

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

Doktori Disszertáció

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Bodily Vulnerability in Non-Fiction Comics: Interactions among Artist, Object and Reader

Testi sebezhetőség nem fikciós képregényben:
interakciók szerző, tárgy, és olvasó között

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Budapest, 2017

ADATLAP
a doktori értekezés nyilvánosságra hozatalához

I. A doktori értekezés adatai

A szerző neve: Szép Eszter

MTMT-azonosító: 1047918

A doktori értekezés címe és alcíme: Bodily Vulnerability in Non-Fiction Comics:
Interactions among Artist, Object and Reader

DOI-azonosító: 10.15476/ELTE.2017.168

A doktori iskola neve: Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola

A doktori iskolán belüli doktori program neve: Modern angol-amerikai irodalom és kultúra
doktori program

A témavezető neve és tudományos fokozata: Dr Bán Zsófia, PhD, egyetemi docens és Dr.
Friedrich Judit, CSc, egyetemi docens

A témavezető munkahelye: BZs: ELTE BTK Amerikanisztika; FJ: ELTE BTK Anglisztika

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Kelt: Budapest, 2017. november 13.

a doktori értekezés szerzőjének aláírása

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Acknowledgements

I could not have written this dissertation alone. I am grateful to the many people who have helped with ideas, questions, and with their presence. I am indebted to and I would like to thank

my mother, Eszter Meleg, for encouraging me to study.

my supervisors, Zsófia Bán and Judit Friedrich, for their advice, support, emails, coffees, and especially for the sometimes difficult questions they have challenged me with. A very personal thank you to Judit for allowing me to read her family's *Calvin and Hobbes* collection in preparation for my first major international publication on metacomics.

the European Association of American Studies, whose postgraduate travel grant made it possible for me to research at the absolutely fabulous Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at the Ohio State University in 2015. I also would like to acknowledge the help of Susan Liberator, librarian and heart of BICL.

Mihaela Precup from the University of Bucharest, for the inspiring conversations, and fun! And also for inviting me in her research project *Representations of Violence in Contemporary American Popular Culture*, funded by UEFISCDI, whereby making it possible for me to research at the Bodleian Libraries, and to visit a number of inspiring conferences: the *Stages and Pages* Graphic Medicine conference at the University of Dundee in 2016; the *Birth, Death, and Rebirth: (Re-)Generation as Text* conference at the University of Bucharest in 2017; and the *Documenting Trauma: Comics and the Politics of Memory* conference at the University of Oxford in 2017.

Lynda Barry, Miriam Katin, Gabby Schulz, and Fantagraphics Books for their permission to reprint images from their work.

my friends and fellow researchers, Laurike In't Veld, Harriett Earle, and Kata Gyuris for the honest and insightful conversations about writing, comics, academia, and life in general.

comics scholars Jared Gardner, Hillary Chute, Nick Sousanis, Scott Bukatman, Paul Williams, Paul Fischer Davies, Christina Maria Koch, Lukas Etter, and Ben Owen for their expertise, ideas and advice at various stages of this project.

the members of the Narratives of Culture and Identity Research Group, the coolest gang of young researchers ever. Our more or less regular meetings have always inspired me, helped me focus and regain faith in my own research project.

Balázs Horváth, friend and giallo expert, for being the first reader of all of my chapters and for providing extensive reliable feedback.

my husband, Kálmán Jelítai, for the support, encouragement, listening, cooking, coffee, interest, questions, and for reminding me that days off are the best things about dissertations.

Preface

Reading comics is not only a performance of our cognitive skills, it is also a performance and interaction of bodies. I remember clearly the morning when I was reading Miriam Katin's autobiographical graphic narrative, *Letting It Go* (2013) in the bathtub: what a charming colorful book of memories and mundane events, what a modern old lady talking to her son via Skype, I thought. The book deals with the everyday activities of a comic book artist called Miriam, and the process of her learning to accept that her son plans to settle in Germany, a country that she still associates with the Holocaust and her childhood traumas. I remember marveling at the courage Katin has in drawing a caricature of herself, showing the character that stands for her in a series of unflattering situations, like freaking out at the sight of cockroaches. Katin representing Miriam occasionally almost as a witch, with ridiculous uncombed hair, big bulging eyes, and in an old-school nightgown. What irony, I thought. The narrative is equally honest and uncompromising about the prejudices of the old hag in a nightie. But I was not prepared to see the naked body of the protagonist of this confessional narrative covered in her own excrement. I winced. The scene is in full color and is long, almost longer than one can bear. Why is this such a challenge to bear? What is happening to my body while I am reading that book, that scene? How does this address by the artist change my approach to the remaining parts of the story? Why is Katin doing this? Was she not afraid to draw herself like that? Is it a unique gesture or is it part of a strategy? How does such a representation relate to the tradition of self-representation in comics and to the ways cartoonists communicate with their readers?

The following dissertation was born out of these questions.

Introduction. Engagement via Drawing in Non-Fiction Comics

“Drawing... shows us to ourselves as it were in a mirror at the heart of our own world of truth—truth not of abstract concepts, but of visual conviction.” Philip Rawson, *Drawing* 6.

My approach to comics is pragmatic in nature and is based on phenomenology: I consider comics as a form of dynamic and embodied interaction between its creators and audience. Via interacting with comics, the artists and the readers take part in performances during which ideas and experiences are exchanged. Creating and reading comics can, in fact, be thought of as forms of “dialogical engagement”—to borrow Vivian Sobchack’s term from phenomenological film theory (23). During this engagement, the possible meanings of comics are performed by the “dynamic involvement” (13) of the artist and the reader, whose active and embodied participation is organized around the actual comics. Naturally, appreciating art in general can be approached as interaction, and mutual involvement is not a special characteristic of comics. Yet, I believe there are specific forms of embodied engagement unique to the medium of comics; and within the medium, non-fiction comics can also be described by specific characteristics. This dissertation claims that the way creators and artists interact with each other and with the actual object of comics can be approached through their engagement with their own and with others’ vulnerability. Modes of embodied engagement via drawing is, in fact, the topic that this dissertation ventures to investigate: my aim is to find out how non-fiction graphic narratives, which are made with extensive bodily labor, reconnect with one of the most basic experiences of the body, that of its vulnerability.

Non-fiction comics are preoccupied with the body—I will elaborate the nature of this relationship shortly—and for this reason, they need to come to terms with the body’s imperfection, limits, possibilities, and exposure; that is, with its vulnerability. This dissertation is the first systematic study of the intersection of comics and vulnerability; and the enquiry undertaken will be governed by questions inspired by the drawn nature of comics.

This dissertation focuses on drawing in comics as a way of artistic engagement and also as a product resulting from the artist’s activity. For this reason, to refer to the producer of lines and drawings, I will use the simple term “drawer” instead of other often used terms, such as “artist,” “creator,” “cartoonist,” and “draughtsman,” all of which open up connotations and associations in directions this dissertation does not wish to examine. Using the term “drawer” allows me to narrow my focus on the type of engagement that I believe to be specific to comics autobiography and comics reportage: the engagement enabled by the line. However, outside the context of the activity of drawing, e.g., in the context of publishing, I also use the above terms where appropriate.

Engagement with comics takes place, on the one hand, by the involvement of the drawer’s and reader’s bodies, and, on the other hand, by acknowledging and interacting with the materiality of the actual comics which is mediating the interaction. Reading comics can thus be thought of as a mediated interaction between three bodies: those of the drawer, reader, and object. This conception, again, resembles the way Sobchack speaks about experiencing film. The study of how the body is involved in activities around comics is not alien from recent investigations in comics studies. Comics scholars have either studied the embodied investment of the artist (Baetens in “Revealing Traces,” Chute in *Graphic Women*, Gardner in “Storylines,” Grennan in *A Theory of Narrative Drawing*), or that of the reader (Hague in

Comics and the Senses, Orbán in “Embodied Reading,” Scherr in “Shaking Hands” and Scherr in “Joe Sacco’s Comics of Performance”). This dissertation maps out a framework in which the embodied processes of drawing and the embodied processes of interpretation can be related in dialogical engagement. Based on this dialogical framework which determines my thinking about comics, the chapters focus on the embodied involvement of the drawer. The four chapters investigate aspects of the drawer’s interaction with his or her material and the experience of vulnerability drawing allows. The reader’s bodily engagement and performance of comics are not examined at the moment; however, the last chapter offers ways that I believe are fruitful in studying embodied readerly performance, a direction I intend to investigate in the near future.

As a point of departure, this dissertation relies on the re-evaluation of the body’s role in thinking (especially in orientational metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson 14-21), on the phenomenological perception of the lived-body establishing the basis for communication (Sobchack based on Merleau-Ponty), and on current explorations of the ways in which the body is involved in activities around comics. Non-fiction comics is at the center of embodied interactions: the handmade drawings are not only the products of the drawer’s hand, they also reference the drawer’s body in many ways (see Chapter Four). In turn, readers use not only their senses to interpret comics, but also use their bodies as reference in their interpretations of visual narratives. Because of the involvement of the body, both drawing and reading comics can be regarded as performance: meaning is born in situated and embodied interactions. During these performances the drawer and the reader interact with the material features of comics: the drawer uses pencils, pens, and digital tools; the reader (typically) holds the printed comics in hand. Even though the final comics is printed and mass-produced, the reader feels the drawer’s bodily trace in the drawings; the Benjaminian *aura* in the age of mechanical reproduction needs to be reinterpreted in the case of comics

(Bukatman, Chute, Gardner). Hillary Chute calls this felt presence “intimacy,” and says that autobiographical comics are emphatically private (*Graphic Women* 10). Jared Gardner explains the embodied connection enabled by the drawn line with the fact that comics is the only reproduced medium where the original line, the trace of the drawer’s hand, is not replaced by typography (“Storylines” 56).

Comics, however, is not the only medium that builds on the visibility of the drawer’s bodily investment: handmade artist books are created with a similar attention to bodily performance. In the context of digital textuality and digital image making, “different genres of paper-based literature are now reinventing themselves as *embodied* writing” (Brillenburgh Wurth et al. 94). Similarly to artist books, digital contexts do influence the production and interpretation of comics; the present turn to bodily processes might in fact be a way to come to terms with both the new possibilities and with the materiality of the old, paper-based media, in light of, and co-presence with, digital environments.

In printed and mass produced comics, drawing preserves the trace of the drawer’s actual body on the material surface of the page, and the comics invites the reader not only to read it or to have a look at it, but to engage with it. I will devote a separate section to theories of drawing and to approaches to the line as a trace of the body (“Methods: Focusing on Drawing, Reading the Line”), and the whole dissertation is devoted to the study of the drawer’s body, the drawn body, and the line, and their interrelated performance of vulnerability. Now, I would like to briefly introduce some approaches to the reader’s involvement in reading comics, as these, though not yet explicitly theorized in the following chapters, do influence the readings I make on these pages. In the framework of this dissertation, I consider the reader’s performance while reading a part of the dialogue in which the body plays a decisive role: the senses and the shifting position of the body inform

the perception and interpretation of comics, and our bodies also provide reference for interpreting the depicted scenes.

Throughout the history of comics scholarship, the active involvement and engagement of the reader has been a frequently repeated and accepted fact, but it has been thought of as mental, and not bodily, engagement. Comics engages readers in medium-specific ways, but the most influential theory, McCloud's concept of closure, narrows this involvement down to the visual field. Closure means that the reader creatively and mentally fills in the gaps, so called gutters, found between two adjacent elements of comics (*Understanding Comics* 63). Importantly, McCloud theorizes closure as a link between adjacent elements. Thierry Groensteen, however, thinks about pages, issues, and even series of comics as a network of interconnected elements. Groensteen elaborated his theory in *System of Comics*, in which the reader works out tabular relations. Groensteen relies on the reader's visual memory as well as their imaginative involvement: the reader imaginatively connects remote parts of comics, and thus perceives it as a network—yet his approach still restricts the reader's involvement to the visual field.

These theories minimize the role of the reader's body in the process of interpretation. More recent approaches, for example Scott Bukatman's and Tom Gunning's comparison of comics reading to playing games, do count on a type of bodily engagement; especially Bukatman builds on the concept of immersion in play and reading (*Hellboy's World* 2-3). Gunning says that navigating irregular page layouts and intricate grids requires "acrobatic skills"—metaphorically, but, in the case of oversize comics, also physically—and provides "vertiginous" sensations (46). Katalin Orbán's description of comics as a transitional medium incorporates the reader's bodily interaction with comics while reading. According to Orbán, comics thrives on the threshold of digital and printed media, and to interpret it, the

reader equally relies on hyperreading, the strategy necessary for navigating multimodal and tabularly organized digital media, and strategies utilized with paper-based mediums. Orbán acknowledges that the mediality and materiality of comics influence readerly interaction, and calls comics reading “visuo-haptic processing” (“A Language of Scratches and Stitches” 171), in which the reader’s body takes an active part, and prominence is given to the sense of touch. Ian Hague’s monograph, *Comics and the Senses* (2014), categorizes and lists the ways in which comics can provide sensory input for the reader: the reader reacts to these material characteristics—e.g., the size, shape or weight of the comics, its colors and gloss, soundtrack, etc.—and these sensory influences can have an effect on the reader’s performance of comics.

Within a framework of embodied communication among the drawer, the object, and the reader, I believe that non-fiction comics enable special kinds of relationships. According to Nancy K. Miller, author of *But Enough About Me*, readers interpret autobiography—which is one type of non-fiction that will be examined in this dissertation, the other type being reportage, both, naturally, in the medium of comics—in terms of identification and disidentification (3). Non-fiction comics articulate these processes of dis/identification narratively, visually, and in embodied ways. Smith and Watson, in the second edition of their *Reading Autobiography* (2010), connect the experience of creating and reading comics autobiographies to the body when they write that non-fiction comics build on “registering and archiving of embodied styles and practices that elicit the viewer’s relational identification in co-constructing a narrative” (173). The “relational identification” mentioned by Smith and Watson is reinterpreted in this dissertation as a layered embodied relationship building on vulnerability.

Concepts: Vulnerability as Embodied Dialogue

Engagement with comics and the experience of vulnerability are both rooted in the body. Moreover, similarly to my model of embodied engagement with comics, is experienced and performed in interaction and in dialogical situations. Vulnerability does not refer to risk, weakness or getting or causing bodily harm—rather, it is a necessary ethical consequence of the very bodily nature of both our existence and of the bodily nature of interaction with comics. By vulnerability, I understand a *potentiality* for *encounter*, which is mediated via *bodies*, and which is manifest in the drawer's and the reader's respective embodied interactions with comics as an actual material object. The experience of vulnerability may be openly addressed in any comics, for example in comics about the Holocaust, genocide, war, illness or sexual assault. I would like to claim, however, that the experience of vulnerability can be regarded as a defining underlying quality in non-fiction comics, as it can inform the birth and the quality of the lines in drawing (Chapter One), and the ways the autobiographical character is drawn in memoirs (Chapter Two).

The emphasis on vulnerability in interactions among individuals and social groups has been most influentially articulated by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Butler's starting point is the experience of pain and grief, an experience common to everyone: "the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency" (26). It is because of the body that Butler conceptualizes vulnerability as a universal condition, a condition shared by everyone. For Butler, vulnerability "emerges with life itself" (31). She elaborates on this notion as "there is a more general conception of the human... one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other ... by virtue of bodily requirements" (31). In other words, due to our bodily and social needs we are always vulnerable to the Other. Although the individual experiences vulnerability in his or her own body, the social aspect of

vulnerability is defining: vulnerability manifests in the interaction with the Other. Furthermore, the elementary need to be supported, the quality which Rosalyn Diprose calls the “intercorporeal foundation of human existence” (185), creates a sociability among people which is based on the experience of helplessness.

As suggested earlier, vulnerability manifests itself as a form of dialogue: these risky and dynamic interactions reveal that one’s vulnerability can be responded to in many ways. Butler observes that “we are not only constituted by our relations, but also dispossessed by them” (24); and Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds sum up the fundamental effect of vulnerability in the very first sentence of their essay collection as “[h]uman life is conditioned by vulnerability” (1). Because it is such a vital experience from early on in human existence, Butler talks about “primary vulnerability” (31), while Simone Drichel, editor of the “Vulnerability” issue of *SubStance*, refers to the baby’s experience of “original helplessness,” which is Freud’s term (12). “In other words, and importantly,” explains Drichel, “helplessness *has to be experienced* ‘in order to become a moral creature’” (12, emphasis in the original).

Too often, vulnerability is framed as a dangerous openness, as an exposure to violation, against which the individual or a community has to protect themselves: “the experience of vulnerability ... generally results in pursuits of invulnerability, where invulnerability serves the function of restoring a sense of control and mastery over a threatening environment” (Drichel 5). Margrit Shildrick notes that, often, vulnerability is not only perceived as a lack of a positive quality but is also directly attributed to the Other. Shildrick contrasts this conception of vulnerability to that of hers: vulnerability is “an existential state that may belong to any one of us, but which is characterised nonetheless as a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm” (1). Vulnerability can

be used to label social groups, who are then further described in negative terms as weak or exposed to harm. Within this framework of value attribution, when the term is applied to the community of the speaker, and not to that of the Other, the emphasis “tends to fall back into the language of protection” (Diprose 189). However, when positioning vulnerability as a threat and as a mere negative quality, individuals and communities miss not only the possibility for empathy and ethical encounter, but to be able to feel pleasure: “Getting helplessness wrong, then, means fleeing from and defending against the very relationality that, to be sure, is always a potential source of pain and wounding, but that is also the condition of possibility for pleasure and satisfaction, and ultimately for ethical life. Without helplessness ... we deprive ourselves of the conditions of possibility of satisfaction” (Driel based on Phillips, 13).

In Butler’s framework the dialogical nature of vulnerability means that it allows for an ethical encounter with the Other (*Precarious* 43). This encounter involves risk, as there is no guarantee that one’s vulnerability will be recognized, as vulnerability is conditioned not only by personal, but also geopolitical and social factors. When the ethical encounter takes place, “that recognition [of the Other] has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself” (*Precarious* 43). Diprose speaks about the same experience when she writes that vulnerability manifests the “dynamism of existence” in “corporeal interdependence,” because of which interactions can be mutual, instead of only one-way (185). The above shows that theoreticians of vulnerability think about the risk inherent in the concept not as a threat or pretext for building actual and metaphorical walls, but as potentiality and a key to its dynamic nature. However, vulnerability cannot be grasped within the binary oppositions of lack and gain, self and other. Shildrick, just like Butler, speaks about the potential of vulnerability to “signal a transformation of the relation between

self and other.” For Shildrick, the encounter with the Other is not a single occurrence but a “constant condition of becoming” (1). Transformation and the state of becoming are the sources of dynamism in vulnerability, and they also make regeneration possible after a negative response—answering the vulnerability of the Other via drawing will be in focus in Chapter Three, while Chapter Four will investigate the issue of regeneration.

Shildrick’s concept of a “constant condition of becoming” suggests a transformative potential in experiencing vulnerability. When leaving the framework of loss and gain behind, vulnerability as an “ethical encounter” can trigger change for all parties involved. In Butler’s words, recognizing vulnerability “is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other” (*Precarious* 44). This transformation happens in the state that Diprose, based on Heidegger, calls “dwelling” and defines as a “place and process” which “is precarious in the sense of [being] *dynamic, somewhat unpredictable, and always unfinished*” (192).

In the dissertation I claim that via drawing, invitations for ethical encounters are initiated by the autographers, to use Gardner’s term for authors of autobiographical comics (“Autography’s Biography” 3). The autographer’s invitations are mediated by the drawn line and by the actual printed comics; and can be responded to by the reader. Sometimes, and the last two chapters on Sacco’s comics reportage will show this, the autographer is staging an ethical encounter for a third party in a sensitive way. I aim to explore here the nature of transformation enabled by vulnerability as it is initiated and articulated in a mediated form in comics. Chapter Four, and more emphatically the Conclusion, turn from examination of the drawers’ formulations of vulnerability to the readers’ interpretive strategies and performative responses to the meaning of the given comics, and more specifically, to the way vulnerability has been introduced in the given comics. Taking part

in the ethical encounter offered by comics autobiography or reportage is a kind of empathic response which builds on emotion as well as cognition, and in this respect it recalls E. Ann Kaplan's concept of vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma refers to the feelings of empathy in those who have encountered someone else's trauma in a visually mediated environment (90). However, by drawing this structural similarity between vicarious trauma and an encounter enabled by the experience of vulnerability, I do not intend to equate the two: while one can be vicariously traumatized by images or narratives, one does not necessarily engage in a transformative discourse based on the shared, recognized, and embodied experience of vulnerability. The idea of encounter that I build on becomes closest to vicarious trauma in the last chapter, which deals with Joe Sacco's raw representations and direct treatment of trauma in his comics reportage. Here, Sacco represents traumatized named individuals (e.g., fig. 3.2 or 4.3), traumatized crowds, and traumatizing situations; and, as a result, the reader's relational identification with those who suffer or have suffered is stronger. With this in mind, it is my intention to show in this chapter the dynamism and possibility for transformation that is inherent in the concepts of vulnerability and ethical encounter.

Materials: Autobiography and Reportage as Genres of Non-Fiction Comics

Comics, "the first true mass-media form" (Gardner, *Projections* 5), started out in the 1890s as short, "remarkably unfunny" (*Projections* 9) series of images on the "shock of modernity" (*Projections* 9), published in various periodicals and read by immigrants and the urban poor. Until the appearance of the one-shot graphic novel at the end of the 1970s, comics as a medium has been rooted in seriality not only because of its basic structure building on sequences of visual units, but also because of the rhythm of publication of daily strips, weekend special, or comic book (Gardner *Projections*, Hatfield, Sabin). Book format

autobiography and reportage became a marketable and culturally relevant form of comics at around 2000, when the generation of cartoonists inspired by Art Spiegelman's *Maus* started publishing their own non-fiction narratives. Before this turn, and, in fact, simultaneously with it, serial publication and the format of the comic book have been the major platforms for fictional stories as diverse as science fiction, fantasy, post-apocalyptic narratives, stories about superheroes, and many more. The roots of autobiographical sensibilities reach back to the 1960s, to the personal, rebellious and ironic comics of the commix underground. The new "subversive meanings" (Hatfield 11) were particularly represented by Robert Crumb in his *Zap Comix*. Crumb became an iconic figure of the movement, where, from 1972, feminist perspectives were also represented, especially in *Wimmen's Commix*.

Comics Autobiography and the Graphic Novel

The first comics autobiography emerged within this alternative comics community in 1972: in *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, Justin Green gives an account of his teenage years, Catholic guilt, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The painful honesty of *Binky Brown* showed the possibilities of the medium to go analytical, and it has influenced most autographers in Green's generation, including Aline Kominsky-Crumb, who said: "When I saw Justin's work it gave me permission to or a way to find my voice to talk about my own life" ("Panel" 89). Similarly, Art Spiegelman, a major influence for the post-2000 generation of autographers, famously said that "without Binky Brown there would be no *Maus*" (quoted in Gardner, "Autography's Biography" 8). Justin Green's story is preoccupied with the protagonist's body's relation to space, and it addresses the embodied nature of making comics on its very first page, entitled "A Confession to My Readers." Here, the author's naked body is drawn hanging face down with hands tied behind his back, while he is drawing a page of comics with a pen held between his teeth. Green shows the very moment when his

first-person comics is born, and significantly to my dissertation, he depicts this moment as torturous, painful and embodied. The confessional honesty of comics autobiography is shown here to be tied to an extreme experience of bodily pain and vulnerability. Furthermore, the autographical situation is discursively constructed: Green's avatar is looking out at the readers, addressing and involving them in his literal performance of his graphic confession. The autographers following in Green's and Spiegelman's footsteps confirm the relationship between body, pain and creating comics.

Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1986), an early first version of which was published in the same year as Green's *Binky Brown*, is a narrative of trauma and post-trauma (Hirsch) caused by the Holocaust, and, significantly, it also engages with the issue of representing the body. It reaches out to the funny animal tradition by Spiegelman's rendering of various nationalities as people with the heads of mice, cats, pigs, dogs, moths, reindeers or frogs (in fact, the original story was published in *Funny Animals #1*.) These composite bodies can be interpreted as the second generation Holocaust survivor's reply to the purifying rhetoric and practices distorting, experimenting with or annihilating the bodies of people considered subhuman by the Nazis and their allies decimating the first generation. However, the subversive value of the animal metaphor is problematized when actual family photographs are included in *Maus*: bodies escape categorization inherent in representation. It is no surprise that there is a strong tendency in the post-2000 boom of the Anglo-American graphic novel to address the questions of representing bodies in their diversity: whether gendered (Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 2006, and *Are You My Mother?*, 2012; Nicole J. Georges, *Calling Dr. Laura*, 2013), racial (Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 2017; Sarah Glidden, *Rolling Blackouts*, 2016), disabled (Al Davison, *The Spiral Cage*, 2003), or abused bodies (Katie Green, *Lighter Than My Shadow*, 2013; Una, *Becoming Unbecoming*, 2015). Considering the prominence of the issue, Chapter Two is devoted to the autographer's

creation and recreation of a cartoon body, and to the processes of self-examination and self-objectification inherent to the autobiographical look (El Refaie), and which also entail exploring and visualizing one's vulnerability.

Though it has been first studied in *Maus*, autographers frequently include actual or drawn photographs in their comics; and the peritextual elements of these works also frequently display photographic material. Photography is used by these authors either to pin down, or, on the contrary, to complicate assertions of truth in non-fiction comics; these images also mediate relationships to memory; and photographs also position graphic narratives as authentic and accurate. The study of actual and drawn photographs has become an inspiring and fruitful direction in studies of comics non-fiction (e.g., Hatfield, Orbán); recently, for example Nancy Pedri edited a fascinating thematic issue of *ImageText* (9.2) called "Mixing Visual Media in Comics."¹ In the introduction Pedri argues that comics utilize a multimodal literacy and "visually complex narrative strategies," and for this reason the medium can be regarded as multisemiotic. In this dissertation, instead of regarding photography as a tool that facilitates or hinders authentication or factuality, I approach it as a medium of representation which can inform the drawn line in comics. This dissertation contributes to the study of photography in comics by looking at photographic realism as a stylistic influence. The contrast of realistically drawn photographs and a non-referential imaginative style will be studied in Chapter Two, where I elaborate the different positioning of the drawn body that these styles enable. Furthermore, in Chapter Three I build on the association of photography with factual truth, that is, with something that has happened in front of the lenses of a mechanical recording device (Möller, Ritchin). I will demonstrate this persisting presupposition influences realistic or photographic drawing styles, which are consequently

¹ Pedri also edited "The Narrative Functions of Photography in Comics" issue of *Image & Narrative* in 2015.

praised for the degree of detail in which they show the factual, even in the age of widely manipulated digital image-making technologies.

The titles of graphic memoirs listed a few lines earlier—in a list that did not even make an attempt at including the many titles in comics life writing—indicate that, since *Binky Brown*, a decisive shift has taken place in terms of comics format and distribution. Traditional and historically significant platforms where comics strips used to be published, such as newspapers and magazines (cf. Lynda Barry’s interview in Chute, *Outside the Box*), either refrain from comics, or republish already popular syndicated strips (Ben Katchor, *MoCCA Arts Festival*, 2015). Instead, the current English speaking market is dominated by two of comics longer formats, the comic book—which is, strictly speaking, a booklet—and book format comics—often, though not always, hard cover editions. Comic books and book format comics address different audiences, they are marketed and distributed differently (Baetens and Frey, Hatfield), and non-fiction genres boom especially in the graphic novel format and on online platforms. Following Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, authors of *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, commissioned by the Cambridge University Press, I refer to the graphic novel as a separate category within comics. Baetens and Frey list multiple reasons for considering the graphic novel as a separate means of expression within the medium of comics. The authors argue that “the graphic novel as a medium is part of other more-encompassing cultural fields and practices (graphic literature, visual storytelling)” (7), and list four features that have a tendency to characterize graphic novels, though they are not necessarily present in all graphic novels. First, graphic novels tend to share certain formal features, such as exploring and reflecting on the rules of the comics medium, or the increased importance of the narrator. Second, as far as the content is concerned, there is a recognizable tendency to speak about serious topics in serious tones, be it fiction or faction. Third, the already discussed publication format of the book, in contrast to serially published

comics, suggests prestige and long-standing value, and makes different storing practices available. Finally, and this has also been touched upon, the production and distribution of the graphic novel happens in different channels than other forms of comics: instead of the direct market of specialty shops, it is also available for a general readership in bookshops and online bookstores (7-23).

However, before Baetens and Frey bravely and somewhat provocatively argued for the graphic novel as a legitimate and separate category in 2015, the term had not been frequently used in academia. The reason is that, in popular use, “graphic novel” has often been reduced to “a convenient, if often inaccurate label” (Hatfield 4) and an umbrella term popularized by marketing departments: more often than not what consumers find under this label in bookshops are not graphic novels as described by Baetens and Frey, but collections of previously published comic book stories often about superheroes, or Japanese manga, or strip collections. The graphic novel is marketed in a higher price range and the term is in fact rooted in marketing: it reaches back to Will Eisner, who allegedly coined, but definitely popularized, the term when he marketed his *A Contract with God* (1978) with it. However, as the magazines and fanzines of the 1970s show, the term was not invented by a single person. Rather, it was born within comics fandom, in its inner dialogs conducted in magazines via mail (Hatfield 165, Paul Williams *Reframing the Graphic Novel*, upcoming).

Since the 1980s the term “graphic novel” has not been popular with many cartoonists who felt that the new term denies the roots of the medium in favor of a new cultural position and continued to use the words “comics.” Referring to these sentiments and artistic positions, in the “Comics and Media” issue of *Critical Inquiry* (2014) Katalin Orbán called the graphic novel the “product of the gentrification of comics,” which has become elevated “into a canonizable literary form” (170). The new format of the actual book that was introduced

with the new term has brought with itself new social practices and a wider audience. The new format premiered loudly outside fandom in 1986-87, when “the big three,” Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* were published as one-volume comics narratives. These comics, in the position of the “new” graphic novel, “were perceived by a naïve press not familiar with comics fandom ... as constituting a new and historically unique trend” (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 91).

After 2000, the number of works published as graphic novels, as well as “real” graphic novels in the sense Baetens and Frey mean it, increased. The graphic novel has established itself as a means of expression and as a term that is not an insult to comics. The number of established publishing houses opening their doors towards the medium (e.g., Jonathan Cape) also increased, while the publishers specializing in comics (Fantagraphics, Drawn & Quarterly) are also stable on the market. The corpus of this dissertation has also been selected from this post 2000-period: this is the time when the memoir boom reached comics, and when the medium offered a wide range of relevant book-length contributions to addressing topics that have previously been studied primarily in literary fiction and non-fiction.

A few years ago, Art Spiegelman called the long graphic novel the “dominant format” of comics at the present. Though he does not refute the legitimacy of the format, he highlights its drawbacks from a practical point of view, when he claims that comics

does have a dominant format now; it is called the graphic novel. It is the book. The single book that tells a story. And that can function. You mentioned these other things like the web, which can be periodic. It can happen every day, people clicking on the website. I think insofar as we have a culture that can consume things, it can

include graphic novels. The problem with graphic novels, maybe, is that to make material in three hundred page chunks, man, talk about original sin, you know? That's an enormous amount of punishing labor. Many of the best graphic novels that are coming out take five years, seven years, nine years. For me it was thirteen years [making *Maus*] trying to figure out what this graphic novel might be. ... If that's the only format that people can get paid for making comics in, there is a problem, because people who can barely put together a two-page story have to make a six hundred page story to make their mark. ... for me at least, comics are an art of compression. (Mitchell and Spiegelman 35)

The word “comics” has indeed been almost impossible to utter in academia until recently, hence the founders of the prestigious *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (est. 2010), deliberately chose the word order in their title in order not to frighten university libraries as founder and editor David Huxley explained at the *Comics Forum: Comics and Space* conference (Leeds, 15 Sept 2017). Interestingly, as the word “comics” has become more and more acceptable, a new debate or new taboo has emerged in the positioning of comics—and not graphic novels—within the art sphere. Writing in 2014 about the 2012 *Comics: Philosophy and Practice* conference at the University of Chicago, film scholar Tom Gunning notes:

For the most part the people who drew and wrote comics proclaimed that they had no interest in being dragged into this category by academic critics, while most of the academic critics claimed they had no such intentions. As a film historian, well versed in the debates during the last century over whether cinema could be an art, I find such discussions simultaneously pointless and oddly useful. (36)

This dissertation, in building on terms and concepts borrowed from art history, can be approached as a contribution to this debate. I believe, however, that in *Comics Versus Art* (2012) Bart Beaty convincingly positioned comics within the arts, practices around art, and the art world, and his line of thought will be introduced in more detail in the “Methods: Focusing on Drawing, Reading the Line” section of the Introduction.

Baetens and Frey observe a shift in how a good graphic novel is perceived by its readers, and this shift defines the foundations of my research project: “In the early to the mid-1990s, graphic novels were sometimes identified simply as comics created by better writers. In contrast, grosso modo, today’s contemporary graphic novel is more associated with visual sophistication” (94). Naturally, this is a generalization, but it describes a tendency that runs parallel to the turn to the body in cultural theory and a simultaneous interest in comics studies towards the embodied nature of drawing and reading comics. Comics is a drawn, interpreted, and subjective narrative medium, and its creators have recently increasingly turned to narratives that border on the factual and the fictional, such as the diary, memoir, autobiography, semi-autobiography, biography, political commentary, case study, travelogue, and journalism. The undeniably interpretative nature of drawing and narrating is always clearly visible in comics—and this has not been seen as a hindrance. Quite on the contrary, according to Jared Gardner; the openness about the processes of mediation is what non-fiction comics creators find engaging and inviting about the medium. In “Autography’s Biography” he writes: “[t]he split between autographer and subject is etched on every page, and the hand-crafted nature of the images and the “autobifictional” (sic) nature of the narrative are undeniable. But it is important that this split is not a casualty or regrettable cost of the autobiographer’s chosen form, but is instead precisely what motivates the drive to tell the self in comics form” (12). The mockingly on-the-spot term “autobifictional” was coined by Lynda Barry to describe her own autobiographical comics. “Autobifictionalography,” by

which Barry indicates the difficulty of separating fiction from fact, was printed at the front matter collage of Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) as a joking warning: "Please note: this is a work of autobifictionalography."

The dilemma of how to interpret non-fiction comics was probably brought to the attention of the general public by the success of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Having seen in amazement that the second volume of *Maus* reached high ranks on *The New York Times* best sellers list under the category "fiction," Spiegelman asked the editors in a letter, published on 29 Dec 1991, to move the book from the list of "fiction" to "nonfiction." His argument is worth quoting at full length as it highlights some of the anxieties around the idea of non-fiction comics. His deeply ironic solution refutes the medium to be taken too seriously as he proposes the introduction of a new label especially for his work: "nonfiction/mice."

If your list were divided into literature and nonliterature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that "fiction" indicates that a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the 13 I devoted to my two-volume project if I could only have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelistic structure.

The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing, and it's not as though my passages on how to build a bunker and repair concentration camp boots got the book onto your advice, how-to and miscellaneous list. It's just that I shudder to think how David Duke—if he could read—would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.

I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special "nonfiction/ mice" category to your list? (nytimes.com 29 Dec 1991)

Spiegelman does not argue for the legitimization of comics as literature—an argument that was taken by comics scholarship at the beginning of the 21st century (see the titles *Alternative Comics. An Emerging Literature* by Charles Hatfield or *This Book Contains Graphic Language. Comics as Literature* by Rocco Versacci). Spiegelman votes for considering comics as a separate medium. Furthermore, Spiegelman uses the length of time spent on creating *Maus* as an argument for its seriousness, implying that the work was completed with the help of thorough research and a series of interviews, all of which could have been spared had he wanted to write and draw a fictional story.

Maus offers a life narrative of Spiegelman's father, but it is also a record of Spiegelman's life. He consciously edits the scenes represented in the panels, building on visual hints, parallels, symbols, and even visualizing the errors of memory. Cartoonists disagree on the degree to which the plot of autobiographical comics could or should be interpreted as authentic or transparent reformulations of actual life events, expressing that the truth value of non-fiction comics cannot be reduced to factual truth. Phoebe Gloeckner, author of *"A Child's Life" and Other Stories* (2001), repeatedly claims that she maintains a distance between herself and her cartoon self in her autobiographical comics: "I mean you make a character of yourself. It is not really you. People can feel like it is you, but in a sense it is not" ("Panel: Comics and Autobiography" 93). In contrast, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, creator of *Need More Love* (2007), said in the same conversation: "My character is me. I have no detachment and no control and I can't make up anything" (93). Comics autobiography is motivated by this tension between distance and identification that is present both in its

creation and in the fluctuating reading strategies utilized by its audience. Consequently, identification and authenticity (Hatfield 2005, El Refaie 2012), and the representation of the “complicated nature of identity” (Versacci 49), have become the main topics of academic study of comics. In this dissertation I insert the dance between distance and identification in the framework of an embodied interaction between artist and reader, and trace this dilemma back to the very origins of the line used in drawing. Distance and identification in creation will be connected to the experience of one’s vulnerability, the aspects of which are investigated in the different chapters.

Comics Reportage

In the second part of this dissertation, I analyze two comics by Joe Sacco, namely *Safe Area Goražde* and *The Fixer*, which belong to the genre of comics reportage. Sacco, a trained journalist who publishes his works in the medium of comics as graphic novels, says that he cannot imagine leaving the character based on himself—that is, his autobiographical avatar—out of his stories, as a result of which his reportage is always personally invested, and contains autographical traits. Sacco calls his work “comics journalism,” and he is in fact the inventor of the genre, which has become very popular both in print and online media. While major print news outlets such as *The Guardian* also occasionally order comics reportage (e.g., “Complacency Kills” by Joe Sacco), several websites have been established to be dedicated to comics journalism: *The Nib*. *Political Cartoons and Nonfiction Comics* (thenib.com), *Cartoon Movement* (cartoonmovement.com), or *Positive Negatives* (positivenegatives.org).

