ABSTRACT

Art and Text: An Exploration of the Graphic Novel

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The graphic novel is one of the most exciting forms of storytelling in use today. Its combination of art and text offers endless possibilities for creative expression and can produce incredibly complex and rich narratives. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate why certain stories are best told as a graphic novel rather than through traditional prose or some other medium. In doing so, this thesis will briefly explore the history of the graphic novel and its emergence as a distinct form, discuss unique features of this medium and their use in crafting a narrative, and examine specific texts that utilize these features to create meaning and develop a story that could only be told in this way.

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ART AND TEXT: AN EXPLORATION OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

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INTRODUCTION

The graphic novel is one of the most exciting forms of storytelling in use today. The combination of art and text, when done skillfully, offers endless possibilities for creative expression and can produce narrative just as rich and complex as that of a traditional novel. It adheres closely to the culture of the time, often drawing on both modern sensibilities and more traditional styles, combining and reshaping them to create something new. Because of this, the graphic novel is in a near constant state of reinvention as creators continue to subvert old styles and push the limits of what kinds of story, structure, and points of view it can support.

The goal of this thesis is to examine specific examples of graphic novels that make use of its unique features to create compelling narratives that could not be told in any other form. This exploration of the graphic novel will begin by discussing the origins of this medium and its emergence as a distinct kind of literature in the late 20th century. The next chapter will examine specific elements of the graphic novel including page layout and panel design, physical structure, and art style. This discussion will look at how these elements can be used to control the reader's experience of a story in innovative way. The third chapter will examine non-fiction graphic novels and argue that this medium has a unique ability to engage with different concepts of memory and the nature of autobiographical stories. The fourth chapter will examine fictional graphic novels and argue that graphic novels have a particular ability to use color and background design within panels to create tone within a story and that these elements can play an active role in shaping the narrative. Overall, the goal of this thesis is to showcase the exciting

possibilities that this form offers and show that it is as deserving of careful reading and

consideration as any other medium.

CHAPTER ONE

The Origins of the Graphic Novel

The history of the graphic novel is almost as interesting as the form itself. It is a relatively new type of literature that emerged during the late 20th century, quickly gaining popularity among readers and, over the years, becoming respected by critics as well. Its closest predecessor is the comic book, which also came into its own during the 20th century, and these mediums are still closely intertwined, so much so that the distinction between the two often becomes blurred.

Comic books originally began as reprints of syndicated comic strips, called "comic magazines" (Gabilliet 10). These magazines produced no content of their own, instead simply collecting and reproducing popular cartoons from newspapers. Over time, more publishers started appearing, and the industry began to rapidly grow. Hoping to stay competitive and realizing that they would soon run out of old comic strips to reprint, a shift toward original content began. This shift proved vital to the development of the comic book, and subsequently the graphic novel, as individual forms. By producing original content, comic books were becoming valuable in their own right, providing something that was not available anywhere else, rather than reprinting comic strips from newspapers. In 1939, the most widely produced original content was superhero comics, the genre most commonly associated with this medium. *Action Comic*s #1, published in 1938 and featuring Superman, had been a huge success, particularly with young readers, and played an

integral role in the popularization of this genre, leading other publishers to develop their own costumed crime fighters (Gabilliet 19).

With the rise of superheroes, comic books now had an audience comprised primarily of young readers. Because of this, concerns about content soon emerged as the popularity of these books grew. This would eventually lead to widespread censorship of comics. Educators at that time feared that comic books were having a negative effect on student's reading abilities, feeling that children should instead be consuming more literary content (Nyberg). Soon more voices joined these protests, arguing that the content of these books was inappropriate for children due to their depictions of violence and criminal behavior.

Around this same time, Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist, began campaigning against selling comic books to children, arguing that young readers were becoming desensitized to violence and encouraged to imitate the dangerous behavior of these fictional characters (Nyberg). Wertham published a book, *Seduction of the Innocent,* in 1954, detailing his arguments against the content printed in these books. This and other protests quickly lead to the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) that same year (Williams 25). U.S. comics publishers agreed to submit copies of their books to the CMAA who would review them to make sure that their content fell in line with their code of acceptability. Those that were approved received the Comics Code Authority seal (Williams 25).

The introduction of this code created a situation in which publishers had no choice but to comply with the CMAA's restrictions. Wholesalers who delivered

comics to newsstands refused to distribute any products that did not have the Comics Code Authority Seal, forcing publishers to censor their work in order to have it sold (Nyberg). The original code developed by the CMAA was incredibly strict. Not only did it prohibit depictions of things like violence and sex, it also contained sections requiring comic books to promote respect for governmental and parental authority and prohibited the use of slang terms (Nyberg). The code did not remain this way, however. Over the next few decades, as public perceptions of what was appropriate changed, the CMAA issued a number of revisions to the code that allowed publishers more freedom in the content they chose to print. Still, publishers were seeking ways around these restrictions. Around the 1980s, publishers began selling their products directly to specialty comic stores who were willing to carry products that didn't have the CMAA's seal (Nyberg). As more publishers began to abandon major retailers in favor of these smaller specialty stores, use of the Comics Code Authority began to decline. In 2011, the last remaining publishers withdrew from the CMAA, leading to its demise.

