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Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact Nor Fiction[1]

One! Hundred! Demons!, a collection of seventeen short "autobi-fictionalography" (Barry 2002: 5) stories by Lynda Barry about her problematic adolescence, opens with a two-panel page portraying the author-protagonist sitting at her desk, brush in hand, asking: "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (2002: 7).[2] The introduction's direct challenge to authority through questions of mediation and veracity touches the heart of the issue at hand: to what extent can one distinguish between fact and fiction in graphic memoir, and is it theoretically attractive to do so? If, as Barry suggests, facts are altered when translated into representation and if "'telling the truth' in memoir is not always a straightforward process" (Versaci 2007: 57), then how is it that memoirs are able to create "in readers the expectation that they are told about something—for example, a series of life-changing events—that has actually occurred more or less as presented" (Böger 2011: 604)? What are some of the multimodal narrative strategies or operative conventions put in place to impart to readers graphic memoir's "special reality" (Eisner 2008b: xi)?

Memoir, it is argued, claims to, and is thus expected to "depict the lives of real, not imagined, individuals" (Couser 2012: 15). Memoir communicates as accurately as possible through self-representation a self and a life that exist or existed in the real world. Its writing can thus be said to be governed by what David Davies, expanding on the theories of Kendall L. Walton and Gregory Currie, calls the fidelity constraint, a constraint that makes readers "assume that the author has included only events she believes to have occurred, narrated as occurring in the order in

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1   Despite its growing popularity and the large outpour of graphic memoir, no consensus has been reached as to how to refer to this graphic narrative subgenre. Graphic memoir is referred to as 'autographics' by Whitlock 2006, 'comic book memoir' by Versaci 2007, 'autography' by Gardner 2008, 2012, 'autographic memoir' by Watson 2011, 'graphic novel memoir' by Chaney 2011c, and 'autobiocomics' or 'autobioBD' by Miller and Pratt 2004. Graphic memoir also belongs to the spectrum of 'out-law' genres of autobiography proposed by Kaplan 1992.

2   For a discussion of how these two panels establish Barry's sincerity, cf. Chaney 2011c: 22.

which she believes them to have occurred" (Davies 2007: 46).[3] Although the memoir's overriding constraint is fidelity so that readers are asked to believe instead of make-believe the narrative's content,[4] it is rare, especially today, to read a memoir that does not also betray a fictive intent. Not only do memoirs openly adopt many recognizable authenticating strategies, but they also draw attention to gaps and omissions, to doubt and invention. Many comingle fact and fiction, self-critically using literary techniques to tell 'real' stories about people's lives. Even though memoirs are nonfictional, then, they differ from other works of nonfiction in that, while fidelity is the overarching constraint, most memoirists relax this constraint to produce a desired effect on readers.[5]

To postulate memoir as nonfiction and, at the same time, appreciate its fictive intent impacts questions of memoir's representation and its readers' appreciation of facts. Walton, for instance, specifies that although facts are made and not found, "[e]very piece of discourse or thought which aspires to truth has a reality independent of *itself* to answer to, whatever role sentient beings might have in the construction of this reality" (1990: 102). This claim is echoed by Marie-Laure Ryan, who clarifies that whereas readers contemplate the textual world of fiction as "an end in itself," they "evaluate [that of nonfiction] in terms of its accuracy with respect to an external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information" (2001: 92). So, although a certain "leeway or looseness with the facts is expected" (Yagoda 2009: 2), as is the inevitable mediation and subsequent constructedness of self through representation, memoir is bound by a claim, if not an obligation to present a "compelling and authoritative and close-to-the-bone honest" (Yagoda 2009: 241) account of a real person. This obligation, in turn, is met by readers, who turn to it with an eye for truth.[6]

Graphic memoir has been theorized as differing "from text autobiographies in several ways, tending towards self reflexivity and often

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3   As Davies explains, chronological presentation means that the "narrated events be *represented as occurring* in the order in which the author believes them to have actually occurred" (2007: 191, note 13, original emphasis).

4   Several theorists who distinguish between fiction and nonfiction do so in terms of intention and what kind of response the text prompts in readers: whereas nonfiction asks readers to believe the text's content, fiction asks them to make-believe or imagine its content. See Currie 1990; Walton 1990; Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Davies 1996, 2001, 2007; Lamarque 1996.

5   Davies (2007: 48) makes a similar argument in relation to Mailer, Capote, and Morrison.

6   For an overview of how the concept of authorial intention has governed theories of autobiography, and a strong critique against it, cf. Anderson 2001: 1–6, 123. For a structuralist position of truthfulness in memoir, specifically AIDS memoirs, cf. Chambers 1998: 1–4. For a sustained analysis of how autobiography and its subgenres, including memoir, are susceptible to the burdens of proof, see Egan 2011.

featuring metafictional elements that point to ideas of the self as a construct" (Williams 2011: 356). While this argument is difficult to support when keeping theories of fiction in mind, it has gained currency among those who claim that the fictive intent is inherent in the comics medium. Some argue that since the "formal grammar [of graphic narratives] rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous" (Chute 2008: 457) and thus "everything in [its] represented world is very overtly *as if*" (O'Neill 1994: 99, original emphasis), the graphic memoir's proposed (and expected) factual portrayal of self is openly caught up in the cartoon image's constructed and interpretative quality.[7] Cartooning, the argument goes, renders overt the inevitable subjective register of self-representation, openly operating under the pretense that all that is presented was "transformed through somebody's eye and hand" (Wolk 2007: 118).[8] Although much can be said to weaken claims that fictionality is inherent to the medium of comics, these readings serve to illustrate the complex reading demands born from complementing the fidelity constraint with more general interests in storytelling.

