

Cartooning Ex-Posing Photography in Graphic Memoir

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Factual Images

Fiction and memoir relate differently to reality. Whereas fiction is not bound by existing facts and events, memoir is a nonfiction genre that “depicts the lives of real, not imagined, individuals.”¹ Like other forms of life writing, memoir sets out to communicate truthfully through self-representation an identity and a life. Indeed, memoir is said to “not accommodate the counterfactual.”² Thus, memoir is bound not only by a claim, but also an obligation to truth that, in turn, is met by readers who turn to it with an eye for truth.³

Graphic memoir is not exempt from this obligation; it too is governed (if not downright policed) by the obligatory “autobiographical pact” between writer and reader.⁴ However, given that graphic memoir tells life stories with the aid of cartoon images, images that are notorious for not being able to hide their handcrafted quality, the graphic memoir’s relationship to reality is somewhat removed from the type of objective facticity of verbal memoirs that relies so heavily on the longstanding “association of the printed word with factual evidence.”⁵ Because the “formal grammar [of graphic narratives] rejects transparency and renders textualisation conspicuous,”⁶ the communication of truth in graphic memoir is openly caught up in the cartoon image’s constructed and interpretative quality. Cartooning, in other words, renders overt the inevitable subjective register of self-representation. Consequently, instead of the factual and verifiable, graphic memoir tends to

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¹ Thomas G. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 15.

² Couser, *Memoir*, p. 55.

³ Recently, Philippe Lejeune has specified that the difference between fiction and nonfiction rests in the latter’s commitment to truth, which readers expect the author to respect. See Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie: Le pacte autobiographique 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 31.

⁴ Lejeune, *Signes*, p. 31.

⁵ Susanna Egan, *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt, and Identity in Autobiography* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier P, 2011), p. 39.

⁶ Hillary Chute, ‘Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,’ *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2 (March 2008), p. 457.

openly privilege a type of truthfulness that is better able to accommodate its insistently and elaborately constructed narrative medium.

Like most comic genres, graphic memoir is “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially.”⁷ It goes without saying that this multimodal form of life writing – or what Caren Kaplan calls an “out-law form of autobiography,”⁸ and Gillian Whitlock, “autographics”⁹ – where words and cartoon images unite to narrate a true story about a real person is “different from both written life narrative and visual or photographic self-portraiture.”¹⁰ The cartoon representation of graphic memoir, however, is far more complex than the straightforward comingling of two modes of representation. What is apparent, but more often than not critically overlooked, is that graphic memoirs usually combine different writing styles and fonts in their verbal track, as well as different visual styles and types of images in their visual track. Representational shifts in either the verbal or visual track raise fundamental questions about how to interpret the visual as well as about the power of the visual to relay affect.¹¹ But, variation in the graphic memoir’s visual track also introduces a change in the degree of visual abstraction, thus raising questions as to how the factual can accommodate the interpretative initiatives signalled by stylistic or genre variations in the visual track. The comingling of different visual media in graphic memoir’s visual track, as Marianne Hirsch asserts in relation to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, “definitely eradicate[s] any clear-cut distinction between documentary and aesthetic.”¹²

An analysis of the ever more popular comingling of cartoons and photographic images is particularly important for understanding how the

⁷ Chute, ‘Comics,’ p. 452.

⁸ Caren Kaplan, ‘Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subject’, in *De/Colonizing the Subject*, eds Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

⁹ Gillian Whitlock, ‘Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of the Comics,’ *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter 2006), pp. 965-979.

¹⁰ Julia Watson, ‘Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,’ in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. Michael Chaney (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. 124.

¹¹ Will Eisner argues that “[t]he style of lettering and the emulation of accents are the clues enabling the reader to read it with the emotional nuances the comics storyteller intended. This is essential to the credibility of the imagery.” Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (New York: Norton, 2008), p. 61.

¹² Marianne Hirsch, ‘Memory and Postmemory,’ in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. Michael A. Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. 25.

factual and the subjective, the faithfully rendered and the imaginatively constructed, are negotiated in graphic memoir's truthful portrayal of self-identity.¹³ This article proposes such an analysis. A brief comparison of the formal differences between the two types of images will lead to an extended exploration of the narrative function of photographic images in four graphic memoirs: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Mom's Cancer* by Brian Fries, and *One! Hundred! Demons!* by Lynda Barry. Throughout, particular attention is given to determining how the two types of images work together to consolidate the graphic memoir's truth claims.

Cartooning and photography have been theorised as opposite types of pictures in relation to their level of abstraction, that is, in relation to how closely they resemble their real-life counterparts.¹⁴ Unlike photographic images that are said to have a necessary logical "relationship to objective reality," cartoon images have a "relationship to the subjectivity of the artist: a drawn image implies that someone drew it."¹⁵ Hence, whereas the photographic image is readily approached as "an imprint or transfer of the real,"¹⁶ the cartoon image makes apparent its own handcraftiness. It is, as Philippe Marion argues, "eminently self-reflexive and autoreferential"¹⁷ and thus renders the comic space a "highly mediated, unreal" one.¹⁸

Discussing the unique blend of photography and cartooning in *Le Photographe*, a three-volume graphic memoir comprised almost equally of photographic images taken by Didier Lefèvre and cartoon images drawn by Emmanuel Guibert, Canadian comic critic Bart Beaty distinguishes Guibert's "stylized and simple" drawings from Lefèvre's photographs by emphasising

¹³ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson, MS, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 41-43. Groensteen comments on the use of photography in comics without, however, stopping on the actual reproduction of photographic images in the comic universe.

