Drawing (from) Life

Reading Autobiographical Comics as a Form of Visual-Verbal Literacy

Erschienen in: Visual Literacy
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"[C]omics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy", American cartoonist Art Spiegelman argued in 1995.[1] Having received critical acclaim for his memoir *Maus*, the first graphic narrative to win a Pulitzer Prize, Spiegelman at that point had become one of the leading figures of the independent comics scene in the US. Literary scholars repeatedly refer to Spiegelman's observation when discussing the common preconception in both popular opinion and academic circles that the medium is low-brow and non-sophisticated.[2] This perception stems from the historical association of comics with satire and comedy, as well as fantasy, science-fiction and other popular genres of children's and youth literature. While there are generic traditions such as superhero comics, the medium as such is not inherently tied to any specific genre, which is to say that it can be a vehicle for all literary forms of fiction and non-fiction alike. The emergence of comics journalism in the last twenty years, for example, shows comics as a medium of documentation or witnessing, which records perceived realities and/or aims to convey historical fact. Accordingly, comics scholar Hillary Chute terms this ability to document the self "an expanded *idiom of witness*, a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form."[3] Importantly, non-fiction comics are not a recent development: there is a broad and significant history of comics artists recording their lives by producing graphic narratives, including travelogues, trauma writings and guidebooks.[4]

Comics distinguish themselves as a form of life writing and documentary by way of two forms of visual literacy. On the one hand, the very creation of comics is used by a wide range of people as an accessible practice of life writing and self-publishing. On the other, the medium prompts readers to engage with the narrative by bridging the gaps between word and image, as well as fragmented sequential frames that are arranged on the page and separated by an empty space or border called the "gutter."[5] Crucially, in these symmetric epistemological processes of encoding and decoding autobiographical comics – of drawing life and drawing *from* life – there lie the requirements for and the competency of visual literacy: a set of self-thought tactics used to negotiate the

consistencies and inconsistencies between word and image, imagination and reality, as well as the space of the page and of geography. The following analysis will thus focus on the practices of reader engagement in regard to non-fiction comics, examining the ways in which they engender a spectrum of visual literacy. To understand how the reader is required to complete the narrative of comics through its visual composition, it is vital to look at a comics page and examine some of the fundamental rules of its spatial architecture.

