

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

Of Steinbeck and Dautremere: Analyzing the visual expansion in *Des souris et des hommes*

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Abstract

Rébecca Dautremer's 2020 graphic novel *Des souris et des hommes* presents itself as an adaptation of the classic 1937 American novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, with the particularity that it features the original text completely unaltered, spread over 420 illustrated pages realized in a wide range of graphic styles, creating a unique case of "visual expansion" rather than the usual "condensation" expected in adaptations from one medium to another. Although Steinbeck's original *Of Mice and Men* has already been adapted since its publication for theater and film, and despite the growing academic recognition of graphic novel adaptations, there is to this day no in-depth study that has examined Dautremer's work as a standalone visual rewriting. The present dissertation argues that Dautremer's adaptation could be considered as an independent literary object, a visual rewriting (or even "re-drawing") that honors to the letter Steinbeck's original novel while building upon it new layers of meaning through the visual dimension permitted by the graphic novel medium. To investigate this hypothesis, I conducted a qualitative, interpretive close-reading of a selection of pages from Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes*, focusing on the visual storytelling and the stylistic shifts impacting it. My analysis of the present dissertation draws on adaptation studies (Baetens, Pointner, Boschenhoff), comics theory (Chute, McCloud, Cohn, Eisner), and additional theoretical framework drawn from feminist theory (Mulvey, Sobchack), studies on the representation of disability and bodies (Garland-Thomson, Szép), and references to art history (Outsider Art). The findings reveal how Dautremer reinterprets Steinbeck's story as a stage director on paper, using stylistic variations to engage with political and social concerns of capitalism and marginalization, to give visibility to previously invisible female characters, and to reframe Lennie's difference by visualizing his neurodivergent perspective. By shifting the focus from sole fidelity to expansion, this study contributes to adaptation theory and offers a model for reading graphic narratives as sites of ideological critique and feminist re-narration.

Keywords: graphic novel, adaptation, Steinbeck, Dautremer, visual expansion, comics, staging, capitalism, feminism, disability studies

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Introduction

Experiencing a literary text always involves a form of interpretation that leads to at least some level of visualization. Whether on a larger scale, such as when a filmmaker, director, or illustrator reads a text from the literary canon to adapt it to another format, or simply at the most basic cognitive level, when the average reader processes the story's information in their mind, thereby creating their own mental images of what they have just read. This visualization of the written work is personal, and there are as many visual ideas as there are readers. This also means that each established visual media adaptation of a literary work will reflect only one of many possible mental images emerging from the source text. When questioned about the matter of adapting literary works onto either the stage or the screen, John Steinbeck, famous American writer and author of *Of Mice and Men*, made the statement that "A man reads a book and he makes his own pictures. If he reads the book first he resents the picture because it's not the picture he's made in his mind." (Steinbeck, qtd. in Fensch, 67). This observation he made on the conflict between the reader's internal imagery and the external images imposed by a film or a play captures in reality one of the core questions studied in adaptation studies, that is, the field of research that focuses on works influenced by or based on previously existing pieces. This area of research often takes into account that no adaptation will ever be an exact reflection of its literary source, often resulting in some level of "loss" compared to the original. Yet, what happens when an adaptation preserves every word of the original text while adding hundreds of pages of new images? Does it still "resent" the reader's imagination, or does it open a new space for dialogue between word and image? These interrogations lie at the heart of the present master's dissertation, as it is precisely what French illustrator and author Rébecca Dautremer did when she adapted in 2020 Steinbeck's cult classic short novel into a massive 420-page-long hardcover graphic novel, *Des souris et des hommes*, nearly a century after the novel's original publication.

Despite the growing academic recognition of graphic novel adaptations of literary texts, to this date, there has been no in-depth study dedicated entirely to Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* as a standalone visual rewriting. In parallel, however, a wide range of research has been conducted on Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, focusing on the novel's key themes, its dramatic structure, and its treatment of masculinity, vulnerability, and marginalization. Alongside this, there is also the general belief, linked to the field of adaptation studies, that when a literary work is adapted from text to another medium, it inevitably results

in some loss, given the subjective nature of each person's interpretation, and that each adaptation inevitably entails losses compared to the original due to various artistic choices made to re-convey the story differently. It is akin to the idea that all translation is a betrayal, articulated notably by the French poet Joachim Du Bellay, who referred to translators as "traditeurs"¹, meaning "betrayers" of the language, as all the specific nuances of a source language can never be fully transposed elsewhere, thus resulting in loss. Arguably, the process of adapting a narrative from one medium to another is not dissimilar to the process of linguistic translation. Consequently, the possibility that an adapted work might potentially be richer in content than its source text is a perspective that is often overlooked in studies of graphic novel adaptations. There is, then, a significant gap in the field of research concerning the opposite possibility where an adaptation would not alter the source text in any way. What happens when an adaptation refuses to cut even a single word from the source text, reuses the entire text without changing even a comma, and, on top of that, expands the original narrative through its visual dimension? How does, then, Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes*, although technically recounting on paper the exact same plot as the original *Of Mice and Men*, introduce new content that was not in the original novel solely through the visual elements of graphic novels and illustration?

The central aim of this dissertation is to highlight that Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* does not constitute a simple illustrated version of John Steinbeck's original *Of Mice and Men*, but it is rather a form of adaptation that works as an expansion of the original text. This new expanded work stemming from the source text of *Of Mice and Men* could be considered as a form of visual rewriting, or, to use a more illustrative term, a form of "visual re-drawing" of the source text. The central hypothesis supporting the present study is thus that Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* can be read as a work independent from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Although it stems directly from the original novel and honors the source text by preserving it in its entirety, the density of new meanings created by the visual dimension of Dautremer's rendition of the story through her narrative staging of the novel's characters, her use of colors, diverse traditional art media (crayons, colored pencils, gouache, watercolors, paper treatment), style variation and page layout, makes it eligible as a new independent literary object, such as a visual rewriting that produces a new autonomous experience of the classic original narrative of *Of Mice and Men*. The present study, therefore, aims to show how Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* reinterprets Steinbeck's original

¹ Du Bellay, Joachim. *La défense et illustration de la langue française*, 1549. Imp. Ed. Garnier.

themes (such as vulnerability, underprivileged perspectives, gentleness versus violence, innocence versus corruption, the Capitalist Dream versus economic reality) through this new visual language.

This study is significant for two reasons. Academically, it contributes to the growing field of graphic novel adaptation studies by shifting the focus from pure fidelity to expansion and demonstrating how an adaptation can be simultaneously faithful to the letter of its source text and radically transformative in its visual dimension at the same time. It also offers a new suggestion for reading graphic narratives as sites of ideological critique, feminist re-narration, and neurodivergent embodiment. More practically, it reveals how visual storytelling can powerfully renew classic literary works without altering their words. Moreover, by analyzing Dautremer's treatment of gender, labor, and disability through the visuals of her graphic novel, this dissertation engages with contemporary debates on the representation of marginalized communities, showing how a novel published in 1937 can remain fully relevant to twenty-first-century concerns through its adaptation.

The methodology used in the present dissertation is qualitative and interpretive, with a clear focus on visual analysis of a selection of specific illustrated pages within the graphic novel. Quotations from Steinbeck's original novel are used throughout the chapters for comparison in the analysis. The research questions and hypotheses are thus addressed through a close reading of selected pages from *Des souris et des hommes*, supported by theoretical frameworks drawn from adaptation studies (Jan Baetens, Frank Erik Pointner and Sandra Eva Boschenhoff), comics theory (Hillary Chute, Scott McCloud, Neil Cohn, Nick Sousanis, Art Spiegelman, Will Eisner), and additional theoretical framework drawn from feminist film theory (Laura Mulvey's male gaze and Vivian Sobchack's "embodiment"), disability studies (Rosemarie Garland Thomson's concept of "misfitting" and Eszter Szép's embodied comics reading), and art history (Outsider Art, specifically referencing the work of Aloïse Corbaz) to support the findings resulting from the visual analysis of the content of Rébecca Dautremer's graphic novel. Throughout the analysis, the original French translation² quoted directly from Dautremer's book is retained when needed, but the analysis is conducted in its entirety in English.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 provides a detailed introduction to the visually adapted text, providing a context that introduces Steinbeck's novel, Dautremer's adaptation,

² Steinbeck, John. *Des souris et des hommes*. 1937. Translated by Maurice-Edgar Coindreau, Gallimard, 1955.

and how the latter concretely fits into the specific framework of graphic novel adaptations. Chapter 2 examines the technical dimension of Dautremer's adaptation by exploring how her graphic novel rearticulates Steinbeck's original text in a procedure that could be described as a "theater on paper", placing her in a role similar to that of a stage director. It draws on Steinbeck's own conception of his novel as a "play to be read", on comics theory, and on a detailed analysis of the adaptation's "visual narrative grammar", demonstrating how Dautremer stages the narrative through a clear structure divided into scenes, interludes, and character introductions. Chapter 3 shifts the focus from form to ideology, first by introducing a brief historical background to the context of the Great Depression in which Steinbeck's original story is set, then analyzing how Dautremer expands on the novel themes linked to capitalism and the Great Depression setting through illustrated pages stylized like advertising imagery or archival documents of the Dust Bowl, constant repetition the main protagonists' dream sequence of owning land one day, and the material representation of labor. Chapter 4 addresses the question of gender, examining how Dautremer takes the character of Curley's wife from a nameless projection of male fears and transforms her visually without ever changing the source text into a visually present heroine with agency, dreams, and perspectives. It also analyses the recurring polka-dot motif as a symbol of female presence throughout the whole graphic novel and the inclusion of sex workers (only indirectly mentioned in Steinbeck's text) as fully visible characters. Chapter 5 turns its focus specifically to Lennie Small, arguing that Dautremer's visual strategies encourage a reading of Lennie's character as explicitly neurodivergent. It connects Dautremer's style to Outsider Art and disability theory.

The analysis conducted throughout these chapters aims to show how Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* destabilizes the original in productive ways by making the invisible visible, giving voice to the silenced, and consequently turning the canonical original story into a new autonomous work of art. In doing so, the present dissertation hopes to contribute to a broader rethinking of visual adaptation as an expansive practice of re-drawing, one that seeks to re-engage with its source text by going where the original narrative did not go far enough.

Chapter 1: Of Steinbeck and Dautremer: an introduction to the visually adapted text

The introduction of this dissertation has established the research context, hypotheses, questions, overall methodology, and the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* to understand in which ways it re-drawn and expands the story of Steinbeck's novel. Before turning to the fully analytical part of the present dissertation, where a close reading of selected pages of the graphic novel will be realized to examine in detail how the 2020 adaptation creates new layers of meaning to the original story, it is first necessary to present the two primary source texts at the heart of the research in greater depth. This first chapter, therefore, provides a comprehensive overview of John Steinbeck's 1937 original *Of Mice and Men* and of Dautremer's 2020 *Des souris et des hommes*, situating them within their respective contexts and serving as a bridge between the methodological introduction and the purely analytical part that follows in Chapters 2 through 5.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. Section 1.1 examines Steinbeck's novel, focusing on its main themes, its stylistic economy, recurring patterns, and its inherent re-interpretative potential. It argues that *Of Mice and Men*'s brevity, its dialogue and external description, and its deliberate silences and elements left unsaid create a narrative structure that could inspire personal re-interpretation and thus potentially visual expansion. Section 1.2 introduces Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes*, describing its publication history, its unusual nature as a textually faithful yet visually expanded adaptation, and the artist's own conception of her work as a hybrid object between graphic novel and illustrated album, thought as a project drawing from both photographic and theatrical characteristics on paper. Section 1.3 addresses the generic ambiguity of Dautremer's project by engaging with definitions of the graphic narrative and with the artist's own reluctance to classify her work, while demonstrating that *Des souris et des hommes* can legitimately be approached as a graphic novel or graphic narrative, as it is how this work will ultimately be referred to throughout the rest of this dissertation. Finally, Section 1.4 recontextualizes Dautremer's visual expansion within contemporary adaptation studies, moving beyond the traditional fidelity-based model to embrace a perspective that considers adaptation as a fundamental feature of modern storytelling that helps to renew the literary canon.

1.1. Of Mice and adaptation: recontextualizing the original novel and its re-interpretative potential and relevance

First published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is widely regarded today as one of the most emblematic works of American literature. It is widely considered as a “classic” text and yet, compared to other timeless great novels, its nature as a work of literature is somewhat challenging to define. With its number of pages varying between 80 and 120 pages depending on the edition, it is neither a full-length novel nor a short story. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as a novella with a six-chapter structure. Those chapters’ brevity and clear linear progression through the plot development have often made this book an ideal required reading in secondary school and undergraduate education. However, it could be argued that *Of Mice and Men*’s ongoing significance goes beyond its value in literary education, as the text still articulates a series of themes that remain central to our modern social and political concerns.

Set in the US during the Great Depression, the novel follows George Milton and Lennie Small, two itinerant ranch workers moving from job to job in California. Both men long to own a little piece of land to gain some degree of independence, security, and dignity, yet their dreams contrast sharply with the harsh realities of the economy of the system they came to evolve in. Steinbeck’s narrative exposes the fragility of the idea of the American/Capitalist dream, which is portrayed as an ideal accessible only in theory but never in practice for those situated at the margins of capitalist society. No matter how hard George and Lennie work, it will never be enough to attain the dream life they are chasing. In addition to the economic aspect of the story, *Of Mice and Men* explores a variety of universal themes which include hope for a better future, vulnerability, gentleness against violence, innocence against corruption, and, above all else, loneliness or solitude as a theme that runs throughout the entire text. Nearly every character is isolated, either emotionally, socially, or physically. The ranch is populated by men who move constantly, form no lasting bonds, and define themselves primarily through their hard labor in that environment. It is thus, from the very beginning of the story, a very male text. In this context, the characters’ masculinity is shaped by their physical strength and emotional restraint, which leaves little room for any expression of their vulnerability and results in inevitable violence most of the time. This violence emerges thus as both an anomaly and a natural consequence of the restraining environment, and it erupts in moments when social tensions, fear, or desire are expressed in ways that cross the boundaries of the narrow limits understood by the community. This overwhelmingly controlled and male environment is a particularly

striking feature of Steinbeck's novel. The story is populated almost exclusively by men, and the social space of the ranch is structured as a homosocial environment. The only woman who appears directly in the narrative is Curley's wife, who remains unnamed and is defined primarily through the male protagonists' perceptions and desires. All the other female figures, such as Lennie's Aunt Clara or the sex workers that the characters go visit in the city, that are only hinted at or mentioned in the dialogue, exist only indirectly by being mentioned in the original text through memory or allusion. This absence is not incidental, as it reveals a gendered distribution of visibility and agency that contributes to shaping the novel's emotional portrayal of the feelings of both isolation and desire of the male protagonists.

Among all these male protagonists, Lennie's character stands out and brings to light many of these central tensions. Steinbeck describes him as "a huge man, shapeless of face... the way a bear drags his paws" (Steinbeck, 5), combining strength and awkwardness. Too big, too strong, too dumb, too clumsy, described through animalistic metaphors and repetitive gestures, Lennie's character embodies a form of cognitive and social difference that places him at odds with the environment in which he came to progress. His physical strength contrasts with his mental vulnerability, making him simultaneously dependent on George and perceived as a potential threat by others. While Steinbeck never explicitly labels Lennie as disabled or neurodivergent, the narrative repeatedly presents his body and behavior as out of place within the social and spatial environment of the ranch. The tragedy of the novel arises not only from Lennie's actions but from the impossibility of accommodating his difference within a rigid social system governed by productivity, fear, and conformity of the environment of the ranch.

Stylistically speaking, Steinbeck's prose is defined by precision, privileging dialogue and external description over psychological introspection. Since the characters' emotions are characterized by their restricted nature, they are rarely named and appear instead suggested through a series of described gestures, silences, and recurring motifs. Each chapter opens with a detailed description of the setting, functioning almost like stage directions, before the characters enter and interact. Everything that is left unsaid in the written narrative, meaning all their desires, fears, memories, and internal conflicts, becomes as charged with meaning as what is spoken, leaving room open to the reader's interpretation based on their own sensibility. Steinbeck further reinforces this openness through insistent repetition. Every element that contributes to the development of the narrative recurs rhythmically, thus building a structure that uses patterns that readers can easily pick up on. The dream of the ideal ranch where Lennie could tend to his rabbits is recited from the opening pages to the final scene, while violence

escalates through a series of echoing acts, from the killing of the small mice kept in Lennie's pockets to the ultimate tragedy.

Therefore, it can be stated that Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is already a text with re-interpretive potential, inviting readers to fill in what was left unsaid within the novel's 100-page framework. Yet even at the most fundamental level of interpretation of the original text, the potential for modern-day reappropriation appears powerful as the core issues it addresses remain relevant in contemporary contexts. In fact, returning to the novel offers the possibility of re-exploring the still relevant questions of marginality, exclusion, and vulnerability. The economic instability experienced by Steinbeck's characters as they move from ranch to ranch, relying on temporary employment, resonates strongly with present-day anxieties about job insecurity, financial stability, and seemingly unattainable long-term professional perspectives. In this light, the novel continues to challenge the myth of individual self-sustainability, and even beyond this economic dimension, the questions it raises about minorities within the story also strongly resonate with contemporary debates about marginal bodies and social normativity.

1.2. Introducing Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes*: an experimental project

All these interpretative possibilities, therefore, call for a visual adaptation of the original text, a practice that has gained significant scholarly legitimacy in recent decades. As it has already been stated in the present dissertation, there exist many ways in which a literary text can be adapted to a visual medium, one of which is the adaptation of a literary text into a graphic novel. A graphic narrative, as famous US cartoonist and comic artist Will Eisner defines it in his book *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, refers to "A generic description of any narration that employs image to transmit an idea. Film and comics both engage in graphic narrative." (Eisner, 6) In the case of an adaptation into graphic narrative from a literary work originally published as a traditional novel, this involves, among other things, reworking what was originally conveyed solely through text into a new form that ensures that the images are narrative as well. Over the past decades, graphic novel adaptations have gained increasing recognition as complex literary objects, which has allowed them to explore new ways of approaching the classic literary texts they emerged from. This new visual approach helps to expand the possibilities of interpretation through the use of narrative imagery alongside the text, as opposed to a scenario in which great works of the literary canon would remain closed or fixed. Within contemporary adaptation studies, Jan Baetens in his book *Adaptation et bande dessinée: éloge de la fidélité* frames the adaptation of literary texts into graphic novels not as a

marginal practice, but as an essential cultural process. He argues that adaptations fulfill a dual necessity for narratives as they ensure a work's continued diffusion and, in many cases, are vital to its very preservation across time and media. In this perspective, visual adaptation is less an act of derivative reproduction and more of a concrete mechanism of cultural preservation through which stories remain dynamically present within changing aesthetic and social landscapes (Baetens, 6). Returning to Steinbeck's novel through a graphic medium thus becomes an opportunity to explore how meaning can be expanded and reframed without altering the original text. The visual form is particularly well suited to this task, as it can visually reveal what prose often leaves implicit, such as bodily presence, spatial relations, atmosphere, and emotional dimension that was often only hinted at in Steinbeck's prose. In this context, the 2020 graphic novel adaptation *Des souris et des hommes* by French illustrator and author Rébecca Dautremer offers a particularly meaningful and intriguing response to the interpretive "gaps" in Steinbeck's original text and the potential prolongation of its longevity.

Published in 2020 by the French publishing house Tishina, Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* occupies a highly peculiar position in the context of visual adaptations. Dautremer's adaptation retains the full French translation by Gallimard of Steinbeck's original text without altering the dialogue or plot. However, her book spans over 420 pages, making it almost four times longer than the original novel, due to its extensive and detailed illustrations. This decision alone sets Dautremer's project apart from most adaptations, which generally present some level of condensing or restructuring of the source text. Here, the aim is not to transform the narrative through editing or simplification that would result in loss of original meaning, but rather to fundamentally alter the reading experience by building new meaning on the preserved original through a massive visual expansion.

In several interviews³, Dautremer insists that she did not want to produce a comic book or graphic novel in the strict sense, nor a simple illustrated version of the original. She describes her work as a hybrid object, somewhere between a graphic novel, an illustrated album, and a theatrical production, which echoes what has already been said about Steinbeck's functioning almost like stage directions. Rébecca Dautremer positions herself in her creative process as a

³ Dautremer, Rébecca. "Rébecca Dautremer." YouTube, uploaded by Librairie La Galerne – Le Havre, 25 Nov. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=odSO0AtCmvE.

---. "À Niort, première exposition 'Des Souris et des Hommes' pour Rébecca Dautremer." YouTube, uploaded by La Nouvelle République – NRCO, 26 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4SAnFOzco0.

