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Moebius and Digital Tools, from Experimentation to Remediation

Nicolas Labarre, Université Bordeaux Montaigne, nicolas.labarre@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

This article examines the way in which Jean Giraud (1938–2012) – Moebius – used digital tools throughout his career in a variety of ways, ranging from experimentation to remediation and back. A digitally altered image from 1975, republished in 2010 with undocumented changes, demonstrates the way in which Moebius embraced digital tools towards the end of his life, to curate his own legacy, to revisit and recombine his earlier work, but also to supplement his failing physical abilities. These uses, accompanied with often contradictory statements from the author, are but the final step in Moebius's engagement with these tools, from the late 1980s to the moment of his death. The article examines the scattered traces of early experiments, including a recently rediscovered digital exhibit of abstract images from 1993, and the gradual integration of digital tools in Moebius's professional output, before attempting to make sense of the author's reluctance to acknowledge their importance in his late work.

In October 2010, slightly over a year before his death, Jean Giraud — Moebius — helped curate "Mœbius-Transe-Forme," a striking exhibit of his life and work at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. The blockbuster show functioned as a wide-ranging recapitulation of his career and was accompanied by an expensive catalogue, which quickly became sought after by collectors (Cassé et al., 2010). Pages 26–27 of the book feature a familiar black-and-white image of various extraterrestrials in a sort of police lineup, including an unusually somber self-portrait of Giraud among his characters (**fig. 1**). The catalogue lists the picture as "Arzach et compagnie", Arzach and friends, with a 1975–2010 copyright.

Figure 1: Moebius [Jean Giraud], "Arzach et compagnie", 1975–2010.

1975 is the date of publication of an earlier version of that image, in *Métal Hurlant* #3. It was part of Moebius's seminal *Arzach*, a series of short graphic tales and illustrations, published with a variety of spellings in the first five issues of the magazine. That original image, which fit on a single vertical page, did not include a self-portrait of the young Giraud and differed in other ways, both obvious and not. To list but a few

of these changes, in the 2010 version, the reference to *Métal Hurlant* was replaced by one to Stardom — Giraud's self-publishing house — one character in the background was changed to match the established appearance of Arzach as a transmedia character (Huz, 2019) and, amusingly, one character's eyes have been tweaked, as if preparing for a flipbook effect (which Moebius had famously used in *The Horny Goof*, a year before *Arzach*) (**fig. 2**).
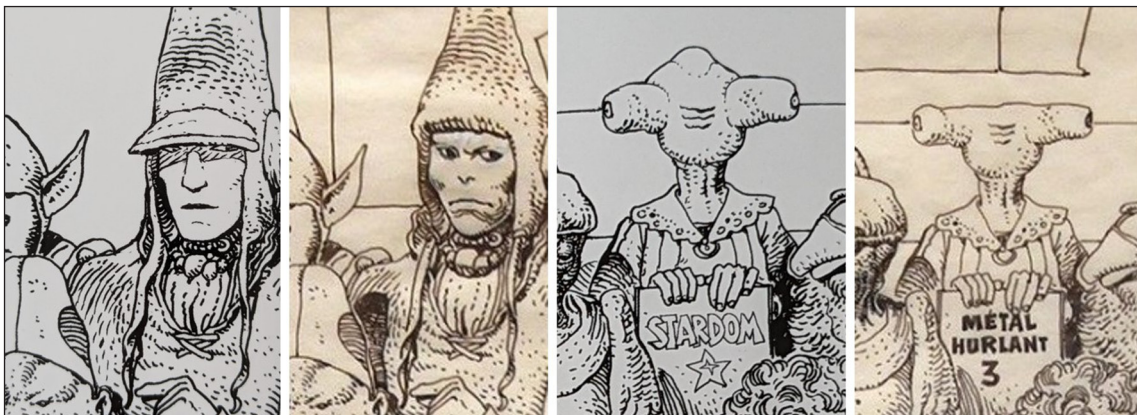

Figure 2: "Arzach et compagnie", left, and "Harzach", right.

