The "graphic novel": Discourses on the archive

La Cour, E.L.

Publication date
2013

Document Version
Final published version

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
The “Graphic Novel”: Discourses on the Archive
Promotiecommissie

Promotor: Prof. dr. M.D. Rosello
Co-promotor: dr. J.G.C. de Bloois
Overige Leden: Prof. dr. B.J. de Kloet
dr. A. Masschelein
Prof. dr. J.J. Noordegraaf
Prof. dr. F. Stjernfelt
dr. F. Tygstrup

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen
Acknowledgements

My first words of gratitude are for my promotor, Mireille Rosello, whose enthusiasm for my project in its fledgling stage gave me the courage to move to Amsterdam to pursue my PhD. Thank you for making me feel welcome at ASCA, for your insightful theory seminars, and for moments of laughter. Most importantly, thank you for constantly challenging me to find the thesis of my thesis and my voice in academia.

I am especially grateful for the unfailing support of my advisor, Joost de Bloois, whose advocacy undoubtedly has been crucial in my growth as a scholar. Your steady character helped steady me throughout this process and taught me a great deal about patience, endurance, and confidence. In offering suggestions for further reading, pointing out ideas that were underdeveloped or misguided, and encouraging the steps that were on the right track, you were always thorough in your advice, but more importantly, you were always kind. For that I will be eternally thankful.

A very special thanks goes to Frederik Tygstrup who always encouraged me to see the bigger picture. I have both greatly enjoyed and been incredibly inspired by our many talks. Thank you, also, for granting me a desk in Copenhagen for the last year of my project. Being a part of the community at KU was a great experience that engendered many new friendships and helped to expand my network of scholars in the fields of memory studies and comics studies.

Speaking of communities, none of this would have been possible without the wonderful community of scholars and faculty at ASCA. From Eloe and Jantine, who always offer their support with a snarky joke and a smile, to the many inspiring lectures and seminars given by the
faculty members, ASCA has been an incredible place to call home. From the start, my fellow
PhDs have proven inspirational and thought-provoking, consistently challenging and
encouraging. But, more than this, so many have proven to be dear friends. Thank you especially
to Pepita and Aylin for being my paranymphs and to Anik for being my honorary paranymph.
You three have been there from the start, and I'm so happy to have you stand beside me now.
Thanks, too, to all you other lovely ASCA people who've made this experience a million times
better—Adam, Birkan, Melanie, Margaret, Hanneke, Niall, Lara, and Thijs.

I am also grateful for the new friends and colleagues I've made in Copenhagen. Thanks
especially to Rikke for endless discussions about comics, and more importantly, for solidarity
and many fun times in Copenhagen. To Anne Magnussen for being a great advocate and
inspiration. To Lucian, Mathias, Frauke, and Peter for great camaraderie. To K for always filling
the air with laughter. And to Annesofie for late night kitchen talks.

And finally, an enormous thanks to my family and friends. Mom, your constant support
and unconditional love has helped me more than I could ever say. To Dad and Perry, Ian and
Leslie, thanks for always being there. Serhat, your company has been even better than your
delicious food. Geoff, you've always been able to make me laugh—most often at myself, so
thanks for that. Janne, your kindness, understanding, and distractions would be hard to live
without. Katayoun, your sweetness is a blessing. Roxana, your friendship has kept me sane.
Maria, thank you and your boys for giving me a home away from home. Daniel, thanks for
consistent fun and inspiring projects. Callie, thank you for everything all the time. And finally,
thanks to David for holding my hand through the final stages and just for being you.
Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................5

The Institutionalization of the Archive.......................................................................................... 10

Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription .......................................................... 14

Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation ........................................ 16

Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power ............................................... 19

Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature” ..................................................................................... 22

“What’s Up with These Graphic Novels?” .................................................................................. 23

Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription .......................................................... 25

Intermediality and the Graphic Novel ....................................................................................... 32

Comics and Popular Literature in Art Discourse ...................................................................... 47

Undermining Comics as “Kitsch” ............................................................................................. 63

The “Graphic Novel”? ............................................................................................................. 78

Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation ........................................ 81

Disrupting Fact as Truth: The Aims of Personal Narrative ....................................................... 84

Defying Language and Understanding: Experiential Truth and Visuality in

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* ......................................................................................... 96

The Advancement of Personal Narrative Comics ................................................................. 110

Searching for Truth: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* ................. 120
Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power ........................................ 133

The Formal Operation of Space and Time in Comics ............................................. 138

The Potential of “Thirdspace” .................................................................................. 149

Paul Hornschemeier’s Mother, Come Home .......................................................... 151

Subjects and Spaces of the State ........................................................................... 151

Style and Structure ............................................................................................... 159

Masking .................................................................................................................. 163

Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature” ................................................................ 167

Works Cited ............................................................................................................ 179

Summary ................................................................................................................. 189

Samenvatting .......................................................................................................... 195
Introduction

After completing my master’s degree in British and American Literature, I began working as an editorial assistant at a major publishing house in New York. The imprint I worked for was steadily making a name for itself due in large part to my boss’s keen eye for current trends in popular culture. One day she tossed on my desk a copy of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, which at the time had sold more than 500,000 copies, a huge feat in the publishing industry for any book, let alone a memoir by an unknown author, and much less a graphic novel memoir—and this was before the animated film adaptation was released, which only worked to skyrocket sales worldwide. “Find out what’s up with these graphic novels,” she said. “Find out how well they’re selling and why—and if we should try to get our hands on one.”

Though I was an avid reader of comics as a child, with a particular fondness for *Calvin and Hobbes* and *The Far Side*, as I got a little older, my interest waned, or rather, was curbed by my desire to assert my adulthood. I put down comics and picked up literature. Sure, *Calvin and Hobbes* was funny and even smart, but, I thought, it was for children. So to be faced years later with the task of figuring out graphic novels left me dumbstruck. I had no idea why so many people were enthralled with *Persepolis*, nor really how to find out why. In an attempt to approach this question, I first turned to the company’s sales database that lists figures both for copies printed and actual copies sold. I looked up similar titles, pulling numbers for several first-time authors’ memoirs. On average, the bestselling ones had sold well under 50,000 copies, a mere fraction of the figures for Satrapi’s work. Because this information got me nowhere, I next had a look at various reviews of *Persepolis* and pulled figures for other graphic novels mentioned in
relation to it from the larger, and less accurate, industrywide database. These figures were
unsurprisingly worse, not only because of the lack of accuracy, but also because many graphic
novels were, and to a large extent still are, being sold in secondary retail outlets—in this case,
comics shops—which leads to their sales figures not being accurately tracked; some fairly
famous titles showed sales as low as 100 copies.

By the end of the day, I had come up with more questions than answers. Was *Persepolis* a
fluke? Were people just interested in Satrapi’s story and its insider look at the “axis of evil”
country of Iran? And if so, would *Persepolis* have been as well received as a “straight” memoir?
I picked up the book and headed home. Reading it on the subway, I received many curious looks,
which I imagined then, and am fairly convinced of now, were due to a grown woman reading
comics so openly. As I mentioned earlier, at the time even I was under the impression that comics
were for children or, worse, the stereotypical comics nerd overly nostalgic for lost innocence.
From the moment I opened the book, though, I joined the ranks of those nerds unabashedly
reading comics in public. I finished the book a couple of hours later, completely mesmerized by
the story, the images, and the time in which I could ingest so much information. This led me to
even more questions: Does the graphic novel change memoir? Does it make it more accessible,
exciting, interesting, appealing? My impulsive answer to these questions was yes, but then I was
faced with the inevitable questions of “How?,” “Why?,” and “If so, why is it shameful to be a
comics nerd?” These were the questions that eventually led me out of the publishing industry and
back into academia.

What was most striking to me in my initial research into comics studies were the
seemingly unending debates over what constitutes comics and why it is a valid area of research.
Even now, many comics scholars feel the need to begin presentations, articles, and funding applications with phrases such as “Not all comics are funny,” or “Not all comics are for children,” or “The field of comics studies has grown exponentially in the last few years.” Further striking to me was that advocates of the term “graphic novel” circumvented some of this apologetic introduction to their research by asserting that graphic novels are different from—and better than—comics. Of particular note on this side of the debate are the assertions made by self-proclaimed coiner of the term “graphic novel,” comics artist Will Eisner.¹ Since the debut of his 1978 *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, which he claims is the first graphic novel, Eisner has been instrumental in maintaining that there is a division between comics and graphic novels based on both form and content.

In a particularly adamant keynote lecture at the 2002 University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, Eisner claimed:

> I’m here to tell you that I believe strongly that this medium is literature. […] The word “comics,” of course, we’re still living with it, is a misnomer. We can’t get rid of the thing. We can’t get rid of it—it’s like “Kleenex.” It doesn’t belong here and it’s partly our fault because comics originally were designed to be funny stories.”²

While Eisner’s critical work has been highly contested in comics studies, his inexorable stance that the graphic novel is literature has been highly influential both within and outside of the field. Following Eisner, many advocates of the term “graphic novel” have made similar claims to its

---

¹ Eisner claimed that he invented the term “graphic novel” in order to try to sell his work to Bantam Books, but this story has been refuted. He is now credited with popularizing the term, which is thought to have been coined by Richard Kyle in 1964. For a discussion of the term’s coinage, see Andy Kunka (2010), “Will Eisner and the ‘Graphic Novel,’” http://doctor-k100.blogspot.dk/2010/12/will-eisner-and-graphic-novel.html. Eisner has acknowledged the refutation to his coinage of the term, but maintains, “He [possibly Kyle] had never used it successfully and had never intended it the way I did, which was to develop what I believe was viable literature in this medium” (See Will Eisner, “Keynote Address, Will Eisner Symposium,” *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 1.1 (2004).

² Eisner, “Keynote Address,” paragraph 16.
being different from comics based on its literariness, its “seriousness,” and to a large extent, at least popularly, the term has become conflated with the literary genres of memoir and autobiography. Of course, as in any discursive field, defining and distinguishing terms remains an important area of inquiry, but what this particular debate over terminology led me to was not an attempt to define comics or the graphic novel per se. Rather, what was more interesting to me was to explore why scholars in this field feel the need to justify the study of comics, either in their own right or through distancing themselves from comics through the creation of and adherence to the new term “graphic novel.”

This final question led me to the crux of my thesis project: what the “graphic novel” can reveal about the way in which we hierarchically categorize what we find important to study, how these objects and fields of study are inscribed and organized within our cultural memory institutions, and how these systems of classification form a cycle of importance that is laden with sociopolitical consequences. In the application of critical theory to the field of comics studies, I contribute a new perspective on the terminological distinction between comics and graphic novels. I assert that rather than indicating an artistic or cultural elevation of comics, that the term “graphic novel” allows for the political function of comics to emerge. By calling attention to the system of value upon which the archive is built and maintained, I argue that the “graphic novel” opens an avenue for comics to expose and critique the practices of the archive from archival inscription to interpretation to enacted power.

3 While this is certainly not always the case, as Jan Baetens (2008) notes, many of the heralded graphic novels, especially from the United States, are autobiographies or memoirs, including, for example, Art Spiegelman’s Maus and Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. This point raises interesting questions about the role of the publishing industry in the promotion and popularization of the term “graphic novel.” As Roger Sabin (1993) notes, the “graphic novel,” rather than a medium or a genre, can be seen simply as a marketing term aimed at selling comics to an older audience with more money to spend, and includes various genres of comics, most often from the superhero genre.
In a cross-disciplinary approach to the question of “medium,” I first examine the historical precedence of the denigration of comics across various discourses. I argue that because the term “graphic novel” is used to mark a separation from comics that is hinged upon medium classification, it exposes how the inscription of objects and discourses into the archive is reliant upon discursive terminology that endows them with what Pierre Bourdieu terms “cultural capital.” By upsetting the parameters of this terminology that maintains, or is instrumentalized to maintain, any distinction between comics and graphic novels, I demonstrate how the term “graphic novel” allows for a reversal of the rejection of comics and thereby positions comics to further expose and critique the practices of archival interpretation and power.

As in the dividing practices of archival inscription, the interpretation of archival material is also based on a system of attributable value. Because the hierarchical categorization of archival material is often scaled on an idea of truth, which is particularly evident in the privileging of document over testimony, personal narrative comics is an ideal object with which to explore and critique this practice of the archive. As an archive itself, personal narrative works to comment on archival practices in its categorization of the various evidential and memorial material that make up the truth of a life. In a comparative analysis between textually based personal narrative and personal narrative comics, I argue that the aims of contemporary personal narrative to question the privileging of document over experience is advanced through the use of comics style, which obscures and thereby further questions hierarchical classifications within the archive.

This questioning of archival privileging of certain objects and discourses in the practices of inscription and interpretation leads to yet another political function of comics: a critique of the

---

4 See Bourdieu (1986)
enacted power of the archive. Already in its exposure and questioning of how archival material is hierarchically categorized, comics ties the personal to the political in terms of the creation of the subject. Through an analysis of the form of comics, I assert that comics further works to explore subjectivity through its revelation of the power inherent in spatial relations. Because comics can blur the perceived boundaries of both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it works to criticize the political ramifications of archival power and promote a new form of subjectivity.

Finally, I offer that in its critique of the archive, first through its disruption of the value attributed to cultural objects and discourses, secondarily through its exposure of the hierarchical systems of classification and interpretation, and thirdly through its revelation of spatialized power relations, comics can be seen as offering a new perspective on the problematics of the archive and houses a potential for a new form of subjectivity not impeded by dividing binaries. I conclude in my epilogue by asserting that comics is a “minor literature,” and thereby not only offers a critique of the archive, but can be seen as “Opening the impasse, unblocking it.”


The Institutionalization of the Archive

In order to approach the question of the archive, I find it useful to consider the intersection of Jacques Derrida’s writings on the archive and Michel Foucault’s critique of institutions. Although Foucault is obviously associated with his critique of the archive, I would like to focus more specifically on where his critique of institutions is in accordance with Derrida’s writings on the archive. This point of overlap between the two is where I find the most productive definition of “the archive,” because what I am concerned with exploring is less what the archive is and
more what it does. In examining Derrida’s and Foucault’s claims about the archive and institutions side by side, I aim to uncover the performative aspect of the archive—that is both what it benignly seeks to accomplish and how it is used to mediate cultural memory across various sites.

Though “the archive” proves to be difficult to define given its connotative multiplicity, I find its breadth of meaning useful in examining archival tendencies. Foucault argues that the archive does not work as “the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity,” including its institutional collections and their discourses of remembrance. Indeed, though he offers an extensive critique of institutions, he maintains a separation between such systems and the archive. He writes:

Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive.

Derrida, in his discussion of the archive, however, departs from a different premise. For Derrida, the archive carries with it its historical connotation of *arkhé*, of which he reminds us “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*.” Though, to some extent, Derrida is in agreement with Foucault that the archive can never represent the sum of culture, he nevertheless asserts that “the concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhé*. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying

---

7 Ibid.
also that it forgets it.”

Derrida then can be seen as offering an eclipse of Foucault’s idea: while the archive for Foucault can only collect statements and not judgments, for Derrida, the archive is still, even if forgetfully so, power laden through its institutionalization. He writes:

A science of the archive must include the theory of this institutionalization, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it. This right imposes or supposes a bundle of limits which have a history, a deconstructable history […] This deconstruction concerns, as always, the institution of limits declared to be insurmountable.10

What Derrida claims is that in the institutionalization of the archive the memory of the arkhé is enlivened. While it is perhaps an antiquated notion to think of the archive in terms of its Greek origin as a physical location guarded and interpreted by state officials, what Derrida argues is that in its modern configurations, even the most benignly intended archives fall prey to consignation and authorization. Pointedly, for Derrida, the archive speaks to both how it is formulated and how it is mediated. He writes, “At the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible.”11 Like the arkhé, institutions become scenes of the domiciliation of the archive, both visible and invisible, and actively seeking out homogeneity to maintain order and authority. He writes, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”12 For Derrida, then, the action of the archive, what comes out of the (incomplete,

---

9 Ibid., 3.
10 Ibid., 4.
11 Ibid., 3.
12 Ibid., 4 (note 1).
While, again, Foucault does not consider institutions as such to be manifestations of the archive, his critique of them raises similar concerns to Derrida’s writings on archival power. Derrida’s assertion that the hypomnesic nature of the archive “assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression,” which works to ensure forgetfulness and the destruction of the intention of the archive, directly speaks to Foucault’s concerns about institutions. Foucault asserts:

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.

For Foucault, the workings of institutions belie any neutrality they portend to have, much in the same manner as Derrida’s sites of archival power; as neither “memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience,” the archive in its exteriority, in its institutionalization, is always orchestrated and orchestrates.

This crossover between Derrida’s writings on the institutionalized archive and Foucault’s critique of institutions forms the basis of my use of the term “the archive.” Thus, as I use it, the archive is the collection of all archives that make up our cultural memory, and more pointedly, the institutions that are ascribed hierarchical importance through discursive reiteration, namely “high art” discourse, historical writing, and evidential documentation. Through an investigation

---

13 Ibid., 12.
14 Ibid., 11.
16 Derrida, Archive Fever, 11.
of how the archive privileges certain works and certain modes of articulation, I endeavor to provide a new perspective on the root of the problem, that which helps create and maintain hierarchies within our cultural memory institutions and thus forms a cycle of importance: cultural capital.

Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription

In order to discuss how the “graphic novel” can shed insight into the problematics of the archive, it is pertinent to first examine how archival sites are imbued with importance. I posit that archival systems are built upon objects and discourses attributed with a certain cultural cachet due to a perception of uniqueness and unattainability; Bourdieu’s theory of capital delineates these objects and discourses as being endowed with prestige by an elite class that, like Derrida’s discourse on the magistrates of the *arkhé,* is the governing factor in how institutional inscription is granted. As art historian Lucy Cotter aptly points out, “Cultural capital is held most obviously in an objectified form in art works, museum and library collections, as well as in its institutionalized form in the highly valued qualifications that prestigious universities and academies confer.”17 Indeed, cultural capital is embedded in our cultural memory institutions and is perpetuated within the archive through institutional inscription and discourse, which maintain value-based distinctions created and invoked by the ruling class.

I assert that cultural capital is made manifest in the term “graphic novel,” which is not merely objectified cultural capital, but a representation of institutionalized cultural capital through the discourse that upholds its hierarchy over comics, which, as mentioned earlier, grants

it status as a more prestigious field of study. Because of its dual position, I find it important to investigate the discourse instrumentalized, but not properly attended to, by advocates of the term “graphic novel.” For while many comics scholars on both sides of the debate over whether graphic novels are comics have noted that the term “graphic novel” delineates a separation from comics that points to the division between high and low culture, much of the discourse has stopped there, merely grazing the surface of the capital attributed to cultural objects. Therefore, in chapter 1, I investigate the claims of uniqueness and unattainability of objectified cultural capital through careful consideration of the discursive terminology that endows objects with this capital.

To this end, I explore how the binary of high and low culture developed from the hierarchical parameters ascribed to the term “medium,” and further, how rather than simply underlining the division between high and low culture, that the term “graphic novel” marks a separation from comics that necessarily hinges on medium classification. Enacting a cross-disciplinary approach, I offer a plurality of ways in which “medium” has been addressed from the often-conflicting standpoints of intermediality studies and art discourse. In so doing, I seek to at once illuminate the problems inherent in “medium” spanning different discourses, and the inescapable hierarchical nature of medium classification. I analyze the progression of the parameters for the term “medium” both in intermediality studies—from Fluxus artist Dick Higgins’s 1965 reintroduction of the term “intermedia” to Irina Rajewsky’s new scheme for medium classification—, and in art discourse—from Clement Greenberg’s 1939 article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” to Rosalind Krauss’s contemporary reworking of the term. In exploring their

18 Intermediality studies is a relatively new area of study distinct in its approach to the relationship between various media. I use the term here broadly but will narrow its scope throughout chapter 1.
points of discord and convergence, I endeavor to unmask this terminology to uncover a more holistic, unimpeded understanding of the term “medium,” and thus “graphic novel.”

In using intermediality studies and art discourse as meta-tools, I assert that the “graphic novel” calls attention both to the problematic terminology that inscribes objects with cultural capital and to the institutions that perpetuate value-based distinctions between cultural objects in order to maintain their own cultural capital. Rather than being solely an attempt to culturally elevate comics or the graphic novel through asserting their medium status, in this chapter I demonstrate how medium classification obscures debates about comics’ abilities to function politically through dismissing them as low culture and therefore politically irrelevant. In this way, I assert that the “graphic novel” can provide insight on how such terminology, which upholds institutionalized cultural capital by obscuring what Foucault terms the “political violence” of institutions, can be exposed as faulty in its logic, which works to displace the entire question of the value of cultural objects.

Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation

Following from my discussion of how objects are attributed with cultural capital, I next turn my attention to the genre of personal narrative comics. As mentioned earlier, because the graphic novel has often been conflated with memoir and autobiography, personal narrative comics further proves a fruitful object for the analysis of archival systems because of its dualistic status as cultural object and archive. This status, I argue, allows another political function of comics to emerge: the ability of comics to offer a critique of classifying structures within archival systems. Because the categorization of archival material within institutions is often hierarchically ordered
based on a idea of truth, personal narrative is particularly imbued with the potential to explore and critique this function of institutional archives. Therefore, before addressing how personal narrative comics can work to call into question our cultural “archive fever,” it is important to first situate these comics within discourse on memoir and autobiography, two textual personal narrative forms that have long been seated in the debate about the ability to represent the truth of a life.

Early discourse on these genres focused on carving out an assertion of truth through distinguishing personal narrative from fiction, an assertion that was largely hinged on personal narrative’s ability to offer a verifiable account of the events of a person’s life, supported by evidence such as documents, history, and chronology—the “facts” presented within non-personal, biographical writing. As such, this evidence was positioned as the truth in personal narrative for its factual reliability, and therefore necessarily more truthful than the personal testament of the individual, which in its subjectivity to both to memory and emotion, has been perceived as at best faulty, and therefore necessarily subject to fictionality. In chapter 2, I explore how this parameter of truth does not account for the truths that personal narrative aims to speak to, truths that cannot be as easily verified: identity, experience, and memory. I examine how personal narrative, due to its inherent subjectivity and reliance on the illusory nature of memory, necessarily establishes a contentious relationship to fact. This contention, I argue, rather than supporting a hierarchically categorized scale of truth that positions objective, non-personal writing at its zenith, works to undermine the supposed binary of fact and fiction. I offer that personal narrative therefore supports a definition of truthfulness that, as between or outside of evidential or memorial truth alone, is not reliant on objectivity but rather speaks to and
illuminates the importance of individual, experiential truth, the truth in personal narrative.

While current discourse in autobiography studies has largely left this fact-versus-fiction argument behind to focus on identity and subjectivity as it is constructed through the autobiographical process, I aim to illuminate how current autobiographical texts are still toying with this binary in order to explore the limitations of experiential truth in its negotiation between evidence and emotion. In so doing, I argue that the truthfulness of personal narrative is indeed tied into the binary of fact and fiction in its exploration of how we dis-member to re-member both ourselves and our stories. In a comparative analysis, I present examples of textually based contemporary personal narrative before moving forward, in a close reading of postmodern writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, to discuss the manner in which the use of images can aid in the discourse on the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a life.

This focus on truth, I assert, further sheds light on how the way in which we individually archive our own lives is informed by our cultural archiving practices, and simultaneously reveals the fault in both what is inscribed in and what comes out of such practices. Each personal narrative comic, as a collection—and a purposeful, chosen, collection—works to reveal the archival practices of the individual that mimic the practices of the institutions. As in institutional archives, which Derrida notes “produces as much as it records the event,” the personal archives of personal narrative categorize various traumas, memories, and documents in order to cull some understanding of the self and the past. And yet, because much contemporary personal narrative has become conscientious of this desire of the archive, it self-reflexively speaks to this problematic by exhibiting and questioning the hierarchy ascribed to certain archival material over others, in particular documents over testimonies. In this way, while personal archives mimic

---

the institutions, in their questioning of their own archival practices they reveal the practices unquestioned and maintained by the institutions.

What personal narrative comics adds to this contemporary movement of personal narrative is the use of comics form, which works to queer archival practices. Through a close reading of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, I assert that by presenting trauma, memory, and document congruently through comics form, personal narrative comics plays with and employs visuality to literally show the flaws inherent in archival systems. In so doing, it not only reveals that the archive is always curated and never complete, in making the system visible it reveals how the power of the archive lies in its interpretation.

**Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power**

The relationship between power and visibility is further explored in comics through the use of its spatial structure. While in personal narrative the form of comics works to collapse document and experience to expose how cultural memory is both curated and interpreted through the mediation of the institutionalized archive, the spatial structure of comics offers a different perspective on the archive: a revelation of how archival power is enacted through the mediation of space by visibility. In the tension between image and text, comics is positioned as yet another site of binary contestation. Because both on the page and on the narrative level comics blurs the perceived boundaries of time and space to create a sense of *time as space*, as Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue, it offers a refutation of G. E. Lessing’s argument that W. J. T. Mitchell succinctly summarizes:

> Reading occurs in time; the signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence; and the events represented or narrated occur in time. There is thus a kind of
homology, or what Lessing calls a “convenient relation” (bequemes Verhältnis) between medium, message, and the mental process of decoding. A similar homology operates in accounts of visual art: the medium consists of forms displayed in space; and the perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time.\(^{20}\)

This spatializing of time in comics, I assert, not only works to comment on the formal possibilities of text and image, it further provides insight into how time is spatialized in terms of the real and the imaginary. Because comics style and structure can be used to confuse and conflate both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it is imbued with potential for institutional critique as it highlights that space is inherently multidimensional and power-laden.

Through a close reading of Paul Hornschemeier’s 2003 false memoir Mother, Come Home, I explore how comics necessarily addresses Foucault’s notion of heterotopic space, those “real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society,” and his notion of utopic space, the “arrangements which have no real space.”\(^{21}\) In so doing, I argue that comics is thereby able to expose what Foucault has called the “political ‘double bind’”\(^{22}\) of institutional power wherein subjectivity is both imposed upon the individual by the state and has become manifest in the individual through learned embodiment of the state’s ideals. In its toying with style and form through the use of color, various drawing styles, panels, and gutters, which can effectively move the space of the page and the space of the narrative in and out of various real and imagined spaces, I assert that comics make visible the workings of spatial constructions.

Further, through these same means, I assert that comics offers a potential answer to Foucault’s call to criticize institutions “in such a manner that the political violence which has


\(^{22}\) Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), 216.
always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.”

By exposing the power enacted through visibility, comics can be seen as offering a potential to subvert this power of the institutions, and thereby serves as a possible answer to Foucault’s call to “refuse what we are.” In its creating a possibility for conceptualizing other spaces beyond modernist binaries—spaces that necessarily blur the borders of both public and private and the real and the imaginary, I further assert that comics is able to open what cultural geographer Edward Soja has termed “Thirdspace.” He writes:

> Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.

Because “Thirdspace” can be used as a tool to address the problematics raised by Foucault in his discourse on institutionalized power, I posit that comics, through its collapsing of binaries and rethinking of subjectivity, offers a potentiality to unmask and effectively criticize the power inherent in spatial constructions and thereby the political ramifications of archival power.

**Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature”**

In the epilogue, I offer that comics can be considered what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have termed “minor literature.” As outlined in their work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, “minor literature” illuminates:

---

24 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 216.
[…] where the system is coming from and going to, how it becomes, and what element is going to play the role of heterogeneity, a saturating body that makes the whole assembly flow away and that breaks the symbolic structure, no less than it breaks hermeneutic interpretation, the ordinary association of ideas, and the imaginary archetype. Rather than Foucault’s call to liberate ourselves from the workings of the institutions, Deleuze and Guattari argue that it is not liberation that is needed, but escape, “find[ing] a path there where he didn’t find any.” Eclipsing Soja’s notion of “Thirdspace,” “minor literature” is not simply a recentering of the margin but is an avenue through which to contemplate the language and systems upholding binaries such as center and margin, and public and private. “Minor literature” does not speak to how to subvert or rethink current systems but to the “revolutionary machine to come,” an entirely new system not yet fully conceived of.

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “minor literature” works to expose what they term the “network” that encodes society. This network, based on “an entire micropolitics of desire, of impasses and escapes, of submissions and rectifications,” offers merely a systematic process of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization,”—that is, a movement from public to private in a system of constant flux that works to reinscribe hierarchical structures even in its attempt to escape them. They explain: “In short, it’s not Oedipus that produces neurosis; it is neurosis—that is, a desire that is already submissive and searching to communicate its own submission—that produces Oedipus.” What “minor literature” enables, then, is a way to expose the workings of dominant systems to provide a veritable escape from the impasse created by such systems.

The three characteristics of “minor literature” are, first, that it is written in a major

26 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 7.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 18.
29 Ibid., 10.
30 Ibid.
language and thus actively deterritorializes major language; second, that it is immediately political because the individual concern connects to other political programs; and third, that it is always collective because of its lack of a “master.” I illuminate how comics is “minor literature” using the arguments made in the individual chapters; I argue that because comics actively deterritorializes language through its combination of text and image, is inherently political in its commentary on power enacted through spatial relations, and thereby immediately disrupts the notion of the individual as separate from the collective, it works to expose the fault in binary oppositions that uphold processes of reterritorialization. In its disruption of the value attributed to cultural objects and its blurring the borders between document and experience, public and private, and the real and imaginary, comics not only exposes the archive’s processes of institutionalization, inscription, and interpretation, it “express[es] another possible community and forge[s] the means for another consciousness and sensibility.”