---. "Festival du Polar Regards Noirs – 'Réinventer les récits en images.'" YouTube, uploaded by Ville de Niort, 27 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8sR_wROqal.

stage director, stating in her interview with Librairie La Galerne or during her public apparition at Festival du Polar Regards Noir in Ville de Niort, 2021 that, in her opinion, staging a text in images is a bit like the work of a stage director, with the blank page being the empty stage and the characters being the actors. The only difference with a real director is that she can move around her stage (the page) and see all the angles, all the points of view, and she is not hindered by the weight of bodies. The artist explains that she wanted to design a book with “many pages” (“très paginé”), deliberately heavy, to break with the fast-paced reading rhythm associated with the original text. The readers who open her book are initially confronted with what seems like a big picture book, without necessarily anticipating that they are reading Steinbeck’s original text in its entirety. This initial shift is already a first form of critical appropriation as the source text is still there, but it is no longer immediately central. It is instead immersed in a visual materiality that reshapes its reception. This decision to expand the work was based on a long-term project which took nearly two years and the production of more than two hundred original illustration spreads.

Very early in her artistic process, Dautremer chose to use a variety of graphic styles, techniques, and visual registers to allow different levels of reading to be articulated within her rendition of the story without modifying the original text. One of the central aspects of the project lies in Dautremer’s relationship with photography and graphic design. Before becoming fully involved in editorial illustration, the artist reveals in interviews that she considered a photography career, and this initial training continues to influence her work. She explains that, when drawing on paper, she conceives certain images as if she were holding a camera, thinking in terms of framing, depth of field, blurring, optical distortion, and contrast. This photographic logic is particularly visible in the pages that imitate archival documents, worksheets, or advertising images from the 1930s. These illustrations give the impression of a documentary reconstruction which helps to place the fictional story within a clearly identifiable aesthetic that refers to a precise historical context and thus reinforces the socio-economic background of the narrative.

The work on the narrative rhythm is another fundamental aspect of the adaptation. Before even beginning the process of drawing all her illustrations for the book, the artist cut up the original text on a blank rough draft in order to determine the number of text lines she wanted to appear on each page, always with the intention of producing as many pages as possible. This preliminary work immediately created a new reading tempo that is completely different from the original novel. The text was digitally inserted in a pixelated font as an image, rather than

vectorized as is usually done in text editing for traditional book layouts, so that it becomes an integral part of the illustration. At times, fragments of the original English text even appear directly in the image, not as explanatory quotations, but as graphic components to echo once again the aesthetics of the original text with its period expressions that are not always translatable into French. This choice responds to the dual logic of preserving the linguistic materiality of 1930s English and fully integrating the text into the image, so that words and drawings participate in visual communication as one logical whole. This close integration of text and image allows Dautremer to slip between the lines of the novel, where Steinbeck deliberately left things unsaid.

The artist also emphasises that the original text never explicitly reveals the characters' emotions and makes no moral judgments and it is precisely this restraint that provides the space for her to intervene. In this context, the way she decides to visually represent certain scenes through illustrations necessarily means taking a stance, and choosing a frame, an expression, a lighting atmosphere, and a drawing style is already an act of interpretation. Dautremer is fully aware of this and recounts in interviews how she really tried to amplify what the text suggests without ever fully trying to clear up its deliberate gray areas. This approach is particularly apparent in sequences that expand on events only hinted at by Steinbeck that will be closely analyzed in the later sections of the present study, such as the characters' memories, their visits to town (to visit the sex workers, never described in Steinbeck's text), or certain episodes of violence reported off-page. These moments are often presented in her visual adaptation in the form of silent sequences or highly stylized pages, where the image takes over from the textual narrative to communicate something new to the reader. They introduce secondary temporalities, flashbacks, or anticipations that do not exist explicitly in the text but extend its internal narrative logic simply by existing on the pages. This process could be linked to what Kai Mikkonen refers to as the concept of "monstration", that he defines in his book *The Narratology of Comic Art* writing that "the concept of showing is useful for the narratology of comics [...] to better conceive and emphasise the visual aspects of narration in comics, i.e. the way in which comics rely on visual means of storytelling by showing characters engaged in a situation, behaviour, or action in some world." (Mikkonen, 87) In other words, this concept is closely related to the famous expression "show, don't tell," which is particularly relevant in the case of graphic narratives and is widely used by Rebecca Dautremer to draw between the lines of Steinbeck's plot and articulate something new alongside the original text.

1.3. Des souris et de la BD ? An attempt to define Dautremer's hybrid adaptation

Understanding the graphic adaptation *Des souris et des hommes* involves taking into account the way in which Rébecca Dautremer herself defines her project. In the interviews she gave around the publication and exhibitions of the book, she was particularly reluctant to place her work in a stable generic category. If the work is often presented as an illustrated book and/or a graphic novel, Dautremer immediately nuances this appellation and insists on the hybrid, atypical and experimental character of her project. Dautremer frequently describes her work as a staging of the literary text by establishing an explicit parallel between the role of the illustrator and that of a stage director. This theatrical metaphor immediately shifts the subject of mere illustration to that of interpretation, where it is not a matter of faithfully representing what the text describes, but of deciding how to make it play visually to show something new to the audience, or here in this case, to the readers. To this scenic logic is added a strong photographic and cinematographic influence where the image is not subordinated to the text but, on the contrary, where it imposes its own rhythm, sometimes out of step with the linear temporality of the original textual narrative. The text can then appear as a form of voice-over, while the graphic “camera” moves freely through the time and space of the story, showing what happens before, during, or at the margins of the events explicitly narrated in the novel. This ambiguity is also visible in the way Dautremer's work is presented on her official website. In the section devoted to her career (“à propos”), it is noted that she has worked on two projects of this kind, first *Soie* by Alessandro Baricco, and then *Des souris et des hommes*, and that she takes hold of these great literary texts and then “sublimates” them⁴. Once again, the terminology remains deliberately broad and imprecise, but it could still be argued that this notion of “sublimation” is to be understood as pointing toward a process of expansion where the original text is not condensed or simplified, but rather extended, amplified, and rearticulated through visual means. Despite Dautremer's hesitation to define her work as a “graphic novel”, it remains necessary to ask whether *Des souris et des hommes* can nonetheless be approached as such within a literary and theoretical framework. When turning to existing definitions of graphic narrative, several elements strongly support this reading. Jan Baetens in *Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative*, for instance, proposes the following definition:

The term ‘graphic narrative’ may be somewhat misleading for non-specialists, but it is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to terms such as ‘comics’ and ‘graphic novels,’ which cover more specialized forms of the general field of graphic literature

⁴ Rebecca Dautremer - Biographie. (s. d.). <https://rebeccadautremer.com/bio>

(Baetens and Frey 2015). There are, of course, many other forms of visual narrative such as, for instance, narrative illustrations, as in the multimodal novel (Hallet 2009), not to mention the various kinds of narrative that rely on mobile images. However, in what follows, ‘graphic narrative’ will refer exclusively to works in print in which a story unfolds with the help of drawings, regardless of whether or not these drawings are accompanied by verbal elements. (Baetens, 41)

Baetens emphasizes above all the printed, drawn nature of the work and the recounting of a story through images, which are criteria that clearly apply to Dautremer’s *Des souris et des hommes* thanks to its materiality as a traditionally published book. The insistence on drawings rather than on a set of strict formal conventions makes it possible for hybrid works such as this one that do not strictly conform to traditional comic layouts to still participate in what is considered visual storytelling. This perspective can be further complemented by Hillary Chute’s definition in *Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative* of comics as a hybrid medium:

Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning. (Chute, 452)

Chute emphasizes forward movement in time, which is indeed characteristic to the physical structure of the book as an object that is read page by page. However, *Des souris et des hommes*, although following a narrative linearity imposed by the materiality of a traditionally bound book, also actively encourages the reader to turn back, to linger, and to physically manipulate the book to grasp the full extent of the visual additions to the story and the intentionally disrupted temporality that Dautremer introduced into the original text with her metaphorical “camera”. Dautremer’s book thus constitutes an amplified version of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, demonstrating that it is possible, through adaptation, to create a new work completely standing on its own without altering a single word of the original text. The novelty emerges entirely from the narrative power of the images, as here text and image no longer function as separate entities, but instead the text becomes part of the image, the typography itself acquiring a visual dimension, and the images, in turn, play out the narrative function. One might be tempted to describe this process as a “re-drawing” of Steinbeck’s text. Yet the prefix “re-” implies that the story had already been fully drawn once before, which is not the case, as Steinbeck never conceived his novel as an illustrated work. It would therefore be more accurate to speak of a “drawing” of the original version, a first entirely visual telling of the text. However,

I would still argue that the expression “re-drawing” in the context of graphic adaptation is more evocative as it mirrors the form of the word “rewriting,” a term already familiar in literary circles that refers to a concept not too far removed from this one. Scott McCloud’s broad definition of comics further supports this difficulty of defining one’s subject of research. In *Understanding Comics*, he writes that “Comic” is the word worth defining as it refers to the medium itself, not a specific object as ‘comic book’ or ‘comic strip’ do.” (McCloud, 4), and he further develops, drawing on Will Eisner’s notion of sequential art, that “Taken individually, the pictures below are merely that—pictures. However, when part of a sequence, even a sequence of only two, the art of the image is transformed into something more: the art of comics!” (McCloud, 5). To which McCloud also insists that “The art form—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images.” (McCloud, 6). So from this perspective, even if Rébecca Dautremer does not explicitly define her work as a rewriting or re-drawing, or as a graphic novel in the strict traditional sense, her project nonetheless engages in a complex reflection on the boundaries between illustration, adaptation, and autonomous creation that could be inscribed into the visual logic of comics and graphic novels. *Des souris et des hommes* presents itself as a standalone visual creative work which serves as a (re-)drawn vessel to dialogue with and challenge Steinbeck’s text without serving solely as its “illustrated version”.

1.4. Recontextualizing *Des souris et des hommes* within adaptation studies theory

All of the above, therefore, calls for a theoretical framework in adaptation studies to better approach and analyze all the new facets of *Des souris et des hommes*. For a long time, the concept of adapting a piece of literature was dominated by a hierarchical and normative perspective that evaluated the quality primarily in terms of their fidelity to a source. Within this model, the original literature occupied a privileged position, while its adapted new versions were often regarded as secondary, derivative, or as completely reduced and thus irrelevant compared to the original. Any shift from one medium to another was interpreted through the lens of loss, where transformation was immediately equated with betrayal. As a result, many adapted works (and especially those stemming from prestigious literary classics) were almost systematically judged as inferior to their sources. About this main problem surrounding adaptations, Jan Baetens in *Adaptation et bande dessinée: éloge de la fidélité* has observed that for decades, “les études de l’adaptation ont été mobilisées par la question de la fidélité, à la fois comme critère technique et critère de qualité,” leading to a critical framework that “jouait

systématiquement en défaveur de l'œuvre-cible" (Baetens, 17). In such a model, the inevitable alterations implied by a change of medium were interpreted as "betrayal", reinforcing the idea that literary value resided exclusively in the original literary text. This logic proves particularly restrictive for visual adaptations, often accused of simplifying or flattening the literary complexity of the source text. Over the past decades, however, adaptation studies have luckily taken a profound theoretical reorientation and now, rather than conceiving adaptation as a derivative practice, contemporary scholars increasingly understand it as an essential constitutive feature of modern storytelling. Baetens argues that stories have become more diverse nowadays thanks to the phenomenon of adaptation (Baetens, 5). Narratives are no longer bound to a single medium and they circulate instead across different forms and supports: "le récit n'est pas seulement une structure [...] c'est aussi un type de communication qui passe sans trop d'entraves d'une forme à l'autre" (Baetens, 5). From this new perspective, the adaptation of literary texts into comics or graphic novels appears not only legitimate but necessary. Baetens thus makes the great observation that the fact that graphic novel adaptations of literary works exist is overall unsurprising, as this process of adaptation contributes to the circulation, survival, and renewal of narratives (Baetens, 6).

Further contributions to the discourse by Frank Erik Pointner and Sandra Eva Boschenhoff in *Classics Emulated: Comic Adaptations of Literary Texts* help refine this perspective by directly addressing that persistent suspicion toward the quality of comics adaptations of literary works. Quoting Douglas Wölk's harsh statement that such adaptations "are almost uniformly terrible" and "end up gutting the original work of a lot of its significant content" (Pointner and Boschenhoff, 87), the authors demonstrate that this criticism is based on assumptions that are rarely applied to other media used to adapt literary works, especially when it comes to cinema. As they point out, films also "run on a different current" than prose texts, yet they are far more often considered as autonomous works rather than as failed reproductions. Pointner and Boschenhoff argue convincingly that comics, in many respects, are closer to prose literature than film as they share with literary texts a solitary mode of reception (reading is generally a single person activity), flexible pacing (the reader of both the novel and the graphic novel can read at any pace they find comfortable, closing the book whenever without disrupting the experience), and the possibility of rereading and close analysis. The reader "may take her time closely studying one image or turn the pages back to reread a certain sequence," a freedom that does not exist in cinema (Pointner and Boschenhoff, 88). Moreover, the production process of comics is often carried out by a single creator or a small team, which more closely resembles

that of literary craft than the collective nature of filmmaking (88). Crucially, comics are not restricted by strict temporal limits and therefore allow for expansion, accumulation, and visual density, as it is the case with Rébecca Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes*. This capacity for expansion rather than reduction directly challenges the popular assumption that adaptation necessarily involves loss. As Pointner and Boschenhoff note, "the deletion/addition process is generally more spectacular when films are made from literary sources than when the same sources are applied to compose comic books," yet comics adaptations continue to bear the brunt of fidelity-based criticism (88). The devaluation of the literary value of comics therefore seems to come less from their narrative qualities than from old cultural hierarchies that continue to place the text above the image. This echoes what Scott McCloud states in his book about the prestige of the classic literary text that tends to be placed above visual narratives:

Words and pictures together are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst, a product of crass commercialism. As children, our first books had pictures galore and very few words because that was "easier". Then, as we grew, we were expected to graduate to books with much more text and only occasional pictures – and finally to arrive at "real" books – those with no pictures at all. (McCloud, 140)

This quote is read in the original book in its graphic novel format, in which the author presents his theory. An amusing detail catches the eye of the reader, as in the panel representing the serious "real" book without pictures, the author has chosen to illustrate the reader reading... *Of Mice and Men*.



FIGURE 1.1 p.140 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* © 1994 Scott McCloud

Chapter 2: Behind the scenes: the graphic novel as a stage

The first chapter examined the narrative and thematic foundations of *Of Mice and Men* and the broader context of its adaptation into a graphic novel by Rébecca Dautremer. It demonstrated how the original novel and its adaptation are part of a long tradition of reinterpretation, in which literary texts circulate from one medium to another. Building on this framework, this second chapter will focus on the form that communicates the visual narration. Rather than analyzing what the story tells, which will be the aim of the later chapters, the following sections will first explore how the graphic novel was employed as a medium by Dautremer to visually stage her story. In other words, this chapter will examine the theoretical and technical mechanisms that allow the graphic adaptation to function as a kind of “theater on paper”, following the claim of Rébecca Dautremer herself, who stated in interviews that she worked on her project like a “stage director”.

To develop this part of the present dissertation, this chapter proceeds in four sections. Section 2.1 reframes Steinbeck’s original novel through the lens of its visual and theatrical potential by drawing on Thomas Fensch’s *Conversations with John Steinbeck* and Robert DeMott’s introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *The Grapes of Wrath* to show that Steinbeck himself had already ambitions to produce works with this hybrid visual potential. Section 2.2 examines how Dautremer stages her own “theater on paper” as the framework for rearticulating the original narrative, engaging with the theoretical reflections of Art Spiegelman, Thomas Inge, and Will Eisner on the relationship between comics with other narrative media such as theater and cinema. Section 2.3 explores the *Des souris et des hommes*’s capacity for narrative spatial simultaneity and temporal control, two essential narrative strategies that are possible on paper but not in cinema or on a stage, showing how Dautremer uses all the possibilities of the graphic novel as a medium for storytelling to introduce parallel scenes at the same time, where such a thing was impossible in Steinbeck’s text. It also introduces Neil Cohn’s concept of “Visual Narrative Grammar”, which is then applied in the final section of this chapter breaking down the first chapter of Dautremer’s graphic novel into its functional phases (Orienter, Establisher, Initial, Prolongation, Peak, Release), thus demonstrating how the very form of her creative work, without even getting into what new narrative content the images convey yet, already conveys new ideas compared to Steinbeck’s original.

2.1. Steinbeck's perspective: on writing a novel with visual potential

The theatrical qualities present in Dautremer's adaptation are not unrelated to Steinbeck's original novel. In fact, it could be argued that Steinbeck himself intended *Of Mice and Men* to be a text that, to some extent, could stand at the boundary between the novel and the stage play. Indeed, *Of Mice and Men* was published in 1937 and was very quickly adapted for the stage. As Thomas Fensch recalls in *Conversations with John Steinbeck*, the novel was published in February and the play that followed premiered in New York in November of the same year (Fensch, xviii). The success was immediate and was awarded with the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, proving that the story performed very well as a theatrical production. This rapid transition from novel to stage was not accidental, as right from the start, Steinbeck had envisaged his text as a form with hybrid potential. In an interview transcribed in Fensch's book, he explains that "My idea [...] was to write a play in the form of a novel. It was an experiment. I wanted to call it at first 'a play to be read.' I constructed it in scenes and filled in the character descriptions and painted in the background" (Fensch, 9). The narrative's dramatic qualities that one can observe in Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* could thus be considered in this light as the natural continuation of Steinbeck's original intentions. Steinbeck even describes his project as an attempt to merge two art forms, "an experiment in making a play that can be read or a novel that can be played... to find a new form that will take some of the technics of both" (Fensch, 35). It could be then argued that there was a real theatrical intention behind Steinbeck's project, yet in the end the author himself deemed the experiment a mixed success, later stating that the project had "flopped" as a theatrical attempt because it required significant rewriting for the stage, though the novel's structure still retained its dramaturgical characteristics (Fensch, 9). The archives of the 1937 theatrical production also indicate that "practically 85 percent of the dialogue now spoken on the Music Box stage is to be found in the book", with only a few minor adjustments having been made for the sake of "dramatic effect" (Fensch, 9). It could be assumed that the original novel had, since its very conception, significant potential as a "script".

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Steinbeck's story unfolds over six chapters, each centered on a specific location and built around a relatively separate dramatic interaction, which then inspired Dautremer to divide the text into "six scenes" for the layout of her graphic novel. Each scene, whether in Steinbeck's text or in the graphic adaptation, opens with a detailed description of the setting before the characters enter the scene in a process that directly echoes theatrical stage directions. This scenic logic is aligned with what is understood to be Steinbeck's

writing style in general, as critics have highlighted the strong visual dimension of his prose. In his introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Robert DeMott emphasizes the “remarkable tonal and visual acuity of Steinbeck's ear and eye”, highlighting the descriptive vividness of his writing (DeMott, xiii). These stylistic qualities once again highlight the visual potential of his stories, which can inspire adaptations beyond the literary realm, whether for the stage, the screen, or the “theater on paper,” as in Dautremer's graphic narrative. Indeed, this adaptability of his work became apparent very early on, as film versions of *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* had already emerged by the early 1940s (Fensch, xix). This swift succession of adaptations confirms again that it was only natural for Steinbeck's narratives to re-emerge in visual format, even almost a century later.

Nevertheless, Steinbeck still held a nuanced view on the relationship between literature and visual media. In a later interview, he reflected on the difference between reading a book and watching its film adaptation. When a reader discovers a story through prose, he argues, they construct their own mental images, but watching the film afterward can create a conflict between the reader's personal imagination and the director's interpretation: “a man reads a book and he makes his own pictures. If he reads the book first he resents the picture because it's not the picture he's made in his mind” (Fensch, 67). This observation is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges in any adaptation process. While visual media allow for reaching new audiences, as Baetens suggested in *Adaptation et bande dessinée: éloge de la fidélité* (Baetens, 6), they also replace the reader's personal mental imagery with fixed visuals imposed from the outside, generally the personal visualization of the artist adapting the piece. However, the case of the comic book/graphic novel appears more complex because, unlike cinema or theater, it preserves the physical presence of the text while simultaneously introducing a visual dimension, all within the materiality of the “book format” proper to literature. In theater and cinema, the narrative unfolds continuously, while the viewer experiences the story at a pace set by the performance or editing, without having to “work physically” to make the narrative unroll linearly to the end. Graphic novels, by contrast, preserve a significant degree of reader participation. As Nick Sousanis argues in *Unflattening*, the interaction between text and image fundamentally reshapes how a narrative is experienced, explaining how “Traditionally, words have been privileged as the proper mode of explanation, as *the* tool of thought. Images have, on the other hand, long been sequestered to the realm of spectacle and aesthetics, sidelined in serious discussions as mere illustration to support the text – never as equal partner.” (Sousanis, 54) Yet this visual dimension of the graphic novel, alongside its usage of the text, still offers its

own unique way of storytelling, because “While image *is*, text is always *about*” (Sousanis, 58). The reader, confronted with this duality within the physical form of the graphic novel, must therefore make sense of the information conveyed by the images coexisting with the information conveyed by the text on paper and physically turn the pages to unfold the story. “It’s a participatory dance, an act of the imagination, in which the reader animates and transforms the static into the kinetic... and brings it to life” (Sousanis, 61). Reflecting on the visuospatial characteristics of the medium in *MetaMaus*, Art Spiegelman articulates another visual metaphor for comics, where the pages are structures composed of panels that function like windows articulating a narrative space. He explains that comics pages can be conceived as units assembled, “as if each page was some kind of building with windows in it” with individual panels operating like sentences within a paragraph (Spiegelman, 166). This structural organization reinforces the idea that the comics page can function as a space where narrative elements are deliberately arranged (and staged), inviting the reader’s active engagement in creating meaning from how the artist has configured them. This fundamental statement appears equally supported by Will Eisner, as he writes in *Comics and Sequential Art* that “The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. [...] The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.” (Eisner, 8)

Dautremer’s adaptation thus occupies a unique position within this continuity of media forms. The images she created in her graphic rendition function less as new fixed representations and more as suggestions for new readings and interpretations, drawing on what was less exploited in Steinbeck’s original text. While *Of Mice and Men* was conceived as a “novelized play to read with visual potential”, Dautremer’s *Des souris et des hommes* could be considered as the reverse operation, namely a new visual representation of the plot of the original novel that unfolds across the pages of a material book.