While major publishers had been willing to follow the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority in order to sell their products, many creators were not so willing to comply. In the 1960s, while the CMAA's censorship was still in full swing, underground comics began to emerge in the United States. These were independently published comic books that rebelled against the strict censorship of the CMAA that many creators felt stifled their creativity. Because these comics were not approved by the CMAA, they could not be sold in major retailers. Instead, they were primarily sold at "head shops" along with other countercultural products

(Williams 26). The content of these comic books differed drastically from those being sold at major retailers, featuring depictions of violence, sexuality, drug use, etc., all of which were prohibited by the CMAA. These books were not intended for the younger audience that read approved comics from Marvel and DC. Instead many of them contained "Adults Only" labels on their covers and explicitly instructed retailers not to sell them to minors (Estren 20).

While the content of these comics was more mature, these works were rarely written purely for shock-value. Instead, they often dealt with issues of politics or religion and commented on the culture of that time. In *A History of Underground Comics*, Mark Estren argues that these comics had complexity that was lacking in the more mainstream, code-approved publications, saying "most of the underground strips can be read and enjoyed on several levels—indeed, *must* be read that way in order to make complete sense (in some cases, to make any sense at all)" (18). In addition to the wider variety of subjects available in underground comics, there was also more variety in the art styles used. These styles ranged from purposefully simple drawings to incredibly detailed and technically impressive images. This art was much more advanced than that of mainstream comics, Estren argues. He claims that mainstream comics use illustrations rather than cartoons because they merely provide a visual representation of what is going on in the text. The cartoons used in underground comics, however, do much more than this: "A cartoon, unlike an illustration, stands almost entirely on its own: words and pictures together make an effect which neither words nor pictures would make alone" (23).

At this time the graphic novel had not yet fully emerged as a distinct form, but the foundation for these works had been laid. These comics created a shift toward more adult narrative, not only in their use of more mature content, but also in their complexity. Unlike the largely plot-driven narratives present in mainstream comics that offered little depth, underground comics at this time were producing books that grappled with larger issues and required more careful reading from their audience. While mainstream comics' stories had to fit within certain genres, feature certain characters, and abide by the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority, these underground comics were more of a personal expression by the creator, seen through the many stories that draw heavily on the personal experiences of the creator (Baetens 56).

This incorporation of autobiography into the narratives of underground comics also had an important influence on the development of the graphic novel, as it challenged the kinds of stories that comics could tell. Not only were these comics featuring stories with a blend of fiction and memoir, they were also using narratives that were grounded in reality. Plenty of underground comics still worked with fantasy or science fiction, but narratives also focused on the activities of everyday life, with no element of the supernatural involved, and showed that these more mundane subjects could still spawn interesting narratives.

In the mid-1970s, as the counterculture of the 1960s began to dissipate, the underground comics scene began to collapse. At this same time, the graphic novel was finally beginning to emerge as many artists sought new ways to produce content after having lost their audience and publishers. Will Eisner was one of these

artists. Eisner was a cartoonist who began writing mainstream comics in the 1930s, then became a part of the underground comics world in the 1970s (Baetens 63). In 1978, he published *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, a graphic novel that included a collection of four stories about a Jewish community living in a tenement building in Depression Era New York. There is a semi-autobiographical element to this collection, as Eisner drew on his own experiences in writing these stories, including the loss of his daughter, which is reflected in the first story in the collection, which centers on a man who has lost his adopted daughter to illness (64). In addition to this, Eisner's stories resemble underground comics in their harsh depiction of reality. The stories collected in this book are dark and deal with complex questions about life and religion as the various characters must deal with tragedies in their lives.

In the late 1980s, three graphic novels were published that achieved both commercial and critical success and helped establish the graphic novel as its own form. These works, often referred to as "the big three", are *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, and *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller. These three books provide excellent examples of the possibilities available to the graphic novel in terms of content, structure, and style.

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* were both originally published as serial issues, by Marvel and DC respectively, then collected into graphic novels later. Both of these titles feature darker, less idealized superhero stories than the ones printed in the 1940s, with Moore's focusing on a group of superheroes he created and Miller's focusing on an older version of

Batman. By focusing on superheroes, both of these books utilize and subvert the style of the classic superhero comic books published in the 1940s. They took these idealized stories that were wiped clean of any mature or unpleasant content by the Comics Code Authority and infused them with the, often dark, reality of the modern world in a way that adds new layers to the story. This demonstrates the way that the graphic novel is often self-referential, incorporating elements of its own history (in this case a traditional comic book style) and manipulating it in order to create something new.

The other member of "the big three", Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* provides a very different view of what a graphic novel can be. In this book, Spiegelman recounts his father's stories about his experiences as a Polish Jew during the Holocaust, in addition to depicting his complicated relationship with his father and his own struggle to deal with the weight of these stories. *Maus* is an excellent example of some of the genre confusion that can occur due to the term "graphic novel". Initially, *Maus* would appear to be non-fiction because it is retelling the personal experiences of Spiegelman's father. However, the book's artwork has led some to categorize it as fiction instead. Spiegelman draws all of the book's characters as anthropomorphized animals, with the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats. While this text is centered on a series of real interviews with Spiegelman's father and has been incredibly well researched, this artwork introduces an element of unreality that complicates the placement of this text among more traditional non-fiction works. When *Maus* appeared on *The New York Times* Best Seller List in the fiction category, Spiegelman himself wrote in, requesting that his book be moved to the non-fiction list and the

editors soon complied (Spiegelman "A Problem of Taxonomy"). When *Maus* won a

Pulitzer Prize in 1992, the board managed to avoid this genre confusion by

awarding Spiegelman a Special Award.

Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey discuss this blurring of genre lines in *The Graphic

Novel: An Introduction*. They offer examples of works that communicate a true story

while still drawing on the traditions of fiction to craft it, as well as examples of

fictional works that are still heavily connected to the personal experiences of the

author, both cases showing why the categorization of these works can sometimes be

so difficult. Baetens and Frey posit that it is the ability of the graphic novel "to work

on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history-from-below, and oral history, as

well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning (and vice versa) that makes it so

fascinating and important a body of work" (13).

This blending of fiction and non-fiction is one of the most fascinating

characteristics of the graphic novel. As mentioned before, this draws on the history

of the underground comics, where creators began producing deeply personal stories

that blurred the line between fiction and autobiography. In the years following the

advent of "the big three", numerous other graphic novels were published as the

medium became more popular both among creators and readers. Many of the more

recently published works also make use of autobiographical elements, though they

continue to be categorized as fiction through the term "graphic novel". Alison

Bechdel's *Fun Home,* for example, focuses on her strained relationship with her late

father, using a non-linear structure that simulates the way memories are often

called up out of order. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is another example of a graphic

novel that focuses on personal experience, depicting her life growing up in Iran

during the Islamic Revolution. It is in works like these that the line between fiction

and memoir becomes difficult to distinguish. In *Persepolis*, for example, Satrapi

devotes a page to her experience of puberty, featuring a series of panels in which

her body grows in dramatic disproportion. One eye swells twice as large as the

other and her chin sticks forward dramatically (189). In another chapter she has

been living on her own in Vienna for two years when she finds out her mother will

be paying her an unexpected visit. Satrapi depicts her reaction to this news by

drawing herself split into two people, both wide-eyed, running in opposite

directions, their legs tangling together (199). These images are obviously not

faithful representations of what Satrapi looked like during these moments in her

life, but instead are able to convey what she was feeling. The graphic novel has a

particular ability to handle this blend of genres, using stylized art that, through

exaggerated figures perhaps more accurately conveys the truth of how the author

experienced a situation than a purely factual account of what happened would.

Though the graphic novel is still a relatively new form, it is heavily influenced

by the history of its predecessors: mainstream and underground comics.

Particularly through the influence of underground comics, the graphic novel

developed an immense capacity for creative expression through experimental art

styles and structures, as well as an emphasis on creating complex narratives that

deal with larger ideas beyond the surface of the story. The autobiographical

elements of many underground comics also had a significant impact, as seen

through the many authors who continue to produce graphic novels that seem to

exist between genres, blending fiction with personal narratives. The fluidity of the graphic novel is a large part of what makes it so fascinating to study, as creators are constantly utilizing new styles or subverting old ones in ways that reinvent it. In such a short time, the graphic novel has already changed and grown to include such an expansive body of work. We can only guess at what exciting new developments might lie in its future.

CHAPTER TWO

Examining Specific Elements of the Graphic Novel

The graphic novel is a form that values experimentation with narrative structure and stylistic elements that shape the way the audience reads the text. Due to its unique combination of art and text, graphic novels can often control a reader's experience of a story in innovative ways. Elements such as panel size, page layout, art style, color, physical format, etc. can all be used to shape the reader's interaction with the story and emphasize certain concepts or themes. Excellent examples of this can be found in Will Eisner's *A Contract with God,* which often discards traditional panel layouts to immerse the reader in the world of the text, Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, which tells a story through a collection of fourteen separate printed works and forces the reader to play an active role in constructing the story and creating meaning, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* which uses a purposefully simple art style to control the reader's perspective of acts of violence throughout the text and view gruesome acts more abstractly.

The page layouts in Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, a series of short stories depicting the lives of Jewish residents of a tenement building in New York, are different from most other graphic novels. Eisner does not have a consistent arrangement of panels throughout the book and often doesn't use panels at all. Many pages of the text feature only one large illustration that has no frame, with the text integrated into the image instead of being in a caption box or speech bubble. Eisner still uses more traditional panels as well, but they are often placed over these

larger images or sometimes even scattered over the page at odd angles. In the introduction to *A Contract with God*, Eisner discusses his composition, saying, "I see all these as threads of a single fabric and exploit them as a language. If I have been successful at this, there will be no interruption in the flow of narrative because the picture and the text are so totally dependent on each other as to be inseparable for even a moment."

This unusual style is reflective of the fact that *A Contract with God* was one of the first graphic novels published and was one of the works that helped establish this form. By using larger, unframed images, Eisner is differentiating his work from his previous work on the serialized superhero comic, *The Spirit,* and making it clear that these stories must be approached in a different way (Duncan 149).

Eisner's style also plays an important role in shaping the narrative of the text. The larger images help draw the reader into the world of the story, unlike smaller panels that tend to have more of a focus on action and plot progression. For example, the first five pages of the title story simply show the main character, Frimme Hersh, walking to his house in the rain, each page featuring only one unframed image integrated with the text. These pages offer a slow entrance in to the world of this text, introducing the main character as little more than an isolated silhouette making his way down the street. The rain obscures everything in these images, pouring down in thick lines that run off the brim of Frimme Hersh's hat and collect in large puddles beneath his feet. Soon he approaches the tenement building and the reader is introduced to the setting around which these stories are centered. It is at this same moment in the text when it is revealed that the main character is

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returning home from a funeral after the death of his daughter. This image serves as a starting point both for the individual tale of Frimme Hersh and the larger collection of stories, as it presents, through the text, the emotional pain that this character must grapple with and, through the art, the community that will serve as the backdrop for this and other stories.

