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Self-reflexive graphic narrative: Seriality and Art Spiegelman's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!*

Keywords

Art Spiegelman
memoir
seriality
memory
Portrait of the Artist

Abstract

In the fall of 2008, Art Spiegelman reissued his first collection of comic strips, Breakdowns: From 'Maus' to Now, *in celebration of its 30th anniversary. While the original 1978 version included a brief preface, the new edition of* Breakdowns *contains an extended self-representational introduction, titled* Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*! (2008). Portrait *tackles the recursivity of memory and the serial nature of experience, and this self-reflexive introduction is uniquely positioned to address the ways in which audiences and authors approach autobiographical graphic narrative as his texts underscore the possibilities for serial production of graphic life writing. Indeed, Spiegelman's memoirs present self-representation and lived experience as inherently episodic. In turn, and in tandem with the larger 'memoir boom' of the last thirty*

years, Spiegelman's graphic memoirs expose a contemporary cultural impulse to engage in the practice of repeated self-examination, self-presentation and visual self-archivization.

In the fall of 2008, Art Spiegelman reissued his first collection of comic strips, *Breakdowns: From 'Maus' to Now*, in celebration of its thirtieth anniversary. The original 1978 version includes a brief introduction in which Spiegelman discusses terminology for the kind of work he produces because, as he told Rebecca Milzoff in a 2008 interview, 'The language I was using was not one most people spoke'. In that early introduction, he explains how 'comic strip' leads him to 'narrative', defined as a 'story', which he writes makes the most sense in relation to its Medieval Latin context – 'a row of windows with pictures on them'. Similarly, he continues, 'cartoons' implies humour – something with which he is not solely invested – and he notes his preference for the terms 'drawings' or 'diagrams'. For the new edition of *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman includes an extended self-representational introduction, titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!,* which presents the author's development in line with traditional *küntslerroman*, but which also tackles the recursivity of memory.[1] Spiegelman's self-reflexive introduction is uniquely positioned to address the ways in which audiences – and artists – approach autobiographical graphic narrative. In particular, Spiegelman's self-referential series of texts – from *Breakdowns* (1977), *Maus I* (1986), *Maus II* (1991), *The Complete Maus* CD-ROM (1994) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), to his most recent publications, *Portrait* and *Be a Nose!* (2009), and to his future projects, which include the eagerly anticipated *Meta Maus* (described as a book of sketches, drawings, interviews and notes from *Maus*) – underscore the possibilities for serial production of graphic life writing, as they present self-representation and lived experience as inherently episodic.[2] In turn, and in tandem with the larger 'memoir boom' of the last few decades, Spiegelman's graphic memoirs expose a contemporary cultural impulse to engage in the practice of repeated self-examination, self-presentation and visual self-collection.

Such emphasis on repetition and episodicity is especially relevant in graphic narrative, as the serialization of time through panels allows memoirists to represent life narratives as assembled through paratexts, discrete installments, frames and images. 'More than a boundary or a sealed border', Gerard Genette notably suggests, 'the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*', an '"undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary' (Genette 1997: 1–2). Like the possibilities presented by the gutters of graphic narrative, paratexts and the attendant paratextuality underscore the mechanisms of comics, as they also point to the fluidity of reading across and through those thresholds. These textual breakdowns, in conjunction with Spiegelman's introductions, illustrate how graphic narrative is poised to address major shifts in contemporary self-representational strategies, such as an emphasis on recursivity and the transparency of textual

1. The title of *Portrait* is, as Hillary Chute notes in a recent interview with Spiegelman, 'irreducibly comics. To say it out loud, one must say, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Blankety-Blank'. To type the title, one must replace its hand-drawn squiggle – the third character in its last 'word' – with an ampersand. Both involve an act of translation that reminds us of the marks and movements that are innate to the form'.

2. In an interview with Rebecca Milzoff, Spiegelman explains that *Meta Maus* is 'sort of like the Criterion DVD that has my notebooks, my sketches, rough drafts, interviews, transcripts, photos, historical references made into a work that can sit next to *Maus*, now that *Maus* has become something used in schools, and allows me the personal pleasure of being able to finally liberate about eight shelves of my studio which I'll never have to look at again once it's been *Meta Maus* – ed.'

3. One important difference between 'serial' and 'sequel', according to Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg, is that sequel is aligned with the word 'sequence', from the Latin *sequi*, or 'to follow'. Sequels are linked with temporality in a way that series may not be. Sequels also require 'a precursor narrative that was originally presented as closed and complete in itself (whether or not it was, in fact, conceived as such by its authors)' (Budra and Schellenberg 1998: 7).

production in relation to self-narration. Spiegelman's graphic serial memoir project itself relies on paratextuality because, throughout his works, moments from previous texts appear and reappear to be read in new ways. His texts (and for the purposes of this argument, *Portrait* in particular) posit the paratext as one way to present and navigate relational subjectivity.