“What’s Up with These Graphic Novels?”

In the spring of 2010, I traveled to Copenhagen for a conference on the archive, for which I had prepared a paper that started with some such phrase as “The field of comics studies has grown exponentially in the last few years.” I arrived the day of the volcanic eruption of Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull, which prevented most of the conference participants from getting to Copenhagen and eventually caused the conference to be canceled. After a few days of trying to figure out how to get back to Amsterdam, I finally joined together with several other stranded travelers and hired a cab. At some point on our long journey, one of the other passengers asked

---

31 Ibid., 17.
me what I did. I told him I studied graphic novels. Shocked, he replied, “My God, what do your parents think?” I answered, “Well, they’re not just for children, you know.” To which he replied, “I should think not!” After a little clarification, I finally understood he thought I meant pornographic novels and he seemed relieved, if still a bit wary, to know that I meant comics. From the pornographic novel to the traumatic personal narrative to the collection of a comic book series, the graphic novel, as an object, has multiple meanings both implied and practical. While I firmly believe that graphic novels are comics, what my thesis aims to uncover is what the “graphic novel” is and what it actually does, starting with its addressing questions such as “My God, what do your parents think?”
Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription

At first I thought I could simply draw a line under the word medium, bury it like so much critical toxic waste, and walk away from it into a world of lexical freedom. “Medium” seemed too contaminated, too ideologically, too dogmatically, too discursively loaded.

—Rosalind Krauss

How to define the graphic novel has been an ongoing debate since the advent of the term, not just within comics studies but also, and more problematically, in terms of discourse on intermediality and art. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a divide within the field of comics studies between scholars who advocate for the term “graphic novel” as separate from comics and those who question the motivation behind the terminological distinction. As comics scholar Ed S. Tan notes, those in the former category uphold the idea that “historically speaking, graphic novels may be seen as an art form that has grown out of and subsequently outgrown the comics genre.” This theory is undoubtedly and unabashedly adhered to by the self-proclaimed coiner of the term “graphic novel,” Will Eisner; not only, as mentioned earlier, does he argue that the graphic novel is a medium distinct from comics but, that as a new and emergent medium, it has surpassed comics’ scope to leave “the comics ghetto far behind.”

On the other side of this argument, however, are scholars who assert that the graphic novel is not at all a separate medium from comics, but rather, that the term only marks a desire to

---

34 Eisner used the term “comics ghetto” in his back-cover praise for Paul Hornschemeier’s 2003 Mother, Come Home.
escape the ubiquitous lowly status of comics that persists across various disciplines and popular culture alike—that the graphic novel is comics with cachet. In his introduction to the edited volume *The Graphic Novel*, Jan Baetens directly points to this side of the argument when he writes:

[…] at least theoretically, [the term is] used to make a clear-cut distinction between the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” between comics’ pulp fiction and more or less high-art visual narratives in book-form whose ambition it is to save the literary heritage in an illiterate world.35

These binaries of good and bad, literature and pulp fiction, high and low art, in addition to Baetens’s snide comment about the ambition of the graphic novel, quite clearly expose why advocates of the term seek a separation from comics. However, what is remarkably left underdeveloped on both sides of the argument is that these distinctions—outgrowing, leaving the comics ghetto behind, and even good and bad—do very little to establish what the graphic novel is, especially without its comparison to comics.

What this chapter will explore is how while scholars on both sides of the debate point to the “graphic novel” as a means to distinguish between high and low culture, much of the discourse has not moved forward to consider how this division functions both in and outside of comics studies. In light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, I will investigate the claims to uniqueness and unattainability maintained by discourse upholding the notion of high culture, which serves to elevate the graphic novel as different from and better than comics. I posit that the binary of high and low culture developed from the hierarchical parameters ascribed to the term “medium,” and that advocates of the term “graphic novel” hinge their argument on medium classification. In order to pursue this avenue, I will explore how “medium” has been

addressed from the often conflicting standpoints of intermediality studies and art discourse, and further will illuminate how, even in its spanning different discourses, the hierarchical nature of medium classification is inescapable and, as Michel Foucault would put it, endowed with “political violence.”

As art critic Rosalind Krauss laments in this chapter’s opening quote, “medium” has been haunted by its historical connotations, and yet is a term too pervasive and one that carries too much weight to be abandoned completely. Because of the stubborn presence of “medium” in the vernacular, both intermediality studies and art discourse have sought out new parameters for it by inventing terminology that would expand its original connotative confines, such as “post-medium,” “hybridized media,” and “multimedia,” or the newly popularized umbrella-term “intermediality.” Though this various terminology has afforded “medium” a conscientious shifting of its previously rigid borders, as I will illustrate, both intermediality studies and art discourse still maintain within these new definitions a hierarchical structure, and ultimately offer no clear, substantive definition for the graphic novel, either in its own right or in terms of its relation to comics. However, in an exploration of their points of discord and convergence, I will demonstrate how a better understanding of “medium,” and thus the graphic novel, can be achieved.

I will first approach the discourse on “medium” in the relatively short history of intermediality studies. I will explore how, from its start with the Fluxus art movement, discourse

---

37 Irina Rajewsky notes that from its beginnings not only has “intermediality” served as an umbrella term for “new ways of solving problems, new possibilities for presenting and thinking about them,” but also that it has opened the possibility for “new, or at least [...] different views on medial border-crossings and hybridization [...] pointing] to a heightened awareness of the materiality and mediality of artistic practices and of cultural practices in general.” (“Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,” *Intermédialités* 6 (2005): 44).
on intermediality has continuously sought out a place for new works of art outside of, or in between, the traditional singular media defined by art discourse. In early attempts to grant such work a position as art in its own right, discourse on intermediality consistently criticized the paradigm established by art discourse for medium classification as elitist and antiquated. However, as I will demonstrate, in its aims to dismantle the hierarchies established by art discourse, it ultimately merely reordered its system by claiming that intermedial works are more culturally and artistically important than works in the traditional media. Current discourse on intermediality has begun to recognize the faults in this theoretical approach, criticizing both previous definitions of “intermediality” and the overarching aims of the discourse. Of these critiques, I find Irina Rajewsky’s innovative paradigmatic approach to intermediality most interesting to explore, as she offers a means of defining and classifying various manifestations of the singular media and intermedial combinations in a nonhierarchical scheme. Because of this, Rajewsky’s approach to the question of “medium” serves to shed light not just on “medium” itself, but also on the distinction between comics and graphic novels, and thereby offers a possible step toward a definition of the graphic novel.

I will explicate how because Rajewsky identifies comics as *between media* and, simultaneously, as capable of being classified as *a new medium that emerged* from a combination of media, that so too can the graphic novel be classified as its own medium within her scheme. While this initial argument is rather simplistic, what I intend to illuminate by first establishing this conflation of comics with the graphic novel within intermediality’s parameters for “medium” is that they still stand apart as different from each other due to their distinct terminology. It is

---

precisely the terminological differentiation between comics and the graphic novel that deserves further attention within intermediality studies because it necessarily brings to the fore that the established norms for upholding certain media as more critically important or artistically sound has not been specifically attended to by Rajewsky’s discourse; instead, she rather cleverly avoids addressing the old adage that “not all media are created equal” in refusing to clearly discuss or define the formal qualities of medium-specificity.

As I will elaborate, for while the graphic novel seamlessly fits into Rajewsky’s scheme for comics as between media and as a new medium that emerged from the combination of media, it could also within her paradigm gain status as yet another new medium separate from comics that emerged from the combination of comics and literature. In this possibility of viewing the graphic novel as an emergent medium, it could easily be posited, as Tan explains in the foregoing quote, as a genealogical or evolutionary step from the medium of comics to one more advanced. This implicit hierarchy in intermediality studies generally and, as mentioned earlier, the term “graphic novel” specifically, highlights the problems in Rajewsky’s paradigm of at once conflating terms and allowing for their differentiation. For while it is interesting that this discourse is focused on a classification system rather than the specificities of the media in question, the conflict of at once conflating and differentiating comics and the graphic novel ultimately does not level the playing field for the two. Rather, as Baetens has asserted, intermediality actually can work to obstruct defining the graphic novel by serving as “an alibi to avoid further questions about what the graphic novel is, and what it actually does.”

As I will explicate, despite the fact that within Rajewsky’s scheme the graphic novel can be seen as

distinct from comics based on a different media combination, what actually makes comics
different from, or less advanced than, the combination of comics and literature—that is, what the
specificities of the two new media of comics and the graphic novel are—is problematically
evaded.

Therefore, in order to critically approach the question of the medium of the graphic novel,
this chapter will next turn to what I assert as the root of this problem in terminology: art
discourse's systematic degradation of comics and popular literature. Persisting since art critic
Clement Greenberg’s 1939 article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” both comics and popular literature
have continued to be dismissed as commercialized, low- or non-art kitsch—a sentiment that has
spread from art discourse to the academy and popular culture. As Catherine Labio notes:

> The eagerness with which the phrase “graphic novel” has been adopted in academic
writing points to a stubborn refusal to accept popular works on their own terms.
“Comics” reminds us of this vital dimension. “Graphic novel” sanitizes comics;
strengthens the distinction between high and low, major and minor; and reinforces the
ongoing ghettoization of works deemed unworthy of critical attention.40

As I will demonstrate, it is exactly this desire to distinguish between the high art media and
kitsch, as promoted by art discourse, that is a primary source of the term “graphic novel.”41
Because both comics and popular fiction have a long history of being positioned as prime
examples in the hierarchical division in art discourse, having been specifically named in
arguments delineating artistic work that can be classified as a high art medium from the mere
“commodity objects” of kitsch, it is easy to understand the incentive to create a new term that
would grant it an elevated position as a distinct medium.

40 Catherine Labio, “What’s in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and ‘The Graphic Novel,’” *Cinema
41 Here I say “primary” since comics have also faced a long history of censorship over fears of their danger to
society. This danger, however, very often was sparked from a “high” versus “low” debate, a fear of subculture
and/or a fear of the underrepresented classes or minorities of a given society.
Through looking at the evolution of the term “medium” within art discourse, with a specific focus on the efforts made by Krauss to move forward from Greenberg’s narrow definition by creating the term “post-medium,” I will expose how inventing the term “graphic novel” circumvents the dismissal of comics as kitsch. Within Krauss’s discourse the graphic novel can not only escape kitsch status simply through terminology, but more importantly, it can also gain “post-medium” status by asserting that it self-reflexively utilizes both comics and literature as its technical support to manifest as a new medium. And yet, I will argue that ultimately this laying claim to “post-medium” status does not come any closer to actually defining the graphic novel than does Rajewsky’s scheme for intermediality. For while, in a similar manner to how it operates in intermediality studies, the graphic novel can become a new medium in art discourse, neither its status as a new intermedial medium or “post-medium” affords the graphic novel a definition truly separate from comics in terms of unique formal abilities. Further, in a reverse fashion to intermediality studies, the graphic novel’s gaining medium status in art discourse can actually work to help elevate comics from their lowly position by claims to self-reflexivity and technical support. I will assert that in this manner the graphic novel can work not only to destabilize the parameters established for the denigration of comics but, more importantly, can displace the entire question of value within art discourse.

A systematic critique of the idea that the advent of the graphic novel is a watershed moment where so-called lowly, popular-culture comics merged with high literature to manifest as a new intermedial medium or “post-medium,” in this chapter I demonstrate how medium classification obscures debates about comics’ abilities to function politically. While comics can be culturally elevated in both intermediality studies and art discourse using each discourse’s own
parameters for medium classification, what this process allows for is something far greater: an exposure of the problematic hierarchical promotion of certain objects as more culturally and artistically important. In exposing how the term “medium” inscribes objects with cultural capital and how various institutions perpetuate and utilize such value-based distinctions between cultural objects in order to maintain their own cultural capital, I conclude that the “graphic novel” works to both expose and undermine such systems. The coining of the term “graphic novel” can therefore be seen as a reversal of the rejection of comics in art discourse, and, more importantly, when coupled with the seeming refusal of hierarchies in intermediality studies, allows for a different perspective on the very question of “medium” altogether. To answer Baetens’s call to determine “what the graphic novel is, and what it actually does”: the term “graphic novel” is a critical tool with which to complicate the established notions of defining “medium” and thereby sheds insight into how such terminology works to obscure the “political violence” of institutions.42 By displacing the entire question of the value of cultural objects, the “graphic novel” reveals the fault in the logic of archival inscription.

**Intermediality and the Graphic Novel**

Discourse on intermediality varies greatly from discipline to discipline, leading, not infrequently, to a confusion of terminology, as noted by Irina Rajewsky in her 2005 article “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality.” While there is much discourse addressing the qualifications and scope of intermediality, from specific to more broad schemes, I find Rajewsky’s approach interesting in that she both seeks a definition that could clarify the term across disciplinary borders and offers a practical guide for classifying various

manifestations of intermediality. As I will illustrate further into this section, because her approach seeks to discuss intermediality in terms of how media combine and with what effect, rather than promoting certain media combinations as artistically better or more culturally important, her scheme is aptly suited to approach the question of what constitutes the graphic novel, especially in relation to comics. First, however, it is important to situate Rajewsky’s paradigm within the wider discourse on intermediality to illustrate the manner in which her approach can be seen as an opening up of the term from its previously highly hierarchical confines.

While in her article Rajewsky is careful to point out that labeling any particular work as intermedial is subject to scrutiny by the discipline that lays claim to that work, as well as to that discipline’s definition and parameters of “medium,” she nevertheless asserts:

> An entire range of phenomena [qualify] as intermedial. Examples include those phenomena which for a long time have been designated by terms such as transposition d’art, filmic writing, ekphrasis, musicalization of literature, as well as such phenomena as film adaptations of literary works, “novelization,” visual poetry, illuminated manuscripts, Sound Art, opera, comics, multimedia shows, hyperfiction, multimedial computer “texts” or installations, etc.  

This extensive and diverse list is exemplary of the fundamental way in which Rajewsky departs from previous debates about what constitutes intermediality: she specifically defines intermediality as “a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix inter) in some way take place between media.” The generic quality she attributes to intermediality, which enables it to be a term inclusive of various forms of media interaction, is purposefully a far cry from intermediality’s original connotation, as well as from much of the contemporary discourse on intermediality.

---

44 Ibid., 46.
Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, the coiner of the term “intermedia,” asserted in 1981 that while the term, as he had hoped, had moved beyond its original scope as presented in his 1965 essay of the same name, it was in fact misused in its contemporary conflation with the term “mixed-media.” He notes that while “mixed-media” is similar to “intermedia” in its combination of at least two separate media, the two remain distinctive in how they combine media. As an example of this difference, he points to the opera, about which he writes:

[…] the music, the libretto, and the mise-en-scene are quite separate: at no time is the operagoer in doubt as to whether he is seeing the mise-en-scene, the stage spectacle, hearing the music, etc. […] In intermedia, on the other hand, the [...] element[s] [...] [are] fused conceptually.

Differentiating “intermedia” from other forms of media combination was further specifically attended to by Yvonne Spielmann in her article “Synesthesia and Intersenses: Intermedia in Electronic Images.” In her article, Spielmann reinforces Higgins’s distinctive parameters of “intermedia” to an even greater extent by differentiating “mixed-media” from “multimedia.” Contrary to Higgins, Spielmann names those media presented together yet which still remain distinct, such as the opera, “multimedia.” This she defines as separate from “mixed-media,” which she claims, “incorporates elements of one medium in another (e.g. photography in film, painting in photography).” However, like her predecessor, she maintains that what is of the utmost importance for qualification as “intermedia,” what keeps those works distinct from any other form of media combination, is a formal change of the individual media by their combination that results in something altogether new. She writes, “The form of an intermedia

---

45 Dick Higgins first (re)introduced the term “intermedia” into the vernacular with his 1965 article of the same name. He claims in a 1981 article-response that “intermedia” first appeared in its current usage in an 1812 work by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
artwork is thus defined then not only by collision but also by the *exchange and transformation* of elements that come from different media.***48

This manner of defining intermediality, however, has been highly problematized by Jens Schröter in his article “Discourses and Models of Intermediality.”**49 Schröter argues that this view of intermediality, what he terms “synthetic intermediality,” is problematic on two distinct levels. Primarily, he asserts that Higgins’s highly regarded *fusion* or Spielmann’s *exchange and transformation* of distinct media into a new medium is actually belied by the naming of these new media, which ultimately calls into question their *fusion* or *exchange and transformation* altogether. He sardonically notes:

> It is, however, peculiar that a form whose name is already hinting at the assembly of different forms, such as “graphic poetry,” appears as an indivisibly fusioned intermedium. If intermedia are old forms that are inextricably blended in a new form, then its scholar-viewer can hardly succeed in naming the original forms from which the intermedium is generated; if he/she does succeed at all, then the price would have to be paid to (textually) divide it into the original media which then would directly lead to negate the unity of the intermedium.**50

This critique, which Schröter specifically directs toward these parameters for “intermedia,” does not, however, entirely hold true for what Spielmann aims for in her further elaborations on the subject. While Higgins asserts that it is the emergent new media themselves, rather than their intermediality, that are exciting and worthy of critical attention, Spielmann takes the reverse approach. Her idea of intermediality focuses on the articulation of the media combination, that is, “when the structural elements of both media are made evident and visible in a form that reveals

---

48 Ibid., 59 (emphasis mine).
49 In his article, Schröter presents a thorough and highly critical overview what he terms the four discursive strategies of intermediality. See Schröter (2011).
their differences." However, while her concern for the manner in which each distinct medium is transformed into a new medium allows her to circumvent part of Schröter’s criticism of “synthetic intermediality,” she is yet unable to avoid his further critique of the importance that emergent new media are granted in such discourse. For Schröter, whether or not there is a rejection of or interest in the media that combine, there is a problematic implicit hierarchy established by positing any intermedial work as a wholly new medium. He writes:

Three factors are characteristic for this model of intermediality: a) the condemnation of “monomedia” as forms of social and aesthetic alienation, b) a sharp distinction between intermedia and mixed media, and c) closely connected to the latter, a revolutionary and utopian attitude regarding the triumph over “monomedia” as a social liberation (or at least its preliminary stages) in terms of the return to “holistic types of existence.”

What Schröter illuminates here is the paradox in this particular discourse on intermediality of at once condemning the cultural and aesthetic hierarchy of the traditional media and yet establishing a new hierarchy by elevating these new media to a position over both the traditional media from which they emerge and other forms of media combination.

Schröter’s underlining the fault in both the logic and aims of this view of intermediality as the formation of wholly new and better media was taken up by Rajewsky in her approach to the question of intermediality. Unlike Schröter, however, she does not completely reject either Higgins or Spielmann, but rather uses their arguments to develop a systematic approach to delineate both how media combine with one another and with what effect. Her reappropriation of the term, therefore, allows her to maintain that—while there is a difference in the way in which and with what effect media combine—any combination of media, including “mixed-media,” “multimedia,” and “intermedia,” can be seen as intermedial in that it “designates those

51 Spielmann, “Synesthesia and Intersenses,” 60.
52 Schröter, “Discourses and Models of Intermediality.”
configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media.”53 Her argument carefully avoids the faults Schröter finds in both Higgins’s and Spielmann’s discourse primarily through her refusal to clearly define “medium.” In so doing, she circumvents any discussion of hierarchies to focus instead on what she calls “the phenomena” of media combinations. Ultimately, what is interesting for Rajewsky is to bring various media combinations into one discourse, which could serve to establish a systematized categorization of medial interactions in a manner that avoids privileging one medium or combination of media over another. Of her new strategy for classifying intermediality, she writes:

If the use of intermediality as a category for the description and analysis of particular phenomena is to be productive, we should therefore distinguish groups of phenomena, each of which exhibits a distinct intermedial quality and—what is even more important in the present context—a particular way of crossing media borders. This allows for drawing distinctions between individual subcategories of intermediality and for developing a uniform theory for each of them.54

To this end, she distinguishes three categories of intermediality: medial transposition, media combination, and intermedial references. The first of these categories, medial transposition, addresses works that are adaptations from one medium to another, and thereby intermedial in their transformation from the original source to a new manifestation.55 The second category, media combination, as its title would suggest, is the coming together of at least two distinct media either in process or in product where each medium is materially present. The third

53 Rajewsky makes clear in her article that her use of the term “intermediality” is something to be distinguished from “intermedia” as proposed by Higgins, and yet, her discourse not only addresses but uses part of Higgins’s original meaning of “intermedia.” Indeed, Rajewsky herself cannot fully escape the confusion and conflation of terms, which she points out at the start of her argument, presented in the opening paragraph of this section. Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation,” 46.

54 Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation,” 55.

55 While Schröter notes that this category poses its own set of problems, particularly concerning the independence of narratology from medium, I will not delve further into this argument here since the works this thesis is concerned with are not adaptations. For more on narratology, medium, and Rajewsky’s scheme, see Schröter (2011).
category, intermedial references, applies to one medium evoking or imitating at least one other medium that is not materially present.

In her extensive lists of examples for each category, she specifically notes comics as belonging to the second category, media combination, alongside opera, film, theatre performances, illuminated manuscripts, and computer or Sound Art installations. This motley group is at once a clear indication of Rajewsky expanding the borders of previous discourse on intermediality, which has insisted on differentiating “mixed-media” and “multimedia” from “intermedia.” And yet, specifically within this second category, she agrees with Spielmann’s insistence that the manner in which the individual media self-reflexively reveal themselves in their combination is a key component to their intermediality. About the parameters of this category, Rajewsky elaborates:

These two media or medial forms are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way. Thus, for this category, intermediality is a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation. The span of this category runs from a mere contiguity of two or more material manifestations of different media to a “genuine” integration, an integration which in its most pure form would privilege none of its constitutive elements.

Further following Spielmann, and to a lesser extent Higgins, she notes that the combination of media in a “‘genuine’ integration” could lead to a new medium whose “plurimedial foundation becomes its specificity.” From this passage, while it is clear that Rajewsky insists that intermedial works in this category combine at least two media in

56 As noted earlier, Higgins specifically labeled the opera as “mixed-media,” an argument Spielmann slightly altered by naming the opera and other such works “multimedia.”
57 “Self-reflexivity” is of great importance to Rosalind Krauss in her definition of “medium,” a point I will explore more fully later in this chapter.
58 Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation,” 52.
59 Ibid.
articulation with each other, she not only carefully avoids naming which media combine in her examples but also avoids clearly pointing to what constitutes a “‘genuine’ integration,” and thus a new medium. In this way, while she does follow both Spielmann’s and Higgins’s idea of the possibility for new media to manifest from intermediality, she is able to sidestep the criticism they face from Schröter due to their overtly established hierarchy for intermedial works. By refusing to claim these new media as more important than either the individual media that combined to create them or any other combination of media, Rajewsky therefore leaves it up to each medium’s specific discourse to determine the answers to these questions.

As noted in the introduction, although a more or less “official” definition of comics is in constant debate within comics studies, there is a greater degree of general agreement upon which media combine within comics and to what effect. While it is perhaps commonplace in both popular culture and various disciplines to think of comics as combining the singular media of written text and image, obviously not all comics actually use written text, a point intentionally made in the definition of comics posited by comics artist Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. In his work, McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”60 Though this definition of comics is highly contested within comics studies, what McCloud nevertheless makes clear in defining comics thus is that the juxtaposition, or combining, of media in comics is not necessarily the individual media of written text and image, but rather of sequence and images.61 The latter is a point that many comics

61 McCloud’s definition of comics is both widely known and widely contested. See, for example, Magnussen and Christiansen (1998).
scholars agree upon. Therefore, while in comics it is not exactly written text that is combined with images, comics can still be argued as combining text and image through an assertion that comics constitute a system of language based upon the sequentiality of their images. Comics scholars interested in the semiotics of comics, from Walter Koch and Wolfgang Hünig in the 1970s to Thierry Groensteen in his influential 1999 *Système de la bande dessinée*, have argued that comics constitutes a distinct language created by the sequentiality of its panels, a point that has been further elaborated upon through close examination of exactly how this language operates. For example, in his 2001 article “Relatedness: Aspects of Textual Connectivity in Comics,” comics scholar Mario Saraceni asserts that the layout of comics works as a textual system due to the graphic similarities between the comic panel and the sentence. He writes:

> An obvious element of comparison between the sentence and the panel is of a graphical nature, in that in an extremely simple definition, the sentence could be regarded as a portion of text delineated by two full stops, whose function is then similar to that of panel borders in comics: they represent a graphical boundary for the unit.63

While again, the definition of “comics” and its system of communication continues to be debated, from this discourse on the structure of comics language, it is quite easy to argue that comics is, in fact, intermedial under Rajewsky’s second category of media combination. Using arguments such as Saraceni’s, it can be seen as clearly articulating a coming together of two distinct media: text and image. Further, because the two media in combination work together to create a distinct language system, I assert that their combination can also be seen as constituting a new medium in that they are intertwined, which satisfies Rajewsky’s parameters for a “‘genuine’ integration.” Following this line of argument, because the graphic novel also

---

combines text and image in the same manner as comics, it, too, can fit into this category and also be classified as a new medium. However, to conflate the graphic novel with comics based purely on a formal and “‘genuine’ integration” of media is rather too simplistic. In its distinct terminology, the graphic novel still maintains its separation from comics.

In looking at Rajewsky’s third category of intermedial references, this distinction between the graphic novel and comics can be explored more fully. According to her parameters, comics could also fit into this category, while maintaining their status in the second category. As an example of how media can cross the three distinct categories of her scheme, she explains that while a film adaptation of a novel falls into the first category of media transposition, it can also be seen as falling into the second category of media combination (of film and literature), and often necessarily fits into the third category of intermedial references as well, since the film necessarily in some manner references the text from which it was adapted. However, unlike in media combination, this third category presents just one medium in which the other medium or media are presented. Of this third category, she writes:

> Intermedial references, for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing […] are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification […] The given product thus constitutes itself partly to or wholly in relation to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers.\(^\text{64}\)

This category Rajewsky further elaborates upon with the addition of what she calls their “‘as if’ character […] and illusion-forming quality inherent in them.”\(^\text{65}\) She defines this character as “only generat[ing] an illusion of another medium’s specific practices”—that is, that a literary text can evoke or imitate a film through evoking or imitating such features as the zoom or dissolve,

---

\(^{64}\) Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation,” 52.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 54.
but always remains distinctively within the milieu of the verbal, textual medium of literature. This illusion, the evoking or imitating, of one medium by another she ultimately labels a “putting into relation.”66 As an example, she cites Sasha Waltz’s dance theatre production Körper (Berlin, 2000) (Fig. 1), which she claims achieves a relation to painting. Waltz’s dancers, entrapped between a large frame with a transparent front and opaque back, are able to achieve a sense of weightlessness by:

[…] supporting themselves in the air by pressing their limbs against the two “walls,” […] mov[ing] very slowly, head up and head down, in every possible direction […] With several other factors contributing to its overall effect (a particular lighting, the dancers’ costumes recalling loincloths, bodies seemingly cut off at the borders of the frame, etc.), this sequence as a whole inevitably reminds the viewer of a painting.67

She further notes that Waltz’s piece not only references painting but offers a discourse on both the stasis of painting and the mere illusion of a world outside the painting’s frame, achieved simultaneously in having the dancers move both within and past the borders of the frame.

What is interesting in considering comics in this light is that comics have often been assumed to, using Rajewsky’s term, reference film in an “as if” manner. As stated earlier, in Rajewsky’s example of how a novel can reference a film, she specifically notes that the novel would utilize “certain filmic techniques.” This is a great point of contention in comics studies. As comics scholars Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen note in Comics and Culture, while this idea has become a sort of common belief, upheld by comics scholar Manuel Kolp, in fact, comics actually existed before film and “the cinematographic language (close-up, point of view, dynamic editing of camera angles) was established in comics long before Porter and

---

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 57.
Griffith developed the narrative film."\textsuperscript{68} They propose, therefore, that comics could be seen as influential to film rather than the reverse, which they argue has "led to a general deprecation of comics as an inferior, more static version of film."\textsuperscript{69} In an interesting demonstration of comics’ influence on film, the opening sequence for the film adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s \textit{Watchmen} utilized the same zoom-effect found on the opening page of the first issue of the comic (Fig. 2), a not-so-subtle nod to the fact that film references comics, and not the reverse. Here, it becomes clear that even Rajewsky’s scheme can be instrumentalized to establish hierarchies, and contributes to debates over the formal qualities of specific media, a point I will develop further in the following pages. While this argument maintains for comics its status as a combination of text and image that references only itself rather than film, or by extension, and in a reverse manner, painting or drawing, it still leaves open the possibility for the graphic novel to be distinguished from comics. Unlike comics, which in terminology speaks to something altogether new, using Schröter’s criticism for Higgins’s idea of media fusion cited earlier, the term “graphic novel,” as a combination of “graphic” and “novel,” suggests a different kind of combination, or referencing of, different media.