Comics journalism is a complicated balancing act between news and comics, fact and narrative, mechanical recording and drawing. The history of drawn reports on atrocities goes

back to Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Chute, *Disaster Drawn*), and present-day comics journalists can be regarded as representatives of the artist-reporter tradition (Chute, *Disaster Drawn* 10). Yet the current popularity of comics journalism must be understood in the context of digital image making and image manipulation both in the news and by individuals, and in comics' transparency about not being transparent: in contrast to the dichotomy of suspicion of and dependence on digital images (Möller, Ritchin), comics are open about their artifice and interpreted nature. Comics journalism is defined by one of its practitioners, Dan Archer, as "relaying news stories in a visual format" (Knight Fellowship Talk). Yet it is not simply a "visual format," but a comics format – and this difference is essential. In comics journalism, the multimodality of comics, which has recently been emphasized by Nancy Pedri in relation to photography (but an observation that has been articulated by many other scholars, too), is emphatically made felt and is relied on. Comics journalists frequently incorporate photographs or draw their images based on photographs, and online pieces can integrate links and other media. The medium of comics holds the promise that pieces of comics journalism can reach an audience that is more open to comics than to traditional forms of reportage, and thus comics journalism can be used to raise awareness of various political agendas (Dunn, Stafford, Scherr, Vågnes). However, this assumption is yet to be proved.

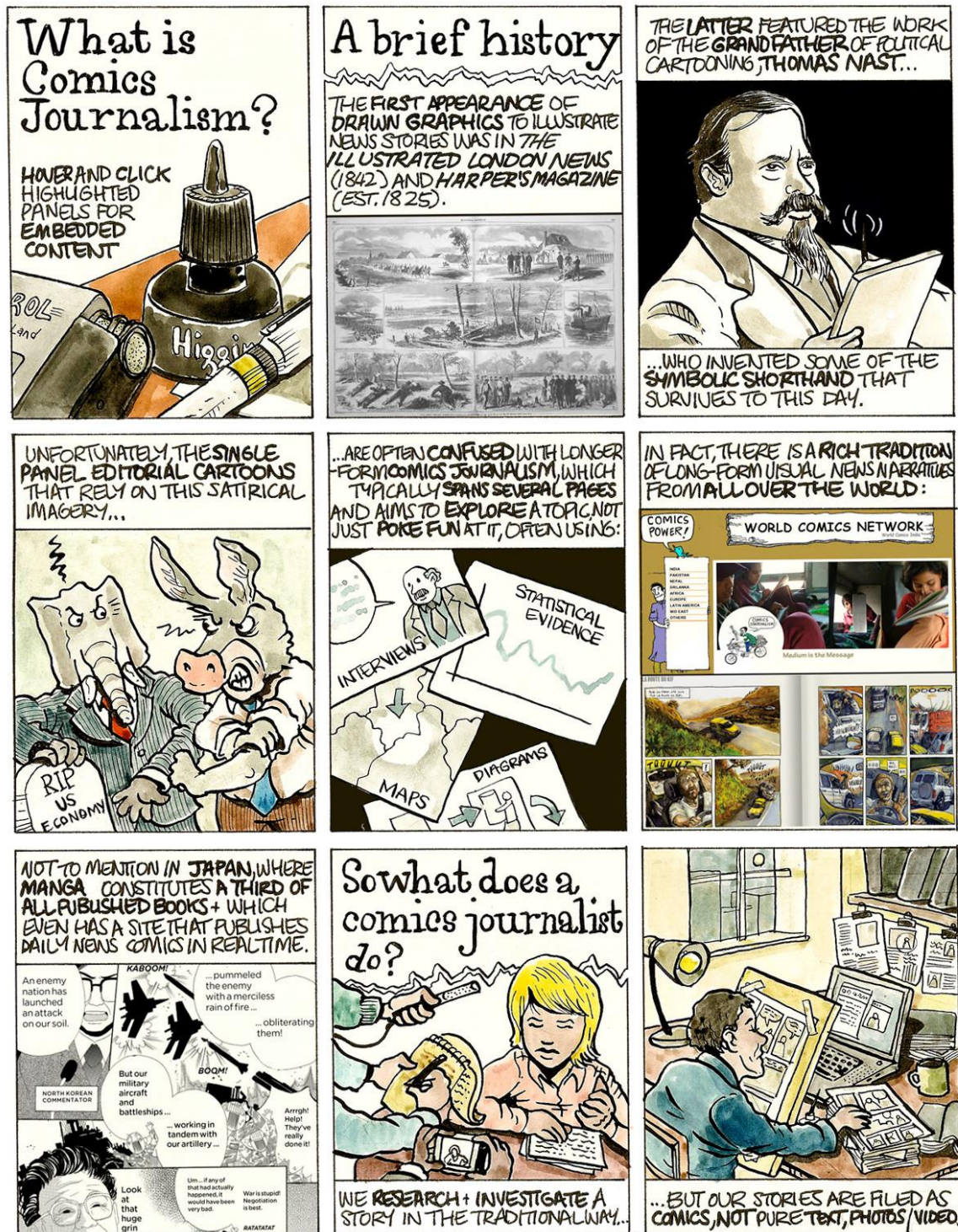


Fig. x.1. Dan Archer, "What is Comics Journalism?"

In “What is Comics Journalism?,” a work with a definitive intent produced in the form of comics, Archer draws on the similarities of how traditional journalists and comics journalists collect their data. However, he does not elaborate on the significant differences of how this data is narrativized and represented in the two types of reportage. Archer also points out that “objective truth” is a “fallacy” in the case of any type of reportage; comics journalism just makes us notice this fallacy. What is more, Joe Sacco states that comics journalists have more responsibility than regular investigative journalists:

The journalist’s standard obligations – to report accurately, to get quotes right, and to check claims – still pertain. But a comics journalist has obligations that go deeper than that. A writer can breezily describe a convoy of UN vehicles as “a convoy of UN vehicles” and move on to the rest of the story. A comics journalist must *draw* a convoy of vehicles, and that raises a lot of questions. So what do these vehicles look like? What do the uniforms of the UN personnel look like? What does the road look like? And what about the surrounding hills? (“A Manifesto, Anyone?” x)

According to Sacco, the accuracy of visual representation is an “obligation” unique to comics journalists. He also speaks about the fact that the visual medium of comics influences the nature of questions asked: comics journalists need to enquire about certain visual details, however painful they might be. Despite what Archer claims, the actual works show that comics journalism does require an investigative approach different from traditional journalism; the medium of the final product, comics, is already in mind when the questions are asked.

Comics journalist Susie Cagle at “#!&% Cartoons!! 2012 A Festival Celebrating Political Cartoons” emphasizes the practical advantage of the pencil over the camera in her description of comics journalism (“Comics Journalism”). A pencil and a notebook are

allowed to places where the camera is not welcome. They are unnoticed, they help ease tension or establish contacts. Nevertheless, comics journalists, Joe Sacco especially, do take or use photos and base their drawings on them. In a lecture at The Leslie Center for the Humanities, Dartmouth College, Sacco explains that when he recreates a scene, he bases his comics either on his own photos, on his detailed notes of his experience, or on archived visual material. The level of accuracy he aims at is that, seeing his drawn representations, “anyone who knows that neighborhood would know those buildings.” Yet the strategy followed by Sacco is visually representing “more an essential truth than the literal truth:” representing and reproducing an undocumented past action based on the testimonies of several eyewitnesses and the accounts of experts, such as doctors, nurses, legal advisors, teachers (all quotes “Comics as Journalism”).

Truthfulness, authenticity, subjectivity, and mediation in framing and storytelling techniques have been major topics of studies of comics journalism in general, and of Sacco’s works in particular. These qualities have been investigated frequently, for the first time possibly by Benjamin Woo in 2010, and most recently by the collection *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World* (2015). In this dissertation my aim is to depart from these concepts and approach Sacco’s comics reportage as means of dynamic engagement with the vulnerability of the Other, not forgetting about the privilege of the journalist and the reader (Butler 91-92). In the chapters I devote to the study of Sacco’s works my keyword will be presence: just like memoirs and diaries, Sacco’s reportage is imbued by the personal point of view and the presence of the artist in the line. With this in mind, in the second part of my dissertation I turn to examining the ways in which this embodied presence becomes expressive of the vulnerability of the Other.

Methods: Focusing on Drawing, Reading the Line

The starting point of my approach to comics in this dissertation is the drawn nature of comics. Until recently, drawing has been an understudied aspect of comics; it has been secondary compared to questions about how a certain topic (race, gender, Jewishness, heroes, histories) are represented. The visual aspect of non-fiction comics has mostly been studied in relation to photography: memoirists use, redraw or reflect on photographs often, which offers itself for really interesting studies. By investigating questions raised by non-fiction comics, my dissertation wishes to contribute to the study of drawing in comics.

I approach the medium of comics by focusing on the artist's creative thinking, which manifests in drawing through the movement of the body. As a result, the reader can still trace the imprint of the artist on the pages even in the final printed product. The handmade quality of comics creates what Hillary Chute calls "intimacy" (*Graphic Women* 10), that is, an embodied presence which prevails and is felt despite the processes of editing, finalizing, and printing. Drawing is embodied even if the product is printed; with Simon Grennan's words "[t]hat it is a reproduction of a drawing does not undermine our understanding of it as a drawing" (16).

For the study of drawing, apart from the questions raised by comics studies, I rely on the findings, and points raised by, art history, art theory and art practice concerning the nature of bodily investment in artistic creation. I believe that relying on points of view and results coming from the study of art has relevance in the study of comics, especially given the focus of this project on the role of the body in creating and interpreting comics; the link between the body and vulnerability; and the attention given to the line in drawing. Following Jared Gardner, I understand the line as a trace of the artist's body on paper ("Storylines" 54).

Whether the line as a trace can be regarded as a transparent link to the artist's personality or ideas, or to what extent such a link can be postulated, has been theorized by many scholars. The question will be taken up especially in Chapter One, where I discuss the American cartoonist Lynda Barry's views on the question.

In the study of the visual aspects and the drawn nature of comics, I rely on the works of several art historians; for example, Lynda Barry's comics will be interpreted along Paul Klee's classic formulation of drawing as taking a line for a walk and W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of the image. James Elkins's works on vision and on the two contradictory traditions of representing bodies in art will be relied on in my reading of Ken Dahl's *Monsters* and Joe Sacco's comics on the Bosnian war. Joe Sacco's comics will also be read along Norman Bryson's study of traditions of integrating or disregarding the painter's work in the final product. Fine art and comics come from radically different institutional backgrounds, which is possibly the most basic reason behind the mutual disregard of the two disciplines (Miodrag, 198). This institutional difference is one of the reasons why comics artists feel that the art world is not open towards them: comics "for so much of the twentieth century, [has been] excluded from the canons of art" as Bart Beaty states in his monograph *Comics Versus Art* (8). The interactions between comics and museums or auction houses, as well as the slow processes of canonization, have usually reinforced the impossibility of approaching comics with the traditional categories of art, which has led Beaty to argue for considering comics "a distinct field of cultural production" (8). I share Beaty's view that the practices around comics constitute a distinct field, a field which is going through a change with the popularization of the graphic novel; however, I also believe that the methodologies that have been relied on in the field of fine art in the study of representation in general, and of drawing in particular, help us theorize the visual aspects of comics. Questions and results from studies of art help comics studies gain an insight into how comics are drawn, how comics work, and

how they are perceived by a given audience, even if comics is a narrative medium with its own characteristics, and even if comics has been considered inferior, infantile, classed, and even labeled as feminine by the art world (Beatty 22).

Studies of the relationship between fine art drawing and painting shed new light on the position of comics as a means of expression that has recently gained immense popularity. The new format of the graphic novel and also the cult of superheroes in print and on film have helped comics to come out from below the critical radar. Yet creators of non-fiction comics do not forget their affiliations with other forms of comics that have not risen in popularity and prestige. In this respect, the rise of certain genres into prestige echoes the way fine art drawing has been repositioned relative to painting. In her article “Drawing is the New Painting” (2011) Karen Kurczynski describes the position of drawing within fine art, which I find strikingly similar to the position of the graphic novel within current narrative art forms. Kurczynski claims that fine art drawing has been given little attention, and it has even been considered inferior to oil painting. It is, however, currently undergoing reevaluation and re-appreciation—like comics, which has recently been discovered by publishers, new groups of readers and academics.

Writing on the reasons behind the current change of status of fine art drawing, Kurczynski finds that “[i]n the postindustrial economy, drawing’s associations with individual expression, accessibility, easy or automatic production, and flexibility, coupled with its newfound economic viability as a commodity, make it uniquely suited both to counterculture and business interest. Drawing now takes full advantage of having it both ways” (98). I believe that comics, and especially the contemporary non-fiction comics, is in a similar position, and that in the quote above the word “drawing” could easily be replaced by either “comics” or “the graphic novel,” revealing a diagnosis of the current state of comics. Comics

has always been considered accessible: it has been regarded a suitable read for the young—this association is still unchanged in Hungary. Comics reportage is often praised for its accessibility: for exploring difficult subjects in the medium and thereby introducing these topics to presumed readers who would not read the same content in the form of a longer article or a book.

The elements on Kurczynski's list of qualities that are valued in drawing can easily be found in the reception of non-fiction comics by the public: "individual expression, accessibility, easy or automatic production, and flexibility" (98). The association of comics with these qualities has contributed greatly to the popularity of the graphic novel in the bookstores and university courses. Furthermore, Kurczynski shows that drawing is associated with a set of similar qualities in the art world as it is associated with in the world of comics studies. She points to a temptation similar to the one we encounter in comics, namely the temptation to "identify the privacy, lack of finish, and visibility of process evident in drawing as sources for ... authenticity" (99). A comics page is preceded by several drafts, and the actual drawing—if done by hand, and not with a digital tool—is usually completed in at least two stages, penciling and inking (digital drawing boards make the transformation of the aesthetic qualities of an outline much easier, though many artists who draw digitally still prepare hand drawn drafts.)

Though comics scholars are aware of the stages of production, looking for the trace of the artist's hand in comics can—but not necessarily does—result in psychoanalytical readings of drawings. Jan Baetens warns that the danger of considering drawing in comics as a direct translation of (sometimes traumatic) events "risk[s] reducing the work to a symptom of self-expression" ("Revealing Traces" 151). Baetens reminds us that the drawn trace of the artist should not be considered a symptom, as the relationship between artist and line is always

influenced by a number of choices. The relationship to the line, as suggested already, is one of the most interesting questions of current comics scholarship examining drawing; parallel to which the search for authenticity, another keyword in Kurczynski's list of associations attached to drawing, has been a major question of recent influential studies of comics autobiographies (Hatfield 2005, El Refaie 2012, Kukonnen 2013, Precup 2013).

According to Elisabeth El Refaie, authenticity in comics is performed by the artist and by the audience, who plays a decisive role in establishing a work as authentic. The audience evaluates the strategies used for authentication in comics, and can also reject them (138). In this dissertation, I will focus on the performative aspect of the line in Chapter Two, in my reading of Ken Dahl's memoir, where the body of the autobiographical character is constantly redrawn in newer and newer forms. The quality of the drawing style can also be perceived as an expression of authenticity: the sketchiness and lack of finish in Willy Linthout's memoir *The Years of the Elephant* (2009) is considered to be an authentic expression of the emotional state of the autobiographically motivated character after his son committed suicide.² Similarly, authors without a formal training in visual expression can be regarded as more authentic performers because of the assumed transparency of the line drawn by an untrained hand—as in the case of Miriam Engelberg's witty memoir, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* (2006).³ However, as Kurczynski argues, what appears to be immediacy in drawing is constructed, and this quality is not inherent to drawing itself. She

² "Linthout's artwork remains deliberately unpolished in this book- the rough pencil drawings uninked, mistakes uncorrected, giving the work and immediacy and rawness that possibly reflects the emotions conveyed in the narrative" writes Ian Williams in his review, "Years of the Elephant."

³ "her untutored, charmingly naive style lends an air of veracity to the work" writes Ian Williams in "Graphic Medicine," 24.

shows that thinking of drawing as authentic has its roots in historically specific art movements, such as in the conceptual artists' use of drawing and handwriting as criticism of established art (94, 98) in the 1970s; or earlier, in avant-garde's gestures of deskilling, and their favoring the unfinished sketch to a finished drawing (97). The principles of, and yearning for, transparency and authenticity in the current definitions of drawing have been inherited from high modernism: high modernist concepts of art have been applied to the understanding of contemporary drawing as a more authentic means of expression in a postmodern setting (99).

In the medium of comics, authenticity or authentication measures the plausibility of a non-fiction story, narrated and represented by someone, against the experience and expectations of the reader. Non-fiction genres in the comics medium claim that their narratives have referents outside their boundaries, and they also claim that the stories are related to truth in visual ways as well. Visual truth-telling and documentation have been associated with photography and film, which offer visual records made by a mechanical apparatus. Although the fact that photography is not pure mechanical image-making has become common knowledge, photography still haunts comics non-fiction, which gave rise to many studies of comics autobiography and reportage focusing on the interpreted nature of drawing.

Non-fiction comics seems to claim narrative and visual truth value while resorting to an openly interpreted medium, drawing. As Philip Rawson reminds us in his monograph called *Drawing* (1987), "drawing is not seeing" (21). Rawson emphasizes that drawing—even drawing following the rules of three-point perspective, which is strongly associated with realism in Western traditions—is neither a mechanical copying nor a selective record of reality. As he argues,

The old academic cliché that the draughtsman ‘selects’ aspects of a given ‘real theme’ must be set aside. The draughtsman may indeed ‘select’ in drawing. But he does not select by an act of conscious eclecticism. Nor does he pick items that he can actually see, for he makes up his drawings out of elements no one can see *in* any object. No one ever actually sees a black outline. (21)

Drawing is interpreted not because the drawer is free to choose what to include and what to omit in the finished work, but because drawing is a way to organize reality. For example, Sacco’s journalistic work is often acknowledged because he includes those people, for example interpreters and editors, whose influence on the final piece of news is hidden. However, when approaching Sacco’s comics from the direction of drawing, the ways in which Sacco represents and constructs the visual world via drawing become central. As Rawson claims, drawings are affirmative statements conveying visual truths (21): they are statements about the world, made by a specific person in a situation, during an activity. This means that drawing “implies and illustrates the artist’s conception of reality” (19). This conception of reality is present not so much in the characters included as in the stylistic and spatial relations within the drawing. Drawing is not seeing, but a visualization of what can be real: ultimately, drawing provides a “visual ontology” (19).

Pascal Lefèvre, who is also inspired by Rawson, writes: “[t]he artist not only depicts something, but expresses at the same time a visual interpretation of the world, with every drawing style implying an ontology of the representable or visualizable” (16). The reader of the comics has no other choice but to share the view of the drawer, being unable to look at the object of representation in any other way (Lefèvre 16). This visual ontology, in non-fiction comics, also involves explicit statements about the artist’s relation to the world: the

artists often draw themselves as characters and these characters share the visual ontology of the given comics.⁴

Drawing is not an unproblematic transmission onto paper of what has been seen. When drawing is compared to photography in the study of non-fiction comics, the same reference to an outside reality which is evoked by photography is included in the interpretation of drawn panels, pages, or whole works. Drawing, however, by being selective and interpretive, projects a kind of new meaning, which is not projected by analog or digital photography. I agree with Dawson when he claims that drawing creates meaning, and in this dissertation my aim is to show that the special kind of meaning-creation in non-fiction comics is inherently connected to putting oneself in a vulnerable position and exploring one's vulnerability. Drawing involves risk in introspection and risk in self-expression: "[a] drawing... shows us to ourselves as it were in a mirror at the heart of our own world of truth—truth not of abstract concepts but of visual conviction" (6).

Curiosity about the nature of the line, which is in fact the starting point of all the chapters in this dissertation, seems to be a common interest in comics studies and the study of art practice. The *Journal of Visual Art Practice* devoted a special issue to the line in 2015, where guest editor Andrew Hewish singled out the relationship between line and thinking as a particularly compelling area of study in art practice research. What Hewish calls the "intersection of the appearance of line with that of mind or presence, both in production and reception" ("Introduction" 1) has currently become a quickly developing subfield of comics studies. Connection between drawing and thinking has been made first in relation to Chris Ware's comics (*Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, *Building Stories*), who has

⁴ The implications of drawing oneself as a character are studied in Chapters Two and Four.

called drawing a way of thinking (Bahl and Kuhlman xix). The first collection devoted to essays on Ware's comics consequently bore the subtitle "Drawing is a Way of Thinking" (Bahl and Kuhlman, 2010). At the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2013 Ware participated at a talk together with Joe Sacco, whose style of drawing is approached in Chapters Three and Four; and Ware emphasized his interpretation of Sacco's comics pages as "a product of your hand, of your mind" (*Ebookfest* 14:40).

For Ware, the hand cannot be separated from the mind—an insight which is further elaborated on, for example, in Nick Sousanis' recently published *Unflattening* (2015). In this important work, which was originally a PhD dissertation created in the medium of comics, Sousanis argues and demonstrates that drawing is an extension of thinking (79): "we draw not to transcribe ideas from our heads but to generate them in search of greater understanding" (79). Thinking via drawing is multidirectional and multidisciplinary, and Sousanis claims that thinking and drawing are in fact inseparable. *Unflattening* also touches upon the involvement of the body in these two processes; Sousanis's intricate page structures demonstrate in creative ways that his approach is in fact related to that of Rawson and Ware: "drawing is a way of seeing and thus, a way of knowing, / in which we touch more directly the perceptual and embodied processes underlying thinking" (78).

Similarly to Lynda Barry, the connection between the drawn line and the movement of the body is crucial to Sousanis. For Barry, as it will be shown in Chapter One, this movement indicates the almost automatic, not reflected movement of the hand, which helps to focus attention and to reach a desired state of mind. Sousanis establishes a different connection between the line and movement when he claims that a single drawn line, as well as a more complex image, are understandable for the observers because the onlookers translate the relationships between represented elements to their own experiences of their bodies. The

represented world is perceivable as a series of relationships: to use Rawson's term, the "visual ontology" of a drawing is interpretable by reference to the movements of the onlooker's own body, and by reference to the onlooker's body's relations to space. The drawn line "carries the marker's expression" (Sousanis 75), which the observers understand because they understand the dynamics and the route of a given line by comparing it to bodily movements that they themselves have experienced. The body and its spatial relations serve as grounds for interpreting the dynamics of the drawn line, or the dynamics of a complete drawing (75-78): "drawing is exploring our seeing in relation" (Sousanis 75). In this dissertation, I will build on this conception of drawing particularly in Chapter Four, where I argue that a particularly laborious drawing style can establish an embodied and ethical relationship between drawer and his subjects.

The drawn line has dual characteristics: it is performance and product at the same time. The drawer's relationship to his or her line can be theorized in many ways, and these approaches can be placed along a scale, which I will call transparency-scale: at one end of the scale, the drawn line is considered a direct expression of the artist's intention or personality. This perception builds on an immediacy between the drawing agent and the result of the performance of drawing, and postulates a transparent, almost organic relationship between the line and the artist. The other end of the transparency-scale stands for the opposite approach, which considers the line non-transparent, and thinks of it as a result of several conventions and conventionalized systems, such as culture. The drawn line in this view is socially conditioned; institutions, training, and contexts have a decisive role in its expressive possibilities, and they also define the reception and interpretation of drawing.

I do not believe anyone would maintain a position at either extreme end of the scale, arguing for either a fully personalized or a fully conventionalized approach to drawing. There are,

however, noticeable tendencies in artists' and theorists' approaches to the line: the different theories can be characterized by the degree of transparency and degree of convention they attribute to the line.

Jared Gardner observes in his seminal article "Storylines" (2011) that every comic page is emphatically embodied due to the act of drawing. The bodily labor of the drawer (or team of artists), which Gardner calls "trace of the hand" (54), is inscribed and felt in every page, commercial and alternative alike: "[t]he physical labor of storytelling is always visible in graphic narrative, whether the visible marks themselves remain, in a way unique to any mechanically reproduced narrative medium" (65). Despite approaching the line as a physical trace of a physical body, Gardner is skeptical about the existence of the transparent or natural line: on the example of Eddie Campbell's and Art Spiegelman's commercial and autobiographical works he shows that the line cannot be translated directly to the artist's life and personality. Both Campbell and Spiegelman are known for their characteristic and recognizable visual styles, which they utilize for narrative ends. They use the same style and build on the same ideas of their lines in comics which have very different takes on truth and reality. "The same line that in *From Hell* [a commercial success written by Alan Moore and drawn by Campbell] is overworked to create the oppressive atmosphere ... in the autobiographical stories is handled with a lighter, quicker stroke, underworked to evoke a very different quality of cobweb: the fragile spontaneity of the everyday" (61). In Gardner's argumentation, the line does not necessarily provide access either to the original scene of composition or to the personality of the artist; like Baetens and the already quoted Kurczynski, he refuses full transparency. The effect of spontaneity of the artist's line and style is learned; the illusion of spontaneity is the result of hard work and practice.

A more transparent conception of the line is theorized by Hillary Chute, who has described non-fiction comics as “manuscripts.” Chute’s starting point is the strong relationship between the line and the artist’s body: she defines creating comics “as a procedure of embodiment” (“Comics Form and Narrating Lives” 113). In Chute’s example, drawing is prominent as an embodied process in cartoonist Alison Bechdel’s practice of redrawing printed documents by hand. Conceptualizing comics as manuscripts also postulates a direct link to the original moment of creation: “Comics works are literally manuscripts: they are written by hand. (Comics is a form invested in the *auratic* but an *auratic* that is divorced from fixed notions of the authentic)” (emphasis in the original, 112). Chute establishes a relationship based on the idea of direct access to the original moment and embodied situation of creation. Her remark in parentheses hints at a reinterpretation of the Benjaminian aura by taking the mechanical reproduction of the drawn line into consideration: the artist’s line is not effaced in print, there is no tension between the original and the reproduction in terms of access to the bodily mark. As Gardner, also drawing on Benjamin, highlights, comics is unique in the sense that it is the only reproduced medium that appeared in the 19th century and does not erase the trace of the hand of its author (“Storylines” 56). In this respect, the line can be thought of as preserving the immediacy of a manuscript.

Furthermore, Chute argues that, due to handwriting, *any* handmade and mass-produced comics carries a “trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker” (*Graphic Women* 10). This way Chute sees an autobiographical quality in any drawn comic, including fictional works. This idea of linking the line to autobiography is very close to Lynda Barry’s theory—and practice—of the line, elaborated in *What It Is* and *Syllabus*: Barry also thinks of the line as transparent to a certain degree. Furthermore, Alison Bechdel, the American graphic memoirist who worked together with Chute for a long time, directly connects drawing comics to autobiography, thereby establishing the line as fully transparent, when she says,

“I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning... I still believe that” (quoted in Gardner, “Autography’s Biography” 1).

Among comics scholars, Chute’s view of the line is the closest to the transparent end of the transparency-scale. She argues that “[h]andwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 11), and it is from this subjective positionality that non-fiction comics is born. Chute argues that “[t]he subjective mark of the body is rendered *directly* onto the page and constitutes how we view the page” (*Graphic Women* 11, my emphasis). For Chute, comics “*looks like what it is*” (*Graphic Women* 11, emphasis in the original), an assertion that is not necessarily true not only because I believe that complete transparency of the line is impossible, but also given the possibilities and existing practices of recoloring⁵ or redesigning comics, or simply publishing them in a different format,⁶ providing a different material support.

Focusing on the original moment of creating the manuscript, and looking for an autobiographical trace in the line, can favor the study of only a certain type of comics and may lead to neglecting others. Comics which do not erase the traces of the process by which they were created, like Linthault’s *The Years of the Elephant*, are stylistic and extraordinary works, warns Jan Baetens. They can be “excessive on the graphic plane, because [their approach to comics] lingers over the unfinished, the rough copy, deletion, and overloading” (“Revealing Traces” 153). Yet the format of the graphic novel, which is typically thought of as the work of a single author or *auteur*, has been repositioned at a higher cultural status

⁵ Although fictional and not autobiography, Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World* has been recolored, which created a very different atmosphere to the world of the comics.

⁶ A number of non-fiction comics are published hardback first, and then paperback.

partly because of its creator's aim at establishing a unique and recognizable style (Baetens and Frey 9). Recognizable style can incorporate qualities of lack of finish, roughness, or excess, but these qualities are more often than not at a distance to the immediacy of manuscripts: they are planned or at least partly consciously applied.

Lack of finish and the immediacy of drawing verbalized by Chute are relatively rare in comics, but are not unheard of. For example, the American graphic memoirist Miriam Katin does not trace or refine the original pages in her comics memoirs, which are in this way one step closer to being manuscripts than comics that are reworked several times. Moreover, the more traumatic scenes of *We Are On Our Own* (2006), which is about Katin's memories of hiding from both the Nazi and the Soviet armies in 1945 Hungary, are almost scratched in the surface: Katin did not return to the images prior to publication, did not redraw or refine them. She says, "[t]he pages I had difficulty describing were left in an almost sketchy way. The reason was that once I almost scratched them into the page, I did not feel like rendering them any more" (Baskind 240).

Yet, comics artists do have personal traits, and the hand of individual artists, that is, both the quality of line and the drawn ontology of reality, can easily be recognized by the trained eye. Possibly one of the most remarkable proofs for the existence of personal traits even despite working in a given uniform style is Carl Bark's establishment as a serious comics artist. Throughout his career, Barks worked within the restrictions and anonymity of the Walt Disney corporation, yet in the 1960s fans identified his anonymous drawings by identifying individual traits of his style (Beaty 80).

However, linking the hand-drawn nature of comics to autobiography, as Bechdel, Barry, Katin, and to some extent Chute, do, is not the same as being reminded of the embodied

actuality from which the line and eventually the comics were born—as theorized by Gardner. In the case of the confessional genre of comics memoirs, it is especially tempting to approach the line as a direct and transparent access to an authentic message or personality, rather than a mere (reproduced) trace of the author’s body. The temptation of enabling direct access to the original autobiographical situation, in which the line gets embodied, is also explicitly represented in many memoirs, in scenes showing the artists themselves sitting at their desks, creating the very comics the reader is holding. Joe Sacco and Lynda Barry show the moment of creation in some of their comics; for example, Barry starts her *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) with a desk-scene, carefully labeling all the instruments surrounding her in the moments of creation. Such moments can be interpreted either as access to an original subjectivity via the act of drawing, or as visualizations and mediations of the birth of the line. In other words, there is a difference in thinking about the line as an index of the author’s subjectivity (most strongly verbalized by Bechdel and Katin, and, as it will be shown, Barry), or as an index of the author’s body or hand.

Drawing in comics can be described by some degree of transparency and personal expression, but Baetens, Kurczynski and Rawson remind us that line and drawing style are also always conventionalized to some degree: “Graphic representation is a socialized act, involving many codes and constraints” (Baetens, “Revealing Traces” 152). Similarly, art historian Norman Bryson emphasizes the influence of social contexts when creating graphic representations. He does not specifically talk about drawing, but about representation and looking in general, when in *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983) he states that “[t]he practices of painting and viewing involve a material work upon a material surface of signs coexistent with the society, not topologically abstracted outside it” (150).

Baetens compares the conventionalized nature of the drawn line to that of the line used for writing: the line cannot be considered simply as “the mechanical or modified reflection of a personality, a body or an unconscious” as “[e]ven if the drawing is very personalized or hyper-individualized, it is still as indirect as the writing itself” (“Revealing Traces” 152). Both kinds of lines are appreciated by a community, and because of this, they are socialized by necessity. The line cannot be fully natural—and fully transparent—without risking its accessibility to its audience. To be interpretable, both writing and drawing need to meet the criteria for common understanding of what communication, writing, and drawing are in a given temporal, geographical and social context. Training and schooling seem to be the first major step in learning to create a socially embedded written sign.

During the process of being taught to write, that is, to recognize and make the forms of characters, one’s handwriting starts out as standardized. However, one’s handwriting gradually becomes more and more unique: the handwriting of a six-year-old is less personalized than that of a sixteen-year-old. This tendency is true even for Chinese calligraphers, who spend years strictly following the rules of the trade: they practice tracing, copying, and reproducing the characters in as perfect resemblance to the template as possible. Yet, at the last stage of their long training, calligraphers are encouraged to disregard the rules learned by their hands, and let individual inspiration guide their pens (Ingold quoting Yen 148). In *Lines: A Brief History* Tim Ingold argues that handwriting is neither as indirect, nor as socialized, as one would expect—and this observation contradicts Baetens’ argument in exciting ways. Ingold shows that though the shapes of letters are conventionalized, when they are drawn by hands, they are just as different and unique as drawings.

Handwriting does seem to have a link to the person regardless of the content of what is written: according to Rosemary Sassoon, author of *Handwriting of the Twentieth Century* (1999), handwriting is an “emotive issue” (3). One establishes a deep and emotional connection towards one’s handwriting even if one is not entirely satisfied with it, and the emotionally loaded nature of handwriting manifests especially when one’s handwriting is criticized by others. Handwriting “is oneself on paper” (Sassoon, quoted in Ingold 146). The praise of one’s handwriting reassures the whole person while the failure of handwriting is considered “as a crisis of the whole person” (Ingold 146). Similarly, one is linked to one’s drawing in complicated emotional ways, be it trauma as in the case of Katin, or a desire to draw well, as in the case of Barry (to be discussed in Chapter One).

Finally, I would like to turn to Philippe Marion’s influential narratological approach to drawing in comics, which answers the question about the extent to which the line can be considered a personal trait by talking about roles and agents instead of autobiographically motivated participants. Marion advises distinguishing the role of the narrator, who is responsible for the textual layer, from a role responsible for visual enunciation. He calls this second role “graphiateur,” and defines it as the agent responsible for “the graphic and narrative enunciations of the comics” (Baetens, “Revealing Traces” 147). Marion’s categorization helps approaching graphic style as a separate component of the narrative, and is also helpful in establishing a distance between artist and his or her line.

Thus, in terms of enunciation, in Lynda Barry’s *What It Is*, we can distinguish between the narrator who is looking back on her childhood and is narrating it, but who is also a visible character talking to other characters; and the graphiateur, who creates the visual layout and produces the design of textual and pictorial elements. In the process of graphiation, the graphiateur constructs the narrative visually by the three basic tools of drawing, namely

lines, contours and colors (Baetens, “Revealing Traces” 149), forever aiming at communicating this narrative to the reader, who will “redo,” “remake” or “re-experience the enunciative work produced by the author” (150).

The tools of drawing and their interpretation call attention to the already mentioned fact that the reader’s involvement in comics, which will be in focus in the Conclusion, does not only happen by performing closure between the disconnected elements—gutters—of comics, but also by reconstructing a meaningful narrative out of lines, contours and colors. Involving readers by inviting them to fill in gutters has been accepted as the major means by which reading comics operate. The gutter has consequently often been approached as the major tool responsible for the reader’s involvement: Gardner sees a meeting point of pre-1910 film aesthetics and comics in their mutual reliance on gutters and gaps (*Projections*, 21-22), Chute devotes a subchapter to the gutter in her “Introduction” to *Drawing Disaster* (35-38). At the end of this dissertation I would like to explore ways of readerly involvement that have their roots in drawing, and are connected to the experience of vulnerability.

1

Line and Autobiography in Lynda Barry's *What It Is* and *Syllabus*

Lynda Barry, the iconic figure of the American alternative comics scene since the 1970s, reveals a unique theory about the line and about drawing comics in her recent work, namely *What It Is* (2008) and *Syllabus* (2014). In these works, just like many theoreticians of drawing⁷, she emphasizes the importance of bodily engagement in thinking and in creation; and, unlike the already quoted scholars, she traces the line back to a special state of mind. As it will be shown, the line born out of this special state is uniquely linked to the personality; and in this respect Barry's concept of the line can be placed towards the transparent end of the transparency-scale. In this chapter, I explore the risky personal engagement out of which Barry's authentic line is born, I show the relationship between the creative state of mind and movement. I will show that two ideas, which are themselves not related to drawing, stand behind Barry's unique take on the relationship between line and person: her theory of the image as a structure of experience, and the importance of the mind for authentic self-expression. First, I introduce some key aspects of Barry's theory—and practice—of the line, such as aliveness, the image, and unlearning, then I offer close readings of comics from *What It Is* which explore the relationship between vulnerability and the line (fig. 1.4, and

⁷ see the section “Methods: Focusing on Drawing, Reading the Line” of the Introduction.

1.5). In the last section I argue that the experience of vulnerability in creation can help one to reconsider the line not as a product, but as a partner: an active, improvisatory agent.

In comics scholarship the line is said to be the most undertheorized aspect of comics, partly because the line “has no neat equivalent in any other narrative form” (Gardner, “Storylines” 53), and also because the first influential studies of comics were influenced by narratology. By reading *What It Is* and *Syllabus*, I would like to contribute to this discourse in two ways, first, by exploring Barry’s unique approach to the line as authentic, and second, by repositioning the line not as a trace or a product, but as a partner.

