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by the Editorial Team

Everything starts with a first step – but to keep going with a sustained effort is what really makes for change. This is the second issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* and its release makes us just as proud – if not even more so – as we were when the very first issue was published last spring.

We are also immensely proud to be part of the recently awakened and steadily growing movement of academic research on comics in the Nordic countries. Since our first issue was published, another three Nordic comics scholars have had their PhDs accepted and several more PhD students researching comics have entered the academic system. Comics studies is noticeably growing in the Nordic countries at the moment and *SJoCA* is happy to be a part of this exciting development.

SJoCA was initiated to ensure that there is a serious, peer reviewed and most importantly continuous publishing venue for scholars from the Scandinavian countries and beyond who want to research and write about all the different aspects of comics. In order to keep this idea alive, *SJoCA* is in constant need of interesting, groundbreaking and thought-provoking texts. So, do send us everything from abstracts to full fledged manuscripts, and take part in making the field of Nordic comics research grow.

"TO EMERGE FROM ITS TRANSITIONAL FUNK": *THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER & CLAY*'S INTERMEDIAL DIALOGUE WITH COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

by Florian Groß

ABSTRACT

The article traces the current critical debate on the phenomenon of the graphic novel through an analysis of Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). It argues that the novel problematises a tendency in comics criticism to construct a teleological historiography of progression that sees the graphic novel as the aesthetic apex of the form. Next to a reading of the principal characters that argues for an inclusion of Rosa Saks in addition to Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, the article focuses on *Kavalier & Clay*'s representation of comics history. The novel is set in the Golden Age of Comic Books, but features elements of comics history to the present day, and thus proposes a cultural logic of juxtaposition rather than progression. According to this logic, serial forms like the comic book exist alongside more recent forms like the graphic novel and are not made obsolete by them.

"To Emerge From Its Transitional Funk": *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*'s Intermedial Dialogue with Comics and Graphic Novels

By Florian Groß

INTRODUCTION

Together with jazz, comic books are among the most frequent candidates for the title of 'original' Americana, of popular culture originating from the United States of America (Kelleter and Stein 2009; Behlman 2004). Comics have been a stable part of U.S. popular culture and a profitable product of the American culture industry for the better part of the 20th century.

Concerning comics historiography, it is interesting to note how several comics historians tend to write a narrative of continual development and innovation that focuses on the progression of the medium and its increasing aesthetic complexity. A good example for this kind of narrative is Stephen Weiner's short history of comics, fittingly titled *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*. The teleological argument already present in the book's title is also stressed in the preface, when Weiner claims that he wants to show "how the comics industry grew up, took itself seriously, and made enough noise so that mainstream readers were finally forced to pay it serious attention" (Weiner 2003, xi). And indeed, his history of (mainly U.S.) comics reads like a one-way road to a contemporary confluence of artistic innovation, commercial success, and critical appreciation. From the Yellow Kid and its newspaper descendants of the early twentieth century to the superhero comic books of the mid-century to independent comics in the 1960s, it presents a historical development that almost necessarily leads to the form's current apex: the graphic novel. The medium of comics is presented in an evolutionary manner as a constantly developing medium that has finally become 'serious' and thus subject to favourable, or at least neutral, critical attention (see Weiner 2003; Roberts 2004).

Because of its progressive view of comics history, Weiner's account is curiously reminiscent of Clement Greenberg's take on art history and Theodor W. Adorno's version of music history respectively. As Andreas Huyssen has shown in his analysis of Greenberg and Adorno, both modernist critics believed in the linear "logic of aesthetic evolution", and both suppressed breaks and ruptures in favour of a progressive narrative (Huyssen 1986, 57). Huyssen (1986, 56) identifies a "single-minded trajectory" based on "a notion of the inevitability of the evolution of modern art" in their historical accounts and argues that they retrospectively constructed a movement towards an aesthetic *telos*. In a similar manner, Weiner's account structures its argument in such a way that the outcome, the graphic novel, becomes inevitable. Thus, just like Greenberg and Adorno, current comics historiographies like Weiner's tend to retrospectively construct a linear, teleological trajectory of progression and thereby elide potential leaps, breaks, or ruptures.

In my analysis I want to contrast this historical logic with a fictional narrative that superficially presents a trajectory of comics strikingly similar to the teleological graphic novel narrative: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). However, I want to suggest

that the novel depicts this trajectory simultaneously with a necessary correlative of progression: juxtaposition. Through a historical logic of both/and rather than either/or or before/after, *Kavalier & Clay* represents the history of comics as a phenomenon that is incommensurable with a modernist narrative of progression.

Kavalier & Clay, a historical novel whose main narrative roughly coincides with the 'Golden Age of Comic Books' (1939–1954), tells the story of two Jewish cousins, one U.S.-born, the other recently fled from Nazi-occupied Prague. Against the historical backdrop of the post-Depression U.S., World War II, and the Holocaust, Brooklynite Samuel "Sam Clay" Klayman and Czech Josef "Joe" Kavalier create the Escapist, a masked crime fighter/superhero in the vein of the era's Superman, Captain America, or The Spirit. Structurally, the novel is a mixture of coming-of-age story[1] and *roman à clef* that synthesises the biographies of the classic comic book artist/writer-duos, from Joe Shuster/Jerry Siegel to Jack Kirby/Joe Simon, as well as of individual comics artists/entrepreneurs like Will Eisner. The novel features a creative team where one half is more artistically minded and the other more pragmatically inclined; through this dialectical relationship, we witness the creation of their franchise at young age, the success of their co-created comic book, how they are exploited by greedy businessmen, and the eventual breakdown of their partnership.[2] However, while the narrative of the book ends in the year 1954, thus coinciding with the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the introduction of the Comics Magazine Association of America's Comics Code, I read *Kavalier & Clay* not only as a historical novel that is phrased in the historically accurate terms of the transitional Golden Age, but also as a discursive product of its contemporary cultural context. Anachronistically, it adds aspects 'ahead of their time' and thus complements its historical narrative with the terms and phenomena of the contemporary transitional era in visual fiction, which is characterised by the emergence of the graphic novel.[3]

[1] The fact that large parts of the novel's narrative are in the form of the *Bildungsroman* is also significant for its take on comics. Douglas Wolk opens his ambiguously titled study *Reading Comics. How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* with the observation that "[i]t's no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature brilliant works". Thus, according to this logic, after "its awkward childhood and difficult adolescence", comics have entered adulthood (Wolk 2007, 3).

[2] For a more thorough historical take on the period fictionalized by Chabon and the relationships between early comic book creators and entrepreneurs, see Jones 2004.

[3] Chabon himself once acknowledged that he wrote *Kavalier & Clay* during "the current boom – one might even dare to call it a golden age – in the graphic novel" (Chabon 2003), and thus explicitly states the connection between historical narrative and cultural context.

A reading of the novel as a meta-historical narrative that is as much about the history of comic books as it is about comics' current status will show how the novel develops complex notions of comics history and aesthetics that go beyond the popular narrative outlined above. Several critics have already addressed this issue, with different emphases. Lee Behlman argues that the novel "embraces the superhero comic book in its earliest incarnation, with its crude drawing style, monotone dialogue, and unlikely plots, as a rough but vivid and fertile form" (Behlman 2004, 63). He also notes the anachronistic aspect of the novel when he claims that the Escapist's origin story, told ekphrastically in prose form, "includes a level of physical detail and even psychological sophistication that would never appear in a comic book of that era" while still being "clearly a comic book story, with all the trappings of its fantasy world" (Behlman 2004, 65).

In Hillary Chute's reading of the novel, *Kavalier & Clay*'s engagement with comics "theorizes a democratic popular culture that is yet aesthetically innovative" (Chute 2008, 281). In contrast to Behlman, however, she puts more emphasis on the aesthetic development of the cousins' career and traces it from the beginning to its (supposed) end. Even though Behlman and Chute touch on important aspects of the novel, I want to suggest that the novel's cultural politics are even more complex and call for an integration of the two options. *Kavalier & Clay* is as much about a celebration of the Golden Age comic book as it is about a depiction of the "trajectory" (Chute 2008, 282) of Joe's career and artistic development; in the end, it calls for an aesthetic that manages to integrate both poles. Since much of what happens in *Kavalier & Clay* is focalized through its artist figures, I want to suggest that a more thorough analysis of Sam's development as well as that of Rosa Saks, who starts out as Joe's romantic fling and eventually becomes the novel's third major artist figure, is necessary. Furthermore, the novel implicitly comments on a paradox of the graphic novel discourse: The development of the graphic novel is often read as the 'serious' expression of comics, more sophisticated and thus better than the standard comics fare, while propagators of the medium simultaneously try to vindicate the entire medium through recourse to this most refined representative. The novel, in addition to a celebration of aesthetic mastery, argues for the necessity to take into account aspects that contradict this logic by juxtaposing serial forms like the comic book with graphic novel-like narratives rather than portraying them as different stages of a progression.

FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE TO THE GREAT DEBATE

Similar to other parts of popular culture, the critical reception of and the cultural value attributed to comics has gradually changed since the 1960s. Comics historiography attributes this development largely to the impact of alternative and independent comics (see Weiner 2003, 9–16; Hatfield 2005), yet it seems necessary to refer to larger processes beyond the medium itself. The

general development of cultural destratification is often attributed to postmodernism, which refuted cultural hierarchies erected along the modernist lines of high art and low culture, a logic for which both Adorno and Greenberg can be seen as epitomes (Huyssen 1986). However, the move beyond "the Great Divide [...] the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" has not led to a culture of no distinctions (Huyssen 1986, viii). In fact, I want to argue that out of the postmodern dissolution of a priori vertical hierarchies grew an increased awareness of other normative, aesthetic and economic distinctions, as well as the increased debate on cultural validation.

Within the field of comics, this can be exemplified by *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud's comprehensive and highly influential "comic book about comics" (McCloud 1993, vii), which devotes its entire first chapter to the question of what comics are and what cultural position they are in. Entitled "Setting the Record Straight", the chapter aims to overcome prejudices against the medium and define it quasi-scientifically along strictly value-neutral lines. Knowing very well that even his impressive 22-page run-through will have no definitive answer to the question of what exactly 'comics' are, McCloud closes the chapter with a panel in which his stand-in salutes "the Great Debate" that necessarily follows from his claims (McCloud 1993, 22). In very condensed form, this chapter shows how the end of the Great Divide has led to, among others, a culture of a Great Debate, in which culture is characterised by an ever-increasing self-consciousness among artists, critics, and audiences across the entire spectrum that goes hand in hand with constant (re-)negotiations concerning the cultural status of authors, texts, genres, and media.

In cases when this debate centres on comics, it does not have to be restricted to comics themselves, as texts from other media also participate in this Great Debate and collectively negotiate the status of comics. For instance, literary engagements with comics have become so frequent that Daniel Punday has identified the literary "subgenre [...] comic book novels" (Punday 2008, 292–293).[4] Alongside Tom de Haven's *Funny Papers* (1985) and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) among others, he prominently includes *Kavalier & Clay*. And indeed, as a bestseller and eventual Pulitzer Prize-winner, *Kavalier & Clay* is certainly among the most prominent recent literary engagements with comic books. The impact goes so far that Weiner (2003, 55) even called it "the biggest boost the comics field received from the literary world" and Kelleter and Stein described it as the "trigger of the comics studies-wave of the early 21st century" (Kelleter and Stein 2009, 88; my translation).

[4] He defines them as "novels about writers who create comic books or newspaper comic strips and novels that use comic-book and comic-strip characters as part of their story" (Punday 2008, 293; cf. Kelleter and Stein 2009, 88).

To understand why a novel can have such an impact on an entire medium, it might be fruitful to consider the following quote from Danny Fingeroth's study of Jewish superheroes: "The superheroes have permeated our popular culture and everyday culture, and – in works such as Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* – our highbrow culture as well" (Fingeroth 2007, 26–27). Even though both authors work with and within the fields of popular and genre fiction, Chabon and Lethem are both safely established within the literary field, as even a cursory look at their publishing houses or the sites of reviews of their books indicate. Given their cultural status, these texts are thus already able to promote comics by doing hardly more than affirmatively engaging with the medium (cf. Ditschke 2009, 269). Fingeroth's statement shows how engagements with comics by established literary authors are taken as endorsements by cultural authorities in that they perform a critical and evaluative assessment of a popular medium which has the potential to elevate the latter into the realm of 'serious' culture. This phenomenon is not only present in discourses on literature devoted to comics, though; we can also find it in a central discourse *within* the field of comics. Here, I am referring to the argument that comics have finally become a credible, 'serious', in short, literary form (with a capital 'L') that deserves the impressive title 'sequential art' (Eisner 2008) and that there has developed a new form of comics that marks a crucial incision in comics history: the graphic novel.

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

> "[W]hen they coined the term 'graphic novel' nobody mentioned that the novel in question was Ulysses." Tom Shone

The term "graphic novel" can be traced back to 1964 (Gravett 2005, 8), but it was no sooner than the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) that the term gained wide currency. However, already the first major representative failed to adhere to the most basic premise implicated by the term. *A Contract with God* was published in book form, but it consists of largely independent stories rather than a single book-length narrative. Irrespective of this, Weiner defines graphic novels as books that have "a beginning, middle, and end between two covers" and try "to have the same effect as serious prose novels – in other words, the characters grow, change, and reach a point of resolution [...] In addition, the artwork propelling the story has to be expressive and telling" (Weiner 2001, vii–ix). Against this narrow and highly normative attempt to fix the meaning of the term, one can put Hatfield's cautionary remark that "a graphic novel can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a longer work – you name it" (Hatfield 2005, 5). This thought is confirmed when we consider that

apart from Eisner's 'original' graphic novel being a collection of short stories, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* was a limited series of DC comic books before it was collected in graphic novel form, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was published in *Raw* magazine before it was collected in book form, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* is a work of journalism, and while Craig Thompson's *Blankets* is one of comparatively few graphic novels that was actually published without having been previously serialised, it is not fictional. All of this contributes to the impression that a definition of what exactly a graphic novel is (and what it is not) will most probably fail because of the vagueness inherent in the term.

Not only because of this, the term "has become distorted with prejudices and preconceptions, riddled with confusion among the media and public, and a topic of dispute among 'graphic novelists' themselves" (Gravett 2005, 8). After all, the exact meaning of the term may not be the central aspect to be considered when analysing the phenomenon, as the term has come to stand more for a new way of appreciating comics than a new form of comics.[5] Paul Gravett (2005, 8) puts it succinctly when he calls the term a "misnomer", but one that needs to be considered, since it "has caught on and entered the language and dictionaries, for all its inaccuracies". Even though one may argue with Wolk that graphic novel is hardly more than "the fancy way" to talk about comics used by those "trying to be deferential or trying to imply that they are serious" (Wolk 2007, 61–63; cf. Roberts 2004, 214), it is undeniable that this "fancy way" is a powerful means to very specific ends.

By setting a normative framework to the discourse, 'graphic novel' signifies a serious and artistic conceptualisation of the medium of comics that endows the form with cultural capital. Read against this context, Eisner's tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement that he used the term to promote *A Contract with God* in "a futile effort to entice the patronage of a mainstream publisher" comes as no surprise (Eisner 2006, x). Eisner revived his career and introduced a term that has come to stand synonymously for comics' artistic and commercial maturation and success since the 1970s – despite, or maybe exactly because of, its terminological inaccuracies.[6]

[5] Gravett cites Eddie Campbell, who once claimed that "graphic novel signifies a movement rather than a form", and that it is a movement that has the goal "to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious level", thus "forging a whole new art which will not be a slave to the arbitrary rules of an old one" (Gravett 2005, 9).

[6] In the context of this article, I am not able to resolve the question whether the relationship between the graphic novel and comics' rise to respectability is of causal or correlative nature. However, it becomes clear from critical and journalistic sources that "[t]he growing dominance of long-form works of comic art – graphic novels – is frequently heralded as an indication of the aesthetic and literary development of the comic art medium in the United States" (Couch 2000; cf. Gravett 2005, 9; Ditschke 2009).

In essence, the contemporary fascination with the graphic novel can be read as a continuation of the "evaluative discourse" that has been a permanent part of comics discourse since its inception (Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 9). Epitomised by the congressional hearings following *Seduction of the Innocent*, this discourse has continued, but under inverted conditions: rather than evaluating the badness of comics, now the goodness of comics is at the centre of public and critical discourses (Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 9). What Stephan Ditschke has shown with respect to German 'Feuilletons' and publishing houses, namely the "literalisation of comics" (Ditschke 2009, 267; my translation), can also be shown in the U.S. context.[7] And even beyond the journalistic context, it is safe to say that the medium of comics has entered the realm of respectable culture and has become the subject of systematic scholarly concern (Weiner 2003, 56).

However, if one looks at university syllabi, newspaper coverage, and bookstore displays, it also becomes obvious that the medium is going through a differentiation process that closely mirrors the differentiation of the literary field in the 19th and early 20th century. Broadly speaking, courses on *Maus* rather than on Superman or Captain America are offered; arts & leisure sections cover the new Chris Ware rather than the new Batman story arc; and rather than putting comic books on the shelf, bookstores display graphic novels like *Watchmen* or *Blankets* (cf. Hess 2012, 26). If we look at the process of cultural construction that was behind the invention of 'literature' as opposed to other, less 'serious' modes of writing and compare this to the current differentiation of the comics field, we witness striking similarities (Fluck 1997; Eagleton 1996, 1–14). Ditschke has identified a significant aspect of this development when he argues with Bourdieu that recent "comics criticism constructs an autonomous field of comic art production (serious culture) that is opposed to the heteronomous field of comics mainstream (entertainment culture)" (Ditschke 2009, 272; my translation). For Bourdieu, cultural producers are basically divided by the degree of autonomy/heteronomy visible in or projected into their works. While heteronomy, the cultural producer's dependence on patrons, employers, or the audience is dismissed as commercialism; a high degree of autonomy from external factors is taken as evidence of a high degree of artfulness (Bourdieu 1996, 218). If we apply this to the graphic novel narrative, we see that comics are increasingly appreciated for a few comics' supposed adherence to a decidedly traditional and exclusionary notion of art and culture as a normative category.

[7] For instance, a cursory search on the *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* websites yields dozens of articles on 'graphic novels', while hardly anything is written on serial comic books.

If we return to Weiner, it is significant how differently the respective circumstances of production and reception are put: While Golden Age superhero comic books were produced "as quickly and cheaply as possible" (Weiner 2003, 2), the graphic novel is described as "a cartoon literary art form" (Weiner 2003, 58) that is produced by individual, identifiable authors/artists. As a consequence, comic books "were the lowest rung of the cultural ladder" (Weiner 2003, 3) in the 1930s and 1940s, while the graphic novel is seen as the catalyst, if not outright origin of the development that finally brought the medium away from the newsstand, out of the comic book specialty shop, and into the book store, where it is bought and sold next to serious literature (cf. Couch 2000). Weiner implicitly portrays comic books as a heteronomous form of comics that is produced under Fordist conditions by dependent artists – thus artistically inferior. In contrast, graphic novels are, according to Weiner, produced under more autonomous conditions, making them more direct imprints of the respective artist's creative mind and therefore more artistic. And through this conceptualisation of comic books and the graphic novel, the critical appreciation of the two forms diverges.

THE TRAJECTORY OF *KAVALIER & CLAY*

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay engages with these contemporary developments through its historical negotiation of comics. As a historical novel, it discusses and represents Golden Age comics in their own discursive context while also phrasing its aesthetic arguments in the discursive context of the novel published in 2000. It depicts a narrative of aesthetic development that conspicuously transcends the novel's chronology of fifteen years to rather encapsulate the development of the form during the last 70 years.

In chronological terms, the novel begins by outlining the common positions on the superhero comic book genre as it was widely received in the 1930s United States. When Sam wants to convince Joe to start a comic book, Sam's plea for the form is not based on an objection to his mother's claim that comics are "trash", but simply on the assertion that "[t]here's good money in comic books" (Chabon 2001, 73). Given the artistic state of the comic book in those days, this cynical and purely commercial view of comics seems to be legitimate:

> In 1939 the American comic book, like the beavers and cockroaches of prehistory, was larger and, in its cumbersome way, more splendid than its modern descendant [...] Inside the covers – whence today there wafts an inevitable flea-market smell of rot and nostalgia – the comic book of 1939 was, artistically and morphologically, in a far more primitive state. (Chabon 2001, 74)

In these quotes, Chabon's novel explicitly affirms Weiner's assessment of the cultural position of comic books in the 1930s as well as his account's evolutionary logic. However, already here, a certain contradiction to a purely progressive assessment becomes obvious. Given the "primitive state" of the comic book and the mainly economic interest of its practitioners, it is made clear that initially comic books were not read as an aesthetic progression, but rather as a fall from grace if compared to the older genre of comic strips and "the mannered splendor of Burne Hogarth, Alex Raymond, Hal Foster" or "the finely tuned humor and adultish irony of *Lil'Abner*, *Krazy Kat*, *Abbie 'n' Slats*" (Chabon 2001, 75).

This shortcoming, however, is overcome when the narrator describes a creative watershed in the development of comic books; namely, the appearance of *Action Comics* #1 and the birth of Superman, "a magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes from Samson to Doc Savage" (Chabon 2001, 77). Superman may lack originality like his comic book predecessors, the figure is a "version", but it is still different from those comics that suffer "a bad case of the carbon copies", those uninspired knock-offs that preceded Superman (Chabon 2001, 77). Because of successful artistry, the character brings the form to a new level by making use of its potential in ways the newspaper strip never could:

> The artist, Joe Shuster, while technically just barely apt, seemed to understand from the first that the big rectangular page of the comic book offered possibilities for pacing and composition that were mostly unavailable in the newspapers; he joined three panels vertically into one [...] and he chose his angles and arranged his figures with a certain cinematic flair. [...] Though he had been conceived originally as a newspaper hero, Superman was born in the pages of a comic book, where he thrived, and after this miraculous parturition, the form finally began to emerge from its transitional funk, and to articulate a purpose for itself in the marketplace of ten-cent dreams: to express the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people with no leave to dress themselves. Comic books were Kid Stuff, pure and true, and they arrived at precisely the moment when the kids of America began, after ten years of terrible hardship, to find their pockets burdened with the occasional superfluous dime. (Chabon 2001, 77–78)

This passage shows, at the same time as it points out the formal innovation brought about by Shuster through his individual exploitation of the medium's potential, that all formal aspects and every artistic progression cannot be taken on their own terms alone. They are always inextricably linked to economic factors and the need to appeal to a very certain demographic, in this case working-class children and adolescents. On its own, none of the three factors – post-Depression affluence, commercial appeal, or formal innovation – would have brought any significant change

to the medium; together, they change it completely. Here, we find the first instance where the novel claims that comic books in particular and comics in general have to be considered a heteronomous art form that has to be evaluated in the concrete context of its production and reception and not only against the yardstick of certain transcendental cultural norms.

