

Constructing a Self Between Image and Text: Reading Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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Abstract

Compared to other genres, Graphic memoirs offer both the textual and visual representations of the relationship between a moment of significance in the author's life and the effective as well as affective construction of that memory for the reader. This duality is why McCloud describes the work of meaning transmission between the author and the reader as a dance between "the seen and the unseen." My aim in this paper is to ascertain the impact of using graphic conventions on the effective and affective construction of meaning and identity in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and how the use of "The Gutter" from a comic's visual structure becomes of even more significance in graphic memoirs. I aim to show that despite the use of panels, which at times can fracture the flow of the narrative into sequenced segments, it is in the alternating of the textual/visual with the blank spaces of the gutters that the narrative comes alive for the reader. These blank spaces, in Cvetkocich's view, are meant to represent an effort to redefine the "connections between memory and history, private experience and public life" via a written account and the "act of witness" represented by a combination of the visual and the verbal. Using this mix of image and text, Bechdel creates an almost palimpsestic effect as a majority of the panels in *Fun Home* show items layered over other images, indicating a blending between the narrative of Bechdel's real life experience and the representation of that life experience in the text. For the reader, this implies a way to address the gaps in knowledge not only for them, but also for Bechdel herself, making the reader a participant observer of the memories within the narrative and not one who is always standing outside it.

Keywords: *Bechdel, Fun Home, memoir, graphic Novel*

The Written Word, a silent secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator honors that contract is a matter of both art and craft.

Scott McCloud

The diary is a piece of lacework or a spider web. It is apparently made up of more empty space than filled space.

Phillipe Lejeune

Graphic memoirs offer a visual representation of the relationship between a moment and the construction of memory, but the medium complicates the issue of subject positionality on multiple levels. The position of the narrator is in flux because s/he is both the creator and the created within the text. Furthermore, this 'creation of self' is influenced both by the author as it is by the reader through the readers conscious effort to negotiate the author's use of space within the pages and panels of a graphic narrative. My aim in this paper is to ascertain the impact that graphic conventions have on the effective and affective construction of meaning and identity in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), both in terms of the intentionality of the author as well as by the input of an informed reader.

The argument that a visual medium engages the reader in a more visceral fashion than prose autobiography is not a new one and has been used to great effect since the "underground commix" written by Robert Crumb in the 1960s and 70s and feminist artists like Phoebe Gloeckner, Trina Robbins etc. in the 1980s. These artists used the tension created by using what was perceived as a cartoon medium in combination with adult themes – something that is still used today by alternative works like *Drinking at the Movies* (2015) by Julia Wertz. But it was not until Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91) that the form was used to its full potential in the long-length book form. Thus, while contemporary graphic narratives written by women like Alison Bechdel are directly influenced by the highly intimate and confessional nature of the underground commix written between 1960's and 1980's, it is the book length format adopted by Spiegelman that lays much of the foundation for the genre form that Bechdel uses in *Fun Home*.

Since the term 'comics' was no longer appropriate for these works, scholars like Hillary Chute introduced the term graphic narrative or graphic novel, which have become the term for classifying book-length works that contain comics content, a hybrid form of word and image. However, for the purposes of my work, the term graphic 'narrative' will be used to describe my selected text because it is a work that is autobiographical or at least semi-autobiographical in nature. Chute states a similar preference for the term as she writes:

The most riveting comics texts coming out right now—from men and women alike—are not novels at all. Instead, even as they deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history, they are deeply invested in their own accuracy and historicity. They are texts that either claim nonfiction status or choose . . . to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storylines. (2010, p. 3)

Bechdel's *Fun Home* is not political in the way Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is – dealing with the Holocaust and Iranian history and politics respectively. While there may not be many historical or social references within the narrative of *Fun Home*—some of the few references being to the Stonewall riots and the Watergate scandal (Cvetkovich, 2008, p. 121)—nonetheless, what Bechdel does

is to focus on the personal story framed within the historical moments that her characters live through.

