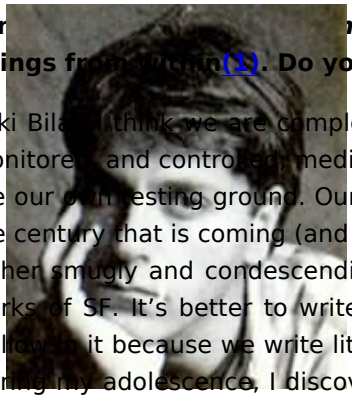
Interview with Enki Bilal (2)

Description

“Accepting the idea of controlled amnesia.” Enki Bilal, an illustrator and director, shares his perspective on the crucial issue of memory.



Arr*meil du Monstre* [SDM], you depict a fly and a metal plate manipulating human beings from within(1). Do you think humans are manipulated in their lives and memories?

Enki Bila I think we are completely manipulated. Even in our democratic society, we will be increasingly manipulated, monitored and controlled; medicine (for our own good) will end up manipulating us. Human beings are extraordinary; we are our own testing ground. Our evolution is part of our self-mutilation. There is both fascination and fear of all this; it is the century that is coming (and has already begun), and it is a form of culture. I cannot escape my references, which are rather smugly and condescendingly referred to as science fiction (SF). Among the great texts of the 20th century are works of SF. It’s better to write for the 6th arrondissement [of Paris] and for the pseudo-intellectual bourgeoisie who wallow in it because we write literature, wildly exciting stories (already obsolete, by the way), and despise the SF genre. During my adolescence, I discovered the real questions and the genuine imagination. I think we are entering the period described by good science fiction authors since the 1950s. Science has progressed beyond that stage; there are many things we still don’t know. We are in an exciting phase!

Does memory not allow us to measure the value, the meaning of death?

I criticize Serbian nationalism for talking about roots and the blood of ancestors in the soil. The memory of everything, of oneself and one’s soil, of difference, of the foreigner, becomes excessively crystallized. The Western world erodes this and erases memory. We must find the right balance. Too much memory is harmful to memory; it weakens it and focuses it on the monstrosity of memory. Without memory, we start again… In Sarajevo, before the war, a happy medium existed, but it was destroyed and not preserved, and subsequently adopted elsewhere. Today, reconstruction means accepting the idea of controlled amnesia.

In the Nikopol Trilogy (1980, 1986, 1992), you portray religion and religious figures. Are they a danger?

Religion, no, even though I used to be more anti-clerical. Human beings need to believe, so they choose a religion. That hasn’t happened to me (maybe one day), but I respect faith and religious practices. I have less respect for indoctrination, such as catechism before the age of reason, etc. There are excesses among the three monotheistic religions; each of them has elements of extremism and fundamentalism.

You have created albums about Eastern European countries, but the current situation in Yugoslavia presented an opportunity to make an album specifically about Yugoslavia.

Now, some time has passed, and I no longer believe that this is an album about Yugoslavia. The memory evoked in SDM is directly linked to the events in Sarajevo in 1993 during the first days of a human being’s life (in the noblest sense of the term). It is the account of a man-witness with a pure newborn. He is eighteen days old at the beginning and one day old at the end, since we are in reverse chronological order. He is the witness, he records, he hears, he sees, and he tells the story. But do eighteen days of a witness at the Kosevo hospital in Sarajevo during the Serbian bombing of Sarajevo constitute a book about Yugoslavia? Not necessarily. I was not in Sarajevo during the war. Still, I think I have succeeded in the coherence of my testimony, extracted from a drama that was well known in the media: the bombardment of the symbolic city of Sarajevo by reactionaries, idiots, people who were drunk all day on sljivovica [brandy].

This testimony becomes something universal and not just about Yugoslavia. It comes at a time when Eastern European countries are losing their raison d'être. They are suddenly defeated, destitute in 1989: they have lost the great war of the century (if we want to reduce the century to that). I wanted this story of Sarajevo to symbolize the defeat of the communist ideological system and to understand why memory is so poorly managed, why history repeats itself. I am disappointed because it has been very poorly reported [by journalists]. This century is ending with a smaller-scale repetition of the Holocaust and other catastrophes for which it is, after all, the legal custodian. But some wonderful things have also happened.

Is SDM the sleep of a memory that is difficult for everyone to digest?