¹⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1994), p. 29.

¹⁵ Benjamin Woo, 'Reconsidering Comics Journalism: Information and Experience in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*,' in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, eds Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), p. 175.

¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' *October*, vol. 19 (1981), p. 26.

¹⁷ Jan Baetens, 'Revealing Traces: A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation,' in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, eds Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 149.

¹⁸ Quoted in Michael Rothberg, '“We Were Talking Jewish”: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as Holocaust Production,' *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4 (Winter 1994), p. 671.

that they are two different types of representations; the first is “stylised,” the second, “realist.”¹⁹ This formal difference between the two types of images - the “caricatured quality of comic art”²⁰ and the realist quality of photography - or, better, the difference in how each type of image is generally appreciated has grave implications for questions concerning the representation of fact, accuracy and truth in graphic memoir. As Benjamin Woo argues,

[b]ecause the images in a graphic novel are drawn rather than photographed, their iconic signification is not accompanied by an indexical relationship to the referent ... Thus, non-fiction comics are inescapably hyperreal, for, although they maintain a truth claim, they do not provide any access to the referent outside of the system of simulacra contained on the page.²¹

Although Woo’s argument significantly undervalues the cartoon image’s ability to provide access to a real referent (even if not by way of an indexical relationship), it does serve to draw a firm distinction between the formal qualities of cartoons and those of photographs, and examines those qualities in relation to questions of the representation of truth.

If one considers that photographs, as W.J.T. Mitchell indicates, “seem to involve a different sort of ‘ethic’ from that associated with drawings and paintings,”²² then it follows that when included in graphic memoir one would expect photographs to provide a more factual, accurate rendition of the author’s self than the crafted cartoon images they work alongside of. Just as in textual life writing, where photographs often provide “evidence of the author’s lived reality beyond the way that she or he may manipulate it in words,”²³ in

¹⁹ Bart Beaty, ‘Le Photographe Vol. 3, Emmanuel Guibert,’ in *The Comics Reporter* (December 14, 2006), at

<http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/eurocomics/7106/>. Accessed 22/04/2011. For an extended analysis of the relationship between photography and cartooning in *Le Photographe*, see Nancy Pedri, ‘When Photographs Aren’t Quite Enough: Reflections on Photography and Cartooning in *Le Photographe*,’ *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Fall 2011), at

http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v6_1/pedri/. Accessed 7/07/2012.

²⁰ Paul Buhle, ‘Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age’, *Tikkun*, vol. 7 (March / April 1992), p. 16.

²¹ Woo, ‘Reconsidering Comics,’ p. 175.

²² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 61.

²³ Natalie Edwards, ‘The Absent Body: Photography and Autobiography in Hélène Cixous’s *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie’s *L’Usage de la photo*,’ in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, eds Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell, and Ann Miller (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 80.

graphic memoir, it would seem that they function in a similar fashion to reinforce the narrative's claims to truth, highlighting and making forcible the objective, realistic and accurate portrayal of self in a way that words and cartoons alone would be hard-pressed to do.

Cartooning Photography in *Maus*

Surprisingly, however, when reproduced in graphic memoirs, photographic images can serve not to confirm that what is being related - identity, self, personal experiences - is real or factual. Indeed, they can, and often do, serve as something other than straight evidence of a visible self. Instead of corroborating the memoir's truth claims, the inclusion of photographs in graphic memoir can very well draw attention to the divide between real life experiences and the telling of those real life experiences.

According to Marianne Hirsch,

[i]n moving from documentary photographs – perhaps the most referential representational medium – to cartoon drawings of mice and cats [in *Maus*], Spiegelman lays bare the levels of mediation that underlie *all* visual representational forms.²⁴

In Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), a two-volume graphic memoir about his parents' Holocaust survival and his own experience as the child of Holocaust survivors, a 1958 photographic image of his mother and himself introduces a four-page graphic memoir 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History.' This short graphic memoir embedded in *Maus* recounts, in a woodcut German expressionistic style, his mother's suicide and the author's mental breakdown ten years later as he struggles to come to terms with her suicide.²⁵ 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet,' which is reprinted in its entirety in the first volume of *Maus*, opens with a slanted photograph framed by a thick black drawn wavy line.²⁶ The cartoon frame is paired with a cartoon drawing of a hand that holds the photographic image up for us to see.²⁷ Together, the two cartoon additions indicate an overt, significant because self-reflexive

²⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 25.

Linda Hutcheon makes a more general observation when she argues that "however documentary or reathlist [*Maus*'s] mode ... it always reminds us of the *lack* of transparency of bo its verbal and visual media." Linda Hutcheon, 'Literature Meets History: Counter-Discursive 'Comix,' *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie*, vol. 117, no. 1 (1999), p. 11.

²⁵ Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), pp. 100-103.

²⁶ 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' was first published in 1973 in *Short Order Comix*.