After these initial narratorial comments, most of the novel's history of comic books is written through the development of Joe Kavalier's and Sam Clay's partnership, focusing on the creation of the Escapist and the comic book franchise attached to it. From the beginning of the cousins' collaboration with Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazy – two stereotypical representations of the greedy businessmen who exploited the early comic book artists – to the publication of the first issue of *Amazing Midget Radio Comics* (as their franchise is called), the novel paints the early career of Kavalier and Clay in lavish and loving detail. In his analysis of *Kavalier & Clay*, Hess accurately describes the novel's "enthusiastic celebration of mainstream, mass-market superhero comic books" (Hess 2012, 26). Together with the Escapist, the cousins create characters with such evocative names like Luna Moth or Mr. Machine Gun and soon establish a successful comic book series. Read along the lines presented so far, the novel closely correlates to Roberts' characterisation as "[a] loving tribute to the burgeoning comic book industry of the 1930s" that forced "the sometimes-elitist academic world […] to again take note and consider its canon" (Roberts 2004, 214).

However, as I have already indicated with reference to the novel's take on Superman, appreciating comics for their popular appeal and the campy celebration of comics exactly for their ostensible aesthetic deficits is only one part of the novel's engagement with the form. While it shares certain aspects with Jules Feiffer's classic study *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, in which Feiffer affirmatively claimed that "[c]omic books, first of all are junk […] there to entertain on the basest, most compromised of levels" (Feiffer 2003, 72–73), the novel cannot be reduced to that. Chabon wrote more than an "enthusiastic endorsement of this by now rather 'square' art form" and does more than celebrate "the pulpy energy, excitement, and crude imaginative power of superhero comics without a trace of condescension" as Behlman (2004, 64–65) put it. Beginning at the latest with the appearance of the first issue of the Escapist comic book, the novel synthesises the entertainment and pleasure of comic books with a discussion concerning the artistic potential of the genre and its medium. Large parts of this debate are centred on Joe, known "today […] as one of the greatest innovators in the use of layout, of narrative strategies, in the history of comic book art" (Chabon 2001, 361). And indeed, if Joe's development is read in isolation, the novel portrays a development of the medium from simplicity to complexity that evokes the graphic novel narrative I have outlined above.

Significantly, this development accelerates after the main characters have attended the premiere of *Citizen Kane*, itself a landmark in the formal development of film and the cultural appreciation of the medium. The movie has a tremendous and immediate impact on the comic book the cousins have created: "But in July 1941, *Radio* #19 hit the stands, and the nine million unsuspecting twelve-year olds of America who wanted to grow up to become comic book men nearly fell over dead in amazement. The reason was *Citizen Kane*" (Chabon 2001, 361). Joe, who had always wondered about the – for him and his European, academy-educated understanding – inverted relationship of comics and art, in which cheap production and crude layout seemed to be prerequisites for, rather than obstacles to, success, finally finds a text akin to his ambitions. He "was impressed – demolished – by it" and is instantly changed by the reception of Orson Welles' directorial debut:

> All of the dissatisfactions he had felt in his practice of the art form he had stumbled across within a week of his arrival in America, the cheap conventions, the low expectations among publishers, readers, parents, and educators, the spatial constraints that he had been struggling against in the pages of Luna Moth, seemed capable of being completely overcome, exceeded, and escaped. The Amazing Cavalieri [his stage name as a magician] was going to break free, forever, of the nine little boxes. (Chabon 2001, 361)

The impact of the film on Joe's understanding of the comic book is worth quoting at length:

> Joe struggled to express, to formulate, the revolution in his ambitions for the ragged-edged and stapled little art form to which their inclinations and luck had brought them. […] *Citizen Kane* represented, more than any other movie Joe had ever seen, the total blending of narration and image that was – didn't Sammy see it? – the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling and the irreducible nut of their partnership. Without the witty, potent dialogue and the puzzling shape of the story, the movie would have been merely an American version of the kind of brooding, shadow-filled Ufa-style expressionist stuff that Joe had grown up watching in Prague. Without the brooding shadows and bold adventurings of the camera, without the theatrical lighting and queasy angles, it would have been merely a clever movie about a rich bastard. It was more, much more, than any movie really needed to be. In this one crucial aspect – its inextricable braiding of image and narrative – *Citizen Kane* was like a comic book. (Chabon 2001, 362)

Sam's response is indicative: "I'd like to think we could do something like that. But come on. This is just, I mean, we're talking about *comic books*" (Chabon 2001, 363; emphasis in the original). And even after Joe's avant-gardist bohemian girlfriend Rosa objects by pointing out that "'[n]o medium is inherently better than any other'" a dictum in which to believe "was almost a requirement for

residence in her father's house", Sam insists that "that's not right. Comic books actually *are* inferior" (Chabon 2001, 363; emphasis in the original). Still, Joe's plan is pursued, and soon after, "Kane Street" is produced, "the first of the so-called modernist or prismatic Escapist stories" and the comic book market – years ahead of its time – is opened to adults (Chabon 2001, 363). And indeed, with subject matter that significantly transcends the genre constraints, "Kane Street" is portrayed as a significant progression.[8] By depicting "the ordinary people" around the superheroes and with Joe's "daring use of perspective and shading, the radical placement of word balloons and captions and, above all, the integration of narrative and picture by means of artfully disarranged, dislocated panels that stretched, shrank, opened into circles, spread across two full pages, marched diagonally toward one corner of a page, unreeled themselves like the frames of a film", the Escapist comic book of 1941 has qualities that are supposed to have come only recently, with the graphic novel (Chabon 2001, 368–369).

Furthermore, this quality is measured according to a standard that can be found in a text that is openly acknowledged by Chabon in his "Author's note" and also ironically alluded to in the novel (Chabon 2001, 545), but fits the historical context of the narration rather than the novel's plot: Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. In this study, Harvey speaks of the "unique aspect of comics' blending of word and picture for narrative purposes" and that "one litmus test of good comics art is to ascertain to what extent the sense of the words depends upon the pictures and vice versa" (Harvey 1996, 3–4). Together with the narrator's obvious historiographic insertions, it is this blatant concordance between the two texts that demonstrates how the narrator tells and evaluates the novel's historical narrative from a point of view steeped in current approaches to the medium.

"Kane Street" is followed by a short period of radical innovation taking place within the constraints of early comic book publishing. This period, however, is prematurely terminated on December 6, 1942 by the death of Joe's little brother Thomas and Joe's subsequent enrolment in the army after the attack on Pearl Harbor. And it will be only after a stint in Antarctica and a period of Romanticist seclusion that Joe will eventually reappear in 1954 with *The Golem*,[9] a 2,256-page comic book that surpasses everything the form has previously come up with and "would, he hoped at the time, transform people's views and understanding of the art form that in 1949 he

[8] However, the fact that this aesthetic progression coincides with and complements their publisher's economically motivated demand for less controversial subject matter once more displays the integrated nature of both.

[9] An actually existing version of this mythical Jewish hero was instrumental in Joe's escape from Prague and the Golem served from the beginning as a role model for Joe's understanding of superheroes.

alone saw as a means of self-expression as potent as a Cole Porter tune in the hands of a Lester Young, or a cheap melodrama about an unhappy rich man in the hands of an Orson Welles" (Chabon 2001, 577).

Concerning *The Golem*, Chute argues that "Joe Kavalier embarks on what Chabon presents as America's first 'graphic novel'" and that "*Kavalier & Clay* is about comics moving out from a degraded mass form (the pulps) to what Joe insists on: comics as serious art form. The book argues for an art form whose politics resides in its aesthetic choices and stances but is yet inclusive of popular conventions and genres" (Chute 2008, 285). Focusing on this development from the beginning of the partnership to Joe's *The Golem*, Chute (2008, 282) argues that the novel "presents a trajectory, showing us how its creative cartoonist protagonists embrace and adopt various comic book methodologies". Read in isolation from the rest of the book, this chronological take on the Escapist comic is indeed a straightforward retelling of the comics-to-graphic novels account of popular comics history as exemplified by Weiner's book.

This view of the novel, however, is only possible by ignoring large parts of the final section and neglecting the artists Sam and Rosa, thus eliding the crucial dialectical dynamic at the heart of the novel. Even more, as Hess points out, Chute's approach to *Kavalier & Clay*'s comics historiography "largely ignores the seven decade legacy of superhero comics" (Hess 2012, 26). Accordingly, Chute claims that *Kavalier & Clay* locates comics' development in Joe's career and moves from "the novelty companies and pulps [...] to the realm of modernist aesthetics [...] and finally propagates a form that draws on elements of both: a solemn, experimental, and – crucially – book-length comics oeuvre that yet wears its roots in generic convention with pride: the graphic narrative" (Chute 2008, 286). However, it seems dubitable that *The Golem* can be read as such an inclusionary text, let alone "a form that bridges the high and the popular" (Chute 2008, 286). Already the fact that this "comic book novel", as Sam calls it, remains unpublished makes it decidedly *un*popular (Chabon 2001, 543). Thus, even though Chute convincingly argues that *Kavalier & Clay* "theorizes a democratic popular culture that is yet aesthetically innovative", *The Golem* can hardly be taken as the point where this cultural politics manifests itself (Chute 2008, 281). Rather, within the novel, this "monstrous comic book" signifies an extreme end in the dichotomy between individual artistic expression and commercial potential (Chabon 2001, 578). Accordingly, we learn about Joe that "the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression – the less willingness he felt to show it to other people" (Chabon 2001, 579). It follows that if *The Golem* is understood as *Kavalier & Clay*'s version of the graphic novel, the form is depicted as an artistically advanced but potentially antisocial genre that cannot represent comics on its own, but needs to be conceptualised together with other forms of graphic expression like the comic book. Accordingly, the last section of the novel

puts as much emphasis on Joe's graphic novel as it does on the work of Joe, Sam and Rosa in the field of serial comic books and thus juxtaposes the two genres.

KAVALIER & CLAY: JOE, SAM & ROSA

The development of the cousins' comic book is but one aspect of the novel's comics discussion, and only through a thorough consideration of *Kavalier & Clay*'s character constellation can we make sense of it without reading it solely along the lines of a teleological narrative. Basically, *Kavalier & Clay* consists of a unique constellation of its two most prominent characters, the "solidly lower-middle class" American Jew Sam, and the displaced upper-middle class European Jew Joe (Chabon 2001, 6). With Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, the novel offers two typical models of approaching comics in particular and art in general; two models that at times converge and at times diverge (cf. Chute 2008, 283; Behlman 2004, 66–67). Joe, on the one hand, is the formally educated European artist who continually aspires to bring innovation to comic books and eventually produces *The Golem*. Sam, on the other hand, is the shrewd American plagiarist that may dream of writing the Great American Novel, but never succeeds in doing so (Chabon 2001, 7; 543). Individually, neither would achieve anything; it is only through the collaboration of the two that anything comes to pass. The novel shows that only a collaboration of different approaches to art, entertainment, and culture makes it possible to come to terms with comics. For instance, coming back to *The Golem*, without Sam, Joe does not produce a comic book, at least not one according to the criteria established before with reference to Harvey – *The Golem* has no words, it consists only of images.[10] Furthermore, Joe resorts to highly idiosyncratic 19th century conceptions of Romantic art (cf. Eagleton 1996, 16–18) and produces *The Golem* in total seclusion and obscurity, eventually declining to publish it. Therefore, a more than fleeting analysis of Sam seems to be necessary.

From the beginning, Joe's counterweight Sam is made out as the almost exact opposite of an original Romantic genius; he is a talented copier, a postmodern artist *avant-la-lettre*: "His grasp of perspective was tenuous, his knowledge of human anatomy dubious, his line often sketchy – but he was an enterprising thief" (Chabon 2001, 7). It is of course significant that later, this "thief" will have played an instrumental role in comics as patron to young artists, as we learn in "A

[10] *The Golem* is reminiscent of Lynd Ward's series of wordless woodcut novels or Frans Masereel's *The City*. However, even though these books are often hailed as proto-graphic novels, the aesthetic, cultural and economic contexts of their production and reception is distinctly different from that of the early comics industry and much more similar to current figurations of literary authors and creators of graphic novels (cf. McCloud 1993, 19).

Postscript", a short piece that was published after the novel and narrates Sam and Rosa's visit to "IronCon" in 1988 (Chabon 2004, 38).

In essence, what Sam lacks in creativity, he makes up for in social behaviour and economic acumen, thus complementing his cousin and the idiosyncratic approach to art Joe stands for. Together, they form a neat complementary cycle that is, however, yet to be completed. Even though I do not claim that she is as central to the novel as the two cousins, I still want to suggest that the function of Rosa Luxemburg Saks has been insufficiently analysed. Rosa, the daughter of a patron of the avant-garde, starts out as Joe's love interest, but she ends up as an artist in her own right, similar to, though not commensurable with, Sam and Joe. So far, Hillary Chute is the only critic who has mentioned her in a more than passing fashion, pointing out that already her names connote wildly divergent cultural phenomena. Communism ("Rosa Luxemburg") and consumerism ("Saks") are separated only by a space character and thus make her an artist "who represents the intertwining of the political and the commercial" (Chute 2008, 289). Subsequently, Chute concentrates her analysis on how the avant-gardist artist Rosa employs popular modes of expression 'from above', thus echoing Huyssen's (1986) conceptualisation of the historical avant-garde and U.S. postmodernism.

I want to argue that the novel goes a step further, again by pointing out Rosa's name. While Chute concentrates on the significance of her birth name, I want to emphasise the names she will assume through her relationships with Joe and Sam. After Joe disappears in 1942 and Sam finds out that Rosa is pregnant with Joe's child, he marries her, and she becomes Rosa Clay. Shortly after, she starts working for Sam and assumes the *nom de plume* Rose Saxon, thus anglicising her Jewish name just like Sam Americanised his. The novel ends with the reunification of Rosa and Joe and the disappearance of Sam. When he leaves, he makes a significant gesture by leaving behind a card that signifies both the relation between all three characters as well as the new relationship between Rosa and Joe by writing, "knotted by the stout cord of an ampersand, the words KAVALIER & CLAY" (Chabon 2001, 636). Thus, in the end, the stable signifiers of the book's title have become ambiguous, for the names do not only belong to Joe and Sam, but also, in equal parts, to Rosa. Together with her avant-gardist upbringing, this makes Rosa the perfect link between the two different approaches to art represented by the cousins.

In the novel's most blatant deviation from the graphic novel narrative, this bridging is artistically represented in a genre that is usually portrayed as an aesthetic decline: romance comics. Rosa's romance comic books can be seen as a mirror of a change in the industry during the 1950s; but on a more personal level they do not only present an option to earn a living, but also a means of

escape for Rosa that mirrors Joe's and Sam's escapist[11] fantasies: "The night he [Sam] offered her the chance to draw 'a comic book for dollies,' Rosa felt, Sammy had handed *her* a golden key, a skeleton key to her self, a way out of the tedium of her existence as a housewife and a mother, first in Midwood and now in Bloomtown,[12] soi-disant Capital of the American Dream" (Chabon 2001, 547; emphasis in the original). With personal liberation comes artistic exploitation of the medium, much in the vein of Joe:

> Her pages, though neglected by all but a few collectors, retain an imprint of the creator's faith in her creation, the beautiful madness that is rare enough in any art form, but in the comics business, with its enforced collaborations and tireless seeking-out of the lowest common denominator, all but unheard of. (Chabon 2001, 551)

Rosa manages, just like Joe did, to create ambitious comic art in everything but independent circumstances (she is, after all, Sam's employee). As the narrator of "A Postscript" tells us:

> Mrs. Rosa Kavalier, better known to aficionados of comic-book romance (sadly few) as Rose Saxon. In the fifties and well into the early sixties she had taken the conventions and verities of the romance genre and stretched them to the breaking point. At first her hallmark was a stylized realism but toward the end, before the bottom fell out of love comics and her career was cut short by arthritis, things took a baroque turn. (Chabon 2004, 36)

This description clearly echoes Shuster's work with Superman and Joe's work with the Escapist. And similar to the heteronomous conditions of Superman and the Escapist, it happens primarily under the guidance of Sam, who is both writer and contractor for her. That Chabon chose a critically reviled genre for this is indicative, as it makes clear how even the most disregarded cultural product may have the potential of actual artistic bliss, thus belying many long-standing preconceptions. Rosa becomes a representation of the heteronomous comic field, and at the same time represents the novel's problematisation of a purely male teleology of comics historiography and functions as a corrective for simplistic conceptualisations of comics history (cf. Frahm 2009, 183).

Thus, contrary to what the current literature on *Kavalier & Clay* implies, the novel's representation of comics art does not end with *The Golem*. Rather, it ends with Sam and Rosa working in romance comics and other typical 1950s genres and, maybe even more significantly, with Joe buying Empire Comics, the publishing house of the Escapist. In the end, the figure of the

[11] For an analysis of escapism in *Kavalier & Clay*, see Behlman 2004.

[12] Bloomtown is the novel's thinly veiled allusion to 1950s suburbia epitomized by Levittown.

entrepreneur and the artist are conjoined both within the character of Joe and of Sam. And although Joe is eventually defrauded of the Escapist, as the title was sold shortly before he purchased Empire, he publishes "adult-themed" titles in comic book form while Rosa continues to make a living drawing 1950s romance comics.

BEYOND KAVALIER & CLAY

Joe and Sam, together with Rosa, represent different *intertwined* possibilities of what it means to be an artist in the culture industry. In their different approaches to being an artist they epitomise, individually and collectively, what Chabon lauded elsewhere as "pop artisans" (Chabon 2008b, 98). For Chabon, a pop artisan "teeters on a fine fulcrum between the stern, sell-the-product morality of the workhorse and the artist's urge to discover a pattern in, or derive a meaning from, the random facts of the world" (Chabon 2008b, 98). He argues that among the "balancing acts" that "have always been the greatest feats of American popular art" is work that stands "at that difficult fulcrum [...] between the unashamedly commercial and the purely aesthetic" (Chabon 2008a, 105). That art and economy are inextricably linked in popular culture is also argued for by Chabon in his elegy on Will Eisner, in which he compares Eisner and Welles in terms of revolutionising one's chosen medium. Chabon identifies one major difference between the two, though:

> Will Eisner had something – was something – that Orson Welles never quite managed, or permitted himself, or possessed a head hard enough to be: Will Eisner was a businessman. He was a Welles and a Selznick, a Brian Wilson and an Ahmet Ertegun. [...] Will Eisner was a great artist and a skilled businessman; inextricably both. I loved that about him. (Chabon 2008b, 142–143)

Chabon himself seems to epitomise this characterisation of Eisner, as he not only wrote a critically and commercially successful novel, but also managed to participate in the creation of extra-textual sequels. To date, there have appeared several short prose pieces written by Chabon that were published in journals and exhibition catalogues; even more, there are also two actual comics that spawned from the book. Although both of them were later collected in trade paperback and hardcover form, respectively, these comic book sequels to the novel clearly represent a further contradiction to the graphic novel narrative.

Collaboration is the keyword for this aspect. From 2004 to 2006, Dark Horse Comics published *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, a quarterly comic book that purports to collect formerly

lost Escapist-stories from the 1940s to the present.[13] Apart from "The Passing of the Key", which is a comics adaptation of the Escapist origin story told in *Kavalier & Clay*, only very few of the stories were actually written by Chabon (Chabon et al. 2004–2006). Using pseudonyms like the anagrammatic Malachi B. Cohen, Chabon's main contributions, apart from being the "presenter", are a number of essay-like insertions which add more information on the novel's fictional universe and also construct an alternative history of comics in which Kavalier and Clay actually existed. The anthology collects work from such diverse writers and artists as Howard Chaykin, Eddie Campbell, Glen David Gold, Chris Ware, Brian K. Vaughan, Eric Wight, and Will Eisner. The impressive number of contributors to each issue signifies the anthology's insistence on comic book production as a collaborative endeavour. And with its broad range of genres in which the Escapist supposedly appeared – from superhero to science fiction to manga to children's comic strips – it also shows the continuing centrality of genre work in comics. Furthermore, the stories collected here are at pains to evade an ironic, distancing stance on comic books. The stories may be aesthetically refined and produced by prominent artists and writers, but they do not try to be metafictional comments on superhero/masked crime fighter comic books; they *are* superhero/masked crime fighter comic books. Here, issue #7, which consists of a single Mr. Machine Gun-story, is a case in point. While the main narrative is written and drawn in a contemporary style typical for mainstream comics as of 2005, chapter two is a 'reprint' of Mr. Machine Gun's origin story, bearing the credit "Kavalier & Clay" (Chabon and Barreto 2005, 31). Unlike many postmodernist appropriations of popular culture, this chapter passes on the opportunity to comment on, ironically or not, its subject and rather presents it in a straight-forward manner.

The anthology, just like the novel on which it is based, can be read as a counterexample to those contemporary appropriations of the genre that "tend to put ironic quotes around their referencing of superheroes", like for instance the graphic novels of Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes (Behlman 2004, 63). In Chabon's own words about the (non-)appreciation of genre and entertainment writing he perceives in general: "Intelligent people must keep a certain distance from its productions. They must handle the things that entertain them with gloves of irony and postmodern tongs" (Chabon 2008b, 13). And it is indeed Chabon's as well as his collaborators' refusal to use "gloves of irony and postmodern tongs" that is one of the crucial aspects of both the novel's and *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*'s take on the popular commercial form of the comic book (cf. Hess 2012, 27).

[13] More detailed accounts of the comic book series and their publication history can be found in Hess (2012, 31–37) and Groß (2012).

The other *Kavalier & Clay* spin-off, *The Escapists*, is a similar plea for the collaborative nature of comics production and an un-ironic engagement with the genre of the comic book (Vaughan et al. 2006). *The Escapists* is a six-issue limited series set in the present, written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by, among others, Philip Bond and Eduardo Barreto. It deals with young indie artists who manage to acquire the dormant rights to the Escapist and try to revive the series very much in the spirit of the 1940s. By focusing on the work of a team consisting of two boys and a girl, thus already echoing *Kavalier & Clay* on this level, the series shows on a textual level what *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist* did on the meta-level: even if the graphic novel is the new critical paradigm in comics, it has to be read alongside comic books that wear their serial and collaborative nature on their sleeve. Furthermore, the comic book displays self-conscious qualities, as it narrates the different stages of comics production extensively in the scenes when the creative team work in its studio (Vaughan et al. 2006, 39) and also shows this on a formal level; for instance, it uses four panels to illustrate the different steps of drawing comics. The first panel is pencilled, the second adds ink, the third is basically coloured, and the fourth adds more nuanced colourings and shadings, thus showing the assembly-like nature of comics production (Vaughan et al. 2006, 22). And even though it represents the comic book industry in starkly negative terms as a capitalist machinery of exploitation and manipulation, *The Escapists* gives further evidence of the continuing centrality of the serial form of comic books. Even after the series' heroes have given up on their revival of the Escapist, they decide to remain in the comic book business and begin to produce a comic book of their own instead.

CONCLUSION

The historical and often openly nostalgic comics narrative of *Kavalier & Clay* comments on, criticises, and helps shape a very current development in the medium: The emergence of the graphic novel and the growing respectability of comics as art.

The novel remedies the paradoxes inherent in the strategy of appreciating the merits of the comic book against its detractors. On the one hand, virtually no one addressing the issue forgets to elaborate on nostalgic memories regarding the first exposure to comic books during childhood. The different approaches to comics almost always stress their popular appeal and a universal understanding of art that includes comics, and also the necessity of appreciating comics in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of art (McCloud 1993, 162–184). Yet, within the ostensibly progressive graphic novel narrative, in which the graphic novel is the adult-oriented, formally refined quality expression of the medium that has helped the entire medium to finally become eligible for the cultural canon, comics are not so much appreciated for these 'popular'

reasons, but rather for a few comics' adherence to a decidedly traditional and exclusionary notion of art and culture as a normative category.