As a lens through which to examine contemporary self-representational techniques, seriality allows both the memoirist and the reader to understand the self as in-process. Insofar as the term 'serial' relates to a repeated action, it is important to take into consideration the repeated publication of self-narrative. Most of Spiegelman's texts were initially published in serial form: *Breakdowns* collects texts from periodicals such as *Short Order Comix* and *Arcade*; both volumes of *Maus* were published serially in *RAW*; *In the Shadow of No Towers* was originally published as a series of pages for, among others, the *London Review of Books* and the German newspaper *Die Zeit*; and *Portrait* was serially published before *Breakdowns'* 2008 release in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* between 2005 and 2007. Indeed, examining these texts solely as discrete books ignores their original, serial roots. As comics scholar Charles Hatfield asserts, 'serialization can undercut or reinforce a graphic novel's structural cohesion. Serial units (chapters or installments) can be used to impose structure on a novel, or, alternately, they can compromise structure through digression, redundancy, and the attenuation of suspense' (Hatfield 2005: 159). Whether the initial publication reifies or challenges the longer text's structure, the serial process by which the text is created and presented to readers matters. Understanding where these texts were originally published, in what context and for what purpose is also important for how memoir is itself concerned with context and the possibilities of recontextualization in terms of life narrative.

Yet, while understanding the word 'serial' in terms of its historic association with publishing is important, the definition of serial is in transition. Now also linked with repetition, seriality can be either recursive and episodic or sequential and chronological.[3] According to the *OED*'s additions of 2001, 'serial' has, over the course of the final few decades of the twentieth century, become linked with the phrases 'serial killer' (which first appeared in 1981), 'serial marriage' (1970) and 'serial monogamy/-ist' (1963, 1986). The definition of serial in the episodic or recursive context, and in relation to my argument, is of a person 'that repeatedly or regularly performs a specified activity; inveterate, persistent' and of a practice 'performed by the same person on a *regular or sequential basis*; habitual, recurrent' (emphasis added). This definition extends Genette's notions of the iterative or repetitive function of narrative, which he suggests is 'always more or less figurative' (Genette *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 1988: 23). A memoirist like Spiegelman, who repeatedly and regularly publishes accounts of the self, thus engages in a particular practice of episodic introspection that can be defined as serial. Persistently repositioning the self, the postmodern serial memoir necessarily lacks closure, or as theorist Sharon Russell argues, the serial refuses such an end (qtd in Langbauer 1999: 8). Postmodern serial memoir, then, is a space in which the writer temporarily attends to the reader's generic expectations, as each book ends, but in

which the writer ultimately declines closure as the memoirist refuses a stable or unified subject position. In so doing, serial memoir rejects the concept of last words inherent to closure.

The seriality of self-presentation, for example, may be transmitted across multiple publications, but it also suggests something about subjectivity beyond medium; it provides a new way of understanding that the subject itself is always incomplete and that self-representational strategies must also shift in order to adequately reflect that unfinished subject. Graphic self-narrative, moreover, located within the interstices of visuality and textuality, is at the fore of contemporary and postmodern experiments in autobiography and self-representation. The intersection between verbal and visual forms of expression, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest in the introduction to *Interfaces*, is a particularly fruitful place for criticism and research in contemporary life writing studies because, in addition to the traditional textual forms of autobiographical writing, there are a multitude of visual modes that can be examined as acts of self-construction. '[I]t is essential to expand the concept of visual autobiography as self-portraiture', they explain, 'to include visual, textual, voiced, and material modes of embodied self-representation' (Smith and Watson 2002: 7). As this issue of *Studies in Comics* suggests, graphic self-narrative, within the interstices of visuality and textuality, is at the fore of expressing postmodern lives in general and contemporary experiments in self-portraiture and self-representation in particular.[4] Further, because the genre of memoir itself is generically tenuous, it allows for a great deal of flexibility and interdisciplinarity in representation and self-expression.