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 15.
Fig. 1: (top) Sasha Waltz, *Körper* (2000), and Fig. 2: (bottom) *Watchmen #1* (1986, p. 1)
In order to pursue what differentiates the media combination of the graphic novel from that of comics, it is interesting to return to Eisner’s influential definition of the graphic novel, which he discussed at length in his 2002 keynote lecture at the University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels. In his lecture, Eisner shared his impetus for coining the term “graphic novel” by revealing that when he was searching for a publisher for his *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, he was determined to find a large publisher who would have a greater reach than the much smaller comics publishers. He recalled his conversation with the president of Bantam Books in New York thus:

So I called him and said, “There’s something I want to show you, something I think is very interesting.” He said, “Yeah, well, what is it?” A little man in my head popped up and said, “For Christ’s sake stupid, don’t tell him it’s a comic. He’ll hang up on you.” So, I said, “It’s a graphic novel.” He said, “Wow! That sounds interesting. Come on up.” Well, I did bring it up and he looked at it and looked at me through his reading glasses and said, “This is a comic book, bring it to a smaller publisher,” which I did.

This pointedly humorous anecdote speaks to what many comics scholars note about the “graphic novel”: that it is simply a marketing term to elevate comics, first coined by Eisner to try to sell his work and since maintained by the publishing industry due to the same motivation.

However, as noted in the introduction, Eisner also claimed:

I’m here to tell you that I believe strongly that this medium is literature. […] The word “comics,” of course, we’re still living with it, is a misnomer. We can’t get rid of the thing. We can’t get rid of it—it’s like “Kleenex.” It doesn’t belong here and it’s partly our fault because comics originally were designed to be funny stories.

Following Eisner’s assertion, the graphic novel could be seen as a medium at once distinct from comics—and one that references comics. Therefore, rather than the graphic novel being

---

71 See, for example, Sabin (1993).
72 Eisner, “Keynote Address,” paragraph 16.
conflated with comics as a media combination of text and image, as both Eisner and the term itself, following Schröter’s argument, suggest, it could be seen as a combination of comics (graphic) and literature (novel). Additionally, like Waltz’s Körper, which offers a commentary on the stasis of painting and the mere illusion of a world outside the painting’s frame through illuminating these properties inherent in painting, the graphic novel, in its ties to “serious” literature, could be seen as referencing and transforming comics’ “funny stories.”

While Rajewsky’s argument can be used to justify comics and the graphic novel as specific media, what becomes problematic in her plan for categorizing various manifestations of intermediality is that in her refusal to clearly define “medium,” she ultimately offers no definition of what intermediality actually means. As Lars Elleström points out in his article “The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations”:

> Without a more precise understanding of what a medium is, one cannot expect to comprehend what intermediality is. This is not only a terminological problem. On the contrary, the understanding of what a medium is and what intermedial relations actually consist of has vital implications for each and every inquiry in old and new fields of study concerning the arts and media.73

Rajewsky’s argument, therefore, rather than leveling the playing field for various intermedial works, only leads back to the exact problem her system tries to circumvent. In leaving the question of “medium” up to the discourses that lay claim to a particular work, her scheme rather reinforces arguments for certain media's discourse to claim their stakes as artistically better or more culturally important than other media. Because the graphic novel can be seen as a combination of comics and literature, it necessarily can be argued, as Tan notes, as an evolutionary step from comics to something more noteworthy, the very position Eisner takes in

---

his discourse on the graphic novel. And yet Rajewsky’s discourse, as Elleström notes, never clearly defines the media that combine in intermedial works, such as comics and literature in the graphic novel. Because of this, Rajewsky’s paradigm does more to lead to additional questions about “medium” and “intermediality” than it does to answer them. In this way, her discourse on intermediality not only problematically works to reinforce the hierarchies established for the denigration of comics but also reiterates and affirms Baetens’s suggestion from the introduction to this chapter: intermediality does “function as an alibi to avoid further questions about what the graphic novel is, and what it actually does.”

Comics and Popular Literature in Art Discourse

Though current discourse on intermediality has attempted a straightforward and nonhierarchical approach to categorizing various manifestations of intermedial works of art, art discourse has consistently had the high-low debate at the forefront of its classification system. As demonstrated in the previous section, at the outset, Higgins and the Fluxus art movement were reactionary to this hierarchical classification system of art discourse and sought a new means of categorization that would reflect the changes in the contemporary production of art. As stated earlier, not only did this initial approach to promoting new art forms simply lead back to hierarchies by inverting them, as I have demonstrated, even later attempts to thwart the hierarchies of art discourse have ultimately been undermined by the refusal of intermediality studies to clearly define “medium.” Therefore, in order to approach the question about what the graphic novel is and what it actually does, it is imperative to return to art discourse, which has long been concerned with the question of “medium.”

With his entrée into art criticism with his aforementioned 1939 article, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg firmly established the paradigm within art discourse for the delineation between “genuine” and mass culture based on a system of value attributable to medium classification. In his article, Greenberg draws a firm line between that which he classifies as the high art, medium-specific work of the avant-garde and the low- or non-art kitsch of popular culture. “Kitsch” he defines as non-medium-specific works intentionally created for market consumption, which have no real aesthetic value due to their mass reproduction. He clearly outlines various forms of kitsch when he writes:

Simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.⁷⁵

Further in his critique, he makes explicit the perilous nature of these rearguard works, labeling them the “debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture.”⁷⁶ While much of Greenberg’s formalist approach to art theory has been criticized in contemporary discourse, his appropriation of the term “kitsch” imprinted its use as an inextricable part of the vernacular; “kitsch” is still used as a label for low- or non-art works in art discourse.

Carried on by Rosalind Krauss in her article “Reinventing the Medium,” she reserves the Greenbergian kitsch label for those works she calls “the fraudulent mask of art,” and perpetuates her predecessor’s denigration of both comics and popular literature through her labeling the photo-novel, and by extension, comics, “the most degraded form of mass ‘literature.’”⁷⁷ This

---

⁷⁶ Ibid., 534.
tradition in art discourse of using the term “kitsch” as a watermark, as well as comics as a scapegoat, are both interesting points to consider in the shift of the parameters of high art brought about by Krauss in her work, “A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition. In Voyage, she sets out to distance herself from Greenberg, noting, as stated in the opening quote to this chapter, that the term “medium” had been haunted by his insistence on the necessity of specificity in a given medium. While once common currency in the art world, she argues that the idea of medium-specificity is an “essentialist reduction of painting to ‘flatness,’” and one that problematically excludes all but the traditional arts of painting, sculpture, and drawing.  

As early as in her 1979 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss begins to delve into the problem that much of her later work, including Voyage, would focus on more specifically: the question of “medium.” In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” she begins her critical approach to the heretofore essentialist connotations of “medium” by constructing an argument regarding what she calls the “historian/critic’s” desire to maintain the “cultural term” “sculpture,” even in an era in which “rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture.” She writes, “In the hands of this criticism categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything.” This, she argues, is not merely a means of retaining a term for the sake of categorical inclusion of new works of art, an area of discourse she would later become highly concerned with, but is testament

---

80 Ibid.
to the desire to understand the vanguard by placing it within a familiar history. She sees this, however, as a “trick” to legitimize new work, which ultimately obscures the term in its attempt to save it. In order to illustrate her point, she notes that what has historically been labeled as sculpture is inseparable from the monument. She notes, “By virtue of this [internal] logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”

She argues, however, that this notion of sculpture as monument, sculpture as inseparable from place, shifted in the late nineteenth century to its contrary: sitelessness. She states that in the modern period, “sculptural production […] operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential.” For Krauss, it is in its placelessness and loss of its base that sculpture came to reveal its own autonomy through creating a discourse on its new status. But this exploration of sculpture’s new position as a “negative condition of the monument,” she notes was rather quickly exhausted and ultimately led to sculpture being “something that was possible to locate only in terms of what it was not.” As such, sculpture entered into a new sort of logic based on its surroundings; sculpture became “not-landscape” or “not-architecture,” and therefore became a “sum of neither/nor.” But this argument, she claims, proves rather more complex. Utilizing a mathematical Klein group to create an expanded field of reference (Fig. 3), Krauss argues for new terminology to be applied to what would have previously been labeled as

---

81 This is quite an interesting claim in consideration of her own work, a point I will develop in the following pages. 82 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 33. 83 This position shifted, according to Krauss, with Rodin’s Gates of Hell (1880–circa 1890) and Balzac (1891). 84 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 34. 85 Ibid. 86 Ibid., 36.
sculpture. This noted postmodernist move would open the possibilities of including into this Klein group of not-landscape plus not-architecture (sculpture) three other forms: landscape plus architecture (site construction), landscape plus not-landscape (marked sites), and architecture plus not-architecture (axiomatic structures).87

![Fig. 3: Krauss's Klein group](image)

This new expanded field, she argues, necessarily calls into question the parameters of “medium.” She claims, “Within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.”88 However, while her argument opens the possibility of possibilities, she

---

87 Ibid., 38.
88 Ibid., 42.
plays into the historian/critic’s desire for categorization when she claims, “The field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions.” Indeed, like the historian/critic, Krauss calls for a logic, but purports that this new logic is better (and more logical) in its escape from the “definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material.” Rather, she notes the logic of the space of postmodernist practice to be “organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.” In order to support her point, she argues that painting would, in this kind of scheme, probably involve the opposition of uniqueness and reproducibility, and that therefore, within painting or any other postmodern space “many different mediums might be employed.” As I will clarify in the following pages, not only does this model work as a synthesis of Krauss’s entire discourse on “medium,” it sets the parameters and the limitations of her scheme, which will ultimately undermine her point.

Following “Sculpture,” to begin her reworking of the term “medium,” Krauss first presents critic Stanley Cavell’s idea of automatism, a backlash to Greenberg in its “insistence on the internal plurality of any given medium, of the impossibility of thinking of aesthetic medium as nothing more than an unworked physical support.” She notes that Cavell’s automatism allows art to be freed from reductive discussions of purity based on medium-specific autonomy, in which, she states, art becomes disengaged from everything outside its frame. She argues that medium-specific autonomy lost any claims to validity in a contemporary context because it had proven illusory both in terms of the art market, which she notes increasingly looked just like any

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
other, and through its various modes of production, such as serialized paintings, which she claims “seemed to carry the imprint of the industrially produced commodity object, internalizing within the field of the work its own status as interchangeable and thus pure exchange value.”

Further, she argues that with the advent of what she calls photography’s “triumphal convergence [with] art in the 1960s,” the idea of medium-specific autonomy became even more obscured. Proceeding from Walter Benjamin’s extensive discourse on photography, she claims that the mechanical reproduction of photography was “both the source and symptom of a full-scale demise of […] aura across all of culture, so that art itself, as celebrator of the unique and the authentic […] empt[ied] out completely.” Both these sites of resistance to the notion of medium-specific autonomy, the art and consumer market—and what she calls photography’s destruction of the conditions of the aesthetic medium—are the points from which Krauss posits that the traditional notions of “medium” have collapsed, and, somewhat paradoxically, that in “the post-medium condition,” “medium” must be reinvented.

Krauss aims to redefine the parameters of “medium” by asserting that if a work outside of the traditional media is self-reflexive, it can be considered a “post-medium” art, which, moving forward from the limitations of the traditional media of the past, manifests as a new medium. As a means of explanation on the difference between the traditional media and “post-medium” art, she notes:

If the traditional medium is supported by a physical substance (and practiced by a specialized guild), the term “technical support,” in distinction, refers to contemporary commercial vehicles, such as cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit, in recognition of the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums.

---

94 Ibid., 11.
95 Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” 293.
96 Ibid., 292–93.
She further explains that where the media of the past, the disciplines of painting, drawing, and sculpture, all require *physical* support in the form of tools, photography and film require more than this alone: both utilize a complex system of *technical* support in both the creation and exhibition processes. Where photography relies on the scene or image captured by the camera as well as the film-development and printing processes, all of which raise the question of what the centerpiece of the work is, film further complicates this question by adding into the list of technical support the projector, the theater space, and the audience.

For Krauss, this point of departure from the traditional media is something that begs closer evaluation; her work confronts the traditional parameters for “medium” by asserting that the use of technical support should not be the criteria for excluding photography and film, and by extension other new art forms, from the qualification of “medium.” Although she agrees with both Greenberg and Benjamin in considering photography the end of the traditional media because of its use of technical support, she argues that the use of commercial vehicles or commodity objects does not necessarily relegate works of art to kitsch status. She is careful to note, using as an example serialized paintings, that even the traditional media can become subject to kitsch status based on Greenberg’s parameters alone, and that therefore his parameters are not viable. She argues instead for the criterion of self-reflexivity in all art; in the same way that Cavell asserts that a work of art must reflect its own internal plurality, she argues that if a technical support is used in a manner that exploits it, criticizes it, or subverts it, and is thereby self-reflexive, it can at once avoid being labeled as kitsch and be viewed as its own new medium.

Clearly, for Krauss, redefining the parameters of “medium” to allow for the incorporation of contemporary art is of the utmost importance, especially in the “obsolescence of the traditional
mediums.” Expanding upon her discussion of the “post-medium condition” in *Voyage*, she offers Marcel Broodthaers’s October 1974 cover for *Studio International* (Fig. 4), which she reads as announcing “the termination of the individual arts as medium-specific.” The cover presents two lines of four circles: the letters *F*, *I*, and *N* in the first three circles are followed by a drawing of an eagle in the last circle of the first line, and a drawing of an ass in the first circle is followed by the letters *R*, *T*, and *S* in the last circles of the second line. While she reads it as a rebus that spells out “fine arts,” she notes that it is also possible to read the cover as:

FIN ARTS, or the end of art; and this in turn would open onto a specific way that Broodthaers often used the eagle, and this onto a particular narrative about the end of art, or—reading his rebus more carefully—the end of the arts.

She carefully analyzes Broodthaers’s narrative about the end of the arts, noting how rather than the eagle standing for the “fineness of the fine arts” and the ass standing for the lowliness of the arts-in-general, that the rebus ultimately reveals “the stupefying particularity of individual techniques, of everything that embeds practice in the tedium of its making.” For Krauss, Broodthaers’s narrative, however, does not speak only to the growing concern over the reductiveness of modernism, but in fact serves as its remedy. She reads his cover as a key example of how contemporary artists can use technical, commercial support to manifest a new medium. In his use of the rebus and the magazine cover, Broodthaers calls attention to the problem he is addressing by self-reflexively using both the historic heraldry and play of the rebus and the commercialized format of the magazine.

The concern over the state of art, and especially its institutionalization, was a recurrent

---

98 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 9.
101 Ibid.
topic for Broodthaers. In another, earlier, narrative on this topic, Broodthaers created a fictive museum-like exhibition within various exhibition spaces, including his home, entitled *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968) (Figs. 5 and 6). In his work, he presented an array of objects in a highly organized display, including paintings and drawings hung on walls, as well as taxidermied animals and other objects placed on pedestals or encased in glass. All of these he tagged with identification numbers and text that read *THIS IS NOT A WORK OF ART*—an obvious nod to both Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte. His fictive museum is clearly a critique of traditional institutional practice that grants objects status as high art through their recognition and classification by the institution itself. Of this project, he writes, “The actual effect of the exhibition consists in the fact that we ultimately gain, through the encounter with fiction, a stronger consciousness of reality—but a mental reality, obviously.”\(^{102}\) “With the help of a fiction like my museum it is possible to grasp reality as well as that which reality conceals.”\(^{103}\) For Krauss, this sort of self-reflexivity is what artists must achieve in the “post-medium condition”: self-conscious and site-specific work that comments on the technical support it employs. In his self-reflexive use of the museum space, art objects, and narrative, Broodthaers can be said to be using the medium of fiction, a new “post-medium” following Krauss’s parameters.


Broodthaers: counter-clockwise from top left: Fig. 4: Cover for Studio International (October 1974); Fig. 5: Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Section of Figures (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present) (1972); Fig. 6: a close-up of objects from the previous photograph.
Two other artists whom Krauss especially notes in her discussion of “post-medium” art are Sophie Calle and James Coleman, both of whom, like Broodthaers, self-reflexively utilize narrative elements as technical support within their work. In Calle’s conceptual piece *The Shadow* (1981) (Fig. 7), for example, she utilizes what Krauss would perhaps call the medium of investigative journalism. Calle explains that much of her work up until this point had centered on her following strangers and taking photographs of them. In the catalogue for *The Shadow*, she writes:

> These works had involved me so much in the act of following that I wanted, in a certain way, to reverse these relationships. So I asked my mother to hire a private detective to follow me, without him knowing that I had arranged it, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence.104

This project, which at once speaks to Pierre Bourdieú’s theory in *A Middle Brow Art* that the photograph as documentary evidence works to reinforce our social relations, also points to the “kitsch” entertainment of contemporary tabloid culture.105 Krauss claims that in Calle's hiring an investigator to follow her and documenting her feelings of being followed, she is self-reflexive in her creation of a commentary on the technical support she employs: textual and photographic documentation. This narrative impulse can be seen in much of Calle’s work, and is particularly interesting in the works in which she explores the narrative of identity from an outside perspective.

Going further than in *The Shadow*, in which she is mostly focused on revealing her own feelings of being followed and how identity can actively be constructed, in *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) (Fig. 8), she instead turns her attention to the opinions and feelings of others. For this work, she asked 107 women from various professions and backgrounds to respond to a break-up

---

105 For further discussion of the photograph as documentary evidence, see chapter 2.
Sophie Calle: Fig. 7: (top) from _The Shadow_ (1981), and Fig. 8: (bottom) from _Take Care of Yourself_ (2007)
letter she received via e-mail from her lover, X. The completed piece, a conglomeration of all responses, which includes analyses from criminal pathologists to linguists to artists, and ranges from video performances to photographs to text, similarly speaks to the gossipy tone of tabloid magazines and also offers a socio-anthropological look at our voyeuristic impulses, desire to gather facts, and belief in a system of right and wrong, absolution and punishment—themes I will explore more fully in the following chapter.

Already in the examples of Broodthaers and Calle, it is clear that what is of the utmost importance for Krauss in redefining the parameters of “medium” is to allow for the incorporation of contemporary art. However, as can be seen in both artists’ work, with regard to the use of commercial vehicles, contemporary art finds itself veering dangerously close to Greenberg’s notion of kitsch, a point Krauss sidesteps by claiming that through self-reflexively appropriating so-called kitsch objects, contemporary art is able to retain its status as medium and thereby salvage the notion of high art in a contemporary context. In her insistence on contemporary art’s self-reflexivity through the utilization, exploitation, or analysis of commercial vehicles, she at once carves out a place for contemporary art and yet is clear in differentiating the new media she helps to define from “fraudulent” art.

Where Krauss briefly discusses both Broodthaers’s and Calle’s use of commercial vehicles, she specifically points to Coleman’s use of narrative and commercialized popular culture in his works in order to further mark this distinction between “genuine” and “fraudulent” works of art. She notes that Coleman’s use of the slide-tape and photo-novel specifically work to discuss both the narrative structure and the degradation of pictorial images as they progressed into mass culture through advertising and “degraded” literature. Thereby, she notes, his work

106 I use the term “women” here loosely, as technically one was a bird and two others were puppets.
specifically raises the question of the distinction between high art and kitsch, and firmly establishes it. Picking up on this argument again in “Reinventing the Medium,” she claims that by utilizing both the narrative vehicle of the photo-novel, and the slide-tape’s still photographic images in a sequence, which call attention to the “paradoxical collision between stillness and movement that the static slide provokes right at the interstice of its changes,” Coleman “presse[s] into service [low-grade, low-tech commercial support] as a way of returning to the idea of a medium.” Pointedly, she argues:

> And indeed it is this resource, this most degraded form of mass “literature”—comic books for adults—that Coleman will exploit in his transformation of the physical support of the slide tape into the fully articulate and formally reflexive condition of what could finally be called a medium.108

However, Krauss’s dismissal of this “degraded form of mass ‘literature’” can be turned upon itself. Using her terms, and following Eisner’s assertion, the graphic novel could be classified as a new medium that employs as technical support both the form of comics and the content of literature. Like her parameters for sculpture, in my Krauss-inspired Klein group below (Fig. 9), it could be argued that the graphic novel gains its status as medium, and therefore status as art, through its self-referential use of both comics and literature. But of course, to assert that the graphic novel is a “post-medium” because of its use of comics is rather too simplistic, and necessarily calls to mind Rajewsky’s scheme for intermediality; this argument still does not get any closer to defining what the graphic novel is and what it does than it does to assert that it is intermedial.

---

108 Ibid., 300.
While Krauss’s paradigm shift widens the circle of high art to include contemporary self-reflexive artworks, she still maintains the tenets of Greenberg’s original hierarchical paradigm. She notes that:

One of the sources for Coleman’s “medium” is the photonovel […] where one sees grown men and women engrossed in these comic-books-for-adults on the Metro or the Underground […] they point directly to an internationalist commercialization of culture in advertising on the one hand and a degraded form of literacy on the other.109

In this statement, she reaffirms her predecessor’s assertion that art objects intended for the mass market—including popular literature, the photo-novel, comics, and by extension the graphic novel—are immediately relegated to kitsch status. This delineation is problematic in that it

purposely brushes aside two key points that could contend with this hierarchical structure, which I will argue in the following section. First, while utilized in this discourse, neither the quite-obvious fact that high art is largely both intended for and dependent upon market economies nor the fact that artistic work meant for reproduction, such as high art Literature with a capital “L,” is explicitly considered or explored in a manner that could complicate and perhaps dismantle such distinctions between high art and kitsch. And second, this discourse also stakes its claims on self-reflexivity and yet does not attempt a closer look at so-called kitsch objects in this light, even when their use in this argument structure—such as in the work of Broodthaers, Calle, and Coleman—already puts the previous rejection of these objects in a position that is difficult to maintain.

**Undermining Comics as “Kitsch”**

Primarily, through a look at the historical precedence of serialized literature, namely the Victorian serialized novel, art discourse’s assertion that the reproducibility and commercial drive of popular fiction immediately relegates it to kitsch can be refuted through Krauss’s own argument about formal reflexivity. The Victorian era heralded the rise of serialized fiction—novels published in short installments in magazines and newspapers over the course of several editions, often spanning at least a year. While there is no doubt that this venture was commercially successful due to readers being enthralled by serials’ thrilling cliffhangers and wanting to keep abreast of popular culture—which seems to support art discourse’s dismissal of them as kitsch—arguably, the greatest success of serialized fiction was its influence on literacy. Because of the simple fact that novels of the era were not affordable for the average Victorian
family while the inexpensive and disposable magazines and newspapers of the era were, serialization allowed for greater dissemination of and access to literature, which directly increased literacy rates and gave writers recourse to earn a living from their art. But this fact alone, of course, does not necessarily elevate such work to the status of literature, and was seen by Greenberg as a sign of the cultural overtaking of kitsch. He argues that the universal literacy brought about by such work caused “the ability to read and write [to become] a minor skill like driving a car” and set the pace for the development of kitsch commodities for the “peasants [who, without] refined tastes [and] insensible to the values of genuine culture,” nevertheless were desirous of entertainment.

As Victorian literature theorist Julia McCord Chavez notes in “The Gothic Heart of Victorian Serial Fiction,” the advent of serialized fiction, and particularly Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*, is “often identified as the watershed moment for the novel as commodity text, and the Victorian serial is seen as a vehicle for increasing consumption of fiction.” But writers of the era also grappled with this problematic, and were quite engaged with the question of whether, due to time constraints and pressure from readers, the autonomy of their art was lost and their work thus relegated to pure commercial status. As Chavez points out, a clear example of this questioning can be seen in Elizabeth Gaskell’s originally serialized *Cranford*, where her character Miss Deborah Jenkyns claims that serialization is “vulgar, and below the dignity of literature.” This statement can easily be seen as Gaskell self-reflexively exploring the form in which she was writing. While the form of the serialized novel can be seen as a mere commercial

113 Ibid., 791–92.
vehicle, easily obtainable and easily disposable and therefore market-driven, the self-reflexivity of these works—the key component Krauss calls for in her definition of high art—immediately affords them the status of medium, regardless of their commodity status. Of course, it is crucial here to note that a great number of originally serialized fiction has come to be classified as canonical literature, a classification upheld by an authority outside of art discourse, but that nevertheless further throws into question art discourse’s assertion that commodity objects and commercial literature are either “mere” or “kitsch.”

Secondarily, Krauss is careful in her exploration of the use of kitsch commodity objects by artists, noting that it is only in their articulation with other aspects of the artists’ work that they can transcend kitsch status. In discussing Coleman’s work, for example, Krauss delineates the ways in which he uses the formal qualities of the photo-novel and comic book to great effect, but does not venture to consider the manner in which they could be considered self-reflexive in their own right. She notes that in both the photo-novel and the comic book any confrontation between two characters cannot, as in film, cut back and forth between reaction shots due to time constraints. Instead, they must use a double face-out, where both characters appear in the frame together, with the instigator appearing in the background, looking toward both his adversary and the front of the frame, and the adversary appearing in the foreground also facing forward (Figs. 10 and 11). In her discussion of Coleman’s work, she notes that creating both shot and reaction shot within the same frame subverts the idea of filmic suture, which renders the viewer incapable of feeling a part of the narrative structure. She writes:
Fig. 10: (top) James Coleman: *Photograph* (1998–1999), and Fig. 11: (bottom) panel from *Watchmen* (2)
[... ] in this refusal of suture, Coleman confronts and underscores the disembodied planarity of the visual half of his medium, the fact that being film-based, it has no other recourse than to unroll the density of life onto a flat plane. In just this sense, the double face-out’s own flatness takes on a compensatory gravity as it becomes the emblem of this reflexive acknowledgment of the impossibility of the visual field to deliver its promise of either lifelikeness or authenticity.114

Similarly to how she claims Coleman’s use of the double face-out comments on the lack of suture, she notes that the stasis of his images further underscores this lack, and yet, by arranging the images in sequence, he offers a counterargument by creating narrative cohesion. She asserts that Roland Barthes’s “third meaning” applies to Coleman’s work by claiming that in his use of still images in sequence Coleman is commenting on “the photographic still’s privilege of being both static and anecdotalized,” and that therefore he is not, in this manner, actually doing something new. Barthes writes:

> There are other “arts” which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis—namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these “arts,” born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning). This is acknowledged as regards the comic-strip but I myself experience this slight trauma of significance faced with certain photo-novels: “their stupidity touches me” (which could be a certain definition of obtuse meaning). There may thus be a future—or a very ancient past—truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.115

Krauss claims, however, that ultimately this is not the point of Coleman’s work. Though he uses the double face-out found in the photo-novel and comics to great success, his work gaining medium status is rather in addition to, not because of, his play on the stillness and movement of the image. She writes:

---

114 Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away?” 22.
I am claiming, his invention is the medium within which such a thing emerges as a necessary convention, illuminating the logic of the support at the same time that it exfoliates a whole field of possible meanings. Which is to say that the slide tape only becomes a medium once it has been able to generate a set of conventions that will be recursive within it.\(^{116}\)

She carves out a place, therefore, for Coleman’s work to become a medium by asserting that it is his acknowledgment of both his technical support and its inherent properties—that is, his toying with narrative structure within the still image, coupled with the movement of the slide carousel—that gives his work self-reflexivity, the very fundamental of medium status.

Krauss thereby escapes having to pay homage to comics once again by asserting that comics is like the photo-novel, which used alone, is mere kitsch. However, comics studies has argued definitively that comics and the photo-novel actually do not share any more similarity than comics do with film. As mentioned earlier, so-called filmic techniques, such as close-up, point of view, and zoom, originated within comics, not film, and yet it is rather commonplace to consider such techniques and terminology as linked to filmmaking. In a reverse fashion, this confusing linkage of comics to film has led to further misuse of terminology in the study of comics. As Groensteen notes, “While the term *editing (montage)* is encountered sometimes in studies on comics,” it does not truly apply to comics for two distinct reasons:

1) the linkage of shots in a film, which is properly the work of editing, carries itself out in a single linear dimension: that of time, while the panels of a comic are articulated at once in time and space; 2) editing is an operation that takes place after the filming, and it consists of an intervention on a material that has already been elaborated; the page layout, on the contrary, generally is invented at the same time that the drawings are realized on the paper, or even before the scenario is drawn.\(^{117}\)

---


\(^{117}\) For a discussion of time and space in comics, see chapter 3. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2007), 101. See Fig. 2 for an example of how “editing” is part of the page layout in comics.
Along these lines, Baetens reiterates that the primary concern in the creation of comics is the page layout, not editing. On the difference between comics and the photo-novel, he writes:

> For the comics creator, the initial problem consists [in how] to divide the page. For the director of the photo-novel, the first difficulty is to make a selection of the available photos and to best combine them within the limits of the page. That one determines its partitioning, this one determines its activity as a function of collage. Thus, the perspective changes completely.¹¹⁸

What Groensteen and Baetens make clear is that while comics utilize certain techniques found within both film and the photo-novel, comics is neither concerned with emulating film nor subverting filmic suture. Rather, they highlight that comics is concerned with its own form, which again, is the key component in work being self-reflexive and therefore qualifies it as a medium according to Krauss’s argument.