²⁷ Spiegelman, *Maus*, p. 100.

comingling of photography and cartooning. The drawn frame and hand not only graphically signal the transposition of the photographic image into the comic universe. They also indicate its importance as a hand-selected artefact, one that gains meaning within the universe in which it was transposed. The drawn hand's similarity (despite its slightly lower degree of abstraction) to the drawn hand at the bottom of the comic page that holds 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' for readers to see further suggests that all visual representations, including photography, are subject to the interpretative manoeuvres of those who create and read them. In its strong presentational gesture, the drawn hands announce the interjection of a subjective mind that directs the graphic memoir's visual (and verbal) telling, including that of the photographic image.

The repetition of the cartoon hand draws a strong parallel between the photographic representation and the comic representation of Artie's experience of dealing with his mother's suicide: it signals choice - the decision to show or reveal in a certain way a particular experience to the reader - and hence the workings of a creative agent. Infringing on the photographic image in very much the same way that the photographic image infringes on the cartoon universe, the cartoon hand troubles the reality effect that is often attributed to photographic images.²⁸ By blatantly transposing the photographic image into the cartoon universe, a universe that announces itself as the product of a "graphiator responsible for graphic line, composition, framing, and layout,"²⁹ the cartoon hand imbues it with some of the qualities of that universe, including its handcraftiness, that is, its openly being the product of an artistic imagination. The graphic imposition of fictionality (or the subjective) is further enforced by the photograph's caption written in the same hand as 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' as well as its drawn jagged frame that renders the captioned photograph very much like a comic panel. The cartoon hand is a meta-representational narrative technique that foregrounds the showing and telling – in short, the representational construction – of the suicide experience embedded in *Maus* in the shape of the short graphic memoir and of the mother-

²⁸ Cf. Gillian Banner, *Holocaust Literature: Schultz, Levi, Spiegelman, and the Memory of the Offence* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2000), p. 133. Banner argues that the photographs in *Maus* serve as documentary evidence. See also Marianne Hirsch who confirms their archival status, Hirsch, 'Memory,' p. 32; and Antonio Oliver, 'The Shoah and the Second Generation: Graphical Representation: The Unusual Structure of *Maus*,' at <http://www.oocities.org/soho/veranda/2207/maus/tut2.html>. Accessed 15/09/2012. Oliver argues that the photographic images in *Maus* provide "a contrast [to the cartoon drawings] that reminds the reader about the ghastly reality of the historical events narrated in the novel."

²⁹ Ann Miller, 'Autobiography in *Bande Dessinée*,' in *Textual and Visual Selves*, pp. 244-245.

son relationship embedded in ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’ in the shape of the captioned photographic image.

The creative, interpretative activities of that drawn hand are further emphasised both visually and verbally within ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’ itself. Artie’s mother is portrayed on the last page of the four-page script occupying the entire panel, except for a little section of its bottom right-hand corner where a roundish frame shows Artie donning the by-now familiar (highly symbolic) prisoner garb and sitting drooped over his knees.³⁰ The verbal track, which specifies, “I remember the last time I saw her...” confirms the temporal overlay of past and present that is visually alluded to by the roundish panel inserted in the right-hand corner of the rectangular panel.³¹ It is the opening panel of a three-panel sequence that portrays his mother approaching Artie as he falls asleep to ask if he still loves her, to which he resentfully answers “Sure, Ma!”.³² Like the drawn hand holding both the photographic image and the short graphic memoir, the roundish panel within the panel – when considered in relation to the three-panel sequence’s verbal and visual track – enacts and confirms the meeting of the nonfictional and the fictional. It is a layered panel where the real events informing the moments leading up to his mother’s suicide overlap with the narrator’s creative sensibility. Tellingly, Spiegelman conceives of the meeting between the real and the creative as “a point of discovery” or “a moment of collision” that gives “the biggest charge.”³³ Because their meeting takes place within a narrative space, that is, a space that houses representation, the clear suggestion is that what follows, like what came before, both verbally and visually, is a personal experience that has been filtered through Artie’s recollection and his artistic rendition of that recollection. Readers are made aware that what they are holding – ‘Hell Planet’ and *Maus* – is, to put it bluntly, “Art’s story.”³⁴

The filtering through Artie of all elements – fictional or nonfictional – that comprise the narrative is so strong that despite a lack of evidence either in the photographic image or added to it (the caption, the drawn frame, or the

³⁰ The lack of visual resemblance between the photographed mother and the dark-eyed, large-figured cartoon rendition points once again to the workings of the artistic hand. There is a similar visual discrepancy between the photographed Artie and the expressionistically drawn Artie, but one would expect this given the ten year difference between the two images and his young age in the photographic image.

³¹ Spiegelman, *Maus*, p. 103.

³² Spiegelman, *Maus*, p. 103.

³³ Art Spiegelman, ‘Art Spiegelman: Lips,’ Interview with Harvey Blume (1995). *Boston Book Review* (1 June 1995) at <http://www.bookwire.com/bbr/interviews/art-spiegelman.html>. Accessed 24/08/2005.