2.2. Staging *Des souris et des hommes* as a “theater on paper”

It could thus be argued that the medium of the comic book makes explicit the theatrical dimension already implicit in Steinbeck’s original text. By transposing the literary narrative into an illustrated visual space, the scenes and their characters are physically staged on the page instead of just being suggested by the written word. Rébecca Dautremer herself confirms this approach when, in several interviews (referenced in the previous chapter), she compares her

role as author-illustrator to that of a stage director, working from the text as if it were a script and orchestrating all the visual elements as if they were stage props.

While this metaphor is particularly relevant in the case of *Of Mice and Men*, where the project was consciously conceived according to this logic, it also points more broadly to a fundamental characteristic of the medium. Indeed, spatial staging (or scripting) is a central principle of the graphic novel as a narrative form, just as it is in theater or film. Dautremer is thus following a theoretical and artistic tradition that has long emphasized the connections between these different forms. This proximity has been highlighted in particular by Art Spiegelman, who emphasizes the specific nature of the medium's spatial organization. In *MetaMaus*, he explains that "what is most interesting about comics [...] has to do with the abstraction and structurings that come with the comics page, the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed" (Spiegelman, 165). He adds that this juxtaposition produces a unique effect on the perception of narrative time, since "the juxtaposition of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one does not displace the other the way it happens in film" (Spiegelman, 165). In other words, unlike cinema, where images linearly follow one another, comics allow for the simultaneous coexistence of multiple temporalities within the same visual space.

This analysis echoes that of Thomas Inge, who points out that the medium of comics shares many characteristics with the theater. As he explains in *Comics as Culture*, "the comic strip draws on many conventions associated with the theater, such as dialogue, dramatic gesture, background or scene, compressed time, a view of the action framed by a rectangular structure, and a reliance on props and various stage devices." (Inge, 5). He adds that the medium also uses certain techniques specific to cinema, such as editing, camera angles, framing, and close-ups. However, despite these similarities, the comic strip's defining characteristic is that it is generally the product of a single artist (or a writer-artist duo) who simultaneously assumes the roles of writer, director, set designer, and producer (5). This observation resonates particularly strongly with Dautremer's background in photography, which she mentions in interviews, providing some additional understanding of her practice as she recalls how she sometimes positions herself as a "photographer" of her own scenes, choosing her angles and framing to produce specific effects with her illustrations. This photographic dimension echoes Inge's observations on the links between comics and visual culture, particularly in the way that framing contributes to the construction of meaning in the narrative. Inge, however, qualifies the comparison with theater by suggesting that comics might be even closer to cinema. He notes that "it has been

suggested that comics are closest to drama [...], but probably the motion picture is closer,” citing in particular Will Eisner, for whom “comics are movies on paper” (Inge, xix–xx).

Nevertheless, Spiegelman explicitly challenges this view, insisting instead on the graphic novel’s unique characteristics. According to him, “despite the commonly held belief that comics are some sort of storyboard waiting to become a movie, maybe a certain kind of comics has more to do with theater” (Spiegelman, 166). He emphasizes in particular that the comic “offers encapsulated sets of abstractions that trigger a response,” while pointing out a fundamental difference that “theater, like cinema, straps the audience to a chair and hurtles you through time,” whereas “whatever’s dramatic in a comic can be stopped with the blink of an eye” (166). This remark highlights an essential characteristic of the graphic novel medium, which is the reader’s control over narrative time. The spatial and visual dimension of the comic thus appears central to the reading experience. The narrative unfolds through a sequence of static pages, allowing the reader to move freely through the work, compare different images, go back, and reframe their understanding of the story.

The page thus becomes a permanent stage, always accessible, unlike a theatrical or cinematic performance that disappears once it has been performed. The artist must therefore carefully coordinate the distribution between text and images, determine the amount of dialogue per page, manage the rhythm of the silences, and make specific room for purely visual elements. These choices stem directly from a stage direction approach that involves positioning the “actors,” organizing entrances and exits, guiding the reader-spectator’s gaze, and establishing the narrative rhythm. This logic of staging is particularly striking in the depiction of characters. Unlike actors in theater or film, who are restrained by their physicality and the limits of their bodies, drawn figures are entirely malleable. Dautremer fully exploits this freedom by varying the styles of representation within the narrative itself, where characters appear in turn in a (semi-)realistic, stylized, caricatured, or even sketched register. These variations are part of a genuine “graphic acting,” in which the visual transformation they undergo conveys emotional states, tensions, or dramatic intensity, in parallel to the original text without ever altering it.

2.3. *Des souris et des hommes* as a versatile stage: spatial simultaneity and temporal control

All the findings above reveal that the graphic novel medium is like a peculiar theater scene that offers the unique ability to be in two places at once without disturbing the

audience/readers through the strategy of narrative simultaneity. Whereas Steinbeck's novel imposes its own narrative focus, the graphic medium allows multiple storylines to coexist within the same visual space, as just Spiegelman has argued previously (165). Dautremer exploits this possibility fully within her creative work by introducing various parallel scenes that enrich the narrative while still never altering the original text.

One example from Chapter 4 of her graphic adaptation is especially illustrative. In *Of Mice and Men*, the narration at that point in the story focuses exclusively on the scene between Lennie and Crooks, while the other characters who have gone into town remain off-screen "Everybody went into town [...] Slim and George and everybody" (Steinbeck, 98). The actions of these characters are not depicted simultaneously, only implied, and they do not reappear on the page until the following chapter. However, on the "paper stage" of the graphic novel adaptation, the medium of the graphic novel allows Dautremer to fill this implicit narrative gap. Without altering the text, she visually introduces what is missing from the written narrative by presenting the reader with a fully illustrated double-page spread depicting the men at the brothel. This scene, which is only hinted at in the novel, therefore becomes visible thanks to this graphic "second camera" effect, and it effectively enriches the reader's reception of the story.

However even beyond this particular example, the overall structure of the adaptation could be analyzed following this theatrical analogy. Steinbeck's novel, composed of six chapters organized around distinct locations, naturally lends itself to a reinterpretation in terms of scenes. Dautremer adopts this segmentation by transforming it into six scenic units within her graphic novel, each functioning as an autonomous segment while remaining part of a narrative whole. This organization can be examined using the "Visual Narrative Grammar" model developed by Neil Cohn in *The Visual Language of Comics*. According to Cohn, visual sequences are organized into six functional categories: "Orienter, Establisher, Initial, Prolongation, Peak, Release", which together structure the narrative progression (Cohn 70-77). Dautremer's adaptation already presents a clear formal structure where each "scene" features a relatively stable structure, so it would be relevant to see how they could be analyzed through Cohn's categories to further reveal the strategies she uses to expand her story. Each scene typically begins with an Orienter phase, including an introductory sequence often constructed as a flashback and accompanied by character portraits with their names, functioning as an introduction to the characters. This is then followed by a chapter page serving as a threshold, comparable to an act break in theater and marking the transition into the main narrative. Next

comes an Establisher phase, focused on setting the scene and echoing the initial descriptions in Steinbeck's work. The development of the plot then, is structured according to the functions of Initial, Prolongation, and Peak, which build tension and drive the narrative forward. Intersected throughout this development of the narrative body of the book are moments of interlude or intermission, which provide the reader with visual and rhythmic breaks reminiscent of one's experience of watching commercial TV programs or sitting through an "entreacte" in the theater again. A Release phase then provides the visual and narrative closure that brings the scene to its resolution. Finally, transitional images lead the reader to the next scene as a chapter's coda, often stylized as "advertisement pages" that function again like an intermission between acts to reinforce the theatrical experience. The following section will provide a detailed analysis of this structure using specific examples drawn from Dautremer's graphic novel to provide a concrete demonstration of how this type of visual staging of the narrative on paper can open up new ways of telling the original story and even create entirely new ones

2.4. *Des souris et des hommes* in paper scenes: analyzing the application of the visual staging

The first scene of the graphic novel, corresponding to Steinbeck's opening chapter, begins even before the official chapter page. Immediately after the title page, as they open the book, the reader encounters a dynamic, textless sequence that functions as an Orienter phase. This introductory sequence visually narrates the flashback to the incident in Weed that caused George and Lennie to hit the road looking for a new job, which, in Steinbeck's novel, is only gradually revealed much later. The first thing that catches the eye is a large handwritten phrase that reads "Like I done in weed" written by hand, proving that it is part of the illustration as a graphic element that is fully integrated into it. The reader is confronted with Dautremer's red pencil sketches here, making the page look very busy. There is a woman whose features are initially calm (in the lower left corner) who suddenly takes on an expression of terror, her mouth open as she screams. The red polka-dot pattern returns and a very dynamic, sketchy, and overwhelming sequence of Lennie pulling at her fabric unfolds. The drawing of the woman is repeated across the page with progressively fewer details in a very dynamic red line. Her wide-eyed expression of terror and her screaming mouth stand out above all else. Lennie's eyes are wide open too as he touches the fabric of her dress, looking just as shocked. Their small, wide-open round eyes are the same size as the small white polka dots on the fabric of the woman he is pulling on (it will be later demonstrated in Chapter 4 of the present dissertation on the

representation of women that this is a significant motif in Dautremer's narrative). All these little polka dots contribute to the very dynamic, busy, chaotic rhythm of the sequence presented across the double-page spread. Furthermore, the onomatopoeia "iiiiiiiiiii," used to represent the woman's scream, not only adds to this sense of chaos and effectively conveys the female character's distress, but it also contributes visually, particularly with all the dots on the "i"s, which echo the polka dots on the fabric of the dress that Lennie is pulling.



FIGURE 2.1 p.10-11 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

Scott McCloud observes “even the variation of lettering styles [...] speak of an ongoing struggle to capture the very essence of sound” (McCloud, 134). Here, the lettering intensifies the scream while integrating it into the polka-dot pattern's visual field, adding an overwhelming feel to the whole double page. At the very top of this illustrated spread, we can see George's profile as he turns around and takes in the situation, a look of disheartenment on his face. Unlike the other two characters (the woman caught off guard and Lennie, surprised by her reaction), he doesn't have his eyes wide open as he looks more disappointed rather than surprised, suggesting that he knows Lennie well and isn't taken aback by this kind of behavior. We then see him turn into a small figure sketched in red as well, grab a stick that resembles the “iii” bars of the onomatopoeia, and strike Lennie on the head to make him stop (an action not explicitly described in Steinbeck's text) before the sequence transitions into flight.

Turning the page, the reader is faced with a close-up of Lennie's portrait, presented with his name written in large letters to properly introduce him to the readers. He appears in the Dautremer's signature most detailed, semi-realistic graphic style. Given the size of the graphic

novel (20 by 24 centimeters), his head appears very large. It's almost life-size, as if we were standing right in front of him, meeting him in real life for the first time. In this introductory freeze-frame, we see him rubbing his head where George hit him. The polka-dot pattern remains on the page and surrounds him even though the female victim is no longer present by his side, highlighting the lasting consequences of his action. On the adjacent page, simultaneously, there is a continuation of the onomatopoeia "iiiiii" with a sequence showing the woman running through the city toward other characters outside the scene. When she arrives in the middle of a group of people and they show concern for her distress, the woman's facial expression changes by taking on a more controlled, hostile look while those who seem to be listening to her look shocked. The entire sequence is without text, but only through these two illustrated double-pages placed even before the official beginning of the story, Dautremer already introduces a new narrative, showing here how the incident transformed into an accusation that caused George and Lennie to flee.



FIGURE 2.2 *Lennie's introduction, p.12-13 Des souris et des hommes © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer*

This entire sequence anticipates information that Steinbeck keeps from the reader until much later in the novel. While the original text only alludes to the incident in Weed in the first chapter of the original novel,

"O.K.," said George. "An' you ain't gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither." Lennie looked puzzled. "Like I done in Weed?" "Oh, so ya forgot that too, did ya. Well, I ain't gonna remind ya, fear ya do it again." A light of understanding broke on Lennie's face. "They run us outa Weed," he exploded triumphantly. "Run us out, hell,"

said George disgustedly. "We run. They was lookin' for us, but they didn't catch us. (Steinbeck, 11)

and only fully explains the incident in Chapter 3

Slim's eyes were level and unwinking. He nodded very slowly. "So what happens?" George carefully built his line of solitaire cards. "Well, that girl rabbits in an' tells the law she been raped. The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie. So we sit in a irrigation ditch under water all the rest of that day. Got on'y our heads sticking outa water, an' up under the grass that sticks out from the side of the ditch. An' that night we scrambled outa there. (Steinbeck, 59-61)

Dautremer, on the other hand, chooses to foreground it from the very beginning. In doing so, she fulfills the function of the Orienter as defined by Cohn, providing a "superordinate framing for the Arc" that contextualizes the narrative before it unfolds (75-77). This sequence continues onto the next spread, where there is now an introductory headshot of George with his name also written in large letters. The sequence is once again very dynamic but less chaotic and overwhelming (the light blue watercolor washes on this spread serve to tone down the mood a little, and while the red outlines of the characters remain dynamic, their drawing is more controlled), showing what happens after the scene where George knocks Lennie unconscious with a stick as he takes him by the hand and the two flee together, first running, then jumping into the water and swimming. This swimming sequence features softer lines, the characters' expressions are calmer, and the blue on the page contrasts with the very vivid red of the previous double-page spread. This graphic choice operated by Dautremer communicates to the reader that the characters are out of danger for now, thus indicating that the flashback is over (and so is the Orienter phase following Cohn's theory) and that the story can now officially begin.



FIGURE 2.3 *George's introduction, p.14-15 Des souris et des hommes © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer*

When turning the page to pages 16-17, the reader finally arrives at the page introducing Chapter 1, which signals the start of the novel and the opening of Scene 1 of this “theater on paper”. What is surprising is that there have already been 15 pages before this page announcing Chapter One that have already provided the reader with a vast amount of information, such as the preceding “Orientation Phase” sequence presented in the style of a cartoon opening credits sequence that shows the characters and dynamic narrative sequences even before the cartoon begins. This first chapter page is a large double-page spread presenting a detailed, highly cinematic illustration of a rural landscape with a major road stretching toward the horizon on the right-hand page, inviting the reader to turn the page to see where it leads. On this road, already far in the distance, are the silhouettes of two men (George and Lennie) carrying bundles of luggage. They are heading toward the far horizon. Above them, migratory birds are flying in the same direction as the characters, showing that they, too, are migrating. On the opposite side, a decayed structure bears the inscription “Éditions Tishina présentent” along with the date “9 avril 2019” referencing the moment Dautremer began the project. This metatextual detail mirrors the narrative threshold, where the chapter page marks the story’s beginning just as the inscription marks the start of its creation. This large illustration also introduces an intriguing detail, a solitary dog positioned in the foreground. He has a rope around his neck, but the rope is severed, which means he could technically head in the same direction as Lennie and George and run away to a better place. Yet the dog remains motionless. In fact, he has his back to the horizon, the direction George and Lennie are heading, and he lowers his head, as if to suggest that perhaps there is nowhere for him to run as the situation is just as bad everywhere else. The dog looks at the viewer, a gaze that which could suggest a silent awareness and perhaps even a foreshadowing of the narrative’s tragic trajectory that both the characters and the readers unfamiliar with Steinbeck’s original story cannot even begin to imagine at this stage.

The Establisher phase, following Cohn’s theory, corresponds to the opening lines of the first chapter, Steinbeck’s famous description of the Salinas River landscape (Steinbeck, 3-5). Dautremer translates this passage into highly detailed, almost photographic illustrations rendered in sepia tones that evoke archival imagery and situate the narrative within the 1930s. As Cohn explains, Establishers provide “referential information [...] without engaging [characters] in the actions of a narrative,” thereby laying the groundwork for immersion (Cohn, 74-75). The setting is meticulously constructed before the characters fully enter the scene. The presence of animals on Dautremer’s illustrations, namely rabbits and herons, faithfully echoes Steinbeck’s text while also reinforcing the sense of a living ecosystem. When George and

Lennie finally appear, they remain small within the composition, visually subordinated to the landscape. The departure of the herons in the upper corner of the page signals the transition from setting to action, the stage has been set, and the “actors” are now ready to perform.



FIGURE 2.4 p.22-23, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

The next pages of Dautremer’s visual narrative follow the application of Initial, Prolongation, and Peak phases. The Initial phase is marked by George and Lennie’s arrival and temporary rest, initiating the narrative action. Visually, Dautremer conveys this through moments of deceleration with sequences in which the characters sit, converse, and move minimally, often against sparse or white backgrounds that emphasize the calm and suspension of the scene. These moments correspond to what Cohn defines as Prolongations, which “delay the Peak, adding a sense of atmosphere and building tension” (Cohn, 75). The visual pacing here creates a contrast with the earlier chaos of the *Orienter*, reinforcing the impression of temporary stability, essential at this early stage of the narrative.

The Peak occurs in George’s sudden outburst of anger toward Lennie, on pages 47-48 of the graphic novel. In Steinbeck’s text, this scene is already marked by intense emotion, which is conveyed through the structure of the dialogue itself with its short sentences, exclamations, accusatory repetitions (“I got you!”, “You can’t keep a job”, “You get in trouble”), and a gradual rise to a near-shout: “His voice rose nearly to a shout. “You crazy son-of-a-bitch”” (Steinbeck, 17). This passage can be interpreted in light of Schulz von Thun’s communication theories, as presented by Lubienetzki and Schüler-Lubienetzki in *How We Talk to Each Other - The Messages We Send With Our Words and Body Language: Psychology of Human Communication*. According to them, “when a person communicates, they always reveal

something about themselves,” as “behaviour reveals our own internalized attitude” (Lubienetzki and Schüler-Lubienetzki, 29). From this perspective, George’s verbal abuse is not limited to informative content but serves as a form of self-revelation, exposing an emotional state marked by frustration, anger, and accumulated tension. The repetition of the pronoun “you” in accusatory phrases reinforces this dimension, making Lennie the direct recipient of this emotional weight.



FIGURE 2.5 p.47 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

Dautremer’s graphic adaptation remains faithful to this part of the original text, but considerably amplifies its expressiveness through the visual medium, favoring a rough sketch in red pencil as was already the case in the chaotic *Orienter* phase analyzed previously, with no apparent retouching or correction, which gives the image a marked immediacy and expressive intensity. The composition itself contributes to this intensity as Lennie appears at the edge of the spread, almost pressed up against the gutter, as if trying to make himself invisible. His face, with its wide-open eyes and slightly parted mouth, conveys surprise and bewilderment. In contrast, the visual space is saturated with red strokes and abrupt, angular lines that invade the page and directly evoke George’s anger. George appears in a fragmented, unfinished form, with a half-sketched face dominated by a bloodshot eye and a mouth open in a scream. This depiction is accompanied by an enlarged and even more disjointed version of the same face, suggesting an externalization of his inner state. Surrounding this central figure is a series of fragmentary sketches in red pencil representing a chaotic fog of silhouettes, faces, accusatory figures, and dogs that seem to embody the accumulation of past frustrations.

However, I would argue that the first chapter also contains a second Peak, which is the discovery of the dead mouse in Lennie's pocket. This moment is crucial as it reveals both his immense strength and his potential for unintended violence resulting in death. As Cohn notes, Peaks represent "the disruption of narrative equilibrium" and often involve moments of surprise or revelation (Cohn, 71-73).

