mainstream journals provided an outlet” (Grove, 88). From this moment on, it was easier for authors to have their work printed and made available to a larger public. The combination of text and images in a panel created a new means for the public to view literature. Each panel contained a piece of the *bande dessinée* that moves in a chronological order of narration through the use of both text and drawings. According to Screech, “...as the historians of the comic strip Thierry Groensteen and Benoît Peeters make clear, Töpffer’s contribution to the ninth art was paramount. Töpffer is crucial because, whether later artists read him or not, his innovative technique came to be adopted on both sides of the Atlantic. Töpffer enabled fixed images to develop through time by dividing events up into sequences of panels, which he arranged in chronological order; each panel grew out of the previous panel and prepared for the following one. Töpffer’s panels were accompanied by handwritten text, not by speech-balloons, but his definition of the form he invented hold true for most comic strips of his day” (Screech, 5).

In the Francophone areas of Europe, comics increased in popularity. “With the growth of literacy, illustrated stories became popular, especially in late nineteenth/early twentieth-century France” (Screech, 6). The manner in which literature evolved and became available to the larger public is remarkable. Not only did the invention of the lithograph and technologically more advanced printing methods of the printing press help provide reading material to the masses, it also changed the way in which we share stories and communicate ideas.

As technology continued to develop in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so did the distribution and creative outlets for the creators of the *bande dessinée*. Later additions to the community include the works of Georges Colomb, who preferred to go by the penname Christophe. His *bande dessinée*, *La Famille Fenouillard*, which portrayed the adventures of a French bourgeois family, is one other early example of the *bande dessinée* from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His stories were published between 1893 and 1899 in a feuilleton called *Le Petit Français Illustré*. In 1913, Joseph-Porphyre Pinchon created *Bécassine*, the story of a young French girl from Brittany who dealt with the challenges involved with moving from the French countryside to Paris. “Bécassine (her real name is Annaïk Labornez) began her career as a servant in the Parisian home of the Marquise de Grand-Air and acts in a variety of capacities in later stories including teacher, war worker, and nursemaid to Loulotte, the Marquise’s goddaughter, who first appeared in 1922. Bécassine is an instantly recognizable figure, dominating the images in her unchanging traditional Breton costume of a wide-sleeved, full-skirted green dress with black velvet trimmings, a red bodice, and a white apron, her hair completely hidden by a white-winged cap. The rustic simplicity of her character is underlined by contrast with the elegant period clothes of the other characters that contextualize the images immediately in the well-to-do milieu of the early twentieth century” (Brown, 195).

Louis Forton’s *Bande des pieds nickelés* was also an early example from the French comic scene and Forton was a major contributor to the modern example of the *bande dessinée* with the addition of balloons to drawings. “In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of European artists continued making comic strips with captions, but change was coming even before World War II. New popular comics with speech

balloons were launched: in France with Alain Saint-Ogan's *Zig et Puce* (1925 – 1969)..." (Booker, 128). It was not until the publication of *Zig et Puce* by Alain Saint Ogan, however, that was laid the foundation for the current and modern version of the *bande dessinée*. It is with this new comic that we are introduced to speech bubbles, also known as balloons. "Speech balloons, which were descended from the medieval scroll device, had already been used by the American comic-strip artist Rudolph Dirks in The Katzenjammer Kids (1857); but speech balloons predated comic strips, having previously been used by European caricaturists, notably the Englishman James Gillray (1757-1815)" (Screech, 6). Although the insertion of speech bubbles changes the location of the text, the speech bubbles also change the way the story is presented in that readers are able to see a direct link between text and visual image. The caricature has a bubble of words being omitted from the character's mouth. A shift occurred that would forever change the layout of most *bande dessinées*, one that is still popular today.

#### **1.4 - The *Bande Dessinée* from 1929 to Present Day**

Georges Rémi, perhaps better known as Hergé, is considered to be one of the most famous Francophone artists of the 1920s. In 1925, Hergé started working for *Le Vingtième Siècle* newspaper in Belgium. "*Le Boy Scout Belge* would be one of his first forays into producing illustrations, and where Hergé would create his first comic strip series, *Totor, Chief Scout of the Cockchafers*. Running from July 1926 to Summer 1929, the adventures of a young Totor, an adventurous Scout and leader of the Maybug Patrol, were quite popular because the boy hero traveled the world over. Seen as an early prototype to *Tintin* in both narrative content and drawing style, in 1929 the strip

temporarily ended because Hergé lacked the time to devote to it; *Tintin* was his priority strip” (Booker, 174).

Born in 1907 to a lower middle class family, Hergé worked for *Le Petit Vingtième*, a newspaper based in Brussels, Belgium. He eventually started working on drawings and creating his *Adventures of Tintin*, which were published regularly in *Le Petit Vingtième*.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Hergé’s *Tintin* series began in 1929 in *Le Petit Vingtième*, a children’s supplement to the Catholic Brussels newspaper *XXe siècle*. It was published in France in *Coeurs Vaillants* in 1930. The first adventure of the boy reporter and his dog, *Tintin au pays des Soviets*, was a catalogue of the evils of communism, and *Tintin au Congo*, which appeared in 1930-31, presented the colonial ideology of the ‘civilizing mission’ in its purest form” (Miller, 17). *Tintin* provides a graphic record of how other countries and cultures were perceived during this time period.

During World War II, he worked for the German run newspaper *Le Soir*. According to Paul State in *Historical Dictionary of Brussels*, “During World War II, Hergé worked for *Le Soir*, a collaborationist paper. He produced six *Tintin* adventures, wartime realities necessitating that he employ escapist and fantasy themes (*The Secret of the Unicorn*, *The Shooting Star*). Following the liberation, he was arrested four times and accused of being a Nazi sympathizer. His reputation remained suspect until, on 6 September 1946, publisher and wartime resistance fighter Raymond Leblanc lent his financial support and anti-Nazi credentials to launch the *Journal de Tintin* (*Tintin Magazine*), a weekly that featured two pages of Tintin’s adventures” (State, 141-142). The *Tintin* stories allow us the opportunity to take an inside look at the viewpoints some

of the Belgian and French citizens held towards certain minority groups at the time, including the severely persecuted Jewish community that was enduring the Holocaust right before their eyes.

Hergé also introduced a new element to the art of drawing the *bande dessinée* by introducing the clear line technique, known as the *ligne claire*. “By now, the crude drawing style of the early albums had given way to the elegance of the *ligne claire*, or ‘clear line’, the graphic style which eschews shading, gradation of colours and hatching in favour of clear outlines, flat colours and geometrical precision. It also implies narrative legibility” (Miller, 19). The clean and professional look that this new style affords opened a new phase in the publication of *bande dessinée* world in Europe. In the 1930s the production of the *bande dessinée* started to slow down due to the lingering war. The climate in Europe as well as the control of the Nazi regime in France and Belgium resulted in changes in terms of what could and could not be published. As the war progressed, publications dwindled and the importation of foreign, especially American comics declined due to censorship imposed by the Nazi regime. As a result, the *bande dessinée* in Francophone Europe would slow down compared to the rest of the world.

After the Second World War, the *bande dessinée* started to make a come back. The reintroduction of the *bande dessinée*, however, was met with a few challenges in France. For instance, in 1949, a law on the publication of material appropriate for minors was established in France. The law of July 16, 1949 was intended to protect French youth by outlawing any material deemed unacceptable by the French government. Many of these banned comics were directed at American comics because they were considered inappropriate. “Along with Disney, came the less morally hygienic adventures of assorted



superheroes and crimebusters Buck Rodgers, Dick Tracy, Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Superman, Batman and others. The lurid excitement and sensuality which thrilled young French readers was a cause of alarm for many of their elders, who saw both moral and political danger in them” (Forbes and Kelly, 149). Although it is rather difficult to imagine any of these comics as being detrimental to the mental health of young French readers, the restrictions were mainly a way to keep out non-French publications and influences. This would in turn allow Francophone *bande dessinée* artists to disseminate their own works within the Francophone countries of Europe. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the *bande dessinée* had reached such popularity that it became a well-established and recognized form of popular literature.

If one French comic should take credit for being the most famous *bande dessinée* both in France and internationally, *Astérix*, by René Goscinny and Uderzo must be the one to take the claim for fame. *Astérix* first appeared in 1959 in the *Pilote* magazine created by Goscinny and Uderzo. “*Astérix* debuted October 29, 1959, in the first issue of French comics magazine *Pilote*, which Goscinny and Uderzo helped to launch. *Pilote*, it bears mentioning, played a pivotal role in the evolution of European comics during the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, continental comics matured as cartoonists began to try to appeal to broader audiences of all ages, not just young readers, and the locus of European comics shifted from Belgium to France” (Booker, 461).

*Pilote* magazine was not solely the work of Goscinny and Uderzo. They also had the help of a third friend, Jean-Michel Charlier, another artist they met when they moved from the United States back to Paris. “The three artists desired greater freedom and more control over their own work. They wanted to operate ‘selon le principe européen’, which

had been established by the Belgians Hergé and Franquin. According to that principle, ‘l’auteur est l’unique propriétaire de son oeuvre, l’éditeur en étant le locataire’. In order to protect artists rights, Goscinny, Uderzo and Charlier set up a ‘Syndicat des dessinateurs. In 1958 Goscinny and Uderzo left World Press to found their own magazine, *Pilote*.” (Screech, 75-76). With the creation of *Pilote* came the popular and much loved *Astérix and Obélix* series that would soon be a global phenomenon. The story follows a group of Gauls living during the time of the Romans and explores the adventures of the two friends, Astérix and Obélix.

As the role of the *bande dessinée* continued to evolve throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *bande dessinée* flourished even more with increased experimentation and freedom amongst artists and authors. New ideas and topics began to make their way into the *bande dessinée*, which revolutionized the way people perceived them. The literary medium once only associated with childhood would now find a larger presence among adults and gain even more respect among intellectuals.