What is interesting to note is that Greenberg, in his sweeping dismissal of comics, found, as Barthes did with the photo-novel, a soft spot for comics, which opened him up to the possibility of their being able to escape kitsch status. In an article on William Steig’s *All Embarrassed* (Fig. 12), Greenberg hints at how comics could become self-reflexive, and thereby elevated. He writes:

> Steig’s cartoons push and strain against the social and psychological limitations of the cartoon form and strive to become self-sufficient, time-transcending art. […] A good deal of automatism has gone into them […] yet they do not manage to escape the neatness and the formularization of the cartoon—nor will they until Steig forces himself to leave his forms more open and to take into greater account the shape of the page.¹¹⁹

What Greenberg suggests here is that if comics could become self-reflexive of its *form*, somehow play with it or manipulate it, it could become art. But what he did not consider is that the


Fig. 12: “Some Kinesthetic Notes III,” from William Steig’s All Embarrassed (1944)
modern, mass-produced comic was already doing just that. Like the serialized novel, newspaper comics and its development into the comic book can make a strong case for medium status by utilizing what Greenberg calls for here, and what Krauss later argues is self-reflexivity. More interestingly, however, the mass-produced comic further turns on its head Krauss’s assertion that there is an obsolescence of medium-specificity in a modern context. Indeed, both these points offer a different perspective to art discourse as outlined by both Greenberg and Krauss in that comics can be seen as at once both medium-specific and “post-medium.”

To illustrate these points, I will present a brief overview of modern, mass-produced comics, which, as I will demonstrate, at once highlight their specific and self-reflexive formal qualities and thereby displace art discourse’s dismissal of comics as kitsch. Beginning with the advent of lithography in the late eighteenth century, newspapers were first able to print images alongside text, which many chose not to do, deeming them not “serious” enough to sit alongside the “straight news.” Satirical papers, however, embraced the opportunity to showcase such work, seeing it as “a distinctive sign of protest and critique.” For example, Honoré Daumier’s Les poires from 1831 (Fig. 13), which mocks King Louis-Philippe of France over a series of four sequential images in which the king’s face morphs into a pear, showcases the unique ability of comics: through the use of image, Daumier is able to convey a “serious” message about the subjugation of the French people by a gluttonous and out-of-touch ruler, while offering the reader the opportunity to laugh at the king’s expense. In addition to the political commentary offered by such images, these comics also speak to the use of the mass-produced image as message-conveyor. As literary critic Richard Terdiman asserts:

As a form immediately distinguishable from the dense flux of printed text, as image, visual representation in the satirical daily could serve distinctively as a representation of the Other: as an alternative to the dominant real, to its discourse, to its characteristic system of expression.\footnote{Ibid., 151.}

Already this early form of mass-produced comics immediately calls attention to its form. It offers not just a discourse on the topic addressed within the image, but, more importantly, a discourse on subversive use of humor and, in this way, self-reflexively speaks to the assumed lowly status of the image and the possibilities of information dissemination that is oppositional to established norms.

---

Fig. 13: Honoré Daumier, *Les poires* (1835)
Unlike the comics presented in the satirical dailies, however, comic books are not able to rely on self-reflexivity in terms of opposition to dominant communication systems quite so easily. Because they are presented as stand-alone albums or books, their position from the outset is necessarily more circumspect than newspaper comics presented alongside the “straight news.” However, much the way the Victorian novel cannot be dismissed as kitsch simply due to serialization and commodification, one of the greatest points of contention in art discourse’s sweeping dismissal of comics seems aimed not just at their form, but at their content. While the historical precedence of humorous comic books certainly contribute to Greenberg’s and Krauss’s disdain for comics generally, I propose that it is the incredible popularization of superhero comics in America that is the main source of their disregard for comics. However, as literary scholars Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti note, to conflate all comics with the genre of superhero comics is problematically misguided. They write:

The expectations of autographers such as Bechdel and Spiegelman that there is a sophisticated and highly literate market for autographics is an interesting indicator of just how presumptive and condescending it is to collapse “comics” to the common denominator of “superhero,” and to characterize the genre in terms of a naive and juvenile reader and a serialized and regimented production process.¹²²

While on the surface this comment seems a backlash against comics being labeled as kitsch, it instead actually reinforces how the line between high and low as promoted by art discourse has created a faction in discourse on comics. What Whitlock and Poletti are ultimately concerned with is carving out a place for “sophisticated and highly literate” comics, particularly those they label “autographics,” or autobiographical comics. Their claiming that it is “condescending [...] to collapse ‘comics’ to the common denominator of ‘superhero,’” further underscores that the aim of their discourse is to separate and elevate “autographics” from such

comics in terms of content. In specifically naming Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman, two comics artists whose autobiographical works have been classified as graphic novels, they refer back to Eisner’s assertion that graphic novels stand apart from lowly comics, thereby reaffirming his claims that the medium of graphic novels—or “autographics”—is literature. However, their using superhero comics as a scapegoat is as superficial as, to paraphrase their words, collapsing all comics into the superhero genre, or dismissing comics altogether as kitsch. As it has been very well argued in comics studies, superhero comics offer more than they perhaps appear to upon first glance, and therefore are quite well suited to refute the argument that it is “condescending” to compare “sophisticated and highly literate” graphic novels to comics. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, while the genre of superhero comics has perhaps been the most highly scrutinized in terms of discourse on kitsch and the “graphic novel,” it, too, can be seen as self-reflexive, and thereby “genuine” art.

In Umberto Eco’s “The Myth of Superman,” he outlines a critical point of what comics of this genre aim to achieve. He writes, “The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he necessarily becomes immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable.”

Certainly, through using an archetypal character, comics such as Superman (Fig. 14) appeal to quite a wide audience, but they do much more than simply entertain. As Carl Jung explains, archetypes, including those found in the character of Superman, are:

[...] primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times [...] that have been modified in a special way. They are no longer contents of the unconscious, but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition, generally in the form of esoteric teaching.124

In this light, it is hard to dismiss even superhero comics as kitsch. For while they offer the reader the ability to envision himself in the role of the superhero, fighting crime and upholding good in the world, and thereby provide an escape into a fantastical story, they do much more: similarly to the comics in the satirical dailies, they also offer both political and cultural commentary through a critique of their content and form. Such early superhero comics are at once upholding and destabilizing culturally circulated messages of good versus evil, of displacement (the immigrant/minority experience), and of hard work and determination (the idea of American Dream, which was widely disseminated in this era)—all of which necessarily also work to comment on the wide circulation and influence of such comics.

Their fixed, archetypal characters comment on the fixed nature of the image in that the superhero character is at once static and yet necessarily internally fraught. As is well known, most superheroes have as a shared characteristic a hidden or otherwise obscured identity separating their “normal” selves from their role as superhero, carrying within the archetype a moveable rather than fixed identity. This split identity, however, is not just a narrative ploy. As comics scholar Marc Singer notes, the superhero is:

one of the most powerful and omnipresent figures used to illustrate the dilemmas and experiences of minority identity. The concept has a long pedigree in theories of race, beginning in 1903 with W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and his concepts of the veil and double-consciousness.125

---

Quite like Coleman’s slide tape, then, the fixed, archetypal characters of superhero comics further comment on the fixed nature of the image, calling attention to the “paradoxical collision between stillness and movement.”

Further, modern superhero comics have even directly pointed to the fixed nature of the superhero, and have used it to highlight the fixed nature of the superhero genre. As Mervi Miettinen explains in her article “Past As Multiple Choice—Textual Anarchy and the Problems of Continuity in Batman: The Killing Joke,” in the titular comic, the characters offer a high degree of self-reflexivity, both in terms of their status as archetypes and in terms of the storytelling conventions of the genre. She writes that in the final scene, when the Joker asks of Batman, “Well? What are you waiting for? I shot a defenseless girl. I terrorized an old man. Why don’t you kick the hell out of me and get a standing ovation from the public gallery?” that:

The Joker’s questions show that he is well aware of the iterative nature of the hero-villain-game, and he knows what the next step will be (and that it will all happen again). This self-awareness of the character exposes a rare level of metatextuality, as the reader, too becomes aware of the forced structure of the superhero narrative, where repeatedly the hero chases the villain, only to have him escape, ad infinitum.

Finally, even as early as 1970, superhero comics have acknowledged the limitations of the superhero in the context of the real world. In Green Lantern #76 “What About the Black Skins?” (Fig. 15) Hal Jordan is confronted by an old black man who asks him why he has been able to save all the other “skins” from oppression, but not the “black skins.” What this question points to is an obvious acknowledgment of the escapist fantasy world of comics, in which superheroes, with all their powers, still cannot “solve” racism. Superheroes post-9/11 have

126 Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” 297.
Counter-clockwise from top left:
Fig. 14: Superman, debut cover;
Fig. 15: Green Lantern #76 panel; and
Fig. 16: The Amazing Spider-Man #36 cover
further had to contend with the fact that they cannot solve any real-world crisis. Not only did the entirely black cover for *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 “The Black Issue” (Fig. 16) speak to this fact by being literally void of representation, but further, the story itself shows not just Spider-Man, but other heroes and villains alike, just as helpless and mournful in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers as any of their readers.129

**The “Graphic Novel”?**

What, then, to make of the term “graphic novel”? As I have illustrated, according to intermediality studies, both comics and graphic novels can share the same classification as new media that emerged from the combination of text and image. Also in this discourse, the graphic novel could be seen as yet another new medium separate from comics that combines comics and literature. In interweaving these arguments with art discourse, however, I have shown that gaining status as intermedial media does not necessarily grant comics or the graphic novel status as a high art medium. And yet it is specifically a combination of the two discourses that have been instrumentalized by advocates of the term “graphic novel.” By laying claims to the intermedial combination of comics and literature, advocates of the term can assert that the graphic novel, in its articulation between its combination of media, is self-reflexive of its form and content, and thereby qualifies as a high art medium.

However, what the term “graphic novel” ultimately achieves is not a status elevation but rather a deconstruction of the parameters of “medium.” As I have shown throughout this chapter through examples of the self-reflexivity of comics, the advent of the “graphic novel” is not at all

129 For a discussion of the use of black panels in comics, see Rikke Platz Cortsen’s “Towards a Taxonomy of the Black Panel,” forthcoming.
a watershed moment in the history of comics. While certainly the term “graphic novel” can be seen as playing into the idea of there being a division between high and low culture—through its distancing from comics, its alignment with “serious” literature, and its promise, to reiterate Baetens’s comment, to “save the literary heritage in an illiterate world”—instead, it presents a watershed moment in the history of discourse on “medium.” Insofar as it functions as a new term, the “graphic novel” does not speak to claiming a new medium but rather emphatically calls for a critical investigation of the hierarchies persisting in discourse on “medium.”

In upsetting previous notions of defining “medium,” the graphic novel proves a useful object with which to examine the claims to uniqueness and unattainability of cultural capital. By revealing how “medium” has been defined moralistically rather than formally in both intermediality studies and art discourse, the graphic novel calls attention to both how such terminology endows objects with cultural capital as well as the unsteady ground upon which such capital stands. In this way, the value of the term “graphic novel” is undermined and thereby reveals a primary step in comics’ ability to function politically. In its displacement of the entire question of the value of cultural objects, comics can begin its unmasking of the “political violence” of institutions by disrupting the terminology used in archival inscription.

---

131 Foucault and Chomsky, The Chomsky-Foucault Debate, 41.
Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation

[...] as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. Memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty for putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer; there is not even, properly speaking, a faculty, for a faculty works intermittently, when it will or when it can, whilst the piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation. In reality the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought, and willed from earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside.

—Henri Bergson 132

As explicated in the previous chapter, advocates of the term “graphic novel” partially stake their claims to its difference from comics on the “seriousness” of both its form and content; however, through close inspection of the discourse that upholds such hierarchical claims of objectified and institutionalized cultural capital, the value-based categorization of cultural objects can be found as faulty in logic and therefore can work to undermine practices of archival inscription. In looking further into the claims of the “seriousness” of the graphic novel, another political function of comics emerges. Because, as noted earlier, to a large extent, the term “graphic novel” has become conflated with the literary genres of memoir and autobiography, examining this conflation in the genre of personal narrative comics offers another interesting perspective on the performative aspect of the archive. In its dual status as cultural object and personal archive, personal narrative comics can work to critique not only how cultural objects are inscribed into the archive but also how material is hierarchically categorized within the archive—that is, how

the archive is organized and interpreted.

Within institutions, certain archival material is often privileged based on an idea of “seriousness” that is tied to the notion of truth. Because the genres of memoir and autobiography have long been concerned with the question of how to represent the truth of a life, they offer an interesting perspective on what constitutes truth in their exploration of the binary of fact and fiction. Though it may seem an antiquated notion to discuss personal narrative’s aims to distinguish between fact and fiction, since autobiography studies has shifted its focus to how identity and subjectivity are constructed through the autobiographical process, I assert that current autobiographical texts are still toying with this binary in order to explore what the truth means. Personal narrative’s exploration of identity’s and subjectivity’s ties to experience and retrospection disrupts the privileging of the evidential over the memorial and thus speaks to a notion of truthfulness that necessarily establishes a contentious relationship to fact in that it works to undermine the supposed binary of fact and fiction. This truthfulness, as between or outside of evidential or memorial truth alone, speaks to and illuminates the importance of individual, experiential truth, the truth in personal narrative. In this way, the focus on truth in personal narrative can work to reveal how our cultural “archive fever,” both on the individual and collective scale, is deserving of critique. Through a self-reflexive exploration of their form, current personal narrative texts examine how we individually archive our own lives and reflect our cultural archiving practices, thereby imbuing such work with the potential to explore and critique what is inscribed in and what comes out of such the archives.

Using the work of memoirist Carolyn Kraus, I will demonstrate how personal narrative calls its readers to explore the question of what constitutes truth through a consideration of how
memories are made and recorded based on feeling. Next, considering autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s assertion that writers of personal narrative “struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies language and understanding,” I will explore how, through the inclusion of various visual elements, writers are able to take a step forward in the aims of personal narrative by visually depicting the contrast between evidential and memorial recording.\textsuperscript{133} Using postmodern writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s \textit{Dictee}, I will illustrate how the use of images within personal narrative can work to upset the notion of document as fact. I argue that Cha’s presentation of a disjointed collection of various documents entangled with her textual narrative allows \textit{Dictee} to advance the aims of personal narrative by offering itself as a discursive structure through which the reader becomes an active participant in feeling, and ultimately questioning, the construction and representation of experiential truth. I will assert that this self-reflexive use of the form illuminates that not only are memory and feeling illusive in their constant negotiation, but that so too are clear delineations between fact and fiction, and between document and experience, as they are inextricably linked in memory.

Finally, through an analysis of the formal qualities of comics and a close reading of Alison Bechdel’s \textit{Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic}, I posit that personal narrative comics advances this discourse through the use of comics style. In its leveling the discrepancy between evidence, experience, emotion, and memory on the comics page, I argue that comics play with and employ visuality to offer the reader a feeling of closeness with the story, which promises to at once bear witness to and situate the reader as a witness of the story of represented truth. I conclude that, through these same means, comics offers a new perspective on the aim of personal

narrative to represent experiential truth in revealing that such an aim is ultimately misguided in its hermeneutic impossibility. In so doing, I assert that personal narrative comics reveal how, as with the illogical value system of archival inscription, attributing hierarchy to certain objects within the archive based on a notion of truth is not only always incomplete but misguided in its interpretation.

**Disrupting Fact as Truth: The Aims of Personal Narrative**

The distinctions made between the terms “memoir” and “autobiography” offer an entry point into the discourse on the representation of truth in personal narrative in that they reveal how truth has been, and continues to be, aligned with fact. While perhaps the most common differentiation of the terms centers on loose designations of time span, memoir positioned as an episodic recounting of events over a specific time period, and autobiography positioned as a life-to-date chronicle of events, more importantly, the terms have been further distanced from each other by arguments made about their modes of communication. In her article “The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction,” memoirist and critic Sue William Silverman aims to elevate discourse on personal narrative through creating a system of classification of its various forms, what she terms its five “points of call”: autobiography, memoir, personal essay, meditative essay, and lyric essay. However, in her attempt to underscore the importance of a subjective voice in representing the truth of a life, she still maintains the argument that biography is more truthful than personal writing in its avoidance of subjectivity.

To begin defining the various forms that she delineates in her scheme, she first turns to autobiography, which she claims is:
[…] theoretically at least, a factual retelling of events […] based on one’s “life of action,” and thus told more historically than impressionistically […] [it] tends toward both a certain documentary sensibility and a well-defined chronological structure.\textsuperscript{134}

Clear in this definition is her assertion that autobiography’s primary tenet of communication is to present a corroboratory, objective sequence of events established by the use of history, documentation, and chronology. Autobiography, she argues here, is biography from a first-person perspective, and therefore the most truthful form of personal writing in that it escapes carrying the emotional impressions associated with and attended to by other first-person narrative forms. She further underlines this point in her argument when she defines memoir, which, in sharp contrast to autobiography, she notes:

\begin{quote}
[…] find[s] a more personal, emotional arc to follow […] [it employs] the use of at least two “voices” to tell the story, to explore the depth of events […], what the facts mean, both intellectually and emotionally.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

In claiming that memoir favors the emotional over the evidential in its exploration of “what the facts mean” rather than simply presenting the facts, Silverman positions it as less truthful than autobiography because of its interest in its subjective perspective. Already in her differentiation between autobiography and memoir—not to mention the other three forms, which she characterizes as being even more interested in the subjective and therefore subject to even greater scrutiny—Silverman can be seen as undermining her overarching goal of promoting the importance of personal writing. For while her scheme does succeed in attributing value to each delineated form and its mode of communication, her discourse ultimately serves to reiterate and reestablish biography as more truthful than personal writing in its straightforward, objective


\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
presentation of the facts. Her suggestion that as each form of personal narrative, or “point of call,” “meanders” away from biography it becomes more emotional and therefore more circumspect underscores how evidence continues to be considered more trustworthy than emotion, an argument I will consider throughout this chapter.

Before directly addressing how truthful representation has been aligned with fact in this discourse, I would first like to pursue the relationship between biography, autobiography, and memoir more closely. While Silverman maintains that autobiography is closest to biography on her “meandering river,” the connection she makes between the two, as stated earlier, is actually a somewhat antiquated notion. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note in Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, discourse on autobiography has long since shifted from viewing it as a subcategory of biography and has come to focus instead on its use of subjective narrative voice.136 This discursive change of focus at once illuminates Silverman’s aims in aligning autobiography with biography and reveals its fault; because autobiography utilizes first-person narration, from the outset it is linked more closely to “emotional” memoir than “factual” biography in its language structure, a point Silverman attempts to downplay in her definition of autobiography. However, regardless of any claims to an objective presentation of facts, autobiography of course cannot but be subjective, as it is told from a subjective point of view, a view further complicated by the ultimate epistemological question of “I.” Rather unlike biography, any form of personal writing at once positions the reader as speculator about the believability of the author-protagonist’s story and also raises the larger question of whether it can be considered referential. It is the “I” referent, with all its inherent questions, that ultimately ties autobiography to memoir in a much more stable relationship than autobiography to biography.

136 See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) for a discussion on the waves of autobiographical criticism.
This bond rather emphasizes the point Silverman originally aims to make: that personal writing offers something unique in the writing about a life because of its subjectivity and emotionality—not in spite of it.

Further, any demarcation between autobiography and memoir seems especially reductive when considering the complicated and often confused etymology of the terms. By denotation, "autobiography," from the Greek αὐτός and βιογραφία, means the writing of one’s own life, while "memoir," from the Latin memoria, refers both to memories and remembering. Though the etymology of the terms, which more closely follows the common differentiation between the two modes pointed out at the start of this section, suggests that autobiography covers a specified time span based on the age of the author, and that memoir does not, ultimately the tie that binds them is stronger than what separates them. For regardless of a difference in time span, or the aforementioned arguments about degrees of emotionality, each form ultimately has the same goal and problematic: representing the truth of a life from a personal point of view. Due to this shared goal and ultimate question of the subjective “I,” I will henceforth refer to both forms as “personal narrative,” and will utilize arguments specifically about autobiography or memoir as inclusive of both forms.

It is important to note here that upsetting the differentiation between autobiography and memoir has been very well argued, and my conflation of the two under an umbrella term is certainly not something new.\textsuperscript{137} However, what is interesting in previous conflations of the terms is how they illuminate the ways in which the terminology has been confused, both with respect to each individual term and the two terms in conflation. Indeed, previous attempts that sought to rectify this terminological uncertainty have instead often led to even more confusion. As

\textsuperscript{137} See Eakin (1992) and Olney (1988).
autobiography scholars Dan Shen and Dejin Xu have noted, “In English, while the singular
*memoir* can only refer to ‘a historical account or biography,’ the plural *memoirs* can refer to ‘an
autobiography.’”138 This particular look at how the terms have been confused is especially
interesting in that it creates a link between the singular “memoir” and historical writing. Already
it is clear that defining memoir in such a way is in opposition to common popular ideas, such as
those put forth by Silverman, that have considered memoir in particular as being quite distanced
from biography. However, as Paul John Eakin reminds us:

In contrast to *autobiography*, which has emerged since the beginning of the nineteenth
century as the umbrella term for self-life-writing, the *memoir* and the chronicle of deeds
or *res gestae*, the dominant forms in the earlier history of the genre (with the notable
exception of religious confessions), are defined precisely by their orientation toward a
historical field of reference. In the *res gestae* and the memoir the individual is perceived,
respectively, as the actor in or the witness to history.139

Further commentary on both the historical and contemporary uncertainty surrounding this
various terminology was shrewdly pointed out by autobiography scholar Timothy Dow Adams in
*Life Writing and Light Writing: Autobiography and Photography*. He remarks that although
memoir and autobiography have long been distanced from each other and particularly delineated
from biography, “many scholars now use the term ‘lifewriting’ when they refer to personal
narratives in general, despite the fact that lifewriting is just English for biography.”140 Not only
does his snide comment reiterate how the terms of personal narrative are often confused and
conflated, but more importantly, it illuminates that attempts to hinge the terms, such as the
umbrella term of “lifewriting,” ultimately reveal a greater problematic: in any alignment of

138 Dan Shen and Dejin Xu, “Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus
140 Timothy Dow Adams, “Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography,” *Modern
personal narrative to biography, what becomes evident is that a great importance has been and continues to be placed upon factual, historical evidence in representing the truth of a life. One can easily surmise that the impetus for coining terms like “lifewriting,” as well as for putting forward arguments about the difference in modes of communication between autobiography and memoir, are to draw a line of demarcation between fact and fiction.

While certainly this line is a concern in personal narrative, to outright, or even subtly, align it with “factual” biography in order to assert its believability ultimately undermines the ability of personal narrative to disrupt the notion that the truth of a life is tied to fact. As Shen and Xu note:

> Despite varying degrees of fictionalization in individual works and despite the difficulty, if not impossibility, of accessing or tracing the real-life experiences of the autobiographer (especially a noncontemporary one) […] the criterion of “truth” is applicable to this genre. Indeed, the discovery of various kinds or degrees of fictionalization in autobiography is based on the very fact that there exists an external reality for distinguishing the fictional from the factual.¹⁴¹

This distinguishing of the fictional from the factual in personal narrative is carefully addressed by Philippe Lejeune in *The Autobiographical Pact*. The pact he defines as “a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name”—that is, an agreement authors offer their readers by virtue of their name on the cover to recount their story truthfully from their perspective, thereby enacting the “auto” in “autobiography.”¹⁴² This contract of believability, however, is not meant to sweepingly validate the subjectivity of personal narrative. Instead, it rather speaks to how self-reflexively questioning the ability to represent the truth of a life is inherent in personal narrative. As Smith and Watson point out:

¹⁴¹ Shen and Xu, “Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality,” 45.
[...] autobiographical narration is so written that it cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple facts. As an intersubjective mode, it lies outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood, as models of the paradox of self-reference have suggested, all the way from Epidaurus of Crete to contemporary philosophers of language.\footnote{Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 13.}

Rather unlike in biographical writing, personal narrative interacts with the idea of truthful representation because of its subjective position, which is necessarily considered by both the writer and reader. Where personal narrative certainly contains evidence of a factual “external reality,” including, as Lejeune suggests, the name on the cover matching the person found within the pages, its goal extends much further: personal narrative aims to speak to and also to showcase the subjective truth of individual experience so as to highlight the personal in contrast to the collective, the emotional “auto” that is perhaps in opposition to or more nuanced than the factual evidential. What the pact then ultimately offers in return for the readers’ belief is that the writers of personal narrative will present their own \emph{experiential truth}. This truth, rather than a truth aligned with fact, is based on an exploration of experiences, a negotiation between evidence and emotion.

However, as was illuminated by the 2006 revelation that James Frey’s \textit{New York Times} bestselling memoir, \textit{A Million Little Pieces}, was largely fabricated, this pact is quite a tenuous one. When \textit{The Smoking Gun} published their article “A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey’s Fiction Addiction,” for which they conducted interviews with various law officials and requested legal documents to further investigate Frey’s claims, it came to light that Frey had egregiously misrepresented events. Not only were his overexaggerations of arrests and charges brought against him cause for speculation about his credibility, but the crux of his story—his relationship with a young woman and his involvement in the events surrounding her tragic
death—further confirmed that his work was certainly not nonfiction. This evidence of the facts provided by *The Smoking Gun* through various testimonies and legally filed criminal reports incited outrage from Frey’s readers, who felt betrayed by his labeling the story memoir, and refueled the debate about representing truth in personal narrative.144 However, while certainly Frey’s account proved factually unsubstantiated, the question that the interrogation into his work ultimately raised was not about the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a life but rather the precariousness of aligning truth with fact.

Because “fact” is a problematic term in the sense that documented evidence of events can be proven incorrect or contaminated, and testimonies often have biased or misinformed views of events, dissecting the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth based solely on factual evidence is not only misguided but, more importantly, beside the point. If the controversy surrounding Frey’s work serves to shed any light on the debate about representing truth in personal narrative, it is that it demonstrates that a factual representation of events is not the sole purpose of personal narrative. This watershed moment in the discourse on personal narrative therefore only reaffirms that the relevance and importance of personal narrative is its self-reflexive exploration of its mode of communication, its exploration and examination of the nature of experiential truth. Keeping in mind the aim of personal narrative, what the Frey controversy more interestingly further illuminates is how the pact of personal narrative is reliant not just on the writers but also on the readers. Frey’s case is a prime example of how this pact has been broken, not only because Frey abandoned it by creating a work of autofiction masked as memoir, but because the public, through their questioning of the factuality of his work,

---

144 On January 26, 2006, Oprah Winfrey invited Frey back on to her show (after having had him on in praise of his work) to castigate him in front of an angry studio audience; multiple news sources wrote articles shaming him for lying; and his publisher, Doubleday, offered to reimburse readers who purchased the book.
demonstrated their unwillingness to accept experiential truth as the truth in personal narrative.145

Tentativeness or outright unwillingness to accept experiential truth as the truth in personal narrative is of little wonder, however, since it is a complicated agreement. As discussed earlier, the pact asks that the readers suspend their disbelief, which is an agreement well established and easily made in the reading of fiction.146 But because there is, as Shen and Xu note, an “external reality” to nonfiction, readers of personal narrative are asked to suspend their belief in the “facts” in order to explore along with the writer an internal reality. This reality, this experiential truth, is more complex than the facts alone, not just in its subjective viewpoint, but in its inseparable ties to memory. As Smith and Watson write:

[Autobiography] depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history. Memory is thus both the source and the authenticator of autobiographical acts.147

This idea of authenticity, along with the pact, ultimately leaves personal narrative at the mercy of memory, which further subjects its believability to intense scrutiny. As literary critic Alfred Hornung suggests in “Fantasies of the Autobiographical Self: Thomas Bernhard, Raymond Federman, Samuel Beckett,” personal narrative that aims to represent experiential truth as the truth is completely farcical. He writes:

145 “Autofiction,” a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky (1977), is a form in which writers manipulate and restructure the past in order to create a cohesive narrative, often adding in fictitious elements or events for the sake of storytelling, and thereby is a blending of personal narrative and fiction.
146 “Willing suspension of disbelief,” as coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817), refers to the agreement between a fiction writer and his or her reader where the reader agrees not to pass judgment on the work’s plausibility in return for the entertainment provided by the writer.
147 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 16.
If conventional autobiographies could be regarded as the proper medium for the realistic representation of a self and for the narrative recovery of past events from the perspective of the present, contemporary autobiographical texts stress the illusory nature of such mythopoeic endeavours. Due to the breakdown of a clear demarcation between reality and fiction or reality and imagination, the traditional conception of the autobiographical genre has lost its degree of certainty and truth.\textsuperscript{148}

Personal narrative cannot and, more importantly, does not aim to represent the truth. What both writers and readers must remember is that personal narrative instead works as an exploration and examination of the question of experiential truth. Rather than relying on the pact or a promise of authenticity, contemporary personal narrative must self-reflexively reconceptualize its aims. In both moving away from romanticizing the past or creating works of autofiction, personal narrative must work to disrupt previous notions of its ability to represent the truth by looking more closely at what experiential truth means, how memory works to construct this notion of truth, and how to become more truthful through an acceptance that there is no singular truth.

Because experiential truth is necessarily biased, writers of personal narrative must first address the subjectivity of their accounts for their readers, which they accomplish in two ways. First, through the use of first-person narration, writers both offer authenticity and undermine it by making implicit to the readers that they are looking through a personal, and therefore biased, lens. Secondly, through the use of the past tense, writers can underline the fact that they are writing retrospectively, which further complicates the notion of truthful, accurate account.\textsuperscript{149}

Because of this position of first-person-past narration, personal narrative is positioned from the outset to explore the impossibility of accurately recounting experiences—that is, of trying to


\textsuperscript{149} Of course, not all personal narratives are written using the past tense. However, in the use of such descriptions as, “It is 1986 and I am thirty years old,” the reader is led to the same conclusion that the writer is writing retrospectively.
accurately re-member memories of past events that have been dis-membered by a retrospective viewpoint. But writers in this genre must take a step forward, and not fall prey to the notion of presenting their lives neatly, concisely, authoritatively, a concern of Paul de Man when he asks, “Can we not suggest that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life […]?”