Credibility: Authority and Doubt

The telling of one's self, whether through recall or direct witnessing, is a task that is often fraught with perils and doubts that pose a challenge for both authority and accuracy. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is Alison Bechdel's memoir about her closeted homosexual father who most likely committed suicide when she was an adolescent and her realization at that time of her homosexuality. Bechdel's narrator sustains that in her dysfunctional family, described by her as "a mildly autistic colony" (2006: 139), each member had only his or her own self. To support her interpretation of how her family functioned as a group of individualistic loners, she briefly mentions her father's "solipsistic circle of self" and then examines her "own compulsive propensity to autobiography" (Bechdel 2006: 140), which concretely manifested itself in the form of diary writing. The task of writing the self, however, soon proves difficult (if not

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7   Gardner argues that "[t]he comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art" (2008: 6).

8   Verano (2006: 326) describes the narrative universe of comics as the world of the fictional signifier; Versaci holds that "the comic book projects unreality to some degree because every comic book is a drawn version of the world and, therefore, not 'real'" (2007: 12); Round 2010 supports this view in her examination of the blurring of fact and fiction in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1989–1996).

impossible) for Alison, who struggles with fundamental questions of knowledge and representation of self.

In her attempt to follow her father's advice to "just write down what's happening" (Bechdel 2006: 140) in her diary, the narrator somewhat surprisingly realizes that "the minutely-lettered phrase *I think* begins to crop up between [her] comments" (Bechdel 2006: 141, original emphasis). This intensely self-reflexive gesture exposes her awareness that the 'facts' about her life are merely what she perceives to be true, that her narrative and the past experiences that give rise to it are relentlessly framed by her own aspectuality.[9] The panels accompanying this realization show how the young Alison inserts this statement of doubt after every declaration she makes, including the most seemingly insignificant ones such as making popcorn (see figure 1). The narrative text accompanying a vertically long panel of Alison making popcorn explains her obsessive fixation as resulting from "a sort of epistemological crisis" (Bechdel 2006: 140). She asks herself how she knew "that the things [she] was writing there were absolutely, objectively true?" (Bechdel 2006: 140). She then admits: "All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those" (Bechdel 2006: 140). Uncertain as to where the truth lies and whether she could ever know it, Alison questions her own ability to be sincere or, at the very least, sincere enough to capture, with the aid of an undoubtedly faulty memory, the factual details of her life.

The protagonist's confusions, interpretive difficulties, and mental turmoil are not as apparently exposed in the visual track. Whereas the verbal track betrays the narrator's desire to communicate the truth and, at the same time, her realization of the impossibility of reaching such a goal since she can relate only what she perceives to be truthful and maybe not even that, given the limitations of writing, the visual track is littered with visuals supporting the declarations she has made in her diary (such as, making popcorn, reading *Hardy Boys*, and writing in her diary). The visual track is authoritative in its declarative statements: the hesitation at the center of the verbal track is nowhere to be seen in the visual track. Even when depicting diary entries that become more and more laden with doubt—she replaces "I think" with a shorthand version that looks like a sort of circumflex or an upside-down "V" that became so ubiquitous that her diary is almost illegible[10] (see figure 2)—the visual track does not

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9   Palmer introduces the term 'aspectuality' to account for how events in a storyworld "are always experienced from within a certain vision" (2004: 51–52). For an extended analysis of how aspectual filtering impacts meaning in graphic narrative, see Horstkotte and Pedri 2011. See also Kai Mikkonen's contribution in this volume.

10   Cf. Bechdel 2006: 143. For an extended discussion of this symbol in *Fun Home*, cf. Gardner 2008: 1–6; Chute 2010: 186–93.

waver in its depictions of what is claimed (and doubted) in the diary entries. This incongruity between the verbal and the visual leaves readers to ask, along with Alison, where the truth lies.[11]
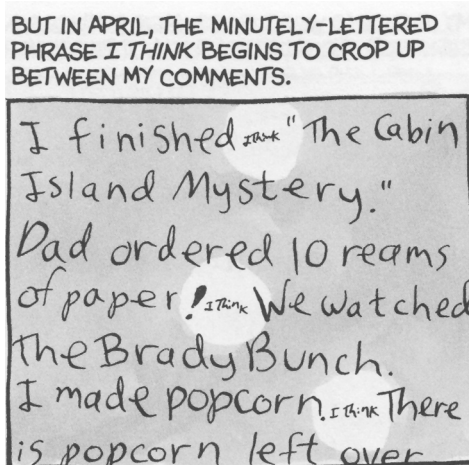

Figure 1: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006). © Alison Bechdel. All rights reserved.
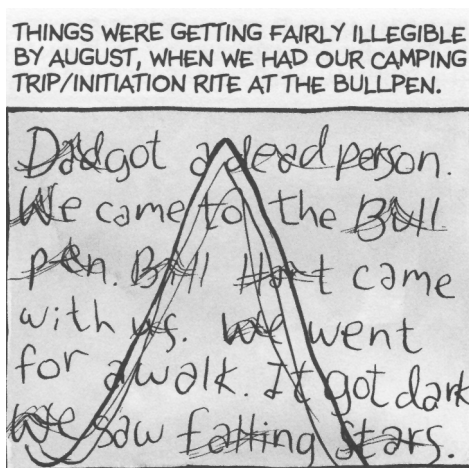

Figure 2: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006). © Alison Bechdel. All rights reserved.

11   This is not to suggest that the visual depicts all that the older Alison narrates in the text boxes. Instead, the visual is confined only to what a younger Alison narrates in her diary entries.