Conventions of graphic memoirs: Medium as message

Anne Cvetkovich writes that *Fun Home* presents an effort to redefine the “connections between memory and history, private experience and public life [. . .]” (2008, p. 111). History in *Fun Home* thus becomes personal history, and it is seen through the lens of memory. This is why I would classify it as also being a graphic memoir, beyond being a graphic narrative. The conjunction between personal history and the graphic narrative form is present in the title of Bechdel’s work as well. The word ‘Tragicomic’ in the subtitle functions as a manifestation of the nature of the book. That is why *Fun Home* is a memoir told through the medium of comic art that details the author’s story of coming out to her family. With this play of words, Bechdel emphasizes both the genre and the function of her text. Furthermore, it is in analyzing the ways in which she chooses to follow genre conventions, break from them, and manipulates them as being “one fundamental way of signifying” and this helps to create “an understanding of genre [which] is always useful in coming to terms with them” (Couser, 2012, p. 34-5).

For the purposes of my paper, I will be outlining the demands of the genre of graphic narratives as the lens I am using for my reading of Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Understanding these conventions are fundamental to the reading of not only a graphic narrative—where its conventions must be considered as they are important to the way comics art works—but also towards understanding the relationship between the graphic narrative and the autobiographical act.

Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1993, p. 9). This is a generally accepted definition though others add that comics are a language with highly developed vocabulary and grammar dependent upon universally understood images for description and narration. Additionally, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) assert that the idiosyncratic function of the autobiographical selves—the narrating ‘I’ who is the author and ‘I’ who is the observed character in the narrative—challenges the “normative notion of life narrative as a retrospective” (p. 71). Graphic narratives present visual fragments, omit more information than they include, and demand attention to detail from the reader when it comes to the act of interpretation. One reason for this ostensibly fragmentary narrative construction is that it is representative of acts of self-representation. Texts like *Graphic Memoirs* or *Autographics* are characterized by layering of meaning on the visual and/or verbal planes, both implicitly and explicitly. This encourages the reader to actively engage in the interpretive process as they work their way through the text (Smith & Watson, 2010,



p. 168-9). For this reason, the knowledge of comic art conventions becomes necessary for us as reader.

Thus it naturally follows that reading comics requires a different set of reading strategies than what readers would use with traditional print-only texts. Moreover, in reading an autobiographical text, the reader also needs to be attentive to the concerns of the 'I' who is speaking—both in terms of the event that is being told as well as the temporal placement of it within the larger narrative. As McCloud also writes (1993, p. 92) in the image to the right. While graphic narratives do follow the normative convention of reading from left to right and top to bottom, the eye doesn't always read left to right in even, linear patterns, but rather it jumps between text and images, zigzagging and sometimes rescanning the information in a new way both *within* panels and *among* panels on a page. Schmitt also agrees that "since it is impossible to 'see' both picture and words simultaneously, the presence of the one necessitates the absence of the other creating a continual unresolvable play of difference between the two textual forms" (1993, p. 158). This means that despite the author's best efforts, the nature of the genre means that "always there are moments in the text when the impression of narrative coherence breaks down, in digressions, omissions, gaps, and silences about certain things, in contradiction" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 78). The reader then must be an active agent in the meaning making process.



McCloud calls the process of creating meaning within graphic narratives as connecting the parts, or the two separate images of the panels, to create a continuous, unified reality "closure" (1993, p. 63), and the reader must needs be as much a part of this process as the author for the text to fulfill its purpose. Since comics have more pronounced gaps than written text, gaps you can 'see' in the form of white space and gutters, in the unspoken narrative that takes place between panels, the reader thus becomes "an equal partner in crime", a "willing and conscious collaborator" (McCloud, 1993, 65-8). Hillary Chute also considers this to be an inherent quality of the comic art form as the panels fracture the flow of the narrative into the sequenced segments which alternate with the blank spaces in between, necessitating the fact that "comics as a form requires a substantial degree

of reader participation for narrative interpretation” (2008, p. 460). Speaking specifically of Autographics, Smith and Watson also feel that this segmented narrative spatiality complicates the depiction of the autobiographical self (2010, p. 260).

