

Of *Maus* and *Gen*: Author Avatars in Nonfiction Comics

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In many ways, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* appear to be literary siblings. While of different national as well as cultural origins, both works have their roots in the 1970s; both redefined the notion of comics by demonstrating the medium's compatibility with such serious subjects as world history and historical trauma; and both provided autobiographical accounts by featuring their authors on the page. And yet, the two canonic texts could not be more different in their stylistic approaches. Not only with regard to the cultural traditions out of which *Maus* (American comics) and *Gen* (Japanese manga) grew, but also in terms of how the artists depict themselves and what functions their avatars have within the respective work. Spiegelman brings himself explicitly to the fore in a highly self-reflexive fashion, following the autobiographical tradition of U.S. independent comics. Nakazawa, by contrast, rather withdraws himself by replacing his original stand-in from the earlier work *I Saw It*, "Keiji," with the heroic kid Gen.

This essay investigates instances where authors of nonfiction comics insert themselves into their works via avatar characters -- a narrative device that corresponds to the traditionally foregrounded role of the creator-artist in the comics medium. In tracing the evolution of author representations in nonfiction comics, I will create links to Bill Nichols's classification of various modes of documentary film. While there have been efforts to transfer Nichols's concept to comics (Adams, 2008; Lefèvre, 2013), none of them has focused specifically on the aspect of the author avatar in this context. A particularity of the comics medium, the author avatar essentially distinguishes itself from forms of self-representation in other media, as akin as they may seem.

In addition to Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) and Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* (1973-1985) and *I Saw It* (1972), I will look at *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1931) by Henry Kiyama, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2002), Brian Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* (2007), and Joe Sacco's comics journalism in *Palestine* (1993-1995). My samples are not so much meant to simply represent some of the most prominent, and well-studied, instances from the comics canon. Rather, my case studies aim to demonstrate that author avatars have evolved over time, becoming essential features of the category "graphic narrative."

Author Avatars in Autobiographical Comics

At least since the late Middle Ages, the insertion of self-portraits in paintings has been a way to signify authorship and provide an artwork with a visual signature (Hall, 2014). With the emergence of comics as a form of popular entertainment, questions of authorship have come to meet the logics of consumer culture. The producers of comics have always fostered the notion of the “original artist” in an attempt to set themselves apart from models of anonymously produced mass culture. Although they are the products of assembly-line-type collaborative processes, Superman as well as Batman were initially marketed partly through the “labels” of their creators (Stein, 2015:162). Clearly, this strategy was meant to create an intimate bond between comics and their readers, and it obscured the meaning of comics as a commodity.

In the early 1970s, the U.S. Underground Comix movement established itself in opposition to the media industries altogether, embracing DIY practices along with the idea of the “lone cartoonist,” as Charles Hatfield puts it, “the notion of a poetic ethos of individual expression” (Hatfield, 2005:21). Many artists in the alternative comics scene centered their works on themselves, their biography, and their everyday lives. In this sense, Justin Green’s graphic novella *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) and Robert Crumb’s cartoon strip *The Confessions of R. Crumb* (1972) were groundbreaking for the dissemination of author avatars through what Jared Gardner describes as “a powerful wave of autobiography” (2008:14) that erupted from the U.S. Underground Comix tradition.

The confessional rhetoric so prominent in both Green’s and Crumb’s comics (as well as works by artists in the wake of the two—from Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Harvey Pekar to Alison Bechdel and Joe Matt) clearly suggest a certain degree of emotional exhibitionism that may be correlated to the artists’ aspirations to break with taboos. “The pioneers of comix,” notes Hatfield, “were self-styled hipsters and iconoclasts who both rejected and built on prior traditions” (2005:18). Thus, while the self-depiction in comics has been a way to enter the public discourse as well as to claim control over one’s role as author and media creator in an artful fashion, the works of Crumb & Co. may similarly be understood as unfolding neurotic tendencies.

Of course, as Daniel Stein points out, we must avoid the fallacy of interpreting the avatar “R. Crumb” depicted in Crumb’s *Confessions* as the real person, Robert Crumb. Rather, the self-insertion constitutes a narrative “gesture” whereby the author avatar becomes an element within the creator’s artistic arsenal to toy with the possibilities the comics medium has to offer (2009:212-213). And yet, even as comics pronounced themselves grown-up, author avatars and autobiography have remained vital narrative vehicles for the creators of nonfiction comics.

At times this may come close to obsessive behavior. For comics artists like Spiegelman, it seems to be an urge to insert their avatars within their works, a fashion the author of *Maus* acknowledges in a self-conscious way in his post-9/11 work *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). The fragmented composition of *No Towers* includes a four-panel strip entitled “Notes of a Heartbroken Narcissist,” next to an arresting image where we see Spiegelman’s mouse persona sitting at his desk, totally exhausted from the 9/11 turbulences, surrounded by tiny characters from the world of comics, and flanked by caricatures of Osama Bin Laden and then-US President George W. Bush (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Spiegelman’s mouse persona at his drawing board. *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Spiegelman, 2004:n.pag.).

Nichols's Seven Modes of Documentary Film (Reconsidered)

Film and comics are sister mediums in that both might be considered sequential units of images, with the traditional analog film roll functioning as an extensive "comic" played at high speed (McCloud, 1994 [1993]:8). The ways filmmakers have employed framing and editing techniques have been adopted by comics artists -- and vice versa. Will Eisner, for instance, remarked that the visual language of film was an important influence on his graphic style and on his use of perspective in individual panels (Eisner, 2001:153).