Barry postulates the line as the medium of self-expression. For Barry, as for cultural historian Tim Ingold and Tom Gunning, the written and the drawn line belong to a single category. Ingold argues that there is no difference between drawing a line that is to become a unit of writing, and one that will be part of a drawn picture. Ingold considers writing is a “special case of drawing” (122), and reminds us that the medium of both drawing and writing is the line (129). Gunning follows this line of thought when he promotes that textual and pictorial interpretation should be *reunited*: “[i]n order for comics to liberate reading, they must first liberate the act of writing, reuniting the art of calligraphy with the art of making images” (46). Theorizing the relationship of the drawn line and the written line in comics, Gunning does not speak about simple combinations, but argues for their active and mutual influence. This active influence is, in fact, demonstrated by Barry’s work by the intensive and improvisational co-presence of written and drawn elements—created with the same tool, the sumi brush—over the pages in both examined comics. Writing and drawing coexist in

Barry's teaching practice, both are inseparably present in her assignments⁸; and their mutual influence is also expressed by Barry's practice of coloring certain letters from her sentences, thereby emphasizing the visual nature of text (e.g., *What* 81). In her works Barry offers a reunion of calligraphy with image making (Gunning 46). However, unlike Gunning or Ingold, or Baetens and Marion, whose theories of the line were discussed in "Methods: Focusing on Drawing, Reading the Line," and who claim that "drawing is not natural" (Ingold 147),⁹ Barry elaborates a transparent relationship between person and line: the line is essentially connected to the person and the personal.

What It Is and *Syllabus* are all about layout, about the surface of the page that is to be filled: the chapters alternate between various forms of visual-verbal storytelling, while on each page visual and logical elements interact. As a result, the line, the mark and trace of the hand, becomes an omnipresent element in both the montages and the comics, while it also transforms printed textual elements. All the pages of *What It Is* and *Syllabus* are primarily hand painted, but some contain printed sections, and cut-out text, thus the book represents an aesthetics where it is not only word and image that coexist on equal levels but also different paper qualities, text sources, and their various authors. The kinds of relationships between word and image in the books include hierarchy in illustration, dialogue in comics, facilitation in explaining or demonstrating ideas, ironical commentary, rivalry,

⁸ In her diary exercises, for example, apart from verbally listing what students did and saw that day, they are asked to draw a picture for each day in their diaries (*Syllabus* 182).

⁹ Ingold argues that drawing is not natural, rather, it has been *theorized* differently to writing. Ingold shows that drawing has been contrasted to writing, and has been regarded as a natural mode of expression partly because it appeared a lot earlier in the history of civilization than writing did. But drawing is not a skill "that is somehow installed in all human individuals in advance of their entry into the world" (Ingold 147).

reinforcement. Ornamentation and decoration are also key principles in Barry's books. In her practice, as figure 1.1 demonstrates, textual bits are just as ornamental as the figurative visual elements; both can be decorated and can be used to decorate, or to fill space.

What It Is is built on a rhythmical alternation between full-page montages and short autobiographical comics sequences. The montages pose questions on imagination, memory, and creation, asking, for example: "[w]hat is where is your imagination?" (sic, 20); "[w]hat becomes of an experience after it's been had?" (22); "[w]hat are thoughts made of?" (70); and "[w]hat is reflection? How does it come about?" (98). The inserted comics deal with Barry's childhood experience in a confessional way, and also contain reflections on her relationship to drawing and comics. The second part of this big and heavy book is designed to address readers, and facilitate in them a similar creative state of mind as the one that has been presented in the montages and comics of the first part. The workbook-like structure invites readers to take part in creation, thereby introducing an open and dialogical structure after the first part, dominated primarily by questions. In the second part, the reader can become a participant, and share not only the joy of creation, but the feelings of vulnerability inherently linked to it.



Fig. 1.1. A page from Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, 106. Courtesy of the artist.

What It Is is bravely experimental in its treatment of visual elements, which come from the widest range of sources. Barry glues bits of paper—torn or cut up to tiny pieces—to create her collages over ordinary yellow notebook pages. As a result, each page presents an array of surfaces, materialities and colors (fig. 1.1). The original three-dimensional nature of each multilayered page is clearly felt even in the printed book. This gives the book a very tactile quality: the reader is enticed to touch the surfaces and trace the irregular lines where two bits of paper meet. For the montages, Barry uses the personal archives of a schoolteacher, Doris Mitchell, and brings the elements of the deceased teacher's books and notebooks into an unexpected, layered, and associative dialog with each other as well as with her own drawings.¹⁰ Barry reconstructs phrases by rearranging individual words that have been cut out of aged printed material, such as newspapers, elementary school textbooks, teaching aids, whereby creating new associations. Figure 1.1, a page from *What It Is*, for example, demonstrates the complexity of a scrapbook page constructed out of handwritten bits that bear the marks of at least two hands. The spaces between these cutouts are filled with drawn elements, while the top and the bottom of the page is framed by rows of printed words cut out of their original contexts (106).

The other book examined in this chapter, *Syllabus*, was published a few years after *What It Is*. It does not build on a structure of collages organized by a central question anymore;¹¹ instead, as the title suggests, it continues the practice-oriented teaching mode that is dominant in the second part of *What It Is*. *Syllabus*, however, is not a workbook. It contains

¹⁰ Barry dedicates the whole book to Miss Mitchell in the last montage, where she includes a photograph of her as well (210).

¹¹ Though there are exceptions, and we find pages organized around a topic, formulated as a question, in *Syllabus*, too. For example, "Where did you get your imagination?" (34).

notes, reflections, assignments, instructions, and students' works from four classes Barry was instructing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison between 2012 and 2014: "The Unthinkable Mind," "What It Is," "Write What You See," and "Making Comics."

In its appearance, design, size, and paper quality, *Syllabus* imitates a composition notebook, but is equally a scrapbook and a richly illustrated colorful portfolio arguing for Barry's theory of drawing lines and creating drawn narratives as embodied self-expression. However, compared to *What It Is*, *Syllabus* is more recognizably the work of a single hand, even if the book uses material made by others, especially by Barry's students. *Syllabus*, in accordance with its title, has a clear agenda and a path to follow; it is didactic in its aims, and it focuses on classwork and task descriptions (as we can see, for example, in figure 1.3). The task descriptions themselves are made by hand by Barry and are richly populated with creatures commenting on the activities to be done by the students at home, thus transforming a topic as banal as a home assignment into a multi-layered narrative. Barry does not only provide a theoretical syllabus to a specific university course, but gives material proof of her practices aimed at re-learning and re-experiencing how to bring forward some honest lines that, in her view, almost all of us used to draw as children.

A Structure of Experience Behind the Authentic Line: Theoretical Introduction

Barry introduces her ideas on the link between creativity, memory, and movement in *What It Is*, claiming in the form of questions, and demonstrating in the form of montages, that these three are related. Barry's questions express the fluidity of memory and imagination, and she suggests that these two complement each other. Some of the questions linking creativity, memory and movement are "Why do some images come back again and again?"

(*What* 96), or “What is movement? Do thoughts move? Do images have motion?” (*What* 83). As far as the returning visual elements of the montages are concerned, these pages feature painted or cut out pictures of animals, such as birds, bunnies, deep water fish, or—a plant—budding boughs. Some of these figures are linked to permanent associations in Barry’s comics, and have specific associations: the nearsighted monkey, for example, stands for Barry herself (fig. 1.1, top left corner); demons turn up in several of Barry’s comics (fig. 1.4); and the often represented octopus even has a name, Magic Cephalopod (fig. 1.4). This character is an important figure in a comics which I will analyze later, it embodies all that Barry has to say about drawing, creativity, spontaneity, and movement, the keywords of this chapter. The Magic Cephalopod is “b(orn) when looked upon. Activated by any activity related to the image-world. Guides pens, pencils, and other mark-makers through exercises” (*What* 138).

The ultimate aim of Barry’s project, as mentioned already, is looking for “a certain state of mind” (*Syllabus* 22), which enables working creatively, and drawing a deeply personal line. This state of mind, called “dream awake” by Dan Chaon (*Syllabus* 128), “comes about when we gaze with open attention” (*Syllabus* 22). It is based on the experience of the person, and is brought about by the mechanical and repetitive movements of the hand: “thinking is a physical act” (*What* 205) writes Barry (placing the proverbial statement between the pictures of cats). The right state of mind facilitates new connections among memories, imagination, and experience, which can then serve as source of one’s creative output.

The creative state of mind has a very special relationship to time: it facilitates entering what I call the meanwhile temporality of drawing. Barry differentiates measured and felt time: though measuring time and being aware of how long it takes to draw something are part of the activities in both books, the time of drawing is felt rather than measured. In *Syllabus*

Barry sums this up as “[t]he drawing seemed to take a long time and then no time at all. Even a minute after I finished it I could hardly remember the beginning stages, and it took on the feeling of having just appeared on its own, somehow making itself come into being” (131). This contemplative state cannot be reached at once, and Barry has several exercises to facilitate it in students by making them familiar with the movements of their hands and the materiality of mark-making. Drawing a castle or a Batman figure is one such exercise: here Barry provides less and less time, descending from as long as three minutes to 5 seconds, for the students to visualize an idea (*Syllabus* 94-96). She also recommends using two timers, one set as a reminder before the second one goes off, indicating that the time for the exercise is up. This way students experience what a given duration is (*What* 147, 150, 154), which in turn will help them get immersed in the meanwhile temporality of creation.

The creative practice based on drawing and writing, which Barry is looking for, is interwoven with experience; it comes from a certain state of mind, and has little to do with artistic training. The line drawn in the right state of mind feels alive. Aliveness contributes to perceiving the line as authentic or transparent, as the line that is alive has a special connection to the drawer. Barry simply uses the word “image” to describe an experience of aliveness: the image visualizes a strange interaction between the individual, his or her memory, and his or her imagination (*What* 34). The image thus is not what is drawn by the line, nor is it the same as a picture: the image is a structure of personal experience. This structure of experience is expressed, for example, by the montages created over the surface of the notebook page: meaning is born out of the coexistence of the various elements over the surface. The image, in this case the unit of the montage, feels alive, on the one hand, because of the associations, memories, the unexpected movements of ideas that the drawer experienced; and, on the other hand, because of the numerous temporal layers that a single image can evoke and incorporate while it is created in the “dream awake” state of mind.

Barry maps out the transgressive nature of images in a montage that builds on the rhythmical alteration of black surfaces and colorful (mainly yellowish) figures, among them the Magic Cephalopod, Barry's returning figure indicating creativity (*What* 30). The questions scattered over the page define the image as experience rather than as a visual entity: "[h]ow and why are there images inside of us?;" "after we read a book is it inside of us?;" "[w]here is a book before we read it?" and "[h]ow do they get inside? How do they get outside?" (all quotes *What* 30). A key attribute of the image, as voiced in the above quote, is its dynamism and aliveness: the spatial metaphors indicate movement and direction, and also hint at creating unexpected associative connections between the person and his or her environment. The transgressive, active, and associative nature of images can be comprehended as a spatial and experiential formulation, rather than as a form of thinking. Barry says that images are "alive in the way thinking is not, but experiencing is, made of both memory and imagination, this is the thing we mean by 'an image'" (*What* 14). While this can be regarded as a definition, she reformulates what she means by the image in *Syllabus*: "[b]y image I don't mean a visual representation, I mean something that is more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive—a book, a song, a painting—anything we call an 'art form'" (*Syllabus* 15).

I find Barry's conception of the image very similar to the point made by visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, who also starts out from the aliveness of images. In *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) Mitchell argues that the image is not the same as a picture: images circulate in human cultural production, they have a "social life" (93) within this circulation: images influence other images, they bring forth unforeseen associations. Mitchell provocatively compares the image to viruses: neither of them has a life on its own, they both need human participation to be carried or to reproduce (87).

In *What It Is* images as structures exist and move in space, and this is also the reason why, for Barry, the handmade nature of actions like writing, drawing, tearing, cutting, and gluing is primary, and she does not refrain from using pieces made by others to make the complex image manifest. Both *What It Is* and *Syllabus* are rich in other people's handwriting, and the traces of other people's hands contribute to the final structure of the montages. This, naturally, is not simple plagiarism, as Barry never states that the pieces made by others and used in her collages were made by her; nor does she make any attempts to create a unified visual layout, in which the work of others would be effaced by the conformity of style. Instead, collaboration is highlighted. Individual creativity and expression relies on the works of others in what Schlick described as a democratized creative process (41). In this approach, the presented drawings and artwork are not thought of as end products; rather, they are conceptualized as manifestations of the ever moving and living image. Having reached the creative state of mind that is born out of movement, thinking, and mark-making with a tool, the image appears on the surface of the page. In sum, the fluid image lives on in the reworkings, rethinkings and reformulations by others.

The importance of collaboration in Barry's conception of image-making and creation can also be seen from the way she changed the title of a chapter in *Syllabus*. An earlier version of "Car and Batman" was published in the "Comics and Media" issue of *Critical Inquiry* (11-19), and a more colorful later version has been incorporated into *Syllabus* (24-33). The most significant difference between the two versions is, however, not the extent to which Barry redesigned, colored and appropriated the pictures drawn by students, but that while the author of the *Critical Inquiry* version is Barry, in *Syllabus* it is indicated that the section was "written by Lynda Barry but drawn by Students" (*Syllabus* 25).

Images, similarly to what Mitchell has called a “social life,” do not stay put: their associations are not fixed, and they require active engagement: “images are found by in through action between inside and outside” (sic, *What* 15) is one of the answers in Barry’s montage organized around the central question “[w]here are images found?.” Barry’s lack of punctuation in her answer emphasizes the spatial multidirectionality of the image. Furthermore, it emphasizes that creators of image, apart from working in a special in-between temporality, also actively engage space via movement. For both Barry and Mitchell, the source of the image is in human experience; however, while Mitchell is describing cultural phenomena, Barry keeps to personal involvement with the image and to the expression of personal experience in a certain mental state. The structure of experience, which is expressed in the image that feels alive (*What* 202), provides the basic background for the birth of the natural or transparent line. Via its double connection to the image and to the dream awake state of mind, the line stems from deeply personal experience, and is expressive of autobiographical content in itself. And just like the work of others was relied on in self-expression, one’s line will subsequently be reused by others.

Though it might seem paradoxical, the aliveness of the image can be found by mechanical exercises like filling the page with parallel lines, or copying or coloring other people’s drawings. Mechanical manual activities enable entering the right state of mind by making the individual more familiar with the process of mark making and the nature of one’s own marks. Furthermore, the exercises facilitate a change in one’s attitude towards drawing should one have fears or anxiety about it. Unlearning negative associations is an important aspect of Barry’s exercises. According to Barry, children’s lines are more easily alive, because they have less unlearning to do (*What* 73, 104), but people who have stopped drawing are also capable of re-experiencing this kind of line if they get rid of their associations and expectations. In fact, Barry’s aim is to make adults re-experience drawing

as a personal and creative activity. The exercises aim to help finding the aliveness of line that has been lost since childhood, and they help unlearning the associations about drawing that stop adults from reaching the right state of mind.

Instead of judgment, and without the intention to teach drawing techniques, Barry approaches the line that has been drawn with intense curiosity. She says, “I’m interested in using the drawing that is already there—is still there in spite of everything” (*Syllabus* 38, emphasis in the original). Due to the lack of training, the uncertain lines of uncertain hands preserve their originality and closeness to the person who drew them, as she demonstrates in the already mentioned “Car and Batman.” Unlearning negative associations about one’s own line helps restoring its aliveness. She explains, “[p]eople who quit drawing a long time ago make the most incredible drawings when they start up again. Some of the best, most original work I’ve seen since I’ve started teaching was made by students who hadn’t drawn since they were kids. ... this kind of picture holds my attention so completely” (*Syllabus* 138). As the above quote indicates, Barry is fascinated by the drawings of untrained hands because she sees them as more original than the lines of people who have had artistic training. “There is a way of making lines and shapes that is ours alone, and the more we draw, the clearer it becomes, not just to ourselves, but to others: a style unique and recognizable. ... The trick is to find a way to keep ourselves from rejecting it before it can fully present itself” (*Syllabus* 70).

Authentic expression by the line can be found by anyone if they undertake the process of deconstructing learned associations about drawing, for example, the fear of creating a bad drawing (*Syllabus* 16-17, *What* 123-135), the fear of being judged because of a drawing (*Syllabus* 19), or using their skills to become more popular with the help of drawing skills (*Syllabus* 126). These fears block the originality of the line and let (real or imaginary) social

expectations intervene, as a result of which the right state of mind and the authentic line are never reached.

Unlearning is very much related to exploring hidden and painful areas, which are mapped out in a long process with a complex temporality. One needs to re-reach a childhood state in the past (*What* 19), use one's imagination as well as memory (*What* 20, 29-36, 165), and, finally, one has to re-experience the intensity of the present, the temporality of creation. As part of unlearning one is to reach a state where one is not influenced by judgment. This is a state where Barry's provocative question about how we are socialized into quitting drawing, namely "[h]ow old do you have to be to make a bad drawing?" (*Syllabus* 16), is only an echo. It is only in this state that the originality that Barry is looking for can appear in one's work. Yet when it does, it cannot be defined; rather, it is intuitively felt: "it's unmistakable when it starts to happen. The whole class feels it. A new way of seeing comes about, a new approach to problem-solving and working that extends beyond the limits of our class time into other aspects of daily life" (*Syllabus* 59).

The Line in Practice: Movement and Thought on Paper

The idea that movement is related to thought, which is a central topic of the page printed here as figure 1.1, comes back again and again. The creative state of mind is in fact presented as the dynamic interaction of these two—movement and thought. In the full-page montage in figure 1.1 Barry ponders about what a body or hand in motion is moved by (*What* 106), and directs attention to the importance of what she calls "ordinary motion" and its relationship to thinking. Ordinary motion refers to the automatic activities of the hand, which are mostly not reflected upon, therefore they are beyond conscious thinking: "[t]here is a

state of mind which is not accessible by thinking. It seems to require a participation with something physical we move like a pen like a pencil Something which is in motion ordinary motion like writing the alphabet” (sic *What* 106, fig. 1.1). Thinking accompanied by moving an object—a pen—in the hand can bring about a state of mind that is not accessible by thinking alone.

In this relaxed state of mind, and out of the relaxed movement of the body, the line is born. The line, for Barry, is more clearly an individual expression, is more transparent, than for Gardner, as a whole structure of personal experience gets expressed by it. The line’s roots in personal experience—or in Barry’s terminology in the image—make drawing lines also an exercise in exploring, enduring, and sometimes even building on one’s vulnerable states. In comics, the stories are linked to vulnerability not only due to their content, but also due to their medium, the line. The line related to the individual, not only as a bodily mark, as Gardner has theorized, but also as a spontaneously born trace of a thought process. I will read two of Barry’s stories in *What It Is* to show how this happens, and to show the extent to which Barry builds on vulnerable states in creation. First, however, I would like to show a page from *Syllabus* which exemplifies Barry’s conceptualization of what a line is (fig. 1.2). Barry designs exercises to facilitate reaching an authentic expression manifested in the drawn line, and this figure, page 72 from *Syllabus*, shows one such mechanical exercise. In Barry’s approach, exercising one’s line is a means not of conformity, but of reaching something truly individual. Training can help reaching both the desired state of mind and can facilitate the ease of the movement of the hand. The page in fig. 1.2 is not an assignment for students, but a contemplation of a possible assignment, namely, whether she as a teacher should ask her students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to draw a page full of horizontal parallel lines to promote physical and mental immersion in drawing.



Fig. 1.2. An exercise of drawing parallel lines from Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*, 72. Courtesy of the artist.

The montage on page 72 is filled with lines: a unit of black-gray lines—the result of the exercise as performed by the teacher—is placed on the left of the page, taking up the majority of the surface. The lines of various gray shades have possibly been painted with watercolor: they are not straight, they are wavy, and are not entirely parallel. Their differences in shade provide a rhythm to this insert, yet the white-gray tones are in contrast with the yellow composition notebook page on which it is placed. This yellow notebook page that is used as support to the white page with gray lines is in turn placed on a support of blue striped paper. The resulting blue margin connects this page and the one next to it, while the handmade horizontal lines, which the blue margin also features, though this time made by crayon, echo the painted lines on the grayscale insert. The structure of this page is symptomatic of the way Barry constructs *Syllabus* and *What It Is*: lines are placed over lines, and at the same time lines are framed by lines; the context of the line is a network of other lines. This structure gives the book an even rhythm with a feel of spontaneity, but also a strong sense of scale: the even pacing and rhythm of stripes on the yellow composition book pages that regularly come up as support to the montages suggest a constant relation to, and distance from, the human body.¹²

The lines create a layered surface on page 72, providing context and frames for each other. Here Barry uses not only the blue striped second support for framing, but she also frames the grayscale insert with her art made up of geometrical forms. At the top, a horizontal

¹² In *What It Is* the reader relies on the horizontal lines as a way of orientation to a greater extent, as here it is not at all difficult to get lost in the richly layered montages of painted colorful surfaces and glued elements, various fonts and pieces of paper. The yellow paper that is the support of these montages is sometimes only visible in traces, sometimes is not hidden at all; the pre-printed line provides a sense of continuity, a sense of scale, and, due to the ordinary nature of the support, a sense of familiarity.

double helix in red is visible against a heavily crosshatched background; on the left, the frame features a vertical formation built on the rhythm of knots and ovals, crosshatched and colored blue; and at the bottom a pattern of rhombuses, with their middles crosshatched, displays all the colors used on the page. The right side of the frame features handwritten notes and a figurative drawing, their size and arrangement suggesting that though this side is not made up of one form, the bits are organized to complete the form. The framing highlights dynamism by the use of multidirectional lines and color, revealing that, ultimately, the whole page is about lines and about the body that has created these lines. Even the seemingly unmotivated figurative element on the right, the elephant-like lady walking on two hind-legs while holding an umbrella and a bag, is represented against a heavily crosshatched background.

The whole page is a demonstration of the experience of the line as dynamic movement and the possibilities of play it offers. The line is also the focus of the verbal elements, though the word “line” appears quite late in the written parts. First, right under the white insert covered in gray lines Barry includes a typed quote by M.P. Follett, from his 1930 book *Creative Experience* on the importance of experience: “Concepts can never be presented to me merely, they must be knitted into the structure of my being, and this can only be done through my own activity” (72). The Follett quote does not mention drawing, nor does the blue sticky-note in the top right corner, which speaks further on the importance of experience. Here we read, in Barry’s capitalized handwriting: “The only way to understand this is by making things. Thinking about it, theorizing about it, chatting about it will not get you there” (emphasis in the original, 72). The elephant drawn under the sticky-note is a demonstration of the line in the making, while the block of handwritten text under the figure visually completes the frame around the insert of the white page with gray lines.

This unit of handwritten text in the bottom right corner openly calls attention to the line in two ways. First, by asking questions about the time it takes to draw a page full of parallel lines, and second, by contrasting all what the page stands for to “the apparent ‘uselessness’ of the activity” (72). The central question of the page is how to make the students see that the repetitive activity of drawing lines is useful, while the whole page demonstrates how drawing lines becomes part of one’s structure of being: the double helix on top immediately gets referenced to the structure of DNA. By the layering and the intensive co-existence of lines on the surface the page also emphasizes the bodily labor that is a prerequisite to understanding and experiencing the line, as well as the structure of our being.

In *Syllabus* Barry uses the form of the spiral to mark physically, on the surface of the page, that the process of image-making has begun. At the same time, the spiral visually connects and tracks the process of reaching the desired creative state of mind via the movement of the hand. Ultimately, the spiral is a visual imprint of the already mentioned temporality of creation, the meanwhile temporality. Being quite literally the trace of the mind on paper, is a possible answer to the problematic raised by figure 1.1. There, the question written with the biggest letters (which are decorated by dots), asks, [w]hy write by hand?” (*What* 106), and a further question asks what moves the hand. These questions ask about, but the spiral visualizes and performs, the mindset of creation. The spiral is the most frequent and most easily recognizable indicator of Barry’s perception of drawing as a bodily process (which is a further major topic of the montage in fig. 1.1), as it is a way to make the hand and the whole body enter the state of mind at some point of which the authentic line will appear. Spiral shapes appear everywhere in *Syllabus*: see pages 9, 11, 46, 60, 62, 69, 73, 75, 76-80, 83, 115, 143, 147, 156, 181, 185, 189, 196, as well as on the front and back covers. In addition, throughout the book Barry also frequently uses concentric circles instead of spirals.

The spiral and the circle are not merely decorative geometric elements; they are the physical and bodily imprints of thinking and creating.

On pages 76-80 of *Syllabus* Barry encourages students to draw spirals while listening to oral texts, for example to assignments being read out loud by fellow students, or poems recited by the instructor. Drawing the spiral facilitates the relaxed yet focused state of mind that is necessary for creation. As Barry's instructions on how to draw the spiral make very clear, the whole body takes part in the creation of the line of the spiral. Her detailed list of how the attention is focused on various parts of the body has the rhythm of relaxation exercises in yoga (fig. 1.3). "While you work on your Spiral put all of your attention on the tip-top of your head... then move it to the center of your forehead..." (*Syllabus* 77)—she starts tracking the route of attention in a block of handwritten text using capital letters. The text ignores the pre-printed lining of the notebook page, and is placed under a sketchy drawing. The sketch is drawn partly in non-photo blue pencil, which, according to Barry, is the color of thinking (*Syllabus* 119), and partly by simple black ink from the same tool that is used for writing. In the drawing, a character is sitting by a table on which the word "relax" is spelled out by dots. The character is drawing a spiral in a striped composition notebook and his/her hair or brain has the same structure of seemingly concentric circles or a spiral. This way there are two spirals, one in the head, and one that is a product of the hand. The drawing indicates direct access or direct communication between the head and the hand, an immediate flow of relaxed concentration where the image can appear.



Fig. 1.3. Instructions on how to draw spirals in Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*, 77. Courtesy of the artist.

Getting Lost: Vulnerability and the Line

When the authentic line, rooted in the aliveness of the inner image, is born, the students—as Barry is talking in the context of university classes—immediately feel that something has happened. Yet to reach authenticity and originality in the line, one has to repeatedly overcome crisis. On the basis of a mini-comic about overcoming a mental block, I would like to show how the line is born not only out of movement and out of a state of mind, but also out of exploring one’s vulnerability. Though *What It Is* and *Syllabus* are meant to inspire and motivate, Barry also calls attention to the painful process preceding the creative state; and there is a further point where vulnerability is experienced, namely in the controversial feelings about giving the lead to the line. In this section I am reading some passages from *What It Is* and *Syllabus* which, apart from preserving their scrapbook aesthetics, can also be regarded as comics, and I am examining the way Barry connects the experience of vulnerability and creation. In the next section, I will return to the idea of letting the line lead the performance of drawing.

Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey emphasize that drawing “is an extremely labor-intensive, repetitive, virtually boring, exasperating, and desperately disheartening activity that can lead many artists to extreme states of depression” (138). They also acknowledge that drawing can be “mechanical, painful, and dull” (138). Depression and anxiety caused by drawing is one of the topics of Barry’s “Two Questions,” a short comic in *What It Is* (123-135). The comic represents palpably the painful process of feeling helpless and vulnerable before getting to the point when one has reached the right state of mind, and the line can be born. The two questions referred to in the title are “[i]s this good? Does this suck?” (*What* 123), and the comic is about being metaphorically and also visually imprisoned by constantly measuring one’s creative output to the expectations of other people. The pressure and

expectation to create artwork that can be labeled as good are communicated in the comics by a pair of tiny ghostlike creatures, who resemble the army of demons in *One! Hundred! Demons!*

“Two Questions” features two characters of autobiographical roots, two Lyndas: a child one and an adult one. Both are constantly engaged in drawing, the mocking and encouraging demons have in fact been put on paper by their very hands. Initially, there are two demons, one of them is constantly smiling and is expecting the Lyndas to create only good art, the other one has “you suck!” written over its body and communicates the worthlessness of what is being created. As the comic progresses, the number of creatures embodying either positive or negative judgment increases, and they occupy more and more space on the pages. While on page 128 the creatures only talk to the young Lynda as she is drawing at her desk, commenting, for example, “and what the *#@* is that s’posta be?” and “be great!,” by the next page they are making it completely impossible for the adult Lynda to create (fig. 1.4). Not only has their number multiplied, their bodies and the great number of their comments completely fracture the surface, devouring the space for creation. With this panel, the aesthetic principle that the comic has been building on so far is broken down. So far, the structure has been based on the balance of alternating, well-distinguishable blocks of words and images against a crosshatched background; now the encouraging and skeptical comments of the creatures are everywhere, causing chaos not only in the artist’s head, but also in the logic of representation.

At this point the story narrows down to the grown up Lynda’s complete inability to create. Her mind is blocked and she cannot tell if what is being drawn is good or bad: “[t]he Two Questions held that part of me hostage” (130) says the first person narrator from the present. In the second part of the comic an angular form becomes a returning element in each page:

the reinterpretations of its roles and functions convey the experience of being hostage. When it shows up on page 130, it is a tiny package on the creature's table; it is in fact the hostage, "that [creative] part" of the artist, which has been taken. Two demons stand around it, the angry one is making a phone call, shouting "[y]ou'll get it back when you can tell me what the *@#% it is, and give me one good reason—besides the fact that it's yours—that I should give it back to you. / Oh- and you suck" (130). The smiling demon says in the bottom right corner of the same page, "hee hee I love this riddle!" and "You're great!" (130). The package stands for the lost capability to create, and the ransom is to name what has been taken.

The next pages offer variations for this scene: Lynda should be able to find the reason why she cannot create. The package is reinterpreted as Pandora's box (131), and in the next three pages the box becomes literally a prison as the ribbons transform into prison bars. Behind the bars we find two characters: Barry's symbol of creativity, the squeezed Magic Cephalopod, and her surrogate, the nearsighted monkey (132). Soon enough the adult Lynda is seen behind the bars (133) reading an oversize book called "On not being able to paint." The next prison-box holds the Magic Cephalopod again, this time begging Lynda to "Give up! Give up!" and "Don't know! Don't know!" (134), while Lynda is shown bent under feelings of despair. The Magic Cephalopod's words, as we will find out with Lynda, are the solutions to get out of this suffocating situation: it is only by admitting and accepting that she is unable to answer either questions ("Is this good? Does this suck?" (123)), and also by admitting that she does not know what has been taken from her, that she will find peace. The answer that makes the creatures or demons go away is "unthinkable" (131): instead of a correct answer, the solution is to live through a cycle of experience. When Lynda, who has been suffering under "a feeling of deadness" (134) admits that she gives up trying and does not know the answer, the creatures immediately disappear.



Fig. 1.4. A page from "Two Questions" from Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, 129. Courtesy of the artist.

It is only by complete surrogation to the idea of not knowing what is good and what is bad, and, more importantly, by giving up volition to control what is being created, that is, only by embracing her vulnerability, that Lynda will be able to create again: “And that feeling... / that strange floating feeling of being there and not being there came back. One line led to another and a story slowly formed under my hands. / To be able to stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape!” (*What* 135). The images on the last page of the story show the adult Lynda being embraced by the Magic Cephalopod, who has “Don’ know” written over its body three times, and who is holding the brush together with Lynda, spelling out “abracadabra” over an empty page.

The magic of creation, the connection with the fluid and alive image, is born out of facing one’s inability to consciously answer and approach creation and, equally, it is born out of the painful process of reaching the stage of not knowing, a process during which one is completely vulnerable to one’s own anxiety. Furthermore, Barry also makes clear that one cannot escape from this experience of helplessness as one has to experience this vulnerability to the creative process in cycles. In the picture showing Lynda giving up control and admitting that she does not know how to create, the narrator’s commentary hints that this realization has happened before, and is bound to happen again: “[Lynda][h]as no memory of having solved this problem before. No idea she’ll have to solve it again and again and have total amnesia each time” (*What* 134).

Creation and reaching originality via the line are never a controllable and predictable process for Barry. During creation, be it the darker phases when one experiences one’s vulnerability, or the state of creative flow, one can never know what exactly is going to come out of one’s brush or pen. While in the previous example Barry compared vulnerability inherent in the phase before creation to being imprisoned, in another example she highlights that drawing

lines involves the risk of getting lost. Similar to the character of the simpleton in children's stories who gets lost (*Syllabus* 90), creation involves the process of not seeing clearly where one's way is taking one, and being able to stand this state. In one of the collages of *What It Is*, Barry asks: "[t]o follow a wandering mind means having to get lost. Can you stand being lost?" (49). The montage on the same page features various elements, e.g., a cat wearing an octopus outfit, an eyeball-like structure, a human figure upside down, flowers made of paper and flowers made of lace, and a red theatrical curtain as frame for the page. Out of the elements of the montage, I would like to emphasize those that resonate—for me—with the textual invitation that seems to respond to the montage's central question: "[f]ind me by not looking" (49). Painted waves and textual references to water ("what happens if you cross") evoke voyage by sea; and in due course, at the bottom of the page we find the monkey standing for the author, and a demon, crossing water in a boat. They have undertaken the crossing in order to follow the wandering mind. The direction and the outcome of the journey is not clear yet, but its dangerous nature is suggested by dark colors and a pterodactyl hovering in menacing gloom.

Though getting lost might seem to be the longer path, it cannot be spared: in another example from her teaching practice Barry describes an occasion when she forgot about the importance of getting lost (*Syllabus* 86-92). She gave her students too specific instructions about how to use crayons, a new material in the class, to color images with, instructions which also communicated Barry's preconceptions about crayons. As a result, the class ended up not liking this technique. In her reflection on what has happened, Barry concludes that while she wanted to save time for the students, she took away the chance to experiment, explore, get lost, undertake risk, and ask their own questions with their coloring. Getting lost and experiencing one's limits leads to building a personal relationship with the materiality and process of drawing.

Barry thinks of both drawing and writing lines as risky spontaneous “picturing” (*Syllabus* 136) that one cannot lead or direct: “[i]t’s a kind of picturing that is formed by our own activity, one line suggesting the next. We have a general direction but can’t see where we are until we let ourselves take a step, and then another, and then we move on to the third” (*Syllabus* 136). Entering the right state of mind and the ability to stand vulnerable and not knowing have been important precisely because it is via these experiences that one can yield to the spontaneously flowing line. In fact, Barry’s conception of the open-ended and active line resembles Paul Klee’s theory of the line as a stroll.

In thinking about the line as a walk Klee approaches the line as a structure of experience or as a process that necessarily has a direction, where the line possesses equal agency as the artist. As Andrew Hewish highlights, the canonical English interpretation of Klee’s German original as “taking the line for a walk” results in a false hierarchy that is not part of Klee’s model: the drawer has the power to take the line, which, in turn, can be taken, for a walk (“A Line From Klee” 3). For Klee, as well as for Barry, the line is emphatically active: it is a loaded possibility that can take any direction any time, and at any single point of which any alternate possibilities might appear (Hewish 13) and get embodied. The very first sentences of Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925, in English 1953) is an apt summary of his approach to the line: “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk’s sake. The mobility agent, is a point, shifting its position forward” (Klee 16).

Comics are created via this unpredictable gesture of embodiment, as Barry explains: “[y]ou know where the story begins and ends—and you know two things happening in the middle—if you are drawing it in four panels. But you don’t know what your drawings will be like until you draw them with this kind of picturing in our mind that moves your hand. The trick is just that: let it move your hand (*Syllabus* 137).”

Wandering, encountering, and getting lost are not at all pleasant experiences; they show the self's essential helplessness or vulnerability before, and also in, the creative flow. The experience of letting go of control is a painful one, through it drawing becomes a risky business: demons and ghosts can come out of one's brush any time. The creatures in "Two Questions" are examples for fears that Barry calls demons, and which spontaneously appear to force the drawer to face them. In probably her most famous autobiographical work, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, which has been approached as a layered visualization of remembering traumatic experiences (Chute, *Graphic Women* 114), all the chapters are structured not only around traumatic memory, but, significantly, around the spontaneity of the active line to unexpectedly bring forth demons. The demons, who can take any shape, but often exist as complex ideas, embody associations and recollections of Barry's childhood¹³. In *What It Is* the character of the child Lynda, who lives these traumatizing situations in the present tense, is often called forth from Barry's brush suddenly and unexpectedly—as if this girl, as well as the demons, manifested involuntarily from the line drawn by Barry's hand.

¹³ In *One! Hundred! Demons!* each chapter title names a demon, e.g., "resilience", "the visitor," "magic lanterns," "cicadas," "dogs;" and elaborates a childhood memory associated with this central traumatic element. Sometimes, as in the case of the mythological *aswang*, cultural heritage merges with personal heritage (see de Jesus 7-12). The demons literally take shape and their black shapes populate the pages of the introduction, which shows the artist in the moment of creation with brush in hand.



Fig. 1.5. "Rolling forward along in time," a one-page story from Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, 157. Courtesy of the artist.

The dark-tone one-pager “Rolling forward along in time,” published in *What It Is* (157), also expresses the dangerous spontaneity of drawing the line (figure 1.5). Here it is the lines that lead the thought: the person has to remain passive so that the line can manifest. Drawing in the right state of mind requires an openness to what is to come, even if what comes is painful: “something happens to my thinking when I start to draw / it becomes more like listening than formulating”—she writes about the experience of giving up control. The title of the story records the indeterminate direction and dynamism of thinking and creation. In the panels themselves we see various heavily crosshatched figures: the young Lynda, a cat, a demon, a robot, and in the final, silent panels, a deep-sea fish and a tapir. This is a comic about how making marks, any mark, not specifically pictures or words, brings forth and also records a spontaneous inner dialogue of memories and thought that have not been considered to interact before. The deep-sea fish is an easily understandable metaphor for the unconscious element in creation, but what stands out for me is how unusually dark the whole page is: the comic is inserted in a black-brown frame reminiscent of dried organic vegetation, the panels are dominated by blue wash and heavy crosshatching. The figures are especially heavily crosshatched as if they came into being despite the lines. The shape of the very pensive cat in one of the panels is born out of the density of hatching lines as if by accident.