Eisner utilizes the composition of these pages to help determine the focus of his story. By using these larger images that fill an entire page, he also slows the pace of the story, allowing time for the reader to gain a sense of the weight of this man's pain, visible in his slumped posture as he continues home. The layout of these images also encourages the reader to linger on the artwork longer than they would be inclined to in a more traditional panel format. This helps draw the readers view beyond the actions of the characters to their settings and smaller details that otherwise may have gone unnoticed. This becomes especially important in images that show other tenants in the background listening in on their neighbors or exchanging gossip. The residents of this tenement building are always being observed, their personal dramas being performed for each other even if they are not always aware of it. This combination of individual narratives and the larger narrative of the community is central to Eisner's work. *A Contract with God* explores the experiences of Jewish Americans in New York in the 1930s, connecting a variety of perspectives through the setting of the tenement building. Through the composition of these pages, Eisner is able to interweave these two narratives in a way that can only be done through a graphic novel. He uses the composition of these pages to emphasize the role of the setting (and, by extension, the community living

in the building) without diminishing the actions and experiences of the individual characters.

Another excellent example of the way artists use elements of the graphic novel to shape and control narrative is Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, which experiments both with story structure and the physical format of the text, pushing the boundaries of what a graphic novel can be. *Building Stories* might not even be considered a book at first glance due to its unusual formatting. Ware's text is contained in a large box resembling that of a board game and includes fourteen different pieces in different mediums ranging from hardbound books to a small fictional newspaper. Like Eisner's text, *Building Stories* is centered on an apartment building and the lives of the residents within. Ware's text, however, has a much different structure because there is no correct order in which to read the contents of the box. While the narrative does have a central protagonist, an unnamed female florist with a prosthetic leg, there is no overarching plot. Instead, Ware focuses on the mundane everyday activities of the residents, at times jumping forward in the lives of both the characters and the building they inhabit. This, in some ways, allows the reader to construct their own experience of the text, creating their own timeline of events and slowly forming a rounded picture of these characters as they collect details from each of the pieces.

The unusual design of *Building Stories* is uniquely suited to tell the story that Ware presents through this collection of work. At its core, the text seems to be interested in exploring what constitutes a lifetime. For Ware, this rarely involves major life events or dramatic developments, instead focusing on elements of

everyday life: a conversation with a plumber, a date with an old friend from school, the troubling thoughts that emerge just before falling asleep. The unspecified order of the pieces reflects the meandering, often random way that one recalls memories, skipping back and forth through time, often omitting major events in favor of small, haunting ones. By separating the story into multiple pieces that the reader must physically sort through, Ware is controlling the reader's experience of the story and forcing them to play an active role in creating the order of the narrative. This structure is replicated on some of the pages themselves, like the folded boards covered in images and text boxes that are strung together without a clear beginning or end. The reader becomes a part of the story as they alternate between books, newspapers, and flipbooks, physically interacting with the text. This kind of narrative control could only be created in a graphic novel because of the way that images don't require a strict order the way that words do, allowing the pieces of this story to create meaning and complexity in different ways based on the order in which they are read.

One final example of the graphic novel's ability to shape narrative in distinctive ways is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* which uses a purposefully simple art style to control the way the reader views acts of violence throughout the text. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi uses only black and white to create her images. Her characters are drawn with a few clean lines to define their faces, though their expressions can often be quite exaggerated. This simple style often contrasts with the subject matter of the book, particularly in the scenes where, as a child, Marjane is confronted with the violence occurring in her country. Hillary Chute discusses Satrapi's art in her

article "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"". Chute argues

that this art style controls the scenes in the text where Marjane, as a young girl,

hears stories about protestors being executed or brutally tortured: "Satrapi's

autobiography is a "story of a childhood," and *Persepolis's* style reflects this

perspective: the narrative's force and bite come from the radical disjuncture

between the often gorgeous minimalism of Satrapi's drawings and the infinitely

complicated traumatic events they depict: harassment, torture, execution,

bombings, mass murder" (99). The depictions of violence within *Persepolis* are

rarely gruesome, clearly communicating what is occurring in the scene without

excessive detail. Bodies are shown in piles, but there is no blood or visible wounds.

Chute argues that this approach to these darker moments in the text helps convey

how Marjane, as a child, cannot fully articulate the trauma of these events, while also

suggesting that no depiction of this violence would be able to accurately represent

this experience (102).

Satrapi has spoken about her choice of black and white and her approach

towards scenes of violence, saying, "I like black and white better than anything,

because there's no bluff in black and white. To me, color is extra information, and

when you add color…it makes something real about it" (Hadju 35). Satrapi's

minimalist style refrains from showing detail in these brutal images, but the absence

of blood or wounds on the victims is, in some ways, more terrifying, because it

suggests that these actions and their repercussions are unimaginable. "Violence

today," she says, "has become something so normal, so banal—that is to say,

everybody thinks it's normal. But it's not normal. To draw it and put in color—the

color of the flesh and the red of the blood and so forth reduces it by making it realistic" (35). Through her art style, Satrapi is able to control the reader's experience of these scenes, giving them insight into Marjane's childhood perspective as well as highlighting their own inability to comprehend such violence.

Each of these texts show how the unique elements of the graphic novel can be used to shape the narrative of the story and influence the reader's experience of the work. Eisner, Ware, and Satrapi each take full advantage of this form to tell their stories, utilizing page composition, art style, and even the physical design of the text to create meaning. This small selection of examples highlights the innovative storytelling that graphic novels are capable of, as well as the complex narratives they can create.