To be sure, we cannot simply equate comics with film. In this sense, Eisner also pointed to the difference of size: in film, each frame has the same measures, while in comics, the size of the panels varies according to the design chosen by the creator (Eisner, 2001:153). However, to better understand the constitution of nonfiction comics it is helpful to look at film theory first. In fact, while nonfiction comics, due to their form as drawn images, are necessarily always "unrealistic" representations of the real world, their filmic counterpart is the documentary film (cf. Mickwitz, 2016:6-7).

Building on his earlier study *Representing Reality* (1991), Bill Nichols identifies seven modes of documentary filmmaking in *Introduction to Documentary* (2001; 3rd ed., 2017). These modes constitute points of reference rather than absolute attributions. Most documentary films refuse to conform to a specific category but are volatile in this regard; they blur the lines of distinction (Nichols, 2017:104). Nichols characterizes his first mode of representation, the *poetic* mode, by its pronounced artistic approach towards the historical world -- a style that might be associated with modernist avant-garde films: Little or no elaboration of social actors is taking place; filmic conventions such as continuing editing are suspended in favor of the film's aesthetic effort (Nichols, 2017:116). The next mode, which Nichols calls *expository*, subscribes to a rhetorical, argumentative logic: While the editing supports an argument or perspective, it is meant to suggest objectivity. The viewer is addressed in a direct fashion, often through titles and an authoritative voice-over narrator (Nichols, 2017:123). Nichols's third mode is called *reflexive* because it self-consciously addresses the problem of representing reality: The mode "deconstructs the impression of unimpeded access to reality and invites us to reflect on the process by which this impression is itself constructed through editing" (Nichols, 2017:125).

Unlike the three aforementioned modes, the *observational* mode conceals the agency of the filmmaker: Adopting a fly-on-the-wall perspective, the observational mode implies to have merely recorded what was happening anyway. At best, this might provoke uncomfortable ethical questions and point to issues such as the voyeurism involved in the process of watching others on screen (Nichols, 2017:133). The *participatory* mode,

by contrast, highlights the filmmaker's presence, perspective, and persuasion. Participatory documentaries highlight the relationship between the filmmaker and the film's subjects as a form of "interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera" (Nichols, 2017:143). Among the indicators of the participatory mode are the filmmaker's off-camera voice or, as a special case, on-camera presence (which can be viewed as being related to the author avatar discussed in the following). Prominent examples of the participatory mode are the works by Nick Broomfield, who is known for his first-person investigations in films such as "Kurt & Courtney" (1998), and Michael Moore, whose on-camera presence and "ambush interview" style (Nichols, 2017:141) in "Roger & Me" (1989) or "Bowling for Columbine" (2002) have become little less than signature traits (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Michael Moore in "Roger & Me" (Moore 1989: 00:44:46).

The *performative* mode emphasizes the subjective nature of lived reality, thus addressing the viewer on an emotional level. What we might similarly call the postmodern approach of documentary filmmaking is, as Nichols puts it, "less about history than memory, less about history from above -- what happened when and why -- and more about history from below -- what one person might experience and what it might feel like to undergo that experience" (Nichols, 2017:153). Performative documentaries typically offer a corrective to dominant truths. The filmmaker empathizes with, and gives voice, to marginalized people or groups, answering "less to a persuasive goal than an affective one" (Nichols, 2017:151).

Nichols's seventh mode, the *interactive* mode, plays only a minor role in his classification. According to Nichols, it should be used to describe the viewer's interactive engagement with a documentary through digital technology (Nichols, 2017:23). Hence I will not discuss it in the present essay. It should be noted, however, that digital/web comics certainly provide powerful opportunities here. Furthermore, we might think of comics as a form of representation that demands reader engagement, and thus as interactive *per se* (McCloud, 1994 [1993]:37).

In order to emphasize the particularities of the comics medium, I will replace Nichols's interactive mode by what I will call the *operational mode* as a possible seventh category. Here, I am drawing on Jason Mittell's adaptation of Neil Harris's (1973) account of P. T. Barnum's funhouse attractions in the context of what Mittell dubs "complex" TV series (those in the vein of *24* or *Breaking Bad*). The operational mode in comics may similarly refer to the formal "special effects" and "moments of spectacle" (Mittell, 2015:42) that make readers adopt an analytical lens, letting them take pleasure in *how* a certain scene works. In this study, I will use the category to analyze moments of formal finesse in nonfiction comics featuring author avatars.

According to Nichols, the emergence of different documentary modes is somewhat related to technological developments (the invention of the hand-held camera, for instance, inspired filmmakers to be more intrusive and interventionist). Comics artists, by contrast, have always been able to take advantage of the freedoms drawing has to offer. Nonetheless, we see a trajectory here in terms of an increasing level of self-presentation and stylistic sophistication, an evolutionary process that I will outline in the following pages.

Nichols's Work in the Context of Comics Studies

Despite its merits, Nichols's typology has received much criticism. Stella Bruzzi (2000), for instance, highlights the evolutionary process Nichols may have implied in his concept, as well as the ambiguity his models seem to suggest (that Nichols has reformulated parts of his terminology from time to time has not really helped to improve this). In his study of documentary comics, Jeff Adams follows Bruzzi's critique, pointing out that "the overlaps [between Nichols's categories] are so ubiquitous that his whole classification system becomes redundant" (2008:56). Adams argues that Nichols's model might be applicable to *Maus*, *Barefoot Gen*, or *Palestine*, but that an application to *Persepolis*, for example, "reveals the limitations to which Bruzzi alerts us" (Adams, 2008:57).