Writers of personal narrative must therefore work to expose and to analyze the ambiguity—the uncertainty—of the question of the truth of a life in order to become more truthful in relating stories of personal experience. As Smith and Watson note:

In life narratives […], narrators struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies language and understanding; they struggle to reassemble memories so dreadful they must be repressed for human beings to survive and function in life. In such narratives, the problem of recalling and recreating a past life involves organizing the inescapable but often disabling force of memory and negotiating its fragmentary intrusions with increasing, if partial, understanding.

Indeed, not only does much contemporary personal narrative explore past traumatic events, it also reveals the way in which trauma begets trauma due to an individual’s inability to fully comprehend the past because of retrospective subjectivity and possible corrosion of memory. This double-edged sword of aiming to represent the truth of a life while recognizing the intangibility of such an endeavor is ultimately the goal of contemporary personal narrative. In the exploration of the illusory nature of memory, authors of personal narrative are able to become more truthful in their representation of experiential truth.

As is evident in the work of memoirist Carolyn Kraus, contemporary writers of personal narrative are working to explore the limitations of fragmented memory, the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a life, and the greater question of what constitutes this truth. In

---

her essay “Proof of Life: Memoir, Truth, and Documentary Evidence,” Kraus addresses these questions through an analysis of her own memoir, using as an example of the problem of memory and truth the moment when she encountered her homeless father. In her memoir, she describes him as:

[...]

She proceeds to reveal that these details are not exactly factual, confessing:

The big feet are clear in my memory, but I can’t swear it was raining, or that my father wore running shoes, or that the book was Tolstoy, though I know he was fond of Tolstoy. It had been depressing to discover my eighty-six-year-old father scavenging among the dumpsters of Los Angeles. Maybe that’s why the sky is overcast in my memory, and it might as well have been raining. My manuscript included memory-filtered accounts of long-vanished events. It was crammed with recollected and invented dialogue. Many details were based on impressions. For all that, the memoir was decidedly not fiction. This point mattered to me.\footnote{Carolyn Kraus, “Proof of Life: Memoir, Truth, and Documentary Evidence,” \textit{Biography} 31.2 (2008): 245.}

While Kraus is careful to delineate the ways in which she sought out the facts in writing her memoir by scouring old documents and letters, and traveling from the United States to Russia and Belarus, the point she comes to at the end of her journey is that the \textit{feeling} of truth is often more tangible than factual details, and undoubtedly more important in personal narrative.

This sort of feeling one’s past, of recognizing the emotion inherent in subjective experiential truth, is something to consider in the discourse on personal narrative—and in memory itself. Kraus’s work illustrates how contemporary writers of personal narrative play with the questions of \textit{what is truth} and \textit{what is fact} in order to come to a greater understanding of how experiences are reconstructed, and therefore how they can be represented. When Kraus reveals

\footnote{Ibid., 246.}
that her prior knowledge of her father’s literary tastes implanted in her memory that he was holding a book by Tolstoy, she underlines that it is difficult to differentiate between emotion and fact, especially from a retrospective viewpoint. Similarly, when she notes that she was not certain that it was raining when she met her father, but that she felt as though it should be raining based on her overwhelming sense of sadness at seeing her elderly homeless father, she further speaks to the emotional cloudiness of memory. While Kraus does not question these memories within her memoir itself, her work nonetheless reveals the subjectivity of personal experience. She believed that her father was reading Tolstoy, that he wore purple striped running shoes, and that it was raining. Those ephemeral details are the truth of her experience, both in the moment and recollected, which work to reveal what she had previously thought of her father and how eventually meeting him affected her. Those details, she clearly demonstrates, need not be evidentially factual, but rather true to her feelings, to herself. As Eakin notes, in a discussion of Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*:

 [...] what seems to count most for her is her memory’s report of what she once thought and felt; this is the past she seeks to reconstruct, and only she can be the arbiter of its truth. That is to say that for Karr […] the allegiance to truth that is the central, defining characteristic of memoir is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one’s self.¹⁵⁴

Defying Language and Understanding: Experiential Truth and Visuality in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*

Kraus’s memoir and subsequent essay illuminate the problematic in personal narrative of writers being faced with questions about how to represent the truth of a life that is indelibly marked by

¹⁵⁴ Paul John Eakin, “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” *Narrative* 12.2 (2004): 125.
“memory-filtered accounts of long-vanished events.” As discussed earlier, these questions are always already necessarily addressed in the use of first-person-past narration and, as Kraus demonstrates, writers of personal narrative make purposeful decisions about how to represent their stories in “an allegiance to the history of one’s self.” Where these elements already work as a self-reflexive exploration of personal narrative through their illumination of the subjectivity of experiential truth, through the use of visuality, writers are able to take a step forward in the aims of personal narrative by addressing what Smith and Watson note as the “struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies language and understanding.” Through the use of visual elements, writers of personal narrative are not only able to explore how visuality is connected to memory-making and memory-recording, but further, they are able include the readers in their search for experiential truth by allowing them to literally see alongside them how this truth is negotiated by both emotion and evidence.

Dictee, the personal narrative of postmodern writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, is interesting to examine in this context in that it pointedly includes the reader in its exploration of experiential truth through the inclusion of various visual elements. Rather than emulating the trope of biography, where a spread of photographs in the middle of the text serves as documentary evidence of the author-protagonist’s existence, Cha’s use of images instead works to upset the notion of document as fact. By littering her text with photographs, art, charts, maps, film stills, and scanned handwritten pages alongside writing in English, French, Korean, and Chinese, she presents a disjointed collection of various documents entangled with her textual narrative. In so doing, her work not only exposes and questions the “fragmentary intrusions” of

155 Kraus, “Proof of Life,” 245.
156 Eakin, “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” 125.
157 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 22.
memory, it offers a critical examination of personal narrative’s aim to re-member dis-membered memories in order to cull self-knowledge from an exploration of the past.\textsuperscript{158} Instead of presenting her narrative as a cohesive experiential truth, with all its inherent questions and feeling of the past, Cha moves forward to disrupt this notion; she challenges a cohesive representation of the truth of a life through a critique of the idea of a fixed self-knowledge and thus that there can be “an allegiance to the history of one’s self,” through questioning the idea that an “external reality” can serve as a barometer of truth, and finally through exposing the congruency of document and experience in memory.\textsuperscript{159}

Much of the attention \textit{Dictee} has garnered since its 1982 publication has focused on its non-normative narrative structure. Both its critics and publishers generally agree that while the work is structurally framed by the nine Greek muses after whom its chapters are named, this frame is disrupted by Cha’s use of non-contextualized visual elements, inserted seemingly at random throughout the text.\textsuperscript{160} They argue that this fractured frame creates a non-normative reading experience, which works as Cha’s commentary on the confusion of constructing and representing her identity as a woman immigrant caught between cultures. For this very reason, \textit{Dictee} is increasingly taught in universities, especially in Asian American studies departments in the United States, and has started gaining greater attention from the academy. While certainly the focus on these aspects of her work continues to be important, I will assert that \textit{Dictee} does far more than relate the woman-immigrant experience or even the fragmentariness of memory alone. Through the use of visual elements, \textit{Dictee} presents itself as a discursive structure, offering the

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} Eakin, “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” 125. Shen and Xu, “Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality,” 45.
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Dictee} has been published by three publishers, Tanam Press (1982), Third Woman Press (1995), and the University of California Press (2001).
reader a position from which to both participate in and question the construction and representation of experiential truth.

Before addressing the visual elements of Cha’s work, I would first like to further explore the criticism about her narrative frame. As stated above, while Cha’s work is often considered to be framed by the muses, in her article “The Concentric Circles of Dictee: Reclaiming Women’s Voices through Mothers’ and Daughters’ Stories,” literary critic Michelle Black Wester argues that this is a false reading of Dictee. She asserts that Cha intentionally misleads her readers in order to call their attention to the fact that her work is a non-Western narrative that speaks of Korean folklore and history. She explains that in changing the muse Euterpe to Elitere:

Cha provides a clue to uncovering this false epic structure […] [and] thus challenges her readers to search beyond their Western knowledge of Greek mythology, and to learn from the images that she provides in order to read a text of Korean and Western tradition.161

Wester’s intention in pointing out this aspect of Dictee is to draw attention to the work’s Korean focus, a point she argues is not given enough attention in critical analyses of Dictee. Though she writes that the work is of both “Korean and Western tradition,” in her article, she stresses that Cha did not intend to only reflect upon her immigrant experience, or a blending of Eastern and Western traditions, but rather more emphatically and importantly upon the formation of a self that is bound by Korean folklore and history.

To this end, Wester reads Cha’s work as a version of the Korean Princess Pali myth. The myth, she explains, tells of a king and queen who are suffering from a deadly curse for banishing their seven daughters out of anger over not having a male heir. Their youngest daughter, the forgiving Princess Pali, ventures to the land of the dead for a cure to save her parents and reunite

her family. Once there, she receives ten pouches and a bowl with instructions, from which she learns that with nine she can save her mother, and that she is to keep the final pouch and bowl for herself. Wester writes, “The circular shape of the bowl and the tenth pouch symbolize a continuation of the mother’s story. Like the bowl that holds all the pouches, Cha has structured her text to hold women’s stories.”162 Wester elaborates her reading by claiming that although male Korean figures appear in *Dictee*, as in the Princess Pali myth, it is the mothers’ stories that ultimately offer a central point from which the story can continue; she claims that when Cha writes, “a circle within a circle, a a [sic] series of concentric circles,” she is thereby offering her work as a circular narrative.163 *Dictee*, she asserts, “is a collaboration of women’s stories, meant to stimulate multiple interpretations of history, character, and identity.”164

But where Wester argues that Cha’s work is meant to “stimulate multiple interpretations” and is of both “Korean and Western tradition,” in her insistence on a concentric circular reading, she ultimately pushes for a Korean focus, which stifles the goal of Cha’s work. For while Wester argues that when Cha writes, “To begin there. There. In Media Res,” that Cha is again pointing to a circular read with the mothers’ stories at its midpoint, she neglects to note that in using this phrase Cha can also be seen as referencing the traditional epic structure that she first establishes by using the muses as chapter titles.165 *Dictee* offers both a Western left-to-right and a circular reading pattern, and can further be seen as providing yet another reading possibility: an Eastern right-to-left read. While all of Cha’s printed text, both in English and French, move her narrative along in a Western reading pattern, in her use of visual elements, she can be seen as pointing to a

---

162 Ibid., 170.
163 Ibid., 173.
164 Ibid., 170.

100
reversal of this pattern. As Wester notes, the cover image of *Dictee* (Fig. 17), encourages the readers’ eyes to move from right to left due to the heaviness of the ancient pyramid on the far right of the image.\(^{166}\) Similarly, the scanned image of the Chinese characters found within the text (Fig. 18), from left to right read “mother” and “father,” which Wester notes is atypical for Chinese language and culture, where “father” would always precede “mother.”\(^{167}\) While Wester reads both of these images as evidence of Cha’s focus on Korean folklore and history in order to support her claims to *Dictee* offering a circular read, I propose they point to more than this. In suggesting a right-to-left read through these images, Cha is further toying with normative reading patterns.

Following this assumption, the lack of contextualization of the various textual and visual material presented in *Dictee* offers yet an additional reading. While the work is sectioned into chapters, which seems to suggest topical cohesion and chronology, the images and text found within each chapter are ultimately not strongly connected with one another, nor contextualized within the larger narrative. As literary critic Anne Anlin Cheng notes in “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” “[it] hardly offers itself as a comprehensive or reliable source of information. Conspicuously lacking in proper documentation, Cha gives her reader evidences divorced from their testimonies.”\(^{168}\) Because the various information in *Dictee* is presented in a seemingly haphazard and decontextualized way, it allows for each piece of information to be viewed as its own (in)complete work and therefore able to be read in any combination with any of the other pieces. In fact, in *Dictee*’s original

\(^{166}\) Wester, “The Concentric Circles of *Dictee*,” 171.
\(^{167}\) Ibid., 177.
Cha, *Dictee*: Fig. 17: (top) cover image, and Fig. 18: (bottom) “mother” and “father” (26–27)
printing, Cha insisted that the book should have neither a back barcode nor page numbers, both of which further suggest that she intended her work to be read starting from any point and moving in any direction.

Therefore, by first establishing a familiar epic structure and left-to-right reading pattern, then destabilizing it by suggesting a circular and a right-to-left reading pattern, then a lack of pattern altogether, Cha ultimately offers her text as Western and Eastern, linear and circular, a work truly “meant to stimulate multiple interpretations.” In offering this multiplicity of ways in which her work can be read, Cha can be seen as commenting on the aims of personal narrative to represent experiential truth. In playing with narrative form, Cha illustrates how the truth of a life is rather impossible to coherently organize. She uses the form of her work to showcase how although we strive to categorize and organize both evidential and memorial information in “an allegiance to the history of one’s self,” as Eakin phrases it, that the truth of a life can always be seen from different perspectives and can therefore only ever be constantly negotiated.

While the form of her work already self-reflexively explores personal narrative in its disrupting of cohesion, her content further questions the aims of personal narrative in its discourse on identity creation, testament, and document. First, Cha’s use of English, French, Korean, and Chinese speaks to the question of identity insofar as it is bound to language. While this at once works to highlight her confusion of self-identity instigated by her upbringing in a culture foreign to the one in which she was born and to which she has familial and cultural ties, and is further complicated by her having been educated in French, the use of multiple languages also works to expose the discrepancy between text and image. By placing images of Korean and

---

170 Eakin, “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” 125.
Chinese characters in her English and French typeset text, she pointedly shows the reader the
trauma of self-identity that she faced existing between languages and cultures and, at the same
time, includes the reader in her struggle. While Wester argues that Cha’s use of various languages
“confronts one with the feeling of separation from the text, anxiety of not knowing the meaning,
and loneliness or isolation from others who do know the meaning,” I posit that it works instead
to bring the reader closer to understanding Cha’s feeling of being between national and cultural
identities—that is, closer to her experiential truth. 171 For even a reader who understands all four
languages must work to transition between them, and one who does not must either seek out a
translation or opt to be left in confusion. In this way, through a visual representation of different
languages compiled together, Cha explores the idea not only of fractured identity, but also of the
ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a person’s identity; she does not merely tell
the story of her confusion of being between languages and cultures but creates an exhibition of it
for her readers.

And yet, in continuing her exploration of the visual as it is connected to identity and
experiential truth, Cha disrupts any sense of her readers experiencing this exploration alongside
her. By presenting images of handwritten text, she prompts the reader question the experiential
reliability she or he has been encouraged to feel in being offered the exhibition of various
languages. To further complicate the search for a claimed identity, Cha uses handwritten text to
lead her readers to question both the idea of a fixed self-knowledge and an “external reality” as a
barometer of truth. Primarily, by including photocopied pages of her own notes (Fig. 19), where
she tries out ideas, crossing out passages and adding in phrases, she shows her readers the
process of her thoughts in creating *Dictee*. By illuminating how she decided to tell her story, how

171 Ibid., 173.
she made decisions about word choice, phrasing, and order, she prompts her readers to consider that personal narrative is always nuanced by the writer, and therefore that the idea of a singular truthful representation is an impossibility. These pages of course also serve to reflect upon the idea presented by de Man that perhaps the writer “produces and determines the life,” and because of this, perhaps there is no experiential truth outside of each singular ephemeral moment of recollection.172

Cha’s inclusion of the letter from “a friend” (Fig. 20), further speaks to the idea of the ambiguity and temporality of truth in personal experience. The letter, addressed to Laura Clayton from “a friend,” informs Laura about her sister’s erratic and suicidal behavior, which “a friend” feels Laura is unaware of. Cha’s inclusion of this letter in particular, with its sloppy, hurried handwriting, addresses the question of truth in experience in multiple ways: first, the truth as “a friend” presents it to Laura is situated in opposition to what he or she thinks Laura knows about her sister’s life; second, the messy handwriting indicates that the view is not only personal, but also possibly a highly emotional account of events; and finally, the truth of the sister’s life lies outside the realm of the letter except through anecdotes from “a friend.” Cha uses this letter to highlight the discrepancy between what we individually think we know about one another and what another’s truth actually is; the suggestion is that perhaps it is impossible to truly see another person at all or, at most, highly subjectively. For not only is the letter hearsay, the hurriedness of the handwriting points to the idea that emotions can overwhelm our opinions and cloud the truth in experience, ideas that harken back to Kraus’s discussion of the feeling of truth. But Cha’s inclusion of this letter goes even further than individual relationships by calling into question the truth of a life; the differential opinions of “a friend” and Laura in regards to Laura’s sister

Standing before hallmarked hero, the only beauty because of the
intrinsic, the absence, the past that remains the best, the
missing which left to the imagining. Erodes not the
viscosity which makes beauty unassessing. They
hallmarked beauty from the

Standing before hallmarked hero, the beauty, because
standing face to face with memory. It is missing, it's
missing, still, what of time do not rest, remains there.
Missing nothing. Time past is all else. All things else.
All of things other. Subject time. Must answer to time.
Time dictates all else, except music, all installed in time,

Aug. 16/93
Sara Shakespeare
Dear Sagrate,

I can imagine
Will write by leggeb
to your sister the
has any full place
and thaur
D will they sell and
her children and
husband has done
got all the can possibly
do any spring thing
sent to her that
she can get and will
are having a time
she is afraid of any
Crazy. No de can
do just any food she
has been to since
and none do any more

at all but she want
give up goes all the
time to them and
agreed all the money
is do, instead of it
get her something to
eat, and she is
afraid to eat the las
will it will hurt.
To the time all she
wants to do is ride
the horses and there
horses are all old and
were out and very
year deal from family
her on the road.
All the money you send
one house good but they
are all good and
do not know what is to

Cha, Dictee: Fig. 19: (top) notes (121–22), and Fig. 20: (bottom) letter from “a friend” (147–48)
suggest the impossibility of knowing the truth of a life from outside of it.

To further explore the idea of an “external reality” as a barometer for truth, Cha uses documented evidence of the past, including photographs of her family members, a map of Korea, antiquated medical charts, and an etching of a Greek goddess. Again, as in the trope of biography, all of these visual elements can be seen as Cha offering proof of the facts of her past, but instead, she uses this assumption to address the unreliability of documents. The two photographs of her mother that appear within *Dictee*, the first of her as a young woman in Western dress (Fig. 21) and the other of her as an old woman in traditional Korean dress (Fig. 22), underline Cha’s motivation in including documents in her work. The photographs call attention to the process and performativity of identity in order to further draw attention to the temporality of experiential truth. Cha prompts her reader to consider that in the same way that her mother has changed over time, so too do other documents; by visually depicting how maps are subject to change, medical advancements discredit previous techniques, and religious systems die out, Cha suggests that the way in which we look at and believe in the documented past also changes as time passes.

Additionally, Cha uses false and decontextualized documents within her text to further toy with the notion of evidence as factual. The first of these is the epigraph to *Dictee* that she attributes to Sappho. It reads, “May I write words more naked than flesh, / stronger than bone, more resilient than / sinew, sensitive than nerve.” That these are not Sappho’s words, but Cha’s, not only raises the question of Cha’s own reliability that she later reiterates by including pages of her notes, but points the readers to question document as fact.¹⁷³ She pushes this idea forward with the only Korean writing found in *Dictee* (Fig. 23). A black-and-white image on the opening

¹⁷³ Kristina Julie Chew (1995), among others, have noted that these words are not Sappho’s.
page of her work, it reads, “I miss you mother. / I am hungry. / I want to go home.” In her article “Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” literary critic Juliana Spahr claims because the image is not contextualized by Cha, it has given rise to multiple arguments about its origin. She asserts that while many scholars have read it as the desperate carvings of a Korean miner during the Japanese occupation of Korea, others insist that its grammar, which points to its being written after the Korean liberation, suggests that it is a fake meant to stimulate an emotional response in support of a newfound Korean nationalism.

Coupled with the inclusion of a film still from Carl Dreyer’s 1928 *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (Fig. 24), Cha offers that not only should document and experience be subject to the same critique, but that they are inextricably intertwined. Like the Korean carvings, the iconic image from Dreyer’s film underscores the interconnectedness of fact and emotion. As both Joan of Arc and not Joan of Arc, it works to further assert that the evidential is corruptible as it melds with emotion and memory. In this way, Cha asks her reader to question whether there is really a distinction between fact and experience or proof and memory, given that both seem to have the same fate of changing as time advances and of being subject to personal interpretation.

And finally, Cha directly addresses the problem of memory within *Dictee* through writing, expanding what she already accomplishes visually in her work. By entitling her work *Dictee*, she raises the questions of dictation and authorship, and in so doing, asks the reader to ponder who is offering the dictation and who is writing it down. Her work ultimately questions

---

174 Cha, *Dictee*, ii. This is Spahr’s translation; alternatively, it can be read, “Mother, I miss you. I am hungry. I want to go home” (Wester 172).
Clockwise from top left: Cha, *Dictee*: Fig. 21: young mother (44); Fig. 22: elderly mother (59); Fig. 23: Korean wall writing (ii); and Fig. 24: Dreyer’s Joan of Arc (157)
whether there are two selves or “voices,” if one is the voice of another, and if so, who this other is; how far the dictation is from its source; and if it can be believed after all. In this way, she prompts her readers to scrutinize memory-making and memory-recording, and invites them to question both as filtered accounts. She asks, “Qu’est ce qu’on a vu / Cette vue qu’est ce qu’on a vu / enfin. Vu Et. Cette vue. Qu’est ce que c’est enfin.” By asking what has been seen finally, she asks her readers to see with her that perhaps there is no finality, no answer. Dictee works to reinforce that documents, experience, and memories all corrupt any sense of finality or truth of a life, and yet, their constantly evolving negotiation are all we have.

**The Advancement of Personal Narrative Comics**

Cha’s toying with the congruency of evidence and experience as it is bound to visuality can be seen as a jumping-off point from which personal narrative comics move forward in the self-reflexive exploration of personal narrative. While, through the use of disruptive and decontextualized images, Cha leads her readers to an understanding that the seeming binary of evidence and experience is faulty and that a cohesive truth is impossible, comics further explores experiential truth through the employment of multiple layers of visual, and often textual, information presented simultaneously and congruently through comics style. This leveling of distinction between evidence and experience in comics suggests narrative cohesion and recovery, and works to offer the readers a feeling of closeness to the story by situating them as a witness to this process, and yet, at the same time, it reveals the hermeneutic impossibility representing experiential truth.

177 Cha, Dictee, 125.
Comics often relate stories through the combination of sequential paneled images and text that are set apart from each other by gutters of space, which from the outset offers comics a particular means of commenting on the ambiguity of the question of truthful representation. As comics scholars Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven write:

[…] the diegetical horizon of each page, made up of what are essentially boxes of time, offers graphic narrative a representational mode capable of addressing complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness.178

These “boxes of time,” create a different kind of reading experience from strictly textual personal narrative. Held within the panels are images of a particular moment of the authors’ past, each one a box of time, which work to visually depict for the readers the authors’ fragmented vision of their past. These images achieve a particular goal: not only can the readers of comics gain a wealth of visual information from the images within the frames, an argument I will develop in the following pages, but also they are constantly visually confronted with what is being excluded from the images and what is missing between the panels. While the panels call the readers’ “attention to the compulsion to transcend the frame in the act of seeing […] reveal[ing] [their] limited, obstructed vision,” the gutters further highlight that their vision is blocked; the panels constrain what is in their scope and the gutters encourage the readers to consider the gaps in events between the panels.179

Both these elements, the exclusion and gaps, create an important commentary on the ability of representing truth in personal narrative in that they point to the subjectivity of personal experience and the disjointedness of memory; each make the readers constantly aware that they

---

are only able to see what they are being shown, that is, what the author both remembers and chooses to reveal. Because of their limited vision, the readers are poised to question what is outside and between the frames, to ponder if there is more to the story, and to actively participate in re-membering the disjointed boxes; they must work to keep pace with the narrative, though there are pieces missing, bridging the gaps in information for themselves. As Thierry Groensteen explains, “More than a zone on the paper [the gutter] is the interior screen on which every reader projects the missing image (or images).”\textsuperscript{180} In these ways, the readers are further prompted to question the way in which memory works and to ponder the possibility of representing truth in ways other than the manner in which the author has offered his or her experiential truth.

The obstructed vision created by the boxes and the gutters also works to comment on the debate about the ability to truthfully represent trauma within personal narrative. According to memory studies scholar Cathy Caruth, the experience of trauma is so precisely temporal that it is impossible for the victims to comprehend what has happened in the moment of trauma, and further, to fully understand why they have survived and what it means to have survived. She writes, “What returns to haunt the victim […] is not only the reality of the violent event, but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”\textsuperscript{181} The paneled images and the gutter space within comics serve to reveal the nature of trying to understand something that is unknowable; the spatial layout of comics works as a diagram of this problematic, revealing parts of the equation, parts of the experience, but never a final solution. In this way, comics also points to the idea that perhaps trauma cannot ever be truthfully represented because in its inability to be

\textsuperscript{180} Thierry Groensteen, \textit{The System of Comics}, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson, MS: UP Mississippi, 2007), 113.

\textsuperscript{181} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 6.
fully grasped, it suspends the categories of true and false; comics offers instead that perhaps the only means of getting close to the truth of trauma is exactly what it offers the reader: fragmented pieces of information and the gaps in between, but never a fully re-membered story. The spatial layout of comics therefore not only works as a commentary on our efforts to understand traumatic events and to reconstruct memory, it also serves to tie the two ideas together; through restrained vision and gaps, comics calls the reader to ponder the difference between seeing and not seeing, of knowing and not knowing—the very fundamentals of remembering, reconstructing, and making sense of the past. Through visual representation, comics literally shows the reader that in the search for truth there are constantly things that are unclear, subjective, unknowable, or just simply missing in our memories of events.

Through the use of images, comics is further able to incite an affective experience in the readers, drawing them into the story and at the same time prompting them to consider how feeling influences their interpretation of experience. As art critic Jill Bennett notes:

[While] words can be put into the service of sense memory, vision has a very different relationship to affective experience, experience which whilst it cannot be spoken as it is felt, may register visually. The eye can often function as a mute witness through which events register as eidetic memory images imprinted with sensation.¹⁸²

Not only, as Bennett discusses, is vision engaged in the process of experiencing and registering memory, it can work to recount these experiences and memories in a method distinct from language. Comics employs images for both of these reasons: to explore how personal truth is experienced and thereby the possibilities of effectively recounting it. In his presentation at the 2002 University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, comics artist Joe Sacco

spoke about an interview he conducted with a Palestinian former detainee of the Israeli military for *Palestine*, a journalistic account of his experiences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After hearing the detainee’s descriptions of his torture, including his being forced to wear a hood soaked in urine, being tied up in uncomfortable positions and sleep-deprived for days, Sacco was confronted with the decision of how to visually depict not just the external, but also the internal torture to which the man was subjected. He said:

> At a certain time, he began to hallucinate and imagine things and he was almost beginning to lose his mind […] So, as I was drawing I was thinking how am I going to emphasize this to sort of add some impact. So, what I started doing was, as the story moves along [was] putting some more panels on a page, basically to make his situation more claustrophobic, to sort of reduce him and reduce the world he’s in, reduce the box (Figs. 25–28). 183

Though Sacco’s work is not purely personal narrative, his revelation of his method illuminates how comics can effectively use the visual to represent traumatic events nontextually. What Sacco accomplishes in these panels goes beyond a mere visual depiction of this detainee’s and his country’s trauma; his drawings of the hooded prisoner work to spark an affective response in the reader. Not only does Sacco offer the reader an entry point to experience along with the detainee his memories of physical torture through a visual play-by-play of events, in his reduction of the panel size and increasing the number of panels per page, he simulates for the reader the feeling of claustrophobic entrapment that the detainee experienced emotionally. 184

Where it could be argued that affective experience in reading and relating to images is diminished in comics because comics uses nonrealistic depictions rather than photographs or photorealistic drawings, on the level of relating human emotional indicators, this has been argued

---


184 Further discussion on the use of panel size and number per page will be addressed in chapter 3.
to be inaccurate. As Ed S. Tan asserts in “The Telling Face in Comic Strip and Graphic Novel,”
“Characters’ emotions are easy to recognize because readers apply the same cues as they do in
recognizing emotion in real life.” Further, as Scott McCloud notes in Understanding Comics,
rather than diminishing the experience and transmission of personal and cultural trauma,
cartoons actually aid in this process. He claims:

When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner’s
features in *vivid detail*. Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own
face, but *this* mind picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement… a sense of
shape… a sense of *general placement*. Something as *simple* and as *basic*—as a *cartoon*.
Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as a face of
*another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see *yourself*.186

McCloud’s assumption that cartoonish representations allow a reader to envision him- or herself
in the place of the characters, and to possibly become more affected by the images presented in
the story, is interesting, if seemingly paradoxical. By using comic “everyman” images, where the
detail is missing, comics offers readers the ability to supplement what they are being shown with
their own sense of reality, thereby placing themselves and their experience in the story.