Today, university campuses all across the United States and France offer courses on the *bande dessinée*. It is my belief that analyzing this new literary genre in an academic setting can be extremely beneficial because it provides students with an example of a new literary genre and how text and illustrations can harmonize and provide a new manner in which to tell, read, and interpret a story.

For young children and academics alike, the *bande dessinée* and graphic novel prove to be an enriching genre of literature that provides as much opportunity for discussion as traditional literature. With the popularization of the computer in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medium continues to develop, with new versions of the *bande dessinée*

starting to make appearances online. Web comics, a new development in the world of comics, are an online version of a comic that enables creators to add a variety of components to their work, using elements such as sound or movement. “The earliest known webcomics debuted in the mid-1980s. Eric Millikin’s CompuServe-based *Witches and Stitches* is frequently cited as the first web-comic, appearing in 1985, followed in 1986 by Joe Ekaitis’s *T.H.E. Fox* in 1986. Because of the Internet’s niche audience at the time, the distribution of these comics was limited; however, as the Internet expanded in popularity, additional titles followed (Booker, 1820). Today, nearly thirty years later, numerous examples can be found online for both English and French speaking audiences. *Évolution* (2013) is one example of a French webcomic, published by Timtimsia. In addition, webcomics are appealing due to their accessibility online. They are also attracting a large crowd in that they are often free or cheaper than physical *bande dessinées*. This new style of having sounds and animation accompany graphic image, or *bande dessinée*, is only the beginning to what the future holds for this ever changing genre. The *bande dessinée* is becoming more popular each day and earning respect amongst intellectuals as being a serious form of literature. The webcomic continues to demonstrate how the combination of text and illustration can interact and change the way readers read and interpret stories. The webcomic, providing elements such as animation or sound, enhances the experience of the *bande dessinée* online. This is attractive for readers of all ages, particularly those of younger generations who are growing up reading via technology from an early age.

## **1.5 – History of Sephardic Jews in Algeria**

Before analyzing heteroglossia in *Le Chat du Rabbin* I want to provide a brief historical overview of the presence of Jews in Algeria. The Sephardic Jewish presence in Algeria dates back to the ninth century B.C. According to Sarah Sussman of Stanford University, “The vast majority of North African Jews were native to the region; they were descendants of successive waves of Jewish immigration from around the Mediterranean beginning in ancient times. They included Jewish traders who had arrived with the Phoenicians in the ninth century BCE, converted Berber tribes, and refugees from the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula and around the Mediterranean.” (Sussman, “Jewish Population of French North Africa”). Following the Muslim conquest of North Africa from 647 to 709 AD, the Jewish population was given a status called the *dhimmi* by the Muslim community. According to Cahen, the “dhimma” is a “terme qui désigne la sorte de contrat indéfiniment reconduit par lequel la communauté musulmane accorde hospitalité et protection aux membres des autres révélées, à condition qu’eux-mêmes respectent la domination de l’Islam...” (Cahen, “Encyclopédie de l’Islam”). Years later, under French colonial rule, Jewish Algerians continued to obey a variety of different laws, including learning French and adopting certain French customs, such as paying taxes and wearing certain clothing letting others know they were Jewish.

The status of those in the Jewish community changed with the arrival of the French because the French gave Algerian Jews French citizenship. The Muslim community, however, was not pleased with the new French presence for several reasons. First of all, the French worked closely with the local Jewish population to produce interpreters for the French government. In addition, the Algerians felt that the French were taking over their country and questioning the abuse and the colonial role France had

in the country. In 1870, under the Crémieux decree, France gave Jewish Algerians French citizenship in order to establish greater French authority in Algeria. “Le décret Crémieux ‘fit’ des Français aussi pour augmenter la présence française en Algérie, à un moment où la France, en plein chaos, ne pouvait se permettre de dégarnir ses troupes sur le sol national pour les envoyer dans la colonie également en proie à des désordres socio-politiques. La puissance coloniale avait besoin de soldats sur place, la République naissante avait besoin d’un électorat qu’elle supposait favorable.” (Benayoun, “Les Juifs d’Algérie: de la *dhimma* à la citoyenneté française”). The decree therefore helped France establish its presence in Algeria and gain a larger influence in the country.

According to the Crémieux decree, under the French Republic, “les israélites indigènes des départements de l’Algérie sont déclarés citoyens français; en conséquence, leur statut reel et leur statut personnel seront, à compter de la promulgation du present décret, réglés par la loi française, tous droits acquis jusqu’à ce jour restant inviolables. Toute disposition législative tout sénatus-consulte, décret, règlement ou ordonnance contraires, sont abolis. Fait à Tours, le 24 Octobre 1870. Signé Ad. Crémieux, L. Gambetta, Al. Glais-Bizoin, I. Fourichon.” (Le Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale., art. 109, n. 136).

Between the 1870s and the 1930s, the Jewish community in Algeria was rapidly changing. Algerian Jews were now French; they were learning French and families were even sending their children to French schools. Consequently, French education would also lead to an increase in the number of people who quit practicing Judaism. Although French education had numerous positive qualities, many members in the Jewish community were having difficulty adjusting to the new educational system that did not

value the Jewish teachings considered important for many Algerian Jews. As a result, certain Jewish communities established Talmud Torah schools so that families who were interested could send their children to an environment that would ensure that the Talmud was still being taught and valued.

### **1.6 – The Jewish *Bande Dessinée***

In order to proceed with this research on *Le Chat du Rabbín*, one final question needs to be considered before continuing to the second chapter: how does the Jewish *bande dessinée* differ from a non-Jewish one? Authors Baskind and Omer define the Jewish graphic novel in their book, *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, in the following manner. “We consider the Jewish graphic novel to be an illustrated narrative produced by a Jew that addresses a Jewish subject or some aspect of the Jewish experience” (Baskind, Samantha & Ranen Omer-Sherman, xvi). For the purposes of my own research, I consider the Jewish *bande dessinée* to be similar in that it pertains to subject matter relating to the Jewish experience.

The 1930s and 1940s was a period in which people on both sides of the Atlantic had to face numerous hardships. In Europe, the Nazi regime was rising to power and Jews were becoming the target of the world’s most tragic genocide. In the United States, Americans were in the midst of the Great Depression and struggling to get by. However, despite these negative aspects of daily life, many readers on both sides were noticing the value of comics and illustrated stories published by artists such as Hergé in Belgium or Will Eisner in the United States. In fact, “the emerging comic-book industry quickly became one of the few commercial success stories of the Great Depression. And even though *Famous Funnies* (by Eastern Color Printing Company) was the only title to see

print consistently throughout that all-important year of 1934, by the Great Depression's end in 1941 the industry had hit its stride: by then, there were over 30 comic-book publishers producing 150 different comic books per month, with combined sales of 15 million copies a month, and a readership of 60 million" (Kaplan, 4). In Europe, however, the comic industry, or publications of the *bande dessinée* had to slow down a bit due to the war. "World War II, paper shortages and the Nazi occupation abruptly halted most BD production, although some magazines were still published" (Screech, 6).

Consequently, the success of comics in the United States was surpassing European equivalents. The United States was also at war. However, the difference was that the United States was able to use comics as a tool for propaganda. Anti-Nazi, anti-Japanese, pro-War, pro-American propaganda became a tool for US nationalism. After the war was over many in Europe were afraid of the negative impact that American comics might have on young readers in Europe. In France, the government even passed a law that prevented French readers from having American comics. "On 16 June 1949, the French government passed a law aimed at censoring comics which forbade any 'apologie du banditisme, du mensonge, du vol, de la paresse, de la lâcheté, de la haine, de la débauche ou de tout acte qualifié de délit ou de crime et de nature à démoraliser l'enfance et la jeunesse'" (Screech, 7). It was through the implementation of this law that France was able to promote its own *bande dessinée* and promote French-language publications such as *Tintin* in Belgium or *Astérix* in France.

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the iconic Jewish *bande dessinée* has to be Joann Sfar's *Le Chat du Rabbin*. The story of a rabbi's cat and his beloved mistress has even made its way from paper to screen. In 2011, directors Antoine Delesvaux and Joann Sfar

successfully turned the *bande dessinée* into an animated film, entertaining children and adults. Sfar intrigues and captivates readers by introducing them to the history and culture of Sephardic Jews in Algeria. Set in the 1920s and 1930s, Sfar's *Le Chat du Rabbin* immerses readers into the history and imagery of French colonial North Africa. The characters all interact and introduce readers to issues both specific to Jews at the time as well as issues regarding French colonization. This will be the *bande dessinée*, therefore, that I use for the basis of my research and Bakhtinian analysis.

Providing a unique version to the Jewish comic, or *bande dessinée*, *Le Chat du Rabbin* is an enriching written and visual text that can be analyzed using some of Bakhtin's theory of the novel. By analyzing written textual elements in the second chapter and visual polyphonic, or illustrative elements in the third chapter, this research will provide an example of how both text and image combine to create a unique reading experience.

### **1.7 – Joann Sfar**

Born in Nice in 1971, Joann Sfar grew up in a diverse household. His mother, an Ashkenazi Jew from the Ukraine and his father, a Sephardic Jew from Algeria raised Sfar in southern France. After completing his studies in Philosophy and Art, Joann Sfar started to work on his first *bande dessinée*, *Ossour Hyrsidou*, which was published in 1994. Eight years later, in 2002, the first album of *Le Chat du Rabbin* was released. By 2006, the fifth and final album was released, making this Sfar's most famous *bande dessinée*. In 2011, in collaboration with Antoine Delesvaux, the two directed and released an animated film with the same name.