³⁴ Ethan Mordden, ‘Kat and Maus,’ *The New Yorker* (April 9, 1992), p. 94.

drawn hand holding it) asserting that it is in fact an image of Artie and his mother, few readers would question its link of correspondence to the author.³⁵ Of course, it must be remembered that the photographic image does not stand alone; instead, it is coupled with cartoon images that inform its representational status. Just as the photographic image works alongside the cartoon image to accentuate the workings of a creative mind, so too do the cartoon images highlight the photographic image's non-objectivity. The photographic image, in other words, holds the meaning it does – as a visual representation of Artie and his mother – due to its being used to add to the story told through cartoon images in 'Prisoner.' What becomes apparent in the union of photography and cartooning in *Maus* is that the extradiegetic, historical experience supposedly captured in the photographic image is actualised by its narrative presentation, always. Through the comingling of cartoon and photographic images, readers are reminded that the graphic memoir "is no doubt accurate, but it is anything but objective."³⁶

Cartooning Self in *Cancer Vixen*

Oftentimes, the inclusion of photographic images in graphic memoirs also makes readers aware that the author's views of self that have been transcribed verbally and visually are not necessarily what can be seen and captured photographically. *Cancer Vixen* (2006), a graphic memoir by Marisa Acocella Marchetto that tells the story of the author's struggle with breast cancer, opens with an ultrasound photograph accompanied by a bright yellow-green cartoon arrow verbally specifying that somewhere in the middle of the image is "the tumor."³⁷ Despite most readers' familiarity with this type of photographic image, it is difficult to determine what black or light shadow actually is the tumour, especially before taking note of the dark sphere carefully delineated by four crosses in the top portion of the ultrasound photograph. The arrow that points to the ultrasound also clarifies that "it looks like a black hole,"³⁸ thus further guiding the reading of the photograph and its meaning. Surprisingly, not the ultrasound photograph, but rather the cartoon arrow, with its

³⁵ The photographic image conforms to familiar practices of family portraiture, making any assumption that it is an image of Artie and his mother quite probable. Critics who have asserted that the photograph is of Artie and his mother include Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 31; Hirsch, 'Memory,' p. 29; and Rothberg, 'We Were Talking Jewish,' p. 679.

³⁶ Mordden, 'Kat and Maus,' p. 94.

³⁷ Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 1.

³⁸ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 1.

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explicatory note and modifying specification, represents the portion of life, the actual event, covered in *Cancer Vixen*.³⁹



Figure 1: Comic strip panel from *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, copyright © 2006 by Marisa Acocella Marchetto. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to A Random House, Inc. for permission.

That cartooning is more apt to detailing the protagonist's personal struggle with breast cancer than photography is particularly evident on the following page where the tumour is visually represented in cartoon form as an oddly shaped lump just above Marisa's left breast.⁴⁰ The close-up of the lump in two sequential panels (row two, panel 1 and 2) portrays it from two different points of view: that of the doctor examining Marisa and that of Marisa looking down at it from the examination table. Marisa's perspective of the lump and its make-up is further emphasised two pages later with the introduction of a round purple coloured background cartoon panel in which a group of cancer cells with green malignant faces, pinched eyes and a protruding red tongue are imaged. Each cell is a one-armed face, and each disparagingly shoots the middle finger. A short verbal footnote accompanied by a yellow cartoon arrow

³⁹ See Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead, 2009), p. 1. Yagoda distinguishes memoir from autobiography by specifying that "'memoir' has been used by books that cover the entirety or some portion of [a life]."

⁴⁰ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 2.

pointing to the round panel indicates that what we are looking at is “possible cancer cells, an artist’s rendition.”⁴¹ A second footnote wrapped around the bottom of the panel specifies that the rendition is “magnified 3 gazillion times”⁴² thus self-reflexively adopting (and adapting) the scientific language that usually accompanies medical images such as the ultrasound photograph that opened the memoir. Unlike that and similar medical photographs, the cartoon renditions of cancer cells in Marchetto’s graphic memoir situate the cancer’s meaning in lived, personal experience by blatantly, overtly offering up for consideration Marisa’s subjective perspective of and reaction to her cancer. The overt creativity, the open interpretative stance of her cartoon images embraces the subjective, openly acknowledging its role in truthfully communicating the objective reality of *Cancer Vixen*.

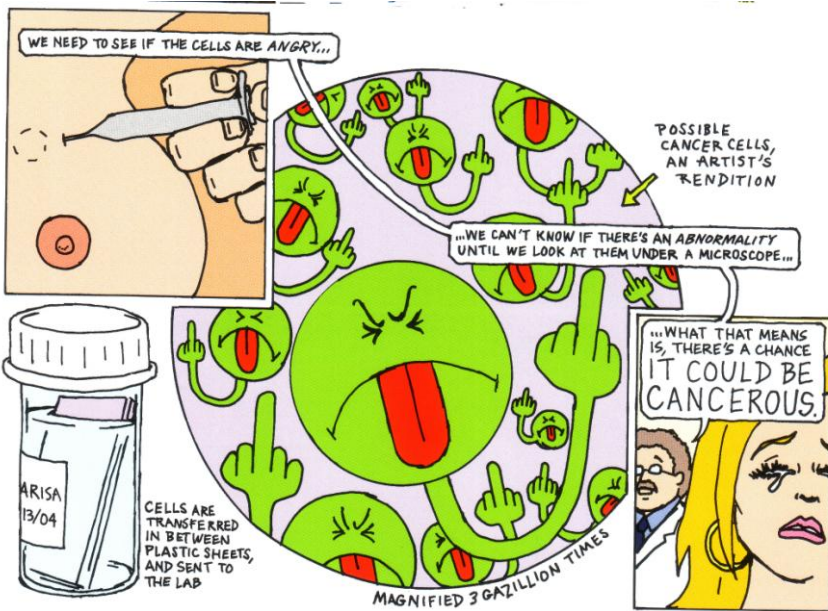


Figure 2: Comic strip panel from *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, copyright © 2006 by Marisa Acocella Marchetto. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to A Random House, Inc. for permission.