Rather than reiterating those shortcomings, this study takes advantage of Nichols's concept. That Nichols avoids clear definitions for his categories

might count as a flaw. On the other hand, his model offers an elastic, and nuanced, framework that allows us to draw comparisons and learn more about the overlaps as well as distinctions between the two media, comics and film. If Nichols's concepts were more categorical, they would be less useful for the transmedia study to be carried out here.

In looking for narrow definitions of Nichols's modes, Adams correctly observes that documentary comics featuring author avatars, like *Maus* or *Barefoot Gen*, match the participatory mode (Adams, 2008:56). For Nichols, the participatory mode "is the opposite of the observational premise that what we see is what we would have seen had we been there. In participatory documentary, what we see is what we can see only when a camera, or filmmaker, is there instead of ourselves" (Nichols, 2017:143). In an application of Nichols's concept, all comics featuring an avatar that signifies the author's presence would be to some degree participatory.

However, such an *a priori* categorization is problematic because it obscures the particularities of the comics medium vis-à-vis the photographic realism of film. Since its inception, comics have featured what Coulton Waugh (1947:14) has called "continuing characters" as an element that strengthens the medium's affinity towards seriality. If the prototype of the continuing character, Richard F. Outcault's Yellow Kid, served as a "narrator or emcee" (Singsen, n.d.: "Content Suggestions"), this function has persisted in nonfiction graphic narratives featuring an "author-as-narrator" that "guides the reader" through the graphic story (Adams, 2008:57). This is to say, serial characters such as The Yellow Kid or Batman (our "heroes") have become archetypal of the comics medium, so that author avatars like that of Joe Sacco might be perceived as much more "natural," and thus less disruptive than, say, Michael Moore's notorious on-camera appearances.

Similarly, Pascal Lefèvre notes that Nichols's observational mode does not really apply to the comics medium because the form of drawing necessarily involves actions of authorial intervention (Lefèvre, 2013:56). Drawn by an artist of some kind, comics have necessarily a subjective quality. By definition, nonfiction comics cannot be "objective" accounts of the real world; rather, they imply human agency through the depiction of that world. However, we may claim the same thing about filmic representations. And just like documentary film, we may read some comics as speaking more than others to the issue of objectivity through their stylistic approach.

Hatfield observes about author avatars that their insertion "among other figures within a visual narrative confers an illusion of objectivity" (Hatfield, 2005:115). Authorial self-images, in this sense, are the result of an externalization process through which the comics artist "objectifies him or her[self]" (often by means of self-caricature), "achieving at once intimacy and critical distance" (Hatfield, 2005:115). In this relation, Michael Chaney reminds us of comics' hybrid nature as image-texts. On a visual level (that is,

detached from first-person captions), author avatars, which Chaney suitably refers to as “I-cons,” are “visual figures scarcely different from any other represented object.” In contrast to the narrating “I” of written autobiography, author avatars in comics are predominantly “on view, being viewed rather than revealing the view” (Chaney, 2016:23-24).

The Four Immigrants Manga as Observational Documentary Comic Book

Printed in San Francisco in 1931, Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama's *Four Immigrants Manga* is among the first book-length comics or “graphic novels.” In addition, it might similarly be the first proper comic book that features an author avatar. Kiyama's work received the scholarly attention it deserved only in the late 1990s, through the research of Frederik L. Schodt. The publication history of *The Four Immigrants Manga* is one of setbacks and strong will. After Kiyama had arrived in San Francisco, where he attended the Art Institute, he became interested in newspaper cartoons and began creating a comic series about his personal experience as a Japanese immigrant to America. Originally, Kiyama intended to publish his comics as newspaper comics strips, but no publisher showed interest. Blessed with conviction and stamina, Kiyama self-published the comic in an integrated 104-page volume (Schodt, 1999:10-13).

What is striking about *The Four Immigrants Manga* is that Kiyama refuses to put his avatar “Henry” center stage. In fact, the avatar is hardly distinguishable from the other main protagonists Fred, Frank, and Charlie. While Kiyama's avatar appears on several panels, it seems to rank on the same level as his fellow immigrants. This differs greatly from many later forms of self-representation by comics artists who would put their avatars center-stage.

I am aware of the problems of reading *The Four Immigrants Manga* in terms of Nichols's observational mode. In applying the observational mode to comics, Lefèvre notes, we can only speak of a “pseudo-observational” mode “because there is no camera to register directly the world” (Lefèvre, 2013:56). Consequently, for Lefèvre, what comes closest to Nichols's observational mode in comics would be a pronounced realistic style that suggests a “plausible representation of what may be a real life sequence” (Lefèvre, 2013:56). But realism is not necessarily the decisive factor here. Much more important for my approach to the observational mode in the context of nonfiction comics with author avatars are degrees of subjectivity versus objectivity. Drawing on the work of Gérard Genette (1988), Kai Mikkonen uses the term *perceptual focalization* to describe visual markers signifying subjective perspective in comics. For Mikkonen, point-of-view

(POV) or over-the-shoulder images are evident markers that create the impression of sharing a character's field of vision; perhaps more subtly, what Mikkonen calls the “gaze image” refers to pictures that show a character “looking at something,” thus evoking subjectivity (Mikkonen, 2015:103).



Fig. 3. Henry Kiyama as himself in *The Four Immigrants Manga* (Kiyama, 1999:42).

Therefore, Kiyama's narrative does, of course, not represent what we may describe as a fly-on-the-wall point of view. And yet the subjectivity of Kiyama's avatar is extremely downplayed. “Henry” only has a few appearances throughout the comic and conforms to the comic's overall

simplified style. He does not stand out in any specific way, not even in an abstract, caricaturesque sense. Moreover, aesthetic techniques that would reinforce a subjective perspective (close-ups, over-the-shoulder images, and so forth) are completely absent. Instead, the comic is governed by a coherent pattern of six same-sized panels per page -- the comic's reduced aesthetic provides a distanced, wide-shot perspective that reveals most of the character's bodily features.