It is thus crucial for the reader to be aware of structural conventions, much like writers are knowledgeable of the specific genre conventions of the form they are working with. The ways in which meaning is conveyed to the reader is very much shaped by the narrative structure, as Will Eisner also corroborates: “Comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language” (1985, p. 8), a language that we as readers can learn and therefore be able to engage with the text and the meaning making process as active participants.

Fun Home as an autographic diary

Bechdel spent seven years writing *Fun Home*, which tells the story of her closeted father’s suicide in 1980 and her own eventual coming out. Moreover, Bechdel’s telling is complicated by the fact that her disclosure exposes that her father, Bruce, had been hiding a lifelong series of sexual relationships with men. Shortly after their shared disclosures, Bechdel’s father dies by being hit by a bread truck, and although it is officially considered an accident, there are indications that the death was a suicide. *Fun Home* thus is both a retelling and the active work of the author’s attempt to sort through her own identity in relation to her father’s at a time when tragedy makes those identities particularly difficult to sort through. It is thus as much the written account and the “act of witness” (Cvetkovich, 2008, p. 120) represented within the narrative as well as its combination with the visual and the verbal, which is a large part of why mainstream audiences feel a sense of empathy for the characters of *Fun Home*.

However, this empathy is as much a part of the art of the comic as it is the conscious crafting of the narrative by Bechdel within the architecture of *Fun Home*. It is a retrospective, self-reflexive view of her journey of self and her attention to detail is visible in not only the time she took to write it, but also the demands of the art form she uses to give her memoir a material existence. Beginning with Bechdel’s choice of color for her memoir, rather than choosing to work in a black and white medium, she chooses to work in shades of green and blue; colors which are evocative of memory and nostalgia. In an interview Bechdel has described the shade as a “grieving color” (Chute, 2006, p. 179). The color green is also like a washed-out version of the green wallpaper that decorated the interior of several rooms in Bechdel’s childhood home, the titular fun(eral) home where she spent the majority of her childhood (Bechdel, p. 36).

The characters within the text are thus the embodiment of not only real figures but also of Bechdel's memory of her own history, and that of her family – as is indicated by the subtitle. In fact, the author's biography on the back cover of *Fun Home* describes Bechdel as “a careful archivist of her own life” who has been “keeping a journal [since] she was ten.” *Fun Home* can consequently be considered Bechdel's ultimate journal entry. Robyn Warhol (2011), in discussing the narrative construction of the text, points out that *Fun Home* is the “corrected version of Alison's journal” (p. 10). This diarist perception is also borne out by the format conventions of the text as well, specifically by the use of panels and the white space in between them. Panels are the most basic aspect of comic art. They are a still image in a sequence of juxtaposed images and can vary in size and shape. Panels hold within their borders all the icons that comprise the vocabulary of comics, but the panels are icons themselves. In *Fun Home*, I find that since the panels do not follow a consistent size, they have been adapted to the needs of the narrative.

The panel layout or arrangement of panels on the page in *Fun Home* is quite complex and forms the narrative machinery that moves the plot. It is not only meant to draw the readers' gaze but also the focus of those within the graphic novel itself. In the image to the right (Bechdel, p. 67), for example, Allison¹ asks her parents about how they met. While the caption above the frame tells us that they are “embarrassed” and that “there was no story”, the visual cues serve to further highlight the “arctic climate” of her family than the words alone manage to do. Her father does not look at her or pause in his actions at all, her mother avoids meeting Alison's gaze when answering personal questions,

I EMPLOY THESE ALLUSIONS TO JAMES AND FITZGERALD NOT ONLY AS DESCRIPTIVE DEVICES, BUT BECAUSE MY PARENTS ARE MOST REAL TO ME IN FICTIONAL TERMS.



AND PERHAPS MY COOL AESTHETIC DISTANCE ITSELF DOES MORE TO CONVEY THE ARCTIC CLIMATE OF OUR FAMILY THAN ANY PARTICULAR LITERARY COMPARISON.



MY PARENTS SEEMED ALMOST EMBARRASSED BY THE FACT OF THEIR MARRIAGE. THERE WAS NO STORY, FOR EXAMPLE, OF HOW THEY MET.



¹ For the sake of clarity, I will be using Alison when referring to the character and Bechdel when referring to the author.

and Alison herself appears to look outside the page, hoping to find answers that her childhood has not provided.