Serialization, whether or not the final product is ultimately read as a longer work, invariably influences the composition of the text, the significance of episodes in its structure, and the way that the narrative – along with the people about whom the narrative revolves – is understood as created across time. Each page presents readers with a fractured, decentred series of images that emphasize the provisionality of selfhood and self-representation. In each of his major works, Spiegelman exposes the struggles he encounters to represent himself, and, whether he articulates himself as a man, as a mouse or as a historically significant cartoon character, he challenges traditional understandings of self-referentiality. While conventional forms of autobiography assert an overarching life narrative and reinforce the possibilities of monolithic self-representation and narrative closure, serial graphic memoir presents the episodic and the picaresque as viable and valid possibilities for understanding life writing and, moreover, for self-representation.

In *Portrait*, for example, Spiegelman foregrounds his indeterminate and in-process self-image as he incorporates a series of faceless individuals at strategic moments in the introduction; often these bodies-without-heads or faces break up the narrative into discrete episodes, signalling a change in subject or illustrative mode. This graphic strategy, which allows him to present himself in different styles, guises and positions, emphasizes the importance of the visual for his self-representation as it underscores the serial nature of memory and of lived experience. In so doing, Spiegelman's texts, like those of others who use graphic media for self-narrative, challenge traditional forms of autobiographical

4. The confusing liminal position of the verbal–visual interface in autobiographical writing was publicly exposed when *Maus II* was first published. Editors at *The New York Times Book Review*, unclear of how it should be classified, placed it on the fiction list. In a letter to the editor, Spiegelman protested the classification of *Maus* as fiction: 'If your list were divided into literature and non-literature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that "fiction" indicates a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author, I believe I might have lopped several years off the thirteen I devoted to my two-volume project if I could have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelist's structure' (Spiegelman 'A Problem of Taxonomy' 1991: n. pag.).

5. Spiegelman tells Chute, 'I wanted to refer to Joyce, because part of the ambition was to make comics that had the willingness to go for broke in directions that moved away from total communication coherency that was part of Joyce's trajectory'.

6. The first line of the breakdowns sheet, placed in the top left-hand panel position, reads '18 – The next week we spent sitting shiva' but has an editorial insertion; instead of 'sitting shiva', Spiegelman has altered it to 'in mourning'. In the final version of the strip, again, reprinted in this volume, the text reads, 'The next week we spent in mourning […]'. This is an especially compelling collage of Spiegelman's archive because it includes both the evolution of text and the development of the images.

writing. The serial production and consumption of Spiegelman's memoirs underscores the inherently episodic nature of graphic self-reflexive narratives, as they rely on both the serial tradition of comic books and the panel-by-panel format of graphic narrative. Serial graphic memoirs thus visually expose a contemporary cultural impulse to engage in practices of repeated self-examination, self-presentation and, ultimately, self-archivization.

Collecting multiple versions of selfhood, Spiegelman crafts an archive as his various self-portraits and stories are gathered, preserved and (re)collected. Inherent in any discussion of the archive, or the serial assembly of objects/texts, is the materiality of that archive. Serial graphic memoir is no different; collections and repetitions of images that represent moments of lived experience are linked by the form and structure of the text to the illustrated and graphically performed self through serial archivization. In *Portrait*, Spiegelman assembles documents through which he can materially manifest the past – both his and his parents'. He incorporates a collage of sketches for 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', covers from *Short Order Comix* and *Funny Aminals*, (in which 'Prisoner' and *Maus* were published, respectively), copies of 'the artist's first period work', titled *The Cop and the Drunk*, and an advertisement circa 1958 for a frontier cabin, 'big enough for 2–3 kids!' Incorporating such documents, evidence of the author's development as an artist, once again points to the serial roots of Spiegelman's texts.[5] 'Prisoner', for example, was first published in *Short Order Comix*, then incorporated in its initial form in the original version of *Breakdowns*, was then reprinted in smaller size in *Maus*, and is once again incorporated into this reissue.

At separate moments in *Portrait*, moreover, the narrator from 'Prisoner' (recognizable in his black and white striped uniform) appears, as memories – particularly of his mother – threaten to take over the author's self-narrative project. Early in *Portrait*, Spiegelman includes a full-page of original sketches for *Portrait*, rendered in colour instead of the expressionist black and white of the original strip. This collage provides readers with a material archive of *Portrait*'s development, from the initial moments of breakdown and corresponding panel numbers, which allow readers to compare the in-process nature of the strip's development.[6] On the opposite page, Spiegelman includes a seven-frame episode, under the heading 'Unpacking/Soho, nyc. 2005'. In this episode, he presents himself sitting at a desk, going through photographs. 'Dear Diary', he writes, 'Thinking back on the days when I drew "Prisoner on the Hell Planet", I looked through a box of old family photos. // I don't tend to confuse Art and Therapy (making Art is cheaper), but I *did* think that Hell Planet had helped me "deal" with Anja's suicide […] // 33 years after drawing that strip, 37 years after my mother's death, I didn't expect the bolt of pain!' (Spiegelman 2009: 4). Following this panel, and beginning a new page, Spiegelman reproduces a photograph of his mother and him, outside, looking at a copy of *MAD Magazine*. He then presents a panel in which he is doubled over, on the floor, having a 'full-fledged anxiety attack' (Spiegelman 2009: 5); to finish the episode, he presents himself wearing the uniform of the narrator from 'Prisoner', sitting in a dark corner, with a photograph by his side. It is impossible to disengage 'Prisoner' from Spiegelman's serial publications; moreover, such recontextualization of that previous strip plays an important role in *Portrait*.