⁴¹ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 4.

⁴² Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 4.

When considered alongside the cartoon representations of the same reality, the inclusion of the introductory ultrasound photograph in *Cancer Vixen* highlights that the cartoon rendition of the tumour is a representation of the reality the author *feels* to be true, and not the attributes of cancer that can be objectively, scientifically *seen*. The inclusion of the ultrasound photograph alongside cartoon drawings of the same tumour stands to indicate two opposite visual poles of abstraction, the photographic and the cartoon image. However, by exposing the photograph as being the least informative of the two types of images and void of emotive charge, it also makes apparent just how difficult it actually is to see the self through visual representation, even when that representation is a photographic one. Put differently, the inclusion of the ultrasound photograph at the beginning of *Cancer Vixen* and its coupling with the artist's cartoon rendition of the same reality actually highlights the "difference between what is shown and how something is shown" that is characteristic of the comic universe.⁴³ As the addition of the cartoon arrow and its specifications suggest as well as the repeated use of the cartoon green-faced artist's rendition of the tumour throughout *Cancer Vixen*,⁴⁴ the subjective truth of cartooning is privileged over the objective truth of photography. Recently, memoirists such as Gore Vidal and Nancy Miller have specified that subjective truth, that is, the truth that lies with the representation, and not historical truth or truth that requires dates, facts, and research is what distinguishes memoir from autobiography.⁴⁵ Within the cartoon universe of *Cancer Vixen*, the scientific facts of an ultrasound photograph are translated and, hence, rendered real through cartooning, thus situating truth squarely within the realm of representation.

Nelson Goodman, in his classical study *Languages of Art*, provocatively asserts that "a likeness lost in a photograph may be caught in a caricature."⁴⁶ And, indeed, when in *Cancer Vixen* Marchetto includes a colour photograph of her and her husband Silvano taken on their wedding day midway through the graphic memoir, readers are taken aback by how incongruent it is with the cartoon renditions of Marisa and Silvano they have been privy to. There is little evidence in the photographic image of Marisa's moles that feature predominantly in her cartoon self (drawn as two black dots on the left side of

⁴³ Kai Mikkonen, 'Remediation and the Sense of Time in Graphic Narratives,' in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, eds Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), p. 81.

⁴⁴ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 89, p. 123, p. 208.

⁴⁵ Yagoda, *Memoir*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 14.

her face even when she depicts herself as an angry smoking chimney)⁴⁷ or her coiffed hair. And, Silvano, although wearing orange, his trademark colour, does not exude the energy and charisma he does in the cartoon renditions. Given the ubiquity of the cartoon drawings and the fact that the photograph's meaning is subject to the context in which it is reproduced (that is, the cartoon universe), the photograph's privileged evidential status as a "visual transcription"⁴⁸ or a mirror of reality becomes suspect. Despite or, rather, because of the constructed nature of cartoon images, they are better equipped than the photographic image to betray a more engaged, complete sense of our protagonist and her husband, a truth about them that may be Marisa's personal truth, but that is nonetheless the truth that memoir ascribes to.

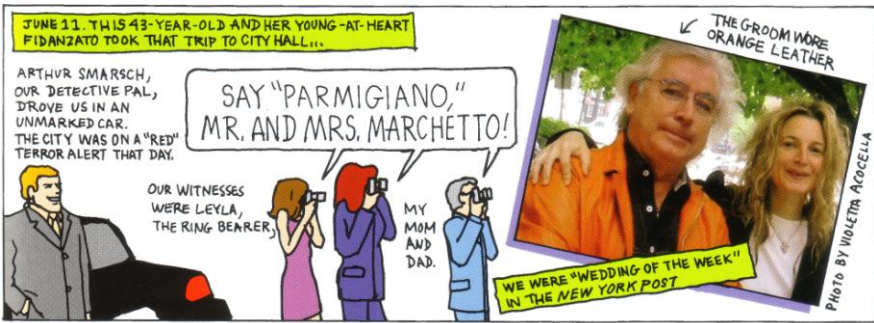


Figure 3: Comic strip panel from *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, copyright © 2006 by Marisa Acocella Marchetto. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to A Random House, Inc. for permission.

This is not to say that the slanted photographic portrait included at the end of an elongated cartoon panel is not particularly forceful for it does announce a break, a dissonance in the graphic memoir's visual framework.⁴⁹ However, unlike the photographic images of Marisa's great-grandfather⁵⁰ or of

⁴⁷ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 54.