These edits are unadvertised in the book, and a casual reader would likely assume that the image was produced at a late stage in his career, befitting the age of the artist in his self-portrait. It thus offers a form of suture between 1975 and 2010, between Giraud's creative peak and the final celebrations of his illustrious career. Digital tools serve to bridge that gap, through what appears to be a painstaking recreation of the line-width and gestures Giraud had used 35 years before. That suture, though, proves elusive. The shadows on the floor differ slightly and the point of insertion of new graphic elements displays the typical artifacts of such tinkering combined with intensive hatching. More subtly perhaps, the self-portrait lacks the confident strokes of the original, and displays evidence of the multiple, fully erasable edits which are part of the affordances of these tools.

Unlike the show itself, which presented technical explanations and examples of Giraud's process, the catalogue offers striking images in isolation, with little precise information. Many pages are not numbered, making it even harder to track down their dates, details and titles, compiled in an austere list in the back of the book, which remains both circumspect and inconsistent about the use of digital tools. A recolored page from *Man of the Ciguri*, for instance, is simply described as using "previously

unpublished colors" ("mise en couleur inédite") — though the perfect gradients leave no doubt as to their origin — while two pages from *Le Chasseur déprime*, a book published in black-and-white are described as using "digital colors". In such an important curatorial effort, supervised by Giraud himself, these omissions and silences are significant.

In this article, I seek to argue that these omissions reveal Giraud's reluctance to acknowledge his use of digital tools in the realm of linework — as opposed to colors — at a time of failing physical abilities and in a decade in which he consistently looked back to his previous, critically acclaimed work.

A History of Digital Work

In his work as Moebius, Giraud's science fiction universes contain few references to computers and digital tools. His storyworlds are either distinctly urban-industrial (*The Incal*, "The Long Tomorrow") or set in ethereal, post-screens settings (*Edena*). Though William Gibson has credited him for the look of early cyberpunk (Labarre, 2022), that vision is perceptible in the sprawl and the dilapidated cityscapes of the genre, rather than in representations of cyberspace. His most celebrated works were in fact produced in the mid to late 1970s, before personal computers or videogaming devices became ubiquitous, and before the digital imagination took over. Even his major contribution to that digital imagination — his work on *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982) — is ambiguous in that regard, since his costume design was used as the basis for analog work masquerading as a digital creation through hand-painted light effects. Most of the celebrated early CGI in the movie derived from Syd Mead's design for vehicles and environments. Likewise, his work on James Cameron's *The Abyss* in 1989 took the form of analog drawings meant to be remediated by and through digital tools, which constituted one of the movie's attractions.