In this regard, the novel shares a caveat with Gravett, who concludes his overview of 30 graphic novel "masterworks" (Gravett 2005, 12) on a cautionary note. In his "Afterthoughts", Gravett claims the importance of not forgetting that, after all, sophistication and the turn to adult-themed subjects is but one future road to take.[14] In a similar vein, Wolk asks a question that touches on central problems of an all-too easy adaptation of a purely progressive framework: "Has something been lost in their shift from disposable pulp to acid-free archival paper?" (Wolk 2007, 10). That is, are there negative consequences to comics' (at least partial) shift from newsstand serial to cloth-bound bookstore inventory? And Hatfield also argues that "there is much about comics, historically and aesthetically, that may be lost in the drive to confer legitimacy on the graphic novel" (Hatfield 2005, 153).

Chabon's novel seems to share these concerns, and as a consequence attempts to broaden the purview. Instead of concentrating purely on the graphic novel, *Kavalier & Clay* juxtaposes it with the comic book and thus argues for an approach that accommodates various forms of comics as different versions of essentially the same phenomenon. Chabon's novel balances culture between two long-standing antipodes: "imitative and reproductive" features usually labelled mass/popular cultural collide and merge with "original and productive" takes, the common resort of high art (Huyssen 1986, 51). The novel argues for a culture where artistic acumen and the possibility of professionalisation as well as serious content and entertainment cease to be polar opposites. Therefore, it provides us with a crucial alternative to the increasing conceptualisation of 'good' comics as autonomous works of art, namely the appreciation of heteronomous forms of comics (cf. Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 15). For better or worse, the comics field emerges as a heteronomous part of the culture industry where people need to make a living. And the novel reminds us that the constraints of professionalism apply even to the most ambitious artists working in the field. The graphic novel, understood as an individual expression of an artist's mind, may be a possible, even welcome, variety within the medium, but it does not necessarily have to be the logical outcome of a unidirectional development. Not in the 1950s, not today.

[14] Certainly not coincidentally, he quotes from Michael Chabon's 2004 San Diego Comic-Con address: "Children did not abandon comics; comics, in their drive to attain respect and artistic accomplishment, abandoned children. And for a long time we as lovers and partisans of comics were afraid, after so many long years of struggle and hard work and incremental gains, to pick up that old jar of 'greasy kid stuff' again, and risk undoing it all. Comics have always been an arriviste art form, and all upstarts are to some degree ashamed of their beginnings. But frankly, I don't think that's what's going on in comics anymore. Now, I think, we have simply lost the habit of telling stories to children. And how sad is that" (Chabon 2008a, 91–92; cf. Gravett 2005, 184).

Fittingly, Punday argues that *Kavalier & Clay* and similar "comic book novels" "use comics to think about identity and originality after the rise of corporate culture" and that it is "a rich attempt to imagine a new way of telling stories about identity in an economic framework" (Punday 2008, 292–293).

Through its juxtaposition of different historical inflections of comics, it also succeeds in acknowledging aesthetic developments while at the same time not 'forgetting' older forms of comics that continue to exist and deserve critical attention. In the words of comic book veteran Jerry Robinson: "Though the comic strip, the comic book, and the comic book's progeny – the graphic novel – have much in common, each form had its own idiosyncratic development with its own unique vision and symbolism. The various genres of cartoon art are a distinct but logical development of centuries of narrative art" (Robinson 2004, 17). Thus, even while certain parts of the narrative are portrayed in a progressive fashion of logical development, it is through the juxtaposition of different approaches to producing comics that the novel shows the distinctness of each individual genre and points out contradicting developments, breaks, and ruptures.

In the end, it may be a hopeful sign that a novel that promotes the synthesis and mutual compatibility of artistic ambition and commercial success was itself a novel that managed to bridge "that most confounding and mysterious border of all: the one that lies between wild commercial success and unreserved critical acclaim" (Chabon 2008d, 25).

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SLEEPLESS IN THE DPRK: GRAPHIC NEGOTIATIONS OF 'FAMILY' IN *THE TRUE IDENTITY OF PEAR BLOSSOM*

by Martin Petersen

ABSTRACT

The True Identity of Pear Blossom (*Paekkot ui chongche*) is a North Korean graphic novel (*kurimchaek*) published in 2004 by Kumsong Youth Publishing House (*Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa*). It is the story of an undercover spy who schemes to destroy her alleged son's important project for the Fatherland and break down her granddaughter in the process. More than merely a spy-story, *Pear Blossom* arguably deals with the meaning of 'family' and its strengths and weaknesses in contemporary North Korean society.

Pear Blossom concludes with a seemingly immaculate conflict resolution, the removal of a false mother/grandmother and the celebration of the blissful integration of a biological family (now reduced to father and daughter) into nation-as-family. Even so, I argue that this graphic novel is noteworthy in the context of Democratic People's Republic of Korea cultural production, which is characterized by a regime that enforces revolutionary socialist realism. It is noteworthy for the manner in which its narrative constitutes a multimodal engagement with a locally polluted social universe: a temporarily afflicted ensemble of social agents. It could even be said to be radical for its graphic representation and focalization of this state of affliction. The final re-constitution of the temporarily and locally afflicted family into the wider social universe may result in 'harmony', but powerful counter-images linger and raise questions about the impact of this work on young DPRK readership. Through an analysis informed by studies of comics and graphic novels as multimodal media (Groensteen 2007) and North Korean cultural production (David-West 2009; Epstein 2002; Gabroussenko 2008; Kim 2010), this paper examines how *Pear Blossom* engages with the family theme through focalization (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011), closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b) and braiding (Groensteen 2007). It is argued that while *Pear Blossom* may be read as revealing deep-rooted structural problems in contemporary North Korean society, it also forces us to reconsider whether what appear to be gaps and cracks in the professedly monolithic façade of North Korean cultural production is in fact a deliberate multi-modal choice.

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INTRODUCTION

The True Identity of Pear Blossom (*Paekkot ui chongche*) (hereafter: *Pear Blossom*) is a North Korean graphic novel (*kurimchaek*) published in 2004 by Kumsong Youth Publishing House (Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa). It is the story of an undercover spy who schemes to destroy her alleged son's important project for the Fatherland and break down her granddaughter in the process. More than merely a spy-story, *Pear Blossom* arguably deals with the meaning of 'family' and its strengths and weaknesses in contemporary North Korean society.

Pear Blossom concludes with a seemingly immaculate conflict resolution, the removal of a false mother/grandmother and the celebration of the blissful integration of a biological family (now reduced to father and daughter) into nation-as-family. Even so, I argue that this graphic novel is noteworthy in the context of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's cultural production, which is characterised by a regime that enforces revolutionary socialist realism. It is noteworthy for the manner in which its narrative constitutes a multimodal engagement with a locally polluted social universe: a temporarily afflicted ensemble of social agents. It could even be said to be radical for its graphic representation and focalisation of this state of affliction. The final re-constitution of the temporarily and locally afflicted family into the wider social universe may result in "harmony", but powerful counter-images linger and raise questions about the impact of this work on young DPRK readership. Through an analysis informed by studies of comics and graphic novels as multimodal media (Groensteen 2007) and North Korean cultural production (David-West 2009; Epstein 2002; Gabroussenko 2008; Kim 2010), this article examines how *Pear Blossom* engages with the family theme through focalisation (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011), closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b) and braiding (Groensteen 2007).

PLOT SUMMARY

The True Identity of Pear Blossom is an 80-page black-and-white graphic novel in A5 format published by the Kumsong Youth Publishing House. The format of *Pear Blossom* is a representative example of the graphic novels being produced in North Korea in the 2000s.[1] The majority of these titles are published by the Kumsong Youth Publishing House, as well as the Literature and Arts Publishing House (Munhak Yesul Chulpansa / Munye Chulpansa) and the Workers' Publishing House (Kullo Tanche Chulpansa).

[1] These graphic novels are widely available through North Korean bookstores as well as foreign online shops.

Divided into three chapters, it deals with a small North Korean family, consisting of a grandmother, father, and daughter, who find themselves in serious trouble because of their social and family background. The graphic novel was created by a team of four: writer Kim Yong-hyon, artist and cover designer Choe Chu-sop, editor Kim Yong-sam and proofreader Chon Hye-kyong.

The main characters are grandmother Paek Ri-hwa, son Pak Song-u and granddaughter Pak Chong-ok. Song-u is a high-ranking scientist. He is working on the completion of P-9, an important project for the national defence industry and economy. His mother is called Riverside Woman, since she was born by the riverside into a poor family of farmhands.[2] One morning, Song-u's mother arrives at his office with a homemade breakfast. A guard tries to block the elderly woman from entering the restricted working area. However, the mother insists on her maternal right to see her son, gains access to his office and serves him chicken broth. It soon turns out that she is a CIA agent, alias Pear Blossom, and that she is spying on her son's project. Song-u's daughter, Chong-ok, is the first to become suspicious. By chance, she witnesses her grandmother listening to foreign music and smoking cigarettes at night and exclaims to herself: "Grandmother?! … That is not like one of our songs… even smoking cigarettes… oh my, [how] scary" (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 9). What Chong-ok does not realise is that moments before, her grandmother had been in radio contact with the CIA, and was ordered to destroy P-9. The sight of the smoking grandmother by the radio, however, is sufficient grounds for Chong-ok to suspect that she is a spy. The daughter reveals her suspicion to her father, who is incensed by the allegation. He scolds and slaps his daughter. The father simply cannot imagine the possibility of treason within his own family.

To get rid of granddaughter Chong-ok, who has become a threat to the mission, the grandmother appears before the girl in the guise of her dead mother's ghost, while the father is busy with his project at night. Chong-ok has a nervous breakdown after the experience. With the help of Song Yon-su, a fellow spy working under the cover of chief of the neurology department of "oo" Hospital where Chong-ok has been sent,[3] the grandmother ensures that Chong-ok is transferred to a psychiatric hospital. Meanwhile, Chong-ok's schoolteacher, who noticed a change in the girl's behaviour in school prior to her breakdown, senses that there is something amiss. She pays a visit to Chong-ok in the psychiatric hospital and urges her to unburden her heart. At first, the girl is reluctant to talk to her teacher about family matters, but in the end she tells the teacher about

[2] The graphic novel indicates that she also gave birth to her son in the same way. This seems to be an inconsistency (compare p. 33 and pp. 50–52 in *Pear Blossom*).

[3] In North Korean graphic novels, places and institutions are sometimes anonymised with 'oo'.

the grandmother's strange behaviour and the appearance of the ghost. The teacher immediately informs the authorities, who then seek out the Riverside Woman's former neighbour in her home village. Based on the recollections of this woman, they realize that the grandmother is in fact the wartime traitor Paek Ri-hwa.

Meanwhile, Chong-ok returns from the hospital determined to talk to her father about these matters again. At the same time, Song-u discovers his mother's outfit from her performance as a ghost. He is in fact immersed in the daily newspaper, *Nodong Sinmun*, when the family's dog drags out the grandmother's props hidden under the veranda. Confronted with her son's questions, the grandmother reveals in a ten-page flashback sequence that she is not a farmhand, nor did she undergo torture and escape an American firing squad during the war. On the contrary, she tells him, she is the daughter of a landlord, took part in American massacres of North Korean civilians in the autumn of 1950, and was left behind by the retreating Americans as a sleeper agent with a false identity as the Riverside Woman and a scarred face so that she could pose as a patriot. She tries to intimidate her son into collaborating – as the son of a spy, he has no other choice if he wants to avoid ruining his household. However, Song-u adamantly rejects his mother's appeal for him to become her accomplice.

Thus faced with treason from within his family, Song-u stands firm as a true son of the nation. Together with his daughter he leaves the house singing a patriotic song about the unchanging pine trees and goes straight to the local party office to report the matter as follows:

> Party Secretary, well, I am the descendant of landlord Paek Hong-su. My mother is not the Riverside Woman. She is the daughter of Paek Hong-su, and she is an American-employed spy. Deal with me, please, that is, after I have completed P-9. (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 72)

The party secretary smiles. He (as the reader already knows) is fully aware of the matter, and reassures the scientist and his daughter that they are indeed descendants of the true Riverside Woman, who was brutally killed by the retreating Americans in late 1950 and had her identity stolen by Pear Blossom. A scar on Song-u's shoulder caused by an American bomb is taken as proof of his true, patriotic family background. Pear Blossom and her fellow spy Song Yon-su are sent away for punishment, and father and daughter are sent on a family holiday to the scenic east coast. On a train ride in the heart of nature, before the graphic novel ends with a full-page image of the small family again singing about the unchanging pines, father and daughter unravel the moral core of the narrative in thought balloons:

> [Father:] Without my loyalty and conviction, what would have befallen us…? The mere thought makes me shiver.

> [Daughter:] If I hadn't told everything to my teacher, what would have happened to my family…? I would still be treated as a psychiatric patient. Hahaha. (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 79)

The message expressed in the thought balloons is unmistakably clear. It firmly places the narrative within the strong didactics of DPRK revolutionary socialist realism (David-West 2009): North Korean parents should always uphold the interests of the nation and state, even when this seems to be to the detriment of their own family. Likewise, children should be ready to report irregularities to their teachers when parents do not listen. In this way, *Pear Blossom* promotes nation-as-family values that allegorise and partly replace biological family values. I say partly, because in this graphic narrative, the biological family is not in itself a liability. It coalesces with nation-as-family in the final event.[4] The biological family with a good family background is portrayed as the basic social unit necessary to solve problems and seek happiness. For individuals and families haunted by the 'reactionary' pro-American identity of their parents and grandparents, however, the graphic novel's message is more ambiguous. In *Pear Blossom*, these ambiguities of family background representations are never really resolved. While the story ends happily for Pak Song-u and his daughter, the reader may be left with a lingering doubt about the plight of good people with problematic family backgrounds,[5] and for that matter about what happens to people who have falsified their family backgrounds (Kim Yong and Kim Suk-Young 2009; Lee Keum-Soon et al. 2009).

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND NORTH KOREAN SOCIETY

The analysis of family background sketched above is the product of a reading of *Pear Blossom*, which does not focus on the multi-modal affordances of the graphic novel (its particular combination of image and words). It is a reading that privileges the textual aspect of the narrative. Also, it understands the narrative as a manifestation of the regime's ideology. To be sure, such an approach is feasible. North Korean studies (at least in mainstream academic institutions in South Korea, Western Europe and the US) have unanimously established that North Korean cultural production is firmly controlled by the political regime. In the words of Alzo David-West, North Korean literature is "[…] bureaucratically controlled, functionally didactic, culturally nationalist, and politically Stalinist" (David-West 2009, 22). While graphic novels do not have the elevated status of, for example, movies and novels in the key writings on literature

[4] For an interesting comparison, see the Chinese revolutionary opera, *The Red Lantern*.

[5] For a discussion of family background representations in DPRK graphic novels, and an analysis of Pear Blossom from this perspective, see Martin Petersen (2012a).

and the arts by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, their didactic virtues are recognised, especially in relation to DPRK children and young people. The definition in the encyclopedia *Choson Taebaekkwa Sajon* stipulates that the graphic novel, due to its accessibility and powers of persuasion, is an effective means of broadening the education and knowledge of nature and society of workers, and in particular children and youths. The definition goes on to mention graphic novels narrated by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Suk and how they are distributed as gifts through the school system (*Choson Taebaekkwa Sajon* Vol. 3, 1996, 392–394).[6]

Accordingly, an analysis of the particular affordances of the graphic novel medium may be considered one way to critically approach and reconsider the notion of a "regime of cultural production" monolith. This article presents an analysis of *Pear Blossom* with focus on the particular narrative affordances of the graphic novel as a multi-modal medium (Kukkonen 2011a). Its approach is partly informed by notions of spatio-topia, arthrology and braiding developed by Thierry Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (2007). It is also influenced by narratological comics studies on panel-to-panel transition and closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b), narrative voice and focalization (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011).

Groensteen (2007, 2) characterizes his approach as "neo-semiotic". His focus is predominantly on formal aspects such as the specific placement of panels on the page (page layout) and interpanel relations at the local level (restricted arthrology) and global level (general arthrology). Groensteen does not pay attention to such features as metalepsis and focalisation. Likewise, in an extensive elaboration of the term "closure", he discusses the artist's perspective (Groensteen 2007, 39–43), but does not address the cognitive processes of the reader, which are central to McCloud's argument. However, after noting the historical disjuncture between narrative theory and the study of comics, Groensteen does set out how the comic is a narrative species with its own distinct "expository model of storytelling" (Groensteen 2007, 8). Along these lines, the recent narrative approaches by Fischer and Hatfield (2011), Horstkotte and Pedri (2011) as well as Kukkonen (2011a; 2011b) can be seen as supplementary to the framework laid out in *The System of Comics*.

As for focalisation and its conceptual affinities with braiding, Fischer and Hatfield (2011) explore "narrative braiding" and "graphic focalization" as artistic devices in their recent study of Eddie Campbell's *Alec*. Horstkotte and Pedri, whose work on focalisation "operate[s] with a binary typology of focalization that sets off the subjective inflection of *character-bound focalization* against a more neutral *narratorial* one" (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 336; emphases in original),

[6] For a further introduction to North Korean graphic novels, see Martin Petersen (2012a, 2012b).

operationalise Groensteen's braiding concept in their discussion of "the function of a higher-level repetition and repetition-with-a-difference for signalling (shifts in) focalization" (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 343). Likewise, Kukkonen's (2011b) work on metalepsis, which is part of an ongoing engagement with transmedial narratology (Kukkonen 2011a), is also based on Groensteen and his discussion of meta-reference in comics (Kukkonen 2011b, 214), as well as the narratorial concept of foregrounding the production of the comic.

NARRATORS AND FOCALISERS

In a central statement in *The System of Comics*, Groensteen argues that,

> Standard readings, which privilege, in each image, the enunciable quality, flatten the semantic richness of the image to profit from its immediate narrative function. Only a descriptive reading – attentive, notably, to its graphic materiality – and an interpretive reading allows the image to deploy all of its significations and resonances. (Groensteen 2007, 127)

Before turning our attention to the semantic richness, graphic materiality and resonances of *Pear Blossom*, we need to identify the character of the verbal narrator in the work. An explicit verbal narrator appears in captions infrequently dispersed throughout the graphic novel. It is this explicit narrator who on the first page establishes that Pak Song-u is in the final stage of a project of great importance "to the economy and military industry of our country". In this way, the narrator assumes the authority to address "our nation" and may accordingly be characterised as "a national narrator".[7]

Other features confirm that this is the kind of omniscient narrator who purportedly links every single cultural production in North Korea: in other words, a meta-author (David-West 2009). At turning points, the "national narrator" appears in captions to introduce narrative settings and extra-diegetically relate the cognitive processes of the schoolteacher (p. 27), daughter (pp. 38, 67) and father (p. 66). In an interesting contrast, the grandmother's cognitive processes are not related in these captions but are accessible to the reader only through thought balloons.

The most conspicuous appearance of the "national narrator" is on pages 66–67, where the graphic novel temporarily assumes an almost "novel-like" character. This all-verbal passage relates how the father and daughter find the resolve to confront the authorities with their knowledge of national treason within the biological family. While arguably this may be a technical matter of the

[7] Notably, the term *uri nara* (our country) is also widely used in Korean in contexts in which the speaker does not assume any particular authority.

creative team not able to express as effectively their message in the predominant mixed word/image form of comics and graphic novels, on a more general level it also resonates with the degree of authority vested in the written word in the, generally speaking, "wordy" DPRK graphic novels of the 2000s.[8]

In a discussion of the spatio-topical system, Groensteen, departing from Benoît Peteers' conceptualisation of the typology of comics page layout as conventional, decorative, rhetorical or productive, identifies four types of page layout: 1. Regular and discrete, 2. Regular and ostentatious, 3. Irregular and discrete, and 4. Irregular and ostentatious (Groensteen 2007, 91–102). This elaboration on Peeters' typology has the advantage of focusing more on the actual operations within a given work than on the work as part of a larger corpus. In other words, the definition of what is conventional and what is rhetorical must be discerned within the comic and its context. The graphic artwork of *Pear Blossom* (whether compared to European *bande dessinée*, graphic novels, American mainstream superhero comics or the *manhwa*/*manga* genres of North Korea's East Asian neighbours, South Korea and Japan) comes across as highly conventional in its form. The spatio-topical system (frames, gutters, speech balloons, captions, page layout, etc.) is relatively regular and there is very little artistic experimentation with the medium's possibilities. Nevertheless, an intra-media analysis focused on the "ostentatious" or "irregular" elements in the otherwise conventional spatio-topical system of *Pear Blossom* shows that some of these elements are foregrounded: full-page panels, expressive (diegetic) balloons, subjective insets, "wordless" page layouts, flash-back frames, and, as noted, extensive captions.

FOCALISATION

As I will show next, the most significant of these ostentatious elements are related to issues of focalisation. Horstkotte and Pedri define focalisation as "the filtering of a story through a consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation" (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 330). Depending on whether this focalisation is associated with a character's consciousness or the event and existents in the story-world, the authors distinguish between character-bound and narratorial focalisation (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 335). In *Pear Blossom*, we find both character-bound and narratorial focalisation employed in sequences of dramatic intensification.

[8] While the relative predominance of the mixed image/word form and its significance for an understanding of this multi-modal medium as such is a key issue in comics studies, it should be noted here that North Korean graphic novels of the 2000s place relatively high importance on words. However, contrary to many North Korean graphic novels in which the national meta-author also appears as a concluding verbal voice of authority, *Pear Blossom* concludes with a speech balloon and the image of a harmonious North Korean (nature/culture) universe.