Another format convention of interest that Bechdel also employs (not just in these pages) throughout the text is that of the lines that enclose individual panels. Typically, panel boundaries are of various styles and line weights and are drawn to suit the purpose of the narration. Will Eisner (1985) states that they are part of the non-verbal language of comics. They guide the reader and convey meaning. He presents examples of three kinds of borders and suggests what they mean: (a) straight rectangle indicates present tense; (b) wavy or scalloped indicates flashbacks or memories; (c) unframed implies unlimited space and the reader must discern what is supposed to fill that space. Bechdel's choice of only using straight block shapes therefore not only gives a sense of immediacy to the narration, but also adds to the affective nature of her narrative.

In the image to the right (Bechdel, p. 38), we can see not only the use of the block shapes, which indicate the author's commentary—the narrative 'I'—on what we are observing in the individual panels, but also see the memory of the event—the historical 'I'—indicated by the speech bubbles within the panels, and the archival material Bechdel has used to fill in the gaps of memory via the notations her father made on his books. The layering of panels and objects within the panels indicates as the layering that takes place within an individual's

construction of memory, as well as the influences that make a self, which ultimately is the function of an autographic. By using the same iconography throughout the



text, we as readers find it easy to not only interpret the intentionality of the author's construction of the narrative but to also implicitly consent to the meaning making process that is constructed by it. Will Eisner writes that "the visual treatment of words as graphic art forms is part of the vocabulary" (1985, p. 10) and it reveals the setting and tells the reader what is happening, and the times these boundaries are crossed with boxes within the panels are the instances where the reader is directly addressed.

Bechdel's self and reflection in space/s

Robyn Warhol outlines the style of narrative layering Bechdel uses in her text as comprising three parts. The first is the "extradiegetic voice-over narration" the voice of the narrator in and out of the panels; the second is the "intradiegetic dialogue" the words spoken inside the panels and the "narrative world"; the third is the pictorial one, which is the level of the drawings that sometimes go hand in hand with the voice-over narration (2011, p. 5).



As shown in the image to the right (Bechdel, p. 16), we can see instances of all three levels of narration, but most specifically the voice-over narration. The blank space between panels is known as the gutter, which as McCloud asserts is "the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium" (1993, p. 13). Gutters play a crucial role in connecting panels into a

sequential, coherent story as much of the action, though unseen, happens in the gutters. McCloud (1993, p. 70-2) posits six panel-to-panel transitions that typically happen in a graphic narrative: (a) moment-to-moment; (b) action-to action; (c) subject-to-subject; (d) scene-to-scene; (e) aspect-to-aspect of a place, idea, or mood; and (f) non-sequitur in which no logical relationship exists between panels. However, in an autographic, especially the way Bechdel writes it, the gutter is also a place for the author's direct narrative; the memoir aspect of the text therefore comes out the most strongly here. Bechdel has essentially co-opted the gutter to her own purposes. While the gutter is usually white space, the non-narrative between the narrative panels, most of this book's narration occurs in the gutter, indicating once more the almost organic relationship that the content of the story has with the material structure.

It thus follows that when gutters are not present, Bechdel wants her version of events to be dominant. For example, in the Roy "centerfold" – Bechdel herself refers to it as such in an interview – is not only one of the few two page layouts in the text, but is also a pivotal moment in her journey.

In fact the whole story was spawned by [this snapshot of Roy]. . . . It was a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn't start working on the book then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It's literally the core of the book, the centerfold. (Chute, 2006, p. 1005-1006).