Lines going in all direction in this comic threaten to deface the characters themselves, they make the differentiation of character and background ambiguous and difficult. Barry depicts the young Lynda in two panels at the beginning: the first one resembles a classical portrait with Lynda looking directly at the reader, addressing us with inexpressive eyes, not smiling. Lynda’s face is almost scarred by the hatches, and as a result her hair is more easily accessible or recognizable than her face. The second Lynda is shown reading a book, with her face in darkness and her hair almost black. In the meantime, the narrator encourages

reading this comic as an illustrated recording of the process of its own spontaneous creation: “[w]hile I move my pen, I hear sentences, like this one for example” (*What* 157), says one of the captions. The face scarred with lines and the comics focus on creation suggests that the overabundance of lines is in fact a materialization of the thought process which is always on the verge of becoming inaccessible to others. Creative thought is always in danger of becoming illegible to the public, and here it is even shown to be on the verge of being differentiated as a form against a background. As always, the text reaching over several panels encourages a linear interpretation of the page: when we follow the direction of reading, the last panel depicting a crosshatched tapir against an unusually white background suggests, as the endpoint of the story, that a form has been differentiated out of the materiality of thinking. The last panel reveals that the lines, which are in fact embodied thoughts, have been tamed: they no longer scratch the surface and they are not means of effacement anymore. Instead, an image has emerged from the tamed lines. Whereas in the penultimate panel, which shows the deep-sea fish, a prominent role is given to the energetic, freely flowing line—which, in the context of deep-sea can equally stand for light and darkness—the lines are contained by the figure in the last panel.

“Rolling forward along in time” suggests the unpredictability of both thought and line, and conceptualizes making comics as a risky open-ended activity. No wonder that Lynda as a returning character is abandoned early on, and is replaced by a series of other creatures, who are only featured once. Instead of a returning character, the true hero of this one-page comic is the spontaneous embodied line. This line is a forever-changing active agent: a companion, which is not *taken* for a walk, but has its very own ideas about walking. So far I have argued that the line for Barry is a means of authentic self-expression, and is equally the product of the mind and the body. Now I would like to introduce the idea of the line is a *partner*, and not a product: it is a partner of the mind and the body. The line becomes authentic when one

lets go of the desire to control, and also undergoes the risk of getting lost. Facing uncertainty, doubt, and insecurity about one's work provide motivation for genuine expression, and this way the admission and exploration of vulnerability become part of the creative process. The line's spontaneity is born out of a mindset that allows dwelling with the complex image that one would like to represent. At the same time, the line is produced by an ease about, and consciousness of, the movements of the body. The line is not controlled by the mind or the body. In giving up the lead, artistic self-expression becomes linked to experiencing one's helplessness. This way drawing itself stems from embracing one's vulnerability: as a condition, according to Lynda Barry, it is a prerequisite of artistic practice.

2

The Cartoon Body as Performance of the Line in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*

Comics offers a perfect medium for autobiographers to express the complexities of identity, subjectivity, or their relationship to their bodies, as the medium builds on the visualization of these questions and the artists' attitudes towards them. Non-fiction comics inevitably visualizes a set of complex ideas and relationships as a network of visual elements, all working together conveying meanings. The artist's attitude is represented in the way he or she draws the world of the comics, in the visual ontology of the drawing (Rawson 19); and in the case of comics autobiographies the artist's view is also embodied in the character modeled on the author. Following Whitlock, I will call the character with reference to the creator the avatar (971).

In this chapter I examine representations of oneself in a narrative of illness and visual inventiveness, and focus on the dynamic visualizations of the body in Ken Dahl's comics autobiography, *Monsters* (2009). In the performative processes of drawing the author's avatar's body is constantly created and recreated. My aim is to show that these repeated acts of transformation are used to ask visual questions about the normative body and also about the monstrous body. The metamorphoses keep the avatar in a "condition of constant becoming" (Shildrick's term, 1), which is a particularly vulnerable situation. Constant

becoming is not only a characteristic of the autobiographic avatar's representation; it also describes the process of continuous self-definition which autobiographical artists go through: the avatar is born out of repeated acts of looking at oneself as another and defining oneself. Othering oneself by one's own look establishes a critical distance, and makes reflection on personality traits and physical bodily features possible. This process is inherent to all confessional genres, and it has an undeniably crucial visual aspect when the artist is working in the medium of comics. In the last section of the chapter I turn from the study of bodily transformations to instances where a change of style accompanies representations of the morphing body. I show that Dahl's ironic take on the visual clarity of infographics, and his incorporation of drawn photographs showing outbreaks of herpes, can be interpreted as further visual ways to undermine the illusionary stability of the normative body.

In the analysis I rely greatly on Margrit Shildrick's approach to vulnerability and the body, which she elaborated in *Embodying the Monster. Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002). Shildrick examines various cultural and bodily forms of monstrosity and otherness which have been considered as inferior to the normal body, and explains that vulnerability is not only confined to the Monstrous Other, but is at the same time "also our own" (6), it is universal. In a provocative move, she also connects vulnerability to the quality of the monster when she calls vulnerability a "companion of the monstrous" (6), and by this she deconstructs the idea of normalcy and monstrosity in images of the body—just like Dahl does, as it will be shown shortly. Shildrick claims that vulnerability is a basic experience shared by everyone in acts of communication: it is "a quality of the self in the encounter with the other" (7). That is, one's vulnerability manifests and can most easily be recognized in interaction with the Other, and here, I would like to expand Shildrick's argument to the world of narrative drawing and autobiographical drawing: such drawing is based on encounters with the Other within the self. I aim to show that vulnerability is a quality of the

self that gets seen—and in Dahl’s comics also gets embodied— on the one hand, in the alienating encounter with oneself as it happens in autobiography, and drawing on the other. Furthermore, and on a more basic level, Shildrick’s amazing book lends itself to reading along with Dahl’s comics because of the central experience it is about: monstrosity. As the plural in the title *Monsters* promises, monstrosity is a multiplied experience that manifests itself in the multiple forms of the shape-shifting main character, Ken, and also in the personified forms of the herpes virus, Ken’s most faithful companion. Ultimately, Dahl’s book is a visual mapping of the interrelated experiences of vulnerability and monstrosity, which manifest both in the experience of carrying a sexually transmitted virus, and in the fundamental process of all autobiographical ventures, namely in the autobiographical encounters with oneself as Other.

Monsters is a three-part semi-autobiography published in one volume in 2009, by a small press New York based publisher, Secret Acres. It appeared under the pen name Ken Dahl, but on the last page the author’s real name is revealed to be Gabby Schulz. Visually, the comics utilizes a clear cartoony style that occasionally borders on caricature. Most pages are divided into four easily distinguishable panels, which results in an easy-to-follow structure, deviations from which are rare, and are indicative of representational excess. *Monsters* is about facing and learning to live with the burden of an incurable sexually transmitted disease, herpes. In the first and longest part, possessing a dangerous and monstrous body is visualized in inventive ways, and the body image is shown to be in a constant flux. The narrative focuses on evading the moral questions and consequences of whether Ken has infected his partner(s) with the virus, and details his carrying the burden of self-imposed isolation. The second part shows Ken, now self-identified as a monster, as a social misfit, trying to control his illness and blaming society for his condition. In the final part Ken makes some uncertain steps towards building an honest and infection-conscious new relationship

with Hannah. In the analysis, in order to differentiate character from cartoonist, I will refer to the author as Dahl, and his autobiographical avatar in the comics as Ken.

Dahl is very clear in visualizing the avatar's body as alien and othered, fluid and monstrous, vulnerable and multiple. In *Monsters* both the body and Ken's relationship to himself are always in the process of visually indicated transformation, and no form can be considered the final one. In the ontology of *Monsters*, experiencing vulnerability and presenting it in an entertaining way are provocatively matched: vulnerability and wit are framed as Ken's central experience. With this, Dahl breaks away from associations of vulnerability with femininity, weakness, and postcolonial subjects, which have prevailed until the rethinking of this concept by Butler, Shildrick, and others (Ganteau 21). Dahl demonstrates the universality and the potential of the constant becoming that his experience of vulnerability is tied with. In *Monsters* a heterosexual white male protagonist loses control of his bodily experience and literally his body image, to the extent that by the end of the narrative the possibility of a normal or stable body gets questioned.

Transforming and re-transforming the avatar's body offers creative ways for Dahl not only to find visual expressions of complex feelings and experiences but also to testify to the endlessness of pictorial embodiment itself. Pictorial embodiment, a term used by Elisabeth El Refaie to describe "the process of engaging with one's own identity through multiple self-portraits" (51), is a potentially infinite creative process: there is no end to drawing avatars that express some aspects of one's identity. Moreover, the autobiographical avatar's body is repeated and re-drawn from scene to scene: this repetition is a necessary and also practical aspect of pictorial embodiment.

The morphing of Ken's body is expressive of vulnerability on two levels: on the level of the narrative, and on the level of representation. First, on the level of the narrative, Ken's body is vulnerable to the virus, which is transforming his body. Initially, the virus particles are represented as threatening beings that invade the body from the outside, but gradually the virus is recognized to be coming from within the body as well. The first lesson Ken has to learn is the admission of his own vulnerability, experiencing, with Shildrick's words, that "the monstrous cannot be confined in the place of the other" (4). Second, the avatar's body is also vulnerable to the twisting logic of metamorphoses in representation: it is denied a stable and constant form. In its redrawings, it is morphing on and on under the hands of a creative and playful graphiateur or drawing agent¹⁴. It is on this level that the comics challenges division of bodies into categories of the monstrous and the standard, the vulnerable and the stable, by making these boundaries uncertain.

In sum, I work with two different interpretations of vulnerability by showing that the character is vulnerable to what he will be turned into by the virus and by the artist. Thus the aim of my analysis is to examine the performance of the line in creating Ken's ever changing character in relation to the vulnerability involved in creating a cartoon self of oneself. The analysis also shows Dahl's experiments with several modalities to express these vulnerabilities: making fun of himself, contrasting his cartoony style to realistic images, and toying with the toolkit of medical discourse. In the analysis I also argue that the visual and verbal expressions of Ken's relationship to the virus are, in fact, contradictory: the inventiveness and carnivalesque freedom of the visual layer are not matched by similar qualities in the textual parts of the narrative.

¹⁴ For an explanation of Philippe Marion's term, please refer to the Introduction.

I believe that the potential to transformation via drawing, which is utilized in *Monsters*, also means a certain openness to the grotesque. Playfulness and elements of caricature characterize cartoon bodies both in the tradition of alternative comics autobiographies and strips about funny animals, as the grotesque has always offered means to explore and experiment with power and with vulnerability. Pictorial embodiment offers opportunities to visualize the vulnerabilities of the artists' actual selves via endless experimentation with "their multiple playful self-portraits" (El Refaie 71). I argue therefore that vulnerability in this respect arises both from the constant and never ending processes of drawing and redrawing oneself as a character; and from the realization that the vulnerability of the self is linked to its monstrosity and otherness.

During drawing the character based on oneself, the "comics autographer"—to use Gardner's term for the authors creating autobiography in this medium ("Autography's Biography" 3)—reinscribes versions of himself or herself in the scenes of his or her life. The autobiographical avatar is born out of the study and interpretation of one's subjectivity and physical features. It usually aims at a truthfulness in expressing the understanding that has been born out of the objectification of oneself, rather than factual realism in representing one's bodily features (Hatfield 114-127, El Refaie 147). Drawing oneself as a comics character builds on the play between closeness and distance, between being the object of study and the subject of one's art—mirrors, therefore, frequently appear in comics autobiographies. Dahl's comics is no exception: he uses the trope of the mirror to reveal the arbitrariness of what actually seems to be natural and conventional. First and foremost, Dahl deconstructs the convention of the cartoon character having a stable body, which either does not change, or follows a realistic pace of aging. Dahl transforms freely the bodies drawn for his avatar. Because of this, a central concern of *Monsters* is precisely the potentially never ending process of self-study, self-objectification, recognizing oneself as monstrous and

vulnerable; and, equally importantly, the artist's skill and imagination in representing versions of this constantly changing body.

As an illness narrative, *Monsters* is obsessed with the various symptoms and signs of the body, and the book is preoccupied with skin as a legible and threatening surface and also as a boundary. The visual reinterpretations of skin reveal that the actual threat is not coming from the outside, rather, its source is inside the body. The primary topic, the sexually transmitted disease of herpes, is provocative in itself, given the moral judgment and stigma that such conditions still get associated with (Sontag *Aids and Its Metaphors*), and given that the comics displays various versions of the changed or diseased body. Via sometimes playful and other times realistic representations of the monstrous and abject body, *Monsters* very much builds on the potential of the comics medium to "intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation" (Chute and DeKoven "Introduction" 772). To address the issue of bodily taboos Dahl visualizes a very complex relationship to one's body. He also uses multiple forms of the same body, both isolated and integrated in society.

Seeing and representing the self as abject defines the aesthetics of his pages, but so does his visual inventiveness. Yet representing a(n often naked) body with visible marks of a sexually transmitted disease is risky: it goes against social expectations and norms, if not directly taboos. Shildrick writes on the matter that "[t]he disruption of corporeal integrity and the open display of bodily vulnerability is always a moment for anxiety and very often hostility" (53), and Dahl puts a lot at risk when he offers up his autobiographical avatar's body for the judgement of the reader. Dahl enjoys the reader's shock or laughter caused by sudden changes of bodily forms, and a number of visual puns draw on the proximity of what Bakhtin called the grotesque to the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque is evoked by the palpable joy of the graphiateur, the drawing agent, in drawing and collecting grotesque and monstrous

bodies, which evoke horror, laughter, or both (Koch 155). Horror is evoked especially by photographic realism (fig. 2.5), a style which can indeed shock onlookers when used for representing the extreme vulnerability of the body¹⁵.

Giving the Monster a Form: Negotiating Boundaries Between Oneself and the Other

Dahl's memoir uses striking visual metaphors for the representation of emotional states and the fluctuating ways the protagonist relates to his medical condition. The by now canonical graphic memoir one immediately associates with the keenness to present illness with visual associations and fluidly transforming bodies is David B's *Epileptic* (originally serialized in six volumes in French between 1996 and 2003; published in English in 2005). "This book is ultimately about art, representation, and creative energy as much as about epilepsy"—summarizes Hillary Chute ("Review" 425), and I consider the statement to be equally valid in the case of *Monsters*. Dahl's comics is not simply an illness narrative, it is also about testing the flexibility of representing the human body, and about transforming the cartoon self.

Engagement with monstrous bodies is a topic *Epileptic* and *Monsters* have in common. In David B's work the brother's epilepsy is made manifest as a monster, or as horse, mountain, and bird-snake, while in *Monsters* Ken's own body is abstracted and made monstrous, dangerous, alienated, and other. Furthermore, similar to David B's *Epileptic*, here, too illness is materialized and personified: it does not only exist inside the avatar's body, but also

¹⁵ Representations of vulnerability in realistic styles will be explored in Chapter Four.

outside it, it is a character that has also been given a cartoon body. Sometimes Ken and the embodied and personified virus are roommates and best friends, and occasionally they even behave like a married couple sharing the same bed (154, 180). The virus-buddy fulfills Ken's emotional needs by expecting him home, or telling him off when he comes home late (153). It can change its size from a small, cute yet annoying pet (125) to an enormous menacing presence (124). The personified, abject virus is the only being Ken can discuss his infection or his anxiety with. He is the only one who can understand Ken, as the virus-buddy's body visually stands for the fullness of the same monstrous qualities which characterize Ken's body in various degrees: it is fully abject. The virus-buddy, apart from being a friend, also acts as a predator and as an embodiment of temptation, trying to persuade Ken to engage in sexual relationships with women without informing them about the details of his medical condition. The virus-buddy speaks for both its viral self, arguing for its need to find new hosts to survive: "Is that the girl that works in the bookstore? / She looks so *pure* and *vigorous*... she'd make an *excellent host*! / Oh, don't get *indignant*... You want to infect her just as bad as *we* do!" (emphasis in the original, 125).

The most often returning representation of the personified and embodied monster of herpes is a jelly-like body that has no head or limbs; and has a transparent, spiky skin which covers the swirling, dark mass inside. Ken in his monster form (fig. 2.1) also looks like this. To describe the monstrous body, one can easily adapt Kristeva's depiction of the abject as "[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome" (2). Kristeva's theory of abjection will be discussed shortly; at this point I just would like to note the amazing literariness with which the virus-buddy and Ken visualize Kristeva's description. The form of the virus, in which the outside reveals the inside, visually recalls what Shildrick calls the "confused and essentially fluid corporeality of monsters" (48), the literal fluidity of

which contributes greatly to its abject associations. The monstrous form in its fullness, to which Ken's white, heterosexual, male character has to find meaningful ways to relate, has no sense organs: it possesses only a mouth. The mouth, apart from giving the virus-buddy the ability to speak, also reveals the dotted, uneven, fluid materiality of its inside. In finding ways to relate to this form, Ken is undertaking no less than attempting to redefine the boundary between defined the autonomous human subject who has a normative, "integrated and fully functioning body," and the very fluid and monstrous body against which Western cultural traditions have pinpointed their norms (Shildrick 50).

In *Monsters*, however, an opposition between the monstrous body and the normative body cannot be maintained. Although early on in the story Ken is very judgmental about people with herpes, labeling them "disgusting" (6), he has to experience living with an infected and contagious body that embodies the same monstrous qualities as the virus-buddy. Furthermore, he Ken further alienated from his body by the dynamic changes of its form. In Ken's experience the "openness towards the monstrous other" (Shildrick 3), that is, to follow Shildrick's ethical position to stop the binary opposition between monstrous and normal, and the experience of finding monstrosity within (fig. 2.1), are painful. Gradually, as the mirror-scene in figure 2.1 shows, Ken arrives from attributing threatening monstrosity to his surroundings to realizing that this quality is also found within. This process goes hand in hand with a parallel realization, that of vulnerability: it is a companion to feelings of monstrosity, which develops as Ken's self-definition as a person with a normative body becomes more and more uncertain.

At first the threat of the virus is perceived and is represented to be coming from the outside: before the character of the virus-buddy enters the story (quite late, on page 69), and before Ken realized the monstrous potentialities of his own body (54, fig. 2.1), the virus is represented as a dangerous mass dwelling near the characters, threatening with coming too close and making the body disappear. In the first part of *Monsters*, monstrosity is the characteristic of Ken and his girlfriend's surroundings: monstrous particles fill the most banal actions with an unknown danger, looming near everyday objects, threatening to multiply endlessly. For example, the depth of the earth over which the unsuspecting but already infected girlfriend, Rory, is cycling is made up of monstrous forms (21), just like Rory's thoughts a few pages later (29). In the scene where Ken is told the news that his girlfriend has herpes, tiny bits of the virus-monster overrun and overwhelm the speechless man's body (23-24, fig. 2.2). In this two-page sequence, the viral forms are originally the pieces of dough Ken has been working with at his workplace. The dough, having transformed into tiny but numerous monstrous forms, start floating towards Ken. At this point of the narrative, Ken's judgmental attitude based on stereotypes about herpes is clear, as well as his perception of his own body as whole and healthy. The virus attacks him, and two times four panels are devoted to representing the swift process during which the viral forms swirl all over his body, cover it completely, and drag it down to the floor behind the table. First, his body disappears under the spiky forms, but is not influenced by them: they do not transgress the boundary of his body, neither does he transform from the inside. By the final panel on page 24 his body disappears completely under the virus particles, but its integrity is untouched.

The major marker of qualities of monstrosity, abjection, and vulnerability in *Monsters* is, as many times in human history, the quality of the skin. The already described viral skin is rough and shiny at the same time: with its spikes and opaqueness it is a truly uninviting,

abject surface. This monstrous body, a from which can be taken up by Ken, is perceived as abject because it “radically disrupt[s] morphological expectations” (Shildrick 2). Monstrous bodies “disrupt both internal and external order” (Shildrick 4), and indeed it is the disruption and reorganization of external and internal that Dahl is undertaking in the narrative of *Monsters*. The first step of the disruption of internal and external is making skin, the boundary between inside and outside, the primary marker of abjection. The prominence of skin-related imagery can easily be reasoned with the fact that the actual symptoms of the medical condition of herpes also affect the skin. *Monsters*, however, also uses the representations of abject skin to characterize the relationship between the character and society. Skin “negotiates and re-distributes the relation between inside and outside,” argue Elsaesser and Hagener (111), and in *Monsters* skin simultaneously becomes the outward expression of the monstrosity and vulnerability inside Ken and a visual marker of Ken’s body as contagious. It is the skin that marks and identifies the subject as monstrous and marks Ken as an outcast, as the skin is the display of symptoms coming from within the body itself. Monstrous skin marks Ken as repulsive, while it is also a boundary which is crossed from time to time as Ken engages in guilt-ridden relationships with women.

Given the emphasis on skin as a marker of vulnerability and monstrosity, it is no surprise that touch (or the lack thereof) is the sense most often referred to in the narrative. Ken is often featured touching his skin and his infection outbreaks in acts of self-inspection, preventive medication, or masturbation. The opening sequence of the comics jokingly presents scenes of a life where touching (kissing, sharing food, sharing a toothbrush) carries a dangerous potentiality of infection, yet the last panel of the sequence breaks the relaxed atmosphere not only by the dominance of its black background, but also by suddenly representing a person with abject, infection-ridden skin (1-3). The person is in fact the same girl who has been kissed on the first page of the comics, her transformation is unexpected:

the sequence uses the structure of a joke with preparation and punline (punchpanel) to convey a bodily experience that is anything but funny.

The importance of the sense of touch is also alluded to by the most often used way to express the monstrosity and vulnerability of Ken's body: a second layer of monstrous skin drawn over and around his human form (63-67, 78-79, 83, 91-92, 151-152). In this form, the spiky and transparent skin covers Ken's human body like a shell or spacesuit, isolating him from the people around him, and imprisoning him in his wounded state. Ken sees society through the isolation of the viral skin, while his human body is often shaded dark, evoking the dark substance inside the fully monstrous form. I call the representation with the second skin, which visually balances between the fully monstrous form and the standard representation of Ken with a normal human body, a semi-monstrous form, as it is associated with the utter vulnerability and total isolation of the fully monstrous form. It is in this semi-monstrous form that Ken most heavily experiences social vulnerability: the semi-monstrous form calls attention to the interconnectedness of bodies by visualizing isolation as part of one's own body.

The semi-monstrous form freezes the in-between stage of Ken's body constantly oscillating between a stage of becoming a monster and a stage of maintaining his human character. This form visualizes the constant state of becoming, which in turn indicates the interconnectedness of monstrosity and vulnerability. Here, again, Dahl's comics visually supports Shildrick's argument that "neither vulnerability nor the monstrous is fully containable within the binary structure of the western logos" and that "the strange is not a discrete event but the constant condition of becoming" (1). The semi-monstrous form is an expression of Ken's experience of fluctuating boundaries between self and Other, which, as the narrative progresses, will be completely redefined.

As the narrative progresses, monstrosity gradually becomes a defining experience of Ken's body, revealing that his body "has been unstable all along" (Shildrick 4). By the middle of the book, an ambivalent relationship is established towards all forms of Ken's body: the monstrous forms and the semi-monstrous skin are alien, but are also recognized as Ken's own. This duality of rejection and possession is the exact description of one's relationship to the abject according to Kristeva. Kristeva aptly describes the conflict represented by Dahl, when he introduces her *Powers of Horror* (1982) with the following description of abjection:

"There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. ... But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsions places the one haunted by it literally beside itself" (1).

Ken sees his skin and his body as abject, and the book is in fact about the gradual unlearning of contrasting and measuring his body against that of others.

The mirror-scene where Ken establishes a relationship between the virus and his body, thereby acknowledging for the first time its monstrous and vulnerable qualities (fig. 2.1), is a four-panel sequence that is structured similarly to the one showing Ken's first encounter with the virus (fig. 2.2). In both scenes, Ken's body is represented frontally, standing behind a flat surface (sink, table). But while in the scene at the workplace the body is overwhelmed by virus, in the scene at the bathroom it is transformed into an abject body completely made out of tiny viral forms.

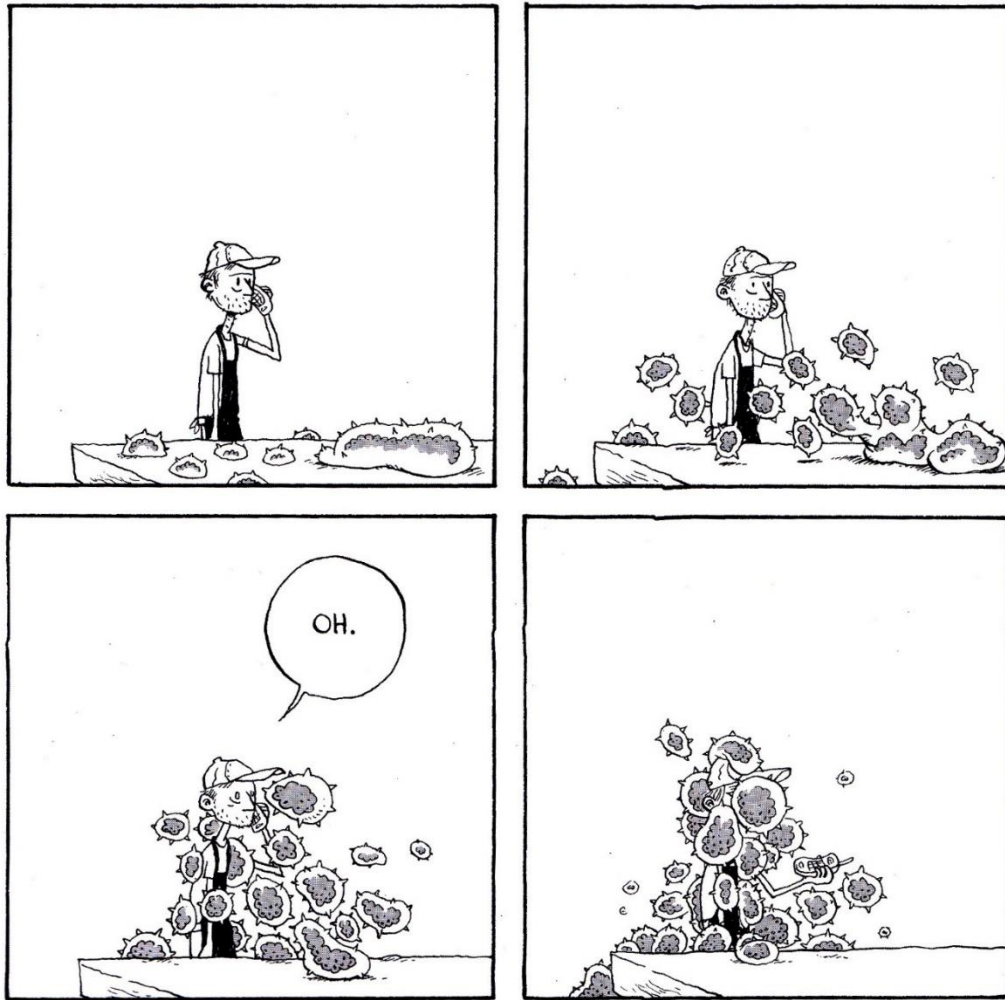


Fig. 2.2. Ken finding out Rory is infected, from Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, 23. Courtesy of the artist.

The mirror scene shows the moment of Ken's self-identification as a monster, and it is a significant step in recognizing and representing the vulnerability of the body (54, fig. 2.1). In the first panel three tiny virus-bubbles are lurking behind Ken, who is inspecting a sore in his mouth: they are separate entities, there is no physical connection between them and Ken's body. In the next panel the viral forms jump on him while he is standing impassively, having lowered his hand from his lip. Ken is giving out inarticulate sounds, while a form seems to be coming out of his mouth, indicating that the forms were not only outside but have been also inside his body. However, as the direction of movement is actually not indicated, an equally valid reading of the panel is that the virus is in the process of entering Ken's body, acting out what, in Shildrick's view, counts as the greatest threat associated with the monstrous: "[t]he issue is not so much that monsters threaten to overrun the boundaries of the proper, as that they promise to dissolve them" (11). The forms completely cover Ken's body in the third panel, and the monstrous form coming out of, or entering, Ken's mouth is bigger: the cold sore that is in fact the herpes itself has a life on its own. The process is complete by the last panel, where the virus transforms Ken's body into a single huge humanoid spiky jelly-like form of a monster, with his arms and hands transformed into useless barbed chunks (54), and his sockets dark and empty.

Having been transformed into the virus itself in the mirror scene (54), the next page can be considered as the first time Ken verbally identifies himself as a monster (55). The transformation happened during self-inspection, during the study of the body which, up until this point, has not been perceived as monstrous. Dahl utilizes the topos of the mirror as a means by which insight can be gained, and he frames the whole sequence of the first bodily transformation into a monster by an invisible mirror: its frame coincides with the panel boundaries, which highlights the intimacy of this painful scene of gaining self-knowledge (fig. 2.1).

This scene of recognizing oneself as a monster is a spectacular example of the process of comics autobiography's plastic rendering of hidden inward processes, during which "the inward vision takes on an outward form" (Hatfield 114). Turning oneself into a character involves reflections on the physicality of one's body, and the appearance of the character also visualizes the personality and emotions of the actual person (El Refaie 60). Speaking about the avatar's double relations to the actual body, El Refaie emphasizes that "[e]very act of self-portraiture entails a form of dys-appearance, in the sense that one's body can no longer be taken for granted as an unconscious presence" (62). The body that is scrutinized becomes othered, and appears strange and dysfunctional. El Refaie here builds on Drew Leder's concept about the dys-appearance of the body: according to Leder, instead of the everyday associations of the body, which are taken for granted, it is the one's othered body which spurs the study of one's body and spurs the reflection on one's bodily experience. Dahl in *Monsters* indulges in the dys-appearance and the othering of his cartoon body, making its various forms express different angles of his bodily experience at a distance.

The scene of self-study in the mirror represents one moment of the endlessly repeated basic structure of creating autobiography in the comics medium, namely, finding adequate visual forms by which a change in one's mental or emotional state, that is, moments of dys-appearance, can be made manifest. The starting point of the realization is looking at oneself in the mirror, a situation to which Dahl returns later as well (73, 126), and the importance of which is also expressed by the cover of the book: it shows Ken's mirror image in the moment of inspecting himself. Self-study in the mirror brings dangerous insight and, in two cases out of the three (54, 73), results in Ken's complete bodily transformation into a monster. In these scenes, the instability of the body image is connected to the necessary moments of scrutiny and distancing that artists need to undergo in order to create their cartoon selves or autobiographical avatars. As mentioned already, establishing distance to visually formulate

personal knowledge of oneself is the basis of creating and drawing a cartoon self. As an obvious outcome of the ongoing scrutiny and drawing, the cartoon self is not to be understood as a transparent, unbiased expression of the whole truth about the self and its relation to the world. Quite on the contrary, it is the visual expression of the limitations and the personal nature, as well as the situated quality, of such knowledge about oneself. Ken's shape-shifting is also expressive of the dynamic nature of this knowledge.

Transforming the Body by Drawing

In the mirror-scene Ken identified himself, and Dahl framed his character (by the mirror and by the panel) as a monster. The following page shows imaginary scenarios of interaction between the monster-self and the world (55), immediately connecting the monstrous body to isolation and social vulnerability. First, Ken, in the form of the monster, is shown embracing a woman while talking inarticulately. Then he starts to devour her: her face is absorbed by the monster, whose grip is getting tighter around her. The final image shows two monsters standing next to each other without any bodily contact: the woman has been transformed into a monster, and this time it is her that is uttering the same sequence of sounds that was leaving the freshly transformed Ken's mouth on the previous page ("Ohhhhhhhh" 55). By now, Ken identifies with the virus, and sees himself defined only in terms of its contagiousness. The captions state: "Let's face it: / nobody wants to fuck a monster... / ... and become monsters themselves" (55). The pictures illustrate exactly what nobody wants to do, a woman becoming a monster, and only the repetition of inarticulate sounds hints at the lack of volition. Monstrosity is shown here as a threat that transforms the whole body, not only the skin, and the source of this transgressive danger is Ken's own body.

After the first, threatening transformation (fig. 2.1), Ken's body can turn into a virus-monster or other kinds of monsters quite of a sudden any time, indicating that the body of the cartoon self has become unstable. This, thanks to Dahl's visual inventiveness, is shown to be funny and tragic at the same time. For example, expanding on the topic of isolation, a woman (not the same as the one who has been transformed into a monster,) is shown running away in terror from the virus-monster that Ken has become on page 55, only to find refuge on the next page in the persons of two armed macho heroes, who are, in the narrator's words, "'normal,' 'clean' alpha males" (56). The necessary turning of the page between the woman running (55) and the woman being saved (56), however, wittily recontextualizes the monstrosity of Ken's body. It has been given a new form during this necessary hiatus in the flow of the narrative: it is now represented as a new kind of monster and also an outcast from society, a vampire (56-58). Dahl uses Ken's vampire-form to address the feelings of the social misfit in a lighthearted fashion, for example, by making the vampire shout "hypocrites!" at the shocked and disgusted people in a McDonalds restaurant (57).

Recontextualization in the above scene happens almost invisibly: on the first page the reader is made to believe that the woman is terrified by Ken's fully monstrous form, as this is the body that the character was represented in last, and the second page reveals retrospectively that she has been escaping from the form of the vampire. In this sequence Dahl breaks with the convention of maintaining the character's consistent shape between panels and pages by turning Ken's human body first into a virus-monster openly, then into a vampire hidden in the representationally empty space of the gutter. Playing with what is shown and what is implied calls the reader's attention to the challenge that self-representation poses to the artist. This challenge, which is also a source of inspiration, is usually hidden by the relatively constant way in which characters are represented, although, the self-study and self-

objectification which leads Dahl to change the form of his character, do not ever end in either case.

When drawing their memoirs, autographers face the challenge of re-representing themselves continually, from panel to panel. What we see in *Monsters* is that the morphing of the cartoon self does not seem to stop: during the process of pictorial embodiment, Ken's body becomes an easily transformable shape-shifter that is equally abject and vulnerable in each of its forms, and is also vulnerable *because of* its many forms. The graphiateur really enjoys the multiplicity of bodies, and the multiplicity of possible connections between visual form and reflections over his "innermost sense of self" (El Refaie 51) in the visualizations of his avatar. Ken, the character, has no influence over the changes, but the graphiateur finds obvious joy and fulfillment in designing the wildest forms for his cartoon self, which will be introduced shortly. Dahl has a tendency to connect each form to a specific emotion, aligning, for example, a gaping hole in his body with guilt; or becoming a dog expresses his lust for women. As Ian Williams, founder of the *Graphic Medicine* blog and movement summarizes in his review: "[h]erpes, obviously, isn't funny, but Ken¹⁶ is funny, his drawings are funny, the way his characters morph into dogs, viruses and monsters is funny and his observational humour is spot on" ("Monsters. Review").

Ken's bodies, which are shown in newer and newer forms, are born out of reflection on the autographer's own body and self. Apart from the viral forms (the completely monster-like form and the second skin around the body), Ken's character is drawn as a vampire (56-58); it turns into a dog driven by sexual instinct, drawn in a cartoony style (69-72); or it becomes

¹⁶ Williams here is referring to the author, Ken Dahl, not the character, who I have been calling Ken in the chapter.

a person without a face for several scenes after his face has been smashed by the giant index finger of the virus, imitating of God's index finger (97-106). Furthermore, Ken's body transforms into a dragon-like monster of fury without recognizable traces of human body parts (104); while earlier, the guilt felt over not being able to talk honestly about his medical condition to his new girlfriend was shown as a hole in Ken's stomach (87-93).

The various forms of the body allow for exercising some degree of control over the represented events, as they enable the autographers to literally become observers of their cartoon selves. In this way, comics enables autographers to revisit and redraw the sites of memories, and, especially in the case of trauma narratives, help restoring a sense of agency.¹⁷ "Paradoxically, playing with one's image can be a way of asserting the irreducibility of the self as agent" claims Hatfield (115), connecting redrawings of the cartoon body with artistic control. The metamorphoses of Ken's cartoon body under Dahl's hands can be interpreted, following Hatfield, as the autographer's repeated acts of asserting agency and taking control of the cartoon form of his body. Simultaneously, the various body forms testify to the transformative and performative abilities of Dahl's line: the line enables and performs the morphing of the cartoon body.

We can regard the whole narrative of *Monsters* to be driven by the performative potential of the line: the story is not pushed forward exclusively by its plot, but also by the line's visual performance. This observation supports Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's that it the logic of representation rather than a temporally evolving plot that comics build on. Baetens and Frey's argument that the graphic novel is "no longer based on plot and action but on the narrative potential of drawing itself" (182), is demonstrated by the transformations of Ken's

¹⁷ This practice, which Chute calls "retracing" ("Texture" 93), will be further explored in Chapter Four.

body. *Monsters* clearly builds on the narrative potential of the line by foregrounding the fluidity of the drawn line and its performative potential. The morphing of Ken's drawn body, naturally, has its functions in the narrative as well: it stems from the already mentioned experience of bodily dys-appearance by the autographical look, and it initiates coming to terms with the body's essential vulnerability.

As an example for the performative power of the line, let me cite the sequence where a giant index finger—covered with monstrous skin—crushes Ken's face (97-106), and Ken walks around faceless from that moment on. In these scenes Ken can no longer evade the consequences of his irresponsible sexual relationship with his unsuspecting new girlfriend, Megan. When the gigantic index finger strikes and crushes Ken's face in a one-page panel, the picture with the sound effect "putsch" (97) expresses the sudden shock and guilt-ridden annihilation that Ken feels. On the next page, however, the scene is transformed into a gag: Ken does not seem to realize that he does not have a face any more, and pours alcohol over his face where his mouth used to be (98). The captions on the next page ("the next day" and "soon," 99) indicate Ken's complete disregard of his changed bodily conditions over an extended period of time. The panels show Ken doing his morning routine with a black hole over the area where his eyes and nose used to be, with a protruding jaw and some teeth remaining from his mouth. Dahl then maintains this form of his avatar for the next longer scene of confrontation with friends, where Ken's losing face becomes a fact in the narrative itself, not only a visual joke. So much so, that on page 103 the transformation of the self-defensive Ken proceeds from his head to his hands, fingers, and body (fig. 2.3), and on page 104 he turns into a gigantic furious dragon.