I'll let you think what you want. The title came to me very early on, and the story followed. How can I explain SDM? The monster is wide awake! It couldn't be the monster's awakening, since it's been awake for a century: the monster's sleep is very ambiguous; it comes from a well-known phrase: "The monster slumbers in each of us". I had to start from the human root. Then I began working on the script, focusing on introspection and memory, which were the common threads of the album and my own investigation. I unraveled it day by day. Every element, every character, every echo of the story resonates monstrously: memory, the memories recounted by this newborn, and then sleep too, through nightmares and dreams, it's monstrous. Regardless of the title and its meaning, the album features elements of sleep and monsters.

Which stories did you use to create the story of The Sleep of the Monster?

Nike remembers his first eighteen days, during which he knew that little Lejla and little Amir were younger than him. This situation is absurd in itself, which is why I didn't show them graphically; seeing three newborns, symbols of purity, ruined everything – it wasn't believable. To believe it, I did not need to see them. It was exciting because I saw the faces of the adult characters very quickly. The cover is essential; the three characters are drawn in the position they probably had at birth: they are there, and we can see their heads. This story is a testimony I made up myself, but it's also totally plausible; it comes partly from my imagination (it's very easy to imagine a hospital at that time), based on information and books on the subject that I devoured, and partly from within, with that culture.

When a journalist interviews Nike, she only asks him at the end whether he is Serbian, Croatian, or Muslim. Did you want to show that in Bosnia, or even in Yugoslavia, identity is more absurd than real?

Yes, unfortunately, that's the reality! The obsession with identity is ridiculous in itself, and in my opinion, it led in part to the war. People started saying, "I am Serbian, this is the land of my ancestors, blood has been shed here," and that's when we entered into the nationalist madness that we also see among Croats. All of this was latent and frozen under Tito's regime and system. I was naive, deceived by this façade, happy that there were Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Muslims. I didn't even know what that meant. All it took was for Tito to disappear, and the power game, aided by the economic crisis, the collapse of ideologies, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, all of which precipitated not a need but reactions of fear and withdrawal. Milosevic, as early as 1986, found resonance in the countryside and then in Belgrade. He spoke to them charismatically, despite his unattractive appearance. A sentiment arose along the lines of "This is it, we, our people, will exist again!" In Croatia, nationalists like Tudjman rubbed their hands with glee at the sight of Milosevic. Then it all descended into horror. It's difficult to say what should have been done from the inside, but it's clear that a specific culture of opposition was lacking.

Nike, in SDM: "A wrath from the heavens that reassures me, far more impressive than the fire of men, for I am a ten-day-old orphan happy to feel that nature is stronger than them." Thunder seems more natural than bombs sent by men, nature seems stronger… Is this optimism?

I want my text to convey the following message: discerning between artificial fire and natural fire is a form of optimism. This message may be considered 'green', perverse, or disguised, but it brings us back to the roles of nature and humanity. The two compete, with man competing with nature: "Am I going to make more fire, more noise, more damage?" Anti-personnel mines kill at physical and temporal distances. That man is nothing but despicable. It is a good thing for a newborn to be happy and proud to realize that nature is reassuring, even if it hurts.

In *Les Phalanges de l'Ordre noir*, young people are drugged: was this simply a tool or a reflection of a youth that is unable to take up the torch that only the "old" would be capable of carrying on?

This album is a fictional reportage created with Pierre Christin in the late 1970s; the events are journalistic, with young people divided between big "smoke-filled concerts" and the revolutionary cause, active in politics. Our heroes belong to the older generation, and the message stems from the failure of their epic journey and the lucidity of the woman who leaves at the right moment, no longer understanding the stubborn madness of her former comrades in the brigades.

By the way, regarding your beautiful heroines, what are your inspirations?

The women of Yugoslavia are gorgeous; my own experiences and aesthetic sensibilities also come into play, without straying too far into fantasy. I don't draw from photographs or women I know (contrary to what my friends believe). Graphic design transcends reality; it starts with a vague idea that gives rise to a visual form on paper. The women in my albums are not perfect; they often have broken noses or mouths that are too large. The work involves focusing on the gaze and the eyes, and assigning them a role. It is very far from reality, which makes both women and men fantasize. My male characters are created in the same spirit. They are more than just heroes, not really heroes at all, in fact. They are disproportionate to the canon of beauty, which is utterly empty and uninteresting.

(1) See issue 16 (July-August 1999) of *Regard sur l'Est*

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Thumbnail: Enki Bilal (http://bilal.enki.free.fr/photos.php3)

Read the first part of the interview

Link to the French version of the article

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