Going through a box of family photos after her father's death, Alison discovers this photograph of Roy, her babysitter and, as she later discovers, her father's lover. It does away with the gutter altogether, with Bechdel drawing her own text boxes of narration around the picture. Alison's hand, drawn in the clear line style, dominates the page. Because there is no frame around the page, Julia Watson reads this image as a reminder "of our complicity as viewers in this intimate glimpse, as our hand holding the book overlaps hers" (2008, p. 39-41) and blurs the line between the narrator, the author and us as the readers. Within the boxes, the narrator describes the picture's aesthetic qualities as "an ethereal, painterly quality"; "In fact, the picture is beautiful." Yet, she also wonders, "But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged?" (Bechdel, p. 100). The use of visual-verbal rhetoric here is meant to have readers agree with the author's interpretation of the image rather than making up their own minds, as indicated by any lack of transitions, and spaces in which we as readers can allow for our own interpretation of the memory and its impact on Bechdel's own sense of identity. The apparatus of the graphic novel is consequently particularly suited to how Bechdel has situated herself as the autobiographical I, the subject of the autobiographical eye, and the historicized self of her father's identity.

The nature of a memoir is always meant to be visual and descriptive, and unsurprisingly very much suited to the art of the graphic narrative. But Graphic memoirs also serve the function of being a meta-textual manifestation of memory. In Bechdel's case it becomes a material collection of memory, archival material, and family artifacts which collectively function as a record from her childhood, as a tool for retelling her memory of her father. The non-chronological and non-linear narrative is a result of, as Watson remarks, Bechdel's reviewing her memories while depicting herself as a main character that is not only an observer of what happens in that house, but who also takes part actively in the story (Bechdel, p. 126). For readers, this results in a narrative that is arranged thematically and is why we have multiple time periods depicted on a single page. For example, in one case we see Alison with three different hairstyles (Bechdel, p. 45) which not only allows us to read the timeline of the narrative as whole, but also invites us to read into the temporal space created between the images. The Gutter, and in effect, the white space on the page functions as a liminal space, marking out not only significant individual events, memories, and impressions, but also stages in Bechdel's own self development.

Furthermore, the reader, by accepting the events that take place across this unspoken space, participates in creating closure, which McCloud describes as the phenomenon of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (1993, p. 137). This is, interestingly enough, also the purpose of a diary as well. Phillipe Lejeune states "A private diary, by definition is allusive. Implicit reference is preponderant in the private diary, so that the reader spends a great deal of time trying to guess what is being spoken about" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 41). This Temporal and spatial freedom is granted by the use of the gutter, the white space that is an aspect of both a diary and a graphic narrative. The reader must fill in the narrative gaps created by the gutter and supply the action or images that connect the panels (McCloud, 1993, p. 65). In this way, "the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (McCloud, 1993, p. 65). An instance of linear space-time motion in *Fun Home* is a drive to the movies that Alison and her father go on. This memory is visually depicted as spread across two pages, each page contains twelve square panels of the same size. Each panel shows them conversing in the car, and the twenty-four panels are almost identical, with the same background and the same positioning of characters (Bechdel, p. 220-221). However, it is clear that time is passing in this sequence. The words of the conversation make the progression of time clear, but the convention of space as time in comics also suggests to readers that time is passing, because even though there is no movement to indicate events across time, the fact that the scene is broken up across multiple panels suggests that time is occurring between and within those panels.



But there are instances when we are told of a metaphorical journey taken by Bechdel in a non-chronological structure, which makes it even more significant to realize how individual points in time seem to stand alone but are actually shaped by a continuation of previous moments. For example, in Chapter 3, we see Alison laying curled up on the floor with the phone pressed to her ear.

The same image is shown repeatedly over the course of this chapter indicating that there is a continuous 'present time' conversation that is happening – in this case with her mother who reveals the truth of Alison's father's sexuality to her. In the first iteration, Bechdel is surrounded by a masculine plaid shirt, a sketchpad, and *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (Bechdel, p. 59). The scene has clear importance to Bechdel, as it is featured on multiple pages, although each time the image is slightly altered with a different panel size and vantage point revealing more or less of Alison's surroundings (Bechdel, p. 79).