Fun Home's visual track, however, is not without its gaps and omissions. When Alison recalls a camping trip at the Bullpen, she marvels that her "notes on it are surprisingly cursory. No mention of the pin-up girl, the trip mine, or Bill's .22. Just the snake--and even that with an extreme economy of style" (2006: 143). As if in imitation of that economy of style, the large comics panel accompanying the verbal text depicts a young Alison with two other children staring at a garbage-ridden body of water from which a partially drawn snake is drinking (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006). © Alison Bechdel. All rights reserved.

All of the other details, so matter-of-factly exposed by an older Alison, who functions as an extradiegetic narrator in the present who writes and draws of her past self, do not figure in the comics panel. A text box within the panel specifies: "Again, the troubling gap between word and meaning. My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such

a laden experience" (2006: 143). Here, the narrator acknowledges her own doubts as an artist, admitting, if even implicitly, that uncertainty, 'untruthfulness,' and artifice are inevitable features of remembering and creating. The implications of these words for memoir's factual representation of self echo across *Fun Home*, which incorporates into its narrative an extended discussion on Alison's struggle to put the story into words and images. Implied in them is that so much of her life cannot be adequately, accurately represented. Her story, she admits to readers, is riddled with gaps and fissures, doubts and uncertainties.

Taken together, the initial incongruity between the written and the visual tracks,[12] which are immediately followed by a cartoon sequence where the two are more in sync,[13] situates the narrator's dilemma of telling the truth squarely within narration, that is, squarely within the very process of representation.[14] What is verbally and visually thematized across these four pages (and throughout *Fun Home*) is that in graphic memoir, "the power of memory must always share the act of self-representation with the devices of fiction" (Gardner 2008: 6). To highlight the union of fact and fiction in graphic memoir is to suggest that fact and truth telling have little to do with reference. Instead, here they rest, at least in part, in openly confronting that the real, the remembered, and the subjective share center stage with fictional creativity.

In doubting the truthfulness of her own account and her ability to transcribe her life into words and images, Bechdel's narrator intimately connects her subjective (re)interpretation to both the telling of self and personal experience, the storyworld and lived reality. Her reflections on and enactment of the conflicted process of self-representation contribute to establishing a relation of trust between the narrator and her readers. Fact and truth telling prove to rest on the closeness between the narrative assertions and "*the way we, as readers, believe the actual world to be*" (Davies 2007: 61, original emphasis).[15] Thus, the narrator builds credibility by questioning her writing while she writes, by recognizing that the very act of making sense of her self and her history is part of the problem. The second-guessing of her own perspective actually closes the gap between the author's historical presence and the Alison she has constructed as the narrator of her story. It also seeks to elicit in readers a complex narrative

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12 Cf. Bechdel 2006: 140–41.
13 Cf. Bechdel 2006: 142–43.
14 Quite surprisingly, it is Alison's mother who teaches her to overcome the compulsion to scribble over all she writes, encouraging her to stand behind what she writes. Cf. Bechdel 2006: 149.
15 For a similar argument, cf. Mooij 1993: 125–48.

response that secures belief in the narrative's content.[16] It does so by asserting common, real-experience understandings of the impossibility to fully know and represent the self.

To render transparent her own anxiety about being able to respect the fidelity constraint and abide by memoir's "preference for the literal and verifiable" (Gilmore 2001: 3) is one of the key strategies adopted by this and other graphic memoirs to communicate nonfictionality. The memoir's narrative authority is thus left intact; indeed, the narrator's credibility is enhanced through the admittance of doubt, of not knowing for sure if the event unfolded as it is being told. Working within the fidelity constraint, doubt feeds the readers' need to know not only what happened, but also how it is perceived to have happened as well as how the narrator/author struggles to communicate faithfully that subjective perception.

Authority and doubt thus unite to ensure credibility. That they are both caught up in the very fabric of graphic memoir's commitment to accuracy is a central theme in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), a two-volume graphic memoir of the author's engagement with his father Vladek's Holocaust survival and its narrative. Throughout *Maus*, the fictionality of its verbal and visual telling is repeatedly highlighted by Artie, who serves as both the extradiegetic verbal narrator (in text boxes) of the 1980s storyline in which he interviews his father in New York about his Holocaust experience (the intradiegetic storyline) and the visual narrator—i.e., drawer or graphiator—of the extra- and intradiegetic narratives. Indeed, concerns of how subjective filtering inevitably infringes upon all aspects of the storyworld are so ubiquitous in *Maus* that Linda Hutcheon observes that it "always reminds us of the *lack* of transparency of both its verbal and visual media. Its consistent reflexivity […] point[s] to the utter non-objectivity of the historian or biographer" (1997: 306).

A brief analysis of an instance where *Maus*'s visual track communicates the narrator's doubt will serve to compliment and emphasize the argument that evincing doubt and non-objectivity does not necessarily threaten credibility. A three-panel series relating the destiny of an Auschwitz prisoner addresses the narrator's doubt as to the facts of Vladek's eyewitness account by way of a shading technique (see figure 4). The episode is introduced in the context of Vladek's telling of the endless roll calls in Auschwitz. The page opens with two panels that span its width, depicting long rows of prisoners. The first illustrates the prisoners' anonymity: all in striped prisoner garb, the crowd of prisoners is one great mass of undistinguishable faces. The second, slightly taller panel zooms in

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16   Lehman (1997: 164–93) offers a similar reading in relation to Tim O'Brien's nonfictional work.

on a portion of the group, making it possible to discern individual faces—
some mice, some pigs. In it, a 'mouse' prisoner steps forward to protest to
the guard: "I don't belong here with all these Yids and Polacks! I'm a
German like you!" (Spiegelman 1991: 50, original emphasis). In the next
row, comprised of a symmetrical pair of panels, doubt about the
prisoner's identity is visually expressed, a doubt that can be attributed to
Artie, the visual narrator—or drawer—of Vladek's telling.