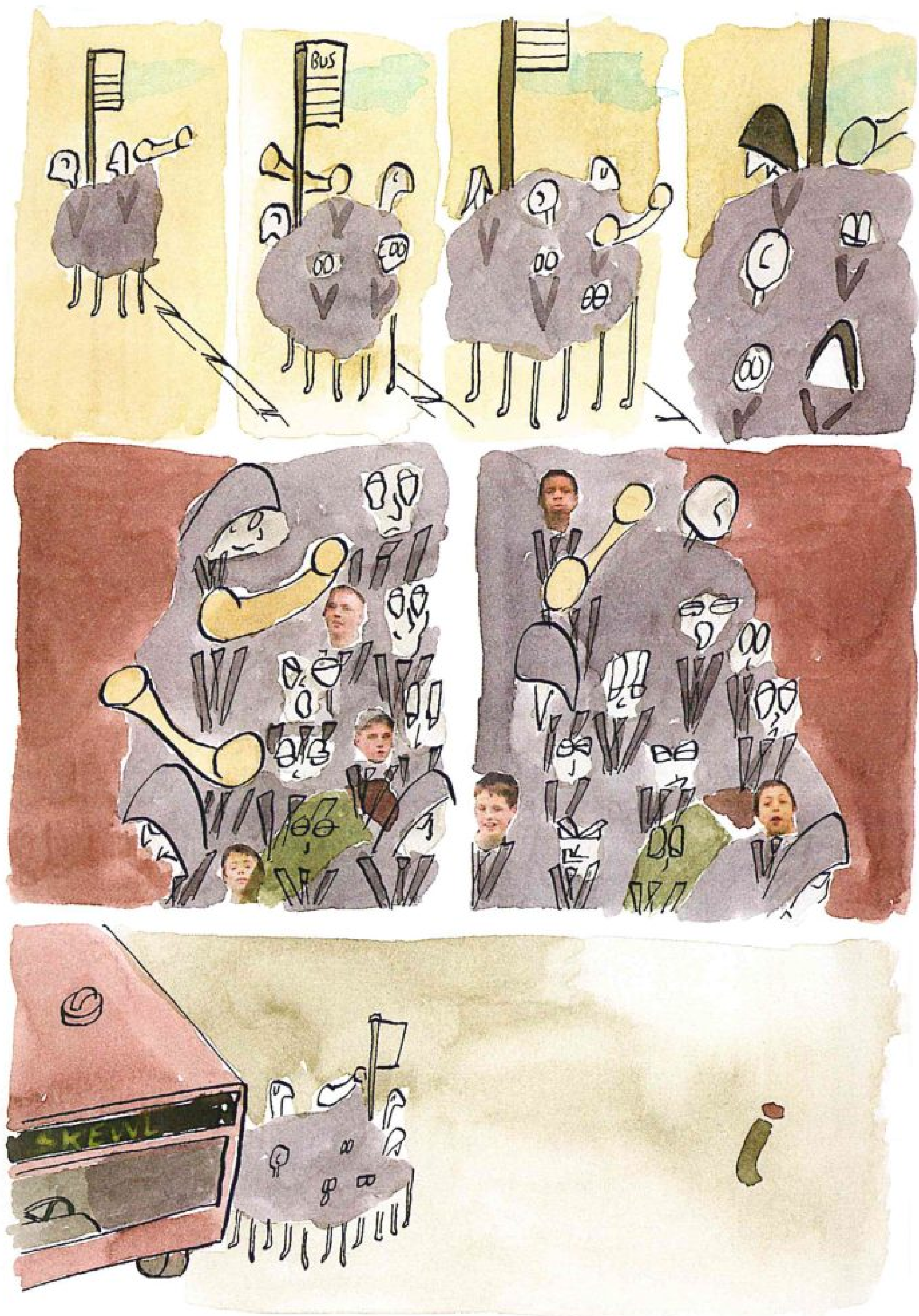

Figure 1. Page visualising East’s encounter with a group of schoolchildren. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.)6

At one point in *Proper Go Well High*, a comics travelogue by British cartoonist Oliver East, the protagonist walks down a street and passes a group of schoolchildren waiting for the bus. The first row of images is drawn from East's perspective, as can be seen by the bulk of children gradually becoming bigger as he approaches them. By this point in the story, the reader has learned about the history of bullying endured by East during his young life, and knows that his now 29-year-old self is still terrified of meeting young people. Adopting East's gaze in this first row of images thus conveys to the reader a rising threat to the first-person narrator, showing a largely incomprehensible grey mass of children with menacing faces and outstretched arms with clenched fists. The situation intensifies when East's green silhouette passes through the crowd: the panels in the middle of the page render this moment loud and frightening by setting the children's grim facial expressions against a dark red background. The tension is released in the last and biggest frame on this page, which features the outline of East as he walks away from the children, who are now entering the bus to "Skewl." It is a long shot coloured in a soothing light green, capturing a wide, empty space between the bus passengers and East that stands in contrast to the crowded panels above.

As the reader follows the panels and combines them to understand East's journey and struggle, the page demands a specific competency that transforms a visual arrangement of separate pictorial moments into a sequence of events. The page as static, spatial artefact is turned into a spatio-temporal scene, as the participation of the reader completes the depicted fragments into a continuous whole – a process called "closure" in comics scholarship. Comics thus require the reader to bridge the gaps between succeeding panels, presenting narratives of heterogeneous components that the reader must negotiate between to make sense of the story. Comics thus spatialise temporality by "offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" that prompt the reader to engage and complete them into a narrative sequence.[7] This act of making sense of single visual elements allows the reader to complete, augment and expand the narrative in an individual way, using their own experience. It is precisely this ability of 'committing closure' that fundamentally constitutes the visual literacy gained from comics. Consequently, comics utilise "different strategies of reading and attention" as in prose work,[8] as the medium requires the reader to negotiate "counterpoint[s] of presence and absence".[9]