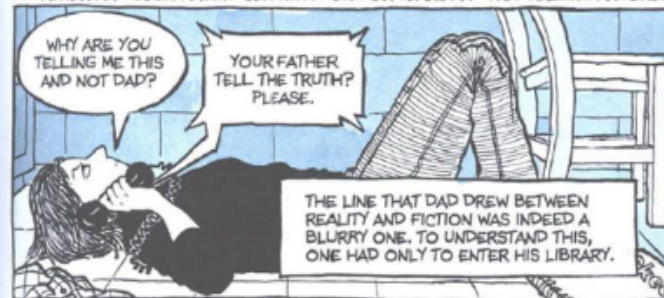
As readers, we are given a visual thread to connect together these images to maintain that temporal thread, while the intervening pages are filled with an almost stream-of-consciousness narrative that connects various memories, letters, discoveries of her life that went through her mind or helped her understand that event at the time Bechdel was actually writing *Fun Home*. As per the norm by now in the text, this adult, authorial perspective is in the Gutters between the panels, the narration that reads like diary entries from different points in her life that only distance allowed her to understand (Bechdel, p. 211).

IT WASN'T UNTIL THREE WEEKS LATER THAT MOM LET ME IN ON THE BIG SECRET.



Each time the storyline returns to this crucial moment, a different context of knowledge surrounds it. The repetition of the image braids the panels together across the narrative of *Fun Home*, creating recursive layers of meaning. The experience of revisiting the same moment three times, each with a slightly different context, allows the reader to understand the many different emotional reactions and the lasting repercussions of this moment.

WHY HAD I TOLD THEM? I HADN'T EVEN HAD SEX WITH ANYONE YET. CONVERSELY, MY FATHER HAD BEEN HAVING SEX WITH MEN FOR YEARS AND NOT TELLING ANYONE.



Bechdel's childhood was filled with secrecy: the secret of her father's sexuality, his multiple affairs with young men, the secret of her own sexuality, and ultimately, the unconfirmed secret of her father's suicide. She establishes how, at first, she merely began writing down her experiences after the encouragement of her father who suggests that she "just write down what's happening" (Bechdel, p. 140). In fact, Bechdel states that the first three words of her diary, "Dad is reading,"

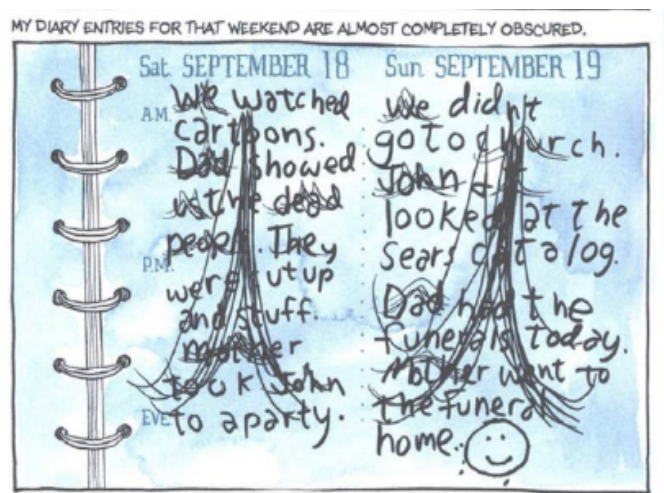
FOR YEARS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, WHEN THE SUBJECT OF PARENTS CAME UP IN CONVERSATION I WOULD RELATE THE INFORMATION IN A FLAT, MATTER-OF-FACT TONE...



are written in her father's handwriting. The image of Alison and her father's handwriting existing simultaneously on the same page of the journal immediately suggests that their personal histories are inextricably linked. Bechdel highlights this link with her father through her diary that she writes throughout her childhood which she calls her "own compulsive propensity to autobiography" (Bechdel, p. 140), and that she writes her father's biography nestled within her own autobiography: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (Bechdel, p. 15). *Fun Home* for Bechdel, becomes a "memoir about memoirs" (Watson, 2008, p. 123) as she deals with not only the reality of her father's identity, but also works through the process of how this revisioning of her father also leads to a similar restructuring of her own perception of her own self. The text functions therefore as the construction of the artist, the reconstruction of family history, and the exploration of the hidden figure of her father. This record of tracing out of her father and consequently her own self is the frame within which *Fun Home* functions – Bechdel's diary represents for her a confused adolescent perspective while simultaneously inserting the adult perspective in the gaps of memory through the narrator's voice in the gutter.