Figure 4: Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. II: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991).

In the first panel, the prisoner is a mouse against a black background.
The drawing is a medium close-up, showing the character's head and
upper body down to about his waist. A jagged-edged speech balloon
indicates that the prisoner is shouting: "I have medals from the Kaiser. My
son is a soldier!" (Spiegelman 1991: 50, original emphasis). In the second
panel of the pair, Artie in the foreground asks Vladek, "Was he *really* a
German?" (Spiegelman 1991: 50, original emphasis). Visually, doubt as to
the prisoner's identity is represented with a heavily shaded replica of the
previous panel in the background, with a meaningful substitution of the
prisoner's mouse head with a cat head.[17] The repetition of the two panels
with the visual changes coupled with Artie's question and Vladek's

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17   That Spiegelman draws Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, and so on has
      received much attention since its publication. Hathaway, for instance, argues that
      "Spiegelman's choice to draw animals rather than human figures, visibly and immediately
      alerts the reader to the work's constructedness" (2011: 252). Loman examines the
      "translation of the cat-and-mouse metaphor from the American context to the European"
      (2006: 552); Saraceni sees Spiegelman's use of the animal metaphor as "a mockery of the
      very racial claims that the Nazis promulgated" (2001: 453).

assertion of not knowing indicates hesitation between two possible truths, which would necessitate different visual representations.[18]

Maus's performance of doubt does not weaken credibility in the narrative's authority; instead, it unites authority with a questioning process that is all too familiar to readers. By reflecting on the difficulties and acknowledging the possible gaps and omissions of remembering and knowing for certain, graphic memoir reminds readers that what they are reading is a very human story, one in which the narrator is not a super, all-knowing being, but rather an ordinary person telling his life in his own terms as best he can.

Degrees of Abstraction: Photographs and Cartoons[19]

Like most comics genres, graphic memoir is "a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially" (Chute 2008: 452). It goes without saying that this multimodal form of life writing is "different from both written life narrative and visual or photographic self-portraiture" (Watson 2011: 124). It also goes without saying that graphic memoir is far more complex than the straightforward comingling of two modes of representation. Most graphic memoirs combine different writing styles and fonts in their verbal track, as well as different styles and types of images in their visual track. Representational shifts in either track raise fundamental questions about how to interpret the visual as well as about the power of the visual to relay affect.[20] Variation in the graphic memoir's visual track also introduces a change in the degree of visual abstraction, thus raising a different set of questions as to how the factual can accommodate the interpretative initiatives signaled by such changes.

An analysis of the evermore popular comingling of cartoons and photographic images in graphic memoir is particularly suited for understanding how graphic memoir works within and against common (mis)conceptions informing visual representation in order to secure

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18   In addition, the juxtaposition of these two images exposes the shortcomings of the animal imagery, which does not account for the complexities informing identity—such as that of an assimilated German Jew.

19   This section is a version of "Cartooning Ex-Posing Photography in Graphic Memoir" (Pedri 2012).

20   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" (2008a: 61).

belief.[21] Cartooning and photography have been theorized as opposite types of images vis-à-vis their degree of abstraction, that is, in relation to how closely they resemble their real-life counterparts.[22] Unlike photographic images that are said to have a necessary "relationship to objective reality," cartoon images betray a "relationship to the subjectivity of the artist: a drawn image implies that someone drew it" (Woo 2010: 175). The photographic image is readily approached as "an imprint or transfer of the real" (Krauss 1981: 26) since most readers privilege photography's mechanical processes of production and thus fail to see or overlook the traces of authorship in its product. The cartoon image, on the other hand, has a history of being perceived to be obviously handcrafted, "eminently self-reflexive and autoreferential" (Marion quoted in Baetens 2001: 149).

This perceived difference between the two types of images—the "stylized" quality of cartoons and the "realist" (Beaty 2006: n.p.) quality of photographs—has grave implications for the representation of fact (and fiction) in graphic memoirs that use both modes of representation. 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" (1986: 61), then one would expect photographs in graphic memoir to provide a more factual, accurate visual rendition of the author's self than the crafted cartoon images alongside which they work. Photographs, it must stressed, are governed by an "assumption that the camera makes it possible to obtain as sharp, clear, and lifelike an image as possible of what appears in front of the lens" (Azoulay 2008: 150). This assumption, which Ariella Azoulay claims is actually "an agreement among the citizens of the citizenry of photography [...] concerning access to what is imprinted on the photograph" (2008: 150), brings readers to expect that photographs in graphic memoir function as they often are believed to function in purely verbal memoirs: providing "evidence of the author's lived reality beyond the way that she or he may manipulate it in words" (Edwards 2011: 80).

Surprisingly, however, when reproduced in graphic memoirs, photographic images can serve not to confirm that what is being related— identity, self, personal experience—is real or factual or accurately portrayed. Indeed, the comingling of cartooning and photography in graphic memoir's visual track often "eradicate[s] any clear-cut distinction

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21 Groensteen (2007: 41–3) comments on the use of photography in comics without, however, stopping on the actual reproduction of photographic images in the comic universe. For an extended examination of the use of photography in Emanuel Guibert's *Le Photographe*, see Pedri 2011.
22 Cf. McCloud 1994: 29.