In a 2011 interview with Cécile Mury, Joann Sfar was asked, “Est-il vrai que vous vous êtes inspiré de votre propre animal pour dessiner *Le Chat du Rabbin*? Sfar answered by saying, “Oui, c’est mon “vrai” chat! Il s’appelle Imhotep, comme l’architecte des pyramides. En fait, il n’est pas seul: j’ai trois chats, un chien... et deux enfants! D’ailleurs, ma femme dit que je suis hypocrite parce que je m’occupe jamais de lui, sauf quand les journalistes arrivent: je pose avec “le chat du rabbin”! (Mury, Cécile, “Joann Sfar: “J’adore les Arabes, les Juifs, mais la religion, ça m’emmerde”). Besides *Le Chat du Rabbin*, which was inspired by his father’s Sephardic Jewish heritage, he has also completed another five-album *bande dessinée* called *Klezmer*, which takes place in Eastern Europe before the outbreak of the World Wars. His mother, who died when Sfar was a three, was the reason Sfar started drawing. His family, in order to not upset Sfar too much, told the young child that his mother left on a trip and would return when he was older if he behaved himself. After a year his family claims that Sfar found refuge in drawing, to the point that his family said it became obsessive. By the age of six, Sfar lost hope in his mother returning. Sfar apparently made the comment that, “it was useless to behave and maybe also to believe.” (New York Times, 2011). Years later, at the age of forty-four, Joann Sfar is married and lives in France with his wife and children.

## CHAPTER II: Heteroglossia in Sfar's *Le Chat du Rabbín*

“Mon objectif est d’expliquer qu’un musée est aussi sacré qu’un temple, qu’un texte de littérature ou de poésie est autant investi de spiritualité, car s’il y a un siffle divin, il est dans les mots qui nous viennent tous les matins.” – Joann Sfar

### 2.1 – Heteroglossia

Introduced in Bakhtin's *Discourse in Novel* (1934), the term “heteroglossia” describes the speech variations that exist amongst different characters, narrators and authors in a literary work. “Heteroglossia”, a combination of the Greek words *hetero*, meaning different, and *glossa*, meaning language, presents a new concept that analyzes the various languages that exist within language. It is these various utterances and expressions that are used in different literary mediums that I want to analyze in this thesis. According to Bakhtin, “Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’ ... These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (Bakhtin, 89). I present key Bakhtinian terms, analyzing examples of heteroglossia in *Le Chat du Rabbín* in order to show how the *bande dessinée*, similar to the novel, is an equally successful medium for exploring heteroglossia.

### 2.2 – Utterance, Discourse and Dialogue

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin has revolutionized the way in which literary theorists interpret and analyze the novel. Four essays in particular present many of the

key terms that I use for my Bakhtinian analysis of *Le Chat du Rabbin*. *The Dialogic Imagination*, published in 1975, includes four of his essays written and published throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The first essay in *The Dialogic Imagination* is his *Epic and Novel*, was published in 1941. The second, *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse*, was published in 1940. The third essay, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, was published in 1937-1938. The final essay, *Discourse in the Novel* was published in 1934-1935. Bakhtin has presented numerous seminal ideas regarding language in literature and how readers should interpret language in the modern novel. For Bakhtin, the novel was considered a new genre. Bakhtin says, “Among the great genres, only the novel is younger than writing and the book, and it is the only one organically adapted to the new forms of silent perceptions, that is reading... The study of other genres is analogous to the study of dead languages: the study of the novel, to the study of modern languages, and young ones at that... The novel is simply a genre among others. It is the only genre in a state of becoming among genres that have reached completion long ago and are already partly dead” (Bakhtin, 448). Bakhtin, then, was aware of the novel’s place in history and knew that future versions of the novel would develop.

Although Bakhtin never wrote about the *bande dessinée*, many of his theories are applicable to the genre. In Bakhtinian terminology, there are several items of vocabulary that are useful in understanding the Bakhtinian lexicon. These words include *utterance*, *discourse* and *dialogue*. These terms build upon each other, with the most basic term, an *utterance*, being the very base word in his theory of language. “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an

atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation with any living dialogue. The orientation towards an answer is open, blatant and concrete” (Hale, 495). It is the utterance, then, that evokes a specific response on behalf of a character, narrator or author within a literary work.

At the most basic level, Bakhtin believes that an *utterance* is where language begins. In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, authors Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson state that an *utterance* is, “a unit of ‘speech communication.’ *Utterances* may be as short as a grunt and as long as *War and Peace*, and the distinction between them and sentences be not one of length. Even when an *utterance* is one sentence long, something must be added to the sentence’s linguistic composition to make it an *utterance*” (Morson, 125-126). An *utterance*, then, provokes a certain reaction from another person, whether it is answering a question or acknowledging the other in some manner or another, *utterances* lead to responses.

The *utterance* progresses and builds upon other *utterances*, becoming a *discourse* and eventually a *dialogue*. It is through discourse and dialogue that the reader is able to understand the point of view of the author, narrator and characters within the text. The “...orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social ‘languages’ come to interact with one another” (Bakhtin, 282). For Bakhtin, these various points of view are one of the primary goals of an author when writing. By using the novel as a means to

represent different ideas and points of view, language has the possibility to introduce a reader to new worlds, providing unique perspectives on different languages and cultures, and also different epochs.

At any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another... Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form... Therefore languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways (Bakhtin, 291).

The intersections that occur between different voices and languages provide alternative viewpoints on topics that perhaps differ from the opinions a reader has on a certain idea.

*Discourse*, then, would be a series of *utterances* that provoke continual reactions occurring between two or more characters in a novel. “Any understanding of live speech, a live *utterance*, is inherently responsive...” (Bakhtin, 68). As a result, these responses and discourses between two people become *dialogic*, meaning they take into consideration previous *utterances* in a text prior to this particular moment in literary history. “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation with any living dialogue. The

orientation towards an answer is open, blatant and concrete (Bakhtin, 279-80). While Bakhtin's ideas concerning utterances, discourse and dialogue demonstrate that language is inevitably going to be produced, the exact utterances, discourse and dialogues that take place are unpredictable and continually evolve from one conversation to another.

As Bakhtin says, "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated- with the intentions of others... As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other... The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (Bakhtin, 294). If various voices exist and are represented in the *bande dessinée*, just like the novel, then it is possible to explore the role of different languages that coexist within *Le Chat du Rabbin*.

In *Le Chat du Rabbin*, Joann Sfar uses 1920s Algeria as the backdrop for his *bande dessinée*. The protagonists, most of whom are all native to Algeria, live and interact within an Algeria colonized by France. As a result, readers are able to see different utterances, discourse and dialogue on a variety of issues throughout the story. On one hand, readers see the rabbi and his Sephardic Jewish family and the ways in which they interact and use languages such as French, Arabic, and Hebrew with one

another. On the other hand, readers notice other non-Algerian characters and the ways in which language is used in their lives. The interactions that occur between different cultural groups and language users provide a unique perspective on the ways in which language may have functioned in colonial Algeria.

In *Le Chat du Rabbin*, Sfar incorporates many of one-word utterances. One example is *miaou*, or *meow* in English. Even after the rabbi is aware of the cat's ability to speak, Sfar uses the cat sound *miaou* in order to provoke the rabbi. The use, therefore, of "miaou" as an utterance reminds the reader of the fact that a cat cannot speak and *should* be saying "miaou". In addition, "miaou" is also a way for Sfar to show the reader that the one speaking is the one in control of his or her speech. The rabbi might be the cat's owner, but this still does not mean that the rabbi has control over his cat's speech. The cat is the one who decides when and what to say, through Sfar's creative use of including a cat who is able to speak.

If we examine the six panels on page twenty-six of the first album, it is interesting to analyze the interaction between the rabbi and the cat as they stroll through the city. The rabbi, who is upset at the fact that the cat is apparently filling his daughter Zlabya's head with lies, decides to forbid his daughter and the cat from spending time together. The cat explains to the reader what the rabbi thinks of him. The cat narrates,

"Mon maître trouve que je suis une mauvaise bête, que je mens quand il ne faut pas et que je dis la vérité uniquement quand elle fait de la peine. Je lui dis que moi aussi j'ai de la peine, depuis que j'ai la parole. Je lui dis que j'ai acquis un pouvoir dont je me passerais bien, puisque, lorsque j'étais muet, je pouvais passer mes journées à me faire cajoler. Je lui dis que je suis prêt à tout pour revoir

ma maîtresse. Je lui dis “Miaou! Miaou! Miaou!” (Sfar, 26). The cat is full of contradictions in that he is both good and bad, a speaker and mute, Jewish and non-Jewish, and human and non-human all at the same time.

Why, then, would Sfar use a cat in *Le Chat du Rabbin*? It is interesting because on one hand, Sfar could have chosen a character such as the rabbi to narrate the story. Instead, he chooses a cat that is capable of speaking and interacting with the characters in the story. The cat is aware of his existence in relation to his owner when he starts off this quote by reminding readers that he has a master, but he is the one who is ultimately in control because whether the rabbi wants the cat to speak or not, the cat is the one who determines if he wants to speak or simply miaou to the rabbi, unless God perhaps takes his speech away, which occurs for a certain portion of the story. The cat chooses to miaou in hopes that the rabbi will allow him to return to his mistress. Although Sfar is well aware of the fact that a romantic relationship cannot exist between a cat and a young woman such as Zlabya, the fact that the cat loves Zlabya and refers to her as his mistress is just another means by Sfar to give the cat more humanistic character traits. Not only does the cat speak like a human, but he also thinks like a human. This means that he is, as a result, capable of having feelings for another person. In this case it is his owner's beautiful daughter who spoils him with attention and therefore a dialogic is taking place through a diabolic character such as the cat. Is the cat an embodiment of the dialogic?