Repeated texts or images are always resituated with a difference: even if two identical panels appear in the same narrative, they are not duplicates. Rather, the two images are always distinct because of a citation effect, whereby the second and subsequent images cite the original image. The repetition of the panel, if the panels are distantly repeated, raises the spectre or the memory of the first, or, if the occurrences are contiguous, emphasizes a particular point. Significant for this repetition, as Theirry Groensteen asserts, 'being isomorphs, these panels cannot be "isotopes"; by definition, they cannot occupy the same site' (Groensteen 2007: 149). Like memories, panels cannot be repeated exactly; upon each repetition or reoccurrence, there is a recontextualization. For Spiegelman, each moment of recontextualization provides a new space for considering the significance of personal and historical events. Seriality, then, works in tandem with the role of the archive inherent in Spiegelman's contemporary graphic narrative, both thematically and structurally, as he investigates the authorial possibilities of repetition and recontextualization in memory.

His concern with archiving – and with making the collection/archive available to readers and scholars – is a contemporary version of Jacques Derrida's concept of archive fever, a frantic archivization and preservation that transforms the present into the past by anticipating its memory. As Derrida suggests, the archive is not about dealing with the past because it is past; instead, the archive – a repository for memory and the material objects of memory – is a 'question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow' (Derrida 1995: 36). For Derrida, the archive inhabits many positions simultaneously: it is the physical building in which the materiality of memory is housed, it denotes the materials contained within the site, and it is a metaphor for conserving and preserving the past. Spiegelman's recent publication of three sketchbooks, under the collective title *Be a Nose!*, materializes this archival impulse. The sketchbooks date from three different moments, 1979, 1983 and 2007, and dismantle the boundaries between finished product and in-process work in order to preserve the fragments of the past. *Be a Nose!* also undermines the need for a linear, cohesive narrative in such a text, underscoring that the archive remains outside of such artificial impositions. *Portrait* extends this alinear and archival impulse, as it presents episodes from Spiegelman's life outside of chronology and through material objects like photographs, earlier publications and sketches.

Portrait, in fact, begins with a recreation of the original image from *Breakdowns*' first cover; it is incorporated into the new cover as the object on which the author slips, as if his previous selves or memories return in order to trip him up. *Breakdowns*' original cover features a serialized self in a variety of potential iterations and illustrates the author's interest in the materiality of the image (Figure 1). Spiegelman notes his fascination with printing presses that would put the same image through the press in different ways: upside down, backwards, forwards, and so forth. The serial image then also resonates with attempts to colour comic strips in newsprint; Spiegelman explains that he was 'interested in a large number of possible permutations, like using the black plate in all four colors but off register, and some plates upside down, some plates right side up, mixing together the plates where the

artist was pictured with ones where the artist wasn't pictured. And then yet more, wiggier permutations that kind of become the final broken-down version of *Breakdowns*' (Spiegelman quoted in Milzoff 2008: n. pag.). Alternating the image of himself with other frames in which he is absent – and still others in which he is only shadowed – allows Spiegelman to present himself or his absence – in a new way, echoing one another and itself resembling a page of graphic narrative, a still film reel. In the original version of *Breakdowns*, for example, the cover shows the artist in each panel, while the original endpapers – found in the 2008 reissue on pages 21 and 22 – present the reader with increasingly experimental panels. These images must be read in relation to one another, serially, and the self that they represent can only be understood as a compilation of such serially iterated images. This original cover for *Breakdowns*, like the strips it anthologizes, is also fully incorporated into the reissue of the text.