CHAPTER THREE

Non-fiction Graphic Novels and Examinations of Memory

One of the most prominent genres of graphic novels is that of non-fiction and,

more specifically, memoir. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

are both excellent examples of the way that graphic novels are uniquely suited to

non-fiction stories, particularly in their ability to communicate the element of

subjectivity inherent in memory and the influence that can have on accounts of the

past. Both *Maus* and *Fun Home* use the structure of their texts and stylistic elements

to engage with this concept of subjectivity and the limitations of memory, though

they both tackle this subject in very different ways.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* skillfully interweaves three different narratives in

order to depict a complex and engaging view of the way the past is communicated to

new generations. The story is centered around interviews Art had with his father,

Vladek, in which Vladek told his son about his experiences as a Jew during World

War II, including his time at Auschwitz. In addition to the "present" narrative of the

conversations between Art and his father, and the "past" narrative in which Vladek

speaks about his past, Spiegelman includes a third narrative thread depicting Art's

struggles with his relationship to his father's past. Spiegelman draws these different

elements of the story together through visual tools unique to the graphic novel,

utilizing panel layout and page structure to intertwine these different narratives

visually so that they are always presented in the context of each other. The

combination of these three narratives is an important element of what makes this

text so compelling as it creates a striking exploration of how memories are retold and the complexities of trying to document a story that is not one's own.

The panel layout throughout *Maus* plays a crucial role in keeping the present and past scenes closely linked. It also provides the reader with a specific lens through which to view Vladek's stories. The first few pages of the text show Art arriving at his father's house for a visit. Unlike the scenes from Vladek's past, the present scenes often have little to no narrative text laid over the panels. This first page includes some brief narration, from Art's perspective, in order to introduce the scene and the characters, but soon transitions into allowing the dialogue and the actions of the characters to progress the story. Vladek, seated on a standing bicycle in Art's old bedroom, is asked by his son to tell him about his life in Poland and during the war, beginning with how he met Anja, Art's mother. As Vladek begins his story, a panel shows a close up image of his foot on the pedal of the bicycle and the image of the spinning wheel is transformed into a frame resembling a spotlight around an image of Vladek as a young man (*Maus* 14). The following page features a grid of panels much like the previous one except the bottom left corner is filled with a borderless image of Vladek on the bicycle, narrating the story. This sort of panel layout is used frequently throughout the text during scenes from Vladek's past. The borderless images can be large like this one, acting like another panel in the grid, or can be quite small. Sometimes they are reduced to a tiny drawing of Vladek's head accompanying his narration. Even when there is no image at all his words sometimes float freely in between the panels rather than occupying a text box.

These images serve a practical function, creating a visual distinction between Vladek in the present and his past self on pages where the reader might become confused by the shift in time. However, the complex layout of these pages also serves another purpose by visualizing the relationship between these two narratives and giving context to Vladek's memories. Because the image of Vladek in the present has no border, it appears to be a part of the background page, creating the impression that the entire page of the text is one large image in which the panels depicting Vladek's story are drawn. This serves as a constant, subtle reminder that the scenes in the past are being filtered first through Vladek's communication of them and then through Art's retelling of them on the page. The reader is continually being drawn back to the present narrative, sometimes through more overt means such as when Vladek gets sidetracked or when Art interrupts to ask him to describe something in more detail, but also through the layouts of the panels that tie the past and present narratives together. This process of retrieving and retelling memories, which is so important to the focus of the text, is built into the structure of the pages through the organization of these panels.

In *MetaMaus*, a published collection of interviews, early drafts, and notes that provide insight into the creation of *Maus*, Spiegelman discusses his choice to tell this story in this particular medium. He describes the architectural qualities of page structure, saying, "Thinking of these pages as units that have to be joined together, as if each page was some kind of building with windows in it, was something that often happens overtly in *Maus*, and sometimes is just implicit in the DNA of the medium" (*MetaMaus* 166). He gives an example of a series of pages in the text where

Vladek describes the time that he and Anja, Art's mother, spent living with her

family. A large panel shows the family at dinner, seen through the panels of the

window of their house. One the next page the lines of the windowpane are mirrored

by the grid of panels, each one revealing different characters as Vladek's narration

lists their names. This page, too, has an image of Vladek in the present, as

Spiegelman describes: "At the end of the page, that system is interrupted by an inset

of Vladek on his Exercycle, as at the top, but there's no frame around this drawing—

which allows re-entry for a moment into the present that holds that page together

as a unit." This kind of complex structure that is able to create a visual dynamic

between multiple timelines could only be accomplished in this way through a

graphic novel.

While the first volume of *Maus* primarily focuses on the intertwined "past"

and "present" narratives, the second volume introduces a new narrative thread.

Rather than depicting actual events like the present narrative showing the

conversations between Art and Vladek, or retelling Vladek's memories like the past

narrative, this section of the text offers an insight into Art's state of mind as he deals

with the success of the first volume of *Maus* and his concerns about writing its

sequel where he must depict his father's stories about Auschwitz. While this

narrative is ostensibly set in the time between the publication of the two volumes,

these pages are much more experimental and have a more surreal quality than the

rest of the text, which makes them almost seem to exist outside of a specific time.