The reader only learns about the thoughts or feelings of a character through dialogue or one of the rare instances of thinking, as it appears in the last panel of Fig. 3. But even Henry's thinking is represented through regular speech balloons (actually, it could be words uttered by the character); the entire level of language seems to be confined to the intradiegetic space. This authorial restraint may be read in terms of Nichols's characterization of the observational mode in that the filmmaker gives up full control of sound and refrains from voice-over, but rather restricts herself to passive observation. This extends to the visual representation of language in that Kiyama originally mixed English and Japanese without any comments or authorial annotations. (Translator Schodt aimed to compensate this by representing the Japanese parts through upper and lower case print lettering typical of that era while leaving Kiyama's original handwritten lettering unchanged for the English parts.)

From *I Saw It* to *Barefoot Gen*: Keiji Nakazawa and the Participatory Mode

"Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation," writes Nichols (2017:139). Films following this mode situate the filmmaker as "social actor" similar to the other subjects (as in the scene from Michael Moore's "Roger & Me" in Fig. 2). Of course, such a form of direct engagement is not possible in the comics form, where the "given situation" and the "social" act of documenting the artist's role through the drawing process are spatially and temporally separated.

Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* (original appearance 1973-1985) may still count as a case of the participatory mode. Especially interesting, in this regard, is Nakazawa's departure from his self-portrayal as a six-year-old child who rather passively witnesses the atomic bombing on Hiroshima in *Barefoot Gen*'s forerunner, *I Saw It* (original appearance 1972). Here, the author avatar, "Keiji," is depicted as impotent vis-à-vis the realities of war and, in particular, his survival of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (Fig. 4).

This changes as Nakazawa decided to replace his author persona from *I Saw It* with Gen. On the back sleeve of the American edition of *I Saw It*, Nakazawa writes: "Gen's family and the other characters in the story are

all people who really existed. Gen is myself" (Nakazawa, 1982:n.pag.). If Nakazawa depicted himself as rather passive in *I Saw It*, his alter ego, Gen, plays a very active -- participatory -- part in *Barefoot Gen*.



Fig. 4. Keiji Nakazawa depicts himself witnessing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in *I Saw It* (Nakazawa 1982:n.pag.).

A pertinent example here is to be found in how *Barefoot Gen* remakes scenes from *I Saw It*. (Note the similar mise-en-scène: the completely destroyed cityscape of Hiroshima, the zombie-like creatures that have been burned by the nuclear blast.) As we can understand from the aforementioned moment in *I Saw It*, Keiji was certainly overwhelmed and paralyzed by the shock of the nuclear blast. He stands motionless and screams in the face of the "living hell" surrounding him (Nakazawa, 2004:n.pag.). Gen, by contrast, seems to be in control of himself. Throughout the pages following the nuclear strike, we see him running and helping others -- for example, when he fetches water for a man who was severely burnt (Fig. 5).

The participatory mode informing this scene is supported by the drawing style of *Barefoot Gen*, which is much more manga-esque (with exaggerated movements, speed lines, and physical humor) than *I Saw It*. Through his re-enactment -- with Gen as a stand-in--Nakazawa chose to deviate from the horrible realities, perhaps to make the traumatic experience a little less unbearable. Thus, Nakazawa lets Gen run home after the blast and arrive in time to assist his mother in trying to help the rest of the family escape the ruins. Albeit unsuccessfully in the end, this instance of "historical correction"

perhaps helped to cushion the traumatic reality, where the author was not able to reach his dying family. The only survivor he would find was his mother.

This focus on action and on envisioning Gen, in the words of one of the translators, as “a sort of little superhero” (qtd. in Adams, 2008:63), is carried forward throughout *Barefoot Gen*. Consider, for instance, when Gen bites off the finger of a military official who has hit his sister. It seems like a desire for Nakazawa to install Gen retrospectively as some powerful, rebellious agent that is able to lessen at least some of the horrors and injustices of war.



Fig. 5. The same scene remodeled in *Barefoot Gen* (Nakazawa, 2004:254-255).

I Saw It also covers Nakazawa's decision to become a cartoonist and comics activist. Facing the ashes of his dead mother, Nakazawa depicts himself as he reaches the decision to “draw cartoons about the atomic bomb” in order to fight the primitivism of nuclear warfare, to “destroy it through cartoons!!!” (Nakazawa, 1982:n.pag.). This attempt to fight against nuclear weapons by means of cartoons was realized with *Barefoot Gen*.

Indeed, after its release, *Barefoot Gen* became a staple in Japanese school libraries (Nakazawa, 2010:177), and it is still part of the pop culture socialization of countless Japanese children today. Outside of Japan, *Gen* gained popularity as well. In the United States, Educocomics published it together with *I Saw It* in the early 1980s, including order forms for teachers to get copies of the comics and promotional posters. Both *I Saw It* and *Barefoot Gen* have shown how comics can be used as pedagogical tool to teach school children in Japan and elsewhere about the dread of atomic warfare as well as the effects of unbound patriotism. By aligning *Barefoot Gen* with the participatory mode, Nakazawa turns his avatar, Gen, into an agent for his

comics activism.

The Masked Artist: Self-Reflexivity in *Maus*

Art Spiegelman came across *Barefoot Gen* when *Maus* was still in its early stages (Spiegelman, 2004:n.pag.). *Gen* must have reassured him that the comics medium provides a suitable vehicle to approach the abysses of history through an autobiographical lens, the very approach Spiegelman had originally adopted from the offensive, and often grotesquely humorous, Underground Comix tradition.