And yet, while comics utilizes the idea offered by Bennett that the visual can offer a
“different relationship with affective experience,” it also plays with this notion.187 Rather than
simply adhering to the idea that images can register for the reader in an immediate manner that is
oppositional to reading text, comics toys with this supposition in order to question it and to
further engage with the reader.188 Comics utilizes this “perception” of “no appreciable time” in
order to comment on the distinction between the personal narrative comic and textually based

---

original).
188 For further discussion on the use of time in comics, see chapter 3.
Sacco, *Palestine*: Figs. 25–28 (105–108)
personal narrative in order to question its own goal of furthering truthful representation through the use of the visual. Simultaneously, as shown above, comics also employs this perception as a strategy to engage the reader in the story by leading him to believe that images are more immediate than textual language, and perhaps more closely linked to the manner in which the writer both experienced and recalls his memories.

These self-reflexive elements offer a double-play on Bennett’s idea of the “mute witness” and Chute and DeKoven’s concept of “boxes of time.” For example, when describing another element of *Palestine*, Sacco spoke about the incredible amount of mud and the prolific number of political slogans he saw painted on the walls by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. He said:

> A prose journalist is probably going to mention these things, but he or she is not going to mention them at every paragraph whereas a cartoon, just by the fact that I have background I can play with, I can have these things, the mud, the graffiti. All of these things just follow the reader around wherever he or she goes in each panel so that it just creates an atmosphere.

Not only, as Sacco notes, does the constant presence of the mud and political posters create an atmosphere in his work, they also speak to the sense of time and timelessness in comics. Sacco’s mud and political posters work to reveal a sense of historical time as well as to offer readers a role as a mute witness to this history; the pervasiveness of the posters and mud also offer the readers a constant reminder that they are being told a story within the context of an even larger story, which works to call their attention, yet again, to the subjectivity of the account they feel they are experiencing.

Similar to the cartoon images, the traditional comic form of writing works to further draw the reader into the story, and to question this ability. Because traditional comic writing is often

---

190 Sacco, “Presentation from the 2002 UF Comics Conference,” paragraph 13.
employed as the textual part of the medium, rather than typeset fonts, readers are offered a way into the story that is unlike textual personal narrative. Through the use of handwriting, and sometimes various styles of handwriting, readers are urged to feel a more personal connection to the text. Because handwriting is humanistic and irregular, when it is used in comics, it works to create a diary-like feel that engages the readers with the story; and further, the sense of immediacy the handwriting provides offers the readers a feeling of closeness to the story, for it creates the sensation that they are reading an unedited, contemporary account of events. As Friedrich Kittler has asserted, handwriting offers a trace of the human, offering a “private exteriority” that lies in contrast to the “anonymous exteriority of print.” But this idea of the human trace found in handwriting is also toyed with in comics, for although it is simulated on the page, it is merely at best a scanned image, a copy, a simulacrum, and at worst is actually a typeset font created from the artist’s handwriting. So, while comics uses handwriting to suggest a closeness and immediacy, it also highlights how this closeness and immediacy is just an illusion. In these ways, comics further comments on the idea of truth in personal narrative; because handwriting is individualistic, readers of comics are at once made constantly aware of the subjectivity of the writer, that the account of events are from a singular, personal perspective, and at the same time that the writing is not from a diary or contemporaneous perspective but is a reenactment of events from a retrospective viewpoint.

Further, when the spatial layout and various images within comics are taken together, readers are forced to interact with the object of comics. Rather than reading and imagining the story that is being presented in the typeset language of literary personal narrative, readers of

---

191 Friedrich Kittler, “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” trans. Dorothea von Mu

---
comics must learn to read differently all the elements being presented: the images, the text, and the layout of the work, moving from one element to the other—and also filling in the gaps of what is not being said or shown. As Will Eisner notes:

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 regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act both of aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.192

Through this engagement with the work, comics offers readers not just a challenge in interaction with understanding the structure of the object but also encourages them to further consider the way in which we reconstruct the past to achieve a sense of truth. As comics scholar Roberto Bartual notes:

The act of reading becomes, thus, a mirror image of the act of remembering. It implies the same mental processes: connecting temporal events with geographical spaces and objects, jumping freely from one event to another and then going back to previous events, making inferences about chronology in base to visual and contextual data, etc.193

Because comics presents different forms of communication simultaneously, readers must work to re-member dis-membered elements of the personal narrative to create a cohesive whole. This action ultimately points them to consider the various elements that make up our memories of the past: our own personal experiences, the stories we are told, and various documentary evidence that speak to a past we sometimes do not recall. Through its form, comics thus prompts readers to consider how all these elements come together to create our own sense of the truth.

193 Roberto Bartual, “Towards a Panoptical Representation of Time and Memory: Chris Ware, Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson’s “Pure Duration,” SJoCA 1.1 (2012): 60.
Searching for Truth: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

To more closely analyze how comics is able to achieve this sort of dialogue within its form, I will now turn to a close reading of Alison Bechdel’s 2006 *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel relates the story of her life by taking her readers through vignettes of different periods of her self-discovery in nonlinear time, all of which are juxtaposed with a retrospective look at how she came to uncover her father’s closeted homosexuality. A sort of double coming-out story, *Fun Home* explores the complications in claiming sexual identity in two generations of heteronormative American society and points to the interconnectedness of human experience within trauma, “the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound.”

In order to tell her story, Bechdel utilizes comics to profound effect in that she works in different styles of drawing to represent different moments of revelation, sometimes overlapping them in order to illuminate the discourse on truth as it is related to experience, document, and memory. In this way, Bechdel’s work is a prime example of how comics is at once self-reflexively able to comment on the aim and ability of personal narrative to represent experiential truth, and, more importantly, to speak to our obsessive search for discovering the truth even in its impossibility.

Like Cha, Bechdel utilizes inserted documents to great effect in her work. Unlike Cha, however, Bechdel includes these documents not as disruptive images, but rather seamlessly presents them in the main storyline of her narrative, inciting a markedly different response in the reader. In particular, her use of various works of literature offer an intertextual subtext to her story, which draws her readers’ attention to the way in which documents effect feeling and

memory. While she notes that literature played a great role in her relationship with her father, a
teacher of high school English, and parallels her relationship with him to the myth of Icarus and
Daedalus throughout her work, the most noteworthy intertextual references are those that she
chooses to include but not to discuss. Already in the first panel of the first page of her work,
readers are met with a young Alison, who interrupts her relaxed and reading father to play a
game of airplane (Fig. 29). In the third panel on this page, readers are able to see Alison’s
father’s discarded copy of *Anna Karenina* on the floor next to the two as they play. This
intertextual reference is not mentioned in the text, but reveals to the reader a wealth of
information. As the story unfolds, it is clear that Alison’s father, Bruce, is like Anna Karenina; he
is conducting a secret, adulterous love affair, has a child who is suspicious of him and a spouse
who turns a blind eye, and most importantly, has a reason to conceal his affair: the fear of
societal scorn. Where the placement of *Anna Karenina* in the panel could be seen as Bechdel
accomplishing what Kraus does in her memoir when she claims that her father was reading
Tolstoy’s *On the Meaning of Life*, it does much more than this alone. Because this instance of
intertextuality is coupled with other instances of Bechdel directly addressing how her
relationship with her father was influenced by his love of literature, she points to the confusion
and interrelation of fact and fiction in experience. Because the book’s appearance in the panel is
not addressed, Bechdel leads her readers to wonder whether she recalls this as a memory or
whether she is using it as a narrative ploy.

This question of intent arises in large part due to Bechdel’s quest to understand whether
her father’s death was a suicide and not an accident as reported. Throughout her narrative, she
looks for clues to her father’s intentions in what he was reading, making specific note that
“There’s no proof [of his suicide], but there are some suggestive circumstances [...] The copy of Camus’ *A Happy Death* that he’d been reading and leaving around the house in what might be construed as a deliberate manner.”195 This directive comment, coupled with more understated moments of intertextuality leads readers to further ponder whether Bechdel is using intertextuality as a guide for them or for herself. For example, when she describes her father’s obsession with restoring their home, she notes, “It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word.”196 Underneath this text, the reader finds an image in which Bruce is carrying a column for the porch of their house (Fig. 30). The manner in which his figure is bent, as well as the angle of the column as he carries it, calls to mind the ubiquitous image of Christ carrying the cross on his back. And just in case the reader has missed this overt allusion, Bechdel includes a floating text box to the right of her father’s figure that reads “Libidinal. Manic. Martyred.” Unlike the subtle comparison of Bruce to Anna Karenina, this image is quite the heavy-handed nod to her readers. Here, Bechdel rather obviously suggests that, like Christ, her father has a cross to bear and will unjustly die. In offering her readers a slow-pitched “aha moment” of discovery of her narrative technique, she pushes them to ponder our obsession with the narrative recovery of experiential truth.

Perhaps Bechdel’s most poignant commentary on personal narrative’s obsession with the truth comes through her childhood writings, which she has rewritten and inserted throughout her work. As self-diagnosed obsessive-compulsive, Bechdel began to keep a journal as a way to curb her disorder. She explains that her father told her, “Just write down what’s happening.”197 In this

196 Ibid., 7
197 Ibid., 140.
LIKE MANY FATHERS, Mine COULd OCCASIONALLy BE PREVIOUSLY ON FOR A SPOT OF "AIRPLANE."

AS I LAUNCHED ME. MY FULL WEIGHT WOULD FALL ON THE PIVOT POINT BETWEEN HIS FOOT AND MY STOMACH.

OOF?

IT WAS A DISCOMFORT WELL WORTH THE RARE PHYSICAL CONTACT AND CERTAINLY WORTH THE MOMENT OF PERFECT BALANCE WHEN I SOARED ABOVE HIM.

IN THE CIRCUS, AEROBATICS WHERE ONE PERSON LIES ON THE FLOOR BALANCING ANOTHER ARE CALLED "TORNAN GAMES."

IT WAS HIS PASSION, AND I MEAN PASSION IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD.

LIBERAL.
MANIC
MARTYRED.
statement alone, Bechdel can be seen as commenting on personal narrative, calling her readers’ attention to the subjective reality of “what’s happening.” But further, she illustrates this subjectivity through re-creating the diary pages for her readers to see. In every entry, she writes “I think” after nearly every sentence, regardless of whether she is describing actions or feelings, and eventually creates a symbol representative of the words that she can use to cover any moment of uncertainty (Fig. 31). She notes, “It was sort of an epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” This confusion of truth she expresses both as a child in her diary, and as an adult in her commentary, are of particular interest in that she chooses to place the symbol over not just events, which calls into question how memory influences the truth in experience, but over the names of the people in her life: her mother, father, friends, and even herself. In so doing, Bechdel further calls into question personal narrative’s aims of recounting experiential truth by questioning the relational ties we have to one another. She asks, in essence: Do we ever really know another? Do we ever really know ourselves? What is it that we cannot see? Her creation of the symbol works to showcase Gertrude Stein’s assertion in *Everybody’s Autobiography*:

> It is funny this knowing being a genius, everything is funny. And identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself.

---

198 Ibid., 141.
Bechdel explores these questions more fully through the use of photographs in her narrative. While in her main storyline she utilizes the feeling of familiarity offered by cartoon images, she also plays with the goal of personal narrative through her inclusion of photographs of her family, which she has drawn more photorealistically. Unlike the cartoonish images, the drawn photographs work to exclude the reader from close association with the represented figures, and serve to remind the reader that this is her memoir about her life. As Bechdel said in
an interview with Hillary Chute:

I also like the way [the drawn photographs] anchor the story in real life—the book is
drawn in my regular cartoony style, but the photos are drawn very realistically. It’s a way
to keep reminding readers, these are real people. This stuff really happened.200

Where Bechdel, unlike Cha, uses this trope of biography in her work, including photographs
from school portraits to passport photos in order to assert the credibility of her work, she also
toys with this notion by reading into the photographs herself.

As Rosalind Krauss discusses in “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,”
photography often incites a particular personal reaction in the viewer. In her discussion of Agnès
Varda’s 1983 Une minute pour une image, a French television program that lasted one minute per
episode and asked people to respond to a photograph, she notes that most often the photographs
presented by Varda elicited what she terms an “it’s an x or it’s a y” response from its various
respondents. Ranging from artists to writers to the man on the street, the respondents sought to
discover what was in the photograph, what its story was, and in so doing, ultimately revealed
more about themselves and their own desires or fantasies than about the photograph. As an
example, Krauss presents photographer Deborah Turbeville’s photograph (Fig. 32) and the
response from writer Marguerite Duras thus:

I think she’s dead. I think she’s fake. It’s not a person; yet around the mouth there is
something alive, a trace of speech. She is behind a windowpane. That’s not blood in her
hand, it’s paint, perhaps it is the allegory of painting. No, she isn’t dead. She’s on top of a
closed trunk or a door. There is a shipping label, perhaps it is her coffin. No, she isn’t
dead. No, I don’t see her as a woman from my novels.201

And another, from Marie-Paule Nègre (Fig. 33), with commentary from a man on the street:

It’s the arrival of a train, it’s the arrival of a train in a dream, a woman waits for someone and obviously makes a mistake about the person; the man she was waiting for obviously is ... he isn’t in the shot, he has aged, and she was waiting for someone much younger, more brilliant than the little fellow we see there. ... She dreams and in her dream she is also much younger, at the time when her feelings developed as she would have liked to recover them there, now. It’s a dream that doesn’t work out.202

Krauss explains, following Pierre Bourdieu’s 1965 treatise on photography, *A Middle Brow Art*, that this sort of response occurs in regards to photography because of its ties to and accessibility for the middle class. As such, she asserts that the most common judgment of photography can never be so-called properly aesthetic, but rather will always be judged in terms of identity and social functions.

What is interesting about Bechdel’s work is how she highlights this aspect of photography even as she asserts its believability as document. Where she presents photographs of her family as the proof of her pact with her readers, she undermines this through presenting a panel that shows her father trying to coerce the family to pose in front of their newly restored home (Fig. 34). Above the panel she writes, “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not.”203 This image and text bring to mind Bourdieu’s assertion that:

[… ] it becomes clear that photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, in short, of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity.204

202 Ibid., 52.
203 Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 16.
Varda, *Une minute pour une image*: Fig. 32: (top) Turbeville/Duras; and Fig. 33: (bottom) Nègre/man on the street205

205 Each of the 170 photographs from Varda’s television series was reproduced the following day in *Liberation* with
In this remembered and imagined image, Bechdel speaks to how the photograph is problematically used as a system of proof of family cohesion. And yet she suggests that even in the photograph’s effective masking, it may in fact reveal the hidden truths of the family.

In the only two-page spread in her work, Bechdel draws attention to the conflict between memory and document by presenting the reader with an intimate photograph of her father’s young lover (Fig. 35). Held by Bechdel’s cartoon hands, the photograph of her then seventeen-year-old babysitter, Roy, recumbent on a bed in a hotel room, relaxed and stripped down to his underwear with the sunlight reflecting off his hair, serves as a marker of the rupture between lived experience and document. Coupled with the commentary by Bechdel, ranging from memories of the trip to comments on the quality of the photo, this image serves to show her trying to understand what the photograph is, what it means. Of this photograph, Bechdel said in her interview with Chute:

> It was a stunning glimpse into my father’s hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades.\(^{206}\)

The overlapping of the cartoon hand and the photograph juxtaposes the believability of memory with documentary evidence, for while she has the proof of the photograph, it does not account for the father that she knew, for her experiential truth. In this way, this image of the photograph that sparked Bechdel to write Fun Home also works to reveal the hermeneutic impossibility of experiential truth.\(^{207}\) Especially when taking together all the elements Bechdel provides in her

\(^{206}\) Chute, “An Interview with Alison Bechdel,” 1006.

\(^{207}\) In the same interview with Chute, Bechdel claims that finding the photograph of Roy was the impetus for writing Fun Home, Ibid., 1005.
HE USED HIS SKILLFUL ARTIFICE NOT TO MAKE THINGS, BUT TO MAKE THINGS APPEAR TO BE WHAT THEY WERE NOT.

MASS WILL BE OVER BEFORE WE GET THERE.

THAT IS TO SAY, IMPECCABLE.

SHORTLY AFTER DAD DIED, I WAS ROOTING THROUGH A BOX OF FAMILY PHOTOS AND CAME ACROSS ONE I HAD NEVER SEEN. IT’S LOW-CONTRAST AND OUT OF FOCUS, BUT THE SUBJECT IS CLEARLY OUR TWO-WORK ASSISTANT, RUSSELL, ROY.

IT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN TAKEN ON A VACATION WHEN I WAS EIGHT, A TRIP ON WHICH ROY ACCOMPANIED MY FATHER, MY BROTHERS, AND ME TO THE JERSEY SHORE WHILE MY MOTHER VISITED HER OLD ROOMMATE IN NEW YORK CITY.

I REMEMBER THE HOTEL ROOM. MY BROTHERS AND I SLEPT IN ONE ADJOINING IT.

THE BLURRINESS OF THE PHOTO GIVES IT AN ETHEREAL, PAINTERLY QUALITY. ROY IS ILLUMINATED WITH MORNING SUNNY LIGHT. HIS HAIR IS A LILAC.

IN FACT, THE PICTURE IS BEAUTIFUL. BUT WOULD I BE ASSESSING ITS AESTHETIC MERITS SO CALMLY IF IT WERE OF A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL? WHY AM I NOT PROPERLY OUTRAGED?

BECHDEL, FUN HOME: Fig. 34: (top) artifice (16), and Fig. 35: (bottom) Roy (100–01)
work—the intertextual references, the images of her diary, and the photographs of her family and her father’s private life—Bechdel points her readers toward an understanding that the feeling of truth can never be truly personal, but instead is always inextricable from our ties to each other.

This point, which Bechdel reaches using comics’ form, firmly underlines the aims of personal narrative. As queer theorist Valerie Rohy notes of *Fun Home*:

Surely truth and falsehood are among its central concerns: a father’s closetedness, the rift between ‘public appearance and private reality,’ a mother’s theatrical performances, childhood experiments in cross-dressing, the ‘falsehood’ of the diary that omits them, and the historical struggles of ‘erotic truth’ against censorship.”

Further, however, it works as a commentary on our cultural archive fever. What Bechdel accomplishes in her work is a questioning of what the archive hides and reveals. By upsetting any notion of privileging certain information, she obscures archival authority through dismantling claims to truth in either document or testament. Indeed, she reveals the tenet of archive fever to illuminate “the contradictions inherent in that project: inscription and defacement, preservation and destruction, truth and lies, fact and fiction, history and literature, authenticity and embellishment.”

In her exploration of the limitations of personal narrative to represent the truth, she ultimately undermines any such fixed notion in personal, and thereby, collective archives.

---


Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of [a] political “double bind,” which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.

—Michel Foucault

As demonstrated in the two previous chapters, comics contests binaries across many sites, including the aforementioned debates over high versus low culture, and evidence versus emotion. What this chapter will address is yet another set of binaries that comics obscures: the image as space versus text as time argument famously asserted by G. E. Lessing and critiqued by W. J. T. Mitchell. Not only does comics utilize the “perception” of “no appreciable time” in the reading of images in order to examine the ability to truthfully represent a life, through its unique formal combination of this twofold binary system—of text and image, and time and space—it is able to upset the boundaries delineated by Lessing. Through creating what Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue is a sense of time as space, the form of comics offers itself as a contested space that not only confronts these perceived boundaries but further positions comics as a space from

---


211 As stated in the introduction to my work, Mitchell asserts that for Lessing: “Reading occurs in time; the signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence; and the events represented or narrated occur in time. There is thus a kind of homology, or what Lessing calls a ‘convenient relation’ (*bequemes Verhältnis*) between medium, message, and the mental process of decoding. A similar homology operates in accounts of visual art: the medium consists of forms displayed in space; and the perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time.”
which to both critique the power inherent in spatial relations and offer possible solutions for subverting it.

The spatializing of time in comics, achieved by both collapsing and expanding time through the use of space within images and in the size of panels and gutter space, not only lends insight into the formal possibilities of text and image, it positions comics as an object through which to reflect on how time is spatialized in terms of the real and the imaginary. As discussed in the previous chapter, the style and structure of comics can be effectively employed to present seemingly differential records of the past in a congruent manner, and thereby disrupt privileging systems of archival interpretation. In a similar manner, the style and structure of comics can work to upset the boundaries of time and space formally, but further speak to a larger problematic: the mediation of space in terms of the real and the imaginary. Due to its form, comics reveals that space is inherently multidimensional, and thereby the faultiness of the binary of the real and the imaginary.

The style and structure of comics play an important role in the way comics addresses spatial relations. The formal qualities of comics can be utilized to deliberately determine spaces or keep them indistinct, and can further work to confuse the relation between the space of the page and the space of the narrative. As with evidential documents and emotional testimonies, comics can represent imaginary space and real space side by side, and sometimes intermittently on the page as coexisting spaces or even a mixture between the two, and thereby holds the potential to upend distinctions between real and imaginary space. This double blending, of real and imaginary space on the page and on the narrative level, ultimately affords comics a position from which to offer an interesting perspective on how power is mediated in space through
visibility.

Because comics is a spatial site through which the notions of public and private space, and of conscious and unconscious psychological or fantastical space can be explored, it is poised to be considered as a site from which to reflect upon Foucault’s notion of heterotopic space, those “real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society,” and his notion of utopic space—the “arrangements which have no real space.” As outlined in “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault’s “heterotopias of deviance” specifically refer to the societal institutions created in order to contain, and possibly rehabilitate, members of society who deviate from the mass population mentally and/or physically. Foucault claims these institutions, including the cemetery, the hospital, and the prison, were established in order to maintain control and uphold normalization enacted through spatial relations and visibility. In his famous metaphor for the state and its institutions, he draws upon Jeremy Bentham’s plan for the panopticon to assert that not only is space a powerful tool for the policing of society but also that the effects of such policing eventually result in the members of society learning to police themselves, both out of fear of being watched and because of the learned embodiment of the state’s idea that (self-) policing is important to the structure and maintenance of society.

This influence on the subject is of the greatest concern for Foucault, for he asserts that it is through the members of society establishing a sense of individuality that the state is better able to control each individual. As he explains in “The Subject and Power,” “subject” has a double meaning of being “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or a self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which

---

subjugates and makes subject to.”213 According to Foucault, institutionalized social spaces play an active role in this double formation of the subject through their control and normalization of the individual, achieved through three interrelated modes of becoming subject. The first of these, “dividing practices,” is very clearly seen in his discourse on “heterotopias of deviance,” where the subject is objectified by societal institutions both spatially and temporally; the interrelated second mode is concerned with classifying structures within language; and the departing third mode deals with the idea of becoming subject, where the individual plays an active role in his own subjugation, having internalized the workings of societal institutions and the language of the first two modes. Thus, Foucault claims, objectification and normalization happen through the subject’s use of these spaces, which creates a “political ‘double bind’” that he argues must be exposed in order to “promote new forms of subjectivity.”214

Through a close reading of Paul Hornschemeier’s 2003 false memoir *Mother, Come Home*, I will explore how comics addresses the “political ‘double bind’” and offers possible solutions for subverting the power inherent in spatial relations. *Mother, Come Home* tells the story of a young boy who has lost his mother and is subsequently taken in by his aunt and uncle after his father succumbs to a severe depression. In the narrative, the reader is introduced to the very real spaces of heterotopia and the characters’ attempts to try to subvert the power inherent in them through imagining utopic spaces. In the characters’ envisioning these imaginary spaces, attempted physically through masking and psychically through retreat into psychological or fantastical dream space, *Mother, Come Home* takes up the discourse on power enacted through visibility by revealing how heterotopic systems have infiltrated private space to the point of

213 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 212.
214 Ibid., 216.
individuals enacting the same policing force both within the home and the self. By addressing the “political ‘double bind’” of institutional policing where the individual is both highly criticized and largely ignored, as well as the potential means to subvert this process through becoming invisible, *Mother, Come Home* works to expose the spatial power relations outlined by Foucault.

Hornschemeier’s work is an ideal case study for how comics is able to reveal the “political ‘double bind’” because it deals quite explicitly with the kind of subjectivity imposed upon and made manifest in individuals, and further because it self-reflexively utilizes the distinct qualities of the form of comics to underscore the point of its content. In his toying with form through the use of color, various drawing styles, panels, and gutters—all of which can be effectively used to mask, conceal, advance, and retreat from the space of the real—Hornschemeier dynamically engages with the notion of space. In so doing, he not only makes visible the workings of spatial constructions by effectively exposing them, he offers the form of comics as a potential answer to Foucault’s call to criticize these institutions “in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.”

Through the creation of a truly alternative space, I argue that comics is able to open what cultural geographer Edward Soja has termed “Thirdspace.” “Thirdspace” creates a possibility for conceptualizing other spaces beyond modernist binaries—spaces that necessarily blur the borders of subjectivity and objectivity, public and private, and the real and the imaginary. Because “Thirdspace” can be used as a tool to address the problematics raised by Foucault in his discourse on institutionalized power, I posit that comics, through their distribution of spatial relations, offers a potentiality to expose and critique the power inherent in spatial constructions.

---

By analyzing Hornschemeier’s work through the concept of “Thirdspace,” I explore how it actively works to address Foucault’s concerns by offering a space that can house a potential new form of subjectivity that is not impeded by dividing binaries. I will demonstrate how the coming together of real and imagined spaces in comics necessarily disrupts the binary system upon which Foucault’s “political ‘double bind’” works. In creating a different position for the subject that is both real and imagined and yet neither, comics can be seen as re-centering the position of the individual, and thereby offering a different perspective on individualization. In its collapsing of binaries and rethinking of subjectivity, I assert that comics is imbued with the potential for institutional critique as it makes possible a space from which to address and confuse the power inherent in spatial relations.

The Formal Operation of Space and Time in Comics

In order to discuss the coming together of the twofold binary of text and image, and time and space, it is useful to consider the more or less accepted workings of the form of comics. Figure 36 is illustrative of a somewhat typical comics page layout where three main elements of comics, the images, the gutter space between the images, and the text, can clearly be seen.216 As mentioned in chapter 1, while not all comics use text, when they do, they pose interesting insights into Lessing’s assertion that images are read in space and text read in time. While certainly each particular panel of a wordless comic can be read according to the assertion that images are read in space—that is, that images can be perceived as spatially oriented and thus

216 Like the definition of comics, certainly my delineation of a “typical” comics page and “main” elements could be contested, and perhaps a better example of a “typical” comics page would be a traditional nine-panel grid. Additionally, Groensteen (2007), for instance, would probably disagree with my “main” elements, as he defines four main elements of comics: the panel, gutter, frame, and margin, as he focuses on the primacy of the image.
Fig. 36: Hornschemeier, *Mother, Come Home* (31)
instantaneous in their being “read”—and, in a comic with text, that the text can be perceived as both read and narrated in time, the way text and image interact in comics works to belie this binary.

In the juxtaposition of text and image, comics presents a new concept of the workings of time and space that is interrelated rather than distinct. In particular, the use of onomatopoeic words and speech and thought balloons disrupt the notion of the stasis of the image through the introduction of sound. As Scott McCloud notes, “Words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time—sound.”217 The panel on the bottom-left corner of figure 36 is an example of onomatopoeic text, where the reader sees the phone being placed back on the receiver with a klack. This common trope in comics acts as an iconic sound image. Underscored by the movement lines of the young boy’s hand, the klack immediately breaks the static nature of the image through the introduction of sound, adding time to what could otherwise be read as an instantaneous image. Similar to the operation of onomatopoeic words is the way speech and thought balloons introduce sound into images. Shown on this same page, in the last panel of the middle row, where the reader sees the young boy saying “Thank you,” this kind of text in comics also works to create a sense of time in the image. The representation of sound as outwardly expressed or inwardly thought dialogue on the comics page, like the iconic sound image, creates a sense of duration within the panel. Because both speech and thoughts take time in expression, time is imbedded into the image through their representation, which again works to undermine the notion of images being read spatially and instantaneously.

Narrative text proves more complicated in its commentary on the workings of text and image and time and space. Quite unlike onomatopoeic words or speech and thought balloons,

which introduce time into the image through the duration of sound, narrative text, being outside the image, offers a different perspective on how time and space operate. While certainly text and image are still interrelated in the use of narrative text, the relationship is not necessarily as direct or immediately perceivable as it is for onomatopoeic words or speech and thought balloons. As can be seen in figure 37, sometimes in comics the text and image complement each other. In the top-left panel of this page, the young boy, as narrator, tells the reader that his aunt and uncle were coming around a lot and bringing groceries, which is complemented by the image of his aunt and uncle carrying grocery bags. At other times, the text and image tell two different stories that are nuanced by each other. The bottom panels of this same page reveal that the young boy is telling the reader a backstory about his aunt while the action of the image, which is current to the sequential image narrative, is unrelated to the textual narrative. Also on this page, there is the juxtaposition of narrative text, speech balloon, and image that operate in a similar manner. Sometimes they are in sync, such as in the top-right panel where the three are relative and simultaneous: the reader sees the uncle sniffing and mumbling about a musty smell in the house while the young boy tells the reader that he didn’t like their “under-the-breath judgements.” Other times they are not, such as in the panel just below, where the image shows the father and uncle talking while the young boy tells the reader that his uncle was an engineer.