Take for example pages 20–23. In the first panel on page 20, the granddaughter is shown sleeping, while in the right part of the panel, a subjective inset of the grandmother sitting in her armchair smoking a cigarette next to the radio is shown with a whirl around it. This inset is a character-bound focalization of the girl's troubled mindscape. The following panels on the same page dramatically juxtapose images of the granddaughter from various perspectives, first with sound symbols and then an unnerving monologue of the deceased mother emanating from behind the same door frame where Chong-ok saw her grandmother smoking by the radio the previous night. This effectively conveys that something unknown and menacing lurks behind the door. This juxtaposition of optical perspectives is further dramatised over the following strips on pages 20 and 21, which almost mechanically shift between the granddaughter and the ghost mother (the disguised grandmother) in a strip-level panel transition.[9]

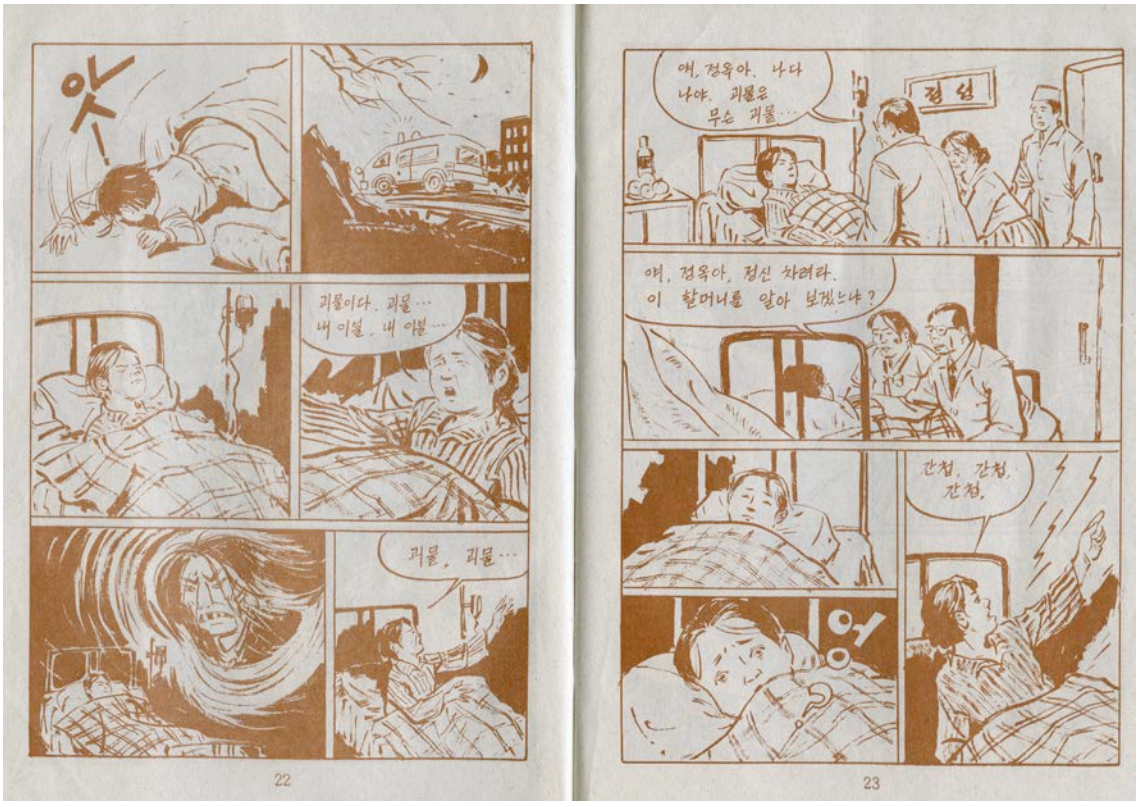

Figure 1. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The effect of these symmetrical juxtapositions of 'ghost mother' and granddaughter is further elaborated over the following double page (pp. 22–23), which covers the granddaughter's

[9] The only exception is a single image framing both characters (page 21, panel 2) for dramatic effect.

breakdown and subsequent hospitalization. In another subjective inset, a frightening image of the ghost mother hovers above the hospital bed (fig. 1). In a sense this is the true face of the grandmother: her true demonic anti-regime self. This repeated use of subjective insets serves to focalise the story-world onto the perspective of the granddaughter. The visual effect is not merely to graphically render her fragile mental state as corporeal matter and thus rationalise the fact of her hospitalisation from an external perspective. The sequence also serves to develop the reader's emotional investment in the young character (who is presumably the same age as most readers of Kumsong Youth Publishing House graphic novels), and to confer a heightened truth value and epistemological authority onto the representations of the granddaughter foci. In the bottom-right panel of page 22 we thus see the granddaughter with closed eyes in her hospital bed pointing into seemingly empty space and exclaiming: "ghost ghost…" The highly resonant bottom-right panel on the opposite page basically re-employs the same image, only now, significantly, the girl's eyes are wide open as she exclaims "Spy spy spy", with an invigorated gesture towards the spot where we have just seen the grandmother (fig. 2). In what may at first glance seem like an artistic breach with the ideals and conventions of socialist realism, the hallucinatory vision of the girl on the contrary is a projection of regime authority; of the regime's ability to identify "ghosts" where the surrounding community has not yet realized it. The girl may be suffering from hallucinations, but she is capable of re-adjusting to this surreal reality and does what the grown-up world is unable to – namely correctly identify and designate a respected senior citizen as a spy.

Figure 2. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

In such dramatic scenes, the character-bound focalisation of the girl's emotions is graphically rendered through the employment of light-and-shadow effects. In the sequence where the grandmother makes her ghostly appearance, the hand of the ghost (the grandmother's glove) seems to be throwing sharply pointed shadows onto the wall, making the horrified girl seem smaller. In response, "etchings" of light emanate from the girl to make her amazement and fear palpable. Again, on page 43 (panel 3), where the girl and father are emotionally and physically (re)united after the girl's return from hospital, the interplay of light and shadow is efficiently employed to blend and unify the "expressive" shadows of father/daughter, calming the effects of the girl's amazement. The father's embrace of his daughter graphically renders a "safety valve" of light, which re-negotiates the earlier separation of father and daughter (page 17, panel 5), where the father slapped the daughter causing an outpouring of light behind the girl (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

This uneasy co-existence in the story-world of disparate reality levels is, in fact, already present on the coloured front page, focalised through multiframe rhyming, cinematographic-style point-of-view juxtaposition,[10] word balloons, light/shadow effects and subjective insets. Here, the granddaughter is painted in a socialist realist style, with clear colours, in an inset framed by a white margin. This makes the image resemble a photograph. In contrast, the grandmother is rendered in blue ink on a yellow background in a deliberately non-realist, cartoonish style in five tableaus, leaving no doubt about her villainous character. Even for those who miss the narrative hints about positive and negative characters on the front page (fig. 4) and who does not notice the realism/cartoon juxtaposition, the grandmother's villainous nature is fully revealed by page 7.

[10] For a discussion of cinematographic style in comics, see Hans Christian-Christiansen (2001).

However, more than merely identifying hero and villain from the outset, the front page visually juxtaposes hero and villain by separating them into two distinct if not incompatible ontological levels.

Figure 4. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The unreal, cartoonish grandmother is a destructive force that dwells within the biological family. Hiding behind food and drink and other universally recognisable signs of maternal care, she is like a postmodern actor whose performative vocabulary encompasses mother, grandmother, ghost, actress, US spy and landlord's daughter, but whose true self can only come about in her expulsion from the North Korean nation and her former "family". In effect, she is a deconstructive force.

In the multimodal collusion between granddaughter and grandmother, the balance between good graphic reality and evil cartoonish unreality (or anti-reality) is upset by the father. While not depicted on the front page, he is a third point in the character gallery triangle on page 1 (fig. 5). It is the father's blindness to his own mother's unreality that causes the un-balancing of the local social universe. With the father's seemingly blind adherence to Confucian family values (Armstrong 2005), and her status as mother and family elder, it is easy for the grandmother to dismiss Chong-ok's suspicion. In a bitter irony, the story has the grandmother explain to the father: "Some time ago the child must have seen me imitate the landlord mistress in a play I acted

in. Heh, heh, heh" (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 18). This counter-factual narrative is privileged in the sense that the son accepts it, and further places us, the readers, squarely on the side of the alienated granddaughter.

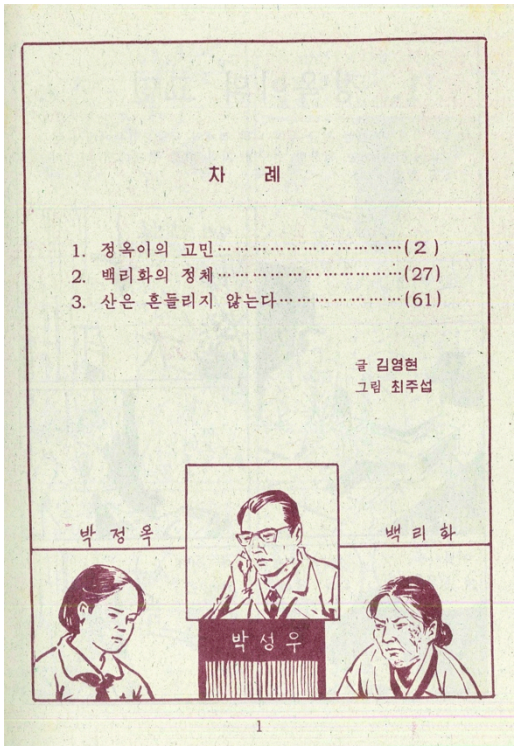

Figure 5. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

As a blind adherent to traditional family values, however, the father is not presented as an individual with an unhealthy affection for the reactionary class society of the past. He is a good North Korean socialist who works day and night in the service of the nation and leaves his daughter alone with her grandmother because his wife has died (at a time and for reasons not dealt with in the narrative). Paternal abandonment of family duties due to work duties for the sake of the Fatherland is also explored in the film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* (*Han Nyohaksaeng ui Ilggi*), where ultimately a daughter comes to understand and even appreciate her father's abandonment (Kim Suk-Young 2010). In *Pear Blossom*, the father is unable to give his daughter psychological relief from the loss of her mother. As in some fairy tales, the father's inability to help his daughter overcome the loss of her mother makes the family vulnerable to evil, to external pollution. The absent mother is a central theme, and as we will see below, through rhyming effects, the graphic novel pivots around how daughter and father reunite by finding and acknowledging their "true" parental-figure, namely the family-as-nation as conveyed by notions such as the "General's Household" (*Changgun ui Siksol*) and the "Motherland" (*Omoni Taeji*).

ARTHROLOGY

Dealing with issues of narrator and focalisation as they are organised in the spatio-topical system of *Pear Blossom*, we have already looked at inter-panel relations within the sequence, which Groensteen defines as restrained arthrology. In the following, I will further develop this analysis from the perspective of closure[11] and metalepsis.

Consider the panel-to-panel relationship on page 12, where Chong-ok has just seen her grandmother sitting in the armchair smoking a cigarette and listening to foreign music. The grandmother on her part has a hunch that Chong-ok may have seen this and also becomes wary (fig. 6). The first panel on the page shows a fully transparent interaction between the granddaughter and grandmother; the girl holds a glass of water served to her by the older woman. Their bodies are turned towards each other with affectionate facial expressions fully enabling mutual mindreading (Sunzhine 2011). At first sight, the transition to the next panel merely registers the passage of time. After drinking the water, the grandmother and granddaughter have seemingly fallen asleep back to back. The affection has vanished, but this does not really imply anything other than their being sound asleep. But the third panel and remaining three panels show that the transition from panel 1 to panel 2 did not merely register the passage of time. Here grandmother and granddaughter are seen back-to-back, wide-awake, with troubled, restless faces. They are sleepless in the DPRK. Panel 3 thus undermines the everyday affection shown in panel 1 and depicts what appears to be the "true" state of the grandmother/granddaughter relationship: mistrust, doubt – emotions that cannot be allowed into the familial relationship and therefore eat into the sleep of both individuals. In the closure between these panels, the transparent body language of the initial frames that enabled mindreading is negated and shown to be the complete opposite: a pretence of mindreading, a jamming of signals and mimicry of conventional family behaviour.

[11] Scott McCloud famously defines and explains this concept in *Understanding Comics* (1994). For a critique of McCloud and Thierry Groensteen's notion of closure informed by cognitive science, see Neil Cohn (2010).

Figure 6. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

This sequence featuring apparently transparent social behaviour exposed as signal-jamming is rehearsed in a different way when the grandmother and schoolteacher are saying goodbye to Chong-ok as she is driven off to the mental hospital (pp. 25–26). Again, the father is absent. Having seen Chong-ok off, the grandmother again laments the girl's mental state. In the first panel both show emotion in their faces (teacher: cordiality, grandmother: sorrow) (26, strip 3; see fig. 7). The adjacent panel, however, presents the two women in a tableau where their facial expressions are inaccessible to the other (but visible to the reader). The grandmother's face has hardened into a grimace. It is the embodiment of hostile thoughtfulness – and of cunning. Notably, however, the teacher's face has also hardened, stiffened into a cold grimace.

Figure 7. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

In the limited perspective of these two sequences in which everyday affection is exposed as signal jamming, the "de-masked" faces of the teacher and Chong-ok merely re-affirm that they both are "good characters" who sense that something is wrong with the grandmother. However, the repetition of this sequence also enables another kind of reading: namely that the grandmother's highly staged, mean-spirited performance of North Korean sociality within the biological family and in society at large is to some degree also performed by Chong-ok and the teacher. Their cordiality and affection towards a family elder/senior citizen can also be seen as pretence. Each in their way, Chong-ok and the teacher are shown to be performing North Korean sociality. The teacher acts on this state of affairs. She sets out to find the reasons for Chong-ok's breakdown first by talking to one of her classmates, then to Chong-ok herself, and finally contacts the local authorities. By contrast, Chong-ok is caught in a net of familial social norms and parental absence. The friction at home immediately causes a personal breakdown in a wider social space, when the absentminded girl makes a fool of herself in school the following day. She has momentarily lost the ability to perform her social role properly. She is all alone in the larger North Korean family, all alone with her ghost/spy experience.

POMI APPEARS: *DEUS EX MACHINA* AND METALEPSIS

Intriguingly, this dissonance and local affliction rendered through the character-bound focalization of Chong-ok's hallucinatory enlightenment and panel-to-panel transitions – which portray the grandmother as the negative image of the positive characters (the schoolteacher and Chong-ok) – is re-negotiated on the double page in which the dog finds the grandmother's ghost props under the veranda and drags them out in front of the father (pp. 40–41; fig. 8). The spatio-

topia of this double page is conspicuous in its regularity. Except for a caption in the upper-left corner taking up some space from the first two frames, all eight frames have approximately the same size and shape. Further, only the fifth panel has text in a speech balloon.[12] Otherwise the visual track solely carries the narrative development.

Figure 8. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

At first sight, the appearance, action and disappearance of Pomi, the family's dog, comes across as a somewhat contrived *deus ex machina*.[13] It seems odd to have a non-human agent, a clueless dog discover the theatre props and thereby cause a dramatic change in the plot. In this case, however, the *deus ex machina* plot device does not seem to me to expose an artistic failure. To begin with, the dog's discovery does not in itself restore harmony to the broader social world. This has already been brought about by the investigating activities of the schoolteacher and local officials. Pomi only brings about change at the local level, helping to open up the father's eyes. If anything, then, the seemingly contrived move towards crisis resolution rather effectively *ridicules* the father

[12] Father: "Hey Pomi, what have you got there?"
[13] For a discussion of the motif of dogs in North Korean literature, and more concretely of cute, playful puppies that respond emotionally to their owners, see Tatiana Gabroussenko (2008) and Brian Myers (1994, 65).

and his inability to see what is around him. Underpinning this, the dog is depicted in such a way that it appears to be looking out at the readers in a transgression of the "fourth wall" (Kukkonen 2011b). Reader and dog are allied as spectators. The effect of this metalepsis is to turn the family in the locally afflicted social space into "extras" in their own lives, and to offer the readers of this rather gloomy story a fleeting moment of comic relief, to momentarily forget the family's story (and its possible parallels with the reader's own family life).

But even before the dog makes its jester-like appearance, the tranquil image of a busy father relaxing outside the house with his newspaper has already been shattered at the immediate linear level of the strip by the grandmother hanging up clothes behind his back. Again, the juxtaposition of images of family harmony and conflict has been employed with a menacing twist. The implicit message is that the father is engrossed in reading the daily party newspaper when he should be concerned with solving the family crisis that has sent his only, motherless daughter to a psychiatric hospital. Is this a subtle critique of regime media communication being potentially distracting from what really matters? While we should not expect this to be the intention of the creators, this ridicule of a patriotic man reading the party newspaper in his precious free time begs the question of how the graphic novel engages visual signs throughout the network, and how the regime's intentions are put to work in *Pear Blossom*.

Other graphic motifs in *Pear Blossom* develop the key theme of the biological family struggling to realise itself eternally in the nation-as-family. Here we will look at the braiding of three of these graphic motifs spread across the whole network, namely "trees", "posters" and "the scar" and how these contribute to the narrative. Braiding, Groensteen explains,

> [...] is generally founded on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif (or of a plastic quality), and it is concerned primarily with situations, with strong dramatic potential, of *appearance* and of *disappearance* [...]. Once a graphic motif spreads across the entirety of the network that composes a comic, it can arouse several thematically or plastically differentiated series. Braiding therefore becomes an essential dimension of the narrative project, innerving the entirety of the network that, finding itself placed in effervescence, incites translinear and plurivectoral readings. (Groensteen 2007, 151–152; 155)

TREES

Trees, and parts of trees (twigs and branches), are scattered throughout the graphic novel. In their most basic function, these trees merely establish for the reader that the physical setting is outside. However, the tree motif, much like the light/shadow artwork and expressive speech balloons, also plays a key role in contributing to the general atmosphere of gloom. This

employment of nature to signify gloom and affliction is forcefully brought to a stop when the father and daughter start their mythic journey from their home polluted by regime betrayal towards the immaculate party office. In the full-page singing scene in which the father gestures towards the pines and together with his daughter sings about them in praise of the Fatherland, the gloomy trees are re-inscribed as stable, wholesome graphic motifs (fig.9). But before being transformed and invested with socialist realist universality, these elements of nature are shown in numerous panels and sequences as dark, knotty, leafless objects in the background. On the first part of the "mythic" journey away from home towards the party office, for example, father and daughter are seen as sombre figures passing between trees whose barren twigs cut through the panel – both vertically and horizontally. Arguably, this is an expressive, character-bound focalisation of the daughter's mental state. If the gloomy tree motifs contribute to a sense of a locally afflicted social universe, then the final pages mark the inevitable return to deeply rooted organic forms invested with socialist realist universality. A plurivectoral reading suggests that the gloom of nature is to be considered a subjective focalisation. This graphically rendered gloom is brought forth by the polluted family itself, while at the end of the graphic novel, it is impossible to distinguish subjective focalisation from regime focalization. Dark, knotty materiality has been transformed into the theme of a song.

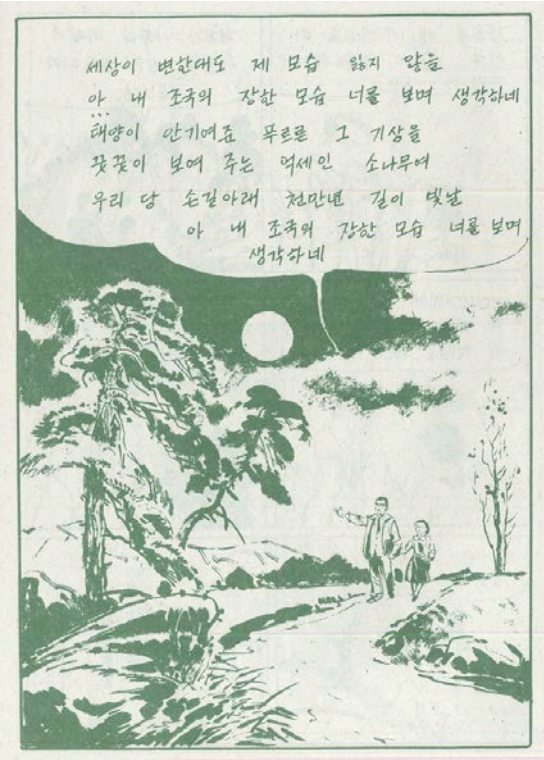

Figure 9. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

Prior to the solution of the crisis, performativity was a floating signifier due to the mean-spirited grandmother. We have seen how her character, through performing different social roles, deconstructed the local social universe. Interestingly, however, the overcoming of the grandmother is not the end of performance. On the contrary, the (re)initiation of father and daughter into the nation-as-family is graphically rendered in a hyper-theatrical staging of selves. This is rendered in the full-page singing panel mentioned above. This depiction of their journey into a realist-mythological landscape is reminiscent of sceneries in operas, theatre productions or poster art. Here, father and daughter realise (or perhaps more to the point, perform) their membership of the nation-as-family, and in doing so pay tribute to the "motherland" by singing about the pine trees.

POSTERS

The full-page "poster-like" theatrical scene, if we choose to see it as a kind of "meta-poster", serves as a convenient starting point for another plurivectoral reading of a motif distributed throughout the network, namely posters. Prior to the sequence with this full-page singing panel, we find the sequence in which the father finally sees his mother as the true villain she is. Here is another instance of the poster as distributed motif where the father is seen standing by the open window with fluttering curtains (panel 1, p. 62). Beside him is a wall poster with the inscription "The General's Household" (fig. 10). This is a first synchronisation of the local social universe (father and daughter but not grandmother) within the larger social universe: North Korea as the General's Household. Likewise, arriving at the party office, father and daughter are received by a smiling official. Next to him is seen the calligraphic slogan "A Strong and Prosperous Nation" (*Kangsong Taeguk*), another major slogan of the Kim Jong-Il era.

Figure 10. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

There is nothing surprising in this employment of posters in a graphic novel. Not only are such slogans to be found everywhere in public spaces in North Korea, but even a cursory glance at North Korean graphic art and painting reveals that slogans are frequently integrated into motifs for "supportive" effect (Noever 2010; Heather and Ceuster 2008). However, the "The General's Household" panel (p. 62, panel 1), the party office's "A Strong and Prosperous Nation" slogan (p. 71, panels 1 and 3) and the meta-poster of father and daughter posing on their journey, may lead the observant North Korean reader (who will be familiar with the intended meanings of posters in everyday life and art) to reconsider the use of poster slogans in the earlier "afflicted" stages of the graphic narrative.

On page 2, in panel 1 we thus find the father immersed in work on his computer. It is clear that he has been working all through the night. Fittingly, behind him is the calligraphic slogan "Science First" (*Kwahak Chungsi*). At first sight, the effect is merely that the father is the embodiment of scientific immersion. Of course, as the reader will soon find out, the father is so engrossed in his science that he utterly fails to see what is taking place right behind his back. Continuing along the lines of identifying dissonance in otherwise stabile signifiers, the opening chapter title – "Chong-ok's Distress" – is placed above this frame. This is a multiframe that subtly juxtaposes Chong-ok's troubles with her father's scientific commitment in an early hint of plot tension. Apart from the already observed feature that the graphic novel focalizes from the perspective of young readers who may recognize the theme of absent parents who are (supposed to be) endlessly labouring under the omnipresent slogans such as "A Strong and Prosperous Nation", "Science First" and

"The General's Household", it can also be seen as an implicit criticism of intellectuals and technical experts, who are not beyond criticism in North Korean cultural production.[14] Ultimately, however, *Pear Blossom* does not present a critique of North Korean intellectuals so much as a criticism of the father's less than impressive embodiment of "universal" North Korean values. He is rigorously attending to science-first values, so much so that he unsuspectingly leaves his daughter at the mercy of the grandmother's psychic terror. We may say that he reads the signs on the walls too literally, or fails to integrate them into his family life.

If there is some ambivalence in the "Science First" panel, the following distribution of calligraphic slogans in the network is downright dissonant. First, in the dramatic scene where the granddaughter discovers the grandmother smoking and listening to foreign music at night, she sits under the calligraphic slogan "The General's Household".[15] Even more dissonance and friction is produced by the first panel on page 24, where the grandmother is seen sneaking through a door to secretly place a note in the papers of her accomplice, Song Yon-su, the chief of the hospital's neurology department. His door bears the calligraphic slogan "Devotion" (*Chongsong*). In this way the graphic novel engages literal signs of regime stability and effectively creates an ambience of uncertainty that contributes to heightening the plot tension.

This raises the question of how far this dissonance goes. Are the newspaper and calligraphic slogans of *Pear Blossom* emptied-out signifiers in a network that amounts to a subtle critique of the regime's communication (a critique which by extension would be equally applicable to the social effect of the graphic novel itself)? Do these employments of graphic signifiers as by-products facilitate ironic readings of signs in everyday life? To begin with, this sort of reading was certainly not intended by the creative team. Also, there is no saying whether actual North Korean readers would perform such mildly subversive readings of graphic narratives. To answer this question would require sociological studies on the consumption of North Korean cultural production, which presently is not possible. What we are left with is the observation that the graphic novel goes a far way to materialise a vision of contemporary DPRK in gloom and threatened by a breakdown of order.