The second chapter of this volume, called "Time Flies", begins with Art at his desk,

speaking directly to the reader. In the first few panels, he goes through a timeline of

events both in his father's life and his work on the text, including when he began work on that particular page. In these panels Art is depicted as a human wearing a mouse mask, with the back of his head and the string tying the mask to his face clearly visible (*Maus* 201). Further down the page, a larger panel reveals to the reader a jarring image of Art's desk sitting on top of a pile of the bodies of Holocaust victims, all drawn with the heads of mice. Throughout this passage, Art is shown being bombarded by camera crews and interviewers asking him about his book, visiting his therapist, Pavel, a survivor of the Holocaust, and eventually returning to work.

The dream-like imagery on these pages repurposes much of the visual imagery used previously throughout the text to give the reader some idea of Art's creative process in trying to make sense of his father's past and his own place in relation to it. The animal metaphors become masks, shown on Art, the interviewers, and his therapist, reminding the reader of the complex human beings involved in these stories. The mask also serves as a representation of Art's disconnect from his father's memories, as he struggles to visualize something that he never experienced himself. The reader is reminded that the story of Vladek's past is being told through a series of filters: his own memory, what he was able to tell Art, and what Art was able to understand and recreate on the page.

It is also important to recognize the placement of this section at the beginning of a chapter rather than by itself. As Art is shown returning to his desk and listening to a recording of his father talking about Auschwitz, the page transitions into a scene of Vladek working at the camp, with a small, borderless

drawing of Vladek's head and the floating text of his narration serving as a bridge between the panels and reintroducing the "present" narrative. In this single page, all three narrative threads are visually present on the page, something that could only be done in this way through a graphic novel. The ability to have images of the past and present side by side on the page is one of the unique advantages of this medium, and one that plays a significant role in this particular text. Spiegelman describes this quality in *MetaMaus*, saying, "In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one doesn't displace the other the way it happens in film" (165).

The interwoven structure of *Maus* that allows for the layering of three different narratives from three different times could only be crafted in this way in a graphic novel. Each narrative thread shapes and contextualizes the others so that Art's work, his relationship with his father, and his father's past can never be untangled from one another. Spiegelman utilizes this structure to create a non-fiction text in which the past can never truly be understood or imagined by those who did not experience it, nor can it be left behind by the next generation.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is another fine example of the strength of non-fiction graphic novels. *Fun Home* tells the story of Alison Bechdel's often-fraught relationship with her father, a closeted gay man who committed suicide just a few months after she came out to her parents as a lesbian. Though this text is different from *Maus* in many ways, it shares some common elements. Like Spiegelman, Bechdel uses the graphic novel to explore the complex nature of memory. She does

this, in part, through including her own reproductions of real-world documents throughout the text. Hand-written letters, detailed maps, dictionary pages dense with text are all painstakingly copied onto the page, creating a tension between these indisputable images and the panels depicting Alison's memories of her childhood. This tension between reality and one's experience of reality is built into the very structure of the book, as each chapter is prefaced with a highly detailed reproduction of Alison's family photos. Bechdel uses this visual distinction between these objective representations of her family and her own subjective depictions of their lives to mirror Alison's attempts to understand who her father was.

This tension between reality and one's experience of reality appears throughout the text. One example is found during a stage in her childhood where Alison develops obsessive-compulsive disorder and creates a series of complicated rules for herself. In her diary she begins to write the words "I think" in between each statement to safeguard the veracity of her entries. Bechdel writes, "It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those" (Bechdel 141). Alison continues this habit, eventually developing shorthand for "I think" and drawing a circumflex over any statements she wants to qualify. Soon she is drawing the symbol across entire pages of her writing: "My *I thinks* were gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified. To fortify them, I perseverated until they were dots" (142). Here Bechdel introduces this concept of "the gap between the signifier and the signified", exploring the limitations of trying to accurately document a personal experience. This idea

becomes one of the central focuses of the text as Alison struggles to understand her father and questions her previous conceptions of him. Just before Bruce Bechdel's death, Alison learns that he has been living his life as a closeted gay man, having secret affairs with young men in their town, some of whom were her babysitters. Throughout the text, she revisits her memories of him during her childhood to try to make sense of them in terms her recent revelations about his life.

Bechdel builds this question of objectivity into the structure of the book itself. *Fun Home* is not written chronologically. Instead, Bechdel tells the story in a dizzying, almost maze-like order that often circles back over particular scenes and images multiple times, each return providing new context that causes the reader to view the moment in a different light. The book is divided into chapters that organize moments from Alison's life by theme rather than years, and each chapter is prefaced by a recreation of one of her family photos, much like the letters and pages of books that Bechdel reproduces throughout the text. Photos also play an important part within the narrative, as a key section in chapter four focuses on Alison's discovery of a box of photos shortly after her father's death. These photos show her father, during his time at college. In one, he is sunbathing with friends on the roof of his fraternity house. In another he is wearing a woman's bathing suit "A fraternity prank?" Alison reflects, "But the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He's lissome, elegant" (Bechdel 120). Though she found out about her father's sexuality a few month's before his death, these photos act as a kind of revelation for Alison, giving her insight into a part of her father's life that he had kept secret from her and allowing her to imagine the kind of life he could have had.