In other words, though celebrated as a futurist, Giraud, born in 1938 and already 40 upon the release of the Apple II — arguably the first personal computer with notable graphic capabilities —, played little role in shaping the narratives and representations of the digital world. Case in point, the image he created in 1983 to advertise the Alice personal computer, a French version of Commodore's TRS 80, is a controlled image, in which the computer promises to subsume a form of comfortable analogue clutter by its very existence, without any attempt at representing the screen or the machine in operation (**fig. 3**). At a time when the visual idiom of computer graphics was becoming ubiquitous, from *Time* magazine to *Playboy* (Newman, 2017; Labarre, 2020), Giraud did not even gesture in that direction.
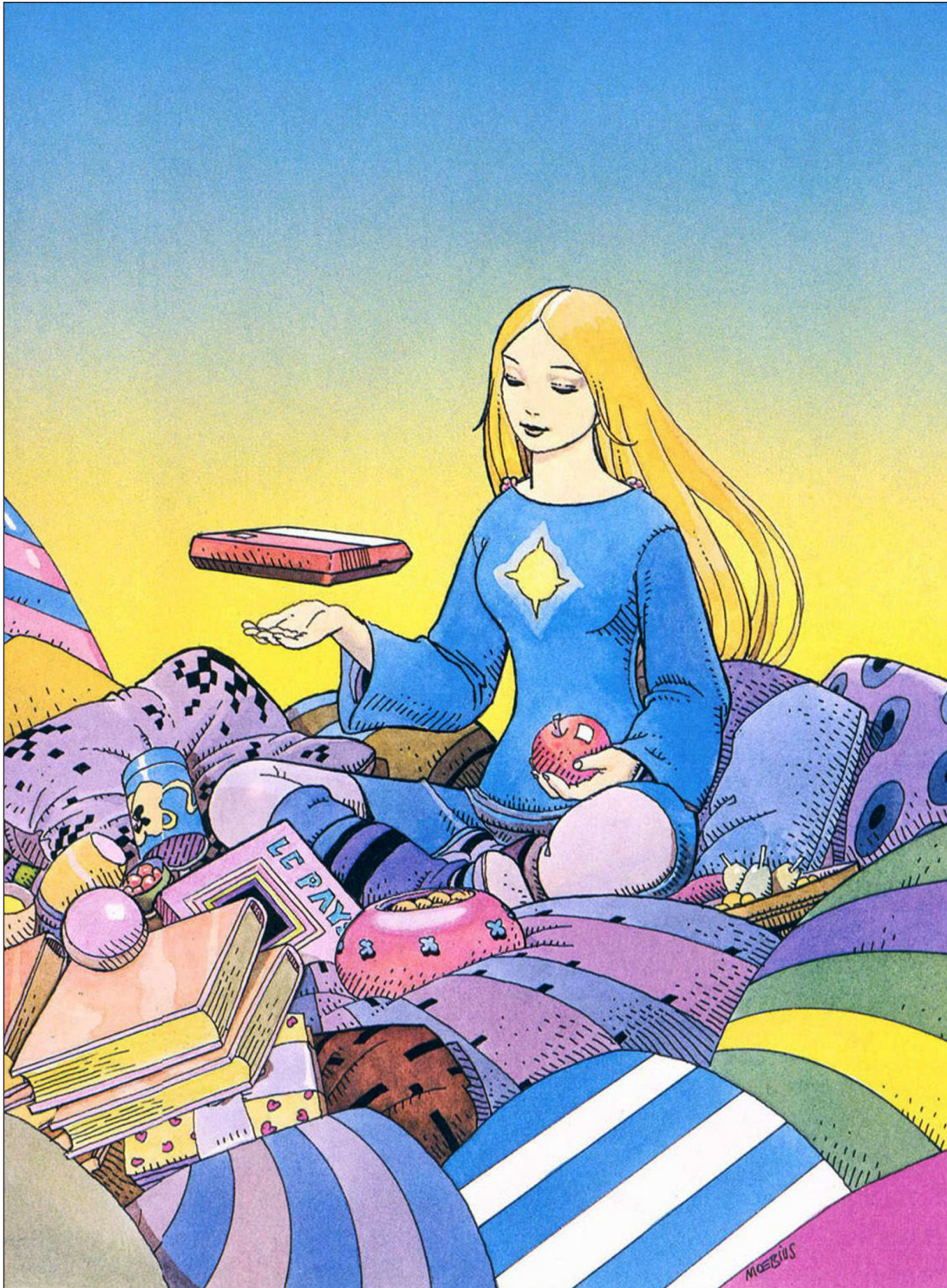
Figure 3: Moebius [Jean Giraud], "Alice", 1983.

Still, Giraud, much like his contemporary Richard Corben, was widely admired for his mastery of the technologies of comics. His use of direct color, in a few *Pilote* stories, then in *Arzach*, served as a demonstration of the untapped visual potential of comics in the 1970s (Bi, 2006). At *Pilote*, when drawing Blueberry in the 1960s, he had already taken over the coloring of his own work, despite a grueling schedule, before delegating it again to colorists working under his supervision, precisely to have control over a greater stretch of the chain of production. Less dazzlingly, perhaps, he consistently worked with the final, printed page in mind. Famously, the first two pages of the *Airtight Garage* were not conceived for publication, but as improvised drawing exercises, which Jean-Pierre Dionnet, the editor-in-chief of *Métal Hurlant*, found and published on a whim (Moebius, 1981). Even these exercises were conceived and drawn with the format and the constraint of printing in mind — on a standard page size and with the inked lines long necessary for mechanical reproduction (Molotiu, 2020).