Following this moment, Dautremer introduces a series of interludes that suspend the narrative flow. One particularly striking example is the page dedicated to the dead mouse, presenting it with a highly detailed, almost hyper-realistic illustration that invites the reader to contemplate the consequences of Lennie's actions. Above it, however, a contrasting sequence depicts a cartoonish mouse slipping and falling, rendered in bright colors and a simplified childish style. This juxtaposition introduces an alternative visual register that echoes Lennie's own justification as he justified himself to George saying "I didn' kill it [...] I found it dead" (Steinbeck, 9). The childlike aesthetic of the sequence mirrors the naïveté of his explanation and reinforces his innocence despite the violence of the outcome. A later visual echo replaces the mouse with a broken figurine resembling Mickey Mouse, extending the metaphor that Lennie's actions resemble those of a child breaking a toy without intending harm. These interludes function as interpretive pauses that offer a more symbolic commentary on the story. In later chapters, each major violent act also occupies the Peak position within its sequence: the death of the mouse in Chapter 1, the killing of the puppy in Chapter 5, and finally the death of Curley's wife. These events echo one another thematically and share the same aesthetic treatment in the corresponding interludes, reinforcing Steinbeck's use of repetition as a narrative device and Lennie's rich characterization articulated by Dautremer.



FIGURE 2.6 *The similarities in visual treatment of the series of deaths caused by Lennie in the graphic novel p.33, p.43, p.331, p.367, Des souris et des hommes © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer*

The Release phase corresponds to the resolution of the conflict between George and Lennie. After the emotional intensity of the Peak, the narrative returns to a state of relative calm as the characters eat, reconcile, and prepare to sleep. As Cohn explains, the Release provides an “aftermath” or “wrap up” to the events of the Peak (73-74). Dautremer reinforces this closure visually through a return to the natural setting. The final image of George and Lennie mirrors Steinbeck’s ending, in which the characters settle into the landscape as night falls

They made their beds on the sand, and as the blaze dropped from the fire the sphere of light grew smaller; the curling branches disappeared and only a faint glimmer showed where the tree trunks were. From the darkness Lennie called, "George - you asleep?" "No. Whatta you want?" "Let's have different color rabbits, George." "Sure we will," George said sleepily. "Red and blue and green rabbits, Lennie. Millions of 'em." "Furry ones, George, like I seen in the fair in Sacramento." "Sure, furry ones." "'Cause I can jus' as well go away, George, an', live in a cave." "You can jus' as well go to hell," said George. "Shut up now." The red light dimmed on the coals. Up the hill from the river a coyote hammered, and a dog answered from the other side of the stream. The sycamore leaves whispered in a little night breeze. (Steinbeck, 24).

The visual representation of the brightly-colored rabbits from Lennie’s unrealistic dream vision suggests a final shift into the realm of sleeping, in which the characters will peacefully end the first chapter. However, this sense of closure is immediately complicated by the page that follows as it features a highly detailed illustration of a dog baring its teeth in response to the distant call of a coyote. This visual emphasis introduces a note of tension, suggesting that danger persists beyond the apparent calm.

Finally, the first chapter concludes with a stylized “advertisement page” featuring a mouse promoting baked beans with a title saying “Food for men! Baked Beans.” This playful and ironic image functions as a coda, linking the recurring motif of the mouse to the title of the book while inviting the reader to “open the tin” and resume reading to the next chapter. It operates like an intermission between acts, and each following act of Dautremer’s graphic narrative could be similarly read through the same stage structure as the one analyzed above.

Chapter 3: Of Capitalism and Men: a graphic mirage of the American Dream

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. [...] They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.” (Steinbeck, 20-21). This lament by George Milton, spoken at the very beginning of *Of Mice and Men*, perfectly captures the isolation of migrant workers during the Great Depression as well as the structural fragility of the American capitalist dream that is one of the central themes of Steinbeck’s original novel. The two previous chapters have established that *Des souris et des hommes* by Rébecca Dautremer is a work of visual expansion that reconfigures, through its physical form as a graphic novel designed as a “theater on paper,” Steinbeck’s narrative through staging, sequencing, and its unique visual hybridity. This chapter will shift the focus of analysis from form to ideology. While Dautremer’s adaptation transforms the way the story is told through the visual expansion unique to the graphic novel as a medium, it also significantly reshapes and enhances what the story reveals ideologically about the socio-economic structures already present in Steinbeck’s novel. By introducing full-page illustrations stylized like retro advertisements, reinterpreting the dream ranch sequences visually, and depicting the materiality of physical labor, Dautremer constructs a distinct critical visual device that exposes the mechanisms of capitalist illusion at the core of Steinbeck’s original plot.

To develop this argument, this chapter proceeds in four sections. Section 3.1 situates *Of Mice and Men* within the historical and visual culture of the 1930s, drawing on the work of historians such as Sidney Baldwin and James Gregory, as well as on the archival photography of the Farm Security Administration, notably Dorothea Lange. Section 3.2 examines how Dautremer transforms the American Dream into a visual phenomenon by creating a form of “visual noise” that saturates the graphic novel through advertising interludes and stylized dream sequences, supported by critical arguments from John L. Marsden and Peter Lisca. Section 3.3 turns then to the representation of the value of labor within the presented system, analyzing how a single page mimicking the boss’s notebook makes visible the dehumanizing quantification of workers, while engaging with readings of Benson, Loftis, and Marsden. Finally, section 3.4 analyzes the climactic collapse of the dream through Dautremer’s ability to radically shift from one art style to another to challenge the narrative, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner.

3.1. Capitalism and the context of the Great Depression

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is inseparable from the historical realities of the Great Depression in the 1930s, a period marked not only by economic collapse but by a profound restructuring of labor and social hierarchies. As Sidney Baldwin argues in *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*, "Chronic rural poverty had been ignored, revealed, rationalized, and explained, and while virtually nothing had been done to strike at its causes or ameliorate its consequences" (Baldwin, 45), the Depression made it all impossible to overlook. Farm policy increasingly treated agriculture as a business, prioritizing efficiency over human well-being, and farmers unable to compete became cheap labor for large commercial farms or were relegated to charity (Baldwin, 45-46). This prolonged instability resulted in widespread impoverishment, abandoned farms, and a growing population of displaced workers. Within this context, the Dust Bowl migrations represent one of the most visible consequences of economic and environmental collapse. In his book *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, James Noble Gregory recounts a series of droughts and dust storms that stripped farmlands from the Dakotas to Oklahoma, forcing hundreds of thousands of farmers to abandon their homes and migrate westward. These migrants, often called "Dust Bowl refugees," traveled hoping for a brighter future in California, only to find more misery (Gregory, xiv). As Gregory observes, this migration came to embody a "pathetic failure of the American Dream," exposing the collapse of the promises of opportunity that formed its vital core (xiv). Steinbeck himself was not unfamiliar with these events. He grew up in the Salinas Valley (which happen to be also the setting of *Of Mice and Men*), learned about farm labor from his father and his mother's family, and as a young man, he worked in the fields for the Spreckels Sugar Company as Benson and Loftis note in *John Steinbeck and Farm Labor Unionization: The Background of 'In Dubious Battle.'* (Benson and Loftis, 195-196). It could thus be argued that his firsthand experience actively impacted his depiction of George and Lennie as the figures of the displaced workforce, moving from ranch to ranch in search of temporary employment but never achieving stability.

The representation of Depression-era poverty was profoundly shaped by the visual culture of that time, particularly through the work of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers. As Meighen Katz states in *A Paradigm of Resilience: The Pros and Cons of Using the FSA Photographic Collection in Public History Interpretations of the Great Depression*, these images have been described as "the most eloquent document of poverty ever

done”, thanks to their unique ability to convey the human impact of the crisis (Katz, 9). Morris Dickstein argues that they have become “the way we are likely to remember the Depression itself, the very look and feel of the period” (qtd. in Katz, 9). Dorothea Lange, one of the most prominent FSA photographers, was particularly skilled at creating sympathetic portrayals of the migrants as she met them during their journey. Yet, as Katz argues, these images are not neutral documents but carefully curated representations shaped by framing, selection, and narrative intention, making the equally well-curated popular idea of Dorothea Lange as a positive figure somewhat controversial, as it appears that FSA photography tended to emphasize only some chosen migrant voices, while “those who fell outside of this constructed personification, such as those who were not resilient in the face of disaster, are little talked about, either in the rhetoric of the 1930s or in the popular imagination that looks back at that period.” (Katz, 22)

Dautremer’s adaptation draws on this visual culture of the 1930s Depression period by incorporating imagery that evokes the archival photography of Dorothea Lange through the usage of sepia tones, the way she chose to frame her illustrations and stage compositions, situating her work within both the historical context and its visual aesthetic, helping the full immersion of the readers. However, I would argue that she does not merely reproduce with only the aesthetic goal in mind of obtaining a 1930s-themed décor for her “graphic novel staging” of *Of Mice and Men*. Instead, she reactivates these codes in a way that serves and nourishes the original narrative by establishing a critical tension between the material reality of economic hardship and the omnipresent ideological constructs that seek to obscure it. This tension becomes particularly visible when archival aesthetics and sequences presenting the protagonist in difficult situations are juxtaposed with the saturated imagery of consumer culture and advertising, as it will be analyzed in the following sections of the chapter.

3.2. The “Capitalist Dream” as an unattainable childlike fantasy and recurring pattern in Dautremer

The concept of the Capitalist Dream and the ambition to own one’s own piece of land could be perceived as the ideology that both nourished and concealed the uncertain climate of the Great Depression. In *Of Mice and Men*, this tension is at the heart of the narrative and is embodied in the recurring dream shared by George and Lennie of owning one day a small piece

of land thanks to their hard work. “Live off the fatta the lan” (Steinbeck, 21), as Lennie says enthusiastically multiple times throughout the novel, would finally allow them to achieve independence and thus escape the seemingly endless cycle of migrant labor. As John L. Marsden notes in *California Dreamin’: The Significance of ‘A Coupla Acres’ in Steinbeck’s ‘Of Mice and Men’*:

The dream operates as a chorus in the novella, in terms of both its tone and the structure that its repetition defines. It is described on three occasions: first, in the opening scene, as a “pipe dream” that George uses to calm Lennie; then, in the middle of the novel, when it appears that there is a possibility of its realization; finally, near the end, where it functions as a requiem for Lennie. In each case, it is recited in religious tones, as if it were a sacred text. (Marsden, 294)

This constant repetition and verbal visualization of their shared dream, which is one of the most prevalent narrative patterns in the story of the novel, as Marsden argues, functions less as a reminder and motivation to achieve their goal than as a psychological necessity, a way to cope and endure their harsh material conditions (Marsden, 294-295). Rébecca Dautremer’s adaptation takes this ever-present theme of the pursuit of this big Capitalist Dream imposed on the struggling protagonists of Steinbeck’s novel and transforms it into a visual phenomenon that is actively imposed not only on them, but also with the same intensity on the readers discovering the story through the graphic novel. A striking example of this phenomenon is made visible on page 55 of the graphic novel, in the first chapter. The full-page illustration is rendered in sepia tones with stained edges, stylized in a way reminiscent of the archival Farm Security Administration photographs of Dorothea Lange and most probably inspired directly by her archival pictures, and depicts George in Dautremer’s signature detailed semi-realistic style. The caption at the top of the page reads “Ils ont pas de futur devant eux” (Dautremer, 55), echoing George’s own words in the novel: “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.” (Steinbeck, 20-21). George is shown in semi-profile from behind, moving toward the right side of the page, the direction of chronological future in Western reading conventions, which could be read visually as him moving forward to find better perspectives in his difficult life situation. His head is slightly lowered, his eyes closed, his lips pressed together in an expression of disappointed acceptance. He is wearing a large black bag on his back, which again suggests in this visual staging that he is traveling in search of better prospects. The desert-like background

painted in warm red-orange tones evokes the Dust Bowl, and the flimsy shacks recall those of the migrant as archived in Lange's photographs⁵. At the level of George's silhouette, the reader can observe a large, brightly colored billboard that depicts a smiling family in a car, dressed in stylish clothes, with an American flag in the background and the slogan "There's no way like the American Way." This tension between the advertised ideal of national prosperity and George's bleak reality introduces one of the fundamental contrasts of Steinbeck's novel, and Dautremer's visual rendition heightens this contrast by presenting the reader with two visual strategies side by side, meaning the hardship of workers like George, depicted in the style of archival photographs that evoke the difficult history of that period on one hand, and the flashy, colorful aesthetic of advertisements that seem to promote empty promises detached from the reality on the other.



FIGURE 3.1 p.55 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

This tension gets developed even further in the scenes where George and Lennie recite their dream of owning their own farm one day. While the previous page, stylized as the archival photograph with the flashy ad in the background, was all about pessimism and the hard reality for people like George and Lennie, the following double-page (Dautremer, 56-57) presents the reader with the other side of the coin, meaning the shared dream that keeps them going. In the novel, Lennie is delighted and begs George to tell the story again, about how they are different from other guys, how they have a future, and "An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the

⁵ <https://dorothealange.museumca.org/>

winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is an the milk like you can hardly cut it.” (Steinbeck, 21-22).

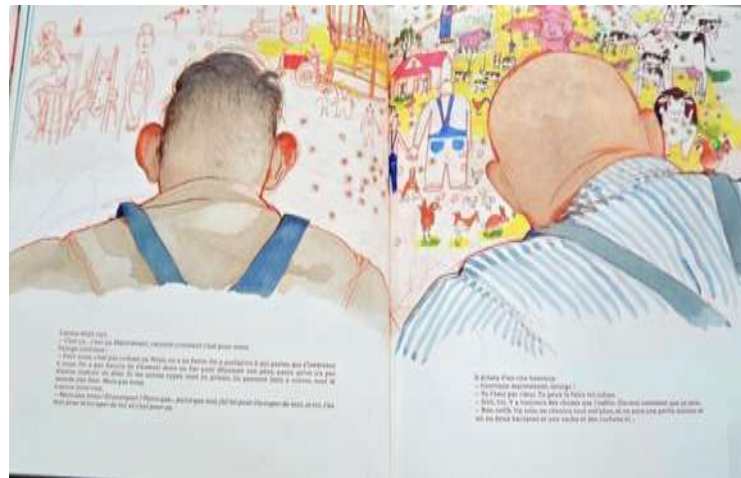


FIGURE 3.2 p.56-57 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

To illustrate this scene, Dautremer shows George and Lennie in the foreground, but this time from behind. The reader gets a big view of the backs of their heads, their necks, their shoulders, as if they are included in the scene and sitting right there with George and Lennie, looking over their shoulders at what the characters are looking at. Both characters are drawn in a much more detailed style than the rest of the image. In front of them, a big fresco drawn in a much simpler, almost childlike style, presents a dream-like panorama of their ideal life. In the center of that picture, there are naive little crayon sketches of George holding the much bigger Lennie by the hand. There is also a drawing of a building with a pinkish-red roof, the dream farm, where two silhouettes (one small, one large) are raising their arms in celebration. The colors are bright, pastel, joyful, and the texture looks like crayon drawings. Little flowers are scattered everywhere, and there are tons of animals drawn in that same simplified, childlike way: pink pigs, cows, chickens, rabbits. The sketches overlap and pile up, creating a real sense of abundance.

This double-page functions as one big illustration across two pages. George is on the left page, Lennie on the right. And most of that colorful abundance is concentrated on Lennie's side. He is the one really looking toward that bright dream. George's side has some of the dream too (a few flowers, some tractors, the silhouettes of the two holding hands), but it also presents some sketches rendered directly in only red pencil, without any colors. Those sketches show the opposite of the happy, colorful dream that he seems to be sharing with Lennie. The reader can clearly observe on his side of the double page a drawing of a man sitting alone at a bar,

head in his hands, eyes closed, and another sketch of a man behind bars crying. Upon closer inspection, that man in the pessimistic sketches seems to be a representation of George himself. Dautremer's character design is so strong that readers can recognize him right away with his long face and aquiline nose. By putting these sketches on George's side of the page, with George himself pictured as exactly the kind of lonely, trapped person he says he and Lennie are not, she shows that he actually has a very different perspective on their situation. While the dream is nice, and it seems that reciting it like a chorus with his partner, as argued by Marsden (294), does help him to cope with reality to some extent, he is also deeply aware that in reality, he and Lennie are those guys who end up in bars or behind bars (Steinbeck, 21). George knows in the back of his mind that just dreaming will not change anything because he and Lennie are ultimately powerless against the system and the people around them. This visual contrast reveals that George is acutely aware of the gap between dream and reality, even as he recites the dream to comfort Lennie.

The illusion gets pushed even further in the later expansion of the dream, on pages 216-219 in the graphic novel. This time, the reader is presented with four pages corresponding to the passage where George goes into even more detail about the farm,

"Sure, we'd have a little house an' a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an' in the winter we'd keep a fire goin' in it. It ain't enough land so we'd have to work too hard. Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn't have to buck no barley eleven hours a day. An' when we put in a crop, why, we'd be there to take the crop up. We'd know what come of our planting." "An' rabbits," Lennie said eagerly. "An' I'd take care of 'em. Tell how I'd do that, George." "Sure, you'd go out in the alfalfa patch an' you'd have a sack. You'd fill up the sack and bring it in an' put it in the rabbit cages." "They'd nibble an' they'd nibble," said Lennie, "the way they do. I seen'em." "Ever' six weeks or so," George continued, "them does would throw a litter so we'd have plenty rabbits to eat an' to sell. An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid." He looked raptly at the wall over Lennie's head. "An' it'd be our own, an' nobody could can us. If we don't like a guy we can say, 'Get the hell out,' and by God he's got to do it. An' if a fren' come along, why we'd have an extra bunk, an' we'd say, 'Why don't you spen' the night?' an' by God he would. We'd have a setter dog and a couple stripe cats, but you gotta watch out them cats don't get the little rabbits." Lennie breathed hard. "You jus' let 'em try to get the rabbits. I'll break their God damn necks. I'll . . . I'll smash 'em with a stick." He subsided, grumbling to himself, threatening the future cats which might dare to disturb the future rabbits. (Steinbeck, 81-84)

To this passage, Dautremer renders four fully-illustrated pages packed with visual information, drawn in that same simple, colorful, slightly childlike style. The slight difference is that for this sequence, the naïve aesthetic of the drawings seems to be a little more polished. There are no more rough red pencil sketches; instead, the drawings have been lined with a black fine line pen and carefully colored with very vibrant flat colors, mostly primary and secondary colors in

their purest forms. Unlike the more chaotic layout of the first dream sequence, all the drawings depicting the ideal characteristics of the dream farm do not overlap but appear carefully arranged one after another, so that every bit of space on the pages gets filled. Everything George and Lennie mention in the dream, every animal, every possession, every activity, is shown in meticulous detail, always with that naive but polished aesthetic. I would argue that this stylistic evolution chosen by Dautremer illustrates how, on the one hand, their dream vision is becoming more polished and concrete in their heads. Still, on the other hand, the delusion is being fed by all these brighter and brighter colors and all these overwhelming little details that cover every square centimeter of these four pages. With no white space left on these fully illustrated pages, they also appear very hard to read and navigate, especially as the text of the original novel is fully integrated into all that visual information.

One could argue that these pages function somewhat like a stream of consciousness that has suddenly been made visual, suddenly offering a range of new possibilities for that initial dream, each emerging from the other. It is enough to take just a tiny part of these cacophonous spreads for there to be an enormous amount of new narrative content. If we take, for example, the top left corner of page 218, we first see a speech bubble from Lennie taken from the original text exclaiming, “Parle-moi de la maison, George” after which, just below this small caption is a tiny drawing of their dreamed little dream house. First, we see a panel with the little house under the snow, but on a green, lush lawn, and then small drawings around it arranged in rectangular panels that resemble the drawings of different rooms on an architectural floor plan of a house. We see that the two protagonists are actually not dreaming of luxury, the house looks more like a small wooden cabin, we see them imagining a room with a bed to sleep in, an iron stove to keep warm in the winter, all this being reinforced by wholesome small depictions of George and Lennie staged in all the rooms of this hypothetical house. To further emphasize the dream of an iron stove for winter warmth, the illustration right next to the original little house shows the house with its large cast-iron stove under the snow where while the setting is depicted in cool, blue tones to symbolize the harsh winter conditions, a halo of warm colors envelops the house with the stove inside, like a protective bubble. Ultimately, what is revealed here is that the American capitalist dream that George and Lennie cherish is not necessarily the dream of getting rich to upgrade socially, instead Dautremer’s graphic adaptation in this scene reveals that George and Lennie dream above all of a safe haven, a place where they could finally live peacefully without fear and without depending on the wealthy people above them. However, although this initial dream seems comfortable, the graphic adaptation here shows how the two

characters very quickly lose control of it as they become entangled in increasingly unrealistic and chaotic fantasies. That dream vision that brought them hope and solace becomes excessive, almost suffocating, and starts to detach itself from any real possibility. As Peter Lisca has pointed out in *Motifs and Patterns in 'Of Mice and Men'*, Steinbeck deliberately creates a kind of “counter movement” in the novel that “insinuates a possibility”, only to reinforce how impossible the dream actually is (Lisca, 231). Dautremer takes that idea and amplifies it through that visual saturation, making what was once inoffensive daydreaming look like a psychedelic hallucinatory vision out of control. The graphic stylization she employed here makes the reader feel the overwhelm of the dream as it keeps growing and growing until it is just too much, too bright, too crowded, and too unrealisable.