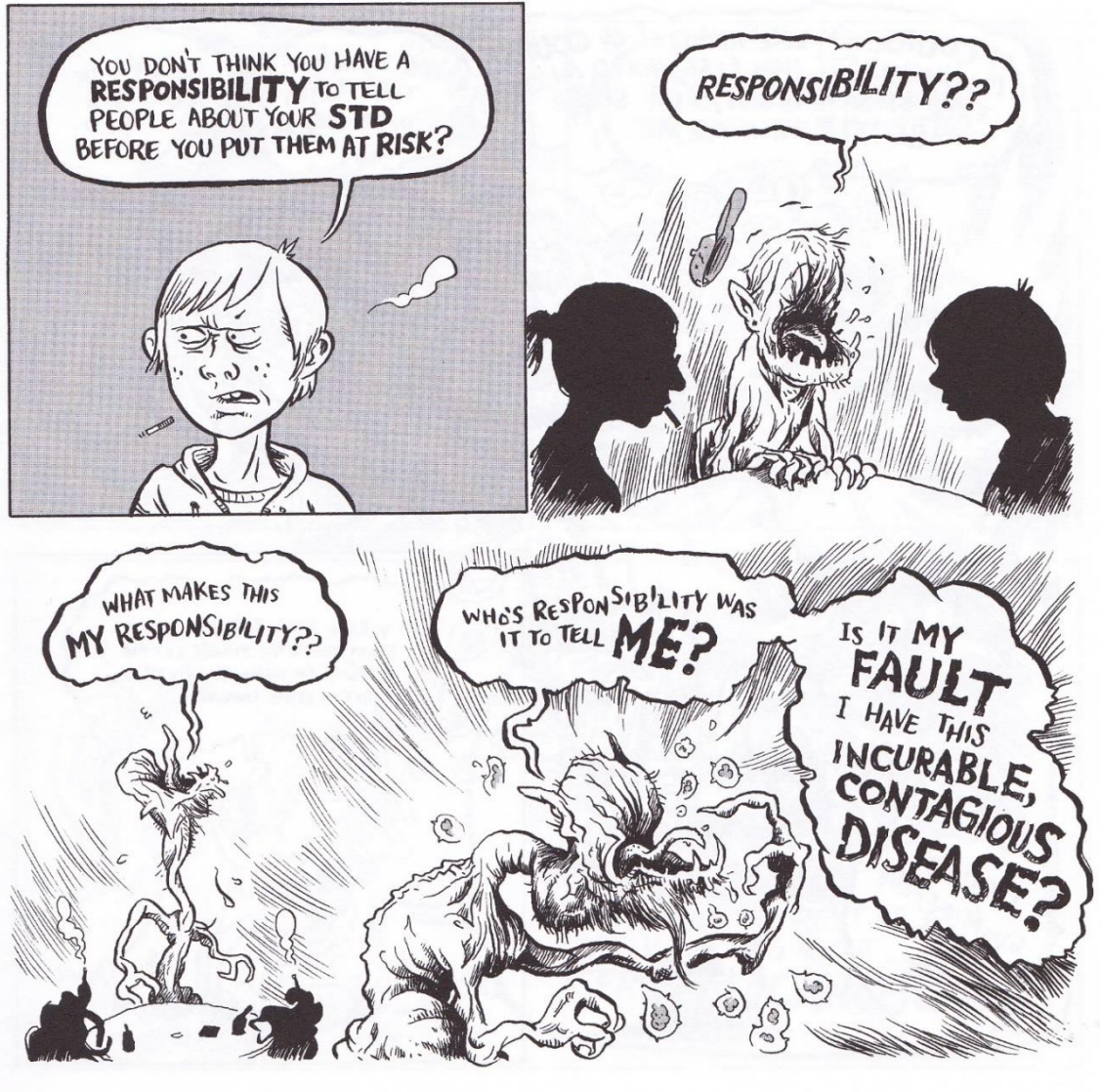


Fig. 2.3. The faceless Ken is transforming into a dragon in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, 103.

Courtesy of the artist.

Having lost his anthropomorphic attributes, the dragon-Ken is floating among herpes particles, and his speech is rendered with a jokingly menacing font. But the morphing still does not stop here, the huge dragon instantly turns into a tiny and limbless worm. The worm's insignificance is enhanced by its past of being a huge dragon. It sitting in the grass, gaping: "Please let me pretend I'm normal and clean just a little longer..." (104). The irony and the joke are on Ken, who still does not get his human form back, and after being briefly given a worm's body, he is represented in his faceless form again (105-106). While the graphiateur frames these metamorphoses as funny, the transformation itself stems from the experience of living in an utterly vulnerable body that is partially destroyed by (the finger of) the virus and changes uncontrollably under the pencil of the graphiateur. This sequence demonstrates qualities that permeate the whole comics; namely, that the associative and creative drive of drawing pushes the narrative forward in unpredictable directions, and that, simultaneously, the transformative potential of representation is inherently connected to the Ken's experiencing multiple vulnerabilities.

On the level of the visual representation of the avatar, the transformations of the body suggest innovation, joke, playfulness and the fluidity of the cartoon self (Hatfield's term, 114); and promote the interpretation of the continual morphing of the body into the abject as expressive of Ken's emotional state. In contrast, the textual component of *Monsters* is not so easy-going about acknowledging the monstrous and vulnerable qualities of the cartoon self. It seems that on the level of narration Ken is revolting against his condition, and goes through phases of denial, as well as feelings of helplessness, optimism, or fight.¹⁸ In contrast, on the level of representation, where the character's embodied form manifests, the

¹⁸ Ken's journey towards redefining himself resembles the five (non-linear) stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross and Kessler).

dynamism of these feelings motivates morphing and a greater degree of ease is present about the monstrous and vulnerable qualities within. The textual components—what Ken is saying as a character, and also the texts of the narrator that accompany the action—verbalize the difficulty of coming to terms with the apparent and uncontrollable morphing of one's body, and the isolation that accompanies the monstrosity of the body. They also address the impossible condition of living with an incurable and contagious illness, which makes the monstrosity of the body visible, and which is transferred by bodily intimacy. It seems that whereas the visual layer agrees with Shildrick in valorizing the transgressive qualities of the monstrous, and in acknowledging the vulnerability of both the self and the Other (Shildrick 3), for the most part of the book the first person commentary (of Ken the character or the narrator) channels discomfort and suffering felt precisely because of this very transgressive nature of the monstrous body.

Shildrick in her study of monstrosity and vulnerability shows that monsters are disturbing because of the very difficulties the textual parts in *Monsters* express: monsters are “neither good nor evil, inside nor outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject” (Shildrick 4). As it has been shown, liminality and transgression are simultaneously a source of humor and self-invention, which is expressed visually; and are a burden, which is expressed by the verbal layer, for example in the following narratorial commentary: “[s]till it seemed like the harder I tried to get rid of my disease, / the further it embedded itself into my life. / I carried it everywhere I went” (Dahl 131). In the interactions of textual and visual elements, Dahl captures the true complexity of the experience of vulnerability, and due to the visual nature of comics the dialogue of text and image literally shows, that valorizing the monster, or finding the vulnerable and the monstrous within, as advocated by Shildrick, are long

processes requiring introspection. In this respect, the introspection needed for the heterosexual white male to explore his vulnerability, is mirrored by the introspection required by autographers.

Visual Discourses on the Vulnerable Body: Infographics and Photographic Realism

The first part of *Monsters* finishes with a longer section explaining the medical background of the herpes simplex virus: this section is visually distinct, it abandons the grid structure and introduces text-heavy pages evoking infographics. This section, entitled “Herpes. A Brief and Confusing Introduction” (110-119), offers a less personal way to address the discrepancy between verbal and visual expressions of vulnerability and monstrosity. Dahl engages verbal medical discourse, as well as medical illustration in this section, and is simultaneously evoking and undermining medical or scientific discourse about the bodily symptoms of the virus. Instead of an illustrated medical text or visualized data, Dahl’s innovative vision mocks the visually clear style of infographics, which builds on visualizing relationships, processes and hierarchies in an accessible and memorable way (Krum).

Graphic narratives about illness tend to incorporate medical image making and medical representations of the body: X-rays, MRI images, schematic representations of organs. Brian Fries’ influential illness memoir *Mom’s Cancer* (2006) evokes infographics to explain stages of the illness, while David Small’s memoir *Stitches* (2009) contrasts X-Ray images to imaginative representations of the inside of the hero’s mouth, where the threat of cancer is located, in order to highlight the contrast between the experience of the body and medical images made about it. Una’s autobiography about child abuse and a manifesto about

women's rights, *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), uses infographics as a way to provide context, convey complicated relationships; present a great amount of data about sexual violence; and also to authenticate the researched nature of the work. For Una, as well as for Dahl, infographics is a way of storytelling—and this is exactly how designers of visualized data define the aim of their projects (Borkin, Groeger, Nussbaumer Knafllic, Smiciklas 22).

Interestingly, and in contrast to other illness memoirs, Dahl does not rely on what historian of science Peter Galison calls the “expertly produced image” (36), which is an image produced by a machine, and the interpretation of which requires a trained person.¹⁹ The creative flow that transforms Ken's body into various forms pervades even the pages devoted to conveying encyclopedic knowledge about herpes, and this greatly contributes to the confusion promised in the title. On the first page of “Herpes. A Brief and Confusing Introduction” Ken plunges into the blackness of his illness, and then guides the reader to a greater factual understanding of herpes while navigating among text and enlarged closed up of infected genitals. Factual information on the cycle of the herpes simplex virus (HSV) and its types float dynamically, but explanation is always merged with Ken's opinion and comments.²⁰

¹⁹ Image making technologies used in various branches of science increasingly depart from the scale, the form, and the circumstances of representing the body, bordering on abstraction and intelligibility for an untrained spectator (Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 60), and they create images of what Galison calls “*nonhuman* points of view” (emphasis in the original, 38).

²⁰ For example, using statistical data, the text argues that most bodies share the condition of being vulnerable to the virus: “[a]round 75% of American adults are infected with HSV” (111), or “90% of people with HSV don't even know they have it” (113). This information is immediately followed by Ken's comment “...like me, before 2003!” (113).

Dahl diverts from his usual lettering used at other parts in *Monsters*, and uses his handwritten imitation of a typefont for playfully appropriating the style of printed documents or medical information booklets (fig. 2.4). Moreover, the body drawn to visually demonstrate the explanatory text in each page is recognizably Ken's: arrows point from the textual chunks towards the illustration of Ken's facial nerves (112), and Ken's own infected body (114). Arrows, as means to organize knowledge, are possibly the most frequently used elements from the toolkit of infographics on these pages. They come in all shapes, sizes, and curves: all of them are unique. In this section *Monsters* breaks with the way illness and the ill body are usually conceptualized, discussed, and represented in contemporary Western culture in terms of military metaphors of attack and defeat (Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors* 11) by letting the autobiographical avatar's own cartoon body undergo the medical gaze, and by simultaneously showing the impossibilities of an impersonal scientific discourse.

"Herpes. A Brief and Confusing Introduction" is visually distinguished from the rest of the book in several ways. Dahl builds on black surfaces, which depart from the generally used layout of the work. As mentioned already, the grid is abandoned, and as a result, textual and figurative bits coexist and freely fill the surface of the page. The text, represented in chunks of clouds, floats among penises and mouths with outbreaks (113), or is inserted between naked bodies of a man and a woman (116). The most serious undermining of medical discourse happens especially by the way Dahl places text in between drawings of genitals: as visual objects, genitals are impossible to see, argues James Elkins based on Georges Bataille. Elkins finds that pictures of genitalia interfere with one's attention, they cannot be impartially observed. One becomes conscious of oneself looking, and one is either drawn to look away, or, on the contrary, is drawn to stare (*The Object Stares Back* 105). Therefore, it is impossible to see genitals the same way as one sees another body part, or an inanimate object. In *Monsters* Dahl provokes and challenges the reader with creating a situation where

long textual bits are placed among drawn genitals, and the reader is expected to maintain a context of information transfer. The images of genitals do not only influence eye movements, they also influence thoughts. “[T]he sight of genitals often impels us to *act*, not just to see,” claims Elkins (106), arguing that such images make the onlooker “aware that it [genitalia] belongs in a sequence of sights and feelings that lead toward or away from sex, and I sense ... that it means something has to be done” (107). This gut reaction of attraction or escape makes the scientific appreciation of Dahl’s pages almost impossible. However, at this point, the reader is shown stylized images in the well-defined context of knowledge transfer—as it will be shown shortly, realistic renderings of genitals raise a number of further questions and uncertainties.

Apart from the arrangement of text and image, the other distinctive visual feature of this section is the use of bleeding: there are no margins at the sides to indicate the borders of the represented world. The black bleeding surface makes this section stand apart from the rest of the book to constitute an appendix to part I,²¹ while the layout also establishes a different relationship with the reader and towards reality. Scott McCloud claims that this layout evokes the illusion of the page effortlessly flowing or bleeding off the material carrying it (*Making Comics*, 163). According to Thierry Groensteen, the margin, which is abandoned here, frames the artwork and sets it apart as an autonomous object. The margin “accomplishes its [the artwork’s] closure and constitutes it [the artwork] as an object of

²¹ The visual solution of bleeding is used only on three other occasions, two of which show personal events – kissing a girl and transmitting the disease (86) and fantasizing about Hannah when believing that Ken cannot have relationships anymore (174). The third instance is a return to medical discourse, or a bridge between the medical and the personal: at the end of the book a doctor investigates his cold sores and declares: “That’s not herpes” (195).

contemplation; in the case of comics, an object of reading” (*The System of Comics* 32). That is to say, the lack of the margin makes the status of the object within exterior reality uncertain: in this specific case, the insecurities about the boundaries of the comics as object, or the body of the actual book format narrative held in hand actually double the insecurities about the human body, which have been expressed in so many visual ways. Now, due to the bleeding pages, the materiality of the book object is used as another means to draw attention to the central crisis.

The page that uses visual means of organizing information in the most traditional way is page 115 (fig. 2.4), which shows Ken’s naked body infected with HSV at all the places a body can possibly be infected with the virus. Explanatory text is linked to the appropriate part of the body with unusually long snake-like arrows. By this solution the body, which suffers under the experience of infection, is distanced from the text of explanation. In each instance, a textual unit contains the Latin name of the specific virus that can infect that body part and a brief, opinion-ridden description of the illness, for example: “Herpes meningitis In the membranes of your brain & spinal cord. Rare, and not usually as bad as it sounds” (115). The page, however, is distanced from the clarity and factuality of infographics in several ways, and the use of what at first seem tiny decorative elements emphasize the painful personal experience of living with a deformed and monstrous body. The most conspicuous element subverting medical discourse, due to its size and also because arrows direct attention to it, is the posture of the figure in the middle of the page. With his arms at strange angles and legs visibly not supporting the weight of his body he looks floating in an abstract black space. The figure’s face also expresses the experience of inhabiting this body: his scalp has even been removed to reveal his HSV-infected brain, while the text explains how easy it is to get the virus.

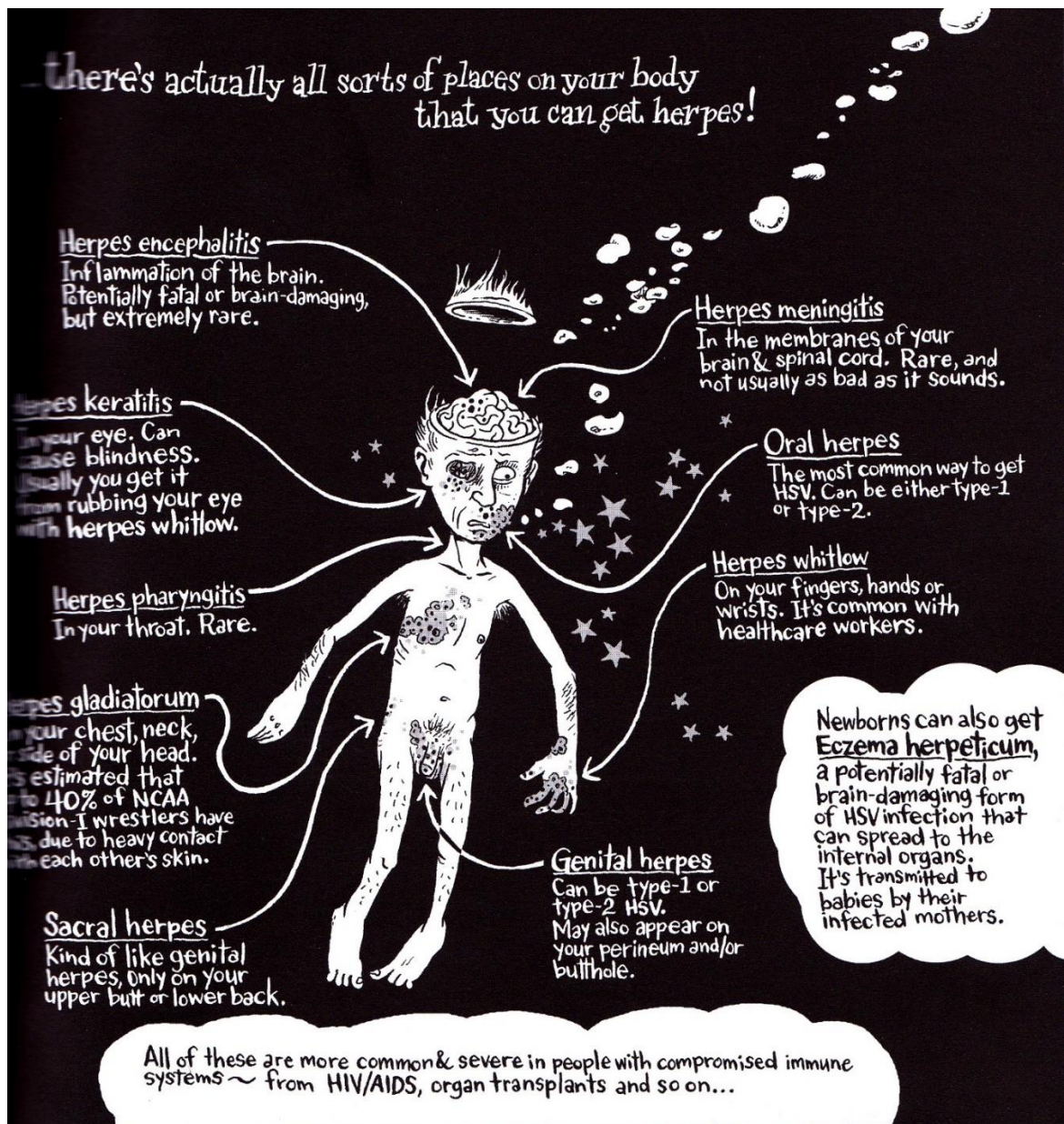


Fig. 2.4. Infographics in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, 115. Courtesy of the artist.

The blackness in which the figure is floating might be outer space, as suggested by the stars, but the figure might also float underwater, which is implied by the bubbles streaming from the head to the top right corner. But blackness is expressive of his illness, too, as shown in the opening page of the sequence (110), where, Ken, having tiptoed around a crater symbolizing his illness (107-109), dived into the sea of the virus. If we think of the black background as an expression of the illness which transforms the body and creates a monster out of it, the stars get reinterpreted as indicators of bodily pain and the bubbles as virus particles. Indeed, the next page (116) features a swirl of these infectious particles that replace the bubbles in their dynamic vectoring between genitals and text.

References to medical discourse are inserted into a surrealist and dreamlike setting, which in turn expresses the lived experience of the body. Representation and commentary both undermine the objectivity associated with scientific discourse: this most medically engaged part of the book refuses the look and illusion of transparency and objectivity that is associated with hard science. The imaginative style that is so wonderful in *Monsters* pervades medical illustration, yet the main theme of this section, just like of the rest of the comics, is the experience of the body as vulnerable and monstrous. Parallel to this, the verbal commentary disrupts the idea that the vulnerability of Ken's body is unique, and extends this vulnerability, and the accompanying monstrosity, to the majority of the population. This way, again, Dahl questions the notions of the normatively able body and shows the vulnerable and monstrous condition of the body as the common one.

In *Monsters*, as said already, the acknowledgment of the monstrous and vulnerable aspects of one's identity and body runs parallel to a gradual redefinition of the category of the normal. Later in the story, Dahl makes Ken (141-142) and another character (187) repeat that the majority of the population already carries a form of the herpes virus in their blood,

whereby the verbal layer explicitly states what has been happening visually with Ken's body through its various shape-shiftings: the deconstruction of the notion of the normal body, and the advocacy of a perception of the body as complicated, experienced and distanced at the same time, and, above all, vulnerable. The normative, healthy body gets redefined as a vulnerable one, or if we look at the other side of the same coin, vulnerability and monstrosity, in their various forms, are redefined as common characteristics of everyone.

Having approached how Dahl's appropriation of infographics engages the ideas of normalcy and vulnerability, in the last part of this chapter I would like to turn to another well-definable segment of *Monsters* where reflection on the vulnerable and monstrous human body happens by change of style. In a two-page sequence, Dahl engages an established way of visual representation: he redraws eight photographs showing various degrees of herpes outbreaks (fig. 2.5). The sudden change to stylistic realism reveals the degree to which the representation of the illness is personified and stylized in the rest of the comics. Pages 51-52 show altogether eight panels of close ups of faces and genitalia with serious outbreaks of the herpes virus, all drawn in a realistic style. These images meet current social expectations of how realism is to be marked in a drawing in terms of detail, proportion, and depth (El Refaie 153), as well as with shading, toning, and perspective. Each page contains only one sentence, a pair of a question and an answer. "Have you ever done an image search for 'herpes'?" (51), asks the first page, connecting the drawn images not only to realism, but specifically to photographic picture making; to the idea of objectivity it is associated with, and to an existing referent in reality (Galison 39). The answer to the question, "[i]t's like something out of a monster movie" (52), casts doubt upon the freshly evoked associations of realness by referring to a movie genre—and, in a parallel contradictory move, it also connects stylistic realism with monstrosity (fig. 2.5).

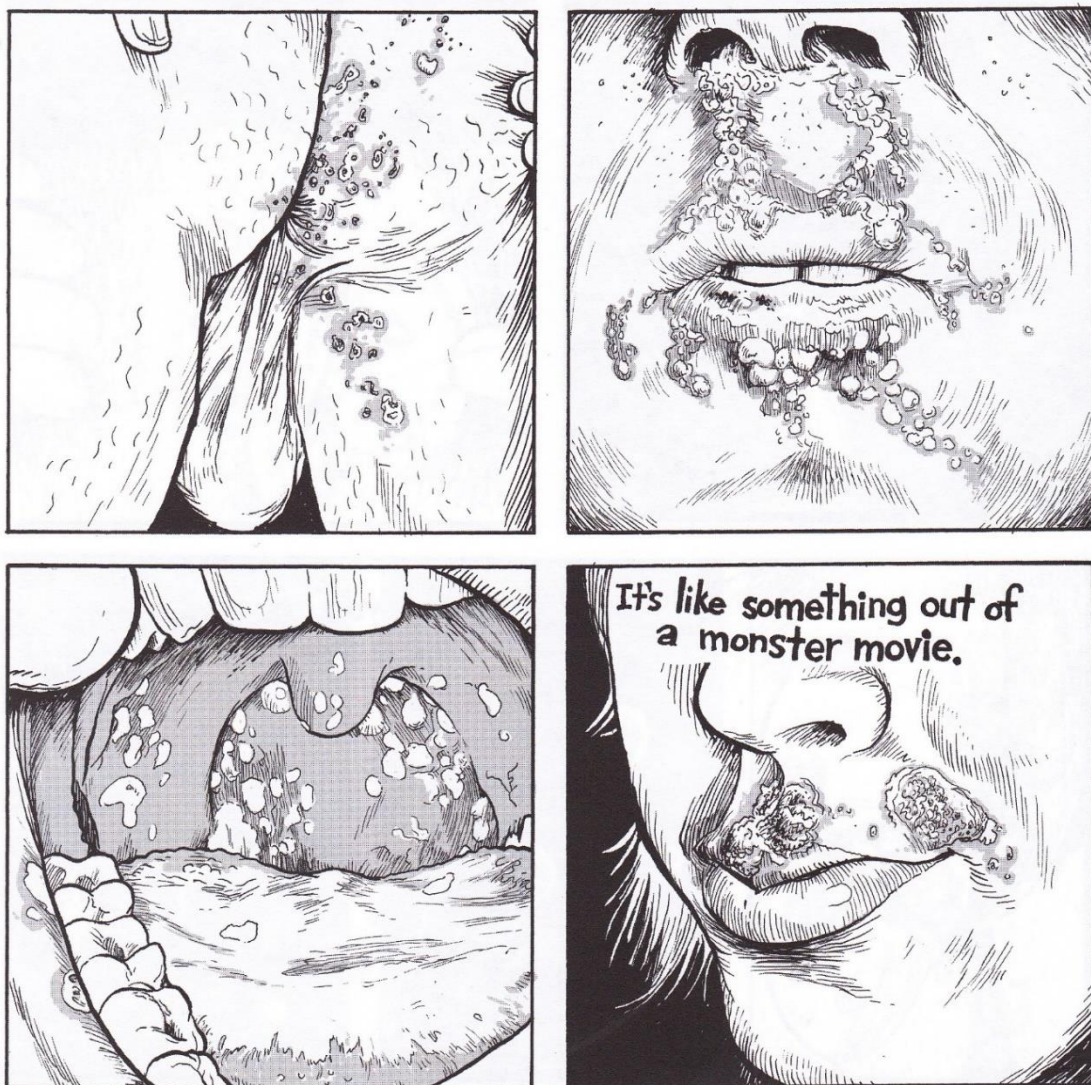


Fig. 2.5. Photographic references in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, 52. Courtesy of the artist.

The change of style in the drawn photos is especially radical if we compare them to the two pages immediately preceding them: one third into the narrative, Ken and his by now ex-partner Rory are trying to adjust to their new lives, where the body and intimacy are sources of threat. Ken and Rory have been drifting apart, and now they stop to reflect. First, we are offered a one-panel page with Ken and Rory standing naked and speechless in an empty white desert under a dark sky. The figures are accompanied by little stars of pain, they turn their backs to the reader, and are facing what is either the Moon or the Sun in the form of a viral cell (49). The rays of moonlight or sunlight are in fact the abject skin and the spikes that the virus is normally represented with. This page thus takes the reader to an abstract place and time, to the experience of the virus; and suggests isolation, emptiness and aimlessness. The next page (fig. 2.6, 50), which is the page immediately before the drawn photos, breaks up the vast space of the desert, as well as the undivided surface of the rare one-panel page, into smaller bits, and turns both the represented space and its elements more and more abstract. The first panel keeps the setting of the previous page, and shows Ken's lonely figure walking in the desert. The stars in the sky gradually turn into, or their place is taken by, viral cells and then actual rashes of herpes.

The process happens in three steps: the first panel shows stars that belong to the metaphoric and atmospheric way of representation; the next panel that is identical in shape, size, and in the positioning of its elements, replaces the stars with tiny units of spiky forms that match the standard visualization of the virus in the book. Both panels show isolated forms against a black background, which initially, under the influence of the previous panels, is interpreted as sky. Narrative coherence also supports the interpretation of the black background behind the spiky forms in the second panel as sky. However, the change of logic equally promotes

recontextualizing the setting into an abstract space: the abstract sky in the previous page is recalled, or blackness might even get associating with the blood in which the virus particles float. The last panel represents a stylistic and logical break in representation, and it is only in the light of the realism of the drawn photographs on the following page that the reader can interpret what is shown here. In the last panel, the viral forms are reinterpreted as actual sores on the human skin, rendered in a realistic fashion by shading, allusion to depth, and attention to proportions. Abstract elements have thus been redrawn as very specific, very human and very abject surfaces and disfigurements.

In the light of the next page, which shows realistically represented mouths and genitals, the last panel on page 50 suddenly gets actual bodily referents, and its background can now be recognized as an actual material context, human skin with some hair among the sores. James Elkins lists five criteria for representing and recognizing something as skin: uniformity of color, coherent texture, relatively constant degree of tension, topological complexity, unbroken surface (*Pictures of the Body* 55-61). Here, however, skin cannot be recognized without the belated revealing of the context of the body, conveyed by the drawn photos. The background becomes skin belatedly, as *this* realistic way of representation has not been used in the book before. The drawn photos as referents provide not only a surface for the reader's mental projections, but also a scale for it (*Pictures of the Body* 19).

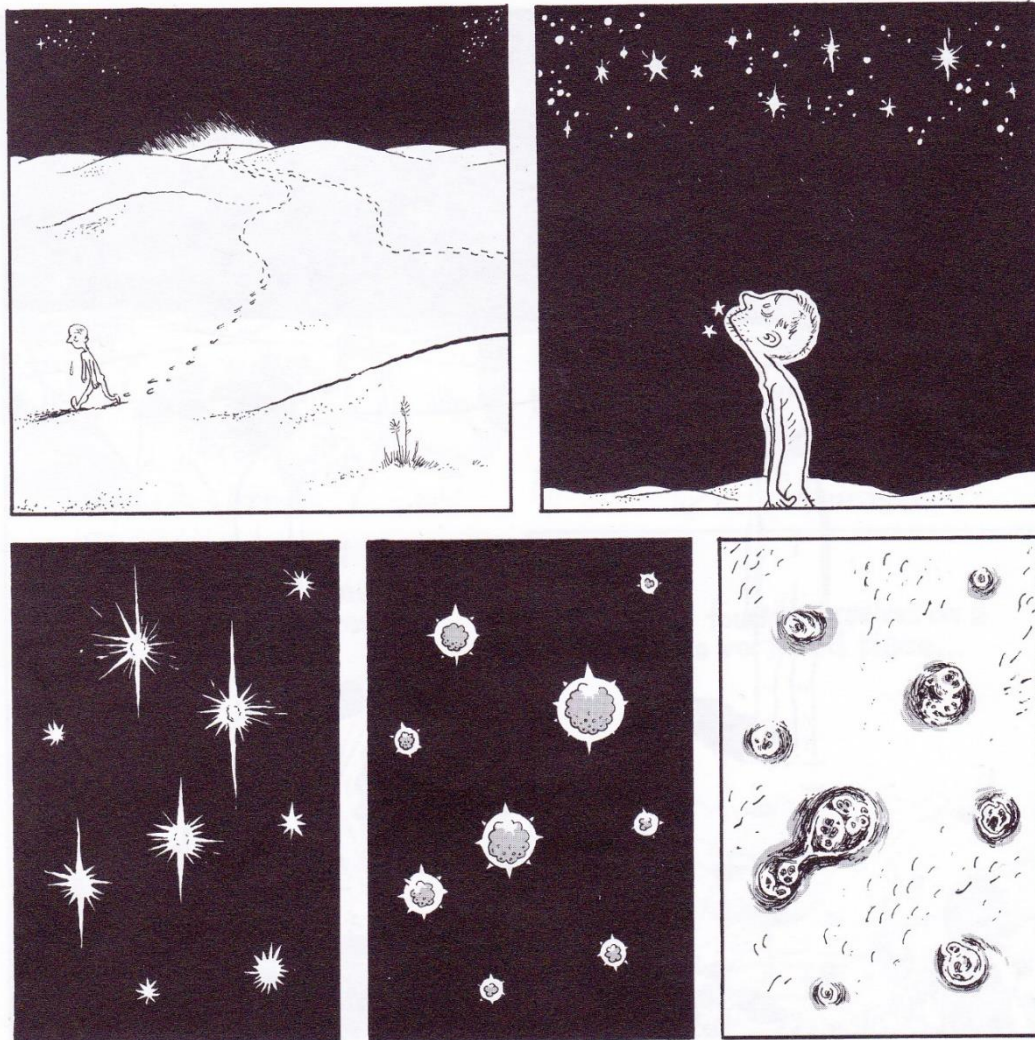


Fig. 2.6. degrees of abstraction in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, 50. Courtesy of the artist.

The slow, silent, and abstract sequence gives way to realistic representations of infected skin and genitals in an unannounced change. The drawn photographs shock the onlooker, and they also evoke the disinterested medical look at the body, which does not recognize shame or privacy (Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 27). In contrast to the section of infographics, which recalls the language of science (herpes simplex virus, mucosal linings, DNA, nucleus, symptom, infection, and the latin names visible in fig. 2.3) but evades the scientific look at the body (110-119), here the reader is addressed directly and informally (“have you ever done an image search for ‘herpes’?,” 51), but the repulsive visual layer establishes a distance. Furthermore, the images do not show the *whole* body, only fragments. These fragments show the skin in its infected and abject state, and the pictures of the open mouth and of exposed female and male genitalia reveal with great poignancy how dubious the boundary between inside and outside is. Doubt is cast on the very definition of skin as standing between inside and outside on two levels. First, this is private skin made public. Second, the topic of the panels, namely nostrils, mouths and the inside of one’s mouth and genitalia, zooms in on the very body parts where the meeting of inside and outside is dubious, and uncertain. The close ups question the very definition of skin as the boundary, and deconstruct the opposition between inside and outside. These drawn photographs demonstrate that “[f]rom the point of view of the skin, the world is a series of invaginations and pockets, with no meaningful way to distinguish what is inside from what is outside” (Elkins, *Pictures of the Body* 44). In this way, this sequence of realistically drawn body parts doubly deconstructs not only the boundary between inside and outside, but the notion of the body as a whole: first, by the fragmentary yet detailed look that they provide instead of an overview, and second by the topic of their representation, namely orifices or invaginations, of dubious territories where one cannot decide where one entity begins, and where another ends.

While it seems that monstrosity has been defined in terms of the skin, and at the first glance the realistically drawn images seem to add information about the actual nature of the skin condition of herpes, what happens here, in fact, is the questioning of the concept of the body as a whole. The representation reveals that the very concept of the body, either as monstrous, or as healthy, is unstable. Dahl is disrupting in this sequence the notion of the body as a given, and visualizes the body's inescapable vulnerability. These two pages challenge the binary opposition between normal and monstrous bodies, and establish the vulnerability of the body as a quality in common in all bodies.

The stylistic change from a lighthearted cartoony style to the realism of the drawn photograph points to the inherent vulnerability revealed in representation itself. Ken's cartoon body is transformed into newer and newer shapes due to the performance of the line: it is constantly becoming a new and different form. Naturally, in *Monsters* the morphing of the character is also connected to his illness, and consequently is a prominent topic of the narrative; I believe, however, that the body of autobiographical characters is never stable. Looking at oneself as another is required by all autobiographical genres, but this self-alienating way of looking is also visualized in comics: the cartoon self is born out of this objectification of the self and of the actual body. The avatar visualizes the complexities of one's identity—here, for example, an extra layer is added by personifying the virus and making it a separate character—and an undertone of Dahl's comics is the narrative about finding oneself monstrous during the objectifying autobiographical look at oneself. The playfulness in Dahl's style does not hide the vulnerability that arises from facing and representing one's monstrosity. On the contrary, playfulness directs the reader's attention to the incredible performative power of drawing.

3

Style as Engagement in Joe Sacco's Reportage on the Bosnian War

Having examined how Lynda Barry connects the birth of the autonomous line to bodily movement, a state of mind, and the ability to face one's uncertainties and vulnerabilities; and having looked at the ways the creation of the character based on oneself is related to encountering oneself as vulnerable; in this section I turn to non-fiction comics which narrate and document the painful experience of other people. Comics journalism has most often been approached in terms of its authenticity (most recently by Weber and Rall) and the framing and positioning of the depicted narrative as reportage (Lunsfold and Rosenblatt, Scherr, Woo). Building on, but also departing from these readings in this chapter I explore the capability of drawing style to express engagement and compassion with the pain and vulnerability of the Other, that is, with the vulnerability of the subject of the graphic narrative being drawn. In my discussion of Joe Sacco's reportage on the Bosnian war I argue that Sacco has a compulsive relationship to drawing, which supersedes his often mentioned meticulous attention to detail. I show that compulsion is present in Sacco's crosshatching, and this laborious technique serves as a means of ethical engagement with the vulnerabilities of the subjects of his stories. Broadly speaking, my aim is to connect style with ethics, and I would like to show that apart from figurative representation, framing, and storytelling techniques, the choice of style also influences the ethical stakes of a given graphic narrative.

Sacco's comics are sometimes difficult to look at and to read: not only are they text heavy, they also show unsettling scenes about the realities of war, poverty, life and death. Sacco's images of violence engage with the ethical questions concerning visualizing and watching violent action happening to other people, and they contribute to the discourse about showing and looking at images of violence. Ultimately, Hillary Chute rightly notes that Sacco presents "the complex and ethical plentitude of the visual," and questions inherited notions of what is perceived as realistic representation, and what can be achieved by drawing (*Disaster Drawn* 201). Sacco's reportage has often been studied in ethical frameworks, and in this respect, my approach has inspiring forerunners. On the one hand, Sacco's topics engage with human rights discourse, and, on the other hand, he also comments on journalistic ethic and practice. As far as Sacco's journalistic ethic is concerned, he has often talked about, and scholars and critics have written on the subjective framing of Sacco's reportage, and on his constant foregrounding of his own role as a journalist in filtering, interpreting, and framing events (Chute *Disaster Drawn*, Sacco and Mitchell 61, Scherr "Framing Human Rights," Singer, Woo).²² Sacco represents himself as an audience to testimonies, or shows himself as a journalist with a notebook in hand, which contributes to the authenticity and subjective nature of his work—the next chapter, where I will approach Sacco's representation of violence from a different angle, will show that the inclusion of Sacco's avatar is key not only to creating an authentic setting, but also to giving the narratives an embodied focus and to facilitate raising ethical questions. A similarly well-studied aspect of Sacco's journalism is his practice of showing the usually hidden work of those who help him as a journalist, a collective of secret players behind the faces of the news

²² For a more detailed discussion of Sacco's journalistic ethos and practice, please see the section "Materials: Autobiography and Reportage as Genres of Non-Fiction Comics" in the Introduction.

industry and its ethos of objectivity: fixers, friends, interpreters, other journalists, and editors (e.g., Chute *Disaster Drawn*, Dong, Macdonald, Rosenblatt and Lunsford, Scherr “Framing Human Rights,” Woo). As Benjamin Woo writes in one of the first discussions of Sacco’s reportage: “Sacco never promises or hides behind a false sense of immediacy, allowing the play of subjectivity to reach the audience on an experiential and affective level” (175).