What these examples reveal is that narrative text works to highlight the form of comics. Being outside of the image narrative, narrative text calls attention to the fact that “the comics panel is fragmentary and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus.”

---

Fig. 37: Hornschemeier, *Mother, Come Home* (34)
arrangement of panels in sequence has the effect of both text and image being read in a temporal
spatiality. As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven explain:

The form’s syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page […]
the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that
moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader
forward in time.219

The panels, or “boxes of time,” as Chute and DeKoven refer to them, constitute a temporal
language in that they are meant as a continuation, a drive from box to box. But rather than being
necessarily a continuous drive, the panels are able to distort notions of time through their relation
with one another. As comics scholar Jeff Adams has pointed out, “The ability to seem to control
time through the spacing of the frames and the turning of the pages is one of the fundamental
characteristics of the graphic novel medium.”220

As stated earlier, held within the panels are images of a particular moment or moments of
time, but due to the spatial layout of comics, which necessarily puts the images in a sequential
relationship with one another, a single panel can be seen as either collapsing or expanding time
and accelerating or decelerating time from frame to frame. Based on the size of the panel and the
gutter space between panels, as well as their relation to the other panels and gutter spaces, the
reader is urged to spend more or less time on a particular panel, and is thereby encouraged to
either read panels more quickly or more slowly in sequence.221 In figure 38, the reader can see
how the spatial layout of the page creates a consistent drive by using equally spaced, same-sized
panels, which have a fluid sequential structure. Meanwhile, figure 39 plays with time, calling

769.
220 Jeff Adams, “Troubled Places: Domestic Space in Graphic Novels” in Our House: The Representation of
Domestic Space in Modern Culture, eds. Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 165.
221 See McCloud (2000); As Rikke Platz Cortsen (2012) has noted, “comics are not always as neat as McCloud’s
examples and the duration of a panel can sometimes be very difficult to determine.”
more attention to the first, larger and more detailed, image of the father’s eye, which can be read as a momentary yet sustained sadness, and less attention to the following frames, where the reader can see monotonous daily events of the characters' lives (events that the text reveals take place over and over again, over the course of several months). Figure 40, what is called a “bleed,” is arresting since it has neither frame nor gutter, and thus can work to suspend notions of time restriction altogether.\textsuperscript{222}

---

\textsuperscript{222} See Groensteen (2007).
Even though the examples above illustrate how comics can work to disrupt the binary of image as space and text as time, using Lessing's assertions, this is not a wholly valid argument. As Mitchell explains, Lessing suggests that temporality can only ever be *implied* in images or in their sequence with one another, and that therefore it “cannot be directly represented by the medium in the way that spatial objects can.”\textsuperscript{223} In Mitchell’s consideration of the coming together of image and text, he offers a heavy critique of Lessing’s restrictive notion of the formal qualities of media. Mitchell ultimately argues that:

\begin{quote}
[...] works of art, like all other objects of human experience, are structures in space-time, and that the interesting problem is to comprehend a particular spatial-temporal construction, not to label it as temporal or spatial. A poem is not literally temporal and figuratively spatial: it is literally a spatial-temporal construction.\textsuperscript{224}
\end{quote}

However, in looking closely at Mitchell’s definitions of the various manners in which image and text can come together, his argument, which aims to break apart Lessing’s hierarchical distinction between painting and poetry, nevertheless implies similar hierarchies. He explains his concept of “imagetext” thus:

\begin{quote}
I will employ the typographic conventions of the slash to designate “image/text” as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term “imagetext” designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. “Image-text,” with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal.\textsuperscript{225}
\end{quote}

What Mitchell delineates in these definitions is that image and text do not necessarily always come together to create “imagetext” in one medium; some combinations of image and text work instead to highlight the tension between the two in *implying* the features of one medium in another. While he argues these combinations, “image/text” or “image-text,” can work to expose and explore the relationship between the image and text, he explains that such works:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 104.  
\end{flushright}
[..] (in the illustrated newspaper or even in the cartoon page) follow more traditional formulas involving clear subordination and suturing of one medium to the other, often with a straightforward division of labor. In the typical comics strip, word is to image as speech (or thought) is to action and bodies. Language appears in a speech-balloon emanating from the speaker’s mouth or a thought-cloud emerging from the thinker’s head. […] Narrative diegesis […] is generally located in the margins of the image, in a position understood to be “outside” the present moment of depicted actions, scenes, and bodies.226

While he is careful to note that comics could be capable of “experimentation and complex deviation from the norm,” and gives examples of comics that self-reflexively use their form in cinematic or uncinematic ways, he underlines the idea that comics privilege image over text.227 This not only necessarily brings to mind Clement Greenberg’s rather short-sighted commentary on Steig’s All Embarrassed I discussed in chapter 1, and certainly reiterates many comics scholars’ assertions about comics being primarily focused on image, the idea of “imagetext” is dangerously close to the hierarchical privileging of fusion and transformation of media in intermediality studies.228 While Mitchell is careful to avoid such hierarchies in his discussion, noting that “image/text” and “image-text” can be “interesting,” much the way Rajewsky attempts to not hierarchically categorize intermedial works, he is not entirely able to circumvent the implicit hierarchies in discourse on medium.

Like his criticism of “literary scholars moonlighting in the visual arts,” his discussion does not demonstrate a thorough investigation of the operation of text and image in comics, which is evidenced by his use of the terms cinematic and uncinematic.229 While, as I discussed in chapter 1, the comparison of comics to film is not only inaccurate and ultimately dismissive of

226 While clearly Mitchell classifies comics as outside of “imagetext” in this quotation, it is important to note here that the University of Florida’s journal ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies was granted permission by Mitchell to use his term; W. J. T. Mitchell, Picture Theory (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), 91–2.
227 Ibid., 93.
228 In his discussion, Mitchell calls William Blake’s work “illuminated books” and “mixed media.” W. J. T. Mitchell, Picture Theory (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), 89.
229 Ibid., 84.
comics as a lesser medium than film, the comparison could have been utilized by Mitchell to take his argument a step further. He notes that in psychoanalytic film theory, “suture might be described as that which ‘fills in’ the gaps between images and shots by constructing a subjective sense of continuity and absent positionality,” which he claims could be applied to the coming together of image and text in a similar manner.\textsuperscript{230} He explains:

Film theory’s emphasis, not surprisingly, has been on the suturing of the image sequences and the construction of the subject as spectator. But the question of the image/text suggests, I hope, that the notion of suture might well be extended to include the subject as reader and listener.\textsuperscript{231}

What Mitchell, similarly to Greenberg before him, does not consider here, is that comics is already actively engaging with the reader. To reiterate Chute and DeKoven’s argument, images “comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time.”\textsuperscript{232} As I demonstrated in chapter 2, text does not merely support the images in comics, but can work with the images to call into question the privileging of document over testimony, what is seen over what is said; while narrative text is not in the image, it still operates as an integral part of the meaning making and subject construction in comics, and therefore cannot be dismissed as subordinate. Therefore, although Mitchell argues above that the “suture” in comics comes from text being subordinate and sutured to the image, a key insight he overlooks concerning the way in which comics operates is right in front of him: the engagement of the reader. As noted in chapter 2 with the example from Sacco’s Palestine, and above in my reading of the father’s eye in figure 39, it is not merely the images or the text alone that enable comics to operate, neither is it the artist’s intentional play with affect,

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 92 (note 15).
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{232} Chute and DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” 769.
but the manner in which the reader actively works to make the various information presented and
missing in comics cohere.\textsuperscript{233} As McCloud notes, “The audience is a willing and conscious
collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion.”\textsuperscript{234}

As I argued in chapter 1, categorizing comics as intermedial or post-medium does little to
establish what comics is or what it does. Similarly, while I support that image and text work
together in comics both on the space of the page and in the space of the narrative, classifying
comics as “imagetext,” “image/text,” or “image-text” is an argument that could go on
indefinitely to no great conclusion. What I find more interesting about the way in which image
and text combine in comics is what it reveals about comics’ ability to function politically. More
than a commentary on the “irregular, heterogenous, and often improvised boundaries between
‘institutions of the visible’ […] and ‘institutions of the verbal,’”\textsuperscript{235} what the coming together of text
and image in comics ultimately leads to is yet another political function of comics: a revelation
of how time is spatialized in terms of the real and the imaginary.\textsuperscript{235}

As mentioned earlier, narrative text in comics can work to push forward the narrative in a
different way from the narrative of the images; it can give the reader backstory anecdotes or
commentary on the image, both of which speak to Henri Bergson’s theory of duration, where
time is spatialized rather than linear, and heavily reliant upon subjectivity.\textsuperscript{236} Onomatopoeic text
and speech and thought balloons also disrupt any sense of a separation between real and
imagined space in that they make the invisible visible. As comics scholar David Carrier explains,
“Speech balloons, because they are visible to the reader but do not lie within the picture space

\textsuperscript{233} See, for example, Jan Baetens (2008), and in particular, his discussion of Olivier Deprez’s Le château de Kafka.
\textsuperscript{234} McCloud, Understanding Comics, 65.
(Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996), 49.
\textsuperscript{236} See Bergson (2002)
containing the depicted characters, distinguish comics [from other works of art].”

Indeed, in blending different real and imagined moments both on the space of the page and in the space of the narrative, comics can engage the reader in the workings of time and space in terms of the real and the imaginary.

**The Potential of “Thirdspace”**

Because comics blends time and space in a manner that exposes the spaces of the real and the imaginary, it works to address Foucault’s “political ‘double bind’” of institutional power. In comics, “real and effective” heterotopic space is interwoven with imaginary utopic space, the “arrangements which have no real space,” thereby positioning it as a form through which to both expose and effectively critique the binaries upon which power structures are built.

In offering itself as a form through which to conceptualize other spaces not impeded by modernist binaries, comics is able to highlight that space is inherently multidimensional and power-laden, and ultimately to open a “Thirdspace” as a potential for subverting the power in spatial relations.

In his 1996 work *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, cultural geographer Edward Soja conceptualizes a new way of thinking about the sociopolitical ramifications of the use of space. Developed in part from the concept of heterotopia, which is closely connected to the way in which Foucault conceives of the “political ‘double bind’” of subjectivity, “Thirdspace” can be used as a tool to address institutional power, which both “subjugates and makes subject to.”

Modernist binary divisions are both contested and reevaluated in the principle that constitutes “thirling”—a process that keeps part of the

---

238 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 25.
239 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 212.
content and function of binaries and upends others. Soja writes that “Thirdspace” “does not
derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a
disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstruction of their presumed totalization producing
an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different.” Thirdspace,” then, is
especially a combination, circumvention, and reintegration of real space and imagined space that
both is and is not a product of these binaries. This disruption and deconstruction of binaries is
central to the notion of “Thirdspace” because it offers a spatial opportunity for subversion and
resistance that is not different from but includes elements of these binaries in an open and
productive relationship.

“Thirdspace” therefore, due to its inherent multiplicity, also can be a space of
empowerment. Soja explains this political potential of “Thirdspace” in his reading of bell
hooks’s work Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. He writes that hooks proposes:

[…] a re-visioned spatiality that creates from difference new sites for struggle and for the
construction of interconnected and non-exclusionary communities of resistance. In so
doing, she opens up in these real-and-imagined other spaces a Thirdspace of possibilities
for a new cultural politics of difference and identity that is both radically postmodern and
consciously spatialized from the beginning.

What he sees as a “vital discursive turn” in hooks’s work is her envisioning the encouragement
of the combination of traditionally separate (and separated) communities in an “empowerment of
multiplicity.” This, he claims, “leads to a new spatial conception of social justice based on the
politics of location and the right to difference within the revised situational contexts of post-

240 Edward Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places (Cambridge: Wiley-
241 Ibid., 96.
242 Ibid.
modernity.”

hooks’s call to claim marginality, he notes, works to disrupt the binary of center and margin by “reconceptualiz[ing] the problematic of subjugation”—that is, by choosing a position of marginality, marginality itself becomes contrary to its meaning. “Thirdspace” thereby offers a potential answer to Foucault’s call to “promote new forms of subjectivity.”

Paul Hornschemeier’s *Mother, Come Home*

Subjects and Spaces of the State

Before discussing the manner in which comics opens a “Thirdspace,” it is important to investigate how comics is able to reveal Foucault’s “political ‘double bind’” of subjectivity.

Through a close reading of Paul Hornschemeier’s *Mother, Come Home*, which has a thematic preoccupation with identity and subjectification through the use of space, I will expose how comics uses its form to, as McCloud notes, “[place] itself in the world of concepts.” Much of Hornschemeier’s work can be seen as an exploration of Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. As the story unfolds, the reader is introduced to the real spaces of heterotopia: cemeteries, psychological hospitals, and schools. However, Hornschemeier’s work is mostly concerned with private domestic spaces, which are presented as confined and threatened “heterotopias of deviance” in their established power structures that are upheld by surveillance and their placement outside of so-called normative culture. The domestic spaces Hornschemeier’s protagonist inhabits are used to explore both how institutional power constructions are mirrored in the home and within the individual, and how this power could potentially be subverted through escape into inner spaces.

*Mother, Come Home* opens with a section entitled “Our Mutual Disappearance” in which  

243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 See this chapter’s opening quote.
246 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 41.
the reader is introduced to a despondent-looking man who is floating through a bizarre landscape populated by jagged mountains, leafless trees, and alien creatures (Fig. 41). Though the man does not actually speak, both the images and text, including the mathematical symbols accounting for spent time (T + 18 in the top-left panel of Fig. 41), suggest that it is he who is narrating, or more accurately, talking to or imagining talking to the person for whom he is searching. Quite soon after the reader is introduced to this surreal story, within just a few pages, the man is forcibly pulled into an inky-black sea of alien creatures. Next, the reader is confronted with a black panel, which is followed by an image the reader can make out through the context of sequence to be a hole in a mask. Then the reader sees the image of a thumb of a feminine-looking hand holding the mask in the foreground so that the young boy who is seated and reading in the background is partially concealed. The sequentiality of these panels allow the reader quite quickly to understand that the opening pages, where the man is floating through the bizarre landscape, is some sort of space that is set in opposition to the space in front of the mask, that behind the mask, things are somehow unreal or less real, a possible subversion of the space of the real.

As the narrative develops, the mask becomes a means by which the young boy, Thomas, endeavors to distance himself from his domestic spaces. Since the mask was given to him by his mother, who is now deceased, it is easy to infer that it gives him a sense of connection to all that he has lost—his lost and longed-for reality. More interestingly, however, it can be seen as a
Fig. 41: Hornschemeier, *Mother, Come Home* (13)
catalyst for his attempts at trying to achieve a subversion of the heterotopic power structures that he envisions both his mother and father as having achieved through death and mental instability, respectively. The first of these domestic spaces the reader is introduced to is the home Thomas shares with his father after his mother has passed away. While his father slowly begins to fall into a depression and to lose his grip on reality, thus at once upsetting the Bachelardian concept of the house as a protective space, and the power dynamic between parent and child, the reader is given clues to Thomas’s fear of normalizing society.\textsuperscript{247}

Though Thomas gives the reader a long list of the ways in which his father was neglecting his duties at work and at home, he explains that “little routines are the first victims of obsessive fantasy and escapism,” an indication that he is understanding of his father’s depression, and that, rather than fixing him, he wants to protect him.\textsuperscript{248} In fact, the reader is presented with vignettes of Thomas taking responsibility for the household chores so that his aunt and uncle will not become suspicious of his father’s depression, and of him repeatedly taking phone messages from his father’s university assistant so that he will not suspect that anything is wrong. These scenes work as further indication that not only does Thomas empathize with his father in their shared loss, but also that he does not want his father to be found out as deviating from the norm. Already here the reader is prompted to understand that Thomas views the home he shares with his father as a space that must be kept from the outside world whose normalizing institutions are what truly upset his home as a protective space.

Thomas’s fears of the normalizing real are explained when the reader is introduced to his mother’s grave, which Thomas has named “The Hiding Place” (Fig. 42). Because his mother can

\textsuperscript{247} See Bachelard (1994)
\textsuperscript{248} Paul Hornschemeier, \textit{Mother, Come Home} (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003), 31.
Fig. 42: Hornschemeier, *Mother Come Home* (29)
no longer be seen, to him she has achieved an escape of heterotopia in that she is no longer visible and therefore no longer entangled with the power dynamics enacted through visibility. What the reader comes to understand is that Thomas has learned that he is not actually protected by society but must retreat into a secure place in order to subvert the normalizing power structures enacted through visibility. To this end, the first panel of this page brings together the floating figure from the opening pages, whom the reader now recognizes as Thomas’s father, and a more cartoon-like depiction of Thomas wearing his lion mask—Thomas’s first attempt at subverting the power dynamics of heterotopias. The text of the top two panels reads, “We stood together before the hiding place, just once. (T) / To my knowledge he never returned. (T+3).”

This statement is at once about Thomas’s father never returning to his mother’s grave and his father’s descent into a depression he does not escape from, a conclusion the reader can draw from it being coupled with the mathematical symbols from the opening pages.

What the coming together of the floating figure, the cartoonlike Thomas, the text, and the mathematical symbols also reveal to the reader is that this is Thomas’s vision of his father’s depression; it becomes clear that the mathematical symbols for time spent are not only a child’s admiration and misunderstanding of his father’s work as a scholar of symbolic logic but that his inability to fully understand what is happening to his previously protected life is threatening to him. He therefore envisions his father as trying to subvert the institutions that will further break his family apart, and begins to scheme about ways in which he could also attempt his own means of subversion by embodying the lion mask his mother has given him. Just as his mother has refused to be seen, his father refuses the space of the real by floating away into a psychological retreat, and Thomas uses his mask to become nonhuman and therefore outside surveillance.

249 Ibid., 29.
Normalizing society makes good on its threat to disrupt the private space Thomas shares with his father when he mistakenly alerts his uncle to the fact that his father was missing his lectures at the university, which results in his aunt and uncle staging an intervention with his father. When his father is taken to the “heterotopia of deviance” of the psychiatric hospital, Thomas is forced to move in with his aunt and uncle, after which point his attempts to subvert normalization gain momentum. While his lion-masking has previously led to temporary bouts of fantasy, as it does in figure 42, where Thomas is shown first as a more cartoonish lion before becoming more realistically drawn, after his move, Thomas’s fantasies become more sustained and begin to include others around him. In figure 43, the cartoonlike images reveal Thomas’s advancement from literal masking to a retreat into a full-fledged fantasy. But even within this escape, just like in the case of his father, he is not successful in subverting the watchful eye of the panopticon; even in his fantasy, his father figure, his uncle whom he has zoomorphically turned into a cat, represents an authority from which Thomas cannot escape, an authority who insists that his deviance from normative culture be corrected through forgetting, or perhaps through becoming a complacent housecat rather than a lion.

Ultimately, neither Thomas nor his father is truly able to subvert heterotopia through an enacted escape from reality. Though they both could be seen as attempting to thwart spatial configurations of reality through their creation of psychological or fantastical spaces, neither is able to do so in the way that Thomas’s mother has. While Foucault has called the cemetery “highly heterotopian,” “The Hiding Place” is not the cemetery, but death itself—an unreal place without topology, a literally utopic space. It certainly is seen this way by both Thomas and his father—and quite possibly his mother, too, as Thomas explains that although she must be lonely,
Fig. 43: Hornschemeier, *Mother, Come Home* (49)
she did not want to be found. This bleak outlook on normalizing society is eventually also taken up by Thomas’s father once Thomas comes to “rescue” him from the psychiatric hospital. Father and son walk into the surrounding woods, where they set up camp. Positioned in a liminal space on the edge of the community, the two spend the night under a makeshift tent in the rain before Thomas’s father, in yet another liminal space, commits suicide by jumping from a cliff. By escaping the confines of heterotopia, Thomas’s father achieves his own sense of utopia, where, like his wife, he is no longer subject to surveillance. What is interesting in this scene, however, is that in the moments before he commits suicide, he asks Thomas to take off his mask, a possible plea to his son to try to find another way to subvert the power dynamics of heterotopia by creating a different space, perhaps one that is both real and imagined.

**Style and Structure**

Hornschemeier makes remarkable use of both comics style and structure to underline the point of his content, and in so doing illuminates how the form of comics already works to expose the workings of institutional power. The style and structure of comics helps shape the spaces of the content by shaping the space of the page. Line, color, and drawing style can become metaphorical in comics. Generally, light, consistent lines with a clean drawing style offer a sense of calmness to a comics page, whereas thick, irregular lines with a more gritty style often help to highlight an aggression of the content. Color works in this same affective manner, where bold colors tend to feel more confrontational to the reader than subdued hues, as the tone of color
often offers a matching tonality of the work. As discussed earlier, the layout of the comics page contributes to its affect in various ways as well. There is often a correspondence between the visual appearance of the page layout and the feeling it seeks to evoke: a small panel can induce a claustrophobic feeling, while a “bleed” offers a sense of openness.

In Hornschemeier’s use of varying styles, he points to the uneasy feeling of personal embodiment of the state’s subjugation of the individual. In Mother, Come Home, style is used less to highlight the workings of heterotopia, and more to distinguish the real spaces from the imagined psychological or fantastical spaces. In an interesting inverse of what would seem a one-to-one stylistic correspondence, Hornschemeier plays with the idea of “normalization” in presenting the real spaces of heterotopia in his story as quite randomly ordered. While these sections are more “normal” in that they are more realistically drawn and colored than the psychological or fantastical spaces are, they offer a variety of panel sizes, framing, and panels per page (including several “bleeds”), and a variety of perspectives (including several close-ups and distance shots)—all of which lend these sections a wide range of affect. As mentioned earlier, considering that panel size, framing, and number of panels per page contribute to the feeling of time in comics, the disorderliness of these sections and perspectives, and even their wide range of earthy colors, call attention to the fact that heterotopic spaces cannot ever truly be contained or systematized, even within the normalizing state.

What makes this commentary from Hornschemeier all the more interesting is that, as different as they are, the various psychological and fantastical spaces Thomas envisions use very consistent framing, color, and style. The opening pages, which as noted earlier show Thomas’s

---

250 For comments on the use of color or black and white in comics, see McCloud (2000) and Baetens (2011). For thoughts on line and style, see Baetens’s discussion of Phillipe Marion (2001).
vision of his father’s attempts to subvert heterotopia through a retreat into a psychological space, contain consistently sized and evenly spaced panels. The surreality of this section, in terms of landscape, the ability of humans to float, and the grayish-purple color scheme, reflect Thomas’s father’s depressive psychological space. Similarly, Thomas’s attempts to subvert heterotopia are also portrayed in consistently sized and evenly spaced panels, and the brighter pastel color scheme reflects the childlike fantastical space Thomas imagines. These two spaces, both in style and color, emphasize that it is only in imagined spaces that the world is ordered and consistent, which prompts the reader to contemplate how the orderliness of institutions is envisioned by society in an attempt to control the unruliness of the world around us.

This point is further underlined by the opening page for the section entitled “The Men for Father” (Fig. 44). Upon first glance, this page’s book-jacket appearance and eerie color scheme creates a break with the other spaces in the story and suggests the cold authority of the state intruding into the private space inhabited by Thomas and his father. However, the keen reader will recognize this page from earlier in the narrative when it appeared as a book on the shelf next to Thomas’s father’s book at the bookstore. What Hornschemeier calls the reader to understand is that the authority of the state lies not in the state itself, but in the subject’s belief in the state. In fact, the actual institutions within Mother, Come Home are shown to not be able to assert any power over the people who use them. The psychological hospital that the men take Thomas’s father to not only has no power to keep him there, as is made evident when he is allowed to check himself out of the facility, the doctor assigned to him cannot, or will not, specifically diagnose and thereby help him.251 Instead the doctor deflects answering Thomas’s father’s question about whether he is crazy by saying, “I think that you know as well as I that these sorts

251 Hornschemeier, Mother, Come Home, 95.
Fig. 44: Hornschemeier, *Mother, Come Home* (68)
of things are—for the most part—arbitrary.”\textsuperscript{252} This, coupled with both the nurses at the hospital and Thomas’s teacher being dumbstruck when Thomas misbehaves, ultimately show how the system is one of individualistic self-policing, and that power lies not in the state but within the imagination of the subjects.\textsuperscript{253}

**Masking**

A further point of exposure of the “political ‘double bind’” is found in the use of masking (both literal and figurative) as a strategy to help reveal the power structures in society and propose a way of dealing with the subjugation individuals experience because of them. As noted earlier, Thomas literally wears a mask to attempt to subvert heterotopia, and he presents the psychological or fantastical spaces of retreat he envisions as also “behind the mask.” What this masking achieves, at the narrative level, is an uncertainty about the reliability of events presented, and, at the structural level, a confusion of the reader’s perception of the characters. In the masking strategies, Hornschemeier explores the way the subject perceives and deals with power and subjectification, and ultimately achieves an unmasking through masking.

As can be seen in the scene with Thomas’s uncle-the-cat, Hornschemeier uses a very explicit technique of masking that has a long history in comics: the use of anthropomorphized animals. As the discussion surrounding the use of animals as metaphor in *Maus* shows, this can be a highly controversial move, but it remains a central tool in the representational strategies of comics artists.\textsuperscript{254} Using the so-called “funny animal” style is deceivingly easy to decode and might risk the overly simplistic interpretation of transferring stereotyped animal qualities to

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 72 and 89.
people or confusing the intended content of a story by drawing too much attention to the style and its connotations. However, there are also very poignant possibilities in the use of anthropomorphic animals in comics and there are many ways to successfully use it as a way of unmasking and making visible the aspects of human life that sometimes appear more succinct in the animal version. What Hornschemeier highlights in his use of animal characters, made especially clear in the above-mentioned scene where Thomas the lion is being commanded by a housecat and a bird, is that the power of the state is truly internalized.

The work is also intentionally unreliable and uses this as a further masking strategy. *Mother, Come Home* is presented to the reader as a memoir narrated by the adult Thomas who tells the story of the months following his mother’s death. In the style of contemporary self-reflexive memoir, there are several textual indications in the work that point to the problematics of recounting memories, especially those from childhood, from the perspective of the present. This is underscored in the work through the inclusion of Thomas’s many narrative intrusions, such as, “But this was month three. I think this was month three. [...] I was seven afterall.” But Hornschemeier pushes the uncertainty of memoir even further by purposely misleading the reader. The opening section, which reads in full, “Our Mutual Disappearance: Introduction to the Second Edition by Thomas Tennant,” is explained a few pages further in with an anecdote from Thomas about how his father did not like to visit the woods surrounding their house. He says, “This took me the longest to understand. My theory then was that these trees simply frightened my father (they frightened me). But, in looking through his journals again to write this edition’s introduction, I found it.” This complicates the reading of *Mother, Come Home* in that the work

256 Ibid., 30.
is not a memoir, but a fictive false-memoir, and it has had only one edition. These purposeful falsehoods not only return to the question of memoir in that the reader is left wondering if the opening pages of Thomas’s father’s psychological space are envisioned by Thomas or by his father or by both, it further aids in confusing any distinction between the various real and imagined spaces within the story by making them all imagined, and therefore outside of the space of the real.

In this way, masking as memoir in *Mother, Come Home* works on multiple levels. Because the reader is initially led to believe that it is a true story, the affect of both the real and the imaginary spaces of the story have all the more impact when the reader learns that it is fiction. The horror, sorrow, and despair felt by the reader of Thomas’s tragic story defuses somewhat when it becomes clear that it is fictive, and the reader’s sympathy perhaps even turns into anger directed toward Hornschemeier, like James Frey, for his perversion in inventing such a grim tale and deceiving the reader with it. And yet, it is the instability offered by the work that hides something while at the same time making it visible. The unreliability of the work makes visible the spaces of the real and the imaginary, and overlaps them, blurring the boundaries into a “Thirdspace” from which we are able to understand and rethink power, subject, and their relation.

As I demonstrated throughout this chapter, Hornschemeier actively employs the way text and image, and time and space, works in comics to generate a “Thirdspace,” which is *both* imagined and *real*, a space that insists on multiplicity and instability in a fight against fixing the subject in heterotopic space. By unmasking how the state’s power and surrounding society discipline the individual, and how the individual subjugates him- or herself, Hornschemeier’s
comic reveals how these structures can be laid bare, which is the first step to critically subverting them. He works to illuminate how the instability, unreliability, and multiplicity of comics makes it radically open and imbued with potential for critique of archival power as it makes possible a space that can address and confuse modern power structures. As Mitchell notes of Lessing:

One thing he teaches us, almost in spite of his canny rhetorical instincts, is that the relation of genres like poetry and painting is not a purely theoretical matter, but something like a social relationship—thus political and psychological, or (to conflate the terms) ideological. Genres are not technical definitions but acts of exclusion and appropriation which tend to reify some “significant other.”

Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature”

As I have illustrated throughout my thesis, comics works to disrupt the binary systems upon which the archive is built and thereby effectively unmasks the operations of archival power. From undermining the value attributed to cultural objects to blurring the borders between document and experience, public and private, and real and imaginary space, comics not only exposes the archive’s processes of institutionalization, inscription, and interpretation, it houses a potential for a new form of subjectivity through the creation of a “Thirdspace” that both acknowledges and reworks such binaries in a system of multiplicity. In this epilogue, I assert that comics’ political potential reaches even further; in its toying with established language systems, its political commentary, and its tying the individual to the collective, I argue that comics can be seen as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term “minor literature.” As such, I assert that comics is therefore not only able to expose and critique the archive but, more interestingly, to offer a way out of such systems, “a line of escape.”