between documentary and aesthetic" (Hirsch 2011: 25). As Marianne Hirsch suggests in relation to the use of photographs in *Maus*, "[i]n moving from documentary photographs—perhaps the most referential representational medium—to cartoon drawings of mice and cats, Spiegelman lays bare the levels of mediation that underlie *all* visual representational forms" (1997: 25).[23] In addition to blurring boundaries separating the documentary and the aesthetic, the inclusion of photographs in graphic memoir can accentuate a commonality between photographic and cartoon images that is often theoretically and practically overlooked: both are representations or, to borrow from Walton, both induce an imagining. A 1958 photographic image of Spiegelman with his mother (see figure 5) introduces a four-page graphic memoir "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History" (1986: 100–03) that recounts his mother's suicide and the author's mental breakdown ten years later as he struggles to come to terms with her suicide.[24] Framed by a thick black drawn wavy line and captioned in the same hand as the embedded memoir's cartoon panels, the photograph is held up at an angle by a cartoon drawing of a hand. The drawn frame, caption, and hand
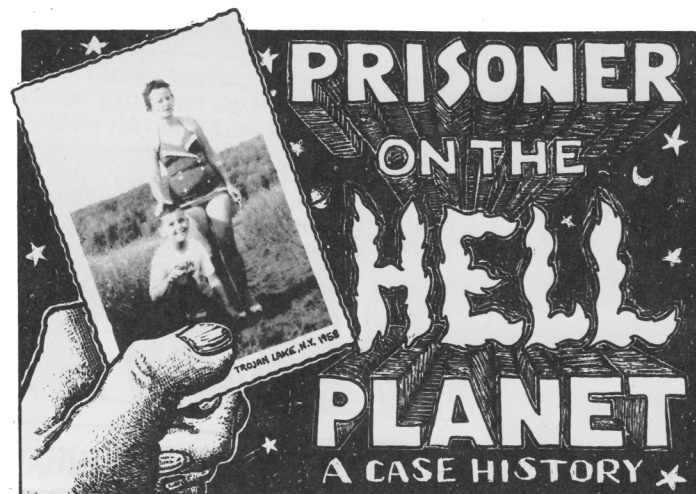
Figure 5: Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986).

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23 Hutcheon makes a more general observation when she argues that "however documentary or realist [*Maus*'s] mode [...,] it always reminds us of the *lack* of transparency of both its verbal and visual media" (1999: 11).
24 "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" was first published in 1973 in *Short Order Comix*.

graphically signal the transposition of the photographic image into the comic universe. They also indicate its status as a hand-crafted, hand-selected artifact, one that gains meaning within a particular context.

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" (Miller 2011: 244–45), the cartoon hand accentuates the photographic image's fictionality.[25] It announces that what is shown in the photograph is not to be believed to be true, but rather imagined to be so. The hand's similarity (despite its slightly lower degree of abstraction) to the drawn hand at the bottom of the comic page that holds open "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" further suggests that all visual representations are subject to the interpretative maneuvers of those who create them (see figure 6). 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 fictionality. Through their comingling, readers are reminded that *Maus* "is no doubt accurate, but it is anything but objective" (Mordden 1992: 94). In this way, readers are made aware that what they are holding—"Hell Planet" and *Maus*—is, to put it bluntly, "Art's story" (Mordden 1992: 94).[26]

The union of photography and cartooning in *Maus* (and in other graphic memoirs) exposes the historical experience supposedly captured in the photographic image as always actualized by its narrative presentation. Hence, their union in *Maus* enacts and confirms the meeting of fact and fiction, thus shedding light on how graphic memoir works to secure belief. Tellingly, Spiegelman conceives of the meeting between what he calls the real and the creative as "a point of discovery" or "a moment of collision" that gives "the biggest charge" (1995: n.p.). The overt comingling of fact and fiction brings readers to confront their union as generating a continuous assessment of their own expectations and assumptions in relation to the author's intention of fidelity. Readers are thus made aware of their own role in believing the narrated events.

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25   Banner (2000: 133) argues that the photographs in *Maus* serve as documentary evidence; Hirsch (2011: 32) confirms their archival status; Oliver suggests 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" (2009: n.p.).

26   The filtering through Artie's consciousness 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 in the surrounding information (the caption, the drawn frame, or the 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. Critics who have asserted that the photograph is of Artie and his mother include Hirsch (1997: 31; 2011: 29) and Rothberg (1995: 679).
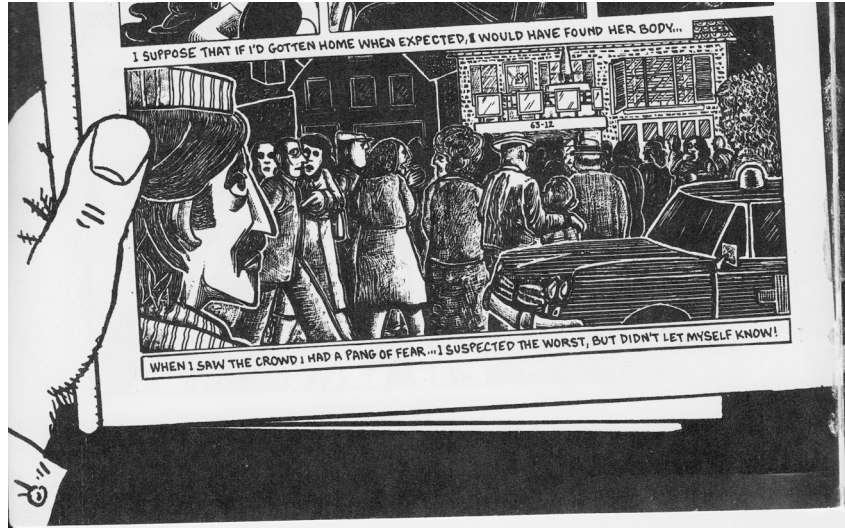
Figure 6: Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986).