FIGURE 3.3 p. 218-219 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

Moreover, the addition in the graphic novel of transitional illustrated pages stylized as retro advertisements as interludes between chapters (or scenes) further complicates the status of the dream. On page 8, even before the story properly begins, a full-page advertisement in the style of a 1930s American poster appears right next to the title page in English. Against a solid turquoise-blue background, a large red lettering reads “TOMATO ketchup.” At the center of the

page stands a hyper-realistic mouse, rendered in Dautremer's signature mixed-media style using gouache, watercolor and colored pencils with great attention to texture, down to every tiny hair of its fur. Despite its realistic appearance, the mouse stands on two legs in an anthropomorphic posture, holding a fork in its paw and wearing a small pink polka-dot apron (the polka-dot pattern being a recurring motif throughout the book as a visual marker of femininity, to be discussed in the following chapter on women in *Des souris et des hommes*). To its right sits an enormous, intensely red tomato, rendered with glossy highlights. Below them, a handwritten cursive line reads "At all grocers a wonderful relish" with a manually crossed-out "GLUTEN FREE" label underneath, which humorously evokes modern advertising concerns, it could be argued that this anachronistic detail is also part of the artist's desire to create a hybrid work, both in terms of the techniques and graphic styles used as well as the visual references, which here echo modern advertising trends (from 2020 rather than 1930) in a hybrid blending of eras. This advertisement directly references Lennie's wish for ketchup on his beans, a small luxury that he and George cannot afford, which triggers the novel's first major conflict when George vents his frustration about their difficult situation, joblessness, and poverty (Steinbeck, 13-18). The cozy, colorful image of the mouse in its apron styled like an ideal American housewife stands in stark contrast to the characters' reality. The ketchup, as an ordinary condiment, becomes a "small luxury" that reveals how the American Dream reached into every domain of life, including domestic comfort and everyday household convenience. By placing this advertisement before the narrative even begins, Dautremer confronts the reader with the distinctive visual aesthetic of 1930s commercial imagery, which will recur between chapters throughout the book, functioning as a form of "visual noise." In a time when the misery of the Great Depression was at its peak, capitalism manifested itself everywhere, starkly contrasting with the suffering of people like Steinbeck's protagonists.

The advertisements appearing between chapters in the rest of the book further this strategy. On page 143, a brightly colored advertisement for a pest control exterminator company appears as an interlude between the second and third chapters, placed immediately after the final scene of the second chapter, which deals with Candy's old dog that will later be put down. This visual interlude sends the unambiguous message that within this system, unproductive or useless members must be eliminated. The ad for the exterminator visually reinforces the throwaway logic that governs not only the animals but also marginalized people and any deemed useless workforce in the capitalist world of the ranch. On page 240, an ad for work overalls appears between chapters 3 and 4. Sold for \$1.49 (roughly Lennie's daily wage as

another illustration by Dautremer will show) the overalls are promoted with the slogans “Buy the Best Overalls GUARANTEED” and “\$1.49 for Work or Play.” This advertisement embodies the quintessentially capitalist idea that buying the right product will make the worker more efficient and productive. Yet this price alone represents nearly a full day’s wages for Lennie, underscoring just how even the ideal tools of labor to work better and hopefully gain more money remain out of reach.

These advertising breaks saturate the reader’s visual environment within the graphic novel, just as advertisements saturate capitalist society. They serve as a reminder that the characters are surrounded by promises that are structurally inaccessible to them. By inserting these advertising interludes between scenes of poverty, hard labor, and nostalgia, Dautremer visually conveys without altering Steinbeck’s original text that the American Dream is something to be contemplated, but in the end never attained, as there will always be one more thing to buy or attain pushed by the consumerist system. The advertisements in *Des souris et des hommes* serve as visual noise, much like the actual commercials that constantly surround people in a capitalist society. Thus, the “dream” appears as an image imposed from the outside, and what is desired does not come from the characters themselves but from a system that constantly dictates to them what their desires and life goals should be.

3.3. Labor, value, and the vulnerability of workers made visible

If the idea of the “safe haven” operates as a promise and advertising imagery as its visual reinforcement, the conditions of labor depicted in *Of Mice and Men* reveal the material reality beneath both. Benson and Loftis note that “Many of the Dust Bowlers were so desperate that they would work for as little as a dollar for a ten-hour day. If one person or even a group refused to accept low wages, there were always others who, out of necessity, would.” (Benson and Loftis, 204) This system ensured that labor remained abundant and undervalued, and that competition among workers perpetuated their precarity.

Dautremer makes this aspect visible on page 89 in the second chapter of the graphic novel, where a notebook listing workers and their wages is prominently displayed to the reader. Here, this page serves less to advance the plot than to reinforce the sense of authenticity and immersion for the reader through the physicality of the graphic novel. Narratively, at this point in the chapter, George and Lennie have just arrived at the ranch, and the boss is asking them

questions so he can sign them up in the work log and give them the job. "The boss stepped into the room with the short, quick steps of a fat-legged man. "I wrote Murray and Ready I wanted two men this morning. You got your work slips?" [...] He pulled his time book out of his pocket and opened it where a pencil was stuck between the leaves." (Steinbeck, 30-31). This boss scene passage corresponds to page 88 in the graphic novel, where we see a scene depicting the first encounter between Lennie and George and the boss, who questions them before jotting down their data in his notebook. Dautermer chose to depict him as smaller in stature than the two main protagonists. Yet, even so, the difference in their status is clear. The boss is short, but he is neatly dressed, wearing a tall black hat and black shoes with heels, while George and Lennie are in old, worn-out clothes. Despite their larger stature, they stand hunched over in front of the boss, heads bowed. Their body language betrays the vulnerability of their precarious position. They are, in fact, dependent on this man's decision regarding whether or not to let them work on his ranch. The boss, despite his small stature, is thus a dominant figure.

The following page 89 in the graphic novel is thus stylized to look like the page in the time book where the boss has just logged George and Lennie. With this immersive inclusion, Dautermer expands the brief scene into a full-page visual artifact. The time book page is meticulously designed to resemble a real archival document. The background mimics yellowed, slightly stained paper, there are ink blots, and all entries are handwritten with variations in script and ink intensity, suggesting they were made at different times. The table lines appear drawn by hand, likely with a ruler, and the red lines have the texture of red pencil. For the duration of this page, the graphic novel in the reader's hands transforms into the boss's own notebook. The reader is placed face-to-face with the page that the boss has just filled out, as if having stepped into the story and now holding the prop themselves.

It shows George Milton and Lennie Small entered as "Hand," with George earning \$2 and Lennie only \$1.60 for the same occupation. Lennie is the lowest-paid worker on the list. The notebook also reveals that Slim, another major character from the novel, was hired three months earlier at \$4 as a "Skinner". By showing George and Lennie with different wages for identical work, Dautermer indicates that the boss has from the start made a value judgment about Lennie, rating him as less worthy despite his physical strength.

This page serves several functions. First, it insists on the concreteness of the capitalist work world, presenting labor in its administrative details with wage figures, dates, and job classifications. The reader sees with their own eyes what has been assigned to George and Lennie. Second, it reinforces the effect of realism, exploiting the materiality of the graphic novel

to create the immersive illusion of suddenly holding one of the scene props. The time book page does not just serve as an illustration of the scene but is an actual object that exists within the story's diegesis. The ordered list of names and numbers suggests a system that is both structured and impersonal, emphasizing efficiency over individuality. The workers themselves are absent from the image, replaced by the numerical traces of their labor in a form of visual erasure that highlights how the human aspect of work disappears within systems of economic calculation.

Lennie occupies a particularly precarious position within this system. His cognitive differences make him valuable as a physical laborer, being “strong as a bull” as George describes him (Steinbeck, 31), but also unstable in the eyes of employers. As Marsden argues, “Lennie has been portrayed as an ideal worker for the industrial system: he personifies the sheer bulk and strength of labor power. Clearly, though, his actions illustrate that he is beyond the control of authority, and therefore a threat to that authority.” (Marsden, 296). This contradiction reveals a crucial aspect of capitalist system, namely the same strength that makes Lennie a valuable commodity also makes him dangerous when it cannot be controlled. The boss's suspicion of George's motives, asking “what stake you got in this guy?” (Steinbeck, 32) further emphasizes how the system views workers as isolated figures whose only legitimate relationship to one another must be purely based on personal economic gain. Any bond of care or loyalty becomes suspect as it has no place within this system. Through this single page, Dautremer thus visualizes the dehumanizing logic that structures the world of the ranch. The time book page records labor while enacting at the same time the reduction of persons to data, the quantification of human worth, and the systematic exclusion of those who do not fit the narrow demands of capitalist productivity.

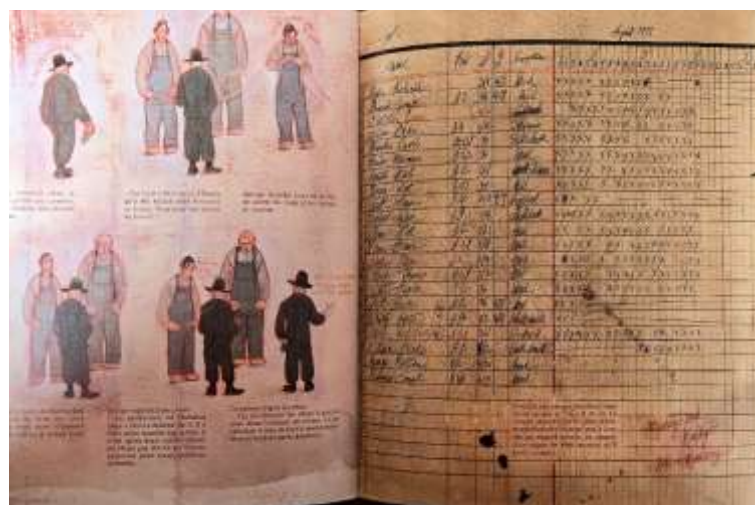


FIGURE 3.4 p.88-89 *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

3.4. The failure of the dream: witnessing the graphic collapse and violence

The collapse of George and Lennie's shared dream, echoing the idea of the general American Dream, constitutes one of the most powerful moments in both Steinbeck's novel and Dautremer's adaptation. To communicate this final destruction of the illusion of the dream, she proposes at the very end of the graphic novel, on the double-page spread on pages 408-409, a type of sequence that resembles classic comic strips, this time adopting the aesthetic of old American comics or cartoons. As it has been already established, Dautremer generally works in *Des souris et des hommes* with one large illustration per page and it could be argued that each page of the graphic novel functions as a single large panel, and the sequence of multiple narrative panels that would be arranged on a single page in a traditional comic book is here expanded into an object that offers rather a "large panel" per page. However, the artist sometimes represents sequences of multiple images when she wants to change the rhythm of the narration, often as a deceleration technique, when the characters are sitting and talking, for example, or to draw the reader's attention to small gestures and movements or full narrative sequences that she wishes to highlight, thereby visually prolonging the moment within the narrative.

The double-page spread proposed by Dautremer is stylized like that old comic from the 1930s. The panels have a classic layout, either square or rectangular. The coloring is executed in vivid, flat colors without gradation, but slightly yellowed by a filter that mimics the printing of American comics of the period, a printing that was affected by the very yellowed tint of highly absorbent paper, somewhat like newspaper. One thing that immediately strikes the eye is that this double-page spread gives a very damaged impression. The paper appears worn and very yellowed, full of stains everywhere, and more importantly, the double-page is crossed by a huge tear as if the page has been torn in several places and then repaired with tape. This stylized scene corresponds to the final chapter, where the men have gone in search of Lennie after finding Curley's wife's lifeless body, and where George, alone, finds Lennie near the riverside spot where he had told him to hide if things went wrong. Another striking visual element is the choice of colors. The majority of the chosen colors are "calm" colors related to a pastoral nature, mainly vibrant green, sky blue, yellow, and white. However, three blood-red panels break the palette of the double-page, as well as one entirely black panel. The following analysis will explain the role of this coloristic disruption from a narrative point of view.

On this retro-styled double-page, the first panel in the upper left corner functions like a title panel as found in old comics which says “George and Lennie” as if it were the title of the comic, of their adventures. However, just below, still in handwritten letters, is written: “George raised the gun and his hands shook, and he dropped his hand to the ground again.” This appears in Steinbeck’s original text on page 150 (Steinbeck, 150). This double-page thus refers to the part of the novel where George comes to find Lennie in the “safe” place he had designated for him, but with the intention of killing him, something the reader realizes at this exact moment upon the mention of the gun that George holds in his hand. This is why the first panel is red. As Scott McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics*: “[...] took great interest in the power of the line, shape, and color to suggest the inner state of the artist and provoke the five senses. [...] – And in doing so, unite the different artforms which appealed to those different senses. We call this idea *synaesthetics*” (McCloud, 123). And further: “[...] Not really a picture anymore, these lines are more a visual metaphor – a symbol. And symbols are the basis of language!” (McCloud, 128). Red is a symbol often associated with danger, or at least with something that immediately captures attention. The fact that it is used here as the background color for the caption immediately draws the reader’s attention to the fact that something is wrong in this scene, namely the gun, which George lowers but still holds in his hand. Dautremer’s stylization of this scene reinforces this feeling of danger and tension through this striking color choice.

George thus lowers his gun and, at Lennie’s request, recites with him once again the same chorus they have been repeating from the beginning, the narration of this perfect farm they will have one day when they are rich. After the red title panel, the next panel shows a beautiful blue sky with some clouds and birds. Then, the following panel executes a zoom-out, the perfect sky and birds are still visible in the distance, but the focus of the panel is a white cow with black spots eating perfectly green grass. In the next panel, there is a pink pig and some chickens, then a large horizontal panel with rabbits. Very importantly, the focus is on the rabbits, because that is what Lennie dreamed of most. The same panel is repeated just after, this time Lennie appears inside it, surrounded by rabbits, in reference to the passage where “Lennie shouted. 'For the rabbits,' George repeated. 'And I get to tend the rabbits.' 'An' you get to tend the rabbits.' Lennie giggled with happiness”. Lennie appears drawn in this panel surrounded by rabbits in the same retro cartoon style as the rest. His design is very simplified, he appears more round, with simple, rounded features, his eyes are two small black dots, his cheeks two red circles, and a curved line for a big smile. As Will Eisner explains in *Comics and Sequential Art*: “The cartoon is the result of exaggeration and simplification. Realism is adherence to most of

the detail. The elimination of some of the detail in an image makes it easier to digest and adds to humor. Retention of detail begets believability because it is closest to what the reader actually sees. The cartoon is a form of impressionism.” (Eisner, 151). Here, the cartoonification of this sequence of the dream, repeated for the umpteenth time, refers stylistically to the comics of the era that reflect a certain commercial aesthetic characteristic of this capitalist period, but also to a childish aesthetic that serves once again to emphasize the naivety of this dream. It is a dream like those in children’s stories.

This childish and idyllic aesthetic suddenly experiences a disruption at the moment when the text indicates that Lennie turns his head (toward George, who stands behind him with the gun). A completely black panel appears, and the illusion is broken for an instant. That is when George says “No, Lennie. Look down there across the river, like you can almost see the place.’ Lennie obeyed him.” (Steinbeck, 150) George wants that, in his final moments (which Lennie and the reader do not yet know are his final moments), Lennie visualizes happy things. After the black panel, the calm colors and pastoral representation of the farm dream return, but the reader has already been made aware of the danger thanks to the black panel, which warned not to turn back, not to break the illusion.

This illusion is disturbed a second time when Lennie says: “I thought you was mad at me, George.’ ‘No,’ said George. ‘No, Lennie. I ain’t mad.’” (Steinbeck, 151). At that point in the dialogue, still on that double-page stylized as the retro comic, there is an image of George from behind, on a red background. The red again symbolizes danger. In the following panel, George is depicted slightly turned toward the reader (or toward Lennie), he side-eyes the reader or Lennie, seems to have a small smile, but the background remains red, indicating that one must remain alert despite what is being affirmed. After that, the last two panels of the double-page become pastoral again, with the text: “No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now. That’s a thing I want ya to know.” (Steinbeck, 151). The silhouettes of George and Lennie are shown sitting together on a fence, looking straight ahead toward the dream they once shared. Except that at this point of the narrative, it has been well established that it is all an illusion and the dream is unattainable. The double-page has been torn because the dream is broken, destroyed, especially after what Lennie has just done. The small pieces of tape holding the torn fragments together are the equivalent of George telling the dream one last time to Lennie when everything is destroyed and nothing will ever be the same again. The pieces of tape are merely the illusion that the dream is still whole.



FIGURE 3.5 p.408-409, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

The following double-page (410-411) corresponds to the part of Steinbeck's text where

The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices. Lennie begged, 'Le's do it now. Le's get that place now.' 'Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta.' And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. (Steinbeck, 151).

In the novel, Steinbeck continues directly:

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. (Steinbeck, 151).

Everything happens very quickly, suddenly George shoots and Lennie is dead, and this sudden resolution is a shock for the reader.

Dautremer, in her visual staging, adopts a completely different approach from the original text still without ever altering it verbally. She chooses to visually decelerate the story at its climax just before George pulls the trigger. The pastoral scene of the dream from the previous page is finished. Now the reader is confronted with a double-page on a black background, directly facing George and Lennie. George is on the left page, Lennie on the right page. These are enormous portraits, enormous close-ups of their faces. Given the large size of

the *Des souris et des hommes* as a physical book measuring 24x20 centimeters, the faces of George and Lennie appear to the reader printed almost at life size. They are rendered in Dautremér's most detailed graphic style, almost realistic. This black background is as if on a theater stage, all the scenery had been removed, all the lights turned off, and the two actors (George and Lennie) isolated with just a spotlight on their faces, all attention focused on them. Will Eisner, in *Comics and Sequential Art*, writes how "Facial expressions affecting the narrative require close-up" (Eisner, 21). He adds that

The surface of the face is, as someone once put it, 'a window to the mind.' It is familiar terrain to most humans. Its role in communication is to register emotion. On this surface the combinations of the moveable elements are expected by the reader to reveal an emotion and act as an adverb to the posture or gesture of the body. Because of this relationship, the head (or face) is often used by artists to convey the entire message of bodily movement. (Eisner, 111).

The reader is confronted with George and Lennie face to face. George has his head lowered, eyes closed, with a sad expression. The position chosen by Dautremér shows George's pain in this scene, making it visually manifest so that the reader can be directly confronted with it. As Eisner further writes in *Graphic Storytelling*, empathy stands as one of the most fundamental human traits, and a storyteller can rely on it as a powerful channel for delivering a narrative (Eisner, 47). On the right page, the reader is confronted with Lennie's face looking with wide-open eyes directly into the reader's gaze. This is the last time the reader will see Lennie alive in the graphic novel (and will see Lennie's face at all). This image forces the reader to see Lennie, to acknowledge what is about to happen to him, which reinforces the dramatic intensity of the scene. However, the scene remains suspended as the text only says that George pulled the trigger, but the result is not yet shown visually. Dautremér uses here the particular ability of comics to rhythm narration. Eisner explains again in *Comics and Sequential Art* that the panel functions as a tool for controlling the reader's attention as there is no way to prevent someone from looking at the last panel before the first (Eisner, 40). Here, Dautremér imposes her rhythm and prolongs the instant by choosing exactly the information she wants to communicate on the pages of her book. Whereas on the same page in Steinbeck, Lennie repeated his dream and then died, in Dautremér the moment takes much longer.



FIGURE 3.6 p.410-411, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

On the following double-page (412-413), there is no text, but instead, yet again, a complete change of scenery. The reader is confronted with a superb idyllic picture of a ranch, hyper-realistic, with a red-painted farmhouse, extremely green grass, an ideally blue body of water, and a cloudless sky. But the scene is empty and still. There is not a single soul on this farm because it does not exist. It is a mirage, the representation of that naive dream of becoming landowners that will never come true. It might be the last scene that Lennie visualizes in his head and Dautremer chooses to make the reader also visualize this dream farm.

Consequently, the page that follows acts as a return to reality as the text indicates the detonation: “The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. George shivered and looked at the gun, and then he threw it from him, back up on the bank, near the pile of old ashes. The brush seemed filled with cries and with the sound of running feet.” (Steinbeck, 151). George thus kills Lennie, and with him the dream and the impossible hope of improving his life condition. This stylistic rupture is highly significant. Their shared big American Dream, once presented as a unifying vision and bonding device, is revealed to be incapable of withstanding realistic material pressures. As Samuel I. Bellman argues in *Control and Freedom in Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men'*, “The kind of self-improvement held up as an ideal in the story was possible neither through the buddyship of George and Lennie nor through George's going it alone” (Bellman, 26). Dautremer’s visual expansion makes this critique immediate and visceral as it ensures that the reader learns that the Dream has failed and additionally also makes them witness its disintegration, both narratively and visually.