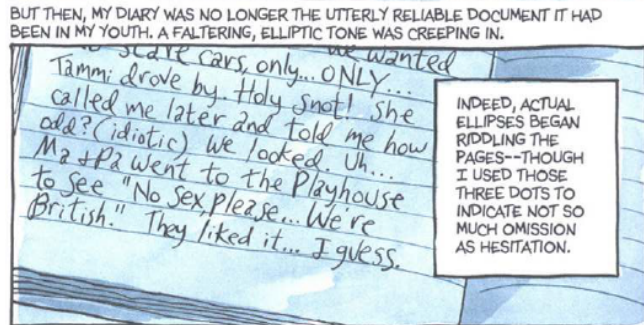
Text as image / Memory as archive

The contrast we are presented with between the diary entries themselves and the changing perception of Bechdel about them over the course of her life is not only another indicator of her self-development but also a tool to draw the reader into the narrative. In entries like the one on the right (Bechdel, p. 148), we must, as readers, invest time into deciphering the words and the meaning of the symbol which, as Bechdel tells us, is meant to signify gaps in time and memory.

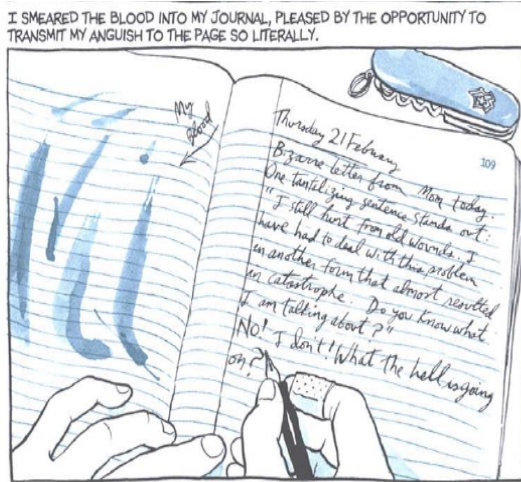


Instances like these indicate how much of a visual medium a diary already is. Lejeune describes it as "a piece of lacework or a spider web . . . made up of more empty space than filled space" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 181). This empty space is as much a reference to the unrecorded events as it is to the passing of time. In this way, comics and diaries are structurally similar, as "comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified

reality” (McCloud, 1993, p. 141). Thus, by participating the act of reading and investing time by which “one assimilates the non-said, one picks up the code, one notices the gaps and one begins to read between the lines [. . .]” (Lejeune, 2009, p. 41).



And in *Fun Home*, one must read between the lines to understand how the diary as a record changes and evolves for Bechdel from being a literal record of her days in “simple declarative sentences” to being “hubristic at best, utter lies at worst” (Bechdel, p. 141). This can partly be attributed to the dual narrative voices of the historical and narrative of the text, but it is as much about how truthfully the experience was conveyed via the diary, as how much she herself was unable to understand her own life. The instance where Bechdel draws a page from her own diary, smeared with her blood is a visual representation of this veracity. Bechdel writes: “I smeared the blood into my journal, pleased by the opportunity to transmit my anguish to the page so literally” (Bechdel, p. 78). Alison’s drive to visually display her anguish by smearing her blood, as in the right panel below, onto the page of the journal suggests that it is simply not enough to accurately depict her emotional experiences with words alone.



The panel on the right pictures Alison’s open journal. The left page contains what appear to be several streaks of blood as well as an arrow pointing to the markings with accompanying text that states “My Blood.” The journal states, “Bizarre letter from Mom today. One tantalizing sentence stands out: ‘I still hurt from old wounds. I have had to deal with this problem in another form that almost resulted in catastrophe. Do you know what I am talking about?’ No! I don’t! What the hell is going on?”