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 literally seen and captured photographically. *Cancer Vixen* (2006), a graphic memoir by Marisa Acocella Marchetto that tells the story of her struggle with breast cancer, opens with an ultrasound photograph (see figure 7) accompanied by a bright yellow-green cartoon arrow verbally specifying that somewhere in the middle of the image is "the tumor" (2006: 1). Despite most readers' familiarity with this type of photographic image, it is difficult to determine what dark or light shadow actually is the tumor, 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 clarifies that "it looks like a black hole" (Marchetto 2006: 1). With its explicatory note and modifying specification, the cartoon arrow, and not the ultrasound photograph, represents the portion of life, the actual event, covered in *Cancer Vixen*.[27]

That cartooning is more apt than photography to detailing the protagonist's personal struggle with breast cancer is particularly evident when, on the following page, the tumor is visually represented in cartoon form as an oddly shaped lump just above Marisa's left breast (Marchetto

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27   Cf. Yagoda, who distinguishes memoir from autobiography by specifying that "'memoir' has been used by books that cover the entirety *or* some portion of [a life]" (2009: 1).

Figure 7: Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen* (2006).

2006: 2). The close-up of the lump in two sequential panels portrays it from two different angles: 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 makeup is further accentuated two pages later with the introduction of a round purple-colored background cartoon panel in which a group of cancer cells with green malignant faces, pinched eyes, and protruding red tongues are imaged (see figure 8).

Each cell is depicted as a one-armed face, disparagingly shooting the middle finger. A short verbal footnote accompanied by a yellow cartoon arrow pointing to the round panel indicates that what is being represented is "possible cancer cells, an artist's rendition" (Marchetto 2006: 4). A second footnote wrapped around the bottom of the panel specifies that the rendition is "magnified 3 gazillion times" (Marchetto 2006: 4), thus self-reflexively adopting (and adapting) the scientific language that usually accompanies medical images such as the ultrasound photograph that opened the memoir.
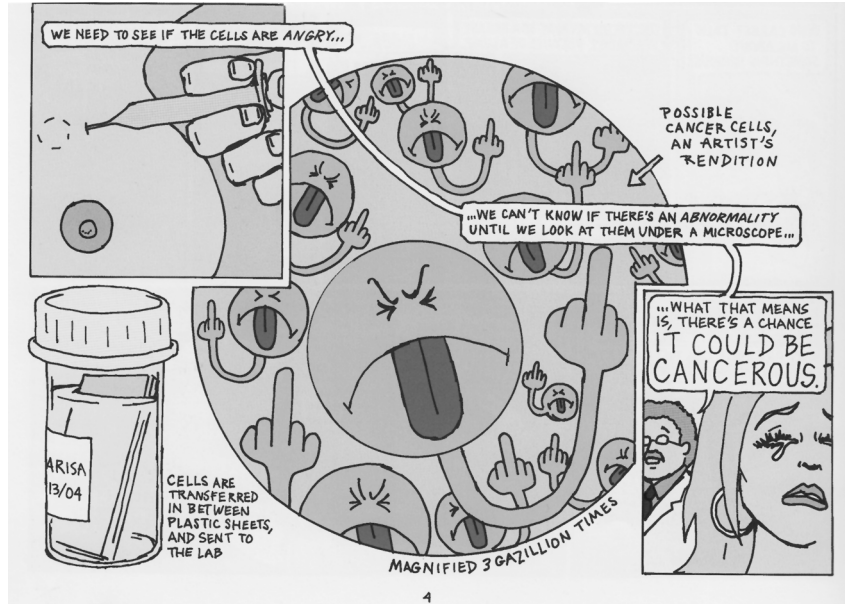
Figure 8: Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen* (2006).

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 open interpretative stance of her cartoon images embraces the subjective, acknowledging its role in accurately communicating the real experience represented in *Cancer Vixen*. Indeed, when considered alongside the introductory ultrasound photograph, the cartoon renditions of the tumor represent the reality the author *feels* to be true, and not the attributes of cancer that can be scientifically (or objectively) *seen*.

The inclusion of the ultrasound photograph alongside cartoon drawings of the same tumor stands to indicate two opposite visual poles of abstraction, the photographic and the cartoon image. However, their union exposes the photograph as being the least informative of the two types of images and void of emotive charge, thus working against common assumptions informing the photograph's appreciation as factual evidence. Consequently, the "difference between what is shown and how something is shown" (Mikkonen 2010: 81) that is characteristic of graphic memoir is raised for explicit consideration. As the addition of the cartoon arrow and its specifications as well as the repeated use of the cartoon

green-faced artist's rendition of the tumor throughout *Cancer Vixen*[28] suggest, graphic memoir secures belief in readers by charging the representation of reality (even that of a photographic image) with the value it has for the character and not by confirming any presumed referential claims to an unqualified real.