The relationship to Underground Comix also manifests itself in Spiegelman's negotiation of his role as an egocentric identity. Stein (2009:215) mentions the ambiguous role of “Artie,” Spiegelman's avatar in *Maus*. “Artie” signifies at once *Maus*'s autobiographical narrator who tells his father's memoirs, a character within the story itself, and a stand-in for the empirical author Art Spiegelman. This nexus becomes even more complex when *Maus* references previous work by “Artie,” i.e., Spiegelman. An impressive example here is the “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” comic strip about the suicide of Spiegelman's mother (Spiegelman, 1997:n.pag. [102-105]). Having appeared prior to *Maus* in an underground publication, the four-page strip is embedded in *Maus* as a comic-within-a-comic whose expressionist woodcut aesthetic stands in contrast to the overall rough visual language of *Maus*.

Spiegelman's author avatar reinforces the self-reflexive mode of *Maus*. This becomes especially striking when Spiegelman departs from his general practice of presenting his avatar, just like the other protagonists in the fable world that is *Maus*, in animal form. Early on in *Maus II*, he chooses to insert a “humanized” version of himself that wears a mouse mask (complete with rubber band). As illustrated in Fig. 6, Spiegelman depicts “Artie” -- that is, himself -- sitting at his drawing board. The scene reveals a psychological view of the artist as a depressed person who feels guilty because the critical and commercial success of his work, *Maus*, is based on the collective horrors and individual tragedies related to the Holocaust. (Artie/Spiegelman is depicted as sitting on top of a pile of mouse corpses, thus creating a strong metaphor.)

Lefèvre asserts that Nichols's self-reflexive category is not very useful in the context of comics due to the medium's nature as an anti-illusionist form of representation. In other words, because the drawing associated with comics contrasts with photorealism, all comics are to a certain degree reflexive (Lefèvre, 2013:53). This may be true. Yet, as demonstrated by *Maus*, there are certainly comics, and especially scenes within individual comics, that are more self-reflexive than others.

By tapping into the theme of the artist reflecting on his own working



Fig. 6. Artie/Spiegelman wearing a mouse mask in *Maus II* (Spiegelman, 1996:201).

conditions, Spiegelman followed the confessional rhetoric exhibited by cartoonists of the Underground Comix era. Through “Artie,” he adopts the gesture of positioning himself as a “postmodern” author, thereby acknowledging his status as media figure, as well as reclaiming multiple forms

of authorship that are self-consciously displayed (Stein, 2009:211). The scene of “Artie” sitting at his drawing board displays this self-reflexivity, for it comments on Spiegelman’s situation as a celebrated and critically acclaimed comics artist who feels emotionally corrupt about his work. As Spiegelman noted, this situation led to “a kind of breakdown” (Spiegelman 2011:146), which he incorporated in a meta-narrative fashion by reflecting the process of creating the very work the reader is looking at (Chaney, 2016:127).

Spiegelman intensifies this self-reflexive mode at work in *Maus* when his avatar directly addresses the reader face-to-face in the fourth panel. By breaking the imagined fourth wall, he once more emphasizes a confessional moment through his avatar, the figure that not only guides the reader through the narrative of *Maus* but also informs us about *Maus*’s genesis.

The Expository Mode of “Comics Prof.” Scott McCloud

The aforementioned moment when “Artie,” wearing a mouse mask, directly addresses the reader is exceptional and noteworthy about *Maus*. Indeed, if not used sparsely, the effect of breaking the fourth wall loses its power as a narrative device. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994 [1993]) takes advantage of this principle. McCloud’s avatar speaking directly to the reader constitutes *Understanding Comics*’s primary form of performance, which signals the absence of dramatic narrative and, instead, reinforces the book’s nonfictional, educational purpose to be a “metacomix” about the comics medium itself (Bachmann, 2016:107).



Fig. 7. McCloud’s avatar explaining the reasons for his look in *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1994 [1993]:36).

Couched in the rhetoric of an entertaining lecture, *Understanding Comics* adopts a didactic approach that conforms to the expository mode in Nichols’s taxonomy. For Nichols, the expository mode is the most prevalent

in documentary film; it aspires to convey an argument as clearly as possible. Typical of the expository mode is the nondiegetic voice of commentary that instructs, illuminates, and illustrates (Nichols 2017:122).



Fig. 8. McCloud's avatar gives a lecture about the function of the gutter in comics (McCloud, 1994 [1993]:61).

While *Understanding Comics* is in many ways self-reflexive, pointing to the medium's formal qualities and almost endless possibilities, it also contains scenes that conform to the self-reflexive mode as discussed above, such as when in the book's introduction we see McCloud speaking about his project to create a comic about comics. However, for the most part, McCloud's treatise about the evolution and ontology of the comics medium is expository, with McCloud's avatar adopting the role of the reader's authority, teacher, and veritable comics "professor."

Although mostly on view, and thus intradiegetic, McCloud's avatar is able to jump back and forth in terms of time and space. He might be depicted in front of an empty background elaborating on a certain topic in one panel, just to illustrate his argument by moving to a completely different setting in the next. This consequent rejection of "realism" is part of the avatar's omnipotent function to be supportive of the argument. It corresponds with the way McCloud designed his avatar in juxtaposition to a "realistic" self-portrayal. Being simplified in his style the avatar does not distract from the message McCloud wants to convey, as he himself notes (Fig. 7). In addition, the avatar's opaque glasses, just like those of Joe Sacco's discussed below, signal a meta level, placing McCloud (as well as Sacco) above the comic's story -- in both functions, as comics creator as well as lecturer (or journalist). In fact, by featuring his cartoony self-portrait in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud created an iconic character in the pantheon of comics, along the aliases of Spiegelman, Nakazawa, or Sacco.