Such archival impulses are not new, and yet the speed and frequency with which texts are thought of as archives in relation to contemporary society and self-representation – assisted by digital texts, online communities and other technological advances – present new spaces in which to examine seriality and the archive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida asks, 'Is the psychic apparatus *better represented* or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrums of living things which already are, and will increasingly be, more refined, complicated, powerful than the 'mystic pad' (microcomputing, electronization, computerization, etc.)?' (Derrida 1995: 15, emphasis original). Spiegelman's graphic serial narrative project certainly engages and interrogates these 'technical mechanisms' as he questions how representation and memory are influenced by contemporary American life. In fact, as Roy Rosenzweig points out, Spiegelman was an early adopter of technological possibilities for archives. Rosenzweig writes that, by '1994, it seemed as if everyone – even historians, a group not particularly known for technological innovation – was working on interactive CD-ROMs' (Rosenzweig 1995: 1622). The possibilities inherent in such a piece of technology interests Spiegelman because he thought 'it would become a repository for the thousands of sketches, hundreds of pages of notes, and hours and hours of tapes' (qtd in Rosenzweig 1995: 1637). In other words, the CD-ROM would work as a contemporary archive that a wide range of people would have access to. Spiegelman continues, asserting that, while the actuality of the CD-ROM was soon realized to be illusory because it could not hold the 'zillions of things' that he hoped it could, the CD-ROM could nonetheless present audiences with 'the various layers that went into making *Maus*' (qtd in Rosenzweig 1995: 1637). In addition to *Portrait*, the recent publication of Spiegelman's sketchbooks, *Be a Nose!*, and the advertisement of *Meta Maus* further illustrate Spiegelman's investment in presenting the archive of self-production and self-narration to audiences.

Spiegelman's self-reflexive texts are indicative of a larger cultural archival impulse, and exemplify what Jared Gardner calls the 'archival turn in the contemporary graphic narrative' (Gardner 2006: 788). This attention to collection and archive, Gardner asserts, is to be expected from graphic narrative because comics require the reader to pause between panels and make sense of what he

or she reads. Stemming from Scott McCloud's theorizations in *Understanding Comics*, pausing between panels, or between episodes in serial memoir, allows both the reader and the writer the opportunity to reflect on what he or she has just read and/or written (McCloud 1994: 67); ultimately, the act of reading works as a kind of (re)collection, imitative of the serial structure of the memoirs themselves. With the cover of *Breakdowns* and its reiterations within the new edition, however, Spiegelman illustrates that the pause between panels is not necessarily a place for reflection (Figure 1). Rather, using black ink in the gutters instead of the traditional white ones, time speeds up. In her essay on seriality and temporality in *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Hillary Chute remarks that 'seriality in comics is connected to the material, visual rhythm of the created page, in which a trace of the imaginary, projected regularity of the grid is always present' (Chute 2007: 235). Extending her argument to note the significance of serial self-representation, the materiality of Spiegelman's repeated self-performances in *Breakdowns* both supports and moves beyond the concept of the grid.

Linking the presentation of the self on the cover(s) of *Breakdowns* to the self-reflexivity of *Portrait*, the regularity of the frames stands out, as they similarly underscore the 'projected regularity of the grid'. In both, the panels are presented in a relatively regular fashion, and even the circular, episode-marking panels, distinct from the square panels that comprise the majority of the text, fit onto the grid (Figure 2). This regularity further emphasizes the importance of the archival performances, as those documents do not stay within the bounds of the frame. The movement of the self in these panels – present, reimagined, repositioned, absent; imaged as a man, a mouse, a child – is central to Spiegelman's autobiographical project, as he visually challenges the ways in which we think we know who we are, and how we document our own subjectivity.

While many may consider the autobiographical trend in comics encouraging as it offers new and innovative ways of self-expression, others express unease with the fact that, as Hatfield writes, 'its episodic, often picaresque […] nature still caters to the outworn tradition of periodical comic book publishing' (Hatfield 2005: 112). Hatfield is concerned by the fact that even self-representational graphic narratives follow the traditional practice of serial publication – that, because authors of graphic narratives work within the established (and very often limiting) system of periodical publication, they reinscribe that very system. Historically, Hatfield and others point out, the practice of serial/periodical comic book publishing has been read as detrimental to authors because their work becomes dictated predominantly by the continuity of the series, rather than the creativity or inspiration or autonomy of the writer.[7] What is not considered here, however, is that serial presentation *is* revolutionary for the autobiographical genres within which these artists work. This so-called 'tyranny' of seriality, to use Jason Dittmer's phrase, underscores the possibility of the episodic and picaresque in contemporary memoir, a genre that has traditionally been seen as inferior to autobiography precisely *because* it is recursive and episodic (Dittmer 2007: n. pag.).