The concept of “minor literature” offers a different perspective on the problematics of the “political ‘double bind’” of institutional power outlined by Foucault. For Deleuze and Guattari, the problem left unaddressed in Foucault’s call to expose the workings of institutions—a problem that is rather highlighted in Edward Soja’s offering a potential solution in the reordering systems of power through the creation of a “Thirdspace”—is how to move beyond what they see as mere measures of liberation. What they propose in their concept therefore eclipses both

Foucault’s and Soja’s discourse: escape. Indeed, they argue that what is needed to address institutional power is neither “a structure with formal oppositions and a fully constructed Signifier,” found in Foucault’s discourse, nor “a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstruction,” as Soja proposes, but rather an awareness of the “whole underground network, and with all the ways out from this network.”

In a reading of Franz Kafka’s “Letter to the Father,” Deleuze and Guattari explain the importance of moving beyond strategies of liberation to find instead a veritable escape. While Foucault calls for political action “to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state,” they argue that liberation merely reorders and reinscribes hierarchies through processes of “detrerritorialization” and “reterritorialization.”

They explain:

[…] the too well-formed family triangle is really only a conduit for investments of an entirely different sort that the child endlessly discovers underneath his father, inside his mother, in himself. The judges, commissioners, bureaucrats, and so on, are not substitutes for the father; rather, it is the father who is a condensation of all these forces that he submits to and that he tries to get his son to submit to.

While their point underlines Foucault’s “political ‘double bind’” in that it speaks to the manner in which the individual is an active participant in his subjugation through his embodiment of the state’s imposed ideals, it advances the discourse on power relations through exposing the impetus behind such systems. They argue that what becomes clear in “Letter to the Father” is that the father demands that his son be submissive to him because he finds himself in a submissive position. This cycle of submission, they claim, reveals that “[...] it’s not Oedipus that produces

---

neurosis; it is neurosis—that is, a desire that is already submissive and searching to communicate its own submission—that produces Oedipus. Oedipus, the market value of neurosis.”262 To break this cycle of desire, they propose an *absolute deterritorialization* free from “reterritorializing everything in Oedipus and the family.”263

As a means to do this, they offer their concept of “minor literature,” which works to actively deterritorialize language and disrupt processes of reterritorialization through an inherently political and collective enunciation. What “minor literature” allows for, then, is not necessarily a solution to the “political ‘double bind,’” but rather offers:

The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu: literature is the people’s concern.”264

Indeed, while Deleuze and Guattari argue that “if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility,” that *every* writer has the potential to “[find] his own point of underdevelopment, his own patois, his own third world, his own desert.”265 While seemingly like Soja’s commentary on bell hooks’s work, of which he notes constructs “interconnected and non-exclusionary communities of resistance,” minor literature is neither desirous of communicating its own submission nor concerned with recentering the margin, which Deleuze and Guattari would see as a process of reterritorialization.266 Quite the opposite: “minor literature” rather

---

262 Ibid., 10.
263 Ibid., 10.
264 Ibid., 17–18.
265 Ibid.
266 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 96.
rejects the major in creating:

[...] an escape for language, for music, for writing. What we call pop—pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing—Worterflucht. To make use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play.  

In the three chapters of my work I elaborated upon the manner in which comics disrupts various binaries upon which the archive is built and enacts power. What I will now outline is how comics can be seen as continuing this discourse in its position as minor literature to “express another possible community and forge the means for another consciousness and sensibility.”

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “minor literature” has three characteristics: that it is written in a major language, that it immediately connects the individual to politics, and that it is of a collective enunciation. The first of these characteristics, Deleuze and Guattari explain, is “that which a minority constructs within a major language” and that “in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.” Because comics is always already effectively policed and penned in by various discourses that maintain that comics exists outside the realms of “real” art, “real” literature, or “pure” medium qualifications, its “kitsch” status, as art discourse would have it, actually can be considered operational in this respect. Comics affects the major enough to be consistently denigrated in art discourse, intermediality studies, and by advocates of the term “graphic novel,” and thereby is positioned as a minor construct within a system of major discourses, and as such is primed to “oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its

---

268 Ibid., 17.
269 Ibid., 16.
oppressive quality.”270

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, in order to deterritorialize a major language, one must “[proceed] by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities.”271 What all of these sites of the denigration of comics point to is exactly a poverty, a perceived simplicity, of comics. This poverty, they argue, whether emphatically or implicitly, lowers its cultural and artistic status. As noted in chapter 1, in art discourse Greenberg found that Steig’s cartoons “push and strain against the social and psychological limitations of the cartoon form and strive to become self-sufficient, time-transcending art.”272 And Krauss argued of Coleman’s work, “it is this resource, this most degraded form of mass ‘literature’—comic books for adults—that [he] will exploit in his transformation of the physical support of the slide tape into the fully articulate and formally reflexive condition of what could finally be called a medium.”273 What both Greenberg and Krauss point to, in these examples and elsewhere, is that comics cannot be art (or literature) because it is not complex enough in its articulation. Similarly, in intermediality studies, granted sometimes less adamantly than in art discourse, privileged status has been given to media combinations found to be in a complex fusion of media, which has been perceived as more advanced than singular media or other media combinations. And, as previously illustrated, both art discourse and intermediality studies have been taken up by advocates of the term “graphic novel” as a means to elevate particular comics. This is often done on a per-case basis, like

270 Ibid., 26–7.
271 Ibid., 19.
Krauss’s favoritism of certain artists, and more generally in terms of, as Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti imply, those comics that are “sophisticated and highly literate.”

But it is the perceived simplicity of comics, its seeming stripping down of art and of literature, that opens new avenues of expression by deterritorializing Art (with a capital A) and Literature (with a capital L) rather than staking claims to a place within the system of cultural capital. As Barthes suggests, “There may thus be a future—or a very ancient past—truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.” Indeed, as noted above, Deleuze and Guattari explain that the minor position of pop allows language (music, philosophy, writing) to escape; being outside the major, pop may be perceived as “derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical”—that is, simple—but these are the qualifications “by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play”—by which an intensity can emerge. As I demonstrated throughout my thesis, comics is far from simplistic, but in terms of its position relative to major discourse it is, and it is this relative simplicity that grants it a minor position.

In the coming together of text and image, comics uses its minor position to discover multiple “points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones.” As I elaborated upon in chapter 2, in its exploration of memorial truth comics exposes dominant communication systems as insufficient. Through her assemblage of various texts and images, Alison Bechdel highlights in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* how in the combination of text and image comics pushes the limits of both by questioning one against the other, ultimately

277 Ibid.
tapping into a possibility of revealing what is hidden by both. In so doing, her work shows how comics “makes the whole assembly flow away” to reveal not only that any representation is impossible but also that there is an untapped intensity vibrating behind representation.\textsuperscript{278}

Relatedly, in chapter 3, I argued that the use of text in comics helps make the invisible visible. Specifically in its use of onomatopoetic words, comics is also pushing the boundaries of language; in the same manner as Deleuze and Guattari note that Artaud does with his use of “cries, gasps,” comics adds sound to text, thus making a “minor music.”\textsuperscript{279}

Indeed, in its assemblage, comics allows a becoming-animal. Quite literally hinted at in the comics trope of having characters appear as animals, as Hornschemeier does to great effect in \textit{Mother, Come Home}—especially in his scenes of Thomas and his uncle-the-cat, where Thomas’s mode of expression is stifled by his uncle’s insistence on his following the norm—, comics further creates the possibility of becoming animal in its appeal to its readers’ senses. In the coming together of text and image, panels, gutters, spatial layout, the visible and invisible, and real and imagined space, comics offers a different reading process, a new language. As Deleuze and Guattari note of Kafka’s work, this new language:

\begin{quote}
[...] remains a mixture, a schizophrenic mélange, a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can’t be said; one function will be played off against the other, all the degrees of territoriality and relative deterritorialization will be played out.\textsuperscript{280}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 26
\textsuperscript{280} Ibid. Jan Baetens, in his discussion of the Fréon Collective, argues, “The articulation of the visual and the textual (i.e. the verbal rephrasing of the narratives elaborated within as well as between the images) shifts from the author to the reader, who must commit herself to a creative partnership with the author. The reader must, in other words, enter the game of authorship as much as the authors themselves […].” Jan Baetens, “Of Graphic Novels and Minor Cultures: The Fréon Collective,” \textit{Yale French Studies} 114 (2008): 114.
\end{footnotes}
In this “schizophrenic mélange,” the second characteristic of “minor literature” emerges: minor literature is always immediately connected to politics. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, unlike in major literatures where the concern of the individual is the crux of the discourse, in minor literature, “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.”\textsuperscript{281} As noted in their discussion of Kafka’s “Letter to the Father,” the father “is a condensation of all these forces that he submits to and that he tries to get his son to submit to,” and thereby is never just a subject, but reveals in his subjectivity the politics of society.\textsuperscript{282}

Comics is immediately political in both form and content. As I have argued throughout my thesis, the form of comics works to expose the hierarchical nature of the archive from its institutionalization to its processes of inscription, interpretation, and enacted power. Already in this way, comics is political in that “a whole other story is vibrating within it,” but even further, its content works to underline the political function of its form.\textsuperscript{283} As I explained in chapter 1, even the comics that are often used as scapegoats in the discourse on high and low culture—that is, superhero comics—cannot be seen as merely inwardly gazing entertainment but are connected to the political. While Deleuze and Guattari argue that archetypes are “processes of spiritual reterritorialization,” as I argued in chapter 1, superhero comics both uphold and destabilize culturally circulated messages, and thereby break the idea of a fixed archetype.\textsuperscript{284} Indeed, especially post 9/11, superhero comics have specifically commented on such cultural ideals by

\textsuperscript{281} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{Kafka}, 17.
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 11–12.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 6.
calling attention to the inadequacy of the superhero to solve real-world problems, and thus the inadequacy of fixed cultural symbols.

Further, personal narrative comics, like Bechdel’s, illuminate the immediate connection of comics to politics as well. As I argued in chapter 2, the form of comics advances the aims of personal narrative in its search for truth by illuminating the negotiation between document and experience in memory. In so doing, these comics are immediately political in that they highlight the flawed systems of categorization and interpretation of archival material. This political connection of the individual to the collective is further underlined in the content of these narratives. While they are poised to consider the world outside as “a mere environment or a background” since they are narrated from the perspective of the individual, as I noted in chapter 2, because personal narratives often relate stories of trauma, they are always already collective in their enunciation.\footnote{Ibid., 17.} As Judith Butler asserts, “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation, but I think it exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order.”\footnote{Judith Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender} (London: Routledge, 2004), 19.}

But comics need not be personal narrative to achieve this political function, a point rather underlined by Hornschemeier’s false-memoir. Like Bechdel’s, Hornschemeier’s traumatic story highlights how grief connects the individual to the collective. But Hornschemeier’s work goes even further and shows how this grief connects the personal to the collective not just in emotion, but in terms of the “political ‘double bind.’” As I elaborated upon in chapter 3, Hornschemeier self-reflexively utilizes the form of comics to underline the content of his story. In his toying with form of comics through the use of color, various drawing styles, panels, and gutters, he
dynamically engages with the space of comics to expose the power enacted through spatial relations. In so doing, he offers comics as a form through which to expose:

[…], where the system is coming from and going to, how it becomes, and what element is going to play the role of heterogeneity, a saturating body that makes the whole assembly flow away and that breaks the symbolic structure, no less than it breaks hermeneutic interpretation, the ordinary association of ideas, and the imaginary archetype.\(^{287}\)

As can be seen from the above discussion, the third and final characteristic of “minor literature” is intertwined with the political nature of the second characteristic in the sense that “in it everything takes on a collective value.”\(^{288}\) In its lack of a “master” Deleuze and Guattari explain, “there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation [...] that could be separated from a collective enunciation.”\(^{289}\) As explained in the examples above, the political nature of comics certainly takes on a collective enunciation in its content and form. As I have illustrated throughout my thesis, comics is politically functional in dismantling hierarchies from the terminology that imbues objects and discourses with cultural capital to the privileging of document over experience to opening the possibility for a new form of subjectivity. What all this discussion, therefore, begs a return to is the question that was the impetus for my writing this thesis: why scholars in this field feel the need to justify the study of comics, either in their own right or through distancing themselves from comics through the creation of and adherence to the new term “graphic novel.”

On the collectivity of minor literature Deleuze and Guattari explain:

\(^{287}\) Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{Kafka}, 7.  
\(^{288}\) Ibid., 17.  
\(^{289}\) Ibid.
[...] talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, [...] [and] scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement.  

This statement, of course, recalls the ongoing debate between those advocating for the term “graphic novel” and those who claim that graphic novels are comics. I would like to conclude by restating that I firmly stand behind those in the latter category. As I have demonstrated throughout my thesis, comics, in its many forms, from superhero tales to personal narrative to fictive false-memoir, is necessarily political in its ability to expose and critique archival systems. While the advent of the term “graphic novel” opens this avenue of discovery, the continued use of the term to distinguish graphic novels as different from and better than comics closes off its political function. To finally answer the question of “what the graphic novel is, and what it actually does”: the graphic novel is comics and the “graphic novel” marks an impasse in what could otherwise be a line of escape. As Deleuze and Guattari assert, “There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor.”  

---

290 Ibid.  
291 Ibid., 26.
Works Cited


Bennett, Jill. “The Aesthetics of Sense Memory: Theorizing Trauma Through the Visual Arts.” *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*. Edited by Susannah Radstone and


Eakin, Paul John. “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” *Narrative* 12.2


Summary

In this study, I explore what the term “graphic novel” can reveal about the way in which we hierarchically categorize what we find important to study, how these objects and fields of study are inscribed and organized within our cultural memory institutions, and how these systems of classification form a cycle of importance that is laden with sociopolitical consequences. I assert that rather than indicating an artistic or cultural elevation of comics, that the term “graphic novel” allows for the political function of comics to emerge. By calling attention to the system of value upon which the archive is built and maintained, I argue that the “graphic novel” opens an avenue for comics to expose and critique the practices of the archive from archival inscription to interpretation to enacted power.

The point of overlap between Jacques Derrida's discourse on the archive and Michel Foucault's critique of institutions forms the frame for my discussion of the performative aspect of archival practice, that is, how the archive is used to mediate cultural memory across various sites. Thus, as I use it, the archive is the collection of all archives that make up our cultural memory, and more pointedly, the institutions that are ascribed hierarchical importance through discursive reiteration, namely “high art” discourse, historical writing, and evidential documentation. Through an investigation of how the archive privileges certain works and certain modes of articulation, I provide a new perspective on the root of the problem, that which helps create and maintain hierarchies within our cultural memory institutions and thus forms a cycle of importance, what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “cultural capital.”
In Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription, I argue that while many comics scholars on both sides of the debate over whether graphic novels are comics have noted that the term “graphic novel” delineates a separation from comics that points to the division between high and low culture, much of the discourse has stopped there, merely grazing the surface of the capital attributed to cultural objects. I therefore investigate the claims of uniqueness and unattainability of cultural capital through careful consideration of the discursive terminology that endows objects with this capital. I explore how the binary of high and low culture developed from the hierarchical parameters ascribed to the term “medium,” both in art discourse and intermediality studies, and further, how rather than simply underlining the division between high and low culture, that the term “graphic novel” marks a separation from comics that necessarily hinges on medium classification.

By revealing how the debate over “medium” has a strong normative aspect that ultimately has led to an impasse about how to define “medium” formally rather than morally, I argue that the “graphic novel” can work to upset these discourses, and in so doing can ultimately work to simultaneously undermine its own value and elevate the value of comics. However, rather than being solely an attempt to culturally elevate comics or the graphic novel through asserting their medium status, in this chapter I demonstrate how medium classification obscures debates about comics’ abilities to function politically through dismissing it as low culture and therefore politically irrelevant. In this way, I assert that the “graphic novel” can provide insight on how such terminology, which upholds institutionalized cultural capital, can be exposed as faulty in its logic, which works to displace the entire question of the value of cultural objects.
In Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation, I argue that, as in the dividing practices of archival inscription, the interpretation of archival material is also based on a system of attributable value. Because the hierarchical categorization of archival material is often scaled on an idea of truth, which is particularly evident in the privileging of document over testimony, I assert that personal narrative comics is an ideal object with which to explore and critique this practice of the archive. As an archive itself, personal narrative works to comment on archival practices in its categorization of the various evidential and memorial material that make up the truth of a life. In a comparative analysis between textually based personal narrative and personal narrative comics, I argue that the aims of contemporary personal narrative to question the privileging of document over experience is advanced through the use of comics style, which obscures and thereby further questions hierarchical classifications within the archive.

I present examples of textually based contemporary personal narrative before moving forward, in a close reading of postmodern writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982), to discuss the manner in which the use of images can aid in the discourse on the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a life. I argue that what personal narrative comics adds to this contemporary movement of personal narrative is the use of comics form, which works to queer archival practices. Through a close reading of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), I assert that by presenting trauma, memory, and document congruently through comics form, personal narrative comics plays with and employs visuality to literally show the flaws inherent in archival systems. In so doing, I argue that comics not only reveals that the archive is always curated and never complete, in making the system visible, it reveals how the power of the archive lies in its interpretation.
In Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power, I argue that the relationship between power and visibility is further explored in comics through the use of its spatial structure, which works as a revelation of how archival power is enacted through the mediation of space by visibility. Already in its exposure and questioning of how archival material is hierarchically categorized, comics ties the personal to the political in terms of the creation of the subject. Through an analysis of the form of comics, I assert that comics further works to explore subjectivity through its revelation of the power inherent in spatial relations. I argue that because comics can blur the perceived boundaries of both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it works to criticize the political ramifications of archival power and promote a new form of subjectivity. The spatializing of time in comics, I assert, not only works to comment on the formal possibilities of text and image, it further provides insight into how time is spatialized in terms of the real and the imaginary. Because comics style and structure can be used to confuse and conflate both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it is imbued with potential for institutional critique as it highlights that space is inherently multidimensional and power-laden.

Through a close reading of Paul Horncscheimer’s false memoir Mother, Come Home (2003), I explore how in its toying with style and form through the use of color, various drawing styles, panels, and gutters, which can effectively move the space of the page and the space of the narrative in and out of various real and imagined spaces, comics makes visible the workings of spatial constructions. Further, through these same means, I assert that comics creates a possibility for conceptualizing other spaces beyond modernist binaries—spaces that necessarily blur the borders of both public and private and the real and the imaginary, what cultural geographer Edward Soja has termed “Thirdspace.” I posit that comics, through its collapsing of binaries and
rethinking of subjectivity, offers a potentiality to unmask and effectively criticize the power inherent in spatial constructions and thereby the political ramifications of archival power.

In the Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature,” I offer that comics can be considered what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have termed “minor literature.” Eclipsing Soja’s notion of “Thirdspace,” “minor literature” is not simply a recentering of the margin but is an avenue through which to contemplate the language and systems upholding binaries such as center and margin, and public and private. “Minor literature” does not speak to how to subvert or rethink current systems but to what Deleuze and Guattari term the “revolutionary machine to come,” an entirely new system not yet fully conceived of. What “minor literature” enables, then, is a way to expose the workings of dominant systems to provide a veritable escape from the impasse created by such systems.

I illuminate how comics is “minor literature” using the arguments made in the individual chapters. I argue that because comics actively deterritorializes language through its combination of text and image, is inherently political in its commentary on power enacted through spatial relations, and thereby immediately disrupts the notion of the individual as separate from the collective, it works to expose the fault in binary oppositions that uphold processes of reterritorialization. I conclude by asserting that in its disruption of the value attributed to cultural objects and in its blurring the borders between document and experience, public and private, and the real and imaginary, comics not only exposes and critiques the archive’s processes of institutionalization, inscription, and interpretation, it offers a potentiality for thinking of an entirely new order.
Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik wat de term “beeldroman” (graphic novel) onthult over de manier waarop wij onze interesses hiërarchisch organiseren, dat wil zeggen: hoe ze als studieobjecten en -velden worden gecategoriseerd in de instituties van ons culturele geheugen en hoe deze classificatiesystemen vervolgens grote socio-politieke belangen dienen. Ik beweer dat de term “beeldroman” niet zozeer een artistieke of culturele verheffing aanduidt maar de politieke functie van strips (comics) blootlegt. Door de aandacht te vestigen op het waardesysteem waarop het archief is gefundeerd en waarmee het in stand wordt gehouden, beargumenteer ik vervolgens dat de term “beeldroman” het mogelijk maakt voor strips om de macht van het archief te ontmaskeren en bekritiseren.

De overlap tussen Jacques Derrida's discours over het archief en Michel Foucaults kritiek op instituten vormt het kader voor mijn eigen reflecties op de performatieve macht van archiveringspraktijken. Zoals ik het begrijp, omhelst de notie van het archief een geheel van verzamelingen die ons culturele geheugen opmaakt. In meer specifieke zin heb ik het hier over instituties waaraan hiërarchisch belang wordt toegekend door zogenaamde discursive reiteratie, in dit geval het discours over “hoge kunst,” historiografie, en bewijsdienend materiaal. Ik onderzoek de manieren waarop het archief bepaalde werken of articulaties privilegieert en ik schep hiermee nieuwe inzichten in een fundamentele kwestie: dat wat hiërarchieën helpt te creëren en in stand te houden in onze culturele geheugen, wat door Pierre Bourdieu omschreven wordt als “cultureel kapitaal.”

In Hoofdstuk 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription, beargumenteer ik dat,
hoewel het onderzoek rondom de term “beeldroman” vraagtekens zet bij het arbitraire onderscheid tussen hoge en lage cultuur, het zich grotendeels beperkt tot slechts beschrijvingen van het kapitaal dat toegekend wordt aan zulke culturele objecten. Ik onderzoek daarom specifiek de claims van uniciteit en onbereikbaarheid van cultureel kapitaal door een gedetailleerde analyse van de discursieve terminologie die objecten van dergelijk kapitaal voorziet. Ik onderzoek hoe de binaire oppositie tussen hoog en laag zich ontwikkelde uit de hiërarchische principes toegeschreven aan de term “medium,” zowel in kunstdiscours als intermedialiteitstudies. Daarnaast laat ik zien hoe de term “beeldroman” een onderscheid aanduidt dat noodzakelijkerwijs afhankelijk blijft van mediumclassificaties.

Aangezien het mediumdebat zeer normatief van aard is, heeft het geleid tot een impasse omtrent de mogelijkheid een medium formalistisch in plaats van slechts moralistisch te kunnen definiëren. Ik beargumenteer echter dat de term “beeldroman” zulke moralistische vertogen kan ontregelen en als zodanig zijn eigen waarde ondermijnt, terwijl het de waarde van strips juist doet verhogen. Ik toon in dit hoofdstuk tevens aan dat debatten over mediumclassificatie de politieke mogelijkheden van strips verhullen, gezien dergelijke debatten strips de facto van de hand doen als lage cultuur en dus politiek irrelevant. Ik beweer tenslotte dat de “beeldroman” deze logica (die geïnstitutionaliseerd cultureel kapitaal in stand houdt) ontkracht en daarmee de gehele discussie over de waarde van culturele objecten opschuift.

In Hoofdstuk 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Inscription, beargumenteer ik dat ook de interpretatie van archiefmateriaal gebaseerd is op een systeem dat waarde toekent. De hiërarchische categorisering van archiefmateriaal wordt meestal op waarde geschat met behulp van een idee van waarheid, een voorbeeld hiervan is de geprivilegeerde positie die
documentatiemateriaal inneemt ten opzichte van persoonlijke getuigenissen. Ik beweer dat “personal narrative comics” een ideaal object vormt om deze werking van het archief te ondervragen en bekritiseren. Personal narrative comics levert commentaar op archiveringspraktijken en de categorisering van de verschillende bewijs- en herinneringsmaterialen die gezamenlijk de waarheid van een leven opmaken. In een vergelijkende analyse van zowel tekstgebaseerde persoonlijke verhalen als personal narrative comics, beargumenteer ik dat het doel van hedendaagse personal narrative comics is om de privileges van het document in twijfel te trekken (ten opzicht van geleefde ervaring). Dit wordt voortgebracht door het gebruik van de stripstijl, die de hiërarchische classificaties binnen het archief vervaagt en daarmee problematiseert.

Ik draag voorbeelden aan van op tekst gebaseerde hedendaagse personal narrative en doe een close reading van postmoderne schrijver en kunstenares Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee. Hier werk ik de manieren uit waarop het gebruik van beeld kan helpen in het discours rondom de mogelijkheid van personal narrative om de waarheid van een leven te representeren en bespreekbaar te maken. Door een close reading van Alison Bechdels Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2006) toon ik aan dat de stripvorm in staat is tegelijkertijd trauma, herinnering, en documentatie te representeren en als zodanig de blinde vlekken laat zien die inherent zijn aan archiefsystemen. Op deze wijze beargumenteer ik dat strips laten zien dat het archief altijd volgt op een selectieprocedure en daarmee nooit compleet is. Door het zichtbaar maken van dit systeem, zo stel ik, onthullen strips hoe de macht van het archief vooral voortkomt uit de wijze waarop ze geïnterpreteerd wordt.

In Hoofdstuk 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power, beargumenteer ik
dat de relatie tussen macht en het zichtbare verder wordt ondervraagt in strips door hun specifieke gebruik van ruimtelijke structuur. Deze structuur onthult de wijze waarop archiefmacht wordt beoefend door de manier waarop ruimte gemedieerd wordt door het zichtbare. Door de manier waarop archiefmateriaal hiërarchisch georganiseerd wordt bloot te leggen en te ondervragen, binden strips het persoonlijke aan het politieke, in de zin dat zoverre dat het een nieuw subject creëert. Door een analyse van de formele aspecten van strips, maak ik duidelijk hoe de verkenning van subjectiviteit in strips ook mogelijk wordt gemaakt door de voortdurende onthulling van de macht die inherent is aan ruimtelijke relaties. Gezien strips de waargenomen grenzen tussen tijd en ruimte, het echte en het verbeelde, doen vervagen, bekritiseren ze de politieke consequenties van archiefmacht en promoten daarmee een nieuwe vorm van subjectiviteit. Strips maken tijd ruimtelijk en geven zo niet alleen commentaar op de formele mogelijkheden van tekst en beeld, maar bieden daarnaast inzicht in hoe tijd ruimtelijk wordt gemaakt in de context van het echte en het imaginaire. Omdat de stripstijl en -structuur gebruikt kan worden om tijd en ruimte te verwarren of samen te laten vallen, biedt het ook hier de mogelijkheid voor institutionele kritiek, aangezien het demonstreert hoe ruimte inherent meervoudig is en dus omgeven door macht.

In een close reading van Paul Hornschemeier’s valse memoires Mother, Come Home (2003) onderzoek ik hoe strips de mechanismes van ruimtelijke constructie zichtbaar maken door middel van het spelen met stijl en vorm, door het experimenteel gebruik van kleur, tekentechnieken, panelen en tussenruimtes. Met dezelfde middelen beweer ik dat strips de mogelijkheid bieden om andere ruimtes te conceptualiseren die voorbij gaan modernistische binariteit–ruimtes die per definitie de grenzen tussen publiek en privé, of het echte en imaginaire,
doen vervagen. Zulke ruimte wordt door cultureel geograaf Edward Soja omschreven als “Thirdspace.” Ik beargumenteer dat strips, door het ineenvallen van binaire opposities en het telkens opnieuw conceptualiseren van subjectiviteit, de potentie hebben om de macht die inherent is aan ruimtelijke constructies, en daarmee de politieke consequenties van archiefmacht, te ondervragen.

In de Epiloog: Comics as “Minor Literature” stel ik voor om strips te denken als wat Gilles Deleuze en Félix Guattari "minor literature" noemen. Dit concept overstemt Soja's notie van “Thirdspace”: het betreft niet simpelweg een centralisering van de marge maar eerder een nieuwe weg waarlangs de talen en systemen die binaire verschillen in stand houden ondervraagd kunnen worden (zoals publiek en privé). “Minor literature” impliceert niet het herdenken van bestaande systemen, maar duidt eerder op wat Deleuze en Guattari de “komende revolutioinaire machine” noemen: een nieuw systeem dat nog niet volledig gedacht kan worden. Wat “minor literature” dus mogelijk maakt, is een manier om de werking van dominante systemen bloot te leggen en duiden daarmee als het ware een ontsnapping uit de impasse die deze systemen veroorzaken.

Aan de hand van de afzonderlijke argumenten in de drie hoofdstukkenlicht ik toe hoe strips een “minor literature” zijn. Ik beargumenteer dat strips taal deterritorialiseren door de voortdurende combinatie van tekst en beeld. Dit is inherent politiek omdat het commentaar levert op de macht inherent aan ruimtelijke relaties. Het ontregelt daarnaast de notie van het individu als afzonderlijk van het collectief, en ontmaskert als zodanig de functies van binaire archiefsystemen die een proces van reterritorialisering in stand houden. Ik concludeer dat door de ontregeling van de waarde van culturele objecten, en in de vervaging van grenzen tussen
document en ervaring, publiek en privé, het echte en het imaginaire, strips niet alleen de macht van het archief ontmaskeren en bekritiseren, maar ook de mogelijkheid bieden voor het verbeelden van een totaal nieuwe orde.