It is thus unsurprising that he should have experimented with the computer as one way to expand his proficiency over a variety of techniques. He did not partake in the early experiments to produce digital comics in the 1980s — *Shatter* (First Comics, 1985–88), *Iron Man: Crash* (Marvel, 1988) (both created by Mike Saenz, see Garcia, 2013) or *Batman: Digital Justice* (DC, 1990) in the US, *Digitaline* (Le Lombard, 1989) in France — but his collaboration with US publishers and his attention to comics at the time suggest that he was probably aware of these attempts. When asked about digital comics by the French videogame magazine *Generation 4*, in 1990, he was non-committal:

> Gen4: Are you interested in computer comics?
> J.G.: Whatever the medium, what counts is imagination, respect for oneself and others, expressing one's anger, sorrow, wonder, contentment with being, rage at the stupidity of the world, heaviness, intolerance... There's a wonderful future ahead if Earth can survive the next ten years. On this subject, I'm neither pessimistic nor optimistic. I think we've got a small chance of getting through, but if we do get through in these conditions, all the more credit to us!
> *Génération 4* #28, pp.256–257 (December 1990). My translation.

This very tepid endorsement notwithstanding, Giraud had been creating digital art that served as a continuation of his traditional work on his son's Amiga since 1987. The Amiga was then the most advanced personal computer in terms of graphics and music (Maher, 2018) and Commodore famously hired Andy Warhol to use it to paint Debbie Harry when the system was released in 1985. Few traces of this work survive — a page in *Amazing Computing* (March 1988, vol. 3, #3) presenting several examples and a

single file, miraculously preserved from early BBS to the modern internet (**fig. 4**) — to suggest that he was keen on using the computer in ways which would have been difficult to achieve using traditional comics techniques. The colored outlines present in these illustrations in particular do not resemble his work of the time, though they have become fairly banal in the 20th century thanks precisely to digital tools. These images all bear a copyright, suggesting they might have been intended for use in the collector's market which Giraud had tried to enter during his stay in the US, between 1984 and 1989 (Quillien, 2024, pp. 349–352), but they remained unused. We know of only one page of digital comics produced in this period, in 1989, in collaboration with his son. However, even this experiment remained unpublished until it was included in the artbook *Fusion*, in 1995.

Figure 4: Moebius [Jean Giraud], untitled, 1987.

According to his recent biography by Christophe Quillien, Giraud also pushed his use of computer art into more experimental areas, attending raves and drawing abstract illustrations as a live performance (Quillien, 2024, p. 115). While we do not have any trace of these works, in 2023, researchers at the Universitat Politècnica de València uncovered and restored a digital exhibit, stored on 12 Amiga Floppy disks, which offers a glimpse into this side of his work, including his embrace of spectacular transitions, reveling in the spectacle of digital affordances. That extensive digital work was meant

to be displayed in 1993, but was never shown, and its near disappearance serves as a stark reminder that most of Giraud's personal work of the time, stored on fragile disks, is probably lost for good. Still, the surviving examples amply demonstrate that he was in fact experimenting with digital art, and strongly considering using it as part of his professional body of work, but never actually did so, by choice or by accident.

His involvement with digital art also took the form of collaborations. He is credited as the director for a 3D version of Starwatcher/Arzach made in 1991, which was intended to become a feature film four years before *Toy Story* but never went beyond a five-minute pilot. The ambition of telling a complete story in 3D was only fulfilled 30 years later, in a ten minute short entitled "La Planète encore", shown during the "Mœbius-Transe-Forme" show. Like "Starwatcher," that short based on the *World of Edena* cycle embraced the aesthetic of CGI and did not attempt to mimic the look of traditional media. Still in the 1990s, Moebius also helped design the characters for the medieval videogame *Pilgrim* in 1997 and lent his name to various projects for the videogame industry, though without producing digital art for these projects himself.