Sacco’s comics contribute to human rights discourse by engaging with topics such as displacement, the status of minorities, torture or war; and his narratives have played important parts in revealing the complexities of armed conflicts for a Western public. His comics journalism offers points of engagement in the current age of collaborative witnessing and disaster tourism (Orbán, “Mediating Distant Violence” 122), and it has been described as “an ethical attempt to represent intimately those ignored in the world arena” (Chute, *Disaster Drawn* 201). Many critics believe that Sacco’s insightful work can entice involvement in readers: it can (or can be used to) mobilize for a cause. Similarly, because it is layered with information, Sacco’s comics journalism can promote the reader’s acknowledgment and awareness of a problem, and it is described as having the potential to shift opinion on a political issue (Dunn, Stafford, Scherr “Framing Human Rights,” Vågnes). Though these qualities and potentialities have been studied mostly while reading Sacco’s comics, naturally, they characterize most players of the quickly growing field of comics reportage in online and offline mediums (e.g., Dan Archer, Guy Delisle, Sarah Glidden.)

A further aspect of the engagement of comics journalism with ethical questions is the practice of bringing characters back to the original sites of trauma, and providing an opportunity to trace and redraw the original traumatic event and the traumatized self (Chute, “Texture” 93). The retracing work of comics has been explored in works of autobiography, where the reader is invited to find connections between the narrator, the graphiateur, the

autobiographical avatar, and the name on the cover of the comics. I will turn to the ethics of re-immersing and re-presenting in the context of comics journalism in the next chapter. Now, I would like to explore a new direction in the ethical readings of Sacco's works by mapping out Sacco's compulsion in drawing, which results in creating heavily crosshatched haptic surfaces and backgrounds. These surfaces offer an opportunity for both artist and reader to dwell with the victims and witnesses of atrocities. Before I turn, in the next chapter, to the representation of the victims, my aim here is to show that crosshatched backgrounds in Sacco's comics create a different temporality for both the artist and the reader, the temporality of dwelling. Dwelling is a dynamic, attentive, spontaneous and unfinished activity that was connected to the concept of vulnerability by Rosalyn Diprose (192). She also calls dwelling "an ontology of interdependence" (191), as it is a relationship among people where the shared nature of vulnerability can be recognized without threat or fear of harm, and where this recognized fragility is loaded with potentialities for activities. For Diprose, dwelling is a kind of ethical encounter which enables caring, dynamic and creative interaction between the parties involved. I connect Sacco's heavily crosshatched haptic surfaces to the ethical quality of dwelling, as the slow and laborious technique of crosshatching enables the drawer to dwell and to be present with those whose stories are being drawn. This style, which is primarily present in Sacco's backgrounds (fig. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.3), emphasizes the drawer's embodied presence in his art, and, I would like to show, it also emphasizes the drawer's embodied dwelling with the subjects of drawing. This kind of drawing does not only enable artist and reader to enter what Diprose calls the "creative dynamism of dwelling" (191), in which the utter vulnerability of the Other is acknowledged, but it also enables being transformed both during and after the activity of drawing or viewing (191). I approach the intensive embodied engagement with the materials used for drawing and, more importantly, with the Other being drawn, with the help of art historian Norman

Bryson's theory of the logic of the gaze, as well as with film critic Laura U. Marks' now classic investigation of haptic visuality. My aim, as hinted already, is to show that style, and not only the choice of topic (humanitarian issues) or the nature of narratives (revealing how news reporting operates), can be representative of ethical issues.

In the analysis I focus on two comics by Sacco that are related in terms of their stylistic features and storytelling technique, *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003). These are also related thematically, as both are about the Bosnian war (1992—1995), both build on the testimony of the locals, and both provide insight into journalistic work. The narratives use multiple temporal layers and multiple narrators: in both books, a temporal layer is devoted to the representation of personal memories of witnesses of the Bosnian war, while there is a second narrative thread taking place in the present, in the time Sacco is visiting in 1995. *Safe Area Goražde* and *The Fixer* emphasize the ways in which the Bosnian Muslim community gets isolated, and elaborates the ways in which the needs of the members of the community are denied even before the outbreak of the armed conflict. Parallel to the focus on the community, Sacco maps ways in which the vulnerabilities of the individuals have been negatively responded: this ranges from representing emotional and mental pain to sometimes very naturalistic representations of bodily pain, which haunt the reader. I believe, and Sacco's comics also illustrate, that the vulnerability of a community or of the individual is an ever present given, a condition which does not necessarily lead to abuse and war. Rather, aggression is only one of the range of responses that can be given to vulnerability (Drichel 10). Sacco's embodied engagement brought about by the technique he chose to work with, is another kind of response to the vulnerability of others.

The present analysis relies on an understanding vulnerability not as a negative quality or a lack, but as a universal condition. Following Judith Butler, I consider vulnerability as shared by everyone, because we all live in bodies which feel pain, which can die, and which take part in social interactions (*Precarious Life* 29). In Butler's words, vulnerability "emerges with life itself" (31), and it is always acted out in what Butler calls ethical encounters with the Other (43). I believe one's vulnerability can be best approached as a question, which always requires an answer. Yet, sadly, the vulnerability of the Other is often disregarded or disputed: in discourses of aggression and war not all lives are considered precarious to the same degree. Sacco's comics demonstrate the vulnerability-denying mechanisms at work, and his unflinching representations of bodily pain, which will be the focus of the next chapter, show the extreme consequences of what happens when an ethnic group gets designated as the radically different Other, and subsequently gets repositioned as the enemy. While in the represented scenes Sacco's comics foreground atrocities, I argue in this chapter that his mode of representation can be considered as a positive response offering care and attention: forms of dwelling. Here I do not mean the caring attention of the active listener (Lunsford and Rosenblatt) or the committed journalist (Sacco, "*A Manifesto, Anyone?*"), but the meticulous attention of the drawer. However, before close reading some panels and pages to show the artistic attitudes of engagement while drawing bodies and backgrounds, let me briefly introduce the two graphic narratives on which my argumentation is based.

In *Safe Area Goražde* chapters with an ironical and personal account of the present of 1995 alternate with, and serve as frames to, chapters on the history of the Bosnian war. 1995 is the year when Sacco visits the town as a journalist several times, makes interviews with locals and experts, and eventually makes friends with the locals. The history of the conflict from 1992 to 1995 is shown in black-framed chapters which are based on the memories and testimonies of the locals (see fig. 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 from the next chapter as examples). While

the first such black-framed chapter is organized as a well-researched fact file with some occasional comments by Edin, Sacco's translator and the protagonist of the chapters in 1995, the black-framed sections increasingly build on personal accounts and testimonies by various citizens and Edin. The portrayal of the witnesses and the representation of the content of their testimonies shows Sacco's engagement not only with the war but also with questions on the possible ways of representing trauma, pain and death.

The Fixer is, again, a multi-layered narrative, but with three temporal layers. The person in focus is Neven, an army veteran of Serbian origins, who was fighting with the Bosnians against the Chetniks in the war, and who is currently earning his living by being a fixer to foreign journalists, that is, being a source of information and contacts, and a supplier of practically anything the journalists might need. The story is framed by Sacco's and Neven's meeting in 2001: this year and its events serve as a means to create a distance from the bulk of the story, which takes place in 1995. 1995 is the year when Sacco and Neven first meet and spend some professional and personal time together. The comics also features a third temporal layer, spanning from 1984 to 1993, detailing Neven's account of his pre-war life and experience in the war.

In *The Fixer* (1-4 and 5-6) two prologues frame the bulk of the narrative, and they introduce the two basic angles of Sacco's comics which I would like to connect to vulnerability. The first prologue shows a multitude of bodies, and the second prologue introduces the reader to haptically charged backgrounds. These prologues introduce two expressions of bodily interconnectedness and vulnerability by their respective focus on bodies and background, and demonstrate the different routes of engagement enabled by haptically charged surfaces and human bodies. Yet, I believe these two greatly influence each other.

Crosshatching as Compulsion

In the first prologue of *The Fixer* (1-4), the inhabitants of post-war Sarajevo walk about with averted gaze, refusing to meet the look of either Sacco's lonely character or the reader. Sacco is shown looking for Neven first in a park first, then in the busy streets. What is remarkable about the crowd of Sarajevo, is their complete disregard of being looked at, either by the reader, or by Sacco's character. Similarly, at the beginning of *Safe Area Goražde*, the locals hurry on with their activities (14-15), and do not stop to return the look. As a result, the reader can scan, contemplate, and follow the movements of the bodies freely, there is no risk in the voyeuristic look or in the free movement of the reader's eyes. The framing in *The Fixer*'s first prologue lulls all suspicion in the reader. It communicates ease and comfort, building up to surprise and the sudden arrest of the reader's look when Neven is staring at us directly in the face in the first panel of the second prologue (fig. 3.1, *The Fixer* 5), which takes place in 1995, at the time when Neven and Sacco first meet.

Neven challenges both the averted gaze of the Sarajevan crowd and that of the unsuspecting reader. After pages where the reader's look was never returned by any of the represented characters, and was allowed to roam freely, Neven now anchors the reader's look and attention, forcing us to face him. The panel shows a close-up of his face, lit with harsh light: after his absence in the first prologue, when Sacco was looking for Neven in vain, suddenly he has come very close, and addresses us silently from this closeness without intimacy. This almost hostile arrest makes it impossible to follow the narrator's instruction, verbalized in the caption: "put yourself in Neven's shoes" (5). The frontal position of Neven's face, which seemed so prominent and close at first, now signals an almost unbridgeable emotional distance via its closeness and impassiveness. Empathy or allo-identification, that is, identification with someone's pain and trauma by adoption (Hirsch, "Marked by Memory"

86-87), are made impossible by this presentation of Neven as frozen in the frontal position. The two-page second prologue keeps to this frontal and confrontational positioning of the reader and Neven. Furthermore, in contrast to the Sarajevans, Neven's body is never revealed: he sits in silence, his coat and a table hide his body, which we never see as a whole, only in parts and details (of especially his hands and mouth).

The way Neven's address of the readers is framed is significant, as it denaturalizes the relations among the bodies of the artist, the character, and the reader: the panel reflects on the conventionally established relationship among these three agents. Neven's look challenges the hierarchy, making the reader feel a little uncomfortable. Yet the panel is about more than Neven's eyes, significantly, it brings the body of the artist into the game. The frame in which Neven appears starts a discussion on the possibilities of drawing as compassion, as ethical commitment. Neven's face occupies the left side of a horizontal panel (5), making the right side empty of figures. However, this empty background is just as important to look at as Neven's face is and the Sarajevan bodies have been. It reveals well in advance that there is another body that will share the position of the protagonist of Sacco's work: the laboring body of the drawer who is creating these surfaces. Jared Gardner reminds us that the body of the artist is forever present in its lines and marks ("Storylines" 62), and the arrangement of the first panel, by relegating half of its surface to the non-figurative lines of the artist, brings these seemingly aimless or decorative lines of background to the foreground of our attention. The panel emphasizes the importance of the hand that is drawing the story: the geometry of the tightly interwoven thin lines creates a dark texture that is not only appealing visually but is also tactile. This surface is just as engaging as are Neven's eyes next to it, creating an address of another kind: the texture of the lines brings back the mobility of our gaze that has been arrested by the direct address of Neven's look. These lines, I would like to argue, also initiate a discourse on ethics and a caring engagement with

the vulnerability of the Other via extensive amount of involvement of the artist's body, the traces of which are present in the abundance of lines.

Quite different ways of seeing are required from the reader by Neven's eyes on the one hand, and the tactile surface of lines on the other. While Neven addresses and holds the reader's attention, and forces him or her to focus, the surface of the background is looked at in order to be skimmed, or to follow the direction of the movement of the line. When looking at the right side of the panel, a different concept of visibility is utilized: haptic vision. Haptic vision is a mode of visual perception that is synaesthetic in nature: it connects tactile and kinesthetic sensibilities with vision without actual acts of touch. "[T]he eyes themselves function like organs of touch" explains Laura U. Marks in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000, 162). Compared to optical visibility, an obvious example for which is the way Neven is represented in the examined panel, we find that haptic vision does not rely on establishing a necessary distance between the viewing subject and the object that is looked at. Instead of focusing at a certain element from a certain point of view, haptic vision "move[s] over the surface of its object" (162). It is a mobile look that moves along the outside rather than give in to the illusions of perspective: haptic vision "is more inclined to graze than to gaze" (162). In the analyzed panel of *The Fixer*, the haptic charge of the background, which takes up fifty per cent of the panel, invites the reader to come close and no longer regard half of the panel as empty. When haptic vision is utilized, the rich surface on the right side of the panel starts telling a story, it testifies to the presence and embodied investment of the artist.

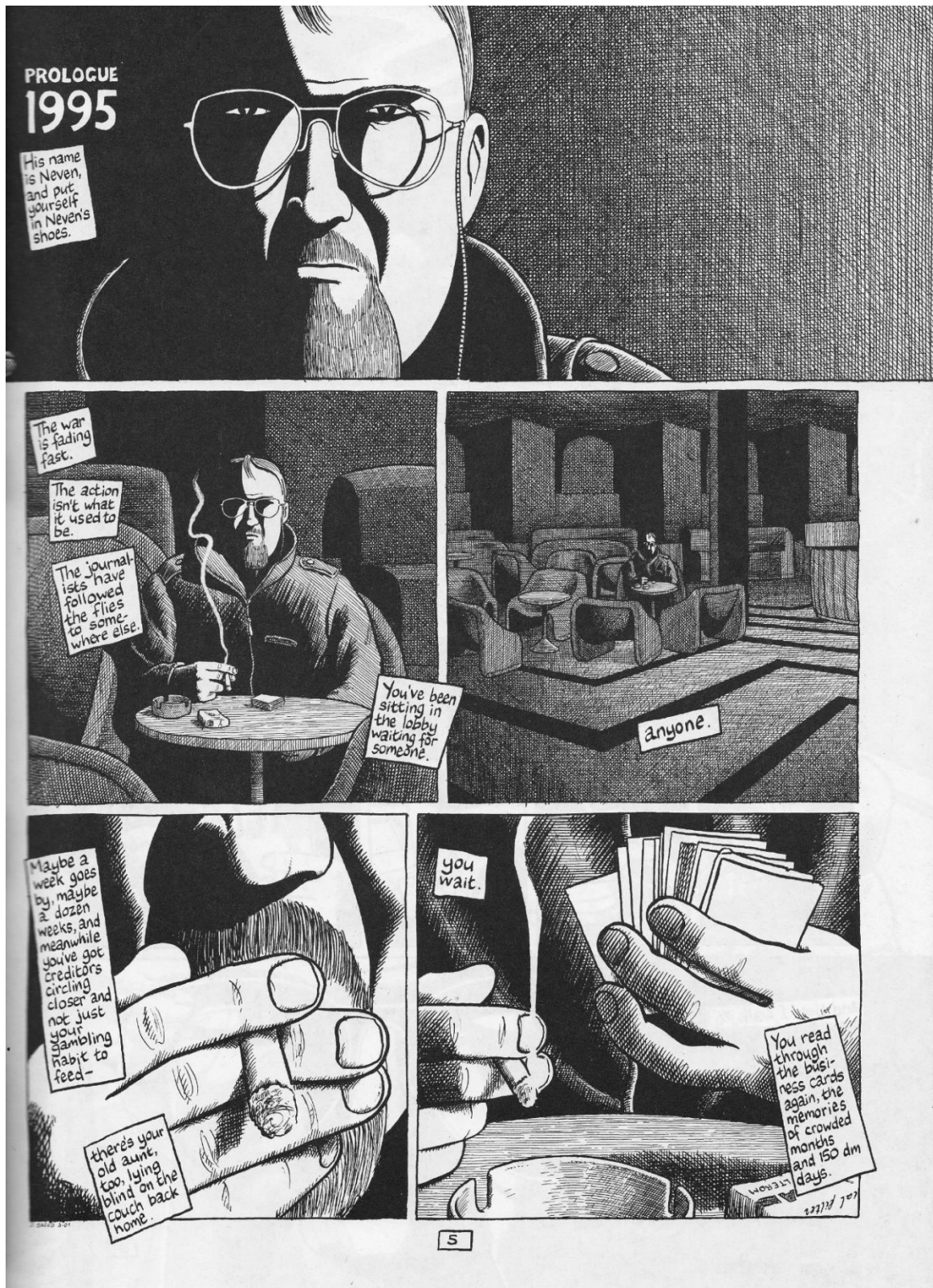


Fig. 3.1. Neven faces the reader in Joe Sacco's *The Fixer. A Story from Sarajevo*, 5.

The haptic and the optical modes of representation and vision coexist in the above single panel, enriching each other's meanings: these two modes are not opposite, but exist in a flow (Marks, *Touch*, xiii). In figure 3.1, the proximity of the two modes creates the full meaning of the panel. It is against the texture-like background that Neven's face, which itself is built on the sharp contrast of black and white shapes, eventually reveals its own emptiness and artificiality. The whiteness of the face, in contrast with the richness of shaded texture adjacent to it, reinforces the interpretation of this face as a mask that cannot be deciphered. While the story of *The Fixer* is about attempts to see beyond Neven's seamless white mask, the first panel of the second prologue reveals that what is at stake in this representation is more than a single revelation: it is the interaction of two bodies, that of the character and that of the drawer. The cartoon body of a character that has a referent in the real world interacts with the body of the artist that is drawing the lines through which, in the course of the book, we can find out something about the mysterious Neven.

Sacco's style frequently utilizes the surface of crosshatched lines to create backgrounds and shadows. He creates detail that seems to possess a certain quality of aliveness. Sacco's style has been characterized as "dense, virtuosic and often photorealistic" by Hillary Chute (*Disaster Drawn* 201) and crafty and compulsive by Adam Rosenblatt and Andrea A. Lunsfold ("Critique, Caricature and Compulsion" 81). They see compulsion in the abundance of realistic detail in Sacco's comics: in his frequent, repeated, showing of the quotidian and repetitive actions of life in the war zone²³ and in his "intense graphic attention to landscapes, architecture, and weapons" (81). This way, Chute and Rosenblatt and Lunsfold tie compulsion with realism, which, in my opinion, is not quite the whole picture.

²³ The routine of everyday life during war is represented in the double spread showing Goražde in pages 14-15. Here realistic detail was drawn based on photoreferences or Sacco's notes.

I also see Sacco's style as compulsive, but I think craft and compulsion are not only features in realism. They are also present in the haptically charged backgrounds. In Sacco's comics, haptic style exists alongside the realistic and figurative images not only to create atmosphere, but also to show a form of engagement with the often traumatic and violent subject of drawing.

When Sacco is controlling the direction of discourse about his own works in interviews or in his manifesto about journalism, just like Chute and Rosenblatt and Lunsfold, he also supports interpreting his attention to realistic detail in drawing as a way to guarantee that truth gets conveyed in drawn reportage. Representing a personalized yet unedited vision of truth is crucial for Sacco: "I'm trying to draw what I've seen. I'm actually not trying to editorialize or put rays of hope" (Sacco and Mitchell 64). To achieve accuracy in drawing the smallest detail, he asks his interviewees to describe, show, or mime visual details of the situations they are talking about (Jenkins, "Interview Part two"), or he elaborates scenes based on photographic record. He also speaks about aiming at visual accuracy in order to convey an atmosphere. He wants the reader to feel the landscape, to feel a given environment as if the reader was there (Sacco and Mitchell 60), and in "A Manifesto, Anyone?" he also argues as follows: "[t]o my mind, anything that *can* be drawn accurately *should* be drawn accurately – by which I mean a drawn thing must be easily recognizable as a real thing it is meant to represent" (x). Realistic detail is thought of here as a means of authenticity, but I would go further and claim that the realistic representation of the often painful details of life is not the only aspect of compulsion present in Sacco's comics.

The meticulously crosshatched surfaces demonstrate that compulsion defines Sacco's relationship to nothing less but drawing itself, while drawing defines his relationship to the people he is creating his journalistic work about. Drawing as an activity thus introduces an

ethical stake: drawing itself is born out of a compulsion to engage, to spend time with the people and situations of the reportage. Drawing is a means to dwell, and the result is a style of texture-like surfaces created by the repetition of parallel thin lines. These surfaces engage both the reader and the artist differently than figurative realism. They open up towards different kinds of ethically engaged relationships between artist and subject, reader and subject, and artist and reader. These relationships build on the duration of time involved in the activities of the artist: and at point it becomes significant that crosshatching is a laborious and time-consuming technique requiring embodied attention. Compulsion is present not only in what is shown or how many times a detail is shown; and compulsion is present not only in realism, but in the very labor-intensive style Sacco chooses to work in.

Apart from giving backgrounds and shadows a very tactile quality, crosshatching also transforms almost each panel into a record of Sacco's compulsion to engage with his story and his characters for as long a time as possible. The slow and repetitive work of creating an almost woven surface out of thin lines is the very means by which Sacco's personal engagement with the violated vulnerabilities of his subjects is made manifest on a non-narrative level. On a narrative level, the traumatic stories reveal the cruel ways in which war has preyed upon people's fragility both as a community and individually. The figurative representation reveals broken bodies and broken lives, dead bodies and exhumed bodies (see Chapter Four). Parallel to this, on the level of style and technique, the laborious representation reveals Sacco's personal answer to what is represented. It is a non-narrative way to acknowledge and give an embodied answer of compassion to their impossibly difficult situations. I interpret this kind of mark making as gestures to dwell with the Bosnians.

The interdependence between people, which is the very foundation of what Diprose called dwelling, has been broken by war. This is, in Butler's view, in itself a violation of vulnerability: "we are fundamentally interdependent in such a way that 'injury' involves not being cut or opened to a world, but losing that relatedness or having that openness and exposure exploited" (Diprose on Butler, 188). Sacco's artistic engagement through bodily labor and time mirrors Butler's concept of vulnerability, and is expressive of a wish to restore connection with the Goražde community, the severance of which itself being defined as a violation. However, when thinking about Sacco's compulsively drawn surfaces as an embodied expression of an ethical connection with those who have suffered, it is important not to forget that in *every* comics *each* page bears the marks of the individual who has created it. Any drawing is always a trace of the body that has made it (Gardner, "Storylines" 56), be it fiction or non-fiction, compulsively drawn or not. Unlike literature, where—in typical cases—the meaning of the text remains the same with the change of, for example, fonts,²⁴ comics does not efface the traces of the creator's body: the lines of drawing carry meaning that changes if redrawn by another hand. Jared Gardner summarizes the importance of the bodily mark in comics: "the act of inscription remains always visible, and the story of its making remains central to the narrative work of the graphic narrative form" ("Storylines" 57). I believe that Sacco's crosshatched marks offer instances for ethical engagement in two ways: in the artist's already discussed and seemingly unmotivated excessive bodily engagement, and in the peculiar temporality of the haptic surfaces, which interfere with the temporality of the story.

²⁴ This is not to deny that layout influences the perception and interpretation of texts, and layout can be used creatively to support the narrative, cf. Horstkotte, Louvel.

Haptic Surfaces as Indicators of Time and Presence

Haptically charged sections in graphic narratives been studied by Katalin Orbán, who, in her reading of Jean Philippe Stassen's *Déogratias*, claims that haptic surfaces have a special temporality. Orbán shows that in haptically charged panels nothing happens "except the passing of time" ("Embodied Reading" 7). I believe that similarly to the surfaces in *Déogratias*, Sacco's backgrounds and crosshatched surfaces "verge of transforming the image into pure texture" (Orbán, "Embodied Reading" 7). The silent passing of time is key on several levels: on the level of the drawer's embodied engagement with vulnerable bodies; on the level of the represented story, as it will be shown shortly (fig. 3.2); and, finally, on the level of reception as well. Haptic elements, though can be skipped or disregarded, offer immersion and invite the reader to exit from the temporality of action and dwell with both the represented subjects and the artist, whose presence is clearly felt in the materiality of the comics. In this respect, haptic surfaces function similarly to what Scott Bukatman calls "pillow panels," which focus on aspects and create atmosphere, but do not bring the represented action forward (*Hellboy's World*, 168). Haptic elements can, but do not necessarily fill whole panels, they also enrich the experience of comics with their contributions to atmosphere, and, importantly, they offer the temporal dimension of dwelling.

Returning to the panel from *The Fixer* that I approached previously as the introduction of the interplay between figurative and haptic modes in Sacco's style (fig. 3.1), I now would like to broaden my argument and claim that the panel reveals that the subject of Sacco's work is not exclusively the mysterious Neven, but equally prominent topics are the *time* spent with drawing, and the performance of the body during drawing. Time and movement, which are prerequisites for the laborious technique Sacco has chosen, are the major means

of his engagement with the vulnerability of the Other—apart from the narratives themselves, which are organized around aspects of violence. The experience of time is on the surface in both *The Fixer* and *Safe Area Goražde*: they use multiple temporalities, and a central thematic concern of both works is the dislocation of time as experienced under war (Gardner, “Time under Siege” 31). The time needed to create these comics is prominent via the haptic surfaces and it is well documented: Sacco signs each page and provides the date of when the given page was finished. This way Sacco records the chronicle of the embodied production of his pages. This small record of the rhythm of production is a constant reminder of the body and the creative engagement behind each page, in addition to being an indicator of the time needed to finish a reporting project in the medium of comics. The time reveals the extent to which each story and page haven become dated by the time of its publication.²⁵

The attitude to introduce awareness of the artist’s body at work, which Sacco does by his laborious style, and the intention to explore the connection between bodily movement and conveying meaning, are investigated in a number of contemporary praxis-based doctoral research projects. These projects demonstrate that the meaning of a work of art is born out of the performance of the artist’s body and a corresponding performance of the audience’s body (Kirk 115), or experiment with ways of bringing back the scale and traces of the human body in digital image making contexts (Love 2015). Naturally, the attitudes about whether the artist’s bodily work during creating a given work of art should be visible, and how this

²⁵ The dating system has of course practical sides during the creative process; pages that have not been completed for a long time and thus could not be dated serve as personal reminders of the fluctuating rhythm of work, of scarce resources, or, as some pages are more emotionally or technically demanding than others, time stamping helps Sacco keep track of the work that is still to be done (as explained in an interview with Chute, *Outside* 148).

visibility might be interpreted, have their own history. In *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983) art historian Norman Bryson reaches back to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, where the brush is seen as an extension of the artist's body, and where the temporality of mark-making by the brush belongs to the subject of the created work (89). Bryson compares and contrasts the Chinese tradition of attentiveness to the temporality of creation to an approach that is more typical of the West: the Chinese tradition of mark making values and traces the movement of the hand, as opposed to an opposite Western tradition of erasing the traces of the artist's labor, for example, by the materials used, such as oil paint (Bryson 92). Similarly, the references to the amount of time needed to create the final work are also concealed. Consequently, the work of art is looked at as a completed, finished product: it lacks any traces about its creation and exists in "a temporality outside *duerée*" (Bryson 93).

In my view, Sacco's comics are characterized by a mentality and attitude towards drawing similar to the Chinese landscape painting tradition in Bryson's example: his pages and surfaces are emphatically and compulsively worked on, the body in the process of leaving traces is a constant presence. This approach invites the reader not only to absorb the figures and surfaces on the page, but also to visualize the cartoonist's body bent over the pages for long hours. The technique Sacco has chosen adds new dimensions to the available repertoire to engage with issues and questions of violence and of the everyday, which are raised by the comics during their plots. Sacco's crosshatching means spending time or dwelling with the stories of abuse, with the people testifying. Sacco's style initiates a relationship with the stories and the people that expresses the interrelatedness of bodies (of the locals, of the drawer, and, as it will be shown, of the reader) but does not will away the pain that the actual Bosnians had to go through.

Figure 3.2 is another example which shows how Sacco's tactile backgrounds express ethical community or dwelling with the Other. Figure 3.2 shows a character, Sabina, from *Safe Area Goražde*, answering Sacco's question about her worst memory of the war. The frames gradually zoom in on her face as she formulates her answer: she is slowly raising a mug to her mouth to take a sip, and after this close up, the last panel returns to showing her sitting at a chair, looking drained and exhausted (152). The structure of the sequence—the use of same-sized narrow vertical panels—emphasizes Sabina's closed posture and tired face. This page reveals much about Sacco's visualizing the vulnerability of his witnesses. In the panels showing testimonies, as in the case of figure 4.3 in the next chapter, the reader is invited to have a closer look and study the faces for minute traces of trauma and post-trauma. In the slow-paced sequence of Sabina's answer, a study of the changes of facial expressions and hand gestures is encouraged.

Sabina has appeared in *Safe Area Goražde* before, she has been represented as a young woman full of life, visiting house parties, having fun, thinking about her boyfriend, displaying a wide scale of emotions ("Silly girls part I"). Compared to these images, the impassiveness of her body in the sequence is striking. Before this scene of traumatic recall, she was making a funny mock MTV-style report with one of her friends ("Silly girls part II"). In light of the dynamism of the preceding scenes, the sequence in figure 3.2 emphasizes the extent to which Sabina's body is involved in silence, and it highlights that almost invisible gestures tell a lot about one's vulnerable status. The sequence offers the reader a chance to witness the birth of the authentic narrative about a person's experience. The sequence shows Sabina alone, isolated, and also aimless. The series of stills, instead of creating a Muybridge-like illusion of motion and progress out of the separated moments of time and action, call attention to the very contrary: the slowness of time and the pointlessness

of her gestures. These hand gestures do not proceed with a specific aim or direction; no matter how many stills represent them.

The Sabinas in the pictures seem to be trapped inside the absurd temporality of trauma. Cathy Caruth defines traumatic memory as “a memory that erases” (*Literature in the Ashes of History*, 78): the traumatic event cannot be remembered and cannot be forgotten; and indeed, as a visual indicator of this, the surroundings of Sabina are so bare as if everything had been erased around her. Elsewhere Caruth described that the sustained presence of the traumatic event is felt precisely in emptiness and vacuum in one’s mind, the metaphor of which is the empty background: “blankness—the space of consciousness—is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literarity” (“Introduction” 8). Sabina’s isolation is addressed openly in the last panel, where Riki’s enthusiastic and loud singing coming from the side, represented with big, capital letters, intrudes in the panel and interrupts Sabina. In the last panel, the contrast of Riki’s loudness, as well as the repetition of almost exactly the same posture as in the first panel, makes the reader revisit the whole page.

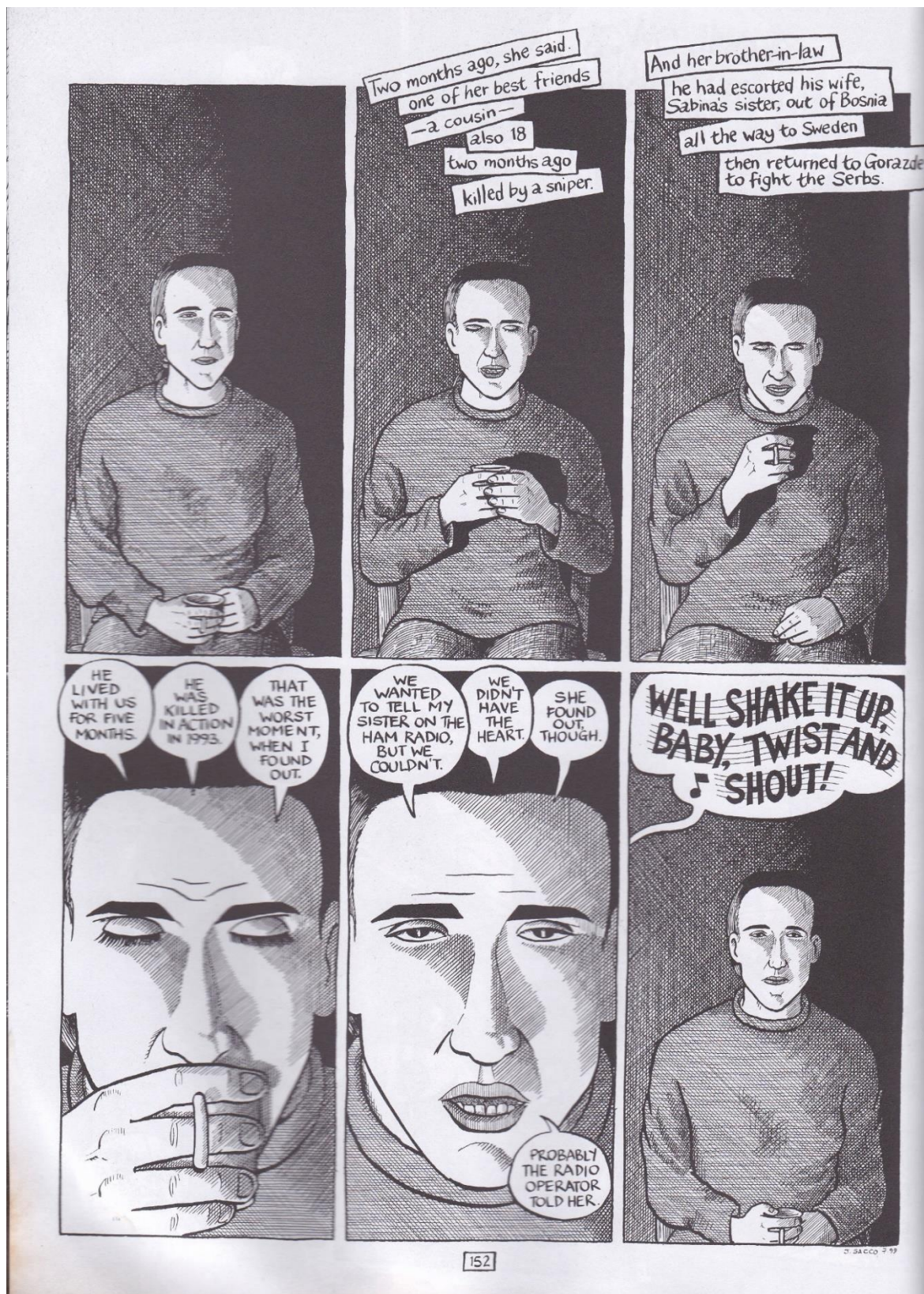


Fig. 3.2. Sabina talks about her worst memory in *Safe Area Goražde* 152. © 2000 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

Several things become apparent in retrospect: all the panels are so arranged that text is always placed in the top, over Sabina's head, but, in fact, Sabina is not saying much. She is mostly silent. There is no text in the first panel, she does not answer the question at once. The next two panels use indirect speech in a series of captions, while the actual character is not saying anything. The first two panels in the second row, the ones which focus on her face, finally show her speaking. Here, the series of small speech balloons—as opposed to using one bigger balloon for all her text—visually expresses the broken rhythm of her sentences. In the final panel Sabina returns to her silence, and looks directly at the journalist and the reader. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that, considering the whole page, the first panel seems to be strangely out of balance. Its top region does not show text, but it is not empty either. Sabina is surrounded by the same rich texture of lines that I have identified as the indicators of the artist's compassionate presence. Though recalling the worst memories isolates her, the presentation in the comics evokes an artistic presence which accompanies her during her account of loss. Sabina is not left alone in her traumatic imprisonment.

Sacco invites the reader to listen to the witness, ponder the haptically charged surfaces and take time to contemplate the vulnerable subjects of the stories. The traces of compulsive and slow drawing offer opportunities for the reader to engage in what Judith Butler calls an “ethical encounter” (*Precarious Life* 43): “[v]ulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee this will happen” (43). Haptic surfaces have a potential to facilitate this recognition in the reader: as figure 3.3, the landscape of Sarajevo demonstrates, haptic surfaces can slow down the narrative and can create pauses in the represented action. Figure 3.1, Neven's portrait, and figure 3.2, a series of Sabina's portraits, showed that the haptic surface hinted at the attentive presence of the artist and promotes recognition. However, a superficial reader might miss the invitation to contemplate at all. In the conventional reading of comics, which is a reading

for action, the pictorial component is normally only looked at in passing, not contemplated for long—unless another element in the comic encourages the reader to do so. Meanwhile, conventionally, the reader spends the majority of his or her time with reading the textual component of a page, as conventionally the captions and dialogs bring the narrative forward. In Hatfield's words, "[w]ords can smooth over transitions and unobtrusively establish a dramatic continuity that belies the discontinuity of the images" (44). The reader does not spend equal time with words and images, and it is all the more easy to bypass the seemingly empty surfaces, backgrounds or shadows which I have previously contrasted to figurative drawing. As demonstrated by figure 3.1, it is these surfaces and textures that Sacco has created to arrest the narrative flow and invite the reader to dwell in the world of the characters and contemplate. This way, engaging with the vulnerability of the Other in the form of dwelling becomes not only an activity of the drawer, but also of the reader. The temporality of haptic surfaces supports the perception of dwelling as both a place and a process (Diprose 192): the actual physical space between the reader and the comic becomes the site of a dynamic engagement.