SCAR

[14] On a more basic level, the fact that the father in *Pear Blossom* is a scientist helps increase plot tension. He is after all working on the completion of a project of national importance.

[15] It should be noted that in a later panel depicting the same location, the poster reads "Strong and Prosperous Nation" (*Kangsong Taeguk*). This is a warning against placing too much authorial intentionality in the posters.

Apart from the juxtaposed panels of performed harmony of family and society, motifs of trees and calligraphic slogans, the most potent motif distributed throughout the general arthrology of *Pear Blossom* is the "scar". The scar not only lies at the heart of the graphic novel's conflicting realities, it is the motif around which the opposing forces of US imperialism and the North Korean national project converge.

As described above, the cover character gallery and the sequence where Chong-ok wakes up and sees her grandmother (p. 7) unmistakably establish the grandmother as a villain for the reader. To this end, the grandmother is given a facial scar to match her cold, twisted expression. In mildly metaleptic scenes, the grandmother appears to be looking at the readers with a knowing smile on her monstrously scarred face (p. 11, panel 3; 60, panel 5). Unlike the metalepsis sequence with the dog, where we are invited to have a brief laugh at the whole gloomy story, we are in effect taken hostage by her devious scheming: we are made to feel uncomfortable. To her unknowing surroundings in the story-world, the facial scar is understood (and respected) as a sign of North Korean suffering in the face of brutality by imperialist US during the Korean War. She is a recognised survivor of US imperialist atrocities.

It takes the effort of the authorities to create a reconstructed version of the grandmother's face in her pre-scarred youth using computer technology (fig. 11), as well as a trip to her distant hometown and an interview with a local woman, to reveal that Paek Ri-hwa, a landlord's daughter and US collaborator, is hiding behind the scars. This detective work by the regime reveals that the grandmother has performed a role for a long time. In the flashback scene, where the grandmother reveals her true background to Song-u, it becomes clear to the reader that in a twisted sense the grandmother's scar is a sign that she herself is merely a petty (but not pitiful) victim of US imperialism. She was "given" the scar by an American senior military officer, who mutilated her face with acid before she was ordered to go undercover as patriotic victim of poor descent prior to the Americans withdrawing from the North in the winter of 1950. The grandmother, this menacing, free-floating signifier with her impromptu, unreal, even anti-real improvisations, has all along – that is ever since the Korean War – been an instrument, an invention of US imperialism. In fact, she is not a free-floating signifier at all. She is more like a second-rate method actor whose mindset and physiognomy is determined within a detestable but none the less fixed system of signification.

Figure 11. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

While Chong-ok, her father and her teacher all have their moments of subjective realisation, the ultimate power to unravel and define truth lies squarely within the domain of the regime as embodied by the local officials. Notably, when father and daughter have arrived at the party office, the scar motif, now no longer a visual motif but a discretely placed mark on the father's body, plays a pivotal role in the cleansing of the father and his daughter. Due to the scar that the father bears on his arm, the party official can ascertain that he is not the son of Paek Ri-hwa, but rather the son of the "true", brutally murdered Riverside Woman. In this way, the "scar" in its successive phases signifies villainy and false patriotism only to lose its "messy" graphicity in a shift from an ugly stain on an ugly face to a discreet sign of membership of the General's Household. In short, it retains its signifying power as a material vestige of US imperialism: a subtle metaphor of North Korea's national suffering.

MOTHER

The final part of the graphic novel portrays the father and daughter riding on a train towards the scenic east coast on a well-deserved family holiday. They now have one more thing in common: they have both lost and regained a mother, and thereby regained a state of untainted mindreading.

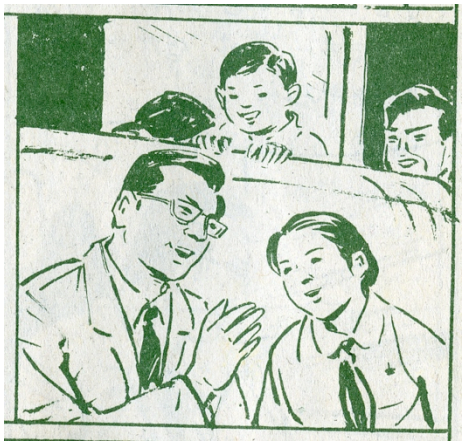

Figure 12. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

Their transparent smiles (which enable mindreading) are shown only in one frame in one of the last panels (page 80, panel 4). Its devious twin images (grandmother/granddaughter, grandmother/teacher) have lost their purpose. The postmodern, traitorous grandmother has been thwarted. Her de-construction of collective wartime memories, of biological family and of social reality has come undone. There is nothing left to hinder the *merger*, *conflation* and *assimilation* of the biological family into the nation-as-family. Father and daughter are both blessed children in the General's Household and of the Mother-land. Their reciprocated happiness resonates with the fellow passengers (implied reader position), leading to the final frame, a panoramic view of utter harmony in a social universe in which the differences between nature/culture, family/nation, young/old have been resolved (page 80, panel 5; fig. 12). The very last frame (fig. 13) expresses universal and familial harmony. This train journey is emblematic of modernity passing through a characteristic Korean landscape (*nost*) and resounding with happy voices graphically rendering both the Mother-land and General's Household, and a final promise that the signs/posters will no longer have an ironic or free-floating significance.

Figure 13. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom,* Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The creative team's efforts to foreground the disturbed and disturbing character-bound focalization of Chong-ok's consciousness have also lost their purpose. The graphic novel goes a long way to level the reader's consciousness and emotions, but culminates in a sequence in which the national narrator again is the filtering consciousness.

CONCLUSION

By the end of our journey across the graphic network of *Pear Blossom*, the father-daughter family has fully realised and revolutionised itself as an ideal family. It has become the subject of poster art. Posters once again *are* what they signify. The tree motif no longer signifies gloom. It is the metaphor of the Fatherland in a patriotic song of the unchanging Pine. The scar has become a discrete mark of distinction worn by the son. The graphic novel has both expelled its own "messy" graphicity – championed by the comic-style grandmother – and crafted the father/daughter family into a clean graphicity of revolutionary socialist realism.

Despite the cleansing of evil and assimilation of biological family into the nation-as-family shown in the final image, the multimodal rendering of an afflicted biological family whose reality is challenged by evil and unreality does not necessarily lose its grip on the reader after father and daughter have successfully traversed the mythical road of transformation. In his reading of North Korean fiction from the early 2000s, Stephen Epstein argues that:

> If we focus solely on how the regime wishes its fiction to be interpreted, we run the risk of taking its profession of monolithic solidarity at face value, precisely as its fiction warns us against doing so [...] it is in fact exactly the idiosyncratic moments of epiphany concluding many DPRK short stories that reveal all the more clearly deep-rooted structural problems in contemporary North Korean society. (Epstein 2002, 36)

It is an open question whether the fixing of signifiers in the latter part of the graphic novel succeeds in undoing the powerful images of the multi-potent grandmother and familial gloom. Readers engaging themselves seriously with the graphic novel are left with several tracks along which to perform critical readings and dwell on the instability and affliction given multimodal expression in *Pear Blossom*. Yet this should not be seen as a result of the creative team behind *Pear Blossom* subtly engaging a dissonant, ironic reading. On the contrary, the kind of mutual distrust we saw in the social/private face sequences might even be considered a deliberate attempt on the part of the meta-author to exert social control through unease just as much as through the triumphant and self-celebratory ending. While *Pear Blossom* can be read as revealing deep-rooted structural problems in contemporary North Korean society, it also forces us to reconsider whether what appear to be gaps and cracks in the monolithic façade of North Korean cultural production are in fact the result of a deliberate multimodal choice.

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LOST GAZES, DETACHED MINDS: STRATEGIES OF DISENGAGEMENT IN THE WORK OF ADRIAN TOMINE

by Greice Schneider

ABSTRACT

This article addresses some of the main concepts and strategies for understanding the feelings of melancholy and desolation awakened by the work of Adrian Tomine. The aims here are threefold. The first part will be devoted to examining how the subject of affective detachment is raised by a discourse of honesty and self-proclamation of shame, with special attention to the process of identification with the imagined reader. The second part will be dedicated to discussing the emphasis on a linear discrete reading over a tabular reading. And finally, the third part investigates a special use of suspense as a narrative strategy that enables a sense of vagueness in the reader, by way of a theoretical framework taken from contemporary narratology. Tomine's peculiar dynamic of visual storytelling will be examined in works of different extension – from single images (covers from magazines like *The New Yorker*), to short stories (published in *Optic Nerve*), to his first graphic novel (*Shortcomings*).

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By Greice Schneider

INTRODUCTION

In the first lines of the introduction to the anthology *32 Stories* – a collection of the early work of Adrian Tomine – the author remembers how he prematurely became "painfully aware" of his detachment from "any type of social interaction" (Tomine 1995, 7). Such acknowledgment of disengagement is disclosed in a very revealing – even if self-ironic – manner, as depicted in the symptomatic cover of *The Comics Journal* no. 205 (Tomine 1998; fig. 1), a self-portrait of Tomine sitting on the globe, under a stream of money pouring down over him, surrounded by reporters, groupies and a bag of fan mail. The most intriguing element of this piece of self-mockery, though, is a series of flying pages reproducing some of the most frequent clichés propagated by his critics. On the first page (fig. 2), for instance, he calls attention to both a thematic recurrence ("I'm so depressed, I'm shy and lonely") and a supposed inability of closure ("I hate ending stories"). On the second page (fig. 3), he highlights the process of character identification[1] with the reader ("I'm so cute! I love coffee ...and 'indy' [sic] rock") and one more time underlines the topic of failed relations ("But... I'm sad. Can you relate?").

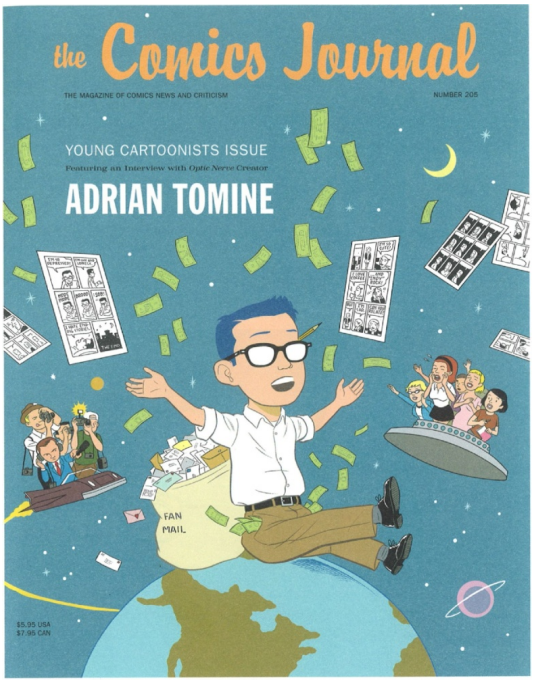

Figure 1. Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205, Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

[1] The term should be taken here as referring to the reader's emotional response, as a strong vehicle of narrative empathy (Keen 2007). This specific case could be classified as what Keen calls "bounded strategic empathy", operating "with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality and leading to feeling familiar with others" (Keen 2007, xiv).

Such caricature may work as satire, but this somehow hides some of the main properties that make Tomine – with all these self-depreciating comments – a typical example of a contemporary tradition of 'alternative comics', where autobiographical confessions of angst, melancholy and boredom are themselves the 'hallmark' of a genre in their own right.[2] It is precisely because of this paradigmatic characteristic that Tomine will be considered here as an exemplary case-study of this major phenomenon, which in various respects also includes authors like Chester Brown, Chris Ware, Seth, Tomine's predecessor Harvey Pekar, and of course, one of Tomine's biggest influences, Daniel Clowes.

Figure 2. Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205 (detail), Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 3. Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205 (detail), Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

This article focuses on the affective dimension of the work of Adrian Tomine, particularly on the feelings of angst and desolation so central to his fictional universe. Although such emphasis on emotions is very often seen with suspicion by critics – who tend to adopt rather an anti-sentimentalist position (Jullier 2002, 140) – such an approach should not be underestimated in

[2] The label "alternative comics" refers to a set of innovative works that aim to explore the literary possibilities of the comic book medium. The term includes works from the underground comix in the 1960s and 1970s, and was consolidated by the publication of *Maus*, in the 1980s. The concept is extensively discussed by Charles Hatfield (2005).

comics scholarship, especially if one considers the phenomenon of alternative comics and its growing interest in more mundane personal stories. What is interesting in many of these stories is less dependent upon the dramatic turn of events (as mechanisms of production of suspense in serial fiction), but is more directed towards everyday situations and the dynamics of human relationships.

The aim here is to explore possible strategies of affective detachment so relevant to Tomine's work, which are also quite representative of a generation of comics artists. In order to do that, both form and content will be mobilised in the discussion, examining not only the construction of the characters and fictional universe (empathy), but also the clean line style, the way panels are laid out on the page and how the narrative is orchestrated.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to examining how the subject of detachment emerges through a discourse of honesty and self-proclamation of shame, with special attention paid to the process of identification with the imagined reader. The second part is dedicated to discussing the reasons behind the adoption of an 'invisible' style, emphasising a linear-discrete reading over a tabular reading. Central here will be the works of the Franco-Belgian tradition of comics studies, namely the ideas of Thierry Groensteen (2007), Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1976) and Benoît Peeters (1991), regarding discussions on comics layout, and Phillippe Marion (1993) on the concept of graphic transparency. Finally, the third part investigates a special use of suspense as a narrative strategy that enables a sense of vagueness in the reader, with a theoretical framework taken from contemporary narratology, namely Raphäel Baroni's (2007) and Meir Sternberg's (1992) work on narrative tension. Tomine's peculiar dynamic of visual storytelling will be examined in works of different extensions – from single images (covers from magazines like *The New Yorker*), to short stories (published in *Optic Nerve*), to his first graphic novel (*Shortcomings*).

IN PRAISE OF APATHY IN THE NAME OF HONESTY: LOSER PRIDE AND READER IDENTIFICATION

The fictional universe constructed by Adrian Tomine deals primarily with human relations, but a very particular kind of humans inhabits his world. First of all, they are young people, examples of the so-called Generation X – a label given to the age group that came after the baby boomers –, young adults of the late 1980s and early 1990s, distinguished by a loss of perspective and the decay of the traditional idea of a nuclear family. The youth counter-culture of this generation is typified by the idea of the slacker, usually described as "educated youths weaned on popular culture and disenfranchised from mainstream America because of social, familial, and economic reasons"

(Hanson 2002, 61). It is for this reason that one of the central strategies of 'alternative' or 'indie' culture is to reinforce the identification with detached characters in the sense of enabling a belonging to a community of non-belonging individuals.[3] Tomine's progressive awareness of this lag between an initial feeling of social isolation and a later revelation of a paradoxical community of readers formed by young outcasts ends up in a trap, making his discourse of self-pity difficult to sustain over the years. Ultimately abandoned by Tomine, in recent interviews, he acknowledges this gap in his early work.

> Prior to publishing my stories, I felt like, I'm really weird, I'm really different, I'm an outsider, I can't relate to people and that's why I draw comics. [...] Then suddenly I start getting letters that say, 'I know exactly what you're talking about, I relate to you, you're speaking to me.' On one hand, it's nice, but at the same time, it's cold water in the face to realize you're not nearly as special and as unusual as you might have thought when you were an alienated teenager. (Tomine 2007)

This bond with the reader is achieved in two ways. The first one is by portraying the characters as having anxieties somehow familiar to this expected implied reader (i.e. the reader required by the text).[4] In the gallery of Tomine's typical characters one may find broken couples ("Smoke", 1995, "Sleepwalk", "Six Day Cold", 1998, *Shortcomings,* 2009), relationships in conflict ("Long Distance", 1998, "Happy Anniversary", 1995), lonely individuals ("Lunch Break", 1998), shattered families ("Dylan and Donovan", "Fourth of July", 1998), and damaged friendships ("Hazel Eyes", 1998). The second way to engage the reader is to include a web of cultural references that are easily recognisable for a specific kind of reader, building the impression of a shared cultural background. The names of certain films, bands, and books mentioned in the stories not only charge the characters with certain affective-cultural properties, but often also function in the manner of a secret wink to the reader, as it were a confirmation of mutual taste (fig. 4).

[3] For a more extensive take on the alternative comics readership, see Hatfield 2007. The author highlights this intriguing contrast when he describes the contemporary comic book field as "a highly specialized if thinly populated consumer culture, one that holds tightly to a romanticized position of marginality and yet courts wider recognition" (Hatfield 2005, xii).
[4] For more on the concept of implied reader, see Iser 1978.

Figure 4. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 20. © Adrian Tomine.

The social characteristics of this imagined public of comics are explored by Daniel Worden (2006) in an article about the celebrated anthology *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* #13 (which also includes an excerpt of *Shortcomings*). According to Worden, the embrace of everyday life strengthens the identification between author and reader, forming "a counter public explicitly interested in cultivating a unique aesthetic and lifestyle" (Worden 2006, 894). Such a relationship enables an almost paradoxical pride in shame, especially recurrent in the scope of alternative comics, also referred to as "shameful art".

> The workings of shame, as both a force of individuation (the comics reader is unlike normal readers) and relationality (all comics readers share in this unique cultural practice), produce a space for the development of a comics-based aesthetics and counterpublic. (Worden 2006, 892)

Besides such apology of shame, the characters are hardly likeable; many of them even have ethically questionable attitudes. "Summer Job" (Tomine 1998, 31) mixes coolness and detachment to create a bored aggressive teenager who lies to his boss, steals office supplies, and vandalises the storage space. In *Summer Blonde* (2003), a collection of four stories initially published in *Optic Nerve* (issues 5 to 8), all the protagonists are portrayed with some kind of human perversion: a blocked writer who cheats on his girlfriend, a frustrated stalker, a lonely depressed prank phone caller and an outsider teenager uncomfortable with his sexuality. The protagonist of *Shortcomings* (2009) – a Japanese-American – behaves in a sarcastic, self-absorbed and even

arrogant manner, in spite of his insecurity about his own ethnic identity. If, on the one hand, such hostility dangerously drives away the chances of empathy with the characters, on the other hand, such confession of unattractive qualities functions as a strategy to suggest not only human complexity, but also (and more importantly) a certain honesty: it establishes an impression of authenticity by unveiling the repulsive side of the characters as well. Though it is true that Tomine builds his characters with such unappealing psychological properties, however, visually he tends to be much more generous, using a very attractive set of young figures that guarantees a first level of immediate irresistible visual identification – they are even "cute", as remarked on the cover of *The Comics Journal*.

In fact, such "honesty" is one of the most critically acclaimed properties of his stories. Tomine is considered a "mild observer, an invisible reporter, a scientist of the heart" (Windolf 2007), his style is "so meticulously honest that he doesn't even seem to care whether or not you like his hero" (Beauman 2007) and his work is "terrifying because it's absolutely real" (Wolk 1995). This impression of authenticity is also reflected by autobiographical claims, made not only when Tomine appears as a character in many of his earlier stories, but also in the stories that are deliberately declared to be inspired by personal episodes. The same happens with the paratext that accompanies his work, confirming this "strategy of shame": from the almost apologetic introductions to the decision of publishing (and giving preference to) the unfavourable letters sent by unsatisfied readers. Even the simple choice of material in which the stories will be printed is already charged with an avowed shamefaced value – the new edition of his mini-comics *Optic Nerve*, for instance, was published in facsimile form and packaged in a cheap cardboard box, instead of the fancy hardcover editions previously released by the same publisher (Tomine 2009).[5]

Although Tomine has an easily recognisable visual style, it would still somehow be possible to classify his work as realistic in the sense that his characters are drawn with a clear concern for proportion and with clean precise lines, very distant from both caricatured exaggerations and over-schematic projects. Moreover, the way Tomine depicts the urban environment also reveals not only an evident intention to make the space as coherent as possible, but also a special

[5] Interestingly enough, just after publishing his first hard cover graphic novel *Shortcomings*, Tomine starts leaving aside this melancholic and realistic style in favor of a more amusing and cartoony one. First he publishes *Scenes from an Impending Marriage* (2011b), a "prenuptial memoir", collecting vignettes about the process involved in getting married. Made as a souvenir for the wedding guests, the book was not initially intended to be published, and that may explain the more loose lines and cheerful tone. Then Tomine goes back to the pamphlet format with *Optic Nerve* #12 (2011a). The issue brings a two-page autobiographical story in which Tomine is portrayed as the "last pamphleteer". In an interview for *Believer*, he laments the idea that comic books have been "lost in the ghetto" whereas the "respectable" graphic novel is "being held up as something to aspire to" (Tomine 2007).

attention to detailing ordinary and recognisable scenarios in modern metropolitan everyday life – from facades of buildings, shops and cafes to streets and public transportation.

IN SEARCH OF FICTIONAL IMMERSION: GRAPHIC TRANSPARENCY AND LINEAR READING

The discourse of honesty and authenticity described above is also reinforced by the way Tomine deals with the specificities of the language of comics. That is clear when he says that he tries to "make the visual style almost invisible" because he wants "all the responsibility to rest on the content of the story" (Tomine 2007). His attempt to develop a more direct experience of immersion often leads to the association between his work and a "cinematographic" quality,[6] a misleading – but understandable – parallel that happens for two reasons. The first and more general reason stems from the many similarities shared between film and comics: both count on strategies of visual storytelling that are not original to either of the two media, but are rather common to a previous system, what Hans-Christian Christiansen (2000, 111) calls "the deep structure of visual storytelling", based on the assumption that "the language of images is rooted in contingent universals". Under such circumstances, this kind of mutual influence between film and comics studies is not only predictable but also very fruitful.

Nevertheless, the association between comics and film does not in itself explain why this cinematographic property is so often attributed to Tomine. The second reason is based on a negative explanation. It is not his proximity to the properties of film that guarantees the label of 'cinematic' for his work, but rather his refusal to call attention to certain possibilities proper to comics storytelling. One of these specificities is described by Hatfield (2005, 48) as a tension "between the concept of 'breaking down' a story into constituent images and the concept of laying out those images together on an unbroken surface". Such tension was initially explored by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1976) through the notions of linear and tabular aspects of comics (*linéaire* and *tabulaire).* While the linear function would tackle sequential aspects, obeying a regular direction of reading (from left to right, from top to bottom, as in a 'zig-zag'), tabular reading would refer to a simultaneously global view of the page. One of the major differences of comics compared to cinema then would be the possibility of playing with the page layout and manipulating elements such as the size of individual panels, interaction between them (what Groensteen [2007, 17–20] calls iconic solidarity) and so on – strategies that cannot be achieved in the one-sized fixed frame of the film screen.

[6] Comparisons with film are often mentioned in reviews and in interviews, see for example Fershleiser 2007 or Petzold 2009.