Digital Comics, Digital Colors

Meanwhile, digital tools gradually made their way into the French comics industry, between the late 1990s and early 2000s, turning from spectacular oddities into increasingly integrated (and paradoxically invisible) tools (Merlet et al., 2022; Walter and Ralenti, 2022). A possible tipping point in that regard can be found in Moebius's work in 2000, with the simultaneous release of *Après l'Incal* and of a recolored version of the original *Incal*, first published twenty years earlier with colors by Isabelle Beaumenay-Joannet. In both cases, the work was done by the studio Beltran, which had found success in the Incal universe in the previous years with a series of flamboyant digital works, employing the affordances of these tools to add volume to the drawn figures and creating a now thoroughly outdated synthetic "realism". Combined with Moebius's traditional linework, this form of coloring as attraction – to echo Tom Gunning's classical description of early cinema – was broadly judged to be a disaster. Giraud told his original colorist "Have you seen what they did to our albums?" (Beaumenay-Joannet et al., 2024) and later reissues of *The Incal* went back to the original coloring.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, digital colors made their way into Moebius's published work, in two different ways. Their convenience first allowed him to go back to coloring his own work, notably in autobiographical series *Inside Moebius* (6 volumes between 2000 and 2010). In a 2011 interview, he described the process of scanning sketches, inking them and coloring them digitally, eventually reaching a pace of 3 to 4 pages per hour (Giraud and Sadoul, 2021, pp. 234–235). *Arzak Rhapsody*, a series of

three-minute films produced in 2002, created using Macromedia's Flash, similarly testifies to the efficiency of these tools, allowing the author to produce the drawings and the entirety of the limited animation apparently on his own. The synthetic strangeness of the Flash animations compared to traditional techniques is unmentioned in interviews and does not appear to have been the point here.

This convenience also led to their use in the few standard albums he produced in the 21st century, often with the help of his frequent collaborator, Claire Champeval. These colors serve a similar function as previous, more time-consuming techniques, and in the case of the late *Blueberry* volumes (vol. 27–28), apart from the covers, are hard to distinguish from the sophisticated analog coloring of Florence Breton (vol. 24–26).

However, the tools also made it possible to explore more singular approaches to coloring. Some of the aforementioned albums, with work by Claire Champeval, make abundant use of gradients, "perfect" flat colors, vivid contrasts and white highlights in ways that foreground their digital nature, without aiming for the kind of "realism" attempted in *Après l'Incal.* Far from being a time-saving device, the digital colors become part of a somewhat garish but certainly remarkable aesthetic, also found for instance on the cover of the complete edition of *Inside Moebius.*
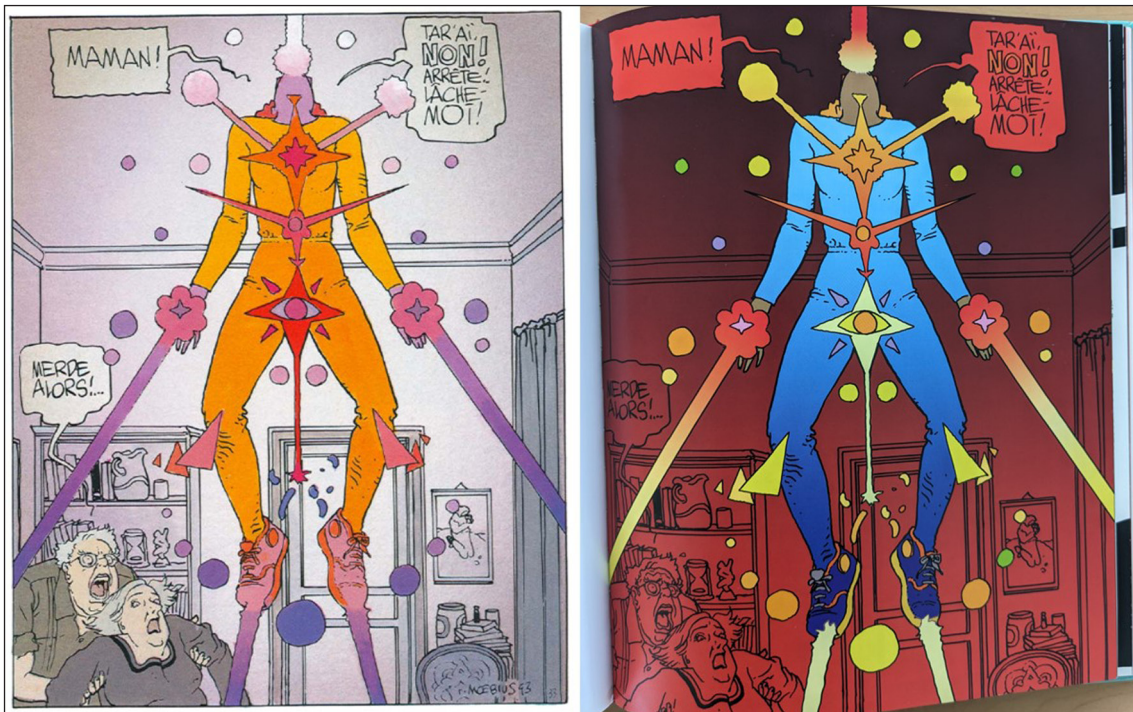