As the rabbi and cat continue walking around the city, the rabbi explains to the cat that he should be quiet and stop meowing, saying that he can tell that the cat is pretending. Why, then, is the cat no longer speaking? Is it by choice or does God take away his ability to speak? The use of “miaou” is important because it is this repeated



utterance that provokes the rabbi to respond to his cat. The cat, who is also able to speak, chooses to use miaou here as a way to engage the rabbi and remind him that he does not have to communicate in a human language. The rabbi's cat chooses to miaou in hopes that the rabbi will allow him to go back to his mistress Zlabya. The discourse that occurs as a result is dialogic in that the cat and rabbi continue to dialogue with one another and discuss the cat's intentions to eventually have a Bar Mitzvah. Whether it is the cat's own choice to meow or speak at certain times or not, one must wonder what the exact role of the cat is during the story? Is he present for simple entertainment or does he play a larger role? I believe Sfar adds the cat as a way to engage the rabbi in a conversation that non-religious readers or viewers would perhaps have with the rabbi if they were able to speak with him. The cat serves as a sort of intermediary between the rabbi, who is purely fictional, and the reader, who is real, allowing for a unique dialogue to occur not only between the cat and rabbi, but the reader as well.

### **2.3 – Narratorial Voice**

One of the key concepts within Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia is that of the importance of the voice of the narrator. Often the first voice in a literary work, the narrator sets the stage for the reader, providing additional background information that would not be known without the characters going into dialogue about the information.

The narrator in *Le Chat du Rabbin* is the rabbi's cat. As both the narrator and a character who dialogues with other characters, the rabbi's cat changes his role throughout the entirety of the *bande dessinée*. The primary role of the cat is to narrate. However, he often engages in present tense conversation with other characters. His role is not only to

give us information not directly stated by characters, but to show us his own language and his opinion on certain issues throughout the story.

According to Thierry Groensteen in *Comics and Narration*, the role of the cat as narrator is unique. "...The narrator is revealed in the fifth panel to be the eponymous cat. It is he who will recount, in the first person, the adventures in which he has participated or to which he has had privileged access. The main characters of the action are nonetheless human beings, chief among whom are the rabbi and his daughter. The paradoxical choice made by Sfar is to delegate the narration to a creature that, in theory, does not have access to language. But in fiction anything can happen, and this theoretical impossibility is neatly sidestepped: the cat can talk because it has eaten a parrot (Groensteen,1). Not only does the cat provide readers with a unique perspective of what is going on in the story, he does so in a comical manner. The cat acts as a ventriloquist of sorts.

The first sentence of the *bande dessinée* is in the third person singular point of view. The cat uses *on*, the French equivalent for *one*, which is rarely used in English. In the second and third panels the cat transitions to using *ils*, or *they* to refer to the Jewish people in Algeria. Finally, after the first few panels, the cat makes one more transition, speaking in the first person, saying *je*, engaging the reader on a more personal level and revealing that he is the narrator. The cat begins: "Chez les juifs, on n'aime pas trop les chiens. Un chien, ça vous mord, ça vous court après, ça aboie. Et ça fait tellement longtemps que les juifs se font mordre, courir après ou aboyer dessus que, finalement, ils préfèrent les chats. Enfin, pour les autres juifs, je ne sais pas, mais mon maître, lui, il dit ça. Je suis le chat du Rabbin." (Sfar, 7). It is interesting to analyze how Sfar uses two

animals, cats and dogs, to begin the story. What is Sfar trying to communicate to the reader as he begins his story? Are cats Jewish and dogs non-Jewish, or people who represent the enemy of the Jewish people?

According to the rabbi, the Jewish community prefers cats to dogs because dogs are similar to those who have targeted the Jews throughout history. As a result, the cat is a better choice for a pet because it poses no imminent threat to the Jewish community. The cat's role as a first person narrator in the text is to entertain the reader of the story by posing philosophical and paradoxical questions that require readers to think about their own beliefs. The cat's diabolical nature as a result is entertaining for readers because he is tempting not only the rabbi and what the rabbis says or does, but he is simultaneously engaging the reader as well by forcing the reader to address these questions while reading.

But why use a cat? Why not another human character? In *Speaking For Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, author Margo DeMello says, "the most common role for an animal "author" is not strictly speaking as author at all, but rather as narrator. The animal narrator is an established element of folklore and children's stories, fairy tales and fantasy. But animal articulacy, in the realm of story, may serve to identify oddity and underscore otherness; that animals narrate their tales is representative of that other world, and not our own. It is understood by all parties that the animal is character rather than actor, as indeed, a human author is typically revealed behind the curtain of animal narrator, identified on title page and copyright, among other places" (DeMello, 81). The rabbi's cat then is therefore partially used out of tradition and also to reinforce the idea of otherness within the *bande dessinée*. By using a cat as narrator, Sfar is portraying the

Jews from a non-human perspective, possibly eliminating nationalism or race from interfering and potentially stereotyping the Jews in a negative manner. A cat as the narrator eliminates potential problems by also becoming an *other* in that he is non-human and unbiased in that every observation that he makes is personal and not from preconceived human ideas or negative stereotypes. The cat even speaks as a narrator, commenting on what is happening as it happens.

Sfar uses the present tense in *Le Chat du Rabbin*, which engages the reader in ways that makes him or her feel as if they are part of the story. According to Ben Stoltzfus, “the dislocation of narrative sequence in time-space (...) in terms of a continuous present, is not always easy to follow anticipate. The reader must contribute actively to the elaboration and metamorphosis of thought and emotion. The fact that everything is happening in the present, which the reader is actively interpreting, gives the narrative an immediacy and impact absent from the traditional past tense story” (Stoltzfus, 12). The *bande dessinée* medium, therefore, uses the present tense in order to immerse readers into the story in a way that makes the reader feel as if he or she is somehow part of the story at the moment of reading. As for the images, the illustrations correspond to the textual components in that they non-textually represent the character’s surroundings and contextualize the narrative. Occasionally, there are moments when the text goes into different tenses. For example, the cat daydreams or reminisces about past or future moments with his mistress, Zlabya.

The action in the story shifts in voice a few pages into the story when the rabbi’s cat eats the family parrot. This moment is critical because it is at this moment that the cat gains the ability to speak *and* be understood by his family. Prior to this moment, the rabbi

and Zlabya are not able to understand their pet cat. The *bande dessinée* progresses from the cat's voice to the voices of its multiple characters. The interaction that occurs between characters in real time engages readers and brings them inside the world of the characters having a dialogue with one another. It is important to mention, in addition, that the cat does not have the ability to speak throughout the entirety of the *bande dessinée*. He temporarily loses his ability to speak after helping the rabbi prepare for his dictée. The reason the cat can no longer speak is because he uses the name of God to pray for his master and his success on his exam. Readers soon learn that the rabbi does indeed pass his exam. His Muslim friend, a Cheikh, tells him the good news while traveling together. The rabbi is too scared to read the letter for himself, so he has the Cheikh read it for him to tell him of the good news that he passed his exam. After learning about his success on the exam, the rabbi and Cheikh celebrate. Thus, while the cat loses his capability of speaking, the rabbi's success is communicated by a religious figure.

#### **2.4 Character Voice / Other Language**

In the next section I will analyze the language exchange between the rabbi and a Cheikh as they are both traveling in the countryside. This particular exchange merits analysis in that it shows an example of how the cat changes role from narrator to also being part of the conversation with other characters. In this instance, the cat narrates and speaks to the Cheikh's pet donkey. As a result, this scene depicts various languages spoken throughout their encounter. This example demonstrates how the characters not only differ in personal language use but also their mother tongue. The cat is speaking in French, and the rabbi and Cheikh are using a combination of French, Arabic and Hebrew. This *bande dessinée* then illustrates the distinction between *langue* and *langage*.

*Langue* and *langage* are two terms coined by Saussure in the field of linguistics to differentiate between language as a social convention and language as speech. “Each language as *langue* belongs to a community of speakers and, because it is a social convention, individuals have no control over it. On the other hand, language as *parole* is something that individual speakers have control over; it consists of the use that individuals freely make of their *langue* in the sentences and phrases that they utter” (Štekauer, Lieber, 5). In *Le Chat du Rabbin*, the different uses of *langue* and *langage* are evident throughout the *bande dessinée*. On one hand, there are multiple representations of *langue*, such as the French the text is written in, the various examples of Arabic, Yiddish, Amharic, and Russian are endless in the text. On the other hand, the various examples of *langage* and dialogue are also present throughout in the various ways each character of each *langue* decides to use their language to identify themselves. “Dialogism, an ambiguous term, refers to the construction of meaning among these multiple voices within the text and with referents possibly outside the text” (Pearson, Simpson, 52). It is throughout the second chapter that I will analyze these various examples of *langue* and *langage*.

In the first panel, the rabbi’s cat is narrating their journey through the countryside, letting us know that they are going to visit the tomb of Messaoud Sfar, a ritual in which they partake annually. “Messaoud Sfar était le beau-père du grand-père du rabbin. C’était un médecin et un saint. Chaque année, nous allons sur sa tombe. Sur le chemin, on croise un vieil arabe sur un âne. Il nous salue. Mon maître offre de l’eau parfumée, l’arabe offre du lait. Ils ont l’air de se connaître. (Sfar, 91). After the narration, the rabbi and the Cheik exchange the same greeting, using a variation of the same greeting, *peace be with you*.

This is represented in the speech bubbles using different spelling variations. The rabbi says, *Salam Aleikhoun*, the Arabic version of the greeting and the Cheikh replies, *Shalom Aleichem*, the Hebrew version of the greeting. The rabbi's cat continues by saying, "Le vieux parle le même arabe que les juifs: l'arabe littéraire. Il doit venir de loin car les arabes d'ici parlent autrement" (Sfar, 91). The reader is now aware of the cultural and religious differences that exist between the two men and between them and their own respective groups.