⁴⁸ Stanley Cavell, 'What Photography Calls Thinking,' *Raritan*, vol. 4 (1985), p. 4.

⁴⁹ Whereas Hirsh, 'Memory and Postmemory,' p. 40, argues that such an incongruity is necessary in the writing and teaching of the Holocaust, a "history we cannot assimilate," I would like to suggest that the narrative disruption introduced by the use of photography in graphic memoir may very well be an attractive tool for communicating the complexities that inform understandings and presentations of self.

⁵⁰ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 44.

a teenage Silvano in army garb⁵¹ – that do not have cartoon correspondents and so stand alone in their representational function – the wedding portrait intrudes into a cartoon universe replete with cartoon representations of its photographed subjects. Consequently, the photographic portrait's oft theorised objective quality that secures its truth value is significantly weakened by the cartoon renditions of self that circumscribe it, inform its meaning, and actually diminish its narrative impact and claims to truth. In this instance, the cartoon images, and not the photographic image of Marisa and Silvano, carry more weight for what concerns the truthful rendition of their selves.

More-than-factual Images

Cartooning – drawn text and images – is the principal mode of representation in graphic memoir. It is the locus of truth even when paired to other modes of visual representation whose meaning is coloured by the lure of truth, such as the types of photographs that tend to find their way into graphic memoir. *Mom's Cancer* (2006) by Brian Fies relates one family's experience with their mother's metastatic lung cancer. In it, cartoon text pencilled on a photographic image critically disrupts a medical photograph's (in this case, an M.R.I. Scan's) promise to truthfully show "a dying brain tumor."⁵² Instead of the M.R.I. scan image, the author reproduces a black-and-white photograph of the M57 "nebula in the constellation Lyra" on a full page and entitles it 'A Universe Inside her Head.'⁵³ Across the photograph's black top margin, white printed writing specifies that what is pictured is of "a bubble of gas" produced by a "dying star ... gas that will someday form a new star with new planets."⁵⁴ Across its bottom margin, a parallel narrative written in the same hand clarifies that the image is "almost identical to an M.R.I. scan of a dying brain tumor" and that "it's funny how death giving way to life can look so similar on such vastly different scales."⁵⁵ The photograph of the nebula is said to look surprisingly like the narrator's mother's brain tumour captured photographically through medical scans. By showing the nebula photograph in lieu of the actual M.R.I. scan of the dying tumour and suggesting that the two are interchangeable, the narrator sets in motion the demystification of claims to objective reality and thus to truth that medical photographs are reputed to

⁵¹ Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen*, p. 21.

⁵² Brian Fies, *Mom's Cancer* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2006), p. 79.

⁵³ Fies, *Mom's Cancer*, p. 79.

⁵⁴ Fies, *Mom's Cancer*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ Fies, *Mom's Cancer*, p. 79.

have.⁵⁶ The suggestion that to a non-specialised audience a photograph of a bubble of gas looks similar to one of a tumour within a graphic memoir about that very tumour aligns truthfulness with the fanciful, constructed, fictional workings of a subjective mind.

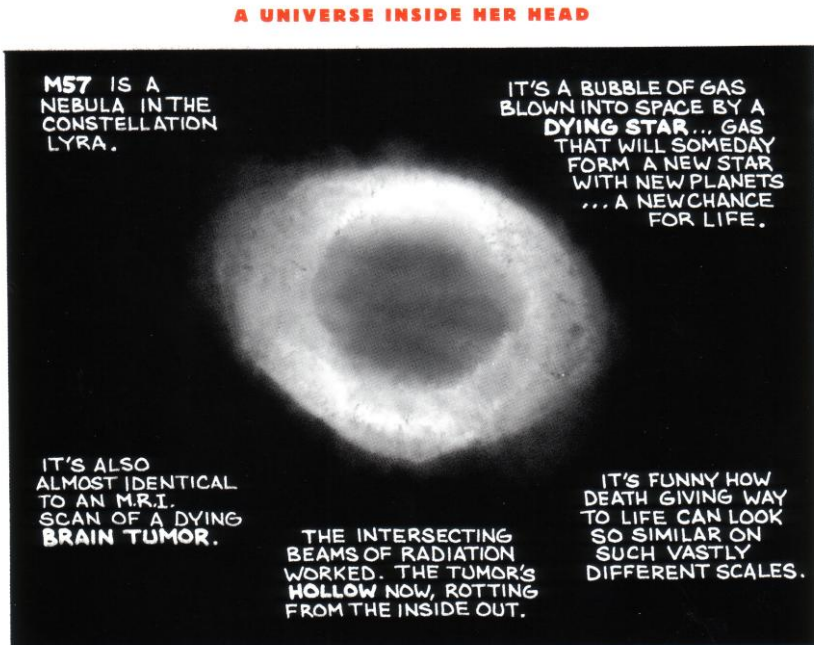


Figure 4: Comic strip panel from *MOM'S CANCER* by Brian Fies, Copyright © 2006 by Brian Fies. Used by permission of Abrams ComicArts, an imprint of Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

When the unnamed first-person narrator of *Mom's Cancer* sets out to research his mother's cancer shortly after she was diagnosed, readers are informed that he "quickly filled folders and binders with facts and theories, drugs and therapies, studies and trials."⁵⁷ The full-page panel that accompanies this explanation is of a collection of photocopied pages of specialised books and journals scattered throughout the panel and serving as a backdrop for our

⁵⁶ Three cartoon renditions of the brain tumor, before treatment, are included at the beginning of *Mom's Cancer*, p. 4. The visual renditions are not accompanied by words.