Figure 5: Moebius [Jean Giraud] *The Man from Ciguri*, 1995 version (left) and recolored page from *Moebius Transe Forme*, 2010 (right).

There is little doubt that Moebius himself was closely involved in those choices, as demonstrated by the abundance of such striking colors in the Moebius *TransForme* catalogue, perhaps most vividly in the case of the recolored page from the *Man from Ciguri* (**fig. 5**). The choice to recolor a page of that book is all the more striking since it was initially released in France by les Humanoïdes Associés in color (by Claudine Pinet) against his initial intention, which was to have a black-and-white book similar in shape to its predecessor, *The Airtight Garage* (Trondheim and Giraud, 1996). The comparison between the two images reveals the chromatic excesses of the recolored version, bordering on garishness. Elsewhere in the book, experiments with ample areas of flat colors and a limited palette echo the earlier experimentations with the Amiga, twenty years before.

Downplaying the Digital Line

These chromatic experiments are hard to reconcile with Moebius's description of his own practice. In 2011 he told Numa Sadoul that despite a long history of experiments with the media (including *Arzak Rhapsody*), the digital tools were to him a mere extension of preexisting techniques.

> I know Photoshop, but I use it as if I had a pencil, an eraser, a nib and a brush in the same tool. I work with the drawing tablet in an extremely traditional way. I treat it as an extension of paper, that's all. I use colors as if I had a paintbrush or an aerograph. I use very few preset effects. I prefer doing my effects myself, using the line to suggest volume rather than using mechanical gradients [des dégradés mécaniques], among others. (Giraud and Sadoul, 2021, pp. 215–6 [my translation])

Of course, these assumptions about the transferability of existing tools are built into Photoshop and similar pieces of software — which typically include a "pencil", an "eraser" and various brushes — but like the floppy-disk save button, these references cannot be misunderstood for exact analogs. The discrepancy must have been especially apparent to Giraud, who had to learn to draw digitally using a mouse on the Amiga, with no hope of transferring gestures from paper to the screen. These claims thus call attention not to the process but to the result: the digital tools not as transparent equivalents to analogue tools, but as a way to replicate the desired end product.

The gap between and ostentatious use of digital colors — as a performance of the digital tools — and the downplaying of these tools in the drawing of the line itself call

attention to the difference between these two elements in Moebius's perception and self-representation, echoing broader assumptions within the industry. Colors, after all, can and have been redone. In addition to *The Man from Ciguri* and *The Incal*, the colors of most Blueberry albums have gone through two or three versions, sometimes with stark differences. Color is always compromised; it is always obviously a technical operation as well as a commercial argument. The line, by contrast, is what remains when comics artists are exhibited in galleries or in expensive facsimiles of the original pages. It is the uncompromised trace of the body at work. As Jared Gardner reminds us, this is obviously an oversimplification, for "the drawn line shares with writing an indirectness that refuses unmediated access to an individual body in the act of mark-making" (Gardner, 2011, p. 62). Yet, as Gardner himself acknowledges, that conception is a potent one, and "we cannot look at the graphic narrative and imagine that the line does not give us access to the labored making of the storyworld we are encountering (and participating in crafting)" (Gardner, 2011, p. 63). In French, "le dessin", refers not only to the general concept of drawing but also to "an artistic composition done with a pencil, a nib or a brush" and beyond that "the style and manner characteristic of an artist as a drawer" (translated definitions from the CNRTL). Or to put it differently, drawing is linework is style is the artist's singular identity.