At this point the rabbi's cat greets the Cheikh's donkey with the same greeting. They both use the same version, *Salam Aleikhoun*. In the following panels the dialogue goes back and forth between the rabbi and the Cheikh and between the rabbi's cat and the donkey. Although the rabbi and Cheikh greet each other in Arabic, Joann Sfar writes the remainder of their conversation in French so that the reader can understand what they are discussing. At the same time, the rabbi's cat and the donkey become involved in a heated debate around the definition of the word *Sfar*. On the one hand the rabbi's cat believes the term to originate from *sofer*, meaning to write in Hebrew. On the other hand, the donkey believes the term *sfar* has Arabic origins, meaning the color yellow, which has been used since the ninth century as a means to identify and discriminate against Jewish people. The most recent example of this can be found in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Hitler required all Jews to wear a yellow Star of David. For the remainder of the trip the rabbi and the Cheikh discuss life, their different religions and eventually they celebrate the good news that the rabbi passed his dictée exam administered by the French, allowing him to remain rabbi for his congregation.

The interaction that occurs between the rabbi and Cheikh is important because, through Bakhtin, we are able to see that communication between the two is possible, even if they are from two different linguistic backgrounds, but are nevertheless able to peacefully coexist with each other. They both differ from one another in how they speak but are still able to live alongside each other.

## **2.5 – Accents and Incorrect Grammar**

The last two characters that I want to examine are Vastenov, a Russian man who is currently living in Algeria, as well as another Russian, a painter who has just arrived in Algeria via cargo ship in a crate full of books. He is first discovered by the rabbi and his fellow friends at the synagogue when a crate arrives from the cargo ship. There, the rabbi and his friends find the unnamed Russian painter inside. In terms of language, the first encounter with him occurs when the rabbi seeks him out as an interpreter for the Russian painter. According to Frank Bramlett in *Linguistics and the Study of Comics*, “additional forms of language contact appear in *Le Chat du Rabbin: Jérusalem d’Afrique*, which describes...the arrival in Algeria of a Russian Jewish painter. He knows only Russian and finds himself in a small Jewish community where no one speaks his language. First he encounters Hebrew and then French. Even the Rabbi who uses the Hebrew of prayers fails to communicate with him. It is only when he meets non-Jewish Russians that he is able to converse at all. Their exchanges are transcribed in Cyrillic characters and rendered in French translation. On the other hand, the French of those Russian characters is riddled with grammatical and lexical errors typical of nonnative speakers” (Bramlett, 153-54).



The first encounter between Vastenov and the rabbi takes place outside. A priest takes the rabbi to where Vastenov is fishing. Readers then become aware of his nonnative manner of speaking French, emphasizing the fact the character is Russian and a foreigner. Vastenov's first words are "je préfère pêche" (Sfar, 232-233) which is incorrect in that he did not leave the second verb in the infinitive form. He continues by saying, "Dieu, je ne le voir jamais. Poisson, au moins parfois, il mordre." In these first two panels it is interesting to see how Sfar depicts a native Russian speaker of French. One characteristic is the lack of conjugating verbs. For example, Vastenov should have said, "...je ne le vois jamais" and "...il mord" (Sfar, 232-233). Vastenov interprets for the Russian painter throughout the *bande dessinée*, who is unable to speak any French. He also serves as an indirect interpreter for the reader. Sfar uses Vastenov's voice to share with the reader what the Russian painter has to say. Sfar even chooses to show some of the dialogue between the two in Russian Cyrillic, not translating the conversation and leaving the reader, who is perhaps incapable of understanding Russian, unaware of what is going on. Readers only pick up on certain portions of the conversation based on the French text immediately preceding or following the Russian text. There are additional moments where the reader is perhaps lacking important pieces of information due to the lack of being able to read the Russian text. For the majority of their interaction, however, Sfar uses poor French grammar in order to reiterate the fact that the two men are non-native French speakers and have accents.

In *Linguistics and the Study of Comics*, authors Miriam Ben-Rafael and Eliezer Ben-Rafael claim that multilingual interjections in *Le Chat du Rabbin* are "...sometimes written either in their original writing systems like Cyrillic, Chinese, Egyptian

hieroglyphs, Arabic, or Hebrew or in a pseudo writing system. Other interjections are transliterated in Latin characters” (Bramlett, 152). The use of Arabic as the rabbi’s go-to language demonstrates that Sfar is showing readers that the rabbi’s native language is Arabic and not French. Sfar is simply writing most of the dialogue in French because the story is designed for French language readers and the occasional usage of the character’s native language serves as a reminder that Algerian Jews were not speaking French as their native tongue. Instead, French is a second (or additional) language for them that is used at moments throughout their lives.

The role the French play in colonizing Algeria during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has tremendous implications in the story and opens reader’s minds up to areas of French and Algerian history that they were perhaps unaware of prior to reading *Le Chat du Rabbin*. According to Bakhtin, “At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions- social, historical, meteorological, physiological- that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (Bakhtin, 428). It is therefore extremely important to pay attention to these social and historical aspects so that the meaning of the text is not lost or misunderstood. It is important to remember that the French language was forced on the Algerian population and is a consequence of colonization. The French even encouraged Algerian Jews to learn French so that they could communicate more easily with them and work as interpreters for the French. By having them learn French, the Algerians would be able to work alongside the French and tell them what the Arabic speaking population was saying, with Jews playing a valuable role in intercultural exchange, but also a disloyal role as helpers to the French against the Muslim population.

Later on in the story, readers learn that “the painter’s dream is to discover the ‘Jerusalem of Africa’, which, according to legend, is in Ethiopia” (Bramlett, 154). In the final section of *Le Chat du Rabbïn*, the characters finally arrive in Ethiopia, the Promised Land that the Russian painter has wanted to reach since his initial appearance in the *bande dessinée*.

I now analyze the conversation that occurs between several of the characters when the Russian painter tells them about the Falasha community for the first time. They are all at a public bath, lounging around and discussing the possibility of the existence of other Jews in Africa. The conversation begins with the rabbi being called racist. “Abraham, vous êtes raciste!” (Sfar, 242). The rabbi, however, responds by saying, “Non, je te dis juste que des Juifs noirs, ça s’est jamais vu” (Sfar, 242). The Russian painter joins in at this point and says, “Moi, ça ne me choque pas” (Sfar, 242). Vastenov also joins in, reiterating the comment of the Russian by saying, “Il dit que pour lui, c’est normal” (Sfar, 242). This comment is almost a translation of the Russian painter’s comment although it is written in French in the speech bubble. At this point in the conversation the rabbi continues, “Oui? Eh bien, peut être qu’en Russie c’est courant mais en Afrique, Les Juifs, c’est nous” (Sfar, 242). Vastenov then asks, “Il demande d’où vous saviez que Moïse être blanc” (Sfar, 242). The rabbi says, “Bon, C’est un artiste, il a besoin d’inventer les choses” (Sfar, 242). The conversation ends with the Russian painter informing the others of Ethiopian Falashas. “Ils ont envoyé des explorateurs dans le monde pour trouver un endroit où se débarrasser de nous. Ils envisageaient la Sibérie mais ça n’était pas assez loin. Ils ont même pensé au pôle sud... Puis une équipe qui écumaient l’Ethiopie y a rencontré des Noirs qui pratiquaient le Judaïsme. On les appelle les Falashas...” (Sfar,

243). This conversation plays a vital role in the *bande dessinée* because once again, Sfar is teaching the reader about a Jewish community that they were perhaps unaware of prior to reading *Le Chat du Rabbin*. As a result, the mental images that come to mind when Western readers envisage Jews is now altered in that they must consider the fact that there are not only Sephardic Jews that once lived in harmony in Algeria and other parts of North Africa, but there was once and still exists a community of black Jews living in Ethiopia. The existence of this community of Falasha Jews represents an imaginary paradise on earth for the Russian painter and he makes it his personal mission to find this so-called land of long lost Jews. The Russian painter even convinces the others to travel along with him in an effort to find them, a proposal to which they agree. Vastenov offers his car and they set off on an adventure across Africa.

## **2.6 – Examples of Intertextuality and the representation of *the other* within *Le Chat du Rabbin***

During the journey across Africa, the rabbi and his companions have two unique encounters that I now plan to address. The first encounter is with Hergé's Tintin character and his dog Snowy in the African Congo. The second encounter involves the rabbi and his friends running into a group of Muslim men in the desert. The cat narrates, "Au Congo belge, nous croisons un jeune reporter très sûr de lui" (Sfar, 63). Tintin tells the rabbi, "J'ignorais qu'il y eût des israélites aussi loin en territoire nègre" (Sfar, 63). The text in this panel is interesting because for those who are familiar with *Tintin*, racial stereotypes are endless throughout the *Tintin au Congo* album published by Hergé in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that Sfar incorporates this into his own work reminds readers how the French *bande dessinée* represented the other in the past and how it continues to

represent the other today in modern examples of the *bande dessinée*. The presence of intertextuality then proves Bakhtin's idea that every utterance of Sfar, consciously or unconsciously, contains the utterances that preceded his, contemporaneous to his, the utterances of the others. Now Sfar rectifies the wrongness of some of those utterances- he has his fictional characters "fight it out" and rectify each other. Not only does Sfar's *bande dessinée* show progress in terms of how Africans are represented, but it also serves as a homage in that it reminds readers of one of the Francophone world's most famous creators of the *bande dessinée*. Although his works are often criticized today, readers are able to appreciate both positive and negative aspects to Sfar's incorporation of *Tintin* in *Le Chat du Rabbín*. It also makes sense because *Le Chat du Rabbín* takes place during the late 1920s/early 1930s and this is when Hergé published *Tintin au Congo* in 1931. On one hand it is not completely accurate to argue that complete progress has been made in terms of fairly representing the other in Sfar's *Le Chat du Rabbín*. However, one could argue that a certain level of progress has occurred in how Sfar chooses to represent certain aspects of the other, by writing about a Sephardic Jewish rabbi in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Algeria instead of writing about an Ashkenazi family somewhere in Europe during the same time period. This story expands the awareness of certain readers who were perhaps unaware of the Jewish communities of the Maghreb. On the other hand, the portrayal of the Muslim nomads in the desert as well as the representation of the Falasha community in Ethiopia is still full stereotypes that are arguably offensive and inaccurate. This choice, to represent the other in such a degrading manner is interesting for an author who appears to be trying to inform readers and encourage acceptance of those who are

different. In the next paragraph I show an example of an encounter that is quite the stereotype.