The style of these photographs that Bechdel reproduces at the start of each chapter is very different from the artwork in the rest of the book. The bulk of the text is drawn in a cartoon-like style with clean lines and minimal shading that creates expressive, engaging characters while still remaining largely within the limits of reality in terms of exaggerated movements or faces. The drawings of the photographs, on the other hand, have a much more realistic style. Detailed shading creates a striking contrast between light and dark in these images, giving them a much more three dimensional appearance than the rest of the text. Bechdel's decision to reproduce these images instead of using photocopies creates enough consistency with the appearance of the rest of the text so that the photographs are connected to the narrative she is creating. However, the distinctive art style allows them to stand out as real world objects rather than scenes that only exist in Alison's memory. This kind of structure could only be created through a graphic novel, as the framework of the story is built around the contrasts in these drawings.

This organizing structure highlights the tension between the objective and subjective experience as one of the focuses of the text as a whole. Alison's reflections on her relationship with her father are punctuated by these photographs that symbolize the concrete facts about her family, things of which she can be sure. Each chapter begins from a place of objectivity, and then merges into Alison's subjective narrative. Alison revisits memories of her father again and again, parsing their interactions for hints of the secrets he was hiding and trying to reconcile her memory of him with this new understanding. The physical center of the novel features one large panel occupying the centerfold, showing Alison's hands holding a

photograph her father had taken of their babysitter, Roy, a young man she now realizes he was having an affair with. The placement of this picture at the center of the text, framed by Alison's hands, reinforces the idea that Alison is contrasting her personal memories of her father with these new pieces of objective information, causing her to reflect on the past in a new light.

Maus and *Fun Home* both explore the complexities of memory and the subjectivity of personal experience. They do this through stylistic elements and the organization of their texts. *Maus* uses complex page layouts to connect three distinct narrative threads and explore how we interact with memories when they are not our own. *Fun Home* uses different art styles to create a tension between reality and personal experience, questioning our ability to truly understand others. The ability of graphic novels to examine these concepts, often within the structure of the text itself, gives them a particular advantage in telling autobiographical stories, especially ones that consider the creative process of compiling a narrative, as these works do. The inclusion of this layer to the story gives these texts the opportunity to stretch beyond an individual account of the past and explore the very idea of autobiographical stories.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Role of Color and Background Design in Shaping Fiction Narratives

Beautiful Darkness by Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët and *Killing and Dying* by Adrian Tomine are fictional graphic novels that could not be more different in the narratives they present to the reader. *Beautiful Darkness* combines elements of horror and fantasy in a text that, in its physical shape and whimsical style, resembles a child's picture book more than novel. *Killing and Dying*, conversely is a collection of short stories set in present day California with a much more realistic artistic style. Both of these texts, however, utilize the color and design of the setting in their images to create a very specific tone that heavily influences the reader's experience of the story. While the color and design of the backgrounds might not jump to mind as one of the most crucial elements of storytelling, they can play a very important role in controlling the way the reader approaches the text. These two works approach this element in opposite ways: *Beautiful Darkness* features brightly colored and richly detailed backgrounds that convey the sense that the forest is as active in the narrative as the characters, sometimes even obscuring their actions. *Killing and Dying*, specifically the titular story from the collection, uses very spare backgrounds with muted colors that allow the characters to stand out sharply against their setting, creating a focus on their small, but powerful actions as well as creating a sense of isolation in the story.

 Beautiful Darkness is a deeply unsettling horror story couched in the tradition of children's books and fairy tales. It features lush, vibrant watercolor

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illustrations and its pixie-like characters appear as though they would be equally at home in *The Borrowers*. While the heavily stylized art of this book might cause readers to associate it with the simple stories of picture books, *Beautiful Darkness* is a complex narrative that leaves its readers with more questions than answers. The story centers on a group of small creatures that spill out of the body of a young girl when she falls dead on the floor of a forest and must try to survive among the dangers of the wilderness and the failings of their community. Throughout the text, background and color play a key role in each page as the dangers within the forest loom over the characters as large as the trees.

The story begins with these characters being suddenly turned out of their home in the middle of the night. When the sun rises, Princess Aurora, the story's protagonist who shares the name of the dead girl, steps out into the bright green grass that towers over her head. The panels on these initial pages are all bathed in sunlight and feature bright yellow flowers in the background. The forest appears beautiful and welcoming as the creatures begin to set up little houses among the flowers. One page in particular shows Aurora proudly looking over her work as the sun sets on their first day in the forest. As night approaches, the colors in the background begin to shift. Shadows are shown moving across the group over a series of panels until their faces are almost obscured from view (Vehlmann 20). Here the background of the panels begins to encroach on the action of the story, creating a slightly claustrophobic sense in the reader that the characters might be swallowed up by the looming darkness.

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The story stretches out over four seasons, showing this tiny society's quick dissolution into violent chaos. As the creatures begin to explore their new home, many are soon picked off by the other inhabitants of the forest. One is dragged away by an ant pile, another carried off by a bird. The plant life and creatures of the forest are typically depicted fairly realistically compared to the extremely cartoonish faces of the characters. The distinction between the level of detail in the backgrounds and the characters helps highlight how out of place these creatures are in the forest and how unequipped they are for the reality of survival.

As the situation of these characters grows worse, the beauty of the forest begins to change as well. The decaying body of the girl still rests in the center of their community, looming over every panel it occupies. Some panels depict gruesomely vivid images of the decomposition process while others simply feature the body as a silhouette in the background. The contrast of this image of death and decay against the bright, lively images of green grass and blooming flowers symbolizes the very real danger that lurks within the forest as well as the mortality of these seemingly otherworldly creatures. It also seems to suggest the capacity for darkness within these characters that soon reveals itself as the story progresses (One character, Zelie, convinces one of the other creatures to bury herself alive because she only has one eye). Like the young girl, their sweet and innocent appearance soon gives way to something dark and disturbing.