This conflation of meaning is especially meaningful for a creator renowned for his mastery of the craft. Thus, a major exhibit of Giraud's work in Angoulême in 2000 was entitled "trait de genie", "line" or "stroke" of genius (Groensteen and Ciment, 2000). Giraud himself, in a 1984 essay, discussed at length the twin influence of Hergé and André Franquin on his work:

> Franquin understood the importance of the gesture in creative work, and among artists like Hergé, one finds a reflection about the line as a way of being. In fact, Franquin and Hergé are the two major approaches to drawings, and they correspond to broader trends which you can find in the whole history of art. [...] As to me, I've been fascinated by both, and I have enjoyed balancing the two. Which is why some Moebius comics have been done in that spirit they call "the clear line," which is a good definition though it only describes the end product, and neither its origin nor its totality. (Moebius, 1984)

Furthermore, Giraud's two personas throughout his career, Gir and Moebius, have often been identified, by critics and by Giraud himself, respectively with the use of the brush and of the nib or pen, even though he actually mixed them occasionally (see for

instance Giraud et al., 1993). Downplaying the role of digital tools in the shaping of the drawn line, in the work and in discourses, could be understood as a way to preserve that relationship to the line as an extension of the artist, often born of spontaneous gestures (his late masterpiece, *40 Days dans le desert B,* was drawn in ink without underlying pencils), as opposed to something that could be manipulated and reworked *ad infinitum.*

And yet, in the 2000s, Giraud's health, eyesight and coordination were in decline, to the point of failing him by the end of his life (Boucher, 2011). Digital tools, and the possibility of magnifying, correcting and redoing enabled him to continue producing work as an extension of what he had done on paper. They served to remediate his declining abilities at the same time as his traditional tools.

However, "Arzach et compagnie" does more than remediate or produce new work. It remixes and alters an iconic image without acknowledging the changes; it also aligns the Arzach character with its usual spelling and transmedia appearance, in a way perhaps not entirely dissimilar to what George Lucas did when updating the original *Star Wars* movies for the "special" edition in order to maintain brand consistency (1997; 2004). In the final decade of his life, Giraud was both the subject and the protagonist of an intense curatorial effort, which consolidated his position as a "genius" in the field and led him to revisit insistently his most prolific decade. Arzach and the Major thus became central again, in a series of work across media.