The second encounter occurs as the rabbi and his friends cross the desert. It is in this portion of the *bande dessinée* that Sfar uses stereotypes of Muslims as violent and hostile when the men are unhappy with the fact that their visitors are not Muslim. The Muslim men question the rabbi and his group as to why they are not Muslims. Vastenov ends up killing one of the men in a duel. In the end, Vastenov also dies and balance occurs, allowing both sides to continue on their way without any further complications. As the group approaches Ethiopia, only the Russian painter, his wife and the rabbi's cat actually make it to their destination. They encounter the Falashas, who speak an unintelligible language, Amharic, which uses characters that many Western readers are not capable of comprehending. Along with their language, they are represented as being hostile and unfriendly. After a few panels, the Russian painter, the cat, and the Russian painter's wife are chased away and they decide to return back home.

In terms of language diversity, the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia speak Amharic. "During the expedition, the unnamed Russian painter meets Ethiopian Jews who speak Amharic and again experiences communication difficulties. Only the rabbi's plurilingual cat understands Amharic and is able to translate into French what is said and presented in pseudo-Amharic graphics. Hence, ironically, the cat becomes the mediator between the Russian, the Algerians, and the Ethiopian Jews" (Bramlett, 154). The role, then, of the rabbi's cat is interesting because he is capable of understanding every language, human and non-human. His role as the narrator is to also serve as an interpreter for the different cultures and languages that the reader encounters in *Le Chat du Rabbin*.

As these two examples demonstrate, instances of heteroglossia and polyphony are numerous. Not only are the characters all using different langue and language, the melting pot of language use within this specific social context is quite fascinating in that a variety of people, religions, and backgrounds are communicating and having a conversation with one another. Many of them do not speak the same language or have anything in common, yet Sfar enables the reader to understand through his usage of French as the main language of the story and because a polyglot cat serves as both the interpreter and narrator.

## CHAPTER III: Visual Polyphony in *Le Chat du Rabbin*

### 3.1 – Introduction

In *The Visual Language of Comics*, author Neil Cohn claims, “comics are written in visual languages in the same way that novels or magazines are written in English” and mentions in a footnote that “when you talk about them, substitute “English” for “visual language” and “novels” for “comics” (Cohn, 2). Here, we can also substitute “French” for any other language such as “English” in order to make the same point. The final chapter addresses the non-linguistic components of *Le Chat du Rabbin*, analyzing visual elements of the medium in order to explore the ways in which visual language is represented in the *bande dessinée*. The goal of this section is to use Bakhtin’s notion of *polyphony*, the presence of several voices, or points of view, and apply the term to the visual elements found in the *bande dessinée* medium. This will show how various aspects of the visual components are polyphonic when each element. For example, the panel or speech bubble simultaneously presents multiple points of view. Visual terminology associated with the *bande dessinée* medium, or comic medium is therefore capable of coexisting with Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony in that these visual elements are a visual variety of polyphony.

According to Ann Miller in *Reading Bande Dessinée*, “As a visual narrative art, *bande dessinée* produces meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without a text (Miller, 75). It is in



this chapter that I plan to address the visual meaning found in *Le Chat du Rabbin*. I will focus on the visual and non-textual polyphonic aspects of Sfar's *bande dessinée*. At the same time, my aim is to relate Bakhtin and his ideas on polyphony as well. In *Mikhail Bakhtin: A Creation of Prosaics*, Morson and Emerson write that "polyphony is often criticized as a theory that posits the absence of authorial point, but Bakhtin explicitly states that the polyphonic author neither lacks nor fails to express his ideas and values (Emerson, Morson, 232&233).

Polyphony, literally meaning *multiple voices*, expresses the various opinions and worldviews of different characters within a novel or text. When these varying opinions on a topic interact with each other, in addition to those of the author, polyphony takes place. Often, an author might have an opinion on a topic, however, for one purpose or another, he or she decides to introduce opposing or differing opinions to the story. The author will do this by making these opposing views part of the personality of a specific character and not his or her own. These voices will proceed to interact and present and work through an issue or provide various opinions to the reader.

Beginning with an analysis of the layout of the page and then analyzing more specific elements such as the various aspects found within a panel, this section explores the choices Sfar and other authors made when creating a *bande dessinée*. The medium is much more sophisticated than one might imagine. Not only do authors of the *bande dessinée* have to create a text, they have to decide where the text goes in relation to the remaining visual elements on the page. Every aspect has to be considered in relation to the other in a manner that best fits the story.

### **3.2 – Sfar's Artistic Style**

Although many of Sfar's works tend to have a variety of differences in terms of style or theme, perhaps as a way to avoid falling into one recognizable style in order to maintain variety, Sfar still leans heavily towards Jewish characters and subjects. Even when comparing his two greatest works, *Le Chat du Rabbín* and *Klezmer*, it is interesting to note that *Le Chat du Rabbín* is entirely drawn in pen and ink while *Klezmer* uses watercolors. Both works, however, portray Jewish characters and are written in French.

The first noticeable artistic element in many of Sfar's works are his uses of color. Every panel is remarkably detailed and colorful. In the beginning of *Le Chat du Rabbín* he has a page dedicated to Brigitte Findakly, who does the coloring for *Le Chat du Rabbín*. The choices are vibrant and bring the *bande dessinée* to life. Readers notice this when the action of the story takes place in the voyage across Africa, the colors are bright and full, providing readers with an overall feeling of warmth and exoticism. In contrast to the bright colors portrayed in Africa, Sfar uses dull, dark and gloomy colors that are used to represent Paris (Sfar, 112-113). As the rabbi, Zlabya, her new husband, and the rabbi's cat are traveling from Algeria to France, the scenery and colors are bright and vivid (Sfar, 111). Even when they arrive in Marseille the colors are still warm and vivid. It is when the characters get on the train for Paris, however, that the colors in the panel's transition to dark hues (Sfar, 112-113). The rabbi comments on seeing the first clouds outside the window as they move north from Marseille towards Paris and decides to put on his clothes so that he will not be cold when he arrives in the capital. A few panels later, when they are in Paris, the colors used by Sfar change considerably and a variety of dark colors, such as gray and black are used to represent Paris. If Sfar had kept his panels in black and white then it is possible that the overall feeling of the *bande dessinée* would be

lacking in some way. Readers are led to believe that being in Africa is better in comparison because the colors used are brighter and more vivid. The colors associated with Paris, however, are somber and make the reader feel as if Paris is a depressing place to be compared to Algiers. The comments made by the rabbi during his time in Paris further prove this point because he is continually complaining about what Paris does not have. For example, when Zlabya's husband, Jacques, shows him the Seine for the first time he comments that the poor Parisians do not even have a sea. They have to settle for a river that does not impress him that much. He is also disappointed in the Champs Elysees because they have no palm trees on the side of the street to enhance the overall beauty of the street. These comments and many more show how the rabbi is happier in Algiers than in Paris. It also demonstrates how he criticizes France even though he must prove his ability to write in perfect French.

### **3.3 – Layout**

Similar to the author who carefully structures his sentence in a novel, the cartoonist has to carefully structure his artwork in order to communicate to the reader the precise mood he or she is aiming for in the *bande dessinée*. One of the first aspects a cartoonist has to consider is the layout of the page. Layout includes panel positioning, also referred to as frames, as well as the placement of elements such as a gutter, the space between framed panels, or tier, a single row of panels and whether or not to have a splash or spread, usually a large illustration at the beginning of the story used to grab the reader's attention. All of these choices the author and illustrator uses contribute to the textual, polyphonic elements of the story.

Will Eisner, a leading theorist and cartoonist, says that one goal of proper panel positioning is “to control the reader’s attention and the reader’s emotion, and try to relate to the reader’s visual and spatial comprehension.” (Eisner, 105). The panel, therefore, is an essential element in the *bande dessinée* medium in that the placement of the panel and what the panel contains will affect the reader in the same way that sentence structure might affect the reader of a novel. The manner in which the author positions the panels is not merely for decoration, it is a way of indicating how he or she wants the information divided and presented to the reader. The presence of a one-page splash or spread at the beginning, is a means to immediately grab the reader’s attention.

Joann Sfar has a traditional approach to the layout of *Le Chat du Rabbín*. There are six panels per page throughout all five albums, with the border of each panel being hand drawn, exemplifying a more casual approach to his style of drawing. For many, the six panels per page is standard and is a result of a critic named Mort Weisinger based in the DC area. “Weisinger insisted on a writing style that limited the number of panels on a page, the number of words on a page, and the layout of the panels on the page. Weisinger’s rules were as follows: no more than 6 panels on a page, no more than 35 words per panel, no more than 25 words in a thought/speech balloon, and a maximum of 210 words on a given page (Romagnoli, 101). The lines are not perfect and as a result the *bande dessinée* has a more casual or relaxed appearance. The borders used in the *bande dessinée* are all drawn in black ink on a white page, resulting in white tiers, or gutters, as they are referred to in the comic and graphic novel vocabulary, are found between the panels on a page. Besides the six panels per page, the only exception is the first page of each album, which is a one-page splash. The page with the title of the album is printed on a one entire page

that has no border and covers the entire page. This approach is beneficial in that Sfar or other artists try to draw in the reader with a visually pleasing drawing.