This abstraction asks for these pieces of life writing to be completed by the reader, rendering autobiographical comics dependent on experience and narrative composition from outside of the work at hand. Comics writer and scholar Scott McCloud argues that it is indeed the abstract way in which comics are drawn that fascinates their audience: by reducing the level of realism and "de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of form", cartooning situates its sequential medium, comics, "in the world of concepts".[10] Minimalist cartoons depicting a situation or concept often make the reader perceive his or her own notion of these elements, whether physically or emotionally or in some other sense. Reading autobiographical comics is thus what Gillian Whitlock explains as "an active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across gutters and frames,

being moved to see, feel, or think differently in the effort of producing narrative closure." Because in comics the abstraction of cartoons necessarily omits many aspects of realistic physical appearance, the reader is enabled to "see [them]self" in a representation of the depicted protagonist.[11] Therefore, the visual reading strategies that emerge from this contribute to "points of indeterminacy and ambivalence" which "predestine autobiographical/autofictional comics to address complex questions of authenticity and artifice"[12]. The medium's tendency towards iconic rather than realistic representation that grants this ambivalent reading process points towards a strategy of narration that is inherent to the medium in many other ways as well: the constant negotiation between fact and fiction.

Martin Klepper summarises that "skepticism about the possibility of representation is inherent in the form and grammar of autobiographical comics"[13], pointing to the work of Michael A. Chaney, who ascertained that they "perform identity visually in the third person"[14]. In figure 1, East visually creates a likeness of himself that serves as his avatar. Unlike prose narratives, comics autobiographies thus literally *picture* the narrator on the page. The outline of the protagonist is as reduced as can be: his point of view is established by the first row of panels; in the second he is shown within the crowd; the third row exhibits his solitude and search for silence and peace amid an urbanity of noise. The perspective changes in each of the rows and panels, shifting from four point-of-view frames to three frames that include the walking protagonist in his green hiking clothes. As is custom for cartoons, East draws himself (and his surroundings) in an abstracted way. The last depiction of East's self on the page is especially simple and highlights the iconicity of the protagonist as avatar and, thus, the medium's disavowal of realism: he is just an "i," remotely drawn onto the page, a body so simplified that it can relate to a range of people calling themselves "I." Realising the conflation of the author and narrator into an abstracted visual sign, Chaney appropriately calls these autobiographical avatars "I-cons", showing how they are the "visual equivalent of the narrated 'I' of written autobiography, they are always on view, being viewed rather than merely revealing the view".[15] Autobiographical comics do not seek mimesis but instead visualise the subjective world of the author, who is rendered visible. This technique creates a tension between the realism affirmed through the autobiographical pact, and the display of a subjective lifeworld that carries elements of expression not present in reality, such as the red background in the second row of East's comics, or the exaggerated faces and gestures.

A non-fiction comic not only openly juxtaposes different perspectives in panels or narrative tracks with word and images, it also – emanating from this constant tension of unifying bimodal or panelled fragments – directly draws attention to its own status as an artwork and its limits or inability (or indeed refusal) to display objective truth. Comics autobiographies make it one of their main themes to uncomfortably sit with the paradoxes and limits of representation, playing with the artificial construction of narrative systems. Their visual vocabulary enables them to self-reflexively use metalepsis, for example, to digress between diegetic levels, accepting the collapse of objective truth in autobiography in favour of what might rather be understood as "real-and-imagined

space" in which fiction necessarily is part of factual life writing. Autobiographical comics thus not only make apparent the conflation of truth and imagination but want to do away with the dichotomy between fact and fiction altogether.[16]

Further dichotomies between words and images are blurred in the comic through its visual language, which can also be seen in the depiction of East as an "i": This avatar highlights the contact zone between words and images established by the medium – in the end, it functions as a hybrid sign that is both lexical *and* pictorial. Therefore, the narrative underlines how the medium of comics is situated between conventional poles of representation, leaving liberties in regard to ways of reading while constantly swaying between showing vs. telling. It not only "asks us to reconsider several dominant commonplaces about images, including that visuality stands for a subpar literacy",[17] but also to question the difference between these two categories altogether. Indeed, graphic narratives approximate both lexical and pictorial signs to show that they are ultimately visual; what keeps them apart is not their modality (their sensory perception through vision) but their varying degrees of arbitrariness between signifier and signified.[18] Thus, words and images are inherently visual, and comics work to challenge dominant notions connected to their supposed values by cultivating literacy in the reader that is based on a spectrum of iconic and symbolic signs placed within sequential frames. In this way, comics like *Proper Go Well High* rely on spatial architectures and conflate words and images into a complex graphic assemblage.