In one of these new books, Le *Chasseur déprime* (2008), the third book-length adventure of Major Grubert, Giraud uses digital tools to stitch together a narrative out of preexisting sequences spread across sketchbooks from the late 1990s. With mismatched designs and signatures, sometimes in the same page, the work does not hide this composite nature. The line is there, but crucially, the digital tools stand out. Lettering mistakes and all-too regular word balloons gradually force the reader to examine the imperfections in the extensions, such as the mismatch between a chunky version of the major in the new digital drawings and its leaner incarnation. The book works, but most critics have pointed out that composite nature, which turns both Giraud into a textual poacher within his own, cutting and pasting existing images and lines into an ad hoc narrative (Legoux, 2008). The book further underlines the aporia of attempting to curate and expand a body of work beyond the body's ability to actually produce it, to try and maintain a continuity between the line work Giraud was once capable of and what he could still produce in 2008. The Arzach image breaks down only under intense scrutiny, but in *Le Chasseur déprime*, the tools simply can't function anymore as a mere extension of paper.
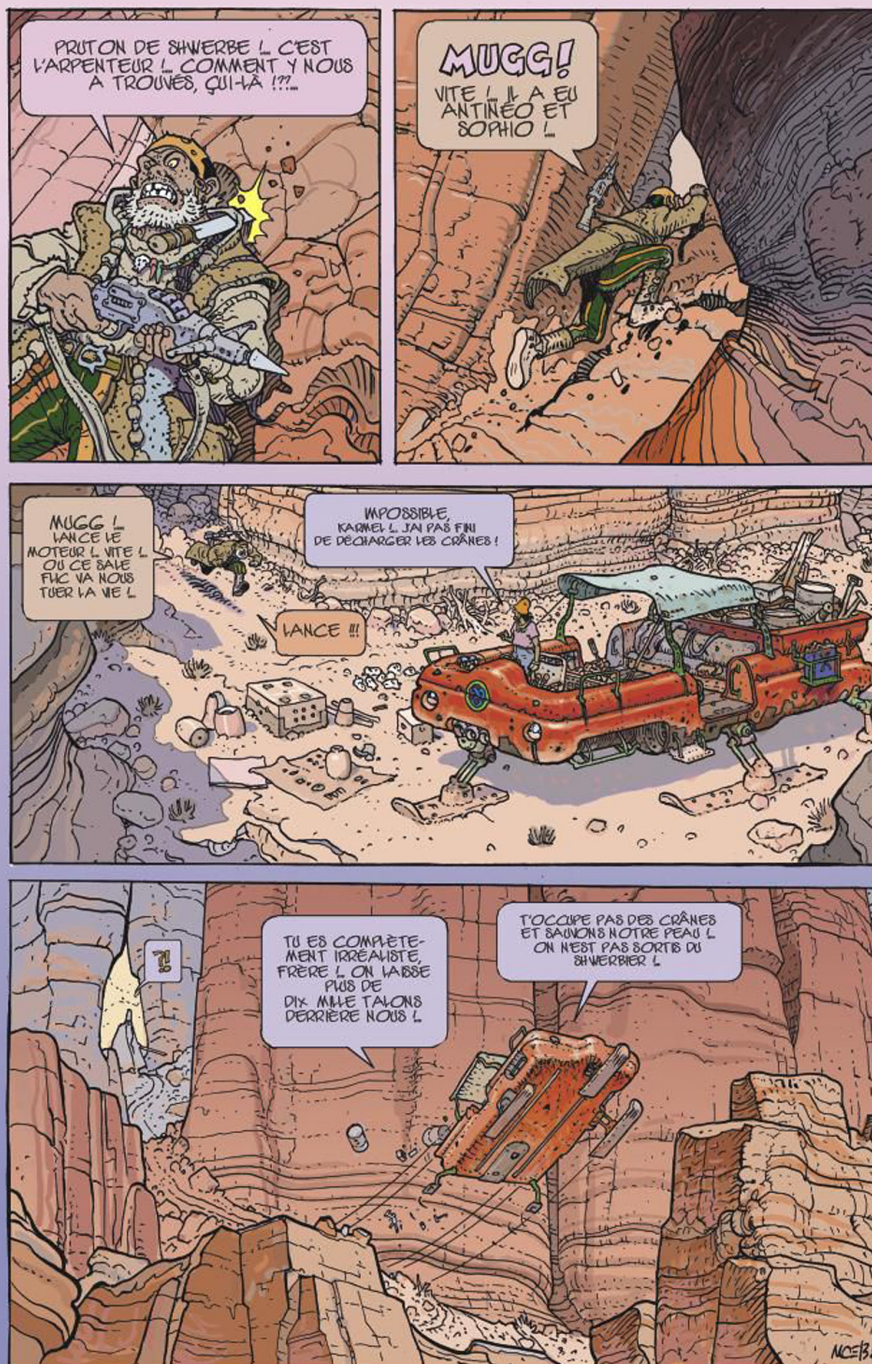
Figure 6: Moebius [Jean Giraud], *Arzak l'arpenteur* (2010).

The final album released by Moebius, *Arzak l'arpenteur* (2010), demonstrates the many uses of digital colors in the later phase of his career and perhaps a reconciliation with the idea of the digital line. With its colored backgrounds, bright contrast and its many ostensible effects, the book alternates between a form of muted realism and more ostentatious chromatic explosions, skirting the line between the two tendencies of the previous decade (**fig. 6**). The digital nature of the coloring also made it possible to simultaneously release a textless collector's edition in grayscale. By that time, Giraud appears to have been ready to embrace a natively digital comic book, produced mostly without traditional media, except for an abundant gallery of conspicuously analogue extras.

In doing so, he would have offered compelling evidence of the centrality of technology in the production and perhaps in the essence of comics, even at the level of line work and even in the case of a widely acclaimed transcendent "genius".

Editorial Note

Competing Interests

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