What happens is that Tomine avoids relying on the possibilities offered by tabularity in most cases and adopts a dominant linear regime of reading. (Even if he has no means to prevent his reader from seeing all the panels simultaneously, such a global view would not enhance the reading experience that much.) Praised for his drawing skills as a cartoonist, and the believable tone of his dialogues, he is rarely mentioned for his achievements in page layout.[7] Quite the opposite, his pages could be classified as what Groensteen (2007, 98) calls a "regular and discrete composition". His page layout is usually not only regular, all pages from his last work being composed by three rows, each of them with two or three equivalently-sized panels, but also discrete – dominated entirely by the story, lacking any explicit logic behind this organisation that justifies such regularity under a global visualization of the page. This discrete composition follows "the law of breakdown", as opposed to an "ostentatious" page, in which the "layout immediately imposes on the reader's perception" (Groensteen 2007, 99).

Another important element here is the use of text. Besides accentuating the impression of realism, (not only because people speak in real life, but also and more importantly because Tomine makes his characters speak in a very convincing way), the dialogues also privilege a more linear reading. A substantial number of panels are filled with talking heads, the understanding of which depends primarily on what is written inside the balloons (fig. 5). (Even if Tomine is very skilful with facial expressions, these depend mostly on what is being said to make sense.)

This refusal to play with page layout, rather than being considered as laziness, can also be viewed as the choice of hiding the marks of the medium in order to reinforce engagement (no matter how conscious the empirical author may be of it). Similar to the principle of perspective, which is responsible for creating an illusion of space (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1976, 21), Tomine's refusal to play with page layout works to illuminate how comics might somehow threaten the plot when the flatness of the support is manifested. Hence the price of denouncing the medium could work to promote fictional immersion.

The same principle is used in what some film theorists call 'invisible' style, or the idea of erasing marks of enunciation and thereby not calling attention to the medium itself. Typical for classical Hollywood narrative, such style recommends removing traces of the medium for the sake of a

[7] And, although the author's opinion is not always the most reliable testimony, it is still symptomatic that Tomine himself confesses having little interest in such questions: "I probably don't pay as much attention to the overall design of my pages as I should. I guess I have some vague aesthetic standards in the back of my head when I'm composing my pages, but for the most part, I think I'm focusing more on the content of the story" (Spurgeon 2007).

stronger and easier engagement in the story.[8] One of the most interesting contributions to this movement of appropriation of film studies to comics' form can be found in the work of the French theoretician Philippe Marion. In *Traces en Cases*, he borrows the notion of *monstration* from André Gaudreault (1988) in order to build his scheme of invisibility in comics (which he calls *transparence graphique*; Marion 1993). While Fresnault-Deruelle and Groensteen address immersion through manipulation of the page layout, Marion is primarily concerned with the graphic trace, and examines the role of a graphic verisimilitude in the fictional immersion process itself. Marion (1993, 277) claims that the homogeneous style is able to produce a realism, if perceived in a certain continuity by the reader falling within the uniformity of a single style throughout a story or album.

Figure 5. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 25. © Adrian Tomine.

[8] Although one could claim the impossibility of applying this notion of "invisibility" to the medium of comics (once the idea of "invisible" is based on the double assumption of movement and a photographic mechanical connection with the object, obviously not viable in comics), such an argument can be circumnavigated by discarding the naïve mythological claim for transparency in the photographic apparatus. (These connections with realism oftentimes offer more material for confusion than clarification.)

Other fruitful insights concerning this transparency can also be found by using David Bordwell's work. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, he states three factors to explain why the classical Hollywood style passes relatively unnoticed (1985, 164); namely, a priority of the function of communicating the plot, "a coherent, consistent time and space for the fabula action" (1985, 162), and the use of immediately recognisable conventions and their contexts of use. If we try to apply these fairly general factors to comics it would be possible to say that the classical style can be achieved by controlling the elements of the *mise en scene* (placing the characters' bodies and faces as the centre of attention through light, panel composition, point of view, gestures, facial expressions etc.) as well as the breakdown (disguising the discontinuity between the panels with a set of strong solidified conventions).

In Tomine's work, the large majority of the panels are occupied by characters (in almost all cases, the protagonist), which usually occupy privileged positions. The few panels in which characters are not present serve primarily to situate the reader in a new space (a car on the highway to indicate dislocation, a restaurant, a shop) and a new temporal location (a clock to communicate a specific time, the sun rising to denote a new day). The close-ups that he employs also have a highly communicative function, emphasising objects significant to the plot (a particular book, a card, a note or any artefact somehow relevant to the narrated situation). Moreover, his characteristic passages between panels are smooth enough so as not to disturb the engagement with the reader and usually favour the coherence of the story. Even if Tomine uses a significant variety of points of view, each panel respects some consistency in the situations – the continuity of the plot, clothing, action and reaction.

However, it is worth noting that the adoption of a conventionally classic style does not imply that Tomine is unaware of the possibilities specific to comics, such as page layout. The very fluidity of the story already depends on this acknowledgement, but they are usually in the service of a specific regime of narrative immersion already so codified that we tend to simply disregard it. Yet nonetheless, it is possible to find interesting variations in the page layout, but they are usually reserved for less intrusive sections, like the beginning and end of the story (or chapters), never disturbing the fluidity of the reading.

This "invisible" aesthetic style is somehow also reflected in his attitude towards his ethnic position – something that also has shifted in the course of his career.[9] In the beginning, there was a conscious effort to distance himself from addressing any question related to his Asian American identity. Sandra Oh claims that Tomine erased racial marks (for example, eyes are always hidden

[9] Most academic articles written about Tomine actually address this subject of ethnicity (see for example Oh 2007; Park 2010).

behind glasses) and invested in the "transparency of whiteness", in an attempt to confer a "universal" tone to the stories, placing him in a context of "post-ethnic" or "post-identity" moment (Oh 2007, 139). Moreover, the very theme of social isolation would also be related with a racial "hyper-visibility" (Oh 2007, 139). Yet, the subject of Asian identity only starts appearing in 1999, in *Optic Nerve* #6 ("Hawaiian Getaway"), and it becomes a central issue in *Shortcomings*.[10] Tomine additionally became progressively more professionally involved with Japanese culture – he edited the autobiography *A Drifting Life* by manga author Yoshihiro Tatsumi (2009), did covers for a box of movies by Yasugiro Ozu (2010),[11] and a series of covers for the Japanese literature quarterly *In the City* (2010). Even if not explicitly mentioned as a theme, Tomine's connection to Japanese culture is also undeniable in his style, clear in his frequent use of aspect-to-aspect transitions in which time seems "to stand still" (McCloud 1994, 81). Due to these stylistic traits, Tomine is even being included as member of the *nouvelle manga* movement (Boilet 2006).

NARRATIVE TENSION: RETICENT ENDINGS AND SUSPENDED GAZE

Another strategy to forge both the impression of honesty and uncomfortable desolation can be found on the level of narration in the way Tomine administrates information and the pace in his stories. Central to understanding this will be the concept of narrative tension:

> [...] the phenomenon that arises when the interpreter of a narrative is encouraged to wait for a resolution, this waiting being characterized by an anticipation tinged with uncertainty which confers on the act of reception a passionate aspect. Narrative tension will thus be regarded as a poetic effect that structures narrative, and in it will be recognised the dynamic aspect or the 'force' of what is customarily called a plot. (Baroni 2007, 18,[12] translation from Kafalenos 2008, 377)

[10] In 2001, Tomine published the one-page story "The Donger and Me", an annoyed response to the stereotypical portrayal of Gedde Watanabe's Asian American character – a Chinese exchange student – in John Hughes' comedy *Sixteen Candles*.

[11] Tomine lists Ozu as one of his influences, and it is interesting to see how he describes the filmmaker's style in terms of comics: "I feel like Ozu's visual style could be compared to the cartooning style that books like 'How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way' are adamant about avoiding. It's like the supposedly boring side view of Dr. Strange walking into a room, as opposed to the 'worm's eye view' of him dynamically bursting through the door. In other words, it's clear, straightforward, honest, devoid of flash, and it's absolutely perfect" (Tomine 2010).

[12] The French original: "le phénomène qui survient lorsque l'interprète d'un récit est encouragé à attendre un dénouement, cette attente étant caractérisée par une anticipation teintée d'incertitude qui confère des traits passionnels à l'acte de réception. La tension narrative sera ainsi considérée comme un effet poétique qui structure le récit et l'on reconnaîtra en elle l'aspect dynamique ou la 'force' de ce que l'on a coutume d'appeler une intrigue".

Strongly influenced by the narratology of Meir Sternberg, Baroni focuses his study on three master functions of narrative: surprise, curiosity and suspense. These functions work by way of a constant comparison between virtual development – what we expect to happen – and effective development – what actually happens. Roughly speaking, the story manages how the information is administrated in a way that purposely leaves gaps so that the reader can feel intrigued enough to complete them in a game of prediction and bets based on promises revealed in the course of the plot.

As indicated by these three basic narrative functions, suspense is considered to have a particularly interesting relation with comics. According to Baroni, suspense is "based on a 'reticence' of the text that polarises the interpretation towards a resolution awaited with impatience" (Baroni 2007, 269; my translation). On the one hand, such suspense can to a certain extent be undermined by the possibilities of a synoptic vision of the comic's page. On the other hand, the organisation of comics as a sequence of pages offers a potential suspense of another kind: one of the most popular techniques to produce an impression of suspense is by stopping the action in a crucial moment in the development of the story, moving the expectations of the reader in a certain direction and instigating his curiosity to follow the story and buy further editions. Largely used in melodramatic literature, through installments (*romans feuilletons*), in comics the technique is part of a genre convention in serialised adventures where the suspense is usually left in the last panel as a kind of preparation, explicitly or not, triggering some kind of "to be continued" effect as a promise of solving open questions.

Upon first glance, it seems difficult to recognise how such a description of suspense can be appropriate to explain what happens in the work of Tomine. First, because rather than a logical course of events ruled by the conceptual pair of conflict/resolution, his stories are best defined as a chronological portrait of routines – labelled as 'slice-of-life' stories. Second, because his world is inhabited by alienated characters who have no perspectives of a future to be "awaited with impatience". In such cases, this angst and impatience would be frustrated not only by the absence of resolution, but moreover by the absence of a question to be solved. What remains in this situation is not an invitation to a prognosis, but a particular kind of angst, a desire for desires.

Nevertheless, the lack of perspective of the characters and the absence of a traditional generic idea of a mission to be accomplished should not imply the lack of narrative tension driving the story. The events narrated may not necessarily have a strong logical-causal order, but the chronological trajectory in which they are arranged does, even if the intended result is to arouse a certain sense of vagueness. In the end, the conflict in the discourse can be located in the very idea

of absence of conflicts in the story as such. In other words, according to Sternberg, "the narrated world may be without end in either sense of telos, limit or purpose; but the narrative discourse is always end-directed" (Sternberg 1992, 512). And this can serve, for example, the purpose of narrating the "'endlessness' of the world, its circular time, or its absurdity" (Sternberg 1992, 512). In this scenario, the absence of resolution can be seen not as incapacity in ending stories, but more precisely as the very intended resolution for that story.

One of the most remarkable pieces of evidence of this kind of narrative tension in Tomine's work can be found in his laconic endings that emphasise this indeterminacy and feeling of suspension, as suggested in the panels from the cover of the *The Comics Journal* (Fig. 2). The absence of resolution is clear, for example, in a number of stories finished with an empty black panel (fig. 6). It is also very common to see stories ending with a detached longing, where characters, lost in thought, stare at nothing, giving rise to an introspective and reticent atmosphere (fig. 7).

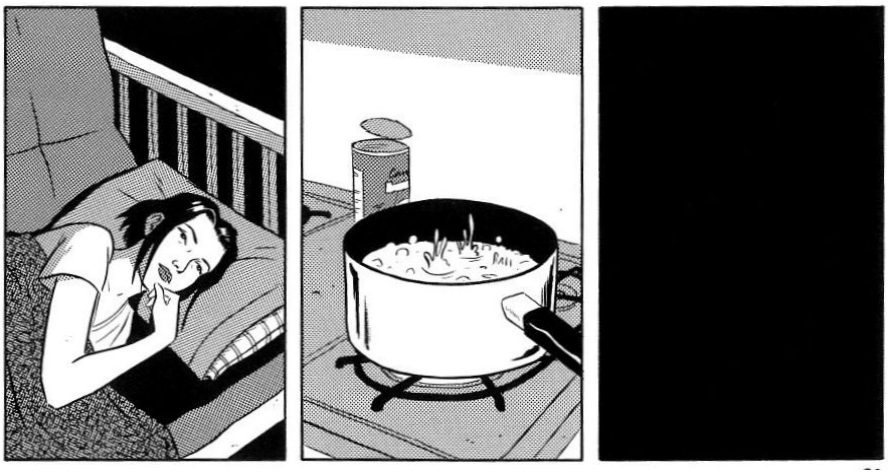

Figure 6. Tomine, Adrian, *Sleepwalk and Other Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1998, p. 89. © Adrian Tomine.

It is possible to identify a special kind of suspense in these endings – in the sense that the action is suspended – yet, what remains is not the desire to know what would have happened, but an emotional hiatus, a kind of anxiety and feeling of incompleteness that compliments the one felt by the characters. Such an emotional dimension in the narrative tension is what Baroni (2007, 20) calls thymic function (*function thymique*), a term used by the author to refer to the capacity of being moved by an emotion (such as pleasure or suffering). In the case of Tomine, the plot's resistance to closure is actually a strategy to arouse the mood of detachment and instability.

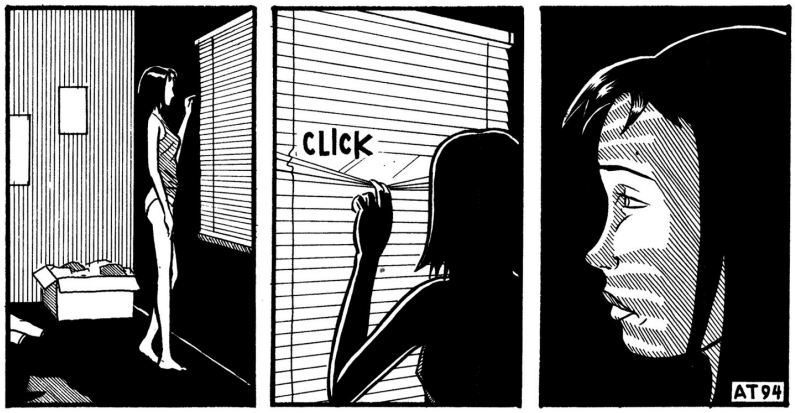

Figure 7. Tomine, Adrian, *32 Stories. The Complete Optic Nerve Mini-Comics*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1995, p. 83. © Adrian Tomine.

Page layout is not the answer to Tomine's narrative tension, but a look at his work as an illustrator perhaps can provide some clues about how he conducts this emotional affection and tension. Tomine has done covers for magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*, rock albums, film and music posters (Weezer, Yo La Tengo, Yasugiro Ozu), postcards, etc. What is interesting in these works is that, even if they are made under specific commercial and spatial constraints, it is possible to identify a way of capturing a fugacious mood of ordinary situations in them and the suggestion of a suspended time.

Although the absence of sequence poses a challenge to the idea of narrative, in these single images without words or other panels to further narrative development Tomine displays an economy of drama in small encounters, in a game of narrative tension ruled by facial expressions, especially the gaze, and the direction of it. The gaze of characters guides our expectations and makes different elements interact, transforming the images into potential scenes, referring to what Fresnault-Deruelle (1993, 188) calls the "story's limbos" (*les limbes du récit*), as a reference to Edward Hopper's paintings.

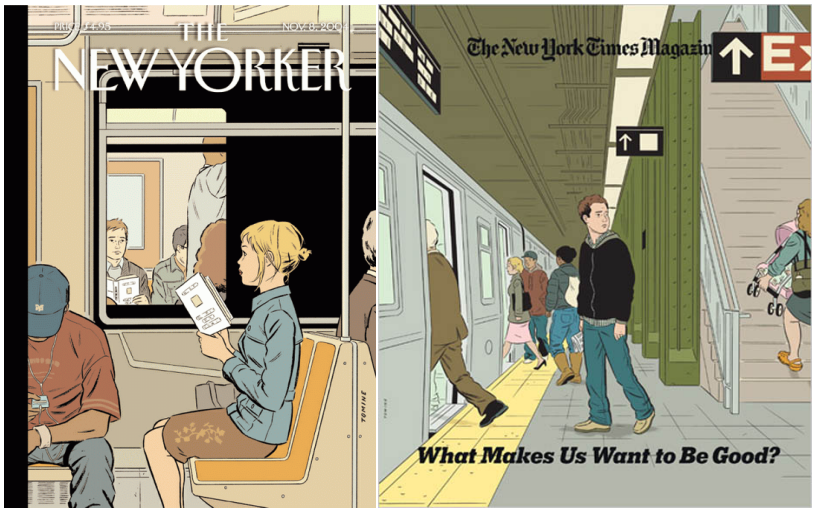

Figure 8. Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2004. © Adrian Tomine & *The New Yorker*.

Figure 9. Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2008. © Adrian Tomine & *New York Times Magazine*.

The main difference between the gaze in some of these fixed images and throughout Tomine's stories is that, while the former frequently depict human interaction (since, for commercial reasons, they cannot be charged with a negative tone), the latter usually reinforce an absence, depicting a detachment between the outside world and an interior life. Take, for example, the cover of *The New Yorker* (November, 2004; fig. 8), in which a young man finds out he is reading the same book as a beautiful young woman in a passing train. The situation presents a connection (even if temporary) between two young people through a shared reading taste. In the same way, the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* (fig. 9) also shows an attached gaze. Yet by contrast, many of the gazes found in the *Optic Nerve* stories reveal a lack of involvement, not only when the characters are alone (fig. 10), but also when the characters are in a populated environment (fig. 11), or even when there is physical contact (fig. 12).

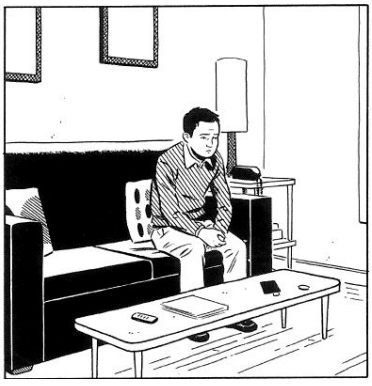

Fig. 10. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 39. © Adrian Tomine.

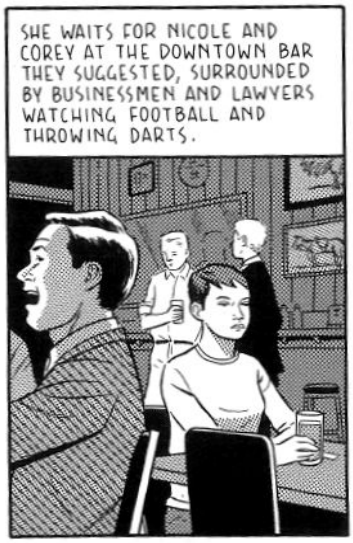

Fig. 11. Tomine, Adrian, *Sleepwalk and Other Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1998, p.97. © Adrian Tomine.

Fig. 12. Tomine, Adrian, *Summer Blonde. Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2003, p. 132. © Adrian Tomine.

But this impression of reflective and moody temporality can sometimes be misleading. Tomine is conscious of what people expect from him (melancholic lonely characters) and plays with it in a rare moment when he uses the constraints proper to comics' storytelling to achieve a specific effect (and, because it is rare, it is therefore all the more powerful). In the beginning of chapter 3, from *Shortcomings*, we see Ben Tanaka's girlfriend Miko in a series of six panels, apparently six moments where she seems to do nothing more than what a character of Tomine usually does: sit or lay down alone with a detached look (fig. 13). However, as we turn the page, we realise that those were actually photos of her (fig. 14). By using the absence of flow and the panel organisation of comics, Tomine blurs the difference between a series of pictures diagrammed as frames in a postcard and a series of moments from the story itself (a story told in comics, through panels).

Even if he gives us some hints, like some posing conventions or the looking "at the camera", and even after we discover the existence of these photos, we still remain in doubt as to whether the panels represent the session where she poses for the photographer, or the photos themselves.

The slow movement of time caused by the reflective gazes becomes even more evident on the basis of the repetition of panels, which functions as a way of showing an introspective moment where little changes with the passage of time. Although such a strategy is not explored in depth in the work of Tomine (there are only a few examples in his more recent work), it adds considerable force to both the detached gaze and the effect of reticence in his laconic endings. This happens, for example, on the last page of *Shortcomings*, when we see Ben Tanaka looking out of the window of an airplane in six similar panels (fig. 15). While the character stays inert during the entire sequence, we see the scenery changing outside the window, indicating the duration of a take-off: other airplanes on the ground in the first panel, the line of the horizon changes its angle in the second and third panels and so too with the clouds in the fourth and fifth panels, and finally only the sky in the last panel of the graphic novel remains.

Figure 13. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 77. © Adrian Tomine.

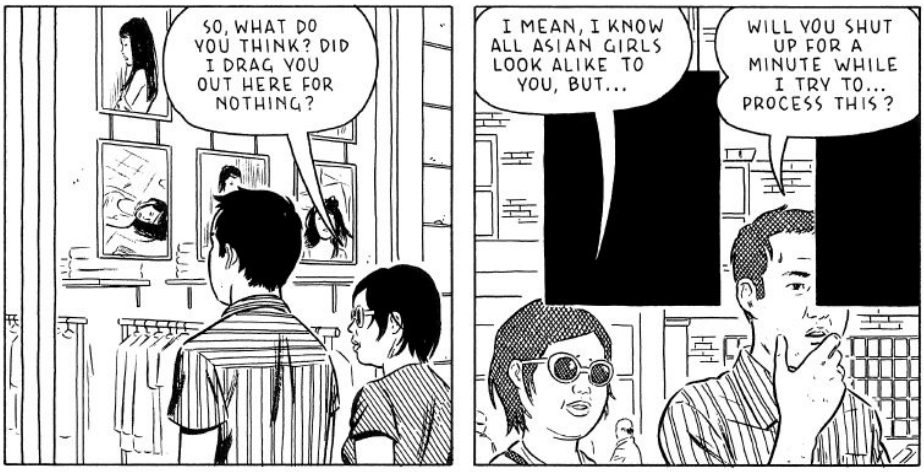

Figure 14. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 78. © Adrian Tomine.

Figure 15. Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 108. © Adrian Tomine.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the mood of detachment and desolation in the work of Adrian Tomine emerges from a combination of two complementary forces. First, there is an impression of honesty achieved by the adoption of a confessional and shameful tone (not only textually, but also paratextually, i.e., through extra surrounding material like the cover, introductions, etc.), the construction of a coherent everyday world (dialogues, construction of space etc.), and the emulation of a sense of indeterminacy and vagueness similar to 'real life' (with a special attention to suspended tension and the way in which the lost gazes are represented). Secondly, there is a special engagement with the readers, guaranteed by the pleasure of self-recognition (sharing the same cultural background) and by the easy and direct fictional immersion through a discreet 'invisible' style. Together, these elements contribute to an interesting game where engagement in the reading experience arouses disengagement as a shared feeling. In other words, rather than representing a conflict with the relative popularity of Tomine (at least in the branch of 'alternative comics'), Tomine's unlikable characters and ordinary stories are actually reinforced by the absorbing storytelling techniques and clean lines he employs. In the end, both the self-depreciative introduction of *32 Stories* and the auto-parody panels on the cover of the *The Comics Journal* mentioned in the beginning of this article reveal not only an awareness of detachment, but also a keen consciousness of the strategies used to express it.