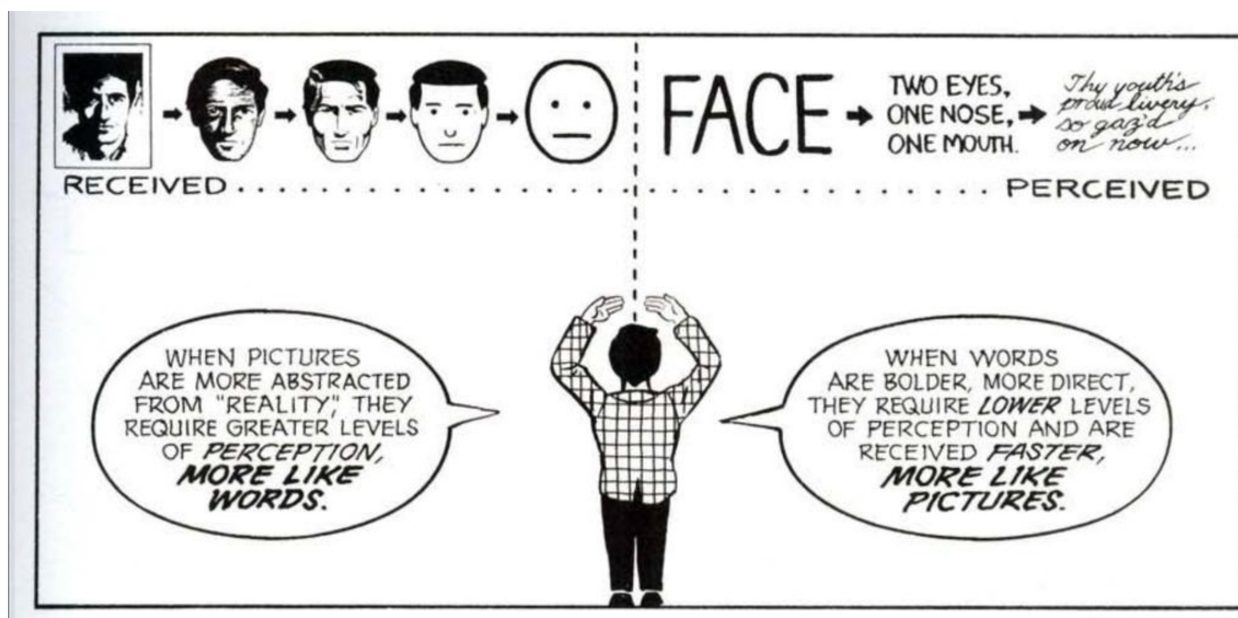

Figure 2. The spectrum of iconography in comics ranging from received to perceived signs.[19]

By outlining the fundamental similarity of two medial forms that have been kept away from each other in the perception of information, autobiographical comics try to dissolve expectations of factuality and authenticity attached to traditional understandings of autobiographical storytelling. Drawing on the work of French scholar Anne-Marie Christin, Jan Baetens and Steven Surdiacourt discuss that "there is no reason to radically distinguish between writing and image".[20] The medium thus teaches the reader to conceptualise signs as belonging to a spectrum, rather than dichotomous realms, presenting "a unified language of comics [that] sends us toward the centre where words