The purpose of the panel in the *bande dessinée* is multiple. Not only does the panel work like an individual sentences and allow for the artist to break up certain moments within the story, but it also organizes the page and enables the reader to follow what is going on in a chronological manner. Scott McCloud claims, “the panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided. The durations of that time and dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than the panel itself. Panel shapes vary considerably though, and while differences of shape don’t affect the specific ‘meanings’ of those panels vis-à-vis time, they can affect the reading experience” (McCloud, 99). In this case, the panel is one of the most important elements that an author and designer of the *bande dessinée* can establish on a given page. Whether he or she remains constant and divides every page up evenly into six panels in the way Sfar has chosen to organize *Le Chat du Rabbín*, or if they divide the page up differently, the key aspect to consider is how it works in relation to that specific story. Not all novels are the same and similarly, not all *bande dessinée* should be similar either.

### **3.4 – Elements inside the Panel**

Another visual aspect to consider is the content found inside the panels themselves. This includes the speech balloons, captions, and sound effects and how they interact with each other in a panel and on the page as a whole. Overall, Sfar remains constant in his use of all of these elements. With speech balloons incorporating the utterances and sentences of the characters in dialogue, the captions depicting the cat’s

comments as the narrator and additional speech bubbles with different color backgrounds and font are a means to represent sound effects within *Le Chat du Rabbin*.

Will Eisner writes in his *Comics and Sequential Art* that, “ the balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element; sound. The arrangement of balloons which surround speech- their position in relation to each other, or to the action, or their position with respect to the speaker- contribute to the measurement of time. They are disciplinary in that they demand cooperation from the reader. A major requirement is that they be read in a prescribed sequence in order to know who speaks first. They address our subliminal understanding of the duration of speech” (Eisner, 18). The speech bubble serves as a graphic element that groups characters’ utterances and sentences in a readable manner. In terms of polyphony, the presence of speech bubbles works as a visual element that contains the voice or points of view given by the characters in the story. The speech bubbles therefore engage the reader and allow for a logical understanding of the story in a chronological manner, facilitating the reading process and serving as a non-linguistic holder of the text. By viewing the shapes of the speech balloons, the reader is able to interpret who is speaking first without even seeing the text based on the positioning of the bubbles, which are generally read or positioned in the same flow as one would read a normal Western text, from top to bottom and from left to right. Written text is not necessary, as it is rather natural to follow the shapes of the balloons.

The speech balloons are as original as the written text itself for Sfar. He draws each speech bubble differently, closing in the text that each character says at that particular moment in the story. The lines of the speech bubbles are hand drawn, as is the

text that goes inside each speech balloon. For instance, the cat has two functions in the story, sometimes narrating and sometimes dialoguing with the other characters. If he is narrating, then the text goes in a caption, which is either found at the top or the bottom of the panel. The reader is easily able to differentiate the panels from the speech balloons because the captions are connected to the panels, with no space between the panel frame and the box that includes the narration. By contrast, however, the speech balloons are detached from the frame and stem from the mouths of the characters. Often including a tail, the point like part of a speech bubble closest to the mouth of the character speaking is what distinguishes the speech bubble from the caption.

The representation of the written text is an equally important element to consider on a page, as the font and way in which the author chooses to letter the text can say a great deal about the story. Eisner addresses lettering in *Comics and Sequential Art*, stating, “Inside the balloon, the lettering reflects the nature and emotion of the speech. It is most often symptomatic of the artist’s own personality (style), as well as that of the character speaking. Emulating a foreign language style of letter and similar devices add to the sound level and the dimension of the character itself.” (Eisner, 18). Sfar’s lettering is in cursive when the cat is narrating and in print when the other characters are communicating. As a result, the reader is constantly aware of who is speaking, again indicating the aspect of polyphony that refers to point of view.

Another element that I want to address in this category pertains to the notion of sounds. Comics, and the *bande dessinée*, are famous for the onomatopoeia that they make as a way to add an extra element to the page. The first example of sound in *Le Chat du Rabbín* occurs in the beginning of the first album when the cat is annoyed with the pet

parrot. There is a panel that shows the parrot with six different speech balloons stemming from its mouth all with bold, capital letters saying, “CRÔO” which is the sound a French parrot makes according to Sfar. Another example occurs in the last album when the men are traveling across Africa by car. The onomatopoeia that Sfar adds include, “BRRRRROUMMM!” and “POUTOU POUTOU POUTOU!” and these letters, or utterances, create sounds that resemble noises from everyday life, such as that of a parrot or that of a car. The final example, one that is slightly different compared to the other two occurs in the last panel of the first album. As the cat follows one of the young Jewish men home, the man becomes annoyed with the cat’s behavior and kicks him with his foot. The last panel shows the cat getting hit with the heel of the man’s foot and the speech bubble, instead of creating a smooth sided bubble, is pointy and resembles an oval shaped sun with spikes, the text inside being “BING!”

Overall, the elements that are found inside a panel move from simple to complex. On the one hand, they are simple, in that on the surface a panel appears to be a simple box that is filled with drawings and text. On the other hand, the panels and elements inside are complex because if the reader is to truly pay attention to everything then he or she will become much more aware of what the author is trying to communicate in the story. As for Sfar, we have learned that the loose lines that he uses to create a border, with the addition of hand drawn speech bubbles and captions all indicate a relaxed feeling, one that almost seems as if he is speaking to the reader informally, and through the cat. Opportunities for interpreting these internal elements in terms of polyphony, therefore, are plentiful. In every box throughout the story the reader is able to see how Sfar interprets and represents the “other”. From the Algerians in the beginning of the



story, to the Muslim men in the desert to the Falasha Jews towards the end of the story, these illustrations and depictions come from Sfar and portray an entire population and culture according to how Sfar sees them himself. This is the point of view of a French person of both Sephardic and Ashkenazi ancestry. His words are visual depictions of his ancestors and are an entire visual demonstration of how one French Jew interprets and portrays the other through his *bande dessinée*.

### **3.5 – Depictions of Ethnicities within the Panel**

One of the more challenging aspects to consider in an analysis of a *bande dessinée* is the representation of different ethnicities within the panels. How does an artist of a particular work differentiate between different races or groups of people? Is it easier to use familiar stereotypes that people are familiar with? As for *Le Chat du Rabbín*, Sfar chooses to represent different groups of people in a way that is easy for the reader to identify. Although stereotypes are used to an extent, the method by which Sfar illustrates the stereotypes is not offensive. For example, the *bande dessinée* begins with illustrations of both Muslim and non-Muslim characters. How does one draw a Muslim or Jew? Sfar chooses to differentiate between the two by drawing a Sephardi kippah on the heads of Jewish male characters or a headscarf on the Muslim characters. The choice to add these elements demonstrates how a French Jew chooses to differentiate between Jews and Muslims within his work.

In this section I want to analyze the way in which Sfar chooses to represent two types of Jewish characters, the Algerian Jew and the Ethiopian Jew. Both characters are Jewish and African, but they do not resemble each other in any way. On the one hand Sfar depicts the rabbi, with tan Mediterranean colored skin, wearing a suit and a

yarmulke, and on the other hand, he portrays a Jewish Falasha who is monstrous in size, black, and wearing little to no clothing. The little clothing that they are wearing is yellow and has the Star of David on it. In addition, the Ethiopians are hostile and unfriendly towards the main characters that are searching for the Jerusalem of Africa.

The negative portrayal of black Africans in the *bande dessinée* is not a new phenomenon. Hergé's *Tintin au Congo*, depicted on pages 270 and 271 of the text, is an example of how an artist can use illustrations to negatively represent a certain group of people. Although Sfar does not intentionally try to stereotype a group of people in a negative manner, he still ends up representing the characters in one way or another. All artists will have to choose the way in which they depict a character, and it is ultimately up to the readers to decide whether or not the representations used are acceptable or insulting. In *Le Chat du Rabbín*, black Ethiopians are portrayed as giants and barbaric in that they wear limited clothing compared to the Algerians and French characters in the *bande dessinée*.

The visual representations of characters within the panel are therefore interesting to analyze because they are a way for the reader to visually interpret the viewpoints of Sfar towards certain peoples and cultures. By analyzing Sfar's drawings, readers are able to understand how Sfar wants others to see certain people. Does he reiterate negative stereotypes or does he provide a unique outlook for the reader? As for Sfar, it is a mix of both. On the one hand, it is easy to look at the drawings of the Algerian Jews and appreciate the fact that he does not use any particularly negative physical traits to represent the Algerian Jews. They only differ from other characters in that their skin color is slightly darker compared to the representations of French characters. One minor

difference might be the addition of a yamukah on Jewish characters, showing that a certain character is indeed Jewish. On the other hand, it is also possible to look at the drawings of Ethiopians and wonder why Sfar would choose to exaggerate their size and overall appearance. Compared to *Tintin au Congo*, the representations of black Africans is nowhere near as negative as those of Hergé, but Sfar's representations are not particularly better. It is interesting to note that the monstrous size, the scant clothing and aggressive nature that Sfar uses for depicting the Ethiopian Jews, results in othering them. It is the dialogue and discourse that occurs between the Russian painter, the cat, and the Ethiopian Jews that is interesting to analyze here. As mentioned in Chapter II of this study, Bakhtin believes that the novel is a means to represent different ideas and points of view, with language having the possibility of introducing readers to new worlds and different perspectives on different languages and cultures. Sfar, then, chooses to portray the Ethiopian Jews as larger beings, and as more simplistic. He also chooses to have their language written, unintelligible to most readers, and further reiterating the fact that the Ethiopians are different. The way they speak is different, their accents are different, and even their language is different.

Overall, visual depictions of characters in *Le Chat du Rabbin* are not particularly insulting. After analyzing several examples of *bande dessinée* throughout its existence, it is possible to see a positive progression in the ways in which Jewish characters are visually depicted. Starting with the negative representations of Jewish characters such as Mr. Blumenstein in earlier *Tintin* stories and ending with the more neutral representations of Jewish characters found in examples such as *Le Chat du Rabbin*, readers of the Jewish *bande dessinée* can see an overall positive trend. There are always exceptions, of course,

and this research by no means makes the claim that the representations are entirely better. Instead, it compares one older example, that of *Tintin* with a modern example, *Le Chat du Rabbín*.