7. Jason Dittmer also suggests that the serial mode of publication in graphic narrative is detrimental because '*the tyranny of the serial* is dictated by the nature of the medium, which involves monthly issues ad infinitum connected to each other through the structures of continuity' (Dittmer 2007: n.pag, emphasis original).

8. Postmemory is a form of second-generation memory that, as Hirsch explains, 'characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood or recreated' (Hirsch 1992: 22).

In that regard, the effects of serial memoir echo Will Eisner's assertion in *Comics & Sequential Art* that graphic narrative is uniquely poised to consider both the commonality of lived experience and its episodic nature – or seriality. Eisner writes that, in order 'to be successful on this non-verbal level, [the artist] must take into consideration both the commonality of human experience and the phenomenon of our perception of it, which seems to consist of frames or episodes' (Eisner 1985: 34). Indeed, a text like *Portrait* is comprised of some episodes that are remarkable, such as the loss of his mother or his engagement with legacies stemming from what Marianne Hirsch has termed postmemory: his parent's memories of the Holocaust and their effect on subsequent generations.[8] He also provides episodes that are quotidian, like the moments in which he shows readers how central comic books were to his adolescence. Presciently, in the sequence wherein Vladek asks Art to help him pack for vacation and Art resists because he is 'learning how to draw *Tubby*', Vladek explains, 'You have to use what little space you have to pack inside everything what you can!' Art, in this frame imaged as the character of Tubby, notes that 'This was the best advice [he'd] ever gotten as a cartoonist!' (Spiegelman 2009: 8). This artistic revelation, though, is complicated by the postmemory of Vladek's lived experiences: packing, for Vladek, is more than putting things in a bag for vacation and, as such, resonates for young Art. In the second to last panel in this episode, as Vladek throws the *Tubby* comic across the room, he shouts, 'It's *important* to know how to pack! Many times I had to run with only what I can carry!' (Spiegelman 2009: 8). This potentially innocuous moment of putting things in a suitcase for vacation illustrates the ease with which such episodes can shift from innocuous to traumatic.

Presenting everyday moments like helping his father pack for vacation allows the reader to understand some of the ways in which Art's memories are comprised of both the ordinary and the extraordinary; Spiegelman juxtaposes these potentially unremarkable events with the more harrowing moments of postmemory and trauma, asking readers to remember the clear phenomenon of individual perception, memory and history. Not coincidentally, the last panel on this page is a transitional frame in which Spiegelman presents a panel titled 'Eye Ball': an image of an eyeball conflated with a baseball. The Eye Ball, in one frame, materializes this comparison, as readers will look twice at the eye (Figure 3). Baseball stitches, semicircles at the top and bottom of the ball, are potentially unremarkable objects, but this eyeball is laced with veins and the optic nerve is exposed, making it an arresting metonymy for the individuality of perception.

Presenting himself as a serial subject, Spiegelman emphasizes the importance of visual images to his own self-representation and underscores the serial nature of experience. In so doing, his texts challenge traditional forms of autobiographical writing that privilege a unified subject whose perception of history remains linear and uninterrogated. Instead, Spiegelman's serial memoir increases the textual spaces available for counter-memory and witnessing: he presents himself in repeated acts of uncovering constructs of selfhood, as he also reveals that his own subjectivity is rooted in

memory. His memoirs thus illustrate memory as episodic, subject to revision, potentially unreliable, and rooted in the stories and histories of his family, and, as the example of his 'Dear Diary' moment suggests, they are often overwhelming. As Michel Foucault suggests in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', history's veneration of identity is needed because unified identity 'is in itself only a parody: it is plural; countless spirits dispute its possession; numerous systems intersect and compete' (Foucault 1977: 161). Thinking of identity as, rather, multiple identities, Spiegelman presents history and memory as plural, recursive and unfinished, as in the cover and endpapers of *Breakdowns*; each panel, on its own, may represent a particular temporal moment with a particular artist in its view, but read together, Spiegelman presents a plural view of self-representation. He demonstrates the recursivity of history and memory throughout his serial memoir, illustrating for readers that, as in the sequence in which Vladek packs for vacation, history is comprised of memory, and memories are experienced – visually, emotionally, personally, generationally – on an individual level.