That the author avatar is an inherent element of the expository mode of *Understanding Comics* manifests itself throughout McCloud's book. An illustrative example is when McCloud gives a lecture about the phenomenon of the "gutter" -- what is happening outside of the frames of the individual panels (Fig. 8). The scene starts with an imaginary anecdote and a child version of McCloud, then shows McCloud's avatar at his drawing board. Typical of the expository mode of *Understanding Comics*, the avatar not only introduces the argument but turns into an object within McCloud's demonstration of that argument.

Looking through the Eyes of a Traumatized Girl: *Persepolis's* Performative Dimension

In her seminal book *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute examines comics autobiographies by female artists. Following a lineage of female autobiographical comics from Aline Kominsky-Crumb to Alison Bechdel, Chute's study analyzes how female comics artists often use childhood memories, tied to traumatic experiences, as the narrative center of their autobiographical explorations.¹ This is also true for the French-Iranian

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (original appearance 2000-2002), which "bridges the narrative-focused testimonies of Sacco and Spiegelman and the child-oriented testimonies of many American women authors" (Chute, 2010:135).

What is particularly fascinating about *Persepolis* is that the perspective of Satrapi as a child is reflected not only through the child avatar "Marji," but also through *Persepolis*'s visual style at large, which expresses a "radical disjuncture" between the minimalism of the drawings and the imagination and witnessing of violence in revolution-shaken Iran (Satrapi, 2000:146). As Chute observes about the style of *Persepolis*, it is rather "simple," but it effectively captures Marji's child perspective through a reduced yet expressionist, monochromatic woodcut aesthetic that integrates elements of Persian art (Satrapi, 2000:144-145).

More specifically, *Persepolis*'s style conveys what Chute calls "child's-eye rendition of trauma" (Chute, 2010:147). Through its visuals, Satrapi succeeds in expressing the thoughts of a puzzled girl who finds herself in a world she does "not quite yet grasp" (Chute, 2010:147). Themes like state-driven terror, persecution, and torture impact domestic life during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a political climate that is indeed hard to grasp (not just, but especially, for a little child). Chute perceptively notes that *Persepolis*'s black-and-white contrasts often mark distortions between things unimaginable for a child and Marji's everyday surroundings: "[In *Persepolis*,] the location of horror is in the everyday" (Chute, 2010:151).

I agree with Lefèvre, who calls *Persepolis* primarily performative because "it is presented as if seen through the eyes of a young girl, Marjane Satrapi, but in fact it is the adult Satrapi who recreates or 're-enacts' this in her comic" (Lefèvre, 2013: 57). Moreover, *Persepolis*'s style in combination with the avatar's child perspective addresses us primarily on an emotional rather than on a factual level by creating "intimacy" (Etter, 2017). The affective tone of the comic corresponds to Nichols's characterization of the performative mode, namely to move its audience into "alignment or affinity" with specific subjective, and often marginalized, perspectives (Nichols, 2017:152).

The performative mode in *Persepolis* becomes evident in a scene in which Marji overhears a witness account by a former political prisoner and friend of her family, who describes how one of his comrades was tortured and did not survive his time in prison. In a non-framed panel, we encounter at once the scene where the friend narrates what has happened, with Marji standing by, as well as depictions representing Marji's imagination of what the witness reports to her parents: a torturer fiercely whipping a man bound to a table, urinating onto his wounded back, and pressing a flatiron onto the man's back. The bottom of the page features a narrow panoramic panel showing Marji at the right-hand side, glancing at the Satrapi household iron exposed



Fig. 9. Marji's imagination of torture scenes in *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2000:n.pag.).

by an open door that divides the panel into three parts. Through the caption, the autobiographer, Marjane Satrapi, comments on the scene in retrospective: "Jamais je n'aurais pensé qu'on pouvait utiliser cet appareil pour torturer" -- "I had never imagined that you could use that tool for torture" (Fig. 9). Indeed, with what Marji just has heard and imagined, her perspective will never be the same again. Her "innocent" child perspective, represented by

the “naive” drawing style, is corrupted by the perversities of the adult world. To put it in Chute’s words: “The open door in the exact center of this panel that graphically divides Marji from the iron at which she stares will never, it is suggested, be closed” (Chute, 2010:151).

It Feels Like a Dream: The Poetic Mode in Brian Talbot’s *Alice in Sunderland*

As Lefèvre recapitulates, Nichols’s poetic mode “explores associations and patterns” rather than causal continuity (Lefèvre, 2013:54). To transfer this notion to the comics medium, Lefèvre takes the example of Olivier Bramanti’s three-page 1996 comic *Réseaux*, which provides several bird’s-eye snapshots of the city of Marseille in comics form, complete with captions in which a first-person narrator talks about his orientation in the city. Though fragmented, the panels seem to comprise a rather organic composition whose “variations from one panel to another,” for Lefèvre, “suggest almost a musical rhythm” (Lefèvre, 2013:54).



Fig. 10. Bryan Talbot’s multi-faced avatar in *Alice in Sunderland* (Talbot, 2007:184-185).

A related yet much more complex project was realized a decade later in Brian Talbot’s *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* (2007). In this comic, Talbot tells the story of the English region of Sunderland and its relationship to Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland*. Henry Jenkins (forthcoming) describes *Sunderland*’s aesthetic in terms of “radical

intertextuality,” referring to the comic’s assemblage of history and fiction that creates a collage of various artifacts from Western cultural history, including the British Music Hall tradition, Harry Potter, and Marilyn Manson.