⁵⁷ Fies, *Mom's Cancer*, p. 24.

cartoon drawn narrator who sits at a table in the panel's bottom right-hand corner holding his head while realising that "this was going to be harder than [he] thought."⁵⁸ Most of the information on the reproduced documents is illegible. Most notably, however, the words *lung cancer* are clearly repeated in different fonts on various photographed pages suggesting that what is deemed important, what needs to be seen, is the event and its impact on our protagonist (and his family), and not the scientific facts gathered through research. So, although the photograph of the documents testifies to the protagonist's attempt to research lung cancer, providing a somewhat redundant testimony since the protagonist is pictured hunched over reading the folders and binders of "facts and theories," its testimony to truth does not extend to the objective, medically sound facts of cancer. Instead, photography is used to accentuate the personal experience of cancer, and not the objective facts informing the disease. In this fashion, it is made to work very much like the cartooning that envelopes it.

The inclusion of photographic images in graphic memoir does something more than highlighting the privileged status of subjective truth in life writing that translates into "a kind of subjective camera" in graphic memoir.⁵⁹ It actually helps expose the authorial subject position as intrinsically linked to its cartoon self. It follows that a diegetic self, and not a real self, is the focal point and the filtering mind of graphic memoir. Such a self often sidesteps or undermines that which is verifiably true to reveal instead in the way "[it] perceive[s], remember[s], and make[s] sense out of [its life]."⁶⁰

One! Hundred! Demons! (2002), a collection of seventeen short "autobifictionalography" stories by Lynda Barry about her problematic adolescence,⁶¹ opens with a two-panel page portraying the author-protagonist sitting at her desk brush in hand contemplating whether her work is "autobiography if parts of it are not true [or if it is] fiction if parts of it are?"⁶² The introduction's direct challenge to authority through questions of mediation and veracity is paralleled visually in the treatment of the photographic portraits reproduced on the "surrealist collage"⁶³ cover pages of four short stories,

⁵⁸ Fies, *Mom's Cancer*, p. 24.

⁵⁹ Ann Miller and Murray Pratt, 'Transgressive Bodies in the Work of Julie Doucet, Fabrice Neaud and Jean-Christophe Menu: Towards a Theory of the 'AutobiBD'' at http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol4_no1/articles/04_01_Miller_trnsg_r.html. Accessed 19/02/2013.

⁶⁰ Michael A. Chaney, 'Introduction,' in *Graphic Subjects*, p. 3.

⁶¹ Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Seattle: Sasquatch, 2002), p. 5.

⁶² Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, p. 7.

⁶³ Hillary Chute, 'Materializing Memory: Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*,' in *Graphic Subjects*, p. 292.

‘Common Scents,’⁶⁴ ‘Resilience,’⁶⁵ ‘Magic,’⁶⁶ and ‘Lost and Found.’⁶⁷ Each photograph is tampered with; either words or other framing marks are scrawled over and around the image, common ordinary material is pasted overtop it, or particular facial features are accentuated and coloured in a caricature fashion.⁶⁸ The photographic portrait, that “prographic fragment” informing the comic universe,⁶⁹ is thus not only transposed into the cartoon universe, but also significantly marked by the craftsmanship of cartooning. Once made to take on some of the visual qualities of cartooning, an addition that changes not only their meaning, but also their formal qualities, the photographic portraits are challenged in their ability to stand as truthful representations for the person they picture. At the hands of Barry’s cartooning, they are forced to relinquish or, at the very least, renegotiate their privileged value as evidential visual traces of that which existed in a particular time and place. Stripped of that value, the photographic portraits in Barry’s cartoon universe are images like all others, representations born of and subject to the meaningful intervention of an artist’s hand. In Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!*, the disparity between the photographic and cartoon images – a disparity of category usually attributed to their genesis – is weakened almost to the point of effacement.



Figure 5: Comic strip panel from the chapter ‘Smell’ in *ONE! HUNDRED! DEMONS!* by Lynda Barry, © 2002 Lynda Barry, published by Sasquatch Books and used courtesy of Darhansoff & Verrill Literary Agents.

⁶⁴ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, pp. 50-51.

⁶⁵ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, pp. 62-63.

⁶⁶ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, pp. 98-99.

⁶⁷ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, pp. 206-207.

⁶⁸ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, p. 50.

⁶⁹ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, p. 42.

The cartoonish scribbles, modifications, and additions thus alert readers to the cartoon artist's creative dialogue with the photographic image, asserting the way in which she adjusts and reads over what is imaged on its surface. The addition to photographic images of cartoonish markings, with their bold, unmistakable alterations, introduces the artist's subjective, imaginative perspective into what may otherwise be considered an objectively sound visual rendition. They announce her crafted, fictional response to the photographs that like most photographic portraits have most probably been taken "to record our own lives"⁷⁰ and saved to archive a family history, a collective autobiography⁷¹ of which Barry is a part.