In this article, I have addressed a few strategies through which this impression of honesty and detachment can be deliberately programmed. My focus was limited to formal and discursive devices found not only in Adrian Tomine's work, but widespread in a number of alternative American comics, especially from the 1990's and 2000's. Such discussion could of course also benefit from a critical assessment of this "shamefaced honesty", undoubtedly a popular trope that made sense as a historical reaction to mainstream extraordinary storyworlds, but that, in the long term, tends toward saturation. As alternative comics steadily reach a stage of commercial success and cultural legitimacy, the urgency to define itself in opposition to the "mainstream" is steadily replaced by a very promising and liberating configuration. But that is another story.

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Digital Comics

By Jakob F. Dittmar

INTRODUCTION

Digital comics can easily transgress on the definition of comics as mostly "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 1993, 9) as they may contain moving images, be accompanied by audio tracks, or even are narratives in true multimedia, i.e. utilize an interdependency of media to tell a story (e.g. Burwen 2011). This Forum text discusses digital comics (web comics and download comics) and how their formats and inclusion of other media has consequences not only for their composition, but also their reception. Recent scholarship on digital comics has discussed in detail the consequences of digital formats on the trade and distribution of comics (see Bell 2006; Yuan 2011, 297), and therefore these aspects are omitted here. But the consequences of digital publishing on the narrative aspects of comics, for example, on the pacing of storytelling and the reading experience, have hardly been covered.

My aim is to describe the currently existing formats in digital comics and start the discussion of their imprint on dramaturgy, storytelling techniques and traditions, as the formats do of course influence the reading process. Also, it has to be asked whether the established definitions of comics are fitting for the various forms of digital and web comics or whether we are witnessing the establishment of a new literary form, which is neither film nor comics nor audio storytelling.

FORMATS OF DIGITAL COMICS

In *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud shows possible developments of comics regarding their distribution and marketing that would allow – at least in the US – a bypass of the dominant publishers. He also presents possible forms of internet comics that are no longer printed onto paper but are read directly on-screen and thus no longer depend on limitations of pages, paper size, etc., that are crucial for comic narrations in other media (McCloud 2000). These new possibilities define another medium different from established comics due to their form: Digital comics are part of tertiary media, as one needs tools and technical equipment to produce, distribute, receive, and also to read them (cf. Beth and Pross 1976). Specifically, computer-based forms of comics that allow for readers' choices in the development of narration (i.e. interactivity) can even be considered quartiary media, as they usually switch easily (and often) between push and pull aspects of the medium (readers have to choose actively to be able to read further) (cf. Dittmar 2011).

In the context of digital comics, McCloud argues for a complete departure from comics as we know them since they are not a print-product and – in some cases at least – not even printable,

but only available as a digital product, only readable with compatible machines. Its content, therefore, no longer offers the narrative structure of comics as we know them, since the sequence of images on virtual surfaces could be placed next to each other in limitless rows; McCloud coined the term "infinite canvas" for these technically borderless formats (for an example see fig. 1). The lack of any printed page leads to an end of conventional narrations and dramaturgical necessities. The build-up of tensions, the positioning of climaxes and anti-climaxes, in storytelling follow our experiences of printed media; they are developed to make the reader want to turn pages to read on. The established formats of paper have influenced the pacing of narratives told on them. In printed comics, the build-up of excitement or suspense towards the end of the page is an established method to make the reader want to turn the page and open up new images. It is a way to stress stages of the narration. Each image is part of the development of moods and occurrences in the comic. Digital comics can follow these conventions or break them by introducing different pacing of story-arches that would not fit on manageable printed formats (everything that is bigger than a broadsheet newspaper or comes in odd shapes which are difficult to open, etc.).

In comics, the images not only work individually but also in combination: Each new page is a new experience of the images in combination and individually alike: the whole page works as a meta-panel (or meta-image) that consists of all its individual images and combination of their designs (in accordance with definitions in film, one can call this effect "mise-en-page"[1]). Decisions about the number of images, their placement and style, are crucial for the storytelling of each comic. The design of each image, in reference to the other images' dominating graphic elements, gives the author control over the design of each full page; for example, sometimes large signs dominate the entire page and are composed from elements in individual images which only assemble into the large sign in synchronicity.

[1] For a detailed discussion of the synchronical and diachronical reading of comic-pages (and comics) see Groensteen 1999.

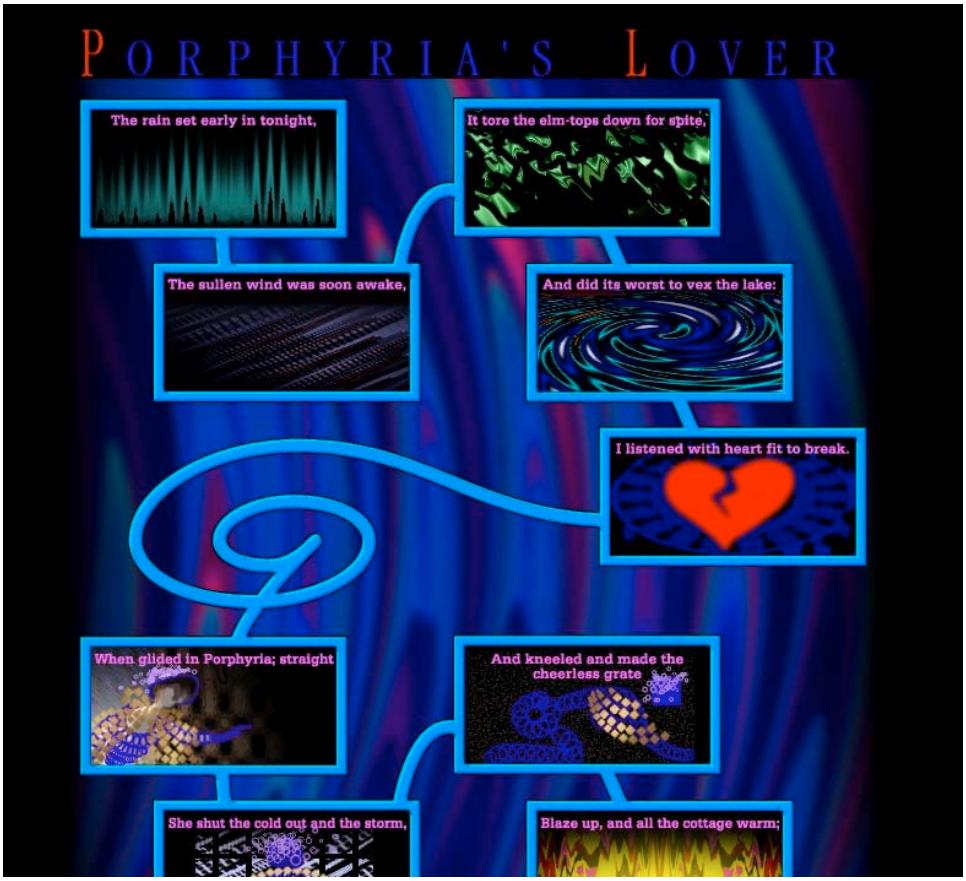

Figure 1. McCloud, Scott, *Porphyria's Lover*, 1998, http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/porphyria/index.html © Scott McCloud.

DOWNLOAD COMICS AND WEB COMICS

The discussion of digital comics has to differentiate between web comics and digital comics, because all web comics are digital comics, but not all digital comics are web comics. There certainly are various sub-forms of digital comics but to suggest a rule: web comics are those comics that are read directly on the Internet, that is, online. They do not have to be downloaded and might not even be intended to be downloaded. The class of digital comics generally contains web comics (as these are obviously digital); however, according to the currently dominate, and narrow, definition, digital comics are comics that are distributed and screened digitally, but not generally read online.

Web comics are executed and distributed digitally, but often offer content that is not different from printed comic strips – only a few experiment with the options given by the technical possibilities of the medium. Most show a limited sequence of images that are most of the time shown on the same page, juxtaposed with each other: a typical meta-panel that is divided into the

individual images when reading the comic. Some web comics mount the images of the strip or the rows of images the strip consists of onto several sub-pages.[2] The reader is able to continue reading in a fashion similar to how a printed comic is read; by clicking through to the sub-pages, the reader recreates the switch from line to line and the turning of the pages. While the screen in use limits the visible width of these strips, the format can be defined to fit the strip or individual parts of the narration shown; it no longer depends on paper-size.

Web comics depend – as their name suggests – on access to the Internet. One group of machines useable to read not only digital but also specifically web comics on are the various mobile phones with big screens and internet-connection. What is interesting about so-called smart mobile phones is that they partly allow for turning the image from portrait to landscape format by tilting the device. Obviously, depending on the choice of tilt, the same tool delivers different visual presentations of the same source-material. And of course, the visual results and reading-experiences are markedly different (for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Wershler 2011).

Digital comics depend on computers to process the images onto some screen, but in the case of download comics these machines do not have to be connected to the Internet after the material is downloaded. Theoretically, they can be shown on all standard personal computers, and in some cases on reading tablets and similar computer-driven devices that have been developed to show text and to replace analog printed matter. Of this latter group of reading-devices, not all are able to show moving images, most – for example, the Kindle reader – are supposed to be loaded with specifically formatted files containing the reading-material. These formats are quite restricted in regards to what can be contained. Also, these reading tablets are not built to connect to the Internet themselves, so web comics would not be readable on them. Some can show colored images, some offer only black and white images and text, as they have been developed to show text similar to printed books while using as little energy as possible. More and more comics, which are available in print, become published for these reading-devices, thus turning classic analog comics into digital comics. Some publishers also start to offer extra online and partly downloadable material in addition to digitally re-published comics themselves – like artist's comments, originally omitted images or sequences, background information, etc. – to enhance the attraction of the digital re-publication for collectors and fans (see Ricknäs 2012).

[2] E.g. most digitally re-published printed comics, like Jamiri's comics on http://www.jamiri.com.

STRUCTURING AND PACING THE NARRATION IN DIGITAL FORMATS

The unifying aspect of all digital comics, whether download-only or online-readable, is perhaps simply that they can define their own format. Unrestricted by print, these comics are no longer bound to a uniform page format, even within a narrative that stretches over several (digital) pages. Also, long sequences or whole stories can be put on one page and are read by scrolling over the page in whatever direction possible and/or necessary. But the technical possibilities for this kind of screen-comics are currently quite limited: Individual settings like screen-resolution or the choice of internet-browser lead to very different frame-sizes for the display of digital comics. With a low screen-resolution, to ensure understanding by an average reader/user, the development of plot, etc., has to progress in small steps to show those images close enough to each other to maintain the build-up of the story. Conventional use of cliff-hangers to make readers stay with the story or return to it, or to "turn" pages, has to be used in accordance with these technical settings and might not work any longer with the introduction of the next standard in high-resolution screens. Whether these necessities and possibilities change story-telling to its advantage is questionable, as the basic structures and methods of narrating are not only specific for individual media, but also are related to more general narrative conventions. This makes the full departure of dramaturgies, plots, etc., of digital comics from those known from printed comics unlikely.

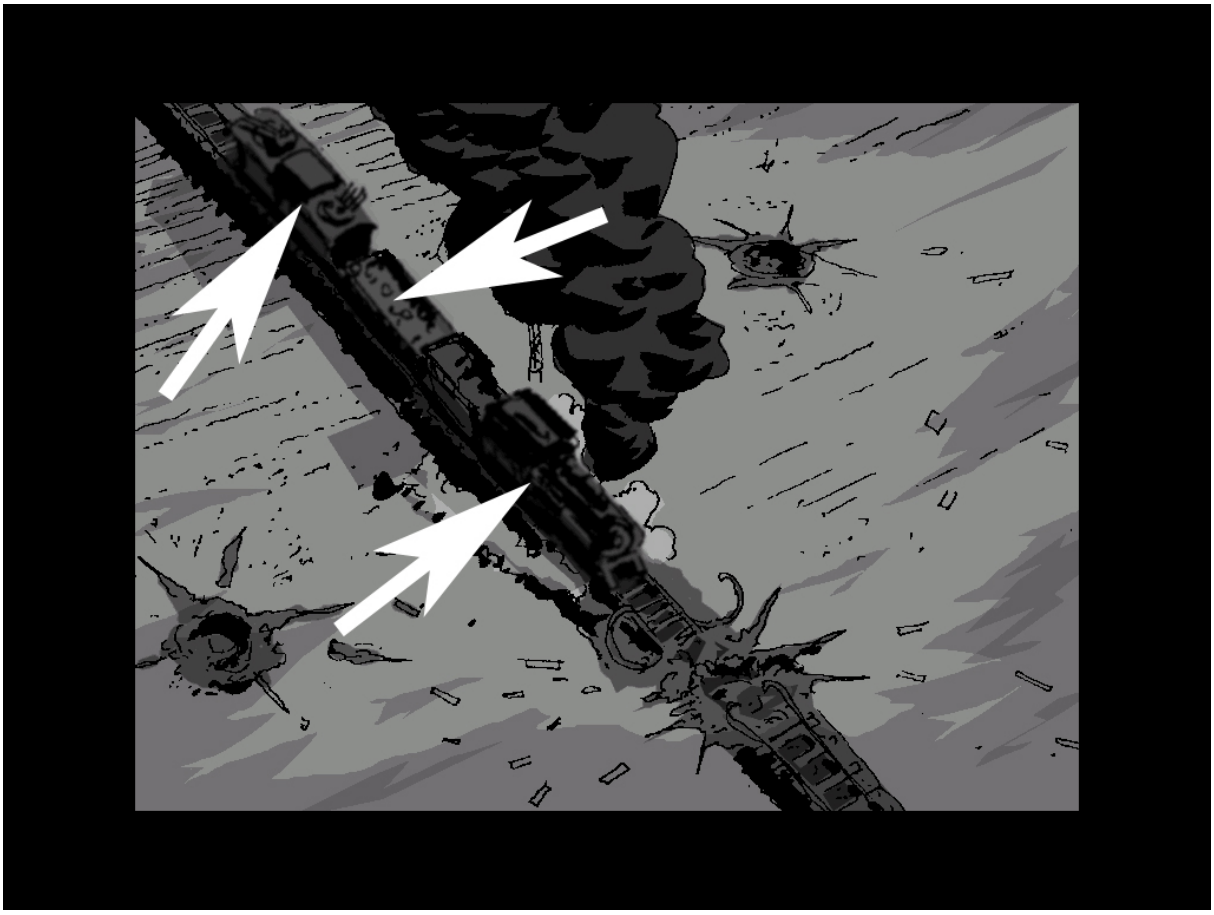

Figure 2. Heuer, Christoph, *Kindergeschichten*, screenshot, 2002. © Christoph Heuer. Different possible narratives starting from this situation are indicated by changes in grey tones when the mouse-pointer is placed on the specific part of the image, in this screenshot indicated by arrows.

It has to be kept in mind that digitally transmitted comics that are shown on-screen but are not supposed to be printed out can use additional layers of narration apart from sequential juxtaposed images and texts, for example, audio material or animated sequences – if the technical platform allows for this. But if these stories contain film- and/or audio-elements, they are no longer comics in accordance with the established definition of this class of media, but animated film or multi-media products. They have to be understood as being another medium. Narrations that only play on computers change the presentational forms and narrative conventions established in printed comics, and also the way they are consumed/read; while readers of printed comics, most of the time, read on their own, digital comics allow for group-readings by mass audiences. This establishes a special medial-form that builds on technical applications for production and reception of content, and at the same time forces the reader – and "user" – to actively decide on the development of the story; without active choice of next page or sequence to be shown, there is no continuation of the story.

For example, Christoph Heuer's *Kindergeschichten* (fig. 2) is built of mostly static images, as known from printed comics, but certain details of the images are animated and accompanied by audio-pieces. A narrator's voice, over a musical soundtrack, comments on each image to construct blocks of the narration and, as a consequence, several parts of the story are given to the reader. To get to the next image, the reader not only has to press a button, but also must choose between several possible narrative tracks that are anchored in the individual images. Different narrations offering distinctly different perspectives on the development of the story are given, but interlink again and again, allowing the reader to trace them piece by piece – and even to retrace them all. The reader controls the development and the speed of the narration's progress, reacting to content and choosing tracks that catch his or her interest. A public screening of this "non-linear novel" is therefore pointless because of the necessity for an individual interaction between the screening device and its user – varying interests cannot be catered to simultaneously. Even if this form of interactive storytelling is quite different from most digital comics available at the moment, the individual reading and decision processes of the reader remains decisive.

NEW FORMS OF STORYTELLING

Picture stories that are not printed allow for the individual interaction with comics that we are used to from their printed relatives. But even when an individual reception is necessary and the individual user is dealing with the story according to his/her own criteria and temporal preferences, the conditions set by, for example, the time-frame of the audio parts, prevents us from labeling these mixed-media forms comics – at least if weight is put on the characteristic that comics are to be read according to individual pacing and interests, and allow for a reading-processes that vary from the sequence of the images themselves (for example, by re-reading earlier or later images). Apart from the freedom to follow or ignore the sequentiality of images, it is decisive that audio-parts have specific lengths that establish the speed in which an image should be read. They dictate reading-speed.

The example of digital comics also shows again that all media, which are used for communication, influence their content and limit the possibility of narrative forms (as McLuhan stated in his famous catch-phrase "the medium is the message"). New and established media trigger the development of specific narrative forms that cater to their particularities. The images of graphic visual stories are hardly ever mounted juxtaposed and sequentially outside the field of print-media (i.e. comics and illustrated books) as each medium applies the concept of narrating with images according to its format's possibilities; for example, films and computer games show their images in time-sequence and not juxtaposed. Animated film and mixed forms that depend on screens and computers obviously do not cater ideally for presenting comics as known from print.

New media always divert from the established forms and lead to new ways of storytelling – without bothering if these may fit the established forms. They define their own dramaturgical limitations, preferences and possibilities and demand for the development of narrative strategies that suit them best. Some will be comics with long juxtaposed or meandering sequences as suggested by McCloud, others will form new kinds of a pictorial medium that may contain comics as one of their narrative elements, and some will present truly multimedial storytelling demanding different forms of activity and participation by the readers, blending prose texts, poems, film and game-elements into the comic. These will be very different from the stories we refer to as digital comics now.

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Comics & Politics – 7th Annual Conference of the Society for Comics Studies (ComFor)

by Linda-Rabea Heyden

INTRODUCTION

From September 27–30, 2012 international comic scholars were invited by ComFor member Dr. Stephan Packard from the University of Freiburg to discuss and investigate how comics interact with politics and the political.

Since 2006 the German Society for Comics Studies (Gesellschaft für Comicforschung/ComFor) has held an annual conference at alternating universities and with a different topic each time. The society's goal is to promote comics scholarship, and its yearly conferences offer an opportunity for scholars to exchange and connect. Since the society is focused on comics research in the German language, its conferences have mostly appealed to scholars form German-speaking countries. This year's conference, however, took a more international approach, inviting comics scholars beyond German-speaking countries by adding a call for papers in English. Furthermore, a big contribution was made by members of NNCORE (Nordic Network for Comics Research), who joined the ComFor conference this year. Despite most papers still being given in German this is a very positive step towards an internationally oriented comics research network that should be pursued in following years.

OPEN WORKSHOP

At some of ComFor's conferences, and this year as well, an additional open workshop is offered. Here, scholars can present their off-topic research. It is a nice way to present work in progress and receive feedback in the following discussions. Due to the workshop being open, the topics' range was considerable – starting off with two classics: Linda-Rabea Heyden presented comics adaptations of Goethe's *Faust* and Daniela Kaufmann examined how the anthropomorphic depictions in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are connected to historical drawings that were used to show the gradual metamorphosis of the man/animal distinction. Kathrin Klohs examined how *phdcomics* uses scientific charts to transport meaning, while the following discussion focused on whether these strips actually parody science or academic life (*Wissenschaft* vs. *Wissenschaftsbetrieb*).

Two presentations dealt with Italian comics. Barbara Uhlig argued that Mattotti uses colour schemes to produce narrative meaning or even ambiguity. As for Elena Potapenko who uses the Comic Book Markup Language (CBML) tool for her *fumetti neri* studies, the audience (mainly literary and art scholars) had some difficulties acknowledging her linguistic approach instead of embracing her input from a different field. Christophe Dony concluded the workshop with the

only project focused on a non-European topic: the publishing strategies of Vertigo Comics that capture the mainstream and independent/alternative market.

COMICS AND WWII

The theme of the conference probably suggests it, and indeed a lot of papers discussed the connection between comics and war. The presentations on the first day were mostly overviews of the relation between politics and comics about or produced during WWII. Kees Ribbens and Michael Scholz examined this relation for European (Ribbens) and Swedish (Scholz) comics. Comics series set in WWII would often portray stereotypical images of the enemy – a topic that would come up again during the conference.

While propagandistic views that featured in fictional wartime stories were part of the entertainment industry, Ralf Kauranen presented Finnish comic strips that were used as official propaganda tool during WWII. Most of them would not so much denounce an enemy but instruct their readers on decrees and laws during wartime. Louise C. Larsen gave a talk on Danish cartoons in the pre-WWII period, which commented on the political development in Germany. Rikke Platz Cortsen on the other hand covered not the pre- but post-war period. She argued that the series *Rasmus Klump* (*Barnaby Bear*) implicitly commented on the cold war era by contrasting it with a complete lack of any conflict inside the fictional world.

GERMAN STEREOTYPES IN COMICS

Another popular theme at the conference was the depiction of Germans in war themed comics. Since many papers were focused on comics about or produced during WWII, there seemed to be quite some concern with German stereotypes while other stereotypes (e.g. the bestial depiction of the Japanese) in these series or other comics received little attention. Unfortunately, Florian Hessel's paper that could have brought some further insight was cancelled.

Two papers focused on the depiction of Germans specifically and, along the way, shed some further light on those comic book covers that feature an American superhero battling Hitler. Matthias Harbeck talked about how the depiction of Germans changed in American superhero comics before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Harbeck concluded that while there are German stereotypes (eating *Wurst*, being efficient, etc.), Nazi Germans were not only popcultural sensations but they and "new (post 1989) Germany Germans" are also used as a foil to discuss politics and xenophobia inside the USA.

Micha Johann Gerstenberg's examination of the Justice Society comics added further insight into the matter. Gerstenberg pointed out that 1940s superhero comics were excluded from official propaganda media yet sometimes propaganda posters (e.g. advertisement to buy war bonds) would be placed on the comic covers.

COMICS AS A MEANS OF EMPOWERMENT AND RE-TELLING THE PAST

The other main block of the papers looked at comics that take the opposite position: comics not as a means for official propaganda purposes by the state, but as a political tool to contest official (master) narratives. Manuela Grünangerl had a look at the Portuguese comic magazine *Visão*. The stories would appropriate and often parody political symbols and rhetoric or reflect on more serious subjects like traumata from the Portuguese colonial war – a topic that before had only been treated by state propaganda or otherwise been a taboo.

Hartmut Nonnenmacher gave insight into the Spanish magazine *El Jueves* that uses satire for its political messages. According to Nonnenmacher, the strips comment on current political events (e.g. economic crisis) without leaning to one political side. While they balance stereotypical portrayals of regionalists and centralists, the continuing strip *Martinez el Fancha* exposes fascists as anachronistic. Christian Knöppler talked about conspiracy theories in several of Warren Ellis' comics. Knöppler summarised these comics as an anti-authoritative reflex keeping the memory of negative examples in American political history alive to prevent a repetition.