Unquestionably, serial publication presents constraints on the artists, as their creative work may not be given the priority it deserves, and Spiegelman's status allows him a privileged position to have the creative licence to publish serially on his own terms. Disregarding the original, serial roots of his long-form narratives, however, ignores the fact that he is part of a vanguard whose presentation of memory, history and subjectivity illustrates the possibilities for repetition, provisionality and recursivity in strategies for self-representation. According to media scholar Roger Hagedorn, episodicity is the most important trait in distinguishing the serial from the 'single-unit realistic narrative, including the novel in book form, the feature film, the radio play, and so on' (Hagedorn 'Doubtless' 1995: 28). For a graphic memoirist like Spiegelman, an author who constantly pays homage to the central role serialized narratives like comic books have played on his development as an artist and a thinker, those serial roots matter. Moreover, such serial publication allows him to, as in *Portrait*, present a sequence of episodes that span much of his life: he provides episodes ranging from infancy and childhood to early publications and contemporary celebrity. Unlike many traditional autobiographical texts, however, these episodes also allow him to eschew the linear progression many might expect from such a text; instead, *Portrait* shows an artist-in-process throughout its scenes.

Concerns about autobiography's status as non-fiction and what might seem the visual–verbal interface's inability to represent truth sit alongside concerns about reinscribing the serial structures under which comics artists work.[9] Of course, discrepancy between 'reality' and 'representation' is a concern that is repeatedly rehearsed in autobiography and life writing studies.[10] Rather than dealing with traditionally written self-reflexive narratives, the reader must negotiate a verbal–visual interface that maligns the reader's ability to recognize the possibilities for hybrid texts. However, the distinction between 'reality' and 'representation' is frequently made transparent by the authors of graphic narrative themselves. In *Portrait*, for example, Spiegelman notes his inability to remember 'being in a baby carriage when he was one or two', and that his '"continuous" memories don't start 'til [he's]

9. '[A]utobiography has become a distinct, indeed crucial, genre in today's comic books', Hatfield writes, 'despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual–verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of "nonfiction". They can hardly be said to be "true" in any straightforward sense. There's the rub. But therein lies much of their fascination' (Hatfield 2005: 112).

10. Discrepancies between 'truth' and representation have been fertile ground for autobiography critics and theorists; see, for example, Timothy Dow Adams' *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990).

11. Like discussions and analyses of truth, questions of genre also abound in contemporary life-writing studies. For a thorough examination of the relationship between memoir and autobiography, see Helen Buss' *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (2002), as well as critical examinations by Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith, Elisabeth Bruss, Liz Stanley, Julia Watson, Jeanne Perrault, Françoise Lionnet, Margo Culley and Lee Quinby.

around six […] or *twenty!*' (Spiegelman 2009: 5, emphasis original). Acknowledging the impossibility of remembering precisely what happens to him when he is 'one or two', though, does not preclude the action in the panels, which may or may not be 'representations' of 'reality'. In this episode, which follows a circular panel of a crying infant with the words 'Cry-Baby!' in its open mouth, Spiegelman presents a sequence of five panels in which a woman pushes a baby carriage, and is stopped by three women who discuss how the baby is 'cute'. Mistakenly called 'she' by one of the women, the panels suggest that the pronoun error causes infant Art to cry and, ultimately, to grow up to be 'neurotic' (Spiegelman 2009: 5). The disconnection, though, between what Spiegelman presents as remembered in the images and the questioning of memory in the dialogue boxes is transparently addressed as he writes, 'How can I make a memoir? I can't even remember what happened last week!' (Spiegelman 2009: 5). Exemplified in *Portrait*, Spiegelman's visible negotiations with memory, its recursivity and the difficulties in self-representation illustrate the potential for graphic narrative to embrace the liminality of the verbal–visual interface through serial self-representation.

Traditionally, Hagedorn suggests, serial narratives have been considered inferior to unified narrative forms (Hagedorn 'Technology' 1988: 5). This, of course, has been plainly articulated in scholarship on comic strips and serialized graphic narratives; the relationship between the serialized parts of a work of a text and the unified longer form are valued differently. Such differences in value often have to do with the materiality of the serialized product – what Spiegelman calls in *In the Shadow of No Towers* the 'fishwrap disposability' of newspaper – as well as the fact of the in-process nature of the text's production. In life writing, the same is true, as episodic forms of self-representation, like personal journals, diaries or memoir, are seen as less legitimate than autobiography. Helen Buss, for example, notes that memoir's liminal position in literary studies may be due to 'the identification of the form as a life-writing practice associated more with history than with literature', as it publicizes the private (Buss 2002: 10). Historically, many of these episodic forms of life writing were written by those without the time or ability to publish long-form narratives or whose narratives did not fit into the traditional autobiographical mode.[11] Another reason for this may be the fact that, as Julie Rak suggests, for many autobiography critics the genre of autobiography 'is not connected to the material conditions of its production' (Rak 2004: 308). The materiality of self-production and self-representation in memoir, I contend, is a central focus of the genre itself, is particularly significant in serial memoir, and is made manifest in Spiegelman's texts. Again, the original cover of *Breakdowns*, iterated and reiterated in *Portrait*, as well as Spiegelman's incorporation of his personal archive into the narrative, illustrates his attempts to preserve and perform the materiality of memory.