The temporal relations between audience and a work of art are defined, at least partly, by how the piece of art (drawing, comics, or painting) frames its own viewing. Parallel to the differences in the way the artist's labor is made visible or is hidden in a painting, Norman Bryson differentiates paintings based on the kind of attention they entice. He calls the two contradictory strategies for framing the audience's attention the painting of the gaze and the painting of the glance (94). Whereas the painting of the gaze, similarly to what Laura U. Marks calls optical visibility, addresses a passive onlooker in a state of "receptive passivity" (Bryson 93), and is met by the frontal contemplation of a finished and perfected painting (often from a predefined fix point); the painting of the glance encourages the mobility of the observing eye to recognize the embodied temporality that the painting carries. The dominant

tradition of Western painting has been described as existing outside *duerée*, because it disregards the time of creation and the time spent with observing it, the opposing tradition of the painting of the glance, in Bryson's words, "addresses vision in the durational temporality of the viewing subject; it does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own techniques does it exclude the traces of the body of labour" (94). I believe Sacco's crosshatched haptic surfaces are drawn along similar ideas about labor and reception to the painting of the glance. As shown already, Sacco makes the traces of his work explicit, and as far as the reception is concerned, his tactile surfaces build on the "furtive or sideways look" (94) of the viewer.

The importance of vision's durational temporality is demonstrated, for example, by a double-spread from early on in *The Fixer* (12-13), which, by appealing to the reader's glance, makes the reader not only see, but also feel the danger of the situation in Sarajevo and the vulnerability of the people living there (fig. 3.3). Sacco explains the importance of wordless visual depiction in this double spread in an interview:

"I think in my script I actually did have words. But then part of the process of doing a comic is saying, okay, what words go out? When does the picture speak for itself? And I realized in this case, no words are necessary at all if you want to create that mood. You don't want to talk about that mood. You want the reader to have that mood" (Mitchell and Sacco 57).

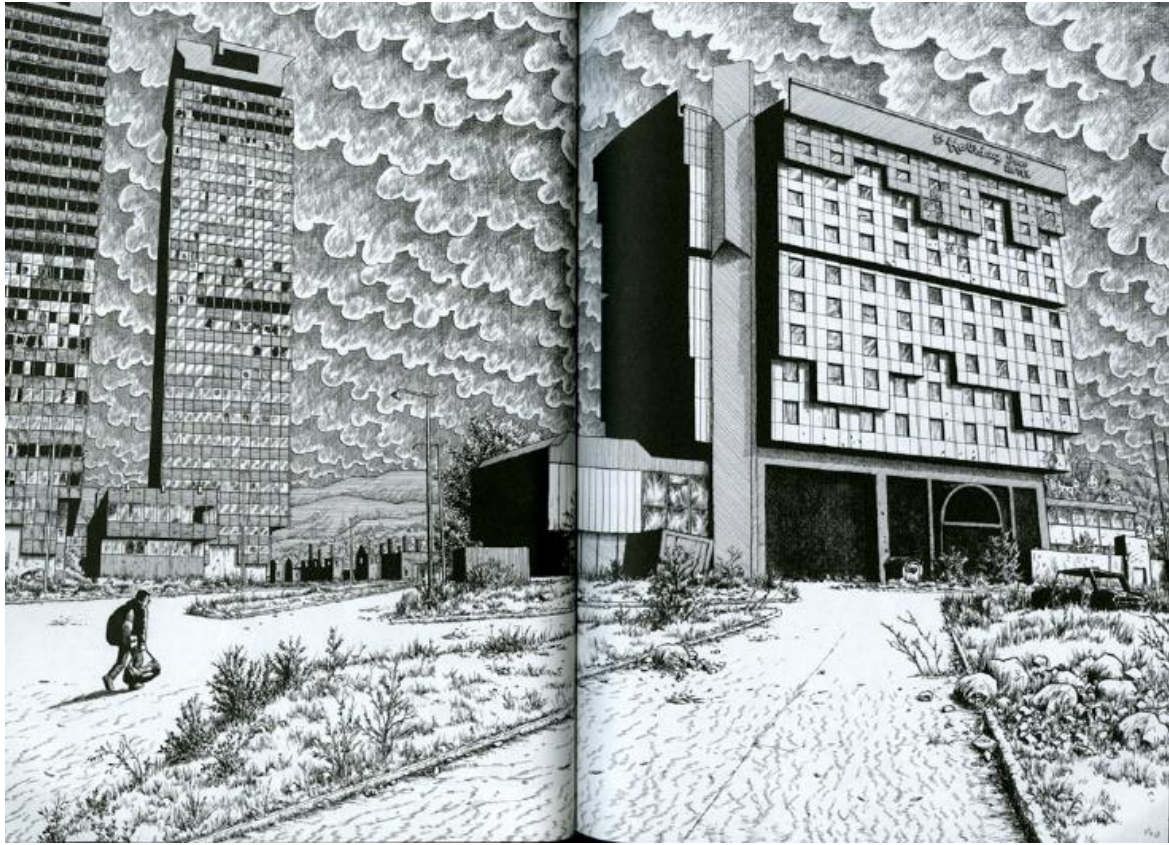


Fig. 3.3. The journalist approaches the Holiday Inn in Joe Sacco's *The Fixer*, 12-13.

The spread showing Sacco's tiny figure arriving at the Holiday Inn Hotel in Sarajevo under a sky heavy with ominous clouds establishes Sacco's quest to elicit the logic of the glance. The page slows down time not only due to its irregularly big size (this is the only double spread in the comic), but also due to its expansive tactile surfaces conveying gloom. The patterns of the clouds, the tall buildings with their various arrangements of broken glass and intact windows, all offer extended surfaces for study. These surfaces are created via the repetition of certain patterns that have the potential to be repeated endlessly. This endless repetition relegates an accidental quality to the actual objects created out of these patterns. Sacco's tiny figure approaching the hotel's gigantic building seems insignificant; his body, bent under the weight of his bags, seems to be suffering to overcome the resistance of not only air but the material actuality of the foreboding clouds looming over him. Sacco's small figure is burdening under a tactile material surface, which, in turn, is expressive of Sacco's artistic presence, concentration, compassion, and body. Via emphasizing the surface of the double-spread, Sacco's compulsive drawing invites the reader to enter the "durational temporality" of the page itself via what Bryson calls the glance, and to take the time, to dwell. As a consequence, the reader is also invited to recognize and contemplate the tiny body's relation to its surroundings; the privilege of the body of the Western journalist compared to the people living under war; the absence of people; and the vulnerability of the buildings themselves.²⁶

Style and technique are artistic and narrative choices, and by the time in Sacco's career when he was reporting on Bosnia, his style has turned realistic and contemplative. His turn to detail and accuracy, as well as the emphasis on the subjectivity of his characters, were preceded by detachment in his first international success, *Palestine* (serialized: 1993-1995;

²⁶ On the importance of the built environment in terms of vulnerability see Diprose.

collected: 2003). *Palestine* builds greatly on visual traits which connect Sacco's comics to the American Underground tradition, such as openness towards the grotesque, caricature, verbal and visual irony, and the frequent alternation of usually wild angles. By *The Fixer* (2003), however, Sacco has abandoned this aesthetic in favor of a greater degree of realism. Parallel to this change, the contours around figures become less important. In the comics on Bosnia, the figures are no longer that radically differentiated from the background. Mark Singer draws a very interesting parallel between Sacco's change of drawing style and a change in Sacco's practice as a journalist: as a journalist and editor of his reportage, Sacco moves away from "he-said she-said journalism" and objectivity, and increasingly invites empathy towards his subjects (79).²⁷

Naturally, changes of style are not radical breaks, but are continuous processes. *Palestine* is not impersonal as such, it highlights elements of subjective reportage inspired by New Journalism; and occasionally it also features drawings with a haptic charge. Elements similar to the surfaces expressing Sacco's personal commitment have been present in *Palestine*, too, for example, in the "Pilgrimage" chapter. Here the horizontal landscapes of the muddy Jabalia refugee camp and the representation of the cloudy sky show traces of the artistic approach of the later works (218-219). Style, however, becomes indication of an ethical commitment in the Goražde-comics in the laboriously cross-hatched surfaces. In the next chapter, I turn away from the bodily marks of the artist in drawing, towards questions raised by represented bodies. I will show that represented bodies are connected to the artist's body in several ways, as one's own body is the easiest reference at hand when one needs a model. The next chapter will also deal with Sacco's realism in representing people or landscapes,

²⁷ It must be noted here that Sacco returns to the aesthetics of caricature that characterized his early work in his most recent comics, a satire called *Bumf Vol 1*.

which have been demonstrated by fig. 3.2 and 3.3, respectively, and which, as mentioned already, have been studied extensively in comics scholarship. Usually, this realism is linked or compared to photography. I would like to depart from this direction and examine the ways in which realistically represented bodies, often shown in extreme pain, affect the viewers and readers and invite them to ponder on the distribution of vulnerability. The onlooker cannot help but share the sensation of the represented body, creating a sometimes unsettling embodied relationship among artist, representation, and onlooker.

4

Drawing and Looking at Visceral Bodies in Joe Sacco's Comics on the Bosnian War

The haptic surfaces of the spread page from Joe Sacco's *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (12-13), which I interpreted at the end of the previous chapter as a conveyor of the artist's presence via the richness of its lines (fig. 3.3), invite the reader for silent contemplation. The only person in this picture, Sacco's cartoon avatar, is shown as tiny and weak in the menacing landscape. The double page inevitably brings about the realization that the scenery is empty of local people. This rare isolation offers a pause, and allows all parties involved—the character of the journalist, the artist at his desk, and the reader—to take a deep breath before experiencing, via interviews, acts of drawing, and acts of reading, the violent stories about bodily pain and psychological suffering.

In contrast, the first prologue of *The Fixer* (1-4), just a few pages before the double-page spread quoted above, is overcrowded with bodies. The carnivalesque scenes of the prologue celebrate the free-moving, healthy bodies of the locals. In these pages, Sacco's avatar, who, to differentiate author from character, will from now on be referred to as Joe, is looking for the fixer he used to work with in a park and in the shopping area of Sarajevo. Both settings emphasize the presence and aliveness of the locals, in contrast to whom Joe is a passive outsider. The bodies are in constant movement: some people are shown in the middle of gestures, such as lighting cigarettes, while a massive crowd is shown walking. The bodies

are full of life, energy, and sexuality, and this dynamism produces a background against which Sacco, in the rest of the book, juxtaposes the various stories of how similar bodies have been torn and broken by the war.

After the previous chapter's focus on the ways Sacco's haptic backgrounds express engagement and dwelling with the vulnerabilities of his subjects, in this section I turn to the way he represents bodies in extremely vulnerable situations in the same comics. In this chapter my aim is to explore the reason why Sacco's comics are frequently described as visceral, and I will argue for connecting this quality to his way of representing bodies. The first prologue of *The Fixer*, as well as the panoramic view of Goražde, indicate that Sacco is preoccupied with the mystery of the survival of the locals (14-15). Significantly, Sacco uses bodily gestures and movements not only to represent bodily pain in visceral ways, but also to address the issue of survival.

In what follows, I will focus on three major aspects of representing bodies, namely the relationship of the drawn body of the Other to the artist, a realistic drawing style, and sequences of violence. Previously, I have looked at ways in which the artists represented bodies in non-fiction settings, and I found that realism was not a dominant feature of autobiographical works. Instead, I noticed an emphasis on visual inventiveness, and showed that Ken Dahl's transformations of his own autobiographical avatar's body present the character in a constant state of becoming. I also showed some realistically drawn images from Dahl's memoir, and argued that, in *Monsters*, realism is an unusual stylistic register, and the artist does not represent his own body in this style. My aim in this chapter is to show that Sacco creates an effect of a visceral hold on the reader, because his work brings the Other close to the reader in multiple ways, and because it shows bodily pain and death unflinchingly.

Realism and naturalism are dominant qualities in Sacco's drawings of bodies both in traumatic and not-traumatic situations. The following three subchapters explore aspects of why Sacco's representations of bodies are unsettling. First, I analyze the relationships between the artist's own body and the represented body of the Other. This relationship has two major aspects, Sacco receiving a cartoon body in the form of the autobiographical avatar and Sacco's modelling for other bodies. Both of these enable for the drawer to draw, and the reader to perceive, the Other's emphatically embodied presence. I perceive the vulnerability of the Other, an emphatically embodied witness, as an invitation for a dynamic interaction, or as a structure of address and answer between the bodies of the artist and the Other. In the second subchapter, I show the significance of stylistic realism, which enables extending the above perception of vulnerability as address and answer to the reader. I show that Sacco's images of bodily pain are interpreted by the onlooker's body, a process by which the reader gets involved in the interaction of vulnerable bodies. Furthermore, I contextualize Sacco's realistic drawings of tortured and suffering bodies in visual traditions of showing violence, and I demonstrate that Sacco's drawings go against major tendencies of non-fiction comics. In the third subchapter, I examine the representation of the Other in sequences of witnessing, and point out that the relatively passive witness is constantly juxtaposed to action-packed panels of violence. I discuss Sacco's representations of extreme vulnerability, and examine the medium-specific ways in which these sequences resist generalizations and relativizations of vulnerability by always emphasizing the individual nature of trauma.

Sacco's representations of people who have experienced war, that is, his visualizations of testimonies, engage in what Marianne Hirsch calls the "*visual* discourse of trauma" ("Marked by Memory" 72, emphasis in the original): which "often gets expressed through the figure of the bodily mark, wound, or tattoo" (72). Sacco's comics take part in this discourse by focusing on the Other's body. Moreover, they also engage in this discourse on

a second level, that of the reader's response. As Hirsch As Hirsch explains, following art historian Jill Bennett's argument, "[v]isual images ... do more than *represent* scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional and bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories. They *produce* affect in the viewer, speaking *from* the body's sensations" (72, emphasis in the original). Thus, the visual discourse of trauma is never merely a visual discourse, it is also an embodied discourse; and I believe there are specific ways in which comics as a medium can engage in this discourse.

Hillary Chute claims that the medium of comics as such "has a peculiar connection to expressing trauma" (*Disaster Drawn* 33). Comics can express trauma because its defining spatial features, such as gutters between panels and the distance between word and image, represent, and also postulate distance and gaps as constitutive elements. This way comics structure can visually recreate the most defining characteristics of trauma, namely its structure of erosion and omission. Cathy Caruth approaches trauma as a structure of experience, and says that the memory of a traumatic event is "a memory that erases" (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 78). The traumatized person keeps on returning to the moment of trauma, yet he or she is unable to return to it, because the memory has been erased: "blankness—the space of consciousness—is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literarity" (Caruth, "Introduction" 8). The structural elements of comics, and the creative ways in which they can be arranged, facilitate the visualizations of the elliptic and repetitive structure of trauma. The role of the gutter is especially significant in comics on trauma, as it enables expressing the impossible temporal experience and the inability to create a fluent narrative. Furthermore, the fact that comics builds on tensions on several levels also enables sensitive articulations of traumatic experiences: the tension (and gap) between word and image; panel and sequence of panels; a sequence of panels and the surface

of the page; and finally a page and a whole publication (Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* 32-67), enable narrative inventiveness.

Apart from the visual discourse of trauma, Sacco's comics also initiate a visual discourse of vulnerability, and represent its complex nature. I have mentioned already, and at the end of this chapter I will return again to, the idea that representations of healthy bodies play an important role in conveying the realness of trauma and the extensive violence committed against the individual and the community. While the first prologue of *The Fixer* does not verbalize its interest in the histories of the bodies, a parallel interest in resilience and being impressed by able and healthy bodies is explicitly verbalized at the beginning of *Safe Area Goražde*, where Sacco provides a landscape of the town in the fall of 1995 (14-15). At this point, the war is not over yet, the peace treaty is not yet signed: the people of Goražde are still moving and operating under the pressure of war. The double spread shows an unpaved street busy with locals going somewhere or doing their daily chores (chopping wood, carrying wood home, shopping), as well as some children playing football.

It is important to emphasize that this double-page spread is the single largest image in the book, and its vastness is further emphasized by the contrast between the size of the landscape and the textual components placed over it. The series of caption boxes offers minuscule, fragmented sentences in small units, placed diagonally over the two-page spread. The arrangement of image and text contributes to the topic of fragile wholeness, and introduces the concern that it is vital to understand that any unit perceived as a whole (be it social, familial, or as in this case, textual) is essentially temporal and vulnerable. The broken-up text in the caption boxes itself answers the question why Sacco the journalist came to Goražde: "Why? / Because you are still here... / not raped and scattered... / not entangled in the limbs of thousands of others at the bottom of a pit. / Because Goražde had lived, and

- / how?” (14-15). This answer reveals that the central motif of Sacco’s journalistic project is, in fact, the understanding of the essential dynamism of vulnerability. On the one hand, as it will be shown shortly, vulnerability is dynamic in nature as it always provokes an answer, though not always a caring one. On the other hand, the series of short captions is the first verbal formulation of the Bosnians’ almost incomprehensible survival despite all odds. The vocabulary—“not raped and scattered,” and “not entangled in the limbs”—directs attention to the body as a vulnerable unit that is easily abused, and also reveals an understanding that the apparent wholeness and integrity of the body might be illusionary or temporary.

It is with regard to this fragile wholeness, to the experience of what Susan Sontag called the “miracle of survival” in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (78), that the representations of torn bodies (e.g., figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3) are to be interpreted. The double-spread introduces the topic of impossible wholeness not only in the relation of the small textual elements to the vastness of the landscape, but also in the relation of the bodies that are presented here in the processes of moving, acting, and in the state of being whole, to the wounded bodies represented in the chapters about the history of the armed conflict.

Creating the Possibility of an Ethical Encounter by Drawing Bodies: Avatars and Impersonation

Sacco says that showing himself as a character in the stories comes naturally: “Since it is difficult (though not impossible) to draw myself out of a story, I usually don’t try” (“Manifesto” xi). The roles and representations of Sacco’s avatar are possibly the most often analyzed and mentioned aspects of Sacco’s journalism. The gesture to include himself in his stories is the guarantee for the authenticity of the traumatic narratives: he is the listener to whom the stories are told. Furthermore, his presence in the story and interaction with the

locals counteract what Judith Butler calls the “derealization of the Other” (*Precarious* 33). Acts of derealization would mean that the presence and precarity of the Other is not judged to be of equal extent or value as that of a privileged group that is framing the discourse about the Other. The character of Joe, a white male journalist from the United States, comes from this privileged group, but the interactions between him and the locals are not aimed at playing these cards of privilege by disregarding the Other as an individual. Rather, the interactions counteract the process of derealization by acts of *realization*: they point at the realness of individual stories and people. Butler explains that “[t]he derealization of the Other means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (33-34). In contrast to the spectral quality associated with the Other, these comics emphasize embodied presence both via Joe’s cartoon body and via the emphasis on the bodily gestures of the locals. Sacco’s avatar is to ensure that the Bosnians are seen and introduced as equally precarious and vulnerable, and equally real, as the target audience of the comics.

Sacco’s becoming a cartoon character means undergoing the same creative interpretive processes out of which the other characters in Sacco’s journalistic comics were born. In Chapter Two, I explored the links between creating an autobiographically motivated character and the concept of vulnerability: pictorial embodiment, that is, the representation of one’s body and identity in a visual form, is rooted in the never-ending processes of introspection, evaluation, and repetition. Both the Bosnians and Sacco undergo the process of being represented as characters, and they appear in the same panels. On a symbolic level, this gesture suggests the realness of vulnerability and acknowledges it to be a universal condition resulting from the givenness of our bodies. Naturally, the encounter with the Other is never without context: Joe is a temporary visitor to the conflict; he is free to leave any time (he does leave a number of times); and in fig. 3.3 he is heading toward the relative comfort of the dwelling place of journalists, the Holiday Inn Hotel. On the other hand, Joe,

while he is a reminder of the realness of the Other, does not conceal the painful differences in the unequal distribution of corporeal vulnerability in geopolitics (Butler, *Precarious Life* 29): the vulnerability of some is taken less seriously than the vulnerability of others.

The inclusion of Joe as a character contributes to the “viscerality” of Sacco’s comics reportage because Joe’s presence contributes to the above mentioned “realization” of the Other by influencing the framing of the stories: Joe’s presence informs the visual angles and arrangements of panels, and guides the graphic focalization of scenes. Graphic focalization means showing action “in ways consistent with the character’s emotional state” (Fischer and Hatfield 78), so that the ways in which scenes are drawn mirror the subjectivity of the first-person character, Joe, even if the character is not visible. When Joe is not actually visible, his embodied presence is made felt via visual hints, such as framing: the other characters are shown in relation to him, but with his absence one part of the interaction is missing. This solution, by which the scenes of testimony are represented (e.g., fig. 3.2), conveys the realness of Other by inviting the reader to mentally reconstruct the whole scene with Joe in it. Furthermore, in cases where the Other looks directly at Joe and out of the frame, the direct address of the look is received by the reader, which deepens the sense of realness. Perceiving the Other not as spectral but as real is a prerequisite to the more traumatizing and more violent scenes, which will be in focus in this chapter, affecting the reader. When the realness of the Other is made felt by various representational strategies, the reader is not anesthetized to violence, nor is the scene perceived as voyeurism.

The opening page of the chapter “The Blue Road” in *Safe Area Goražde* (57) is an instance of a non-witnessing scene where framing ensures a real presence for the Bosnians. Here, the Others, three young women, address an invisible Joe, and, by this gesture they address the reader as well. The lack of Joe’s presence demonstrates the difference between two kinds of

perception of a conflict: looking at it from a distance and observing closely. This difference is thoroughly theorized in terms of objective and subjective journalism in Sacco's works, what I would like to show here is that qualities of subjectivity do not only appear in the drawn action, e. g., in the representation of other reporters, translators, and stages of Sacco's own work, but also in framing. This page from *Safe Area Goražde* contrasts what I call acts of embodied vision to acts of disembodied vision. Embodied vision is personally invested, it belongs to a subjectivity and an embodied presence, and it makes the realization of the Other possible. It is directed at other embodied subjects, and it enables a representation of the conflict, and the people living it, based on experience. In contrast, disembodied vision aims at providing an overview, often from an imaginary vantage point, which disregards the embodied presence of the locals. The page builds on visualizing these differences by spatial juxtaposition: the page contrasts the sight experienced by the journalist who is there in person (the top panel), with two versions of the disembodied gaze, cartography (bottom panel) and the illusion of overview (background). The panel at the bottom shows a map of the region around Goražde, highlighting the route of the UN convoys between Sarajevo and the city. In conceptual terms, cartography aims at translating space into politically and culturally charged territories (Rogoff 74), where the elements of visual representation, such as color or line quality, express abstract ideas or numbers. In Sacco's page, the landscape upon which the map is placed shows a ruined settlement, trees, hills, and the UN convoy, all from above, from an imaginary and physically impossible vantage point. This imaginary position provides an impossibly compact overview of the situation near Goražde.

The disembodied and ideologically charged ways of looking at the conflict are juxtaposed to a picture of three girls directly looking at us, readers, saying "You, me, America?" (57). The girls are in fact looking at Joe in a joking attempt to seduce the American journalist to take them with him on the Blue Road, and this way to get out of the war-torn area that has

been defined by both the map and the landscape. Joe is not visible, but the girl's address is clearly directed at him. Via framing, the panel invites the reader to encounter the same looks and to be addressed in the same way as the journalist, and this way the reader can take part in the interaction of bodies. What is more, the panel is also an invitation for the readers to formulate our own ways of looking at these girls in the war zone. Whereas the map and the aerial view of the convoy show the armed conflict as something one can comprehend from a certain elevated or abstracted vantage point, giving the impression of a localized problem, the girls' picture personifies the experience of what it feels like to live in the safe area around Goražde.

The structure of address and answer is the frame in which the testimonies are shown: the witness answers the journalist's question (e.g., figs. 3.2, 4.3; but, in turn, the testimony of the witness is in itself a second question to, or a way to address, the journalist and the reader. In these interview situations, the witness has exposed his or her vulnerability to the journalist by telling a traumatic memory. In return, the exposed vulnerability needs to be answered. Here, approaching vulnerability discursively, I would like to repeat that vulnerability is an ambiguous condition: the answer, which cannot be predicted, can acknowledge and respond caringly, or deny and violate the vulnerability of the Other (Drichel 10). Because vulnerability always requires an answer, Ann Murphy calls it an "ethical provocation" in her book *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (66): "[t]he provocation of the vulnerable body lies in its ethical ambiguity, its capacity to both suffer and inflict harm" (65). Sacco's comics can, in fact, be perceived as projects about the discursive nature of vulnerability. In the previous chapter I demonstrated that the haptic charge of style can be interpreted as the drawer's embodied answer to the aspect of vulnerability being drawn. In this chapter I have shown that the body of the autobiographical avatar enables the Other, who is in a more vulnerable position than the reporter, to be perceived not in a derealizing way, but as a non-

spectral Other engaged in the dynamic discourse of vulnerability. Now, I would like to argue that engagement with the vulnerability of the Other can also happen during the actual process of drawing their bodies.

To be able to get the poses right, cartoonists often stand model for the pictures in the making, and use their bodies as reference for other bodies: this practice has been explored in the works of Alison Bechdel (Chute, *Graphic Women* 193), and since then it has been connected to her name in academia. However, I would like to emphasize that using one's own body as reference for drawn bodies is an obvious and common artistic practice. The artist's own body can be involved to varying degrees, from observing it in certain positions to posing as a character and taking photos of this pose. The practice of impersonation entails that a diversity of represented bodies, body parts, and positions contain references to the drawer's body. In turn, the drawer's body gets referenced and appears repeatedly on the pages, over and over again. In various situations: in the context of comics about war and trauma, the artist's body becomes linked to sometimes difficult situations of violence either as perpetrator or as victim.

The physical process of re-experiencing how the body of a character, and, by implication, the body of the person on whom the character is modelled, was acting, is accompanied by a complicated mental process during drawing. Drawing is in fact a dynamic and personal, physical and emotional, connection established between at least three components: the artist's body, his or her materials, and the subject of drawing. The materials used for drawing are not studied in detail in this dissertation, but it must be mentioned that they play key role in this dynamics: "there is something very, you know, tactile and they get the ink on their fingers" ("Panel: Comics and Autobiography" 94), says Carol Tyler, author of the *You'll Never Know* trilogy (2009, 2010, 2012). I believe that in a non-fiction setting this tactile link

with the material also entails a symbolic link with the subject of drawing. Drawing and physical impersonation both require emotional investment, and an understanding of, and even identification with, the characters. This identification is indiscriminate; one has to build a connection with perpetrators, bystanders and victims alike in order to be able to draw them truthfully.

Sacco frequently speaks about the challenges and the mental and emotional difficulties that drawing, retracing, and even physically impersonating, characters of violent scenes means (e.g., Sacco and Ware; Sacco and Mitchell). He says,

It is much easier to hear the stories than to draw them. Drawing you actually have to really picture it or try to picture it and, as I said before, inhabit things. So you have to inhabit other peoples' pain or other peoples' aggression. You are thinking in those terms. I mean, it comes down to what does the shoulder do when someone is lifting a club. You are looking at yourself in the mirror trying to think of how that works, you know? So you are there in it. And that's much more difficult. (Sacco and Mitchell 65)

According to Sacco, it is a necessity to inhabit everything he draws, as inhibition is necessary for the sake of a truthful representation of people and events: "[t]he thing about drawing is you have to think about, 'How do people walk in mud?' You begin to think about balance and the way people are avoiding things and how that shifts the body. It makes you kind of inhabit everything you draw" (Sacco and Mitchell 60). Drawing this way is an elaborate and intimate engagement with the subjects: one embodies them in various situations by modeling gestures and reactions. The drawer has to understand clearly what is happening to the bodies of his or her characters, and also has to know what they are thinking. Sacco explains: "You have to put yourself in everyone's shoes that you draw, whether it's a soldier or a civilian.

You have to think about what it's like: What are they thinking?" (Chute, *Outside the Box* 146).

Naturally, the drawer's body can be a reference in both fictional comics and comics non-fiction. However, the experience is more poignant in the case of non-fiction, especially in drawing accounts of violence. Sacco has a name for this emotional difficulty, the "Joe Sacco Trauma Syndrome" (Chute, *Outside the Box* 146). He admits,

I like to draw, generally, but it was not a pleasure [to draw *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009)]. I did not want to go to the drawing table. But I knew, OK, just keep going, just keep doing it. It felt like an incredible chore. After I finished the book, I think it caught up with me. When you're in the middle of it, you don't like doing it, but it's your job. You know you have to get through it, you have to show this. You made that decision to show it. But afterward I was a little repulsed by the whole thing. (Chute, *Outside the Box* 146-147)

In representation—and it must be remembered that completing such a comics project takes years of intensive work—the vulnerability of the victims, as well as the aggression of the perpetrators, are shared by the bodily engagement of the drawer. The impersonation and inhabiting, however, do not lead to the appropriation of the position, suffering, or feelings of the victims. The artist is not replacing one body with the other, only provides a reference for it. Nor does the drawer relativize individual experience and pain. Both impersonation and representation in a visual form have their own limits. Sacco explains that when he cannot understand the psychology of characters, typically perpetrators, he refrains from drawing their faces, hiding them behind weapons or caps (Chute, *Outside the Box*, 146). Elsewhere, he admits that "I think really getting inside someone's pain, that's a matter of fiction. That's

where fiction works. And I think that's where fiction can take over" (Sacco and Mitchell 65).

Fiction and emotional investment by the artist, paradoxically, lead to the communication of actual vulnerabilities of other subjects.²⁸ However, in a sense, Sacco's whole project of representing traumatic memories and unrecorded aspects of historical events is fictitious: his comics are, by necessity, imaginary reproductions by a third party, even if they have been drawn with a maximum degree of attention to the details of the testimony. The limit to inhabiting the Other's pain is further acknowledged by giving over the right to narrate to the witnesses, who, as it will be discussed, are shown frontally, statically; while the represented action, which is Sacco's reconstruction, is shown from all points of view.

Drawing Physical Pain and the Inside of the Body

In both *Safe Area Goražde* and *The Fixer*, the strategy of showing the face of an interviewee in the moment of testimony is juxtaposed to representations of bodies moving in the space of war, where their gestures and movements are defined by the logic of violence. On these pages, Sacco represents pain as a state of the human body, and goes against seeing injury in terms of dominant war paradigms such as "unintentional outcome," "unforeseeable interruption" or "the cost of" a necessary action (Scarry 74-75). Drawn representations of the other person's pain, which will be in focus from now on, form part of the structure of vulnerability as address and answer, discussed earlier. I am interested in Sacco's

²⁸ This process is somewhat similar to the processes of ironic authentication in comics autobiographies, where the admission of artifice in the narrative creates a sense of honesty and authenticity (Hatfield 125).

representations of trauma because, in their extreme ways, these images point very directly at the provocative aspect of vulnerability, which both the drawer and the reader have to answer to.

Figurative drawings can convey a message about pain as experience in ways different from language. Elaine Scarry focuses on verbal expressions of pain in *The Body in Pain* (1985), when she writes that “[t]o have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*” (emphasis in the original, 13). In visual representation, as it is clear from the interviews with Sacco, to see pain also means to *have* certainty: the drawer has to know exactly where and how the pain is felt in order to represent it. Furthermore, if we turn to the way the onlooker perceives drawings of pain, we find that they have an effect on the onlooker’s body. For this reason, Sacco’s art has often been called visceral. Marc Singer, for example, connects point of view with the visceral: “[b]y placing the reader in the viewpoint of his subjects, Sacco renders his meticulously researched findings with visceral immediacy” (79). Rebecca Scherr claims that viscosity is conveyed by the reader’s touch: “Sacco’s form of truth-telling happens in the exchange between reader and text and is based on a kind of emotional and corporeal form of evidence that occurs through a haptic, visceral engagement with the pain of others” (“Shaking Hands with the Other People’s Pain” 20). I agree that touch has a significant role in interpreting comics (Szép, “Touchy Issues”), and I also agree that the visceral is perceived with “immediacy,” that is, it has an uncanny piercing effect similar to what Roland Barthes called punctum in his study of photography (27). I would like to suggest, however, that there are further reasons why Sacco’s images of pain have a visceral effect.

I believe viscosity arises as the result of three interlinked factors. First, because Sacco’s comics do not allow the derealization of the Other; instead they show the Other’s

corporeality as real as his own cartoon avatar's. Second, Sacco draws the human body in a realistic way, a point with implications I will return to shortly. Third, as a result of realism, the bodies in pain immediately get referenced by the onlooker's own experience of his or her body. When watching representations of bodies, for example fig. 4.1, the way the represented bodies feel is also felt by the onlooker's body. This automatic process was in the focus of attention primarily in the 19th century, when it was given the name empathy. Empathy is defined by James Elkins as an "involuntary sharing of sensation between our bodies and something or someone we see" (*The Object Stares Back* 137). In relation to this phenomenon Elkins also uses the terms "visceral seeing," which highlights the multisensory aspect of perception, and "thoughtful embodiedness," by which he denotes that cognitive processes are rooted in the experience of the body (*Pictures of the Body* vii-viii). Viscerality is reinforced by Sacco's tendency not to stylize bodily pain and to avoid visual metaphors, a tendency that, as I will show shortly, is atypical in comics on witnessing. As a result of Sacco's strategies to show the Other in interaction with his avatar and to use a realistic drawing style, a personal and embodied connection is established between the drawn figures and the reader.

Sacco's realistic drawings of bodies in pain resonate with the reader of the comics and they can be described, with art historian James Elkins' words, as belonging to a distinct group of artistic production which allude to "that mode of awareness that listens to the body and is aware of its feeling—whether that feeling is the low-level muttering of a body in good health or the high pain of illness" (*Pictures of the Body* 23). The reader's awareness of bodily feelings does not necessarily manifest in actual physical movement: "I may not actually move in responding to a picture, but I often feel something like moving—and proprioception names the sensation, or memory, or incipience, of motion" (Elkins, *Pictures of the Body* 23-24). In representations of the human body, Sacco's comics journalism draws on the

traditions of horror comics, which builds on excessive elements of gore; realistic drawing traditions, examined primarily in fine art; and medical illustration. *Palestine*, Sacco's first success, for example, is often very close to the grotesque: the faces border on caricature, pain and bad intention are suggested by bulging eyes and grinding teeth (Singer 74, Berlatsky, Rosenblatt and Lunsford 77). Rosenblatt and Lunsford connect caricature and exaggerated facial expressions to the American underground tradition (77), a claim also supported by Sacco's admiration of Robert Crumb's works (Jenkins, "Interview Part One"). Rosenblatt and Lunsford highlight that the use of caricature is always intentional (79), and in Sacco's work this strategy expresses how inhuman circumstances and war distort someone into caricature (80). In contrast, the effect of representations of people in Sacco's comics on Bosnia is different: it causes more "discomfort" (78) than caricature typically does.

Figure 4.1 shows the page with possibly the most bodily wounds and blood in *Safe Area Goražde* (181), a page which borders on excess in pain and blood. It is part of a three-page sequence in the chapter "The 94 Offensive," and is based on Dr. Alija Begovic's and Nurse Sadija Demir's accounts on how hospitals were unable to cope with their tasks during the siege in April 1994, and how the surgeons were performing operations on seriously wounded patients in appalling circumstances, crowded rooms, and without pain killers (180-183). Dr. Alija Begovic starts speaking about the conditions in the hospital on page 180. In the first panel, in accordance with Sacco's standard representation of testimony, Dr. Begovic is facing the reader and is shown against an abstract background, while his account is shown in speech bubbles. Page 181 does not show the moment of testimony; it illustrates what the doctor is talking about. The page is divided into twelve panels of equal size, each panel showing a close-up, most often of the face of a seriously wounded patient, while often there are other badly injured people in the background. We also see relatives or friends near the

wounded, all faces distorted with pain and horror. The staff of the hospital is also present in each panel: their clothes are stained with blood, and in each panel the instruments in their hands (scissors, a saw) direct the reader's attention to the location of pain, the open wound.

While there is a certain sense of excess here, and a feeling of too much blood can evoke terror and also disgust in the reader, the textual component of the doctor's testimony clearly brings this whole page back from horror tropes to reality. Page 181 is possibly the most regular comics page in *Safe Area Goražde*; it is structured by a rarely used three-by-four geometric grid. The page feels crowded with both panels and wounded people, visually articulating the strain of the great number of incoming patients ("70 to 100 patients were coming in in 24 hours" says the doctor (180)). While the panels are about torn and cut-up bodies, the arrangement of the captions in ribbons communicates a sense of an undisturbed flow of words. In contrast, the content of the text is about people suffering and dying, as well as about families and small communities falling apart ("Relatives, friends, neighbors were everywhere. We couldn't stop them. We / "didn't want to stop them... How could you? It might be the last minutes with their loved one."" (181)). The captions are not paired with individual panels, as they normally would be; nor is the text printed in a separate block next to a picture, which is another usual solution to organize word and image. Rather, the continuous text is flowing in horizontal ribbons across the page, separating the four lines of picture sequences, but also tying them together, similarly to tying bandage around a wound. This relationship between word and image expresses the doctor's supreme effort to hold the damaged bodies and body parts together.



Fig. 4.1. Surgeon at work during the siege in *Safe Area Goražde*, 181. © 2000 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

This page also demonstrates that, in drawing pain, Sacco goes against the taboo of representing the inside of the body in a realistic style. It is almost impossible to find a way to look at and represent dead bodies, flesh, and viscera in a realistic way: “it is nearly impossible to come to terms with the inside of the body,” summarizes Elkins the conclusions of his *Pain and Metamorphosis* (134). Elkins shows that representations of cut flesh or the inside of the body have been excluded from fine art, and the repressed interest in representing flesh was transformed into metaphors of meat, fruits, and red wine in Dutch still-life painting (*Pain and Metamorphosis* 126). Even earlier, by and from the 1500s, viscera could only be depicted in medical illustrations, but even in this field few artists could find the balance between “scientific curiosity” and “pathological fascination” (*Pain and Metamorphosis* 137). As part of this fascination, many illustrations of viscera show corpses with the attributes of living persons, which introduces an element of uncanniness in the pictures which otherwise attempt to show medically significant details in realistic ways: skeletons stand up, people walk without skin, or figures showing their own insides have eyes. Realism in representing dead bodies and viscera has been and is still difficult;²⁹ and along this tradition of approaching pain, a parallel tradition of monstrous excess of flesh and blood in horror comics is also recalled by Sacco’s comics.