### **3.6 – Depictions of Places within the Panel**

Similar to the representation of people, the panels of a *bande dessinée* must accurately achieve the task of visually representing a place as well, providing the reader with enough illustrative clues to understand the location within the frame. How does Sfar let us know that the *bande dessinée* takes place in Algeria or another location? By drawing a certain architectural building such as a mosque or by inserting different landscapes into the panels, such as a palm tree, Sfar immerses the reader into a world that can generally be identified based on the series of landscapes and illustrations found within the panels. For example, when Sfar wants to change locations and place the reader in France, the initial panel serves as a sort of transition that must include some illustrative components that represent the location. He also draws the cities of Algiers and Paris and includes familiar landmarks and buildings such as the port of Algiers or the Champs Elysees in Paris.

In *Le Chat du Rabbín*, two examples of how Sfar chooses to represent place visually include Algeria and France. The first panels of the *bande dessinée* include city scenes that are typical of Algiers. Readers know this because there are mosques, palm trees, people wearing headscarves over their heads, as well as other visual elements that represent a certain place. When Sfar draws France, however, the landscape and scenery change drastically. Instead of palm trees, mosques and bright colors, Sfar incorporates more modern aspects of French culture. The panels include more cars, trains, and other

places that are found within a European city. This is a sharp contrast to the illustrations found within the panels that take place in Algeria.

Throughout this chapter, it is interesting to note how examples of visual polyphony are viewed throughout the text. It is not only the textual element within the story that should be noted, but the illustrative components as well. They work as their own language and often say more than the actual text itself. From the choice of medium in which Sfar illustrates, to the layout down to the internal elements of each individual panel, each page is filled with numerous aspects and components which can be broken down into their own language. This is what makes the novel different from the graphic novel. It is non-textual, visual polyphony that adds to the story and provides a whole new meaning to the overall appreciation and quality of the story.

Before ending this thesis, I want to include one final chapter on the animated film version of the story which was released in 2011 and differs from the original story.

## Chapter IV – Heteroglossia and Polyphony in the Animated Film

### 4.1 - Introduction

In 2011, directors Antoine Delesvaux and Joann Sfar created an animated film based on the *bande dessinée*, bringing *Le Chat du Rabbín* to life. The film was a huge success and was subsequently further popularized as a result. Similar to the *bande dessinée*, the film is worth analyzing in that it provides an additional unique perspective on heteroglossia and visual polyphony. In this final chapter, I analyze the film and how text and illustrations change and are adapted to the context of a film. In the first part, I analyze how the text of the *bande dessinée* is transformed into audio and becomes an element that is heard, not read. Similarly, the illustrations are brought to life in the creation of the film and are given movement and sound, creating a new and unique experience that transform the printed comic from image to a motion picture.

Before analyzing the role of heteroglossia and visual polyphony in the animated film, *Le Chat du Rabbín*, I want to first discuss the similarities and differences between the *bande dessinée* and the film. For the most part, the film maintains many of the original dialogues that exist between the narrator and various characters within the *bande dessinée*. One difference is that the film does not include two of the albums. The film is only based on albums one, two, and five. The fact that Delesvaux and Sfar decide to leave out albums three and four are probably due to the fact that the directors probably did not want the film to be too long. This means that the moments where Zlabya marries her husband and they travel to France with the rabbi and the rabbi's cat by ferry and train

are not included in the film. As a result, I think that the *bande dessinée* is better because it provides more information. It also revolves more around the life of Zlabya, a character who plays a relatively small role in the film. Despite the exclusion of including albums three and four, those that are incorporated into the film does a great job of bringing Sfar's pages from his *bande dessinée* to life in a way that makes the text and film correspond in an artistic whole.

#### **4.2 – Heteroglossia in the Film**

Like the novel, a film is usually a continuous stream of utterances, discourses and dialogues that occur between a series of characters. The difference, however, is that these aspects are both seen and heard. Characters are given voices and their dialogues are recorded and placed within the context of a series of animated illustrations. The interactions that occur are communicative and take place on screen, enabling the reader to become a viewer.

One of the first elements to consider is the narrator's voice. In *Le Chat du Rabbín*, the voice of the cat is distinct and pleasant, one that intrigues the viewer and causes him or her to want to listen to what the narrator has to say. An aspect that is important to consider when analyzing the narrator's voice in the film instead of the literary work is that unlike the literary work that distinguishes between the narrator's voice and the voice of other characters by choice of either cursive or print writing, the film does not make this distinction because it is no longer an element that is different in writing, but character voices. As a result, the directors of the film have to be able to incorporate the narrator's voice into the film in a way that is similar to the *bande dessinée*. In this film, the

narrator's voice is represented as a simple narration that is attached to a series of moving images that illustrate action on the screen.

### **4.3 – Accents**

Accents are also taken into consideration during the making of the film. The cat for example, speaks in a standard sounding French accent, but other voices such as that of the rabbi have a slight Algerian accent when speaking French. This adds a certain level of exoticism to certain voices, which makes them different from just another French person out of France. This adds to the film experience in that the reader, who might not exactly be familiar with a particular accent, is able to listen instead and understand how a certain accent sounds. This is not always as easy when reading text that is trying to imitate the sounds of a particular accent. The Russian character Vastenov is another example of how a nonnative French speaker is given the role of recording his voice for the production of the film because throughout the film we are able to hear a heavy Russian accent when the Russian painter is speaking, presenting his unique point of view to the overall viewing and hearing process that goes along with the film.

### **4.4 – Visual Polyphony**

Considering film is primarily about viewing and listening instead of reading, visual components play a different role in the animated film than when reading the *bande dessinée*. Reading the *bande dessinée* still involves more engagement from the reader than watching the film, which is arguably less challenging to analyze and interpret than are the textual and graphic components involved in reading the *bande dessinée*. Not only are the producers or artists having to draw out different scenes in a series of panels, but



they also have to take these and turn them into drawings that move. A film cannot consist of a series of images that appear on the screen, but instead must be adapted and transformed into drawings that move.

#### **4.5 – The role of Music in the Film**

The role of music in *Le Chat du Rabbín* is another interesting element worth analyzing in this research. Unlike reading words of a text or interpreting a visual, music involves a whole other sense, that of the auditory. A component that only the film version can provide, the role of music enhances the overall feel for the story in more than one way. Not only does it set the mood by adding music that is perhaps typical for Algeria, it also places the viewer in the story and makes him or her feel like they are in the actual film. Reading the *bande dessinée* requires the reader to use his or her own imagination when giving the different characters a voice or unique sound. When viewing the film, however, the director adds other elements that the author is unable to add to his text.

This new component, listening, is unique in that it is not often considered when analyzing a *bande dessinée*. It engages a whole other sense that Bakhtin or Eisner fail to address in their research. It is neither textual nor visual. Instead, it is auditory and is unique to the film experience. It is interesting to consider what role music plays when analyzing a *bande dessinée*, or other comic. In *Le Chat du Rabbín*, three artists or groups are used for their musical talent. Enrico Macias, born in French controlled Algeria in the 1930s is a unique choice because Sfar is purposely including artists who are native to the place and time of those in his story. In addition, the group Amsterdam and the Klezmer Band are also included throughout the film. Not only does the music add an exotic feel to

the experience, but also it enables the director to share another aspect of the local culture with the viewer.

## Conclusion

According to Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel*, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (...) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bakhtin, 262). Joann Sfar, then, is the one who creates various voices within the *bande dessinée*, *Le Chat du Rabbin*. Throughout the *bande dessinée*, it is interesting to analyze examples of both heteroglossia and polyphony and how both are portrayed in a French and Jewish *bande dessinée* such as *Le Chat du Rabbin*.

The fictional world that Sfar creates is full of dialogues, voices, and other elements of Bakhtin's heteroglossia and polyphony. This allows the reader of the *bande dessinée* and the viewer of the animated film to see how Sfar chooses to portray Sephardic Jews of Algeria during the 1920s and 1930s. The story helps show a unique perspective on what it means to be Jewish and where Jewish people are located by choosing a more exotic location such as Algeria and parts of Africa.

Bakhtin mentions that voice are "the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness. A voice always has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones" (Bakhtin, 434). Throughout *Le Chat du Rabbin*, numerous voices are present and come together to share the story of a rabbi in Algeria and his speaking cat who enjoys questioning his religious beliefs and traditions.

The voice of each character is unique and contributes to the *bande dessinée* as a whole. Each character not only has his or her own language, point his or her own point of

view, all of which stem from the imagination of Joann Sfar. The characters dialogue with each other, the narrator, and the reader. The engagement of the reader also allows for a unique experience since each reader will be interpreting and analyzing the story differently from others.

Throughout this study the primary objective was to examine examples of heteroglossia and polyphony in order to show how the theories of Bakhtin are not only applicable to the novel, but also more modern examples of literature, such as the *bande dessinée*. The *bande dessinée* includes components that enhance it as a medium by which to explore examples of heteroglossia and polyphony because the *bande dessinée*, unlike the novel, has illustrations in addition to text. These illustrations are a new language of their own, using different voices such as color or drawing techniques to enhance the overall story. Although Bakhtin never addressed the visual components that I analyzed in this research, it is definitely possible to analyze these visual and polyphonic elements in addition to the textual heteroglossia within the *bande dessinée*.

In conclusion, both textual heteroglossia and visual polyphony play a unique role in *Le Chat du Rabbin*. It demonstrates how images and words can work together to create a unique medium for readers to analyze and interpret. These comics, as Eisner said, can be “read” in ways that prove to be different from the way readers read previous literature. This way is neither better nor worse, but simply different. As the *bande dessinée* medium continues to grow, so will the ways in which readers analyze and interpret these textual and illustrative works.

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