Pierre Nora writes that 'Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image' (Nora 1989: 13). The archival foundation of memory is borne out by the ways in which graphic memoir incorporates documents and exposes the position of the narrator as consistently shifting and in-process – often

Figure 1: The 1977 cover of Breakdowns: From 'Maus' to Now: An Anthology of Strips.

Figure 2: From Portrait, page 3.

Figure 3: From Portrait, page 7.

haunted by the ways in which the past returns in material forms. As artists are able to be more creative in their breakdowns, and as readers crave different kinds of self-reflexive texts – including those without narrative closure – the relationship between the conventions and historical contexts of graphic narrative and life narrative becomes more clearly integrated. Disregarding the original, serial roots of such benchmark self-representational graphic narratives as those by Art Spiegelman, as well as the serial self-publications of Will Eisner, Harvey Pekar, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry, among others, ignores the importance of seriality and recursivity in graphic self-representational strategies.

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Suggested citation

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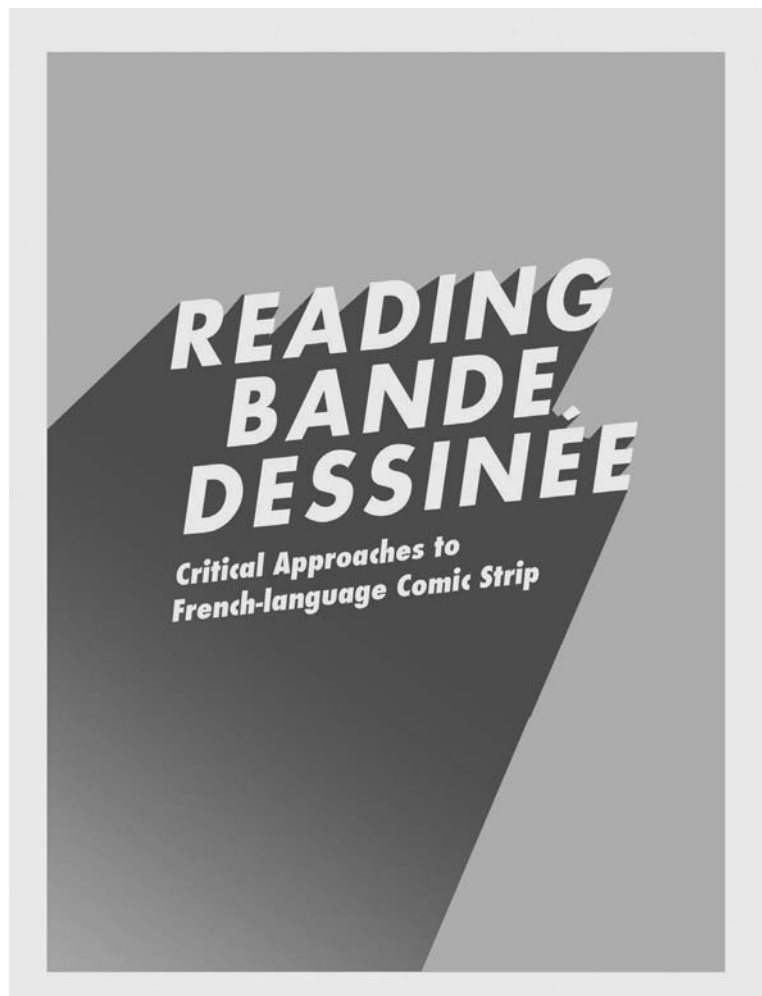E-mail: nicolemcdc@tamu.edu

Reading Bande Dessinée
Critical Approaches to
French-language Comic Strip

By Ann Miller

ISBN 9781841501772
Paperback | £19.95 | $40

The increasing popularity of bande dessinée, or French-language comic strip, means that it is being established on university syllabuses worldwide. *Reading Bande Dessinée* provides a thorough introduction to the medium and in-depth critical analysis with focus on contemporary examples of the art form, historical context, key artists, and themes such as gender, autobiography and postcolonial culture.

Miller's groundbreaking book demonstrates exactly why bande dessinée is considered to be a visual narrative art form and encourages the reader to appreciate and understand it to the best of their abilities. Miller also provides the terminology, framework and tools necessary for study, highly relevant to current curriculum and she creates a multi-disciplinary, comprehensive approach to the subject matter.