and pictures are like two sides of one coin!"[21] To visualize this semiotic continuum, McCloud draws a diagram ranging from received signs of photographic images on the one end, to perceived signs of poetic language on the other (fig. 2). While this model surely has its limits, the application of its most basic tenets to the storytelling in East's comics proves productive for understanding how images and words work together and are assimilated. On the one hand, East uses abstraction to remove his images from reality and to subsequently require his readers to involve "greater levels of perception",[22] moving their way of deciphering towards that of words. Evidence here is East's general style of drawing that moves away from more realistic renderings of the world: as East's drawing of himself in figure 1 shows in comparison to McCloud's spectrum, these comics quite straightforwardly privilege abstraction, schematization and diagramming. Indeed, the world in East's travel comics is so abstracted that often there is not even a face that one could compare to those pictured in McCloud's spectrum. On the other hand, the writing East employs often relies not on the content decodable through vocabulary but on its visual gesture, its "image-ness," for its appearance. Experimental comics like those of Oliver East thus consciously play with different ways of thinking attached to different modes of signification. They do so in order to specifically come to terms with life and memory through visual representation: as John Logan Schell puts it, "comics memoir provides the means to *repicture* one's memories and the opportunity to both take authorial control of history and to relinquish power to one's audience".[23] Among other things, visual literacy with respect to autobiographical comics thus mainly relies on two processes. On the part of the author, it comes about through the framing of life into sequential images, and on the part of the reader, it is realized through the completion of these fragmented panels into a stream of actions.

References

1. Spiegelman quoted in: Groth, Gary (1995): Interview with Art Spiegelman, in: The Comics Journal, #180, pp. 52–106, p. 57.
2. See, for example: Chute, Hillary (2008): Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative, in: PMLA, #123, pp. 452-65, p. 460.
3. Chute, Hillary (2010): Graphic Women. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 3.
4. Following McCloud (1994, p. 9) and Chute (2008, p. 462) and in line with current scholarship on the medium, I will henceforth use "comics" as a singular form. This phrasing is used to signify the status of comics as a medium in its own right. In fact, it is understood as an act of "reclaiming" or "reappropriation" of a term often used in a derogatory way to insinuate a supposed 'lack of literariness' (Heinze, Michael (2020): "What Happens in the Gutter?" und die Symbiose von Text und Graphik – Formale Aspekte in Joe Saccos *Journalism*, in: Krieg und Migration im Comic: Interdisziplinäre Analysen. Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 127–56, p. 135).
5. McCloud, Scott (1994): Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York: Harper Collins, p. 60.
6. East, Oliver (2008): Proper Go Well High. London: Blank Slate, p. 79.

7. McCloud, 1994, p. 67.
8. Klepper, Martin (2019): Autobiographical/Autofictional Comics, in: Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.): Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, pp. 441-45, p. 441.
9. Chute, 2008, p. 452.
10. McCloud, 1994, p. 41.
11. Ibid., p. 63.
12. Klepper, 2019, p. 441.
13. Ibid., p. 442.
14. Chaney, Michael A. (2011): Terrors of the Mirror and the “Mise en Abyme” of Graphic Novel Autobiography, in: College Literature, #38, pp. 21-44, p. 23.
15. Ibid., p. 24.
16. It might even be argued that autobiographical comics create what Edward Soja has called “thirdspace”, a realm in which “*everything*comes together” (Soja, Edward (1996): Thirdspace, Cambridge: Blackwell, p. 56; original emphasis) to eliminate restrictive dualistic hierarchies: They thus stand for the postmodern aim to turn away from either/or categorizations in favour of a “both/and also logic” (ibid., p. 5).
17. Chute, Hillary (2017): Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere. New York: Harper Collins, p. 22.
18. Conventional pictorial signs do resemble the very object they denote (iconic signs), while written and spoken words have no inherent resemblance to their signified (symbolic signs).
19. McCloud, 1994, p. 49.
20. Baetens, Jan, and Steven Surdiacourt (2011): How to “Read” Images with Texts. The Graphic Novel Case, in: Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (ed.): The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 590-600, p. 593.
21. McCloud, 1994, p. 49.
22. Ibid.
23. Schell, John Logan (2020): This is Who I Am: Hybridity and Materiality in Comics Memoir, in: Frederick Luis Aldama (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies, pp. 256–267, 257, my emphasis.

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