Political violence was the subject of Catherine Michel's paper that discussed comics that depict the violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Michel pointed out that the various approaches to the conflict in the comics could even have a positive impact in so far as to broaden the view of 'the others'. Quite a few comics with this subject matter are created both in and outside the Middle East and they take all kinds of perspectives. However, since many of these are not translated, it is hard to get their critical messages to the desired audience. Kalina Kupczynska's paper examined rhetorical pathos and pathos gestures in three Polish Solidarność comics, all produced in retrospect. The first comic from 1984 featured almost no pictures but long text passages. Kupczynska interpreted this as critique and suspicion of pictorial symbols which were often used for propaganda purposes by the state.

MEMORY COMICS

A specific type (or genre) of comics that allow for empowerment by re-telling the past was the subject of Anne Magnussen's keynote: Spanish memory comics. Most of these deal with the Franco regime or the time after and challenge the official version of the Spanish past. While early Spanish memory comics where mostly set in abstract places or time, later ones would make more references to Spain specifically. In one example, Magnussen showed how the specific structure of comics can depict the contest of various narrations by underpinning it with a different version of the truth in the pictures. Thus memory comics can discuss the problem of telling/not-telling with its specific political implications. Marc Blancher discussed a memory comic that deals with the theme of imprisonment in Morocco by Abdelazis Mouride. Blancher showed how the inmate's experience of violence is juxtaposed with a cold and report-like style in the text.

COMICS AND RIGHT-WING PROPAGANDA

Giovanni Remonato presented a striking case from Italy. The neo-fascist group CasaPound organised a lecture on why Corto Maltese is indeed a fascist and therefore one of them. Remonato presented their unlikely argument which reduces Pratt's apolitical and ambiguous character to a few characteristics in order to fit their case.

The 'black rat' is a further example where rightwing extremists appropriate a comics character for their own ideological uses. The 'black rat' originally appeared in a *Chlorophylle* story by Raymond Macherot but it was adopted into the propaganda strip *Les rats maudits* by Jack Marchal who made the rat symbol and role model for the right-wing extremist group *GUD* (*Groupe union défense*). Ralf Palandt demonstrated that the appearance of the 'black rat' on flyers and in booklets throughout Europe beyond those by *GUD* points to the interconnectedness of extremist right-wing groups.

THE POLITICS OF DEFINITION

Ian Hague gave a paper that took somewhat a meta-perspective. Hague pointed out that prevalent comics' definitions are all ocularcentric, defining comics only by their visual elements, while comics' readers would engage with the medium also by touch and smell. His argument was to include these properties of comics in their definitions as well as the academic research on them. Thus, his lecture reminded the audience that defining comics is implicitly a (political) act of inclusion and exclusion.

Ole Frahm, too, talked about the politics of inclusion and exclusion but from a very different angle. Frahm argued that even a simple line is already a regulative gesture defining unities by exclusion. The assessment of the gesture according to a value system, however, is a second step. The gesture itself is at first ambiguous. Frahm explained his argument mostly with the example of brick throwing, mainly with examples from *Krazy Kat* but also from slapstick movies. The frozen flight of the brick (a line on the page) is thus a gesture without purpose that, frozen in time, is still ambiguous and only then put in relation within a system (e.g. by the appearance of a policeman symbolising order).

CALLING THE READER TO ACTION

Dietrich Grünewald led the audience through his interpretation of the political fable *Au pays de la memoire blanche* by Stéphane Poulin (2011). For the purpose of demonstrating the reader's ability to make sense of the wordless pictures, Grünewald left the text aside which he found to be reductive as to the story's meaning. According to Grünewald's interpretation the fable's message was at the same time universal and, with its (intertextual) references to real places, anchored in reality.

Along with Frahm's, Hans-Joachim Backe's paper on Brian K. Vaughan's comics series *Y - The Last Man* and *Ex Machina* was among the most surprising. Backe used terms and tools from political science for his interpretation of Vaughan's political comics. He also applied ideas about the autonomous individual from Jürgen Habermas' *Glauben und Wissen*. Against this foil, Vaughan's comics read like a reflection of Habermas' text. Rather than giving a definite answer to contemporary political problems, these comics would leave the reader to decide in the face of various political perspectives.

ARTISTIC INPUT

Really nice additions to the academic papers were the artists' talks on two evenings of the conference. After the open workshop, Uli Knorr showed parts of his latest project *Herzlicher Gruß*. The comic tells his family's story during WWI by means of authentic (and also very gruesome) postcards which have been sent home from the front. These are combined with background stories of the family members. This interesting project is still in progress and should be published in the commemorative year of 2014.

Peter Brandt is working on the project *Hanisauland* which is aimed at school children and which is organised by the Federal Angency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für Politische

Bildung/BPB). Its purpose is to teach school children about political concepts in a simple and comprehensive way. On Saturday, Simon Schwartz presented a PowerPoint reading of two of his works (*drüben!*, 2009, and *Packeis*, 2012, both at avant-verlag). Like Uli Knorr's project, *drüben!* also focuses on his family and German history but is more autobiographical. In Schwartz's own words it is less about an East-German family moving to West Berlin than it is about a family incapable to communicate in the face of their political differences. Schwartz also presented his biographical comic on Matthew Henson, the first (and unacknowledged) black man to reach the North Pole, but there seemed to be more interest in the east/west German conflict.

I have seen artists' talks at the International Comics Conferences in England (Manchester and Bournemouth), but it was the first time in Germany. I think it is a very insightful addition because it offers a non-academic and different perspective and I hope the next ComFor conference will follow this example.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This year's ComFor conference was a first and very much appreciated step to link German comics researchers to an international network of comics scholars who arrived from all over Europe. Papers covered comics from many European countries, but left non-European comics underrepresented (except for the few American superhero comics as well as Catherine Michel's and Marc Blancher's papers). Still, the combination of all papers provided an interesting overview of the interactions of politics and comics. Surprisingly, or maybe not, for a German comics conference no academic paper covered German comics. This lack was however counterbalanced by the artists' talks.

In general, there seemed to be much concern with comics on war themes and wartime and thus many papers had a historical focus. As Stephan Packard mentioned in his closing speech, not one paper discussed the censoring of comics, or comics that negotiate between subculture and mainstream, for that matter. This is indeed surprising because often the comics discourse still implicitly reacts to such censoring actions like the Comics Code. The success of this four-day conference is much owed to the diligent organisation by Stephan Packard and his team. The atmosphere was welcoming and the papers offered many starting points for further discussion. My hope is that with a stronger networking the focus will be broader too. So please join!

THE NINTH ART SEEN FROM THE OTHER SIDE

by Rikke Platz Cortsen

Grove, Laurence. *Comics in French – The European Bande Dessinée in Context*. Berghahn Books, New York and London, 2010. ISBN 978-1-84545-588-0. 360 pages.

President of the International Bande Dessinée Society Laurence Grove has persistently worked to promote the knowledge and scholarship about francophone comics in English. As such, his book about comics in French follows the ambitions of the society and adds onto the works of other society members such as Ann Miller's *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (2007), Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (2007), and Matthew Screech's *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes Dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity* (2005). Grove's book recognises these other titles and specifically aims to use different examples in its historical approach to bandes dessinées ("drawn strip"), or BDs as they are known for short. This book only concerns itself with the French language comics of Europe and as such leaves out any comics from for instance French-speaking African countries or French-Canadian comics.

The first section of the book, "What is a Bande Dessinée?," takes the reader by the hand through some of the mechanisms and formal elements of BDs and situates them within a specific French language cultural context so that the reader is conceptually well-dressed to begin the chronological discussion of BDs. Because of this initial explanatory section, the intended audience for this publication can be both comics scholars and readers not at all familiar with either comics or French language culture. Depending on your knowledge about comics, you can skip this part, but for scholars not familiar with the French terms, the explanations are very helpful, and serve as very thorough introductions. Grove convincingly manages to navigate the mined field of comics/literature and comics/film by comparing elements from bande dessinée with the French cinema's *La Nouvelle Vague* and the novel type *Nouveau Roman*, underlining both how they share similarities and how bande dessinée is distinct from both literature and film.

The next section, "The Chronological Approach," takes the reader into an equally problematic part of comics scholarship, the discussion of which comic was the first. This is a question that often leads to heated debates, and one which Grove wisely sidesteps by offering a prehistory of comics instead of a fixation on unique artists, a discussion in French speaking scholarship that often leads to the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer. In his introduction, Grove underlines his intentions: "By deflecting attention away from Töpffer I have aimed to provide a broader view of the BD's development and current form, one that takes roots in a rich text/image tradition dating back to the Middle Ages" (p. 8). The prehistory chapter of the book opens the reader's horizon and understanding of comics to the innovative uses of the combination of text and image dating back quite some time. Grove proves to be an excellent guide, not least thanks to his analyses of examples, which are reproduced in the book, albeit not in color.

Grove's familiarity with the collection at Glasgow University MS Hunter allows for very interesting connections to be made between older text/image combinations and more recent bande dessinée, a connection Grove is careful to make consistently so that this pre-history sheds a useful light on the connections between the way image, text and narrative have been put together beforehand. The divisions of one image into several moments through the use of dividers or the use of several images to tell a story in collaboration with a text is shown to be old tricks of the trade. This is the case with the illustration chosen for the book's cover, *Miroir de l'humaine salvation* (1455), themed with the virgin vanquishing the devil: "The work's central concern with the doctrine of the Fall and of Redemption is therefore explored through the visual bringing-together of Old and New Testament events. A primitive form of pictorial narrative exists in that the pictures thus provide a chronologically ordered series" (p. 66).

The chronological section then moves onto both the nineteenth and twentieth century which it covers with a thoroughness that is impressive. For anyone interested in the development of French language comics, this methodical and well-written presentation is definitely worth the read. Töpffer still holds a prominent place in the history of BDs, but many other artists are mentioned and the culture of *histoire en images* is carefully laid out, explaining the importance of the magazine format in the developments of French comics from the beginning of the 20th century with girls' and boys' magazines, the rise of *Tintin* and *Le Journal de Mickey* as well as *Pilote* later on. Particular attention is also paid to the Belgian connection, showing the strength of this tradition as part of the francophone comics culture.

One of the fascinating examples provided by Grove is the comics magazine published during the occupation of France, *Le Téméraire*, which for the most part has been left out of French comics history due to its Nazi-supporting ideology. "It is hard not to let the hard-line Nazi ideology cloud our judgment of *Le Téméraire* [...]" says Grove, "[a]rtistically *Le Téméraire* was of the highest quality, as the success of the later careers of its contributors might indicate" (p. 132). This example also appears in the beginning of the book in an opening anecdote about how Grove has used it in his teaching where it serves as a sample of how comics can be used in discussions about history and aesthetics in the classroom (p. 1–4).

In the following chapter on "Contemporary BD: Innovators, Best-sellers, and Prize-winners", Grove discusses the French BD market in the 1990s and 2000s as one characterised both by the continued popularity of album titles and the new experiments of artists reacting against this mainstream. Both the experimental group OuBaPo and the publisher L'Association as well as best-sellers like *Titeuf* and *Astérix* are mentioned, and in order to sample this wide contemporary field, Grove digs into some of the prize-winners of the Angoulême festival, probably one of the most famous festivals in the world of comics and certainly a force of power in the French BD world. Though I appreciate these descriptions

and their placement in the wider field of comics culture, this choice to describe individual works from the perspective of prizewinners risks becoming a more fragmented presentation. Historical surveys of the near past are always difficult, and it is not entirely clear that the choice of some prizewinners covers this period sufficiently. For those interested in finding new titles to read there is more information in Grove's descriptions, but the use of listings of works breaks with a more thoroughly historical contextualisation that would perhaps have been too difficult to carry out so close to its works' publication dates.

This break with the chronological, historical approach is furthered in the last section of the book titled "The Cultural Phenomenon", which includes chapters on the business side of BD and discussions of French language comics as popular culture, a chapter on BD criticism both in French (written out as a time-line) and in English, as well as a chapter on the use of cultural studies and other theoretical approaches to BD that includes a couple of case-readings.

The aspect of BD as business or part of popular culture is certainly an important part of the history of comics in a French cultural context, the review of comics criticism in French is very useful for the understanding of the field, and the case-studies are solid and interesting. My criticism concerns the manner in which these last chapters are thrown together in a way that confuses the reader to some degree. As the chronological approach is left behind, the book takes us down many paths but never completely all the way, and in all these last chapters there seems to be missed opportunities for further expansion that would perhaps have demanded a completely new book on the topic. I would have liked to see much longer texts on the amusement parks and other commercial aspects of BD as part of a general popular culture in French speaking contexts, or for that matter, more thorough readings of the different methods mentioned in the last chapter, but this seems to be for a whole other project, and their inclusion in this book is not entirely motivated.

Comics in French gives a solid and enlightening view of French language comics and their culture from the Anglo-Saxon point of view and it is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in comics or French language culture. Laurence Grove no doubt holds an impressive knowledge about older text/image cultures and I can appreciate the author's decision to contextualise beyond the historical scope, introduce other methods and stray into contemporary BDs as well, though these are perhaps better covered by the titles mentioned in the beginning of this review. As an addition to Beaty's focus on the French comics culture of the 1990s, Screech's artist-centered approach and Miller's theoretical/analytical book, Grove provides a historical angle that is central to the understanding of the field. The book makes the reader want to dig into new, old, and very old French language comics, and provides the tools for such further studies.

THE SCHOLAR AND THE FAN

by Øyvind Vågnes

Ball, David M. and Kuhlman, Martha B., eds. *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking.* University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 2010. 238 pages.

The most immediately striking aspect of David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman's *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* – the first but definitely not the last anthology on Chris Ware's work – is its impressively multidisciplinary breadth and solid scholarship. The book's fourteen articles clearly demonstrate how comics studies is stimulated and invigorated by its encounters and engagements with cultural theory more broadly. Furthermore, the anthology serves well as an introduction to what have been the central academic perspectives on Ware over the years, and provides an excellent overview and summary of how these have been developed. For the many readers who have been systematically assembling whatever has come to the surface since Gene Kannenberg's first academic essay on Ware was published in 2001, it is gratifying to finally be able to read a book length collection such as this and to peruse its extensive bibliography. For anyone interested in contributing to the rapidly increasing amount of scholarship being done on Ware, the book is simply unmissable.

There is hardly anything surprising to be found here. Among the topics are: Ware's contested engagement with art history; the complexity of the narrative structure of his work and its challenges to conventional conceptions of relationships between spatiality and temporality; the interaesthetic impulse in Ware's comics, and especially his deep concern with architecture; what we can call the consistently nostalgic component in Ware's work; and the place of race, ethnicity and disability in his comics – the ideological and political dimension of the artist's comprehensive output. Whether the articles are deeply informed by individual prominent thinkers such as Walter Benjamin or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, or draw more broadly from the theoretical and critical perspectives that come with, say, a historical or formalistic approach, the methodological strategies are well-argued and executed. What will interest you the most depends on what inclination you have as a scholar, on what you are looking for in your own critical engagement with comics. To this reader the challenges put forward by Ware's use of various formats make for stimulating reflections – what Isaac Cates in his article refers to as the artist's "non-narrative devices": "fake catalog advertisements and coupons, collectible trading cards, fold-up paper-craft projects, souvenir calendars, essays and indicia in a painfully minute text, and multi-part diagrams of almost inevitably discouraging complexity" (p. 90). Cates takes issue with the diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan* and I learned a lot about how these "expand the fictional world" (p. 93) of the book from reading his article. I also particularly enjoyed Daniel Worden and Matt Godbey's articles on the *Building Stories* project, not least in the light of the recent publication of

the 14-piece box set. Both articles quite brilliantly demonstrate how Ware's representations of architecture do much more than accommodate fictional stories; rather, they enter into and intervene in cultural debates concerning the past and future of very real urban landscapes. Godbey's reading of how Ware's work can represent a critique of what Michael Sorkin has termed the "departicularizing" of the contemporary city is splendid (p. 130).

Instead of rehashing the arguments of every single article in the collection I would like to use this opportunity to reflect a little bit on how the anthology seems to be a reflection of certain tendencies that pertain to the field of comics studies a couple of years after its publication. Certainly several readers of this journal will be aware of Bart Beaty's comparison between comics studies and film studies in a 2011 issue of the *Cinema Journal*. There Beaty suggests that the state of affairs in the former is similar to the state of affairs of the latter in the 1960s. Early film theory was not exactly theory in the sense that we have come to think of the term, but consisted, rather, of reflections by practitioners, by filmmakers such as Eisenstein. The equivalent of comics studies would be the theoretical work of artists such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud in the 1980s and the 1990s. More recently, however, we have begun to see sustained critical work being done by scholars on a small group of comics artists, Beaty points out – listing Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, Posy Simmonds, Adrian Tomine, and Chris Ware – "the Antonionis, Bergmans, Fellinis, and Godards of the graphic novel age" (Beaty 2011, 108). When Beaty compares contemporary comics studies with sixties film studies, he suggests that we are presently in a moment not unlike the one that saw the transition of auteur theory from its French origins (André Bazin and the environment surrounding the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*) to its Americanization, and the turn towards structuralism (as in the work by Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen). The French critics were "reverential" in their viewing of films, in the words of Dudley Andrew, whereas the structuralists "came to study systematically the textual knot and to suppress the search for its human source" (Andrew 2000, 20–21). As Beaty points out, it is in the aftermath of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* that we have seen the rise of the comics artist as *auteur*, and the possibility of doing scholarship on comics that "are justifiable to tenure committees as aesthetically meritorious" (Beaty 2000, 107). Matthew J. Smith's (2012) recent reading of Alan Moore in the ambitious critical companion *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (out on Routledge), which explicitly draws on auteur theory, seems to confirm the validity of Beaty's comparison.

So does *The Comics of Chris Ware*. It is both an expression of and contributes to the moment of canonization, as will undoubtedly be the case with several anthologies and presumably monographs on the artists Beaty lists over the next few years. Although Ball and Kuhlman's anthology shows an awareness of this fact, it does not dwell much on its implications. Beaty does,

however, in his recent book *Comics vs. Art*, where he dedicates his final chapter to what he describes as "[t]he rush towards Ware's canonization," suggesting that the artist's rise to fame "serves as an important forerunner of the processes that are likely to govern the comics-art intersection in years to come" (Beaty 2012, 225). Beaty's tone in writing about Ware in *Comics vs. Art* is irreverent compared to the predominant tone of *The Comics of Chris Ware*.

Perhaps it is at this point that I should come clean and confess that this reviewer is one of those who might be said to contribute to Ware's canonization. Not only did I get hold of his recent *Building Stories* as soon as I could, practically salivating over its box set format and its contents, I also visited the Adam Baumgold gallery on the Upper East side in Manhattan to see the exhibition which revolved around its publication, spending much time and finding much joy in perusing Ware's pages-in-progress – and it was not my first visit to the gallery, where Ware has been exhibited on earlier occasions. Indeed, I even brought home the multi-story building model that has been produced in the event of the publication for a considerable amount of money, along with the signed exhibition poster, a true sign of the fan turned fetishist. I admire Ware's work, and enjoy thinking and writing about it – as do most of the contributors to *The Comics of Chris Ware.* Reva Wolf suggests, in a 2008 essay titled "The Scholar and the Fan", that the distinction between the two terms is not as watertight as we would like to think (Wolf 2008). Perhaps my concluding remarks should be that *The Comics of Chris Ware* confirms this, as it enters into and contributes to a system of canonization without disturbing it much. That job is left to other scholars, such as Bart Beaty.

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PUSHWAGNER – THREE ESSAYS ON AN ARTIST

by Fredrik Strömberg

Mejlœnder, Petter. *Pushwagner* (English Edition). Oslo, Magikon, 2008. ISBN: 978-82-92863-07-7. 58 pages.

Hariton Pushwagner is a phenomenon. The Norwegian artist is one of the earliest creators of graphic novels in the world, working with surprisingly, almost anachronistically artistic, silent, multi-layered, allegorical visual stories as early as the late 1960s. His work did not garner much publicity until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, though. A mere decade ago he was totally down and out, homeless and on drugs, selling his whole artistic estate to survive. Now, in 2012, the 70-plus-year-old Pushwagner is one of the most highly celebrated Norwegian artists: he exhibits internationally, his art has been acquired by the world's most prestigious museums, and his magnum opus *Soft City* is not only unanimously hailed as a masterpiece by the critics, but is also quickly becoming the best-selling Norwegian graphic novel of all times, despite it being between three and four decades old.

There is no doubt that Pushwagner is an enigma, and the buzz around him is increasing day by day. Born in Oslo in 1940 as Terje Brofos, early on he embarked on a career as an artist. It was not until he met celebrated Norwegian author Axel Jensen in 1968 that everything clicked, though. They embarked on a journey together to create a new form of adult comics, visual stories that would combine the iconic simplicity of pop art with a genuine will to tell stories – stories that were aimed at making a difference politically, raising the consciousness of the readers on various political issues. Jensen's and Pushwagner's relationship lasted many years, but for several reasons not much of what they produced was ever published or even finished.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century when Pushwagner, after numerous more or less fruitful escapades around the world, had ended up back in Norway destitute, homeless and a drug addict. Against all odds, and like a Phoenix, he was (re)discovered as an artist, *Soft City* was published for the first time to great public acclaim (by the Norwegian alternative comics publisher No Comprendo Press in 2008), he won a major case against his former business partner who had swindled him out of most of his art, and he exhibited in Oslo, Berlin, and Sydney, among other places, in a dizzyingly accelerating speed. Right now he is producing more art than ever before and there is even talk of a Pushwagner museum in Oslo. Not bad for someone who only a few years ago was set on a course of self-destruction.

Petter Mejlœnder has written the first, and so far only biography of Pushwagner, and he is very well suited to do just that. Mejlœnder is an experienced author and has written several biographies before, including one on Axel Jensen, and he seems to actually be able to understand

the rather strange and erratic Pushwagner, both as an artist and as a person. Mejlœnder gives a very personal view of Pushwagner, having been given access not only to his art but also to the person himself in a series of interviews. Mejlœnder has not written a straight biography, even though the basic facts of Pushwagner's life are there, but rather more philosophically discusses the work and the artist concurrently. It becomes evident that Pushwagner is very well read and takes more inspiration from literature than from art, and Mejlœnder underlines this is in his use of a plethora of literary quotes when analyzing Pushwagner's art and comics, breathing life into what otherwise could have been either a very dry account of the artist's life, or a purely academic analysis of his art. As the text stands, it is both enlightening and entertaining, and gives a good first insight into the mind of Pushwagner.

All is not golden, though. *Pushwagner* is a rather slim volume of a mere 58 pages, which basically consists of three short essays (some of them also published in the Norwegian press) on Pushwagner's life and work, and a large proportion of the pages are used for reproductions of his art and his comics. Thus, it is neither the big, end-all biography of Pushwagner or the much needed, oversized coffee table book with reproductions of all his major works (his intricate, almost obsessively detailed art just screams for a book much, much bigger than this almost novel sized volume). But it is a good start, and in terms of writing still the best way to get to know this extremely interesting artist.

One thing is for certain: reading *Pushwagner* will inevitably make you want to read the graphic novel *Soft City* – and reading them together certainly enhances the experience of both books. Having said this, there is still a need for both a much more substantive biography and a really lavish art book with as much of Pushwagner's art as possible. I for one will buy both when they appear.