In Sacco’s comics, the inside of the body is not represented with an anatomical look, nor is it shown via metaphors. The bodies keep their realistic proportions, and the readers answer with strong emotional and bodily reactions. However, not every representation of the human body entices bodily sensations and empathy; for this to happen, some degree of mimesis is required. Based on the nature of reactions enticed, and also based on the degree of mimesis

²⁹ Contemporary fine art reflects to this problem in works which disassemble the body and evoke it in references (Elkins, *Pain and Metamorphosis* 149).

involved, Elkins differentiates two traditions of representations of the body: a tradition which acts on the body, and another tradition which acts on the brain. By introducing Elkins' model here, I would like to show that Sacco's rendering of the body gains its authority from going against the aesthetic principles represented by the most defining artists in the tradition of non-fiction comics dealing with violence, namely Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi. In contrast to these influential artists' works, Sacco's comics belong to a tradition of representation which acts on the beholder's body—a category which Elkins calls "pain." I have already referred to this tradition in relation to the interpretation of images; now I would like to insert Sacco's representation of bodies in the broader context of contemporary non-fiction comics. Spiegelman and Satrapi follow the approach contradictory to "pain," which Elkins calls "metamorphosis." This way of representing the body is built on "graphic simplifications, rearrangements, and transformations of the body" (Elkins 25). Metamorphosis formulates puzzles for the mind, and does not entice embodied reactions. In Elkins' explanation,

although it [metamorphosis] is sensual, it does not present itself as a matter of feeling. ... Although every metamorphic distortion attracts our bodily sympathy to some degree, and although no painful distortion is without intellectual meaning, the distinction between pain and metamorphosis exists *as an idea*: we have the clear notion that bodies can be either broken or merely metempsychosed, and only one of those possibilities entails pain. (26)

In *Maus* (1986 and 1991), undeniably the most influential comics non-fiction until now, Spiegelman visualizes death and the destruction of the body by creating a mental puzzle: the animal heads disrupt the interpretation of the body. The impossible hybrid bodies allow for association and reflection on, for example, the visual traditions of representing Jews

(Doherty 1996), or on “national and ethnic relations” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 13). By showing bodies alluding to, but at the same time removed from, the human body, Spiegelman builds on what Elkins calls the “analytic side of seeing” (26). Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2006) shows bodily pain and death in beautiful stylized images, which also belong to the category of metamorphosis. Torture, fear and death are represented by metaphor and minimalism, creating a style which has been described as “child’s-eye rendition of trauma” (Chute, “Texture” 99). Significantly, it is not only the perspective of a child that is expressed in the images, but also a less mimetic style which creates mental puzzles.

Contrary to Satrapi and Spiegelman, Sacco chooses what Chute aptly calls a “visually traumatic” style (“Texture” 103). Sacco’s comics exercise a visceral hold on the reader because the represented figures belong to the category of “pain,” and as such, they appeal to the reader’s involuntary bodily sympathy. This way, and contrary to Scarry’s characterization of verbal expressions of pain, drawn pain becomes a certainty not only for the drawer, who has to understand exactly how the represented bodies work; but it also becomes a certainty for the reader. Sacco’s realistic style in drawing bodies brings the experience of someone else’s pain closer to the reader; in fact, it brings pain to the reader’s own bodily sensations.

Sacco’s representations of bodily wounds and corpses stem from the same shock and terror that governed the hands of the producers of the first etchings displaying atrocities against civilians. The violent scenes in Sacco fit in the tradition of image making described by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), a tradition started by Jacques Callot in the

1630s, and continued by Goya in the 1810s (38-39).³⁰ According to Sontag, suffering has long been a canonical subject in art and Christian iconography, especially in representations of dying saints and the suffering Christ. These images framed bodily pain as spectacle, and also inserted it in a higher order. Reframing violence as deplorable began with Callot, who showed the cruelties of the victorious French army against civilians (38). Sacco is Callot's and Goya's follower in his personal renderings of human suffering, but does not follow Goya's practice of using textual elements to express his personal reaction. The medium of etching allowed Goya only short outcries as comments, such as "Barbarians!" or "What madness!" (quoted in Sontag 40). Working as a professional journalist, Sacco makes great efforts to faithfully reproduce the words of those who were closer to the experience, the words of experts or witnesses.

Representing Witnessing and Visceral Action

Having introduced ways in which Sacco's actual and cartoon bodies are related to the comics via acts of drawing, impersonation, and via entering the comics narrative as a character, and having shown the significance of realistic style in Sacco's representation of bodies, I now would like to show the very specific strategies by which Sacco maintains the precarity and individuality of witnesses in *Safe Area Goražde*. I interpret two sections of the black-framed chapters, and I study the juxtaposition of the faces of the witnesses in the moments of giving their testimonies, and the representation of their bodies taking part in violent action. I will show that the juxtaposition of post-conflict portraits and in-conflict action sequences

³⁰ Sacco has recently been positioned as an "artist-reporter" (41) and follower of Callot and Goya in Chute's latest book, *Disaster Drawn* (2016).

requires non-linear reading strategies. These strategies are based on the reader's effort to preserve and respond to the precarity of the Other, who otherwise might be seen as one of the nameless locals attempting to survive the bloodshed. The juxtaposed pictures from different temporal layers make the reader experience the cyclical nature of trauma and, implicitly, they also address the issue of resilience: to various degrees, the traumatized people have started the recovery from violence and abuse, and their ability to narrate and show their stories is one of the series of small steps on the way.

It must be noted that, as the narrative of *Safe Area Goražde* progresses, the sections devoted to the past gradually become dominant, which visually leads to an increased proportion of black-framed pages. These chapters themselves become increasingly violent and graphic, and gradually overshadow the chapters on the present, which, however, never fully disappear. As the Serbian armies close around Goražde, the reader is shown more and more of Sacco's unflinching representation of mutilated corpses and bodily pain, such as people shot, raped, or killed by knife. As already shown, he does not conceal blood (fig. 4.1); and as part of his "clinical drawing" approach (Chute, *Disaster Drawn* 221) he also draws burnt or exhumed corpses. Without ever being mentioned explicitly, the dramatic deterioration of the physical condition of the Bosnians becomes one of the most prominent topics, which appears only in the visual layer, and which is presented frequently by juxtaposing images of the same characters in the present and during the war. Visually, the minimalism of the portrait panels conveys a break from the torn bodies; and yet, it usually turns out that looking the frontally represented witnesses in the eyes is just as unsettling as looking at dramatized action (figure 4.3).



Figure 4.2. Citizens of Goražde escape during the first attack in 1992 in *Safe Area Goražde*,

84. © 2000 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

The black-framed chapters in the second part of *Safe Area Goražde* build on personal testimonies and are structured by the recurrence of the portraits of the witnesses in moments of testimony; however, black-framed chapters earlier in the comics put less emphasis on the speaker's face. In the chapters showing the chaotic brutality of war and the violation of bodies, namely in "The first attack," "Around Goražde" Part I and Part II, "White Death," "The 94 Offensive," and "Death and Deliverance," these photo-like portraits of witnesses serve as points of reference to which the reader can return to identify the characters shown enacting what has happened to them. In certain chapters, such as in "The First Attack" (78-93), Sacco is directly playing on the similarity of the characters: he deliberately makes it difficult for the reader to follow who is who and who is where. I consider this a subtle and effective way to visualize the processes by which the brutality of war sweeps away one's individuality, by suggesting namelessness and an easy substitution of one person with another. In "The First Attack," the narrators tell stories that are so similar that at first glance, and at first reading, the slight differences between individuals disappear, and the personal experience of many people is turned into one almost seamless narrative. Especially the first part of the chapter is narrated in such a way that the reader's effort to understand the narrative is structured as prolonged emotional engagement with the people in distress (fig. 4.2).

The first part of this chapter (78-86) is narrated by five people, Edin, Emina, Izet, and a married couple, Rumsa and Ibro. After they are introduced in the first panel of the story, they take turns in revealing what happened to them during the attack: their narratives flow into and complement each other. The text of the captions indicates when there is a change of narrators by naming the new narrator before quoting him or her, which results in assigning particular parts of the chapter to particular speakers (fig. 4.2). In contrast, such changes are not indicated either by the page design, in the tabular structure, or by the visual content of the individual panels. Quite on the contrary, the even rhythm of the visual elements seems

to be playing against the textual ones by making the differentiation of characters and locations difficult. The layout throughout the examined part of the chapter builds on three rows of equal height on each page, and while there is some size difference in the beginning, the regularity of panel arrangements supports an unbroken rhythm in the narrative. This panel arrangement gives the illusion of one seamless narrative of the same people being forced to flee their homes and run through various parts of the town for shelter. The illusion is that the chapter shows less than four fleeing people: the changes in the background from the streets to the trees, then to the streets again, indicate their route, until they—a man and a woman—arrive at the river and continue their escape in the water.

The realization that these are four different people living through very similar situations comes with time, and brings about the reader's constant turning the pages back and forth in order to identify the characters. This eventually disrupts the continuity suggested by the visual components, requiring the reader to force their way through the narrative as it progresses. Significantly, the stories of escape are closed by the frontal portraits of the survivors, which have not been shown during the narratives of escape. While in the first panel of the chapter, before the sequence of escape, the witnesses were introduced and identified by their names (78), at the end of the section there are no name tags, only their portraits (85-86). To find information, the reader goes back to the beginning of the story once again, re-viewing the story of the brutal escape in reverse order. The chapter creates a cyclical structure where, to find information, the reader returns to the starting point repeatedly, and experiences the cyclical temporal structure of trauma. Via engagement, the reader can take part in the visual discourse of trauma within the medium of comics, and can experience the traumatic cycle defining the present of Emina, Izet, Rumsa, and Ibro.

In the closing portraits, the witnesses are, again, represented in frontal positions and in abstract panels suggestive of the timeless nature of their situation. They summarize the losses of that day. Emina: “Five of my relatives were missing and six killed” (85). Izet: “They say a bullet hit my wife in the head just in the place where I left her” (86). Meanwhile, the caption at the bottom of the same panel emphasizes Izet’s silence, which is inseparable from his verbal testimony: “(He declined to talk about the fate of his son)” (86). Ibro: “I lost my daughter” (86). Rumsa, shown standing behind her husband, is silent. The irreversibility of the loss cannot be denied, yet this chapter offers a way for the reader to reconstruct the particularized, individual stories of suffering and loss by revisiting the traumatic moments the characters had to live through, and by this to perform repeated counter-performances to the taking away of the precariousness of the individual—offering confirmation that their stories matter.

In the above example from “The First Attack” Sacco provided portraits as points of reference for the readers to return to, and the sequence was building on the effort required to identify the testifying person with one of the characters in action. I now would like to show a different strategy, one that utilizes the comparison of the series of portraits which show witnesses in the moment of testimony. This narrative strategy is built on what Hillary Chute defined as the “retracing work of graphic narratives” (“Texture” 93): in bringing the subject back to the traumatic situations, Sacco provides “ethical repetitions (of censored scenarios)” (“Texture” 93). Here, Chute refers to the basic operation of comics non-fiction that of bringing the stories of witnesses to the surface and not to letting them be silenced. Stories of traumatic violations would not only be censored by aggressors; they are also censored by the traumatized victim’s mind. Because of the visual nature of the medium, characters, who are modelled on actual people, “*literally* reappear ... at the site of [their] inscriptional

effacement” (“Texture” 93).³¹ Via this strategy, comics offers an opportunity to reformulate scenes of violation in ways that do not add to the aggression committed against the individual. Sacco makes his characters revisit the original sites of trauma; his works “reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract” (“Texture” 93). As part of this reconstruction and counteraction, Sacco constantly breaks the stories of violence by a return to the point of origin in the situation of testimony, and invites the reader to study the minute changes in the faces.

“Around Goražde,” the two-part black framed chapter following “The First Attack,” relies greatly on the repetition of the portraits of the witnesses to juxtapose then and now (109-119). The witnesses narrating this chapter are Rasim, a refugee from Visegrad, who witnessed the brutal mass murder of Bosnian Muslims by Chetniks, which was going on undisturbed for several nights, and who was eventually saved from death by a Serb neighbor (fig. 4.3). The second part of the chapter is narrated by Munira, who was in the last weeks of her pregnancy at the maternity ward of the hospital in Foca, and who testifies about the rape of women in the hospital by Chetnik soldiers. Munira was released for a ransom of 10.000 German Marks, which was paid by her father-in-law. Both Rasim and Munira speak about terrible crimes that they witnessed, while their portraits keep on interrupting the visual narratives illustrating what they are telling. This method emphasizes the presence of the witness, who, in spite of everything, is still there—visually echoing the drive of Sacco’s investigative project that has been verbalized over the double-spread landscape of Goražde at the beginning of the book (14-15).

³¹ In this article, Chute is interpreting Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. I believe, however, that her observations can be used to approach not only comics autobiography, but also comics reportage incorporating scenes of witnessing.

In the first three pages of Rasim's eight-page testimony, we see him in the situation of witnessing six times. His portrait, however, does not appear later. In the second part of the chapter, the three-page story of Munira's testimony includes her portrait four times, out of which three times we see her with her daughter, who was born at that hospital. Sacco's portraits reveal minute changes in Rasim's and Munira's facial expressions: a small change in the wrinkles around the eye or in the position of the mouth in Rasim's case, and Munira's eyes widening in horror as she is telling her story.

These portraits, as pillars on which the stories are based, invite us to look at each person, to contemplate, compare, go back, and abandon, the linearity of the narrative. The expressionless faces, like Rasim's in figure 4.3, make the reader experience what Ann Murphy calls the "irreducible singularity in the experience of vulnerability," which "belies any categorical account of how it is that vulnerability and dispossession are lived (68). While in the previous example (fig. 4.2) the narrative was flowing seamlessly, here the focus on the facial expressions of the witnesses leads to a greater emphasis on the connection and break between past and present.



Fig. 4.3. A page from Rasim's eyewitness account in *Safe Area Goražde*, 110. © 2000 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

The presence of the witness floods these pages. Every time Rasim and Munira face us, we look them in the eye; then we go on examining the very personal ways in which the terrors of the war affected them. The portraits redirect the reader's attention from the violent scenes to the person who lived through the depicted terror. The personal nature of the experience is highlighted by Sacco's starting both stories with close-up portraits of Rasim and Munira, in the moment of witnessing: they are facing the reader, and are represented against a background that bears the traces of the artist's time consuming labor.³² The quotation marks at the beginning of the caption boxes indicate that the narration is given over to them. This way, Rasim and Munira address the reader in two ways: in more immediate speech bubbles and in captions.

Rasim repeats the phrases "I was an eyewitness" five times, and "I saw" another five times, while the representation of what is told ("In only three days and three nights I saw 2-300 killed" (110)) emphasizes the limitations of sympathy by constantly changing the point of view from which the panels are framed. Thus on page 110 (fig. 4.3) the first panel zooms in on a detail, namely that some of Rasim's neighbors were taken away without shoes. This detail is shown from a proximity from which Rasim could certainly not have perceived the events. Next, we see Rasim in the act of watching people being collected: evoking the way dialogues are represented in film, in an over-the-shoulder "shot" we see both Rasim and people getting in a truck. After this, three impossible vantage points are taken by the panels of the middle tier. First, we see the foot of the bridge from which the corpses were tossed into the river from water level. The middle panel is represented from above, looking down on the bloodshed as if from the point of view of God. At the same time, this panel is at the center of the page, and it also shows a little boy being dragged to certain death, looking up

³² This aspect of drawing was discussed in Chapter Three.

at the sky, at the reader, screaming. The third panel in the tier shows a close-up of somebody's throat being cut. To use the language of film again, it is a medium shot drawn from a position facing the bridge, as if the scene was seen by someone hovering above the water. Finally, a total is shown of the bloody massacre: it is the largest panel on the page, and it shows eighteen people. The last panel in the bottom right corner returns to Rasim's face. The point of view changes dynamically between adjacent panels, yet Rasim's point of view is never taken, in acknowledgment of the singularity of his experience.

Representing the realness and also the singularity of the witness's experience of pain and trauma is a major undertaking in *Safe Area Goražde*. Discussing the pages in figures 4.2 and 4.3 I analyzed the possibilities of using multiple narration and multiple temporal layers in the black-framed chapters. Here, portraits were juxtaposed to action sequences in various ways. There is, however, a second juxtaposition at work in the comics, one between the black-framed chapters showing the past, and the unframed chapters devoted to the present. The people in the present of 1995 still live in the reality of war, but the end of the war is approaching, and they have slightly more possibilities to move or to express themselves than previously. They are shown to be trying to find new ways to live after the war; and they are represented at various stages of a long process of transformation. Their pain is not gone; the atrocities are still present. Yet, there is a sense of change. For example, the movement of the body is a major topic in these unframed chapters, which is indicated in the already analyzed opening scenes of *The Fixer*, or in *Safe Area Goražde* by larger panel sizes, less rigorous page structures, and the prominence of private spaces (homes and house parties). All of this expresses the greater degree of freedom that the characters have in the present.

Comparing chapters on the present to chapters on the past reveals that the retracing work of comics does not only consist of redrawing traumatic situations. Rather, it also means an

engagement with the present and opening up to transformation: the spacious unframed chapters show possible ways out of trauma. The juxtaposition of the chapters of the present and the past calls attention to what Diprose calls the ambiguity of the body (“Corporeal” 195): “the body (or the ‘flesh’) always manifests a degree of ‘divergence,’” states Diprose, based on Merleau-Ponty (195), and describes the interaction among people (which she calls intercorporeal dwelling) with Merleau-Ponty’s words as a “non-decisionary project” (195). She explains: “This ambiguity of the body is what spares human existence from the ruin of determinism, both the socio-political and the biological varieties (determinism would reduce human existence to mere life or to a machine that repeats history and/or conforms to some uniform imposed ideal)” (195). Diprose highlights that the condition of vulnerability is not a static one, but one that is open in multiple directions, and argues for introducing a degree of dynamism in the concept (190). We can see this dynamism at work, for example, when the people of Goražde are shown in scenes where they make attempts to formulate new relationships after their vulnerabilities have been abused. Vulnerability as a dynamic condition also entails that it is no longer exclusively associated with weakness: interaction with other people “renders us open to new possibilities for existence” (185). The chapters on the present, and to some extent the drawn photographs of the witnesses in the chapters on the past, also suggest the body’s potential for transformation and renewal after abuse. Naturally, Sacco does not idealize the present, and in focusing now on the resilience of the body I do not aim to deny the realities of abuse. Nevertheless, *Safe Area Goražde* does convey a sense of spatiality, movement, and openness in the chapters on the present. Sacco juxtaposes the body in circumstances of distress with the face of the same person in relative safety in the present, which makes it possible to see not only the cyclic nature of trauma, but also the bodily marks of physical, emotional and mental regeneration after the victim’s

exposed and vulnerable condition has been exploited, while it also highlights the degree of pain these people had to live through.

The naturalistic ways in which Sacco makes the pain of others visible, and the unflinching representations of death, blood, and violence neither hide nor exaggerate the traumatic narratives of the witnesses. Bodily pain is not unproblematic to represent in a realistic way, and its history within the comics medium is connected to gore and pulp tropes. Sacco represents the bodies of others at multiple temporal layers and in multiple conditions, which emphasizes that at every moment there are several possible answers to the exposed vulnerability of the Other. Vulnerability can be responded to by “wounding and caring” (Drichel 10); and, within this framework, I was reading *Safe Area Goražde* as a comics about caring responses. I showed that the very act of Sacco’s self-representation as a character is a caring response enabling the realization of the Other; and in the previous chapter I read the style of tactile backgrounds around the characters—for example around Sabina—as signs of the artist’s caring dwelling. Sacco’s images of violence and bodily pain elicit visceral reactions from readers, and invite them to respond to the represented vulnerability, for three reasons. First, in the processes of visceral seeing and empathy, the feelings of the represented body are mirrored by the reader’s own body. Second, due to the elaborate visual and textual contextualization of each violent or painful scene, and also due to Sacco’s new journalistic methods, the situations of danger and wounding appear plausible. Third, the reader’s body responds to the representation of wounding because of Sacco’s recurrent changes between haptic surfaces, discussed in Chapter Three, and figurative representations of pain, discussed in the present chapter. Haptic surfaces are perceived differently and require a more contemplative interpretation defined by an altered sense of time. The intrusion of figurative elements showing some form of violation of the body finds the reader,

working in another perceptive mode, unprepared. This way, reading becomes a risky business, where one needs to be open to be wounded by the comics.

By Way of Conclusion. The Reader's Embodied Engagement with Comics

Drawing non-fiction comics has been approached in this dissertation as a way of embodied investment which initiates a discourse on bodily vulnerability with the reader. This investment and its embeddedness in the experience of vulnerability were investigated by questions raised by the drawn nature of comics. My focus on drawing, and the fact that the individual chapters are organized around questions raised by drawing, build on the observation of many comics scholars that the starting point of research should be the understanding that drawing is the foundation of comics. I consider drawing a performance of the body, and it follows from this approach that the bodily gestures of drawing are linked to the experience and performance of bodily vulnerability. Vulnerability has been discussed as a common human experience, which is in fact fundamental to human interaction. It has been showed that vulnerability enables a dialogue, during which transformation can happen. Drawing and reading non-fiction comics have been conceptualized as embodied performances offering opportunities to take part in this dialogue, and the chapters of this dissertation have explored the transformation enabled by drawing.

Chapter one discussed the birth of the line, and argued that the autonomous line is born out of embodied gestures expressive of—among other things—vulnerability. Elaborating on

Lynda Barry's theory of the line, I examined whether the line can be autobiographical in nature, and positioned the line as an autonomous partner of the drawer. Chapter Two continued the investigation of autobiography by looking at the birth of the autobiographical avatar. The avatar is the character who stands for the first-person narrator in comics, who, in turn, is encouraged to be perceived—often as a result of multidirectional and ironic authentication performances—as a spokesperson of the author. Analyzing the example of Ken Dahl's *Monsters*, I have shown that the creation of a cartoon body is a never-ending performative process, during which the body is perceived, and is visualized, as monstrous and vulnerable at the same time.

The second part of the dissertation turned to Joe Sacco's comics reportage on the Bosnian war—*Safe Area Goražde* and *The Fixer*—in order to investigate ways in which drawing can perform engagement with the vulnerability not of the self, but of the Other. In Chapter Three I demonstrated that the style and technique of drawing can constitute a means of ethical engagement and dwelling with the vulnerable other, and Chapter Four focused on the ways in which vulnerable bodies of others are represented. I contextualized these images in the tradition of representing pain, and argued that Sacco's visual narratives of testimony position the vulnerable body in complex and sensitive ways: symbolic and physical links are established between the body of the drawer and the body of the subject, as a result of which the drawn body of the subject, which is at the same time the drawn body of the Other, preserves its realness and uniqueness even amid traumatic situations.

The keyword of the last chapter, viscosity, that is, the feeling of being affected by—either being drawn to or away from—Sacco's sometimes graphic representations of bodies in violent situations, indicated that the study of the reader's relationship to the drawn comics is a significant aspect of my research to be explored in the future. By way of conclusion, I

would like to map out this new aspect, which I consider an integral part of the model of embodied interaction with comics I introduced in the beginning. Like the drawer's performance, the reader's performance is informed by the body, and especially in non-fiction contexts, can be informed by the vulnerability of the body. The reader's body takes an active part in the interpretation of the multisensory input of comics, and, as Hague argues, all of the reader's senses are involved in making meaning (25). This performance requires an openness from the reader, for, as Rebecca Scherr writes, "to touch is always, also, to be touched; there is an element of this exchange that reminds us that we are not the other and the other is not us" ("Shaking Hands" 22). Yet readers respond in individual ways to comics, drawings, and the visual expressions of vulnerability. Neuroscience and evolutionary biology also examine the biological nature of these responses (Keen "A Theory of Narrative Empathy 207-214). Some might be traumatized by what they see or read about— Kaplan calls this response "vicarious trauma" (90)—while others do not respond in this way. Suzanne Keen calls an evasive and aversive response in situations when empathy could be evoked "personal distress." It is an answer which is "self-protective rather than other-oriented" ("Fast Tracks" 153). On the other hand, the other extreme of responses, vicarious trauma, does not allow sharing the trauma of the traumatized individual. In the context of this dissertation, for example, it does not mean sharing the trauma of the witnesses of the Bosnian war—rather, the reader feels "pain evoked by empathy" (Kaplan 90). For this reason, empathy is a key term in interpreting non-fiction narratives (cf. Keen "A Theory of Narrative Empathy"), and so is affect. My focus, however, is not on trauma, but on the bodily performances of vulnerability by readers, by which they take part in the dialogue initiated by the drawer. I am interested in the bodily responses that are contextualized, framed, and enabled by the comics, and my intention is to further examine the readerly performances enabled by the embodied nature of comics.

One should not disregard the individual's history, cultural position, and the very situation in which the response is taking place. When I talk about the reader's embodied performance of the experience of vulnerability during reading comics, my investigation is influenced by my own experience. To explain my approach, let me quote film theorist Vivian Sobchack from an interview with Scott Bukatman:

As a phenomenologist, I very often, although certainly not always, begin with my own specific experience as I start thinking and writing something. And then I generalize these specifics as larger structures of experience. ... In the end, I don't write about me. I start out from me (even when I write third person mode). But even when I'm in first person mode, I leave "me" (in the egological sense) to look at the structure of the experience I'm writing about, to move into the domain of a more general experiential structure that anybody might inhabit. I start from me but it's not about me. ... You need to experience and describe before you start interpreting, before you analyze and theorize, before you abstract. ("Conversation")

The experience of reading comics, or the experience of being touched (in the way Scherr has used the word) by non-fiction comics, is always personal. It is based on my personal experience that the following reading of Miriam Katin's *Letting It Go* (2013) was born. After emphasizing the influence of this memoir on my research in the "Preface," I would like to return now, at the very end, to Katin's way of addressing her readers. This address has hit the target—me—so directly, that it initiated connecting the concepts of embodiment and vulnerability in my study of comics. Focusing on three specific instances, I would like to show the workings of how Katin's representational strategy in *Letting It Go* (2013) engages the reader in a discourse of bodily vulnerability both visually and by way of touch.

This graphic memoir presents a gradual untangling of the burden of Miriam's past as a persecuted Jewish child in WWII Hungary, and it shows that the traumas of the past can haunt one's present so vividly that even the idea of travelling to present-day Germany can make one's standing in the world uncertain. *Letting It Go* explores with revealing honesty the very bodily nature of this anxiety in the elderly protagonist's life, and the difficulty to talk about it. After seventeen pages of showing all forms of procrastination in a futile attempt to start the actual narrative of vulnerability itself, the emphatically arbitrary choice of origo, the position to start the narrative from, is a scene of birth: the birth of Miriam's son (n.p.). *Letting It Go*, accounting for a lifetime of anxieties, locates the source of letting go of the trauma in the narrator-protagonist-memoirist's own body, and the maternal body in the moments of giving birth is conceptualized as the starting point of a narrative of learning to deal with the past. While the pictures on the page show details of a caesarean, the verbal component emphasizes the uncertainty the narrator feels about making that specific event the ur-event of her narrative: "Where should the story begin? Perhaps this is the time and place. Tarrytown, New York, 1972. Or is this really the middle of the story? This tale appears to have a floating center. Twice around the neck" (n.p.).

The comics is born out of the most vulnerable, cut up body of the autobiographical character. During the process while this uncertain and complicated point of origo was searched for, a contradictory solution was also offered: to keep such a big distance from one's own story that the author practically disappears from it. The narrator contemplates watching the Brooklyn bridge: "So, where does a story begin? And if you are inside that story right now, in that situation and it hurts and say you can draw, then you must try and draw yourself out of it" (n.p.). The chosen moment of bringing a new life *into* the world is opposed to *drawing* oneself *out* (drawing in both senses of the world of leaving a physical mark with a pencil and dragging and pulling something). These contradictory movements and directions meet

in the body that is lying still on the operating table surrounded by sharp instruments of danger and also of help. Katin's gesture of showing the flesh of her autobiographical avatar is sudden, unexpected, and perplexing. Moreover, the pictures on the page never show the whole body, only segments: this way, after the physical cut of the caesarean, a second cutting up takes place by the logic of representation. The focus of the pictures is on the belly, which is almost entirely abstracted due to the extreme segmentation and the green color around it.

In this graphic memoir, Katin's use of colors evokes associations of childhood and playfulness (cf Bukatman, *Hellboy's World*), a reaction which is also enhanced by the use of pencils and crayons. The easy and colorful context of the book does not prepare the reader for the sudden exposition of Miriam's flesh, which ultimately and metaphorically represents the vulnerability of the author. The reader's unease is further intensified by the repeated representation of scissors, and the syringe and scalpel entering the flesh.

This way of representing giving birth can be considered a gesture of self-abjection. Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror* (1982), says about the liminal nature of abjection that "[t]here, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (3). Katin's representation of the cesarean evokes a similar threshold between life and death. Kristeva continues to define what the abject is as "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). The abject is repulsive and desirable at the same time; it belongs to the self but it is rejected, it is radically Other. "Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be" (10). Katin's rendition of her own body in the process of giving birth in this autobiographical memoir does not refrain from operating with abject elements that have been considered taboos for centuries (see Elkins). The cut into the flesh during the

cesarean and the gesture of showing the inside of the body equally evoke fascination and disgust in the reader.

Crucially, it is not only the baby that is born from the abject and utterly vulnerable female body, but the sequence of narratable memories. And now by the word “sequence” I mean both the fact that the narrator managed to find a way to organize her traumatic past, and the widespread reference to comics as “sequential art,” as positioned by Will Eisner in *Comics as Sequential Art* (1985). Thus, in *Letting It Go* the vulnerable body of the author is conceptualized as a genesis of comics.

Furthermore, Katin’s acts of self-exposition and self-abjection, her voluntary engagement with vulnerability, are ways to activate the relationship between the embodied reader and the body—her avatar’s body—shown in the comic book. Further on in the story, she includes a scene which unsentimentally shows the protagonist defecating and washing her bed sheets. This scene, too, is exemplary in its interplay of mutual bodily vulnerability among avatar, artist and reader, conveyed via touch. Two-thirds into the book, the character Miriam has already made peace with her adult son’s unsettling decision to settle in Berlin, and she has also helped him with the administrative steps. Yet Miriam and her husband’s first trip to Vilnius and Berlin brings unimagined anxieties to the surface. Miriam cannot not think about the Holocaust when thinking about Germany; for her, no experience and no image are innocent; nothing is without associations or the burden of the past. For example, the seemingly neutral billboard showing a smartphone and an athlete ready to run and featuring the slogan “Ultraschnelle Performance” is commented on by a not too impressed Miriam:

“Ok. Ok. I get the picture. Now I feel a whole lot more comfortable. Every detail she perceives convinces Miriam that little has changed since her war-torn childhood.”³³

In addition, the representation of the night following the first day in Berlin (figure xx.1) unexpectedly activates the naturalized role of touch in the reading process, and engages the reader in a discourse of vulnerability. At the beginning of the three-page sequence, which brings purification for the character, but contamination for the reader, Miriam tries in vain to comfort herself with an illusion of safety: “Great food. Great wine. Great mattress” (n.p.). She cannot rest, and tension is eased only via Miriam’s accidental defecation, that is, via bodily purification bordering on the abject and the taboo. Seeing the protagonist in this extreme situation of helplessness deeply touches the reader. The scene is, however, almost too long: the author does not hide the vulnerability of her comics avatar, but exposes it in detail. First, while trying to sleep, ominous dark colors frame Miriam’s portrait, and by the bottom of the page not only is her gown shown as polluted, but her body as well. The last-but-one picture of the twelve-panel page shows Miriam in a position of extreme defencelessness: in an act of self-examination and diagnosis, she raises her gown, exposing her open legs and the excrement covering her lower body (fig. xx.1).

³³ Parallel to this, the text repeatedly problematizes vision; it reflects both textually and visually on the contestedness of looking, and on the repeated acts of framing involved in the way things are looked at. (Butler, *Frames of War* 3). “That’s what I need! To see Berlin out of focus” (n.p.) – is one of the captions accompanying the scenes taken from the program on Germany, while these panels are framed as postcards. Looking at the world through windows is a returning element, while the time Miriam spends with her son and his girlfriend are shown as a set of snapshot photographs.

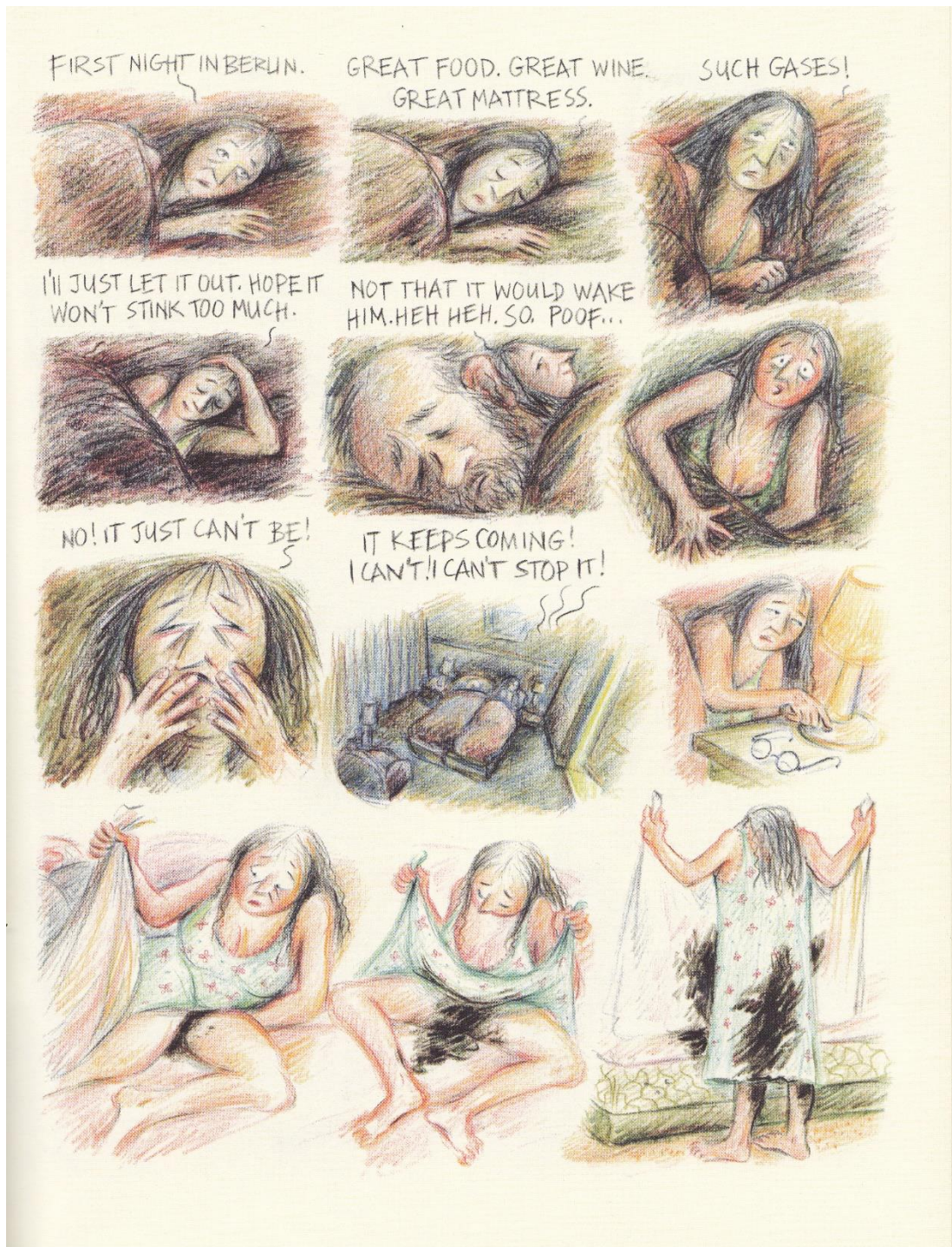


Fig. xx.1. Katin, Miriam. *Letting It Go* (n. p.) Courtesy of the artist.

The next two pages show the avatar taking a shower that is ritual and physical at the same time. These pages are easier on the reader, but are no less honest than the previous one. The colors are brighter with a lot of green and turquoise; the pages feature fewer panels, and thus allow more place between the images. All of this contributes to the decrease of the reader's claustrophobia. Yet it is not only by way of visual transgression, by showing this cathartic scene in detail, that Katin disrupts the reading process and brings the reader's bodily vulnerability into play. In order to turn the page, the reader has to touch both the exposed protagonist and the brown marks representing or evoking excrement.

Touch, which is such an automatic gesture when the reader turns the page in order to get on with the story, all of a sudden ceases to be neutral and mechanical. By touching the page, the reader interacts with the vulnerable and exposed body of the protagonist: touch is a way of response to the depicted body, to the represented situation, and to the autobiographical claims of the memoir. The reader might feel that this degree of exposure and vulnerability is too sudden or too much. During the narrative leading to this point, the reader has not been warned, and consequently could not prepare to expect such a direct address to engage with the naked, defecated body of the elderly protagonist. The provocation of vulnerability, however, is used to establish a new relationship, in which bodily interaction and the mutual vulnerability of bodies are acknowledged. The shared yet different bodily experience of abjection and vulnerability creates an embodied link between artist, cartoon avatar, and reader.

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