Chapter 4: Of Mice and Women: gender, visibility, and the female gaze in Dautremer's Adaptation

Famous feminist critic Vivian Sobchack has once written in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* that :

“Embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an irreducible ensemble. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought.” (Sobchack, 4)

This concept of embodied presence serves as a fitting entry point into Rébecca Dautremer's visual treatment of women in *Des souris et des hommes*. While the previous chapter examined how Dautremer's adaptation exposes the mechanisms of capitalist ideology through visual saturation, advertising imagery, and the material representation of labor, this fourth chapter shifts the focus from class to gender. Steinbeck's original novel is an overwhelmingly male-centered text. The only woman who plays an active role in the narrative is Curley's wife, who remains unnamed. The other female figures, namely Lennie's Aunt Clara and the brothel keeper Old Susy, are mentioned but never appear on the page as active presences and the sex workers from the town's brothels are referred to only indirectly. By giving these women a visible form in her graphic novel with this idea of embodiment in mind that could also be paired with Mikkonen's definition on monstration mentioned earlier in the present dissertation, Dautremer transforms the narrative's gendered silences into sites of critical attention that the reader can actually see. This chapter argues that Dautremer's adaptation does not simply illustrate Steinbeck's patriarchal structures but it actively highlights, emphasizes, and interrogates them. Through the recurring polka-dot motif, the staging of the male gaze, the visualization of Curley's wife's dreams, and the inclusion of sex workers as visible embodied and monstrated subjects, the graphic novel produces a feminist rereading of *Of Mice and Men*. The analysis draws on Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and Eszter Szép's work on embodied comics reading. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that Dautremer's visual expansion gives women a place within a story that originally denied them one, complicating any simple reading of Steinbeck's text as merely misogynistic and instead revealing the intersecting systems of power that shape all the characters' lives.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. Section 4.1 examines the polka-dot motif repeated throughout Dautremer's whole piece as a visual signature of femininity, tracing its appearances from the book's endpapers to Curley's wife's dress and beyond, and showing how this pattern makes female presence impossible to ignore. Section 4.2 focuses on Curley's wife, analyzing how Dautremer moves her from a nameless projection of male fears to a visual heroine with her own backstory, dreams, and perspective in dialogue with the male gaze and its disruption. Section 4.3 turns to the other silenced female voices of the novel, Aunt Clara and the sex workers, and explores how Dautremer grants them visual embodiment and narrative space through flashbacks and portraits. Finally, section 4.4 addresses the tragedy of Curley's wife's death, examining how Dautremer's visual rendering of feminicide shifts to focus on the embodied suffering of the female protagonist, resisting the reduction of her character to a simple plot device.

4.1. The polka-dot motif as the symbol of female presence in *Des souris et des hommes*



FIGURE 4.1 Picture showing the endpapers with the polka-dot pattern, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

One of the most striking visual elements in Dautremer's adaptation is the recurring polka-dot pattern. It appears first on the endpapers of the book as a bright red pattern with white dots printed on the pages glued to the inside of the cover. The choice of red is particularly significant. As Scott McCloud explains about the importance of symbols in graphic narratives, color can function as a visual metaphor (McCloud, 123-128). In the context of *Of Mice and Men*, one could argue that red could evoke the danger that Curley's wife represents to the male characters. One reading of the original novel suggests that Lennie's approach toward a woman

led the two protagonists to their ruin. However, this is a completely male-centered vision that dismisses the female side of the story. Red can also symbolize passion, both positive and negative. Curley's wife had a passion for Hollywood and dreamed of becoming a star, hence her glamorous red attire at the ranch. Moreover, red is a flashy color that immediately catches the eye and is impossible to ignore, ensuring that every time Curley's wife appears in the graphic novel wearing her red polka-dot dress, she dominates the page and focuses the reader's attention. This visibility grants her a presence that she could not enjoy in the original novel, where she had only the title "Curley's wife" and a bad reputation that ultimately caused harm to herself and to George and Lennie.

The polka-dot motif resists reduction to a single interpretation. Throughout the visual adaptation, there are multiple scenes where the dots seem to detach from the dress and float into the surrounding space, affecting the male characters who come into contact with the woman. This applies not only to Curley's wife, but to all the other female characters who threaten the male protagonists' sense of security through their femininity. The opening flashback of the first chapter (on pages 10-11) introduces the polka-dot motif worn for the first time on a woman who is not Curley's wife. This sequence shows the incident that forced George and Lennie to flee Weed when Lennie touched a girl's dress, and she became frightened and accused him of assault. The girl's dress is rendered with that exact same red polka-dot pattern, and the motif seems to overwhelmingly fill the entire space of the double-page spread, creating a chaotic impression. On the following double-page, the reader is presented with a close-up of Lennie while the polka dots are still falling onto his head against a red background, as if the consequences of his actions continue to fall upon him.

Curley's wife first enters the scene on page 124. For this first appearance, Dautremer represents her standing in the doorway. Just before she was introduced to George and Lennie, Old Candy had told them about her saying "Well, I think Curley's married . . . a tart." (Steinbeck, 40) Yet the visual depiction that visually introduces Curley's wife to both the characters and the reader is very neutral; she is clearly does not appear the outrageous figure described earlier. The reader sees a blonde woman with relaxed facial features, standing slightly crooked in the doorway, wearing a dress that is indeed bright (red with white polka dots) but that reaches her calves, with flat red shoes. There is nothing scandalous about her appearance. Even the red of her dress, painted in watercolor on this illustration, has been diluted so as not to strike too forcefully. However, George and Lennie already have prejudice against her because of what Candy told them. They apply the male gaze and preconceived ideas to Curley's wife, which

affects how they perceive her. The male gaze, as theorized in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey entails that “Woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of the woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” (Mulvey, 7). Women are thus positioned as objects of the gaze, while men occupy the role of observers. Steinbeck’s descriptive language replicates this dynamic. The novel’s original text describes her through the men’s eyes: “full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up,” “fingernails were red,” “hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages” (Steinbeck, 44). On the following page of the graphic novel (125), Dautremer presents an oversized illustration of Curley’s wife’s lips, slightly parted and painted deep red. On page 126, corresponding to the text where “Lennie’s eyes moved down over her body,” Dautremer shows Curley’s wife from behind, in a much more detailed style. The attention to detail is particularly focused on her dress, painted in a much more intense red than in the previous illustration, with shading and highlighting at her arched waist, her hips, and her backsides, which appear molded by the dress. Dautremer renders the male gaze once again, showing directly to the reader what Lennie also sees. After Curley’s wife leaves the scene, page 128 records George’s statement saying “Jesus, what a tramp. So that’s what Curley picks for a wife” (Steinbeck, 45). Yet on Dautremer’s page, facing this statement, a tiny George and Lennie are shown falling and losing themselves in the folds of the red polka-dot dress. They may say what they want, perhaps to preserve their own ego in this scene as it would be scandalous for them to find attractive a woman they have been told is a tart by another man, yet the reader understands immediately that Curley’s wife has affected them.

The polka-dot pattern thus operates as what Eszter Szép, drawing on Sobchack, describes in *Comics and the Body*:

Comics can thus be thought of as a mediated interaction between three bodies: those of the drawer, reader, and object (the actual comic). This conception, again, resembles the way Sobchack speaks about experiencing film. Because of the involvement of the body, both drawing and reading comics can be regarded as a performance: Meaning is born in situated and embodied interactions. (Szép, 5)

By making femininity visible with this insistent and immediately recognizable pattern, Dautremer ensures that the reader cannot overlook the gendered dynamics that Steinbeck’s text motivates but often leaves implicit.

4.2. Curley's wife: from nameless male projection to visual heroine

In Steinbeck's novel, Curley's wife is defined almost entirely by the absence of a name and by the perceptions of the male characters. As Mark Spilka observes in *Of George and Lennie and Curley's Wife: Sweet Violence in Steinbeck's Eden*, "He has himself given this woman no other name but "Curley's wife," as if she had no personal identity for him. He has presented her, in the novel, as vain, provocative, vicious (she threatens Crooks with a lynching, for instance, when he tries to defy her), and only incidentally lonely." (Spilka, 174). While Spilka's critique may be too harsh since Steinbeck does reveal her loneliness and dreams in the novel, her perspective indeed remains secondary to the men's. Dautremer's adaptation addresses this imbalance through visual strategies that offer Curley's wife a new presence, moving her from the margins of the narrative toward a more visible and complex position.

It could be well argued that the original narrative of *Of Mice and Men* is completely shaped by the male gaze when it comes to the depiction of women. The concept of the "male gaze" that shapes the depiction female characters in visual narratives is developed by Laura Mulvey, who writes in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that "Woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of the woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (Mulvey, 7). Indeed, the way the original text describes Curley's wife to the reader is almost always through the male character's perceptions and opinions on her. From her first mention in the narrative, the men's discourse frames Curley's wife as a threat. In the graphic novel, on page 113, Candy warns George that Curley's wife "got the eye" and concludes that Curley has married "a tart" (Steinbeck, 40). Dautremer's illustration shows Candy on this page looking pensive, while in the background the red polka-dot motif reappears, along with small drawings of Curley's wife's face (caricatured with big red lips), her made-up eye, and her cleavage. When George responds, "He ain't the first. There's plenty done that" (Steinbeck, 40) to the suggestion that Curley married a tart, Dautremer fills the page with a series of framed photographs showing various couples and hence all the other hypothetical men who have "married a tart." This addition is striking as all those suggested women, simply mentioned in Steinbeck's text as all the other "tarts", are given faces and appearances. They may not even belong to the story of *Of Mice and Men*, yet Dautremer grants them visual embodiment and thus an existence within the graphic novel's diegesis in a process linked to Mikkonen's monstration. However, when Curley's wife first appears on page 124, Dautremer depicts her in a rather unremarkable way, far from all the

outrageous introduction she was given earlier. The text retains Steinbeck's dialogue "Wait'll you see Curley's wife" and "I seen her give Slim the eye" but the image offers an alternative perspective on the characterization of her character. On one hand, the reader sees what the men describe, namely Curley's wife standing there in front of them in her red polka-dot dress and made-up face, yet the visual framing invites to question if she is truly provocative, or if this is mostly the men from the ranch projecting their own fears onto her.

This projection of the male character's fears onto the woman whom they accuse of seducing them is all the more reinforced in the scene in Chapter 4 when Curley's wife enters the barn where Lennie, Candy, and Crooks have gathered and are talking while the other men have gone into town. In the original text, she enters the men's space asking "Any you boys seen Curley?" and when the three characters turn to her to acknowledge her presence, the rest of the narrative describes Curley's wife stating that

Her face was heavily made up. Her lips were slightly parted. She breathed strongly, as though she had been running. "Curley ain't been here," Candy said sourly. She stood still in the doorway, smiling a little at them, rubbing the nails of one hand with the thumb and forefinger of the other. And her eyes traveled from one face to another. "They left all the weak ones here," she said finally. "Think I don't know where they all went? Even Curley. I know where they all went." Lennie watched her, fascinated; but Candy and Crooks were scowling down away from her eyes. Candy said, "Then if you know, why you want to ast us where Curley is at?" She regarded them amusedly. "Funny thing," she said. "If I catch any one man, and he's alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an' you won't talk. Jus' nothing but mad" She dropped her fingers and put her hands on her hips. "You're all scared of each other, that what. Ever' one of you's scared the rest is goin' to get something on you." » (Steinbeck, 109-100)

Here, in the graphic adaptation, Curley's wife enters the scene on pages 292-293 to ask Lennie, Crooks, and Candy the question and deliver her lines. Dautremere depicts the woman on the left-hand page as if she were poking her head through the doorway of Crooks's room. She is shown from the side, her profile taking up almost the entire page, allowing the reader to clearly observe the facial expression and nonverbal cues on her face. However, contrary to what Steinbeck's original text suggests, Curley's wife is depicted here as genuinely concerned. Her face presents a worried expression, she looks at the three men with a questioning gaze, and the reader can even see a small tear in the corner of her eye. Whereas Steinbeck's text gives only the male perspective of the scene, that is the three men who see Curley's wife arrive when she is not supposed to be there and who immediately judge her to be overly made up, breathless, smiling, and playing with her fingernails (perhaps even playing with these three men by showing up here), Dautremere presents the other perspective, that of the woman, by depicting her as clearly anxious in this scene. Because there is nothing to allow the reader to confidently assert that she

was not actually anxious in this scene, the reception of it is influenced by the perspective imposed by the men in Steinbeck's text, whereas here Dautremer allows the reader to form their own opinion by offering an alternative reading through her visual reinterpretation. I would argue that this scene of the graphic novel presents one of the very first instances of female-led narration despite the constraints of Steinbeck's original text, which cannot be altered, it is in fact Curley's wife's anxious expression that narrates this sequence of the graphic novel and offers a new interpretation of the text, introducing a female perspective to a part of the narrative that formerly lacked one. This female perspective is all the more striking when contrasted with the reactions of the male characters depicted on the double-page spread. On the page opposite to the one depicting Curley's wife's profile, also shown in profile and thus facing her when viewed as a whole, are the faces of the three male characters, Lennie, Crooks, and Candy. They all appear with furrowed brows, clearly upset to see her entering their space. There is again this visual play with red pattern with white polka dots as it seems to detach itself from the woman in this scene and "attack" them, as each of these three men is depicted with a cloud of these small polka dots in front of his face, seemingly blurring their vision and troubling them. Dautremer presents here the male perspective of these men who perceive Curley's wife's femininity in a place where she is not supposed to be as a threat. The woman isn't supposed to be there with them, and if anyone (Curley) catches her with them, even if they haven't done anything at all, the situation could backfire on them.

The female agency is further emphasized in the continuation of this scene across the double-page spread on pages 228-229 of the graphic novel, when Curley's wife, seeing the men's disdain for her, decides to talk back and show them that she will not let herself be intimidated or mocked by them.

"Awright," she said contemptuously. "Awright, cover 'im up if ya wanta. Whatta I care? You bindle bums think you're so damn good. Whatta ya think I am, a kid? I tell ya I could of went with shows. Not jus' one, neither. An' a guy tol' me he could put me in pitchers. . . ." She was breathless with indignation. "Sat'iday night. Ever'body out doin' som'pin'. Ever'body! An' what am I doin'? Standin' here talkin' to a bunch of bindle stiffs - a nigger an' a dum dum and a lousy of sheep-n' Orin' it because they ain't nobody else." » (Steinbeck, 111-112).

Accompanying this passage, the reader is presented with an illustration on a yellow background where Curley's wife is depicted at the top of the left-hand page, standing in a theatrical pose, slender and very angular. She is instantly recognizable thanks to her red polka-dot dress, which stands out immediately against the yellow background. On the opposite page, the three men are shown looking at her, grouped together, smaller in size, and above them, in stylized film-poster-

style typography, the handwritten text reads “Talkin’ to a bench of BINDLE STIFFS.” This illustration has a very theatrical quality and stylistically resembles old Art Deco-style movie and theater posters in its choice of colors and the style in which the characters and handwritten text were drawn, angular yet organic, dynamic, and full of contrasts. This could echo the inner world of Curley’s wife, who, as she herself will later say in the book, has always wanted to be a Hollywood star.

Regarding her dream of being a star, this is possibly the only instance in the original text where Steinbeck lets Curley’s wife reveal something about herself that is not directly related to her husband. In the graphic novel adaptation, Dautremer takes all this female agency and expands it to the fullest. The female protagonist’s girlish dreams and inner world are externalized and visually brought to life on the page.

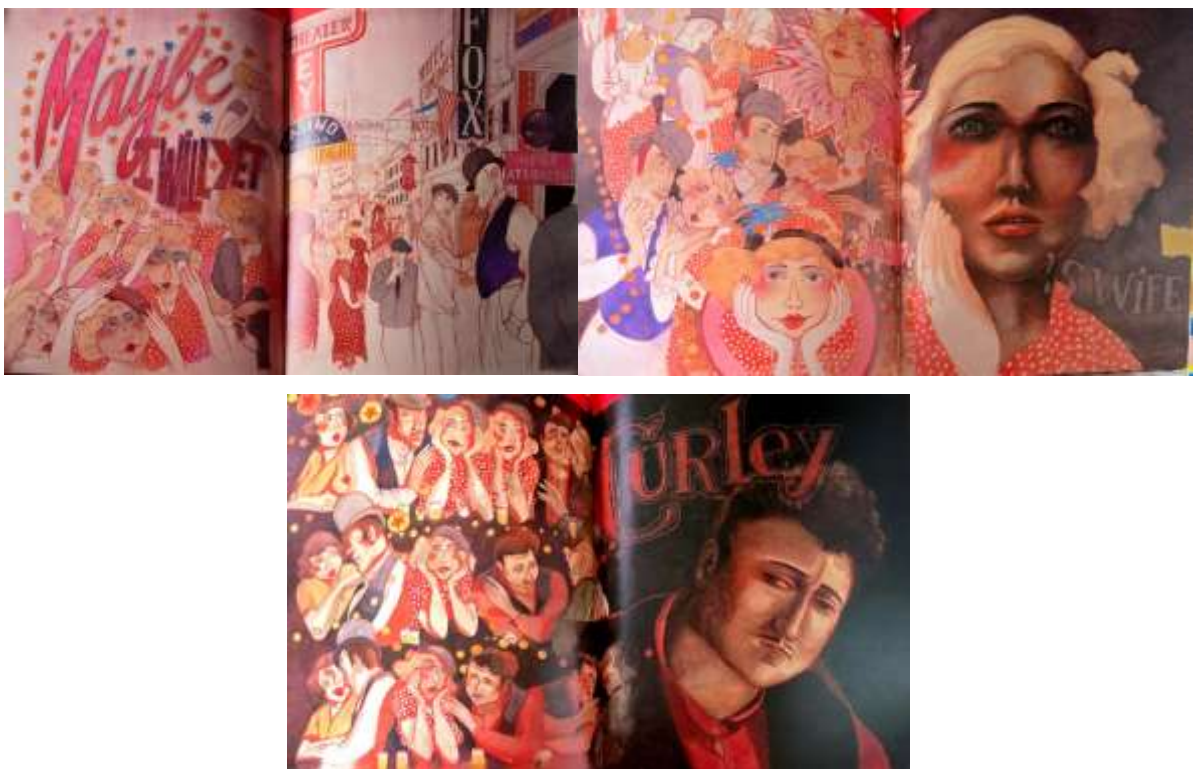


FIGURE 4.2 p.318-323, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

An entire extended flashback sequence (pages 318-323) introducing the fifth chapter of the story is dedicated to Curley’s wife’s life before the ranch. The young woman, who is not yet “Curley’s wife”, is shown preparing herself on page 318: putting on makeup, slipping into her red polka-dot dress, adding a matching little beret, putting on her shoes, and then, on page 319, heading into town. The town is depicted as full of color, advertisement signs, and new people. It is not New York City, one of the signs clearly says Salinas, but it is depicted just as vibrant

and busy with people. Posters read “Casino Cinema Tonight” or “Shall We Dance”, everything that evokes the glamorous world the heroine dreams of. The art style used for this sequence is slightly different from what Dautremer has done so far, the style is slightly more pastel and whimsical, evoking the Art Deco posters of the 1930s and the cabaret posters of Jules Chéret, and Curley’s wife is drawn with small cat-like eyes, freckles, a little heart-shaped mouth, looking curious, young, and full of dreams. Handwritten text reads “Maybe I will yet,” indicating her inner voice and her hope of becoming a movie star. The reader is inside the young woman’s interiority, Dautremer lets the reader glimpse into her way of seeing the world and her own dreams. On the following double-page, a detailed, almost realistic portrait of her stares deeply and directly at the reader on the right-hand page, forcing them to do the same. As with other characters, Dautremer writes the name of the depicted character in large letters. But Steinbeck gave her no first name, and Dautremer does not alter the original text. She writes “Curley” very small and “S WIFE” very large. The intention is clearly to do justice to the character and to show that, despite what the original text says about her, this young woman is a person in her own right, someone who exists by herself, who had her own dream. She is not merely an extension of Curley, she is first and foremost a person in her own right.

The left page shows her entering the glamorous world with theater signs, dancing, a pink limousine, and stars all around, and at the bottom of the page, a drawing of her holding her own face, with star symbols drawn in her blue eyes, presenting a wonderstruck expression. At the top, she appears in a peacock-feather collar and tiara with the word “HOLLYWOOD.” The aesthetic on this double-page spread recalls again the posters of Jules Chéret⁶, whose recurring female figure, the “Chérette,” was a blonde woman dressed in beautiful dresses, resembling Curley’s wife. However, on page 322, the dream begins to falter. She is shown sitting in a bar, uncomfortable, the man who danced with her abandoning her for another woman. Everyone is chatting among themselves, and she looks uncomfortable. Then Curley approaches her. The reader recognizes him immediately, especially since on the right page (323) Dautremer presents Curley’s detailed introductory portrait with his first name written large. Curley appears against a completely black background, not looking at the reader but rather to the side, slightly hunched, his expression somber. His grim expression foreshadows what the reader already knows, namely that the dream has come to an end for the young woman who, by marrying him, will end up trapped with a handful of poor men on a ranch.

⁶ Jules Chéret (1836-1932). madparis.fr/jules-cheret-1836-1932-1913.