Certainly, large parts of *Alice* are highly self-reflexive in that they explicitly deal with issues of the creative process of drawing comics -- in fact, with drawing *Sunderland* itself. These moments in *Sunderland* are supported by various avatars Talbot uses to negotiate his dual identity as author and narrator (Fig. 10). The multi-faced avatar in *Sunderland* is clearly informed by those iconic author avatars I have discussed above, like McCloud’s lecturer or Spiegelman’s mouse alter ego. In fact, on several occasions, Talbot depicts one of his avatars with a rabbit mask, thus referring not only to *Alice*’s White Rabbit but also to Spiegelman’s mouse mask; Scott McCloud even has a proper cameo appearance.

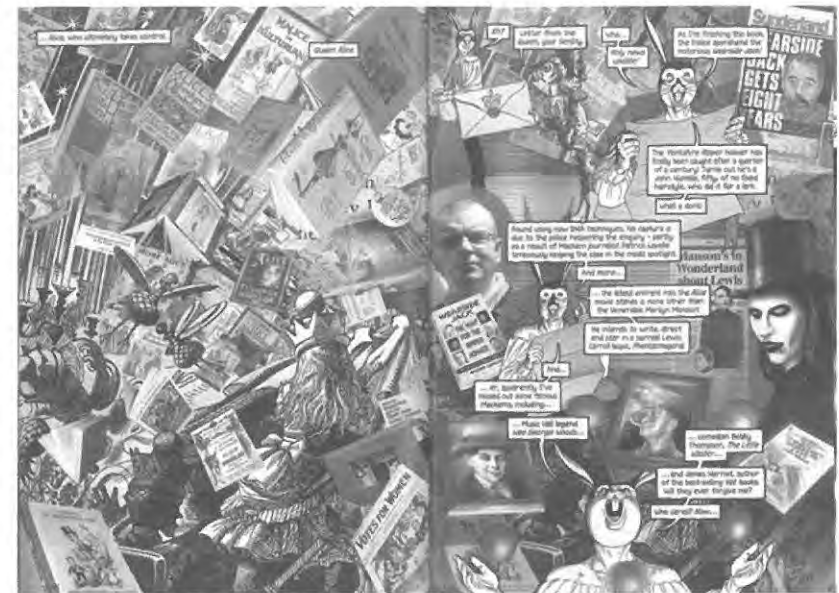


Fig. 11. The poetic mode at work in *Alice in Sunderland* (Talbot, 2007:308-309).

Beyond such self-reflexive moments, *Sunderland*’s narrative organization may be described in terms of the poetic mode. While Talbot includes mythologies and fictional elements in his cultural history of Sunderland, his “tour” of the Sunderland region seems to be mostly associative. In fact, loose patterns of associations and various drawing styles (as well as different styles of colorization) in combination with cut-up techniques and photo-collage turn Talbot’s stream-of-consciousness narrative into a holistic experience.

In *Sunderland*, perspective is often used to toy with the reader’s

understanding of subjectivity, especially in moments where Talbot switches between close-ups of characters looking directly at each other, and thus implicitly at the reader (Fig. 10). With moments of aesthetic pastiche, Talbot's avatar provides a "tour guide" who connects the associative spatial and temporal links and the stylistically cluttered images in *Sunderland* (Fig. 11).

How Is This Working? Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and the Operational Mode

According to Lefèvre, Joe Sacco's comics journalism counts as participatory because Sacco "clearly announces himself as a graphic reporter" (Lefèvre, 2013:56) before he starts his ethnographic encounters. The situation of "having been there," of providing first-hand looks of territories in turmoil or under occupation such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip in *Palestine* (1993-1995) shapes the depiction of Sacco's author avatar. As Sacco notes:

I think having myself in it is a strong part of the work, not because I want to be a character, but because I want to point out that this material isn't objective, this is my point of view, these are the impressions I got. I'm interested in the facts, but that's not the same as being objective. My figure represents the personal pronoun "I" and emphasizes that this isn't "fly on the wall" journalism (Sacco, 2007:n.pag.).

Sacco's reflections on using an author avatar notwithstanding, I am not convinced by Lefèvre's argument to view Sacco's comics journalism predominantly in the participatory mode. In Sacco's comics, the author may self-consciously take center stage as a "comics reporter." But at the same time he remains passive throughout his comics. In *Palestine*, Sacco presents himself as an observer rather than an actor, creating "an illusion of objectivity" (Hatfield, 2005:115).

The suggested passivity corresponds to Sacco's interview method for *Palestine*, where he focused on the process of interviewing rather than on that of drawing or taking photographs, in order to avoid distraction or mistrust on behalf of his interviewees (Adams 2008:126-127). This politics of nonintervention is reflected throughout *Palestine*, for example, when Sacco depicts how Israeli soldiers deny a Palestinian woman access to the market in Hebron while Sacco himself is allowed to pass thanks to his American nationality (Sacco, 2003:127). There are moments where Sacco shows himself taking pictures or engaging in other acts that clearly have a participatory dimension. Yet even there, he positions himself as reluctant, for instance, when he is asked to photograph wounded Palestinian children in a hospital. Most of the time, we see Sacco's avatar listening or observing, a gesture demonstrating passivity that is visually reinforced by the avatar's

opaque glasses without pupils.

In Sacco's comics, which juxtapose caricatures (especially his own avatar with blank glasses and fish-lips) against realistically drawn backgrounds, Sacco's avatar is mostly on view but seldom comments or interferes. The author's thoughts are typically conveyed through captions, not through the avatar. The avatar functions primarily as a reference figure for the stream of impressions and individual story segments *Palestine* has to offer. As a "continuing character," the avatar guides the reader through the visual encounter of Sacco's images -- which often contrast cartoon style and fine art "realism."