The demystification of photographic objectivity is also apparent when photography and cartooning come together in *Mom's Cancer* (2006), Brian Fies's graphic memoir of his family's experience with their mother's metastatic lung cancer.[29] In this memoir, cartoon text penciled on a photographic image critically disrupts the perception that a medical photograph (in this case, an M. R. I. scan) accurately shows "a dying brain tumor" (Fies 2006: 79). Instead of the M. R. I. scan, the author reproduces a black-and-white photograph of the M57 "nebula in the constellation Lyra" on a full page and titles it "A Universe Inside her Head" (Fies 2006: 79) (see figure 9).
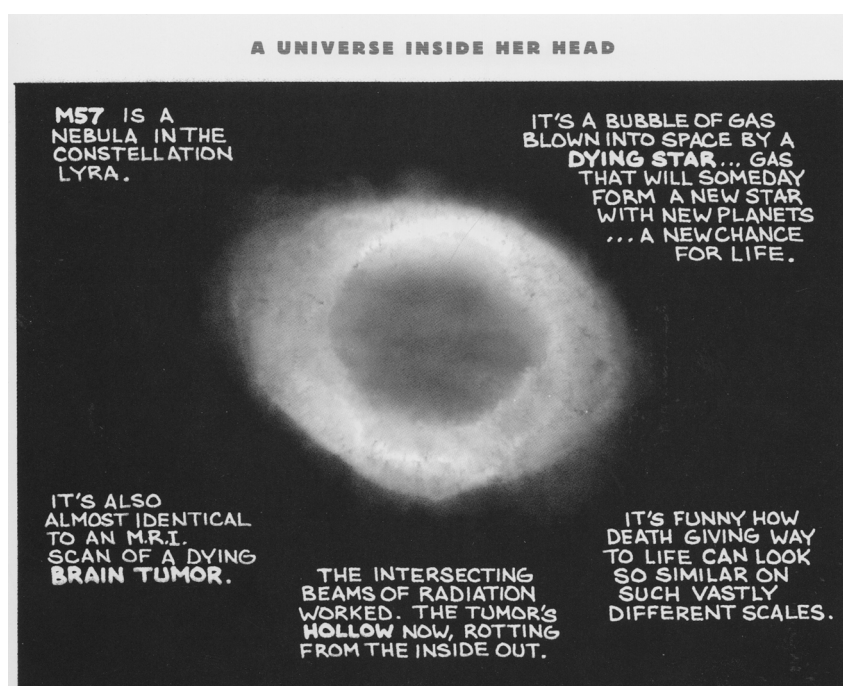
Figure 9: Brian Fies, *Mom's Cancer* (2006). © Brian Fies. All rights reserved.

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28   Cf. Marchetto 2006: 89, 123, 208.
29   For a discussion of how the myth of photographic objectivity has been propagated, see Pedri 2008.

Across the photograph's black top margin, white printed writing specifies that what we see is "a bubble of gas" produced by a "dying star ... gas that will someday form a new star with new planets" (Fies 2006: 79). 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 observes, "it's funny how death giving way to life can look so similar on such vastly different scales" (Fies 2006: 79). The cartoon writing emphasizes that the photograph of the nebula looks surprisingly similar to the narrator's mother's brain tumor captured photographically by medical scans. By reproducing the nebula photograph in lieu of the actual M. R. I. scan of the dying tumor and suggesting that the two are interchangeable, the narrator sets in motion the demystification of claims to objective reality that medical photographs are reputed to have. The suggestion that to a non-specialized audience a photograph of a bubble of gas looks similar to one of a tumor within a graphic memoir about that very tumor aligns belief with the fanciful, constructed, fictional workings of a subjective mind.[30]

Recently, theorists have argued that subjective truth (i.e., the truth that lies with the representation) and not historical truth or truth that requires dates, facts, and research distinguishes memoir from autobiography.[31] Within the cartoon universe of these and other graphic memoirs, the inclusion of photography forges the articulation of a complex truth, one where the "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1933: 8) is held under serious consideration and the documented treatment of actuality under scrutiny. Thierry Groensteen argues that cartooning has the "power to generate a depiction that [...] will manifest, if the cartoonist wants it, the same qualities of precision and veracity as the adjacent [photographic] documented parts" (2007: 42). These examples illustrate that in graphic memoir cartooning often supersedes the photographic in its manifestation of those very qualities.

The inclusion of photographic images in graphic memoir does something more than highlight the privileged status of subjective truth in life writing that translates into "a kind of subjective camera" (Miller and Pratt 2004: n.p.) in graphic memoir. It actually helps expose the authorial

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30   Three cartoon renditions of the brain tumor, before treatment, are included at the beginning of *Mom's Cancer* (cf. Fies 2006: 4). The visual renditions are not accompanied by words. For an analysis of the use of photography in psychoanalysis, see Rose 1986; for a historical-cultural overview of the use of photography in the sciences, including medicine, cf. Marien 2006: 32–44, 143–51, 209–16; for an analysis of photography in medicine, see Ruddick 1982; Auger 1984; Dermer 1999; Van Dijck 2005. For bibliographic sources of the role of photography in medicine, cf. Lenman 2005: 726.

31   Cf. Yagoda 2009: 3.

subject position as intrinsically linked to its cartoon self.[32] When photography and cartooning come together in these and other graphic memoirs, the perception of self and the representations to which it gives rise may be considered more truthful (and, thus, more real) than the extradiegetic, real self, pictured in the photographic image. 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 revel instead in the way "[it] perceive[s], remember[s], and make[s] sense out of [its life]" (Chaney 2011b: 3).

Accuracy: Real World⇔Interpretive Distortion

The privileging of a diegetic self in graphic memoir is why style, which is so personal and subjective, actually betrays important truths about the storyworld represented. "The fact of style as a narrative choice—and not simply a default expression—," Hillary Chute specifies, "is fundamental to understanding graphic narrative (as it is, of course, to understanding, say, prose, poetry, and painting)" (2010: 146). Every graphic memoir has its own particular pictorial and lettering style that "encourage readers to see the story as the author's personal expression" (Versaci 2007: 44). And although much can be said about how that style triggers recognition and appreciation, what is important to accentuate in a discussion on fact and fiction in graphic memoir is that style actually presents readers with a particularly personal vision of what is remembered as having been experienced. Style, then, speaks not so much to what is seen and remembered, but rather to the subjective interpretation of the facts or what some call the "'cartooning as interpretation' effect" (Wolk 2007: 121).

When considered in this light, even the most impressionistic or abstract cartoon style fails to threaten the commitment to fidelity that governs graphic memoir. *Epileptic* (2005), David B.'s graphic memoir of growing up with a brother who suffers epileptic seizures and parents who go to great pains to find a cure for him, is perhaps one of the most visually impressive and challenging graphic memoirs about illness published in recent years.[33] In a letter that serves as the book's foreword,

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32 Cf., for instance, Lynda Barry's cartoon scribbles with which she 'defaces' the photographic portraits reproduced on the cover pages of four short stories, "Common Scents" (2002: 50–51), "Resilience" (62–63), "Magic" (98–99), and "Lost and Found" (206–07).