The depictions of the Hollywood dream placing Curley's wife in the spotlight of the graphic novel narrative continue on page 338, when Curley's wife joins Lennie alone in the barn in the penultimate chapter. All the men have gone to town while he stayed behind, having accidentally killed the puppy by being too rough while playing with it. The text on this page corresponds to the passage where she says "Maybe I will yet," and then her words tumble out in a passion of communication, explaining how she could have gone with a show but her mother would not let her because she was only fifteen (Steinbeck, 124-125). She is about to tell Lennie who she was before being trapped in the ranch, constantly looking for her husband. Dautremer's illustration on this page again resembles retro film or theater posters. Curley's wife's figure is at the center, with her red dress, her little red cheeks, surrounded by arabesques and motifs recalling the posters of early cinema. The handwritten typography around her reads "AMERICA'S FAVORITE GIRLFRIEND TO THRILL YOUR HEART," "MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE EVER PRODUCED," and above all, "THE UNFORGETTABLE STORY OF CURLEY'S WIFE." showing that now it is her turn to take over the storytelling. The color palette is pastel and warm-toned, recalling Technicolor movie posters. Compared to the flashback sequence showing Curley's wife's backstory before she met Curley, the aesthetic and graphic style here is maintained very similarly, but in a slightly less polished, perhaps more naive version, possibly to emphasize the childlike side of her dream.

Following on pages 340-341, Curley's wife tells her dream to Lennie. The text corresponds to the passage where she recounts meeting a guy who was in pictures, who said he would put her in the movies because she was a natural, but she never got the letter, so she married Curley (Steinbeck, 124-126). The logic here is similar to the double pages illustrating George and Lennie's dream of owning their own farm one day. The double-page for Curley's wife personal narrative is completely filled too: drawings everywhere, arabesques, small stars, starry outfits, a rather childlike drawing of a grand hotel, a cinema, tall buildings with one large building reading "RADIO," a very sketchy self-portrait of Curley's wife lying on her side with her hand on her hip and the other supporting her head, wearing a glamorous dress, large flower-shaped sunglasses, and peacock feathers around her head, and another small portrait of Curley's wife all smiles, with big blue eyes, red cheeks, and a big smiling red mouth. The texture of colored pencils is visible in these illustrations, giving a diary-like, adolescent feel, mimicking the style that a teenager would employ when drawing her dream life. One could also think of the stylistical resemblance of the double-page spread to outsider art (Art Brut), which was art made by marginalized people who never received an artistic education. This double-page

strongly resembles the illustrations of Aloïse Corbaz⁷ who, as Bertrand Raison writes in *Mesure de La D mesure*, was an artist who loved the world of opera, glamour, romantic daydreams, and high society (Raison, 193) and who drew in a very similar style, with female heroines often blonde with enormous blue eyes, just like Curley's wife. Thus, without changing a single word of Steinbeck's text but solely through her illustrations, Dautremer brings to the forefront the dreams and aspirations of the only active female character in the original novel that the original narrative either erases or downplays by giving her a place within the visual narrative space of the graphic novel, where her character is celebrated and seen in her entirety. The reader sees what she sees, experiences her hope, and thus understands her tragedy more deeply.



FIGURE 4.3 p.340-341, *Des souris et des hommes*   2020 R becca Dautremer

4.3. Visualizing the silenced female voices through the graphic novel adaptation

One of Dautremer's most significant interventions in terms of female narration in the graphic novel is the role it gives to Curley's wife and the new perspective it offers her, making her a protagonist and narrator of her own story while in Steinbeck's novel her dream of becoming an actress was only revealed in a single monologue. The original novel mentions a few other women who, unlike Curley's wife, do not appear in the novel's main narrative but are only mentioned in dialogue. Among them are Aunt Clara, who raised Lennie, and the women working in the town's brothels. Since they are never introduced in person in the text but only

⁷ Alo se – Site Officiel De L'Association "Alo se Corbaz." xn--alose-eta.ch.

indirectly in conversations between the protagonists, their fragmented involvement is pushed even further to the margins of the novel's narrative. Nevertheless, once again taking advantage of the graphic novel's ability to create parallel narratives simply by depicting something on paper, Dautremer expands these fragments into full visual sequences.

Aunt Clara appears for the first time in a flashback opening Chapter 3 (pages 144-145). She is shown on her deathbed, with George and Lennie mourning beside her. George is depicted holding his hat in a gesture of respect while looking toward Lennie with concern. Lennie, on the other side of Aunt Clara's body, seen from half-profile to the reader, is depicted completely hunched over, head bowed, eyes closed, looking very sad and upset. On the right-hand page, there is a close-up of Aunt Clara's frozen face, shown in great detail. She is dressed in traditional, austere attire, wearing what appears to be a dark blue dress and an off-white crocheted lace collar. Her lifeless face conveys the image of an elderly woman with set features yet without any signs of tension in her expression. She is imposing, and the image suggests she must have been highly respected, though in death she also appears very peaceful. Given Lennie's deeply upset expression and George's respect for her, she must have been a very strong figure in her lifetime. A little further on in the chapter, on page 158, a vintage-style photograph shows Aunt Clara younger, with a small Lennie nestled against her. His hand rests on her in a hug, his face relaxed. This image communicates that Lennie was deeply attached to her and that she was a good guardian. Aunt Clara is one of the few women who has a name in the novel, one hypothesis being that she is an older woman, a figure of authority, and not an object of sexual desire to the male protagonists.

On the other side of the spectrum of silenced women Old Susy, the manager of the brothel in the town where the novel's protagonists are headed, and the women working for her receive even more pages of extensive treatment in the graphic novel adaptation. Pages 200-201 show a double-page spread comparing the brothels of Old Susy and Clara. Both women are depicted as businesswomen, confident, wearing expensive clothes, their expressions serious. Neither is sexualized. Pages 242-247 form a six-page flashback serving as the sequence introducing Chapter 4, entirely dedicated to Old Susy and her workers. The exterior of "The Crowing Cock Club" is shown, then Old Susy greeting customers. The sex workers are drawn with care with different hair colors, different body types, and different expressions. On pages 244-245, a portrait of Old Susy challenges the reader's gaze directly, her name written in large letters. Beside her, the sex workers also look directly at the reader, not necessarily as objects of desire but each as individuals that Steinbeck's novel did not even mention. On pages 246-247,

they are shown with clients, working. Where Steinbeck only mentions that the men go to the brothel, Dautremer makes the episode visible. As Eszter Szép writes, drawing is a kind of thinking, an embodied way of understanding the world and others (Szép, 185), and thus by giving these women faces and postures through explicit monstration, Dautremer insists on their existence.

4.4. Tragedy made visible: death of the Primadonna

The death of Curley's wife constitutes one of the most pivotal and disturbing moments in both Steinbeck's novel and Dautremer's adaptation. In the original text, the scene is narrated from Lennie's perspective, focusing on his panic and his fear of George's anger. Curley's wife's terror and her struggles during her final moments are described only indirectly, filtered through Lennie's confused perception as he just wanted to pet her hair in a moment of fragile closeness. As Mark Spilka argues, Steinbeck presents Curley's wife as a "rat trap", meaning a narrative device whose death serves primarily to trigger the tragic conclusion for George and Lennie (Spilka, 173). Through this reading, her suffering becomes secondary and almost incidental compared to the larger arc of the main male protagonists.

Rebecca Dautremer's graphic adaptation radically challenges and resists this reduction. On the double-page spread 348-349 in the graphic novel, corresponding to the passage in which Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife (128-129 in Steinbeck's text), Dautremer shifts the focus away from Lennie's perspective to propose instead the embodied experience of the female character, a perspective that was clearly missing in the original novel. The sequence on the double-page is read from left to right like a regular comic strip, and it visualises the escalation from calm to panic and from intimacy to terror of the scene.

In the first segment of the double page, both characters are depicted with peaceful expressions. Lennie's hand rests calmly on Curley's wife's head, and her own hand is relaxed, almost as if she is guiding his touch. The faces are rounded, soft, and the lines are gentle and a light watercolor wash is used for the coloring. This initial representation suggests trust and a quiet moment of connection, probably already hinting also at its fragility. However, the second segment of this sequence shows a sudden shift as Curley's wife's eyes widen, her face becomes paler, and her mouth opens to protest. Lennie's expression, in contrast, remains relatively unchanged only with the expression of his eyes appearing a little surprised, but his hand on Curley's wife's head does not release her hair. The asymmetry of power becomes visible in the

very lines of the drawing as Curley's wife's features sharpen with fear while Lennie's remain static and oblivious to her sudden manifestation of fear. As the sequence progresses, the visual language becomes increasingly chaotic. The third part of this narrative sequence presents Curley's wife's face distorted in a scream of genuine terror. Her mouth is stretched wide, her eyes are enormous, and the thick drawing lines around her face are rough and agitated, with the colors suddenly brighter and more intense. Upon closer inspection of the quality of the lines, it can be assumed that Dautremer pressed very hard on the paper as she drew them, using her own physical force to illustrate the sudden physical violence that Lennie begins to unleash in that moment. Lennie's hands begin to swell, becoming oversized and colored in intense red, a color that throughout the graphic novel has signalled passion and danger, still firmly gripping Curley's wife's head as she struggles. On the last sequence his right hand wags a finger as if to say "no, no," while his left hand completely covers her face. Only her wide, terrified eyes remain visible as her mouth is silenced by Lennie's enormous hand completely extinguishing her voice. Her small hands, with their red pointy nails, are rendered in a very light rough sketch as powerless claws, unable to defend themselves against Lennie's overwhelming physical strength which appears reinforced visually with very bold vibrant lines. Her blonde hair stands on end, clearly indicating extreme fear and the overall chaos of the scene. The polka dots from her dress scatter again across the page, breaking free from the fabric and dispersing like droplets of blood or fragments of her shattered identity.

This double-page spread is crucial as it highlights a completely different aspect of this scene. Obviously, the scene was already horrifying in Steinbeck's text as Lennie was just spending time with Curley's wife, wanting to give her the affection she seemed to consent to at first, but just as with the little mice or the puppy Lennie had been too rough with, here his strength failed him as well. While this is tragic for Lennie, it is in fact even more tragic for Curley's wife as the scene results in her instant death. Where Steinbeck's text emphasises Lennie's panic: "Lennie was in a panic. His face was contorted" (Steinbeck, 128), Dautremer shifts the emphasis to Curley's wife's suffering. The reader of Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* is not invited to sympathise with Lennie's confusion in that moment of the story, but rather to witness the femicide as it unfolds from the victim's perspective. As Will Eisner writes in *Graphic Storytelling*, empathy is one of the most fundamental human traits, and the ability to feel another's pain enables the storyteller to evoke an emotional contact with the reader (Eisner, 47). Here, that emotional contact is visceral. The reader is forced to see Curley's wife not as a plot device but as a living, breathing person whose terror is rendered in every frantic

line and every scattered polka dot. The sequence illustrates what Eszter Szép, drawing on Vivian Sobchack, calls an “affective transaction”, meaning an embodied interaction between the reader, the artist, and the comic object that allows the reader to experience the vulnerability of the Other (Szép, 8). By focusing on Curley’s wife’s escalating fear, Dautremer explicitly positions the reader as a witness to an act of gendered violence instead of a simple witness of a surprising scene, as it is more in Steinbeck’s text. The double-page spread directly narrates a murder and makes sure the reader really feels the horror of that death.

Furthermore, Dautremer’s choice to highlight the physical struggle with the hands, the gradually distorted faces and the scatter of polka dots from Curley’s wife’s dress, aligns with Hillary Chute’s concept of the “corporeality” of comics in her book *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Chute argues that drawing makes the body both substance and meaning, and that the graphic narrative can give form to otherwise invisible experiences (Chute, 27). In this scene, Curley’s wife’s body instead of appearing as a passive object is visually portrayed as a site of active resistance, even if her efforts to fight back and survive end up failing. Her hands push against Lennie’s giant red fingers, her head jerks sideways, her eyes scream, and Dautremer refuses to let her become a mere plot point, she is the Primadonna of her scene, the heroine (albeit tragic) of her own death.



FIGURE 4.4 p.348-349, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

Chapter 5: Of Misfit and Men: drawing Lennie's neurodivergent body

While the previous chapter examined how Dautremer's adaptation grants visibility and agency to female characters marginalized in Steinbeck's text, this fifth chapter shifts the focus to another figure of otherness, namely one of the two main protagonists Lennie Small. Steinbeck never explicitly labels Lennie as disabled or neurodivergent, yet the novel consistently presents his body and behavior as "out of place" within the social and spatial environment of the ranch. His physical strength contrasts with his mental vulnerability, his gentleness with his capacity for unintended violence. In her visual adaptation, Dautremer reimagines this portrayal, using Lennie's body as a central narrative device to explore what remains unsaid about his character. This chapter argues that Dautremer uses Lennie's body as a site of narrative tension, visually encoding both vulnerability and the potential for violence, and that her visual strategies invite a reading of Lennie as potentially neurodivergent. Rather than simply illustrating Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie as a tragic figure, Dautremer's adaptation complicates it by giving him an internal visual language and emphasizing his sensory experience. The analysis demonstrates that the graphic novel reframes Lennie's duality not as a contradiction, but as the visible expression of a misread and misfitting body.

The chapter proceeds in five sections. Section 5.1 examines how Steinbeck's original text constructs Lennie as an "other" through animalistic metaphors and the perceptions of other characters, and how Dautremer's adaptation begins to address this narrative silence. Section 5.2 analyzes the visual strategies of infantilization, showing how other characters (and, by extension, the reader) are led to frame Lennie's gentleness as harmless incompetence paired with the uncanny discomfort that his childlike appearance and attitude provoke. Section 5.3 focuses on sensory experience and the importance of touch in Lennie's world, exploring how Dautremer highlights his hands (and other characters' hands) and general tactile interactions to communicate his embodied sensorial perspective of the world and special needs. Section 5.4 turns to animalization and the fear of misfit, examining how Lennie's unpredictable violence leads others to perceive him as a dangerous creature, yet also how this animal imagery can emphasize his vulnerability. Finally, section 5.5 analyzes Dautremer's visualization of Lennie's inner world through childlike, chaotic sketches, drawing connections to outsider art (Art Brut) where I will argue that this visual language invites the reader to experience Lennie's cognitive

overload rather than simply read about it, as was the case in Steinbeck's last chapter of the novel.

5.1. Lennie in Steinbeck's original novel: *Of Mice and Otherness*

Lennie Small's first appearance in *Of Mice and Men* already marks him as profoundly "other." In the opening pages, Steinbeck introduces George and Lennie as a pair, while also immediately establishing a striking contrast between them. George is described with precision as a "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined." (Steinbeck, 4). These adjectives "sharp", "defined" and "restless" already inform the reader that he seems to be a man who presents himself in a proper active way, while also hinting at his implied mental acuity, alertness, and the ability he seems to have to navigate the world with intention.

In contrast to this first verbal character introduction, Lennie is introduced as George's "opposite", meaning "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws." (Steinbeck, 5). The imagery is intentionally weighty and animalistic. Where George is small and structured, Lennie is large and formless, a figure of uncoordinated bulk, and this stark visual contrast immediately signals Lennie as a deviation from the "norm" that was established through the description of George just before. The mental image of him walking "like a bear" evokes both slowness (implying the body and mind) and potential threat. Moreover, Lennie's arms "did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely," a detail that seems minor, which subtly reinforces his bodily difference. For a neurotypical observer, the natural swinging of the arms while walking is an unconscious behavior, and its absence is striking and disconcerting. Even before Lennie speaks, the reader is positioned by Steinbeck's description to perceive him as a bodily anomaly, a presence that disrupts the social and narrative order. His body is presented as out of place, out of rhythm with his partner, and, by extension, with the world around him. This early moment establishes the way in which Lennie will be consistently perceived throughout the original 1937 novel, not through his own interior perspective, but always through the lens of judgments and reactions of others, especially George, who serves as both his caretaker and narrative filter.

This opening of Steinbeck's first chapter, after introducing the two protagonists with their physical descriptions, goes on to describe how the two characters, who had been walking

just moments before, stop in a clearing to rest, where the taller of the two (Lennie) throws himself face-down to drink from the surface of the pool of water by which they have decided to stop. When Lennie eagerly drinks from that pool of water, George scolds him, saying, “You’d drink out of a gutter if you was thirsty” (Steinbeck, 6). The tone of this remark is both protective and patronizing and it gives the reader further indication of the relationship between the two men, positioning George already as the more dominant figure and Lennie as a childlike and dependent figure. To this mocking remark, Lennie’s simple reaction “He smiled happily,” (6) reinforces his emotional naivety and suggests his gentle and unquestioning nature. A few lines later, Steinbeck strengthens this impression through another animal metaphor describing how “Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water.” (6). The choice of the word “paw” instead of “hand” emphasizes a dehumanizing view of Lennie, aligning him more closely with instinct-driven creatures than with rational human beings.

The visual adaptation of this scene from Dautremer’s adaptation offers a unique perspective that reveals George’s point of view to his partner’s behavior, which he perceives as immature and foolish. This passage appears on page 26 of the graphic novel, where Dautremer creates a surreal caricatural image of Lennie as grotesquely disproportionate, kneeling over a gutter in an urban street. This scene contrasts with Steinbeck’s original natural setting, as in that precise moment of the narrative, George and Lennie are in fact resting in the Salinas countryside. Above this distorted depiction of Lennie, George’s line reads “He would drink out of a gutter if he was thirsty” in large, theatrical text, not as dialogue spoken to Lennie, but as an aside exclamation directed at an imaginary audience, which appears as if he seeking the approval of others as if to say, “Look how silly he is”. This grotesque graphic rendition of Lennie in an art style that could be compared to that of either theater or circus posters thus serves to illustrate George’s thoughts about his friend in that particular moment of the narrative, emphasizing how ridiculous it was the way he rushed to the water source to drink after they had been walking. This is clearly not a scene that actually takes place within the narrative, but rather a vignette illustrating George’s opinion of Lennie at that moment. Furthermore, this illustration is set on an imaginary street that bears no resemblance to the wild setting in which the two characters actually find themselves, where imaginary passersby also seem very surprised by Lennie’s behavior. Their anxious and concerned gazes are directed at Lennie, who, in contrast, seems to be staring into space, as if he were thinking of nothing. These fictional passersby are, moreover, dressed smartly, as wealthy city dwellers would be in George’s imagination, suggesting that the opinion of others is important to George. Their gazes convey judgment,

reinforcing Lennie's status as an outsider and a spectacle. His own expression, blank and detached, reveals a character completely unaware of this reaction, while his monstrous proportions emphasize his strangeness and the fact that something is wrong with his behavior, according to George's perspective, which he believes is the opinion others (the potential bystanders) would have as well.

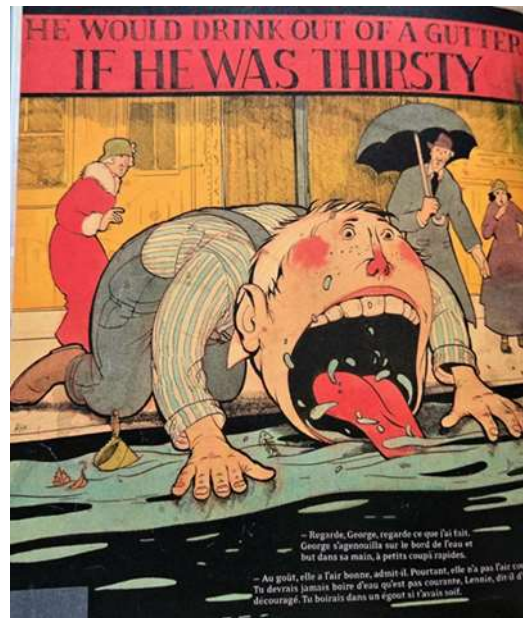


FIGURE 5.1 p.26, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

However, as highlighted above, this visual staging performed by Dautremer serves to emphasize the fact that Lennie is subject to the judgments of others, even George's, thus influencing how his character is interpreted and ultimately how this affects his identity as well. This portrayal is explicitly mocking here, completely distinct from the usual style in which Dautremer depicts Lennie in more neutral scenes, as it serves to make visible the reaction to his otherness within George's interiority. This caricature of Lennie, though, appears only in this scene as in the pages that follow, Lennie's character design returns to normal. This suggests that George doesn't always see him that way and that it was merely a reaction to a specific situation, namely the comical sight of Lennie throwing himself into the water without thinking to drink.

While others' perceptions continually shape how Lennie is viewed as a character throughout the plot of the story, the reader is actually offered little access to Lennie's interiority in the original text. Instead, he is mediated through the perceptions of the other characters like George, Slim, Curley, and Curley's wife. The narrative world reacts to Lennie, defines him, and attempts to manage him. It is only in Steinbeck's final chapter, when Lennie flees to the hiding place George had instructed him to remember, that the narrative finally articulates something

resembling introspection. In that moment, Lennie imagines conversations with his Aunt Clara and a giant rabbit, offering the only direct glimpse into his inner voice that is marked by confusion, simplicity, and guilt (Steinbeck, 142-146). It is the novel's only moment where Steinbeck grants the reader unfiltered access to Lennie's mind, which highlights how frequently his perspective is otherwise silenced. With this initial narrative framework, Dautremer used her expansive and graphic approach to offer a visual perspective on Lennie giving him the chance to present to the reader his previously silenced inner world, as well as to further highlight the perception of his otherness as articulated by the other characters. By making this internal perception of others visible, she thus reveals to the reader the extent of the judgment, forcing the reader to bear witness and thereby take an emotional stance regarding how Lennie is treated. Illustrative examples of this visual technique used in the graphic narrative will be analyzed in the following sections.