Fig 12. A Palestinian refugee camp depicted in a double-page composition. (Sacco, 2003:146-147)

Therefore, the avatar is a device that adds to what I call the operational mode in Sacco's comics. I follow Jason Mittell's usage of what he terms "operational aesthetic," a concept that refers to the ways complex form invites the reader or viewer of TV series to analyze *how* storytelling achieves a certain narrative effect.² Consider the double-page spread on which we see Sacco in the backseat of an old Volkswagen van, being shown around in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip (Fig. 12). Adams compares the crowded picture, which is drawn in a very realistic and detailed style (especially in contrast to Sacco's cartoony caricatures) to the village scene "The Kermess of Hoboken" by 16th Century Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Adams, 2008:128).

As Adams points out, Sacco emphasizes the idea of an elevated viewpoint offering a topographical view of the refugee camp with the onlooker being able to “navigate” through the “roofscapes” (qtd. in Adams, 2008:128). In fact, the density and the realism inherent in the image evokes the ambience of a *wimmelbild*, and thus serves as a stimulus to scan the image for details such as Sacco’s avatar depicted inside the van.



Fig. 13. Sacco observing different groups of people in a refugee camp from inside a car (Sacco, 2003:148).



Fig. 14. Overlapping panels as part of the page composition (Sacco, 2003:124).

Particularly striking are the formal means through which Sacco strengthens his (subjective) perspective as eyewitness. On the page following the “roofscape” scene, we see the silhouette of Sacco’s avatar sitting in the backseat of the van. In an over-the-shoulder perspective, which highlights that this is Sacco’s point of view -- that “these are [his] impressions” (Sacco, 2007:n.pag.) -- we see Sacco’s avatar watching different groups of people passing. The page is divided into three stacked panels of the same size “shot” from the same perspective (Fig. 13). Yet each panel shows a different group

-- children, adult refugees, Israeli soldiers -- while the over-the-shoulder view reaches the effect of zooming in on the people passing, that is, the world on the other side (from the viewpoint of Sacco sitting in the safe car, or the non-Palestinian reader reading the comic in an equally safe environment).

Palestine abounds in such formal play: close-ups, low-angle images, characters breaking the fourth wall are techniques that foreground Sacco's subjective perspective. At the same time, they make us ask how a certain scene works, how a certain narrative effect is achieved. Often, in *Palestine*, this operational mode is comics-specific, as in an elaborate composition including five overlapping panels in the upper half of one page.³ In a formally artistic way, compressing time and space, it represents how an Israeli military jeep maneuvers through a jammed intersection (Fig. 14).

Indeed, the operational mode in *Palestine* is carried out to a degree that, at times, can exhaust the reader. This may be largely owing to the fact that Sacco was still experimenting with formal techniques when drawing *Palestine*. His subsequent project, *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) seems to be much more subtle in this regard (Adams, 2008:128). "In *Palestine*, I feel I overdid some things and have since learned how to discipline my drawing," Sacco himself once acknowledged about his embracing of an operational aesthetic (Sacco, 2006:n.pag.).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have drawn on overlaps between the language of film and comics to investigate whether it is useful to take Bill Nichols's classification of different modes of documentary film and posit it against a set of well-known nonfiction comics. While similar projects have already been undertaken, most notably by Pascal Lefèvre, my focus was on studying nonfiction comics featuring author avatars in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of Nichols's categories in the context of graphic nonfiction.

More precisely, I have shown that the author avatar in nonfiction comics is a particularity of the comics medium. The author avatar has its roots in the continuing character -- "the reader's dear friend" (Waugh, 1947:14) -- being a key characteristic in the tradition of comics. After their debut in Japanese comics (and elsewhere), author avatars gained prominence in the autobiographical climate of the U.S. Underground Comix scene. Rather than overemphasizing the autobiographical element of the texts under investigation, however, my readings have explored the formal features that the palette of possible authorial perspectives involve. Furthermore, my samples suggest an evolution of the author avatar in comics: Author representations seem to have developed in connection with an increasing degree of aesthetic sophistication observable for the comics medium.

The continuing character, I have argued, is so integral to comics that author avatars feel much more "natural," blending with the surrounding mise-en-scène, in comparison to the filmmaker's presence in documentary film that functions more as a device of interference. Therefore, the author's self-portrayal has the potential to emerge within every one of Nichols's modes, not just those entail the filmmaker's presence in the audiovisual context. Moreover, the comics medium's specific formal qualities call for the addition of another mode to Nichols's system, which I have called, following Mittell's approach to scripted TV series, the operational mode.

Ultimately, Nichols's taxonomy tolerates latitude. "The characteristics of a given mode give structure to a film," Nichols writes, "but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization" (Nichols, 2017: 114). That is, different modes may co-exist or vary from scene to scene in a certain film -- or a certain comic for that matter. Applying Nichols's modes to a set of comics thus offers analytical tools rather than fixed attributions. In fact, all the comics seem to be multifaceted; elements of each mode can be found in virtually any comic discussed here. But some clearly speak more to a given mode than others. Further research would have to start from there, and test the usability of applying elements of film theory to comics in other contexts.

Endnotes

¹ Interestingly, Keiji Nakazawa's work departs from this paradigm.

² The operational mode can also be detected in fictional comics like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986-1987).

³ Overlapping panels that reconcile spatial as well as temporal progression illustrate the double function of comics, enabling the onlooker to read *sequentially* -- panel after panel -- and also *simultaneously* -- the page as graphic composition (Schüwer, 2008:161).

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