33 *Epileptic* was first published in French as *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* as a series of six volumes from 1996 to 2003. For a recent analysis of disease in *Epileptic*, see Engelmann 2010.

his sister writes: "You've laid down, in the panels of this book, the shadows of our childhood. My recollections are neither as detailed nor as precise as yours. You've always been concerned about the correct detail, about faithful reconstruction" (2005: n.p.). Besides emphasizing that *Epileptic* is David's story as remembered by him, this foreword also foregrounds the narrative's accuracy, confirming its adherence to nonfiction's fidelity constraint.

What becomes apparent upon reading the book, however, is that as the disease becomes graver (or, David grows into a deeper awareness of it), the cartoon drawings are more and more abstract and metaphorical (and, thus further removed from realist aesthetics). As Douglas Wolk notes, "[t]he artwork in *Epileptic* tracks [David's] perceptions, becoming increasingly elaborate and design-heavy" (2007: 140) as his family begins to collapse under the disease's demands. For instance, dreams become more frequent, with their psychedelic backgrounds and imaginary creatures that betray David's "difficult process of self-discovery" (Tabachnick 2011: 105); his brother Jean-Christophe figures more often as beastly and contorted; his brother's epilepsy takes on the shape of a long-mouthed serpent with a body that twists into all sorts of contortions, often carrying Jean-Christophe with it. With these and other metaphorically charged images, the divide between David's reality and his imagining of that reality begins to weaken.

As we "visit the inside of David B.'s head" (B. 2005: 278), we come to realize that the use of metaphorical representation is the best way he can communicate the turmoil of his experience. He admits as much: "I want to tell the whole story. My brother's epilepsy, the physicians, macrobiotics, spiritualism, the gurus, the communes. But I don't know how to draw it. And I don't yet realize that it'll take me another 20 years to get there" (B. 2005: 291). The year is 1979, and David is living in Paris writing and drawing. The large panel accompanying this confession depicts Jean-Christophe entangled in the epilepsy serpent-like creature, confirming that *Epileptic* is the product of that twenty-year struggle (see figure 10).

Here, David B.'s graphic animalization of illness is embroiled in a "self-reflexivity [that] unveils the text's constructedness" (Chaney 2011a: 141). However, as can be guessed at this point, neither the metaphorical cartoon images nor *Epileptic*'s self-reflexive strategies render that which is narrated fictional. On the contrary, they provide an accurate account of David's experience, if we understand this to mean that readers accept the metaphorical images as adequately expressive of the emotions and emotional responses as the memoirist/protagonist understands them to

Figure 10: David B., *Epileptic* (2005). © David B. All rights reserved.

have been.[34] The use of metaphorical images confirms that his brother's disease and its effect on David's family are best deciphered subjectively. Like other visual metaphors, they "can only 'mean' according to the mind that makes [them] 'mean'" (Reizenstein 2007: 324). As with the comingling of photography and cartooning, in this and other metaphorically charged graphic memoirs, the craftsmanship of cartooning proves to be particularly equipped to address the ins and outs of personal experience. Indeed, Wolk maintains that cartooning's "chief tools are distortion and symbolic abstraction" (2007: 120). In graphic memoir, these tools are put to good use. They expose the interior landscape of characters and thus carry readers into the particular details of the mental processing of hard facts. Indeed, *Epileptic* can be said to guide

> readers who are used to reality as it can be captured by photographs into the profoundly different way [David] perceives the world, partly by relating the specific experiences that led him there and partly by representing everything not as his eye apprehends it but as his consciousness alters it. (Wolk 2007: 141)

The metaphorical images, born from David's imagination, unite real world experience with interpretive distortion and, consequently, persuade readers as to the accuracy of his point of view. The fidelity constraint is thus left intact.

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34 On metaphor and truth, see Ankersmit and Mooij 1993. For an overview of critical approaches to metaphor and its relation to truth, cf. Mooij 1993: 171–86.

Well, then...

The melding of fact and fiction, where one cannot be easily distinguished
from the other, bestows graphic memoir with "imaginative strength, or
plausibility" (Coovadia 2009: 1), indeed, the type of authority that Imraan
Coovadia attributes to literature. Surprisingly, these authors postulate an
accurate, believable self within and across representation by adopting
strategies that foreground fictionality. As argued, they make provocative
use of storytelling techniques that acknowledge, critique, and ultimately
embrace the very impossibility of the truthful representation of self in
which they are absorbed. By so forcibly asserting the inherent
problematics of representing the real and suggesting that a truthful
account of self is out of reach within a genre that is governed by the
fidelity constraint, graphic memoirs dismantle factual/fictional divisions.
Indeed, they make it theoretically unattractive to distinguish between fact
and fiction for the graphic memoir's strength to foster belief in their
telling resides with the abolishment of such boundaries through the
foregrounding of the subjective viewpoints, memory filters, or emotive
charges operative in the representation of self.

The incongruence between the real and its cartoon representation that
has been central to the present chapter's analysis 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 (and reality)
as anything other than always mediated and assumed, and not given. What
ultimately comes to light is the central role of the subjective in graphic
memoir's commitment to the accurate portrayal of a self and its life.
Counterintuitively, the consideration of how fact and fiction meld by way
of a variety of narrative strategies and operative conventions has revealed
that in graphic memoir a diegetic self, and not the author's intention or
other extradiegetic promises, gains the reader's belief. Such thinking
would require understanding the fidelity constraint as secured through
storytelling strategies that take into consideration readers' common
expectations and assumptions to secure belief.

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