5.2. Visualizing otherness: infantilization and the framing of gentleness

Lennie's divergence from neurotypical expectations impacts the way he is perceived in his environment, which leads to different treatments from the other characters in response, one of which being the repeated infantilization of Lennie by other characters. In Steinbeck's text, this occurs mostly through dialogue, as for example in the scene when George explains to Curley "He got kicked in the head by a horse when he was a kid" (Steinbeck, 32).

Dautremer translates this into a striking visual representation on page 98, depicting Lennie as a small child in a style reminiscent of 1930s children's book illustrations. The use of pastel flat colors reminiscent of the printing style of the time with mostly primary colors, soft lines, and the comic tone of a horse kicking a tiny Lennie presents his perceived mental slowness as comically innocent. This positions Lennie as a passive character who cannot defend himself (as evidenced by the fact that George has to speak on his behalf to Curley to prevent him from saying something foolish), with his gentleness, which stems from his genuinely kind nature, being reduced here to a weakness by the other characters. This childish framing allows others to reduce Lennie's threatening potential, rendering his gentleness as harmless childish incompetence. Yet, as Eszter Szép argues in *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability*, "vulnerability is always experienced in a dialogue, because it always elicits a response" (Szép, 3). The infantilizing gaze is thus not neutral, but it constitutes a social framing of Lennie's body as one that must be managed and diminished to be tolerated.



FIGURE 5.2 p.98, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

Dautremer further enhances this dynamic through close-up illustrations. On page 170, Slim comments, “He’s jes’ like a kid, ain’t he” (Steinbeck, 62). Lennie, reprimanded for mishandling a puppy, is drawn with exaggeratedly large eyes and soft facial features. His head appears abnormally large, his eyes much bigger, his freckles more pronounced, his face rounder, as if his adult features have regressed to an infantile appearance. This close-up illustrates the other characters’ perspective, seeing Lennie as this huge, immature child. Yet this immaturity has something uncanny, disturbing, which is conveyed through Lennie’s intense gaze that provokes discomfort. Behind this innocent spontaneity lurks something unpredictable that unsettles the others. His visual form oscillates between vulnerability and threat, referencing Szép’s notion that comics reading requires “the reader’s openness to the touch of otherness” (Szép, 16). Here, Dautremer does not allow the reader to settle into comfort. Instead, she forces the reader to acknowledge that gentleness in a misfitting body may not be reassuring but unsettling.

5.3. Handling sensory experience and the importance of touch

If Lennie’s natural gentleness leads to infantilization from an external perspective, from within Lennie’s own experience, it is translated visually through a higher sensitivity to the senses, particularly touch. Touch is a vital sense for Lennie and he loves to stroke soft things, which is the main reason he goes along with George’s plan to start a ranch, because he wants

to stroke soft animals. For this reason, his hands are absolutely central to his experience of the world, and Dautremer repeatedly foregrounds them in her visual rendition of the narrative.

On page 41 of *Des souris et des hommes*, when George asks Lennie to throw away the dead mouse he has been hiding in his pocket and snatches it from his hands, the mouse itself is not shown. The focus is entirely on the hands of George and Lennie, their movements, how Lennie holds the mouse, and how George seizes it. The visual narrative centers on the moment of contact and not the object itself thus showing that what Lennie was holding was not as important as his constant need to stimulate his senses by stroking something soft

This emphasis extends to the puppy Lennie so desperately wants to pet later in the narrative. On page 139 of the graphic novel, a close-up of the small animal is drawn in great detail, every tuft of fur visible, its round, plush morphology inviting the tactile empathy of the reader. Lennie's face, drawn in a gentler, less detailed style beneath the hyperreal puppy, mirrors his sensory focus with his gaze on the puppy. Following on page 167, Lennie is shown curled up peacefully with the puppy in an almost idyllic tableau. The image is very soft, calm, and peaceful, rendered in a warm color palette. Dautremer represents here what could be read as a bubble of comfort, with Lennie at peace, comfortable and serene with the puppy, in an image which offers a stark contrast to the outside world. This bubble is shattered on the pages that follow the narrative in the graphic novel. On page 168, the scene is rendered from Lennie's perspective, where George's large hand becomes a threatening force descending on the tiny, vulnerable animal against a dreadful black background. This moment powerfully illustrates what Szép calls the "dialogue of vulnerability" (Szép, 9). The hands that seek comfort can also be perceived as threats, depending on perspective.



FIGURE 5.3 p.167-169, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

In addition to that observation, in the violent scene where Lennie breaks Curley's hand, this duality is rendered with even more brutal clarity. The double-page spread with Lennie's disproportionately large, red-toned hand crushing Curley's in the middle is painted in rough, expressive red strokes, signalling a break from the smoother aesthetic of gentler scenes. The shift reflects Lennie's emotional dysregulation, which results in this violent reaction. The contrast is pronounced on the following double-page (236-237) once the harm is done, where the atmosphere is rendered in a much softer style. On the left page, there a disembodied image of a broken hand in a glove (clearly representing Curley's crushed hand) that serves as a visual metaphor for the aftermath. Meanwhile, Lennie is drawn small and withdrawn, his bloody hands now returned to their ordinary size and their threatening potential now obscured. This transition visualizes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea developed in *Disability and Representation* that disability is a "story we tell about bodies" (Garland-Thomson, 523). Dautremer reveals that the story of Lennie's body is fluid and it can be thus violent and gentle in turn.

5.4. Animalization and the fear of misfit

Where Lennie's gentleness leads to infantilization, his unpredictable violence resulting from his different way of perceiving the world prompts others to animalize him, to perceive him like a dangerous animal that could snap at any moment. This is very clear in the scene on pages 272-273 in the graphic novel where Crooks warns him of mental institutions, saying he would be "chained up like a dog," as the double-page spread visually literalizes this metaphor through an image radiating with violence, in which Lennie's features are distorted like those of a rabid dog, his mouth wide open, full of sharp teeth as if he were barking, and chained by the neck just as Crooks had described. While there is definitely anger in this scene, the image also conveys deep distress. The background is black and textured (suggesting anxiety), and all around Lennie are small, childlike drawings, like stick figures with one of them depicting George crying. These childlike drawings could illustrate Lennie's inner monologue, which adds to the scene's chaos, fear, and the fear that George might be harmed or disappointed by him, or that he might be sad if locked up like this. The perspective that Dautremer offers the reader in her re-drawing of this scene highlights something very important that Steinbeck does not explicitly convey, namely the very strong bond between Lennie and George. By showing, through Lennie's perspective in the visual, that he is thinking in this scene of George who might be upset because of him, she highlights just how important George is to Lennie, and thus offers

a deeply emotional additional perspective to Steinbeck's original novel, which was rather reserved in its explicit depiction of the (positive) relationships between its male protagonists.



FIGURE 5.4 p.272, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

On the next page, however, the narrative focus returns to a somewhat external view of the scene, as the animalized imagery ends and Lennie is depicted normally again, showing how all of this was in Lennie's head. The disturbing fusion of childlike imagery with monstrous features underscores what Garland-Thomson calls in *Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept* "misfitting", meaning the dissonance between body and environment (Garland-Thomson, 593).

Nevertheless, animalization is not always aligned with violence. On page 121 of the graphic novel, Lennie is shown in close-up, his face soft and sad, next to a small white rabbit. The rabbit is white, a symbol of purity, hiding its head between its paws as if afraid. Lennie's detailed face looks to the side, his eyebrows sad, he seems afraid and completely harmless too. His detailed, sorrowful face mirrors the tiny rabbit's vulnerability, which prompts the reader to question whether Lennie is truly a threat or just too often misread by a world that cannot accommodate his difference.

5.5. Visualizing Lennie's inner world: chaos, comfort, and Outsider Art

The previous section has highlighted how Lennie's internal perspective can be made visible to the reader of *Des souris et des hommes* without changing the source text, with his thoughts represented through childlike sketches that shift in clarity and composition depending

on his emotional state. In calm moments, such as when George recounts their dream of owning their safe haven on day, Lennie's internal drawings are neat and colorful, evoking stability and comfort. These images are acts of self-regulation, offering coherence in a world that often overwhelms him. However, when Lennie is troubled, this is immediately perceptible in the drawings illustrating his internal state, which become completely disrupted. On page 47, when George scolds Lennie at the beginning, blaming him for being a burden, Lennie's inner monologue is visualized as chaotic, tangled sketches. All the things George reproaches him for, all the fragmented memories, mix in a graphic cacophony that conveys Lennie's distress, even though this distress is not addressed in the source text.

This technique culminates in the novel's final pages when Lennie takes refuge in the safe space George had told him about in case he ever did something bad and needed to hide, and finds himself alone with his thoughts immediately after committing the deeply distressing murder of Curley's wife. Lennie's hallucinations of Aunt Clara and the giant rabbit in this scene, lecturing him chaotically on his actions, are rendered in an overwhelming, surreal yet very rough art style (pages 395-399). Faces distort, panels bleed into one another, the visual field becomes saturated. These images embody Szép's assertion that comics are not merely visual texts but "situated and embodied interactions" (Szép, 5). This visual rendition proposed by Dautremer invites the reader to actively experience Lennie's cognitive overload with him to maybe grasp even more intensely the despair of his situation.



FIGURE 5.5 p.398-399, *Des souris et des hommes* © 2020 Rébecca Dautremer

The style of these internal drawings, sketchy, naïve, mostly colorful, filling every corner of the page resonates with the tradition of Outsider Art (Art Brut). As Bertrand Raison notes, Aloïse Corbaz, the Swiss outsider artist (mentioned already in the previous chapter on women in *Des souris et des hommes* to illustrate Curley's wife perspective, just as silenced as Lennie's)

who was interned in a psychiatric hospital for half her life, where she drew the world of divas, creating her own romantic fantasies (Raison, 193) Similarly, Lennie's internal visions are filled with childlike representations and repetition. Adding to this reference, as Rudolf Arnheim observes in *The Artistry of Psychotics: Art Works Created by the Mentally Ill Spring from the Same Basic Psychological Roots as Do the Works of Other Artists*, one striking trait of schizophrenic art is the tendency to cover every inch of the surface, dominated by an "internally generated urge to act, to express, to occupy the void" (Arnheim, 50). This is evident in Dautremer's depictions of Lennie's dream sequences, where no white space remains on the pages. The connection to Outsider Art is further supported by Sander Gilman's discussion of Hans Prinzhorn's criteria for the art of the mentally ill in *The Mad Man as Artist: Medicine, History and Degenerate Art* as he argues cover the compulsive need to express inner feelings, the need to ornament (the horror felt at leaving any corner of the paper undecorated), the need for order, and the self-conscious development of complex systems of visual symbols (Gilman, 584-585). Dautremer's visual language for Lennie's inner world exhibits these characteristics precisely, linking the representation of his neurodivergence to a long tradition of marginalized creators who used art to construct alternative realities and to create for themselves an active and visible position in an environment that, at first glance, did not offer them the necessary scope to do so, as was the case with the ranch for Lennie.

Conclusion

The present dissertation has shown that Rébecca Dautremer's graphic narrative adaptation *Des souris et des hommes* is not just an illustrated version of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, but a full visual re-drawing standing on its own as an autonomous work of visual expansion that preserves every word of the original while offering new layers of meaning through its visual dimension. By moving beyond the traditional fidelity-based framework of adaptation studies, this research has argued that Dautremer's adaptation uses the formal properties of the graphic novel, such as staging, sequencing, visual rhythm, page layout, as well as the artist's unique ability to vary her art style to express specific ideas, to create a fully coherent work that redraws Steinbeck's original plot.

There are several findings that have emerged from this research. First, it has shown that fidelity and visual reinterpreted expansion are not opposites but can coexist together productively. Dautremer's creative work keeps every word intact yet produces a radically new reading experience, which is a possibility that popular fidelity-based criticism has often overlooked. Second, it has highlighted two particular features of the graphic narrative as a medium that Dautremer exploits to their fullest, namely the spatial simultaneity and temporal control, which she uses to reinvest Steinbeck's plot. Third, that the graphic novel as an adaptation tool is uniquely suited to ideological critique because it can simultaneously incorporate contradictory visual registers to articulate a number of issues, thus forcing the reader to confront the elements that were left unaddressed in the original literary text. Fourth, Dautremer's creative work has shown how a graphic adaptation can give voice and presence to marginalized characters without altering the original text, simply by explicitly drawing everything with close attention to the details and hints left by the source text. Finally, this research has also shown that graphic novel adaptation is not a secondary derivative form, but a legitimate storytelling medium that can produce new literary objects worthy of standalone analysis. Dautremer's *Des souris et des hommes* thus joins the ranks of works that redefine what adaptation through redrawing can do.

The findings of the present dissertation are a result of the analysis conducted in each of the five distinct chapters. Chapter 1 has established Steinbeck's original novel as a text with strong visual potential, defined by the key concepts of graphic narrative and adaptation, and set up the hypothesis of visual expansion as the basis of the present research. Chapter 2 has shown

that Dautremer's creative process of rearticulating Steinbeck's plot could be compared to that of a "stage director" on the page, organizing it visually as she pleases to articulate what she chooses to the reader. The key finding is that the way she structures each chapter can be analyzed through Neil Cohn's concept of "Visual Narrative Grammar" (Orienter, Establisher, Initial, Prolongation, Peak, Release) where each phase of this grammar can be compared to an element of theater staging, which then eventually helps to understand how Dautremer uses the physical space of the page to control narrative rhythm, showing what the graphic novel medium can do that text alone cannot.

Chapter 3 has uncovered how Dautremer's visual expansion exposes visually the capitalist ideology which is implicit in Steinbeck's narrative. She has constructed in her graphic narrative a "visual economy" of capitalism through three main strategies: full-page advertisements stylized as 1930s commercial imagery, the progressive saturation of the dream-farm sequences from hesitant and soft childlike sketches to overwhelming almost psychedelic full spreads, and the material representation of labor on the ranch (the page stylized as if it was from de the boss's notebook showing wages, making thus visible the quantification of human worth). These advertising interludes function as "visual noise" of consumerist promises that the characters can never attain, which ultimately show directly to the reader how this "dream" is an illusion imposed by the system and not a fully personal aspiration. In addition to that, her visual rendition of the sequences where the two main protagonists recount their dream of a safe haven visually shifts from hopeful to suffocating, physically conveying the hopelessness of their situation as migrant workers caught in a "gold rush for work" (which is a theme also central to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*). Finally, the collapse of the promised dream shared by the two characters is rendered through a torn, damaged comic-strip aesthetic that makes the reader materially witness the disintegration and not just read about it.

Chapter 4's most significant finding has shown how Dautremer offers a face and a voice to female characters invisibilized in the original, despite being unable to change a single word of Steinbeck's text (a self-imposed artistic constraint, as she explains in interviews, not by contractual obligation). Because the original novel barely mentions women (Curley's wife is not even named), Dautremer had to work exclusively through the visual dimension, playing with the recurring red polka-dot motif, which functions as a visual signature of femininity, ensuring the reader cannot ignore the female presence in this version of the story, making it significantly different from its overwhelmingly male source text. Dautremer transforms Curley's wife from this nameless projection of male fears into a visually identifiable heroine

with agency by giving her the space to articulate her personal backstory (the six-page Hollywood dream flashback), visualizing her inner world and personality through illustrations in the style of Art Deco posters and Outsider Art aesthetics, and, most importantly, shifting the tragedy of her death. Where Steinbeck focuses on Lennie's distress, making it "his problem", Dautremer's double-page spread of the murder first emphasises Curley's wife's terror, her physical struggle, and the irreversibility of the violence, making it ultimately "her problem". While she could not give her a proper name as it would have been altering the source text, Dautremer has made Curley's wife visible as the heroine of this climactic scene, not a "rat trap" for the male characters (Spilka) that pushes the narrative forward to the final tragic resolution, but a female character killed in an act of clearly gendered violence. This chapter has also found that sex workers, merely mentioned in the novel, are given a physical appearance featured in the graphic novel, which makes them visible participants within the story rather than absent references, as was the case in Steinbeck's novel.

Chapter 5 has shown how Dautremer's visual strategies invite a reading of Lennie not just as a weird man and a tragic plot device, but instead provide a perspective of him as a neurodivergent and deeply misfitting character. First, through his constant infantilization through childlike imagery (the horse-kicking scene stylized as an old illustrated book for children) and the uncanny close-up where the reader is forced to meet his gaze to acknowledge him as he is, she shows how other characters reduce Lennie's gentleness to harmless incompetence, while also representing how his difference can be unsettling because it cannot be controlled. Second, through a sensory emphasis on touch through the focus on hands in multiple scenes, the adaptation visualizes Lennie's embodied sensorial experience, making the reader feel his specific sensorial need to be stimulated by touching soft things and his distress when that need is not met. Finally, through the animalization of his difference (the monstrous dog-like hallucination of Lennie when threatened) performed by the other characters and the use of childlike, chaotic sketches for his inner monologue, Dautremer connects Lennie's cognitive perception to Outsider Art which was historically a place for marginalized artists to express their unique perspectives of the world. Showing how Lennie's internal drawings shift from tidy and colourful soft sketches (when calm) to chaotic and fragmented sharp lines (when distressed) gives the reader direct access to his neurodivergent perception throughout the whole graphic novel, which is something Steinbeck's text only hints at in the final chapter of the original text.

Several limitations should, however, be acknowledged. The present research focused exclusively on Dautremer's adaptation and Steinbeck's original text without systematic comparison to other graphic novel adaptations, and the analysis was limited to a selection of pages, though I believe the selection is representative of the adaptation's core strategies. Further limitations include the lack of direct access to Dautremer's original sketches or personal correspondence with her, and the absence of reception studies from other readers that could have further nourished the present research.

Future research could examine Dautremer's graphic narrative through a postcolonial approach, investigating how the visual strategies employed for Crooks (the only explicitly Black character) either reinforce or challenge the racial stereotypes of Steinbeck's novel, asking whether the adaptation critiques the systemic racism of 1930s America or reinforces Crooks' marginalization. A Gothic lens could interpret the torn pages, dead animals, darker scenes, and chaotic hallucinations as an "American Gothic" aesthetic that links Lennie's vulnerability to broader tropes of the "monstrous body" and Steinbeck's own interest in exploring the darker aspects of the human condition. An ecocritical perspective could explore how Dautremer's lush, warm-toned landscapes and the active role of animals in her work help to visualize the relationship between humans and their environment, how the degraded Dust Bowl imagery mirrors economic precarity, and whether the "man versus nature" motif is reinforced or challenged. Beyond these lenses, comparative studies could confront Dautremer's adaptation with other artists' graphic adaptations of classic literary works, or with her own earlier adaptation of Alessandro Baricco's *Silk*⁸ to better identify the recurring strategies. Most importantly, building on the work of this dissertation, further research should examine how other artists have expanded literary classics through their graphic narratives, thereby defining more precisely what "re-drawing" a canonical text can achieve.

The term "re-drawing" is deliberately ambiguous. Unlike "rewriting" which implies some level of modifications to the verbal text, "re-drawing" operates entirely and only in the visual register. It adds thus to an existing story a new visual language that can shift tone, challenge its source, create new perspectives, and fill the gaps of what was only hinted at originally. This visual language includes multiple strategies that are possible in the graphic novel medium, such as the monstration (showing visually rather than telling), the graphiation (the trace of the artist's hand and the variation in textures which can impact the style and tone

⁸ Baricco, Alessandro, et al. *Soie*. Tishina, 2012. Collection, opus n°1.

of the image), art style variation (such as Dautremer has done by switching between archival sepia imagery, childlike sketches, vibrant advertising illustrations, caricatures,...), and the materiality of the graphic novel as a book, which impacts how the story is received and processed by the reader. All these components have proven to play a significant role in the re-drawing process of the narrative. This dissertation has shown that such a re-drawing can make the marginal visible (Curley's wife), make the cognitive physical (Lennie's neurodivergent perception), and make ideological critique immediate (the doom of the capitalist system) without changing a single word textually. What my work has opened up thus is a way of reading graphic novel adaptations as new narrative sites characterized by productivity instead of losses or betrayal. Dautremer's graphic narrative invites us readers to wonder what other classic literary texts could gain a new re-drawn face, and how many of their hidden themes could become visible when rearticulated through this medium. The present dissertation has taken a first step in that direction, and the future research could continue to explore how the action of re-drawing a pre-existing classic work in a way that is both faithful textually and radical visually can renew the literary canon.

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