The colors of the background also shift over the course of the story. As the seasons change from summer to fall, the bright colors fade and the plants begin to die. When Aurora's dinner party quickly descends into chaos (the animals she

invited immediately devour all of the food and some of the guests), she is shown from high above in a large panel filling half of the page. She is barely discernable amidst the orange and brown leaves piled around her (61).

The background in *Beautiful Darkness*, plays an important role in creating the tone of the story. The cheerful, cartoon-like appearances of the characters disguise their capacity for cruelty, but the colors and the images in the background of these panels often convey the truth. The forces of nature present in the wilderness are harsh and unforgiving and the longer these creatures live within the forest, the more they begin to resemble the animals that threaten them, acting purely out of self-interest. The use of color and detailed background imagery throughout this text helps create a sense of dread and chaos in a way that only this form can. Even when the foliage of the forest is alive and beautiful, its constant presence is in the background

Adrian Tomine's short story *Killing and Dying* (part of a larger collection of the same name) utilizes the color and design of the backgrounds in panels as well, though to a very different end. Tomine's story focuses on the relationship between a father and his teenage daughter, Jesse, as they struggle with her mother's death. The monotone colors and sparse backgrounds of this story help convey the isolation of these characters as they struggle to connect with each other. The backgrounds in this story also utilize negative space to draw attention to even the smallest details in the foreground, helping control the pace of the narrative.

In the first half of the story the relationship between Jesse and her father is strained. She is obviously closer to her mother, who encourages her to sign up for a

comedy class, while her father is more skeptical about the idea. This scene is set in their home, where the background is a pale beige color outlined in thin, barely visible lines. This scene is heavy in dialogue with little movement by the characters. The pale color of the background, however, allows the more vivid colors of Jesse and her parents to stand out, drawing attention to small details in their expressions that bring this scene to life.

The background of the panels also plays an important role in the scenes when Jesse is performing stand up in front of an audience. Jesse is isolated in the panels, with no other characters within the frame and no background aside from a very pale brick wall. In between each joke there is a blank panel, a single monotone square with the audience's response written in the center. The empty space in these scenes, both in the panels featuring Jesse and the text panels, slows the pacing of this scene to a crawl. The reader feels Jesse's anxiety as she waits to see how she will be received. Each positive response ("uproarious laughter") is a relief and each negative response ("scattered sounds of disapproval, increasing chatter") is crushing.

Gradually, Tomine reveals to the reader that Jesse's mother is terminally ill. Though it is never stated explicitly, she arrives at one of Jesse's performances using a cane and wearing a scarf around her now bald head. After a fraught scene in which Jesse's parents take her out to dinner after her performance, there is a gap, a small break in the grid of panels that the reader has become accustomed to and the story jumps forward in time, showing Jesse and her father after her mother has passed away (though, again, this is never explicitly stated in the text). Negative space

shapes the readers experience in this part of the story as well. The simple and familiar grid layout of each page is suddenly broken, halting the pace of the story. The actual events of the mother's death and her family's response are omitted from the page. The negative space here has a powerful effect, conveying this devastating moment with a simple break in the row of panels.

The story continues when Jesse and her father have just begun to move on from their loss. Their relationship has not improved much over the course of the story. The scenes of dialogue between the Jesse and her father never feature them in the same panel. This gives the impression that Jesse and her father exist in isolation, separated from each other by the frames of their panels. The colors and backgrounds in this text remain simple and muted. In the final panels of the story, however, a moment of connection occurs. Jesse returns home from a performance at a comedy club to find her father with a bruise on his forehead and his hair disheveled (having secretly gone to watch her performance and witnessed her failure, he returned home and began hitting his head against the wall. Jesse lies and tells him her performance went well, and he congratulates her. In this moment they are both shown clearly in the same frame as Jesse reaches out across the empty space to fix her dad's hair (Tomine 108). This simple gesture finally physically connects these two characters in an act of affection.

The use of muted colors and empty space in the background of this story plays a crucial role in the pacing of the narrative as well as conveying the isolation of these characters as they try to improve their relationship. Unlike *Beautiful Darkness*, it is the absence of detail and color in the background of this story that creates tone

and offers insight into the characters. In graphic novels, the absence of an image can work just as powerfully as an eye-catching panel.

Though these two texts are very different from each other in terms of their content and style, they both provide excellent examples of the way that fictional graphic novels can utilize elements like color and stylized backgrounds to create meaning in the text and add layers to their narrative. Color is used much less frequently in graphic novels than the more traditional black and white palette, but as shown through these examples a color palette and the level of detail used in the backgrounds of panels can be very influential in symbolizing the way that characters relate to the world around them. In graphic novels, even less overt visual elements like these can be used to shape the narrative and create meaning.

CONCLUSION

The graphic novel originated as a descendent of comic books and the work of underground comics artists, but has emerged as its own distinct literary form, equally deserving of critical reading and examination as traditional novels. Through its tools for shaping narrative like page layout, physical structure, and art style it can be used to create fresh and engaging stories that interact with the reader in unique ways.

The graphic novel is a new and exciting form of literature that offers numerous possibilities for innovative storytelling. Because of its ability to combine different styles and subvert more traditional forms of storytelling, this medium can continue to grow and reinvent itself, introducing new ways to interact with narratives and create complex meaning in a story. Having only been around for a few decades, graphic novels have already proven their ability to engage with different genres and tell powerful stories that could not exist in the same way in any other format.

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