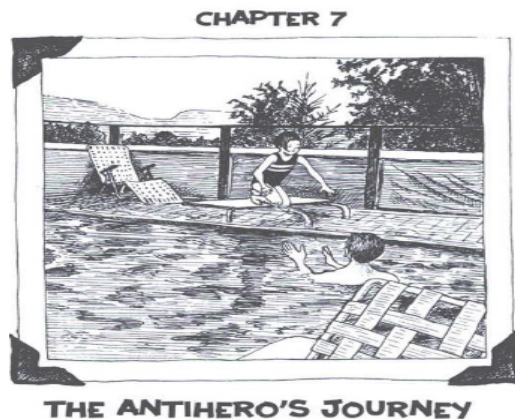
Just as the text stops, Alison’s bandaged right hand is pictured, holding a pen. This imagery also serves as a reminder of the “old wounds” that Alison’s mother describes in her letter. In that case, the wounds refer to her father’s

closeted homosexuality and multiple affairs with men. Unlike her earlier childhood diaries where words and symbol do battle for importance on the page, here, word and image are working together to accurately describe the experience.

Bechdel explores family history, and her own memories through the reproduction of similar archival documents such as maps, novels, letters, newspapers, photographs, etc. Warhol also adds that the pictorial level is the one that includes the reproduction of text and pictures (2011, p. 5). Bechdel creates an almost palimpsestic effect in how she uses these materials. Nearly all panels that feature them show the items layered over other images, indicating a blending between the narrative of Bechdel's real life experience and the representation of that life experience in the text. For the reader, this can imply a way to address the gaps in knowledge not only for them but also for Bechdel herself. As Bechdel writes:

I employ these allusions to [Henry] James and [F. Scott] Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison. (Bechdel, p. 67)

By shifting back and forth between the recreated real and the imagined, we can physically see the moves Bechdel is making in an attempt to shift her own, and consequently, the reader's perspectives. In the last chapter of the text, we see this shifting of perspective and time paralleled not only in the images but also in the accompanying text. The title page for Chapter 7 (on the right above), "The Antihero's Journey" is the reproduction of a family photography showing Alison and her Father Bruce:



The last page of *Fun Home* (on the right below) is comprised of two panels. The first pictures the zoomed in front of a semi-truck, presumably the one that had killed Alison's father. The second is the reverse image of a redrawn photo that appears on the chapter title page for Chapter 7. Alison jumps off a diving board, back facing us, toward her father, who is facing the reader, in the pool, his arms outstretched.



When this photo is first encountered on the chapter title page, the perspective is switched. We see the father from behind and the child Alison leaping toward him. On the previous page Bechdel asks, “What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’s inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought?” (Bechdel, p. 231). The two captions on the last page go on to state: “He did hurtle into the sea, of course. . . . But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (Bechdel, p. 232).

What’s interesting here is that, although Bechdel tells the reader with words that her father was there to catch her when she leapt, she is actually mid-air in the redrawn photos, leaving the reader wondering. This sense of uncertainty is heightened by the fact that though his hands are outstretched to catch Alison, the reader cannot be certain that this actually happens. Additionally, the image of the front of the semi-truck is a haunting reminder of the memory that prompts Alison’s retelling of the story, her father’s death. Only an extremely thin white gutter space divides the two panels, the death of the father and the potential of the father’s embrace existing simultaneously. The mental work of finding the “closure” that exists between these two panels has been the project of the book. Bechdel has recursively told her story in a way that entwines her and her father’s histories in order to reach a better understanding of his death and their relationship. By shifting the perspective, and redrawing the image again, she emphasizes the need to redraw and retrace when retelling her personal history. The blank page that the reader is left with following this image creates a space to imagine the embrace between the father and daughter, or, maybe, not.

In conclusion, although Will Eisner calls the separation between word and image “arbitrary” in comics, I believe it is not arbitrary but necessary in order for comics to be able to represent memory in innovative ways. The idea of the medium acting upon the reader, through this analysis of *Fun Home* as a representative of the genre of the graphic memoir or autographic points to the difficulty of signification that pervades the nature of a memoir itself. Acknowledging that graphic narratives comprise a complex set of relationships between the images, the text and spatiality can, in conclusion, help the reader create meaning within it. Furthermore, reading these narratives must involve the cooperation of the reader because the graphic narrative is as much about the said as it is about the unsaid. Yet, what is left out is vital to the medium, but it is not inaccessible. The ability of graphic novels to examine abstract concepts, often within the structure of the text itself, gives them a particular advantage in telling autobiographical stories, especially the ones that consider the creative process of compiling a narrative, as autographic memoirs invariably do.

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