They also announce the necessity of such an intervention. In a graphic memoir that critically posits personal identity, and how it is represented to self and to others, as inevitably comprised of the factual and the fictional, the deliberate defacing of the photographic image by a cartooning hand betrays a reaction against photographic portraiture's reputed ethos of objective, unbiased recording that is most readily attributed to it. By establishing the photographic portrait as a site of fiction and creation, the cartoon markings expose it as the product of a process of self-imitation, as a kind of performance or "transformation of one's identity into an image."⁷²

Barry's cartooning practice undermines photographic portraiture's ability to represent personal identity objectively, accurately, truthfully. The interference with photographed reality forcefully asserted through cartoonish defacement thus forges the articulation of a complex truth, one where the creative treatment of actuality is held under serious consideration and the documented treatment of actuality under scrutiny. So, although it may very well be that Barry's particular drawing style is "[e]ccentric, sprawling, and fantastical," when understood in these terms, it in no way "threatens to obscure [the memoir's] truths, however accurate their fidelity to Barry's imaginative experience, under the sign of caricature and self-parody," as suggested by Michael A. Chaney.⁷³ Indeed, creative mediation is so forcefully pushed to the foreground that photographic authority, which is tied to "the fact that there is no human intervention in the process of creating the bond between photograph

⁷⁰ Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 123.

⁷¹ For an extended study of how the family album constitutes a collective autobiography, see Anne-Marie Garat, *Photos de familles* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

⁷² Sri-Kartini Leet, 'Negotiating Identities: The Portrait as Representation,' in *Reading Photography: A Sourcebook of Critical Texts 1921-2000*, ed Sri-Kartini Leet (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011), p. 114.

⁷³ Michael A. Chaney, 'Terrors of the Mirror and the *Mise en Abyme* of Graphic Novel Autobiography,' *College Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Summer 2011), p. 22.

and reality,”⁷⁴ gives way to the affirming properties of cartooning. Even when working alongside the photographic image, cartooning asserts its own legitimacy and potential to offer up an accurate portrayal of a self. It is thus positioned to tie the representation of self, with all the fictionalising that it entails, with the memoir’s authorial subject position.

Undoubtedly, the use of photography in the graphic memoir universe informs how the represented self – especially the visually represented self – is understood, created, and made meaningful. Their comingling in a predominantly cartoon visual narrative universe comments on the way in which personal identity is established through visual representation, and how representation restricts and, at the same time, expands upon what is seen and known of self. Counter-intuitively, the reproduction of photography in graphic memoir creates a critical distance between the “real” subject and the cartoon version of that subject. The blunt incongruence between photography and cartooning points to the creative interplay between an individual, private self and its representation in the public realm of graphic memoir to dismantle notions of self as anything other than always mediated and assumed, and not given. The factual, then, joins the subjective to achieve the representation of the truthful. What ultimately comes to light is the central role of the subjective in graphic memoir’s (and, by extension, memoir’s) commitment to the telling of truth.

Unlike drawn photographs, such as those in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), the reproduction of actual photographs in graphic memoir may at first seem to directly appeal to the real, especially given that photographs are images that enjoy “a certain mystique in our culture that can be described by terms such as ‘absolutely analogical’ and ‘message without a code.’”⁷⁵ Surprisingly, however, when reproduced in graphic memoirs, photographs often do not serve as evidential documents that provide a verifiable fact for the telling. The various examples of visual multimedia combinations examined here expose photography as being at pains to *show* the truths of self and cartoon drawings as corresponding more closely (and thus accurately) to the subjective viewpoints, memory filters or emotive charges operative in the graphic memoir’s representation of self. The intermingling of photography and cartooning in graphic memoir encourages the full realisation of how cartooning lends imaginative force to the graphic memoir universe, bestowing it with

⁷⁴ William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 28.

⁷⁵ Mitchell, *Iconology*, p. 61.

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“imaginative strength, or plausibility,” indeed, the type of authority that Imraan Coovadia attributes to literature.⁷⁶

What becomes apparent when photography and cartooning come together in these and other graphic memoirs is that the perception of self and the representations it gives rise to are actually more truthful (and, thus, more real) than the extradiegetic, real self pictured in the photographic image.⁷⁷ Unlike photography, cartooning lends the type of subjective register to the narrative that is at the heart of graphic memoir, a multimodal genre that portrays both verbally and visually a personal story founded on a personal truth about self. So, cartooning may very well have the “power to generate a depiction that, although not informed by a referent, will manifest, if the cartoonist wants it, the same qualities of precision and veracity as the adjacent [photographic] documented parts.”⁷⁸ But, what is even more remarkable is that, in graphic memoir, the cartoon image often supersedes the photographic in its manifestation of those very qualities.

⁷⁶ Imraan Coovadia, *Authority and Authorship in V.S. Naipaul* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1.

⁷⁷ My point expands upon that put forth by Michael A. Chaney, ‘Terrors of the Mirror,’ p. 40, when he writes that in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003, 2004), a two-volume graphic memoir about a young girl growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, there is no firm distinction between “actual and self-stylized portraiture.” On the contrary, Satrapi’s self-portraiture is actual *because* stylised.

⁷⁸ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, p. 42.