PICTURING THE UNSPEAKABLE: TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND VISUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY COMICS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the intersections of memory and trauma in comics, arguing that the interrelations of the visual and the textual elements of this medium allow for an expanded understanding of how representations of trauma and memory function. This project argues for the centrality of trauma studies in comics and graphic narratives, as well as the centrality of visuality—that is, how we see and how we understand what we see—in trauma studies. Moving away from a model of literary trauma studies that focuses on “the unspeakable,” this dissertation proposes that we look instead at the intersections of the visible and invisible, the speakable and the unspeakable, through the manipulation of space and time in the comics medium. Investigating these possibilities, my research spans national and generic boundaries in order to tease out the inherent qualities of traumatic representations in the medium itself. This analysis moves from superheroes to 9/11 to epilepsy to family photographs, and from America to France to Rwanda, showing the ways in which comics’ juxtapositions of words and images, past, present, and future, and presence and absence, create possibilities for representing trauma and memory. It is precisely in the spaces between images and words, between what we can see and what remains hidden, I argue, that these narratives of trauma and memory thicken and transform into dense and problematic zones of contact.

This dissertation begins with an introduction to the broad ways in which the formal aspects of the medium of comics and graphic novels complement the literary and theoretical conceptions of trauma and memory, and an examination of the ways we can use comics to expand these notions to incorporate more precise ideas of the visible and visual. I then move to a series of close analyses, beginning with the superhero genre and its legacy in Chapters One and Two, looking at the Batman franchise and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and the crises—personal and
historical, respectively—that they address. Chapter Three moves to the Rwandan genocide and its representation in both fictional and autobiographical comics, drawing together landscape, colonialism, and trauma. In Chapter Four, I move to an examination of Art Spiegelman’s response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, teasing out the complex relationship between media images and personal images as intertwining representations of trauma. Chapter Five also focuses on the power of images, arguing that Alison Bechdel’s redrawn archive of photographs and other reália in her memoir Fun Home indicates the powerful agency of images—that is, their ability to destabilize and undermine the author and the viewer’s position as spectator. Finally, Chapter Six explores the rhizomatic nature of disability in David B.’s Epileptic, suggesting that rather than considering individuals and their bodies along a linear scale between two extreme points, we can reformulate our understanding of “normalcy” through a nonlinear, multivalent spectrum of experience.

This notion of a nonlinear spectrum synthesizes the difficult problems of visuality, trauma, and memory that the dissertation explores as a whole, and it offers up a new mode of conceptualizing the narrative possibilities of representing trauma. By taking into account the absent, the hidden, the invisible, and the unspoken in these texts, “Picturing the Unspeakable” brings together the emergent field of comics studies with the recent visual and multidirectional turns in trauma and memory studies. This project offers a new way of understanding individual and historical traumas not as a question of either/or (either visible or not, spoken or silenced, past or present, etc.) but as precisely a space of contact between those conventional binaries of representation.
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A Note on Figures

Figures throughout this dissertation have been omitted to respect their copyright status. Placeholders have been included, in order to retain both formatting choices throughout and citation information for reference.
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Introduction: Filling the Visual Gap in Memory and Trauma Studies

Comics and graphic novels are a medium of dualities, constantly in tension between seemingly opposed or dichotomous tendencies. This dissertation takes up the shifting, uneasy aspects of comics and places them in conversation with notions of trauma, memory, and visuality. Emphasizing the zones of contact between image and text, spoken and silenced, what is visible and hidden, I argue that it is precisely in comics’ state of being “in between” that trauma and memory become paradoxically legible. Working across national and generic boundaries, this project thus examines the underlying structural mechanisms at work in comics, investigating what makes this medium so particularly suited to narratives of trauma, memory, and loss.

In Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, the ending scene of the first volume depicts the god Dream's revenge on his former captor, Alex Burgess. Because Alex held Dream prisoner for seventy years, Dream curses him with the doom of eternal waking. This is not the same as eternal wakefulness: Dream's curse means Alex constantly moves between waking and sleep, constantly remaining in between the two states. Gaiman and artist Sam Keith take full advantage of the comics medium to depict this movement of constant in-between-ness, as Alex exists in the seam between sleeping and waking. At one moment, for example, Alex's assistant reassures him that he is waking up; in the following panels, his head begins to melt and the artwork become grotesquely nightmarish, only to move back to Alex waking up again on the following page (figure 0.1).
I open my dissertation with this scene because it illustrates one of the fundamental tensions in the comics medium: that is, the tendency to represent, however disjointedly, traumatic moments or fragile memories. The sometimes conflicting temporal dimensions of comics and the simultaneous presence and absence that comics reify in both visual and narrative terms make this medium particularly inclined towards narratives that circle around trauma and memory. Because comics, like Alex, are continually caught between conflicting tendencies—between the present, past, and future; between what can be seen and what is hidden, omitted, or invisible—the medium itself allows for the potential to represent issues of loss, trauma, and memory. Echoing Freud’s work on the *unheimlich* vis-à-vis Hoffmann’s own “Der Sandmann,” Gaiman’s *Sandman* makes the moment of waking, that moment of uncertainty between sleep and wakefulness, concrete. *Sandman*’s capturing of that brief moment of transition from one state to
another, so ephemeral and fleeting, is indeed uncanny, as “everything is uncanny which ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light” (Freud 4).

Bringing the uncanny to light here means to actually make it both visible and familiar and yet unsettling. The formal tensions within the comics medium mean that comics actually perform the same ideas, themes, and tensions they narrate. Like Alex Burgess existing with and between sleep and waking, the comics page exists with and between text and image, presence and absence. These tensions reveal, too, that the representation of trauma and memory in comics depends upon not only the spaces in between panels but on systems that perform like the mechanisms of trauma and memory. Indeed just as trauma studies’ psychoanalytic side situates the moment of waking as itself the site of trauma (cf. Caruth, Lacan, Freud), so do comics situate the moment and space of in-between as the productive zone of representational possibility. This dissertation argues for a reconsidering of the possibilities of representing trauma in these graphic works not only as a project of fragmentation of subjecthood and of temporality—that is, of the impossibility of linearity and narrative—but as a project of paradoxical coherence made possible only through that which, like Dream's curse, resides in the spaces and moments in between: between visibility and obscurity, between the revealed and the concealed.

The project of this dissertation is to pull apart and examine some of those mechanisms by which trauma and memory in comics reside in the meeting-space of text and image and depend on the friction between what is visible and what remains unseen, what is spoken and what is left unsaid. If trauma is considered a crisis of language, as Ruth Leys writes in Trauma: A Genealogy, then I would argue it is also a crisis of the visible, the disturbing notion that everything we see is not, in fact, everything that is there in the world, and that, just as we do when we read comics, we “fill in the gaps” in both narrative and vision to make sense of time,
space, trauma, and memory. The very structure of comics means that the visual and narrative elements work in tension with one another: its formal qualities echo the Caruthian conception of trauma as the thing that reappears unbidden due precisely to its dislocation in time and consciousness.

Trauma and memory studies have taken a turn toward visual studies and art history in recent years. This turn reflects an examination of the language in critical approaches to trauma and memory, as Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg note: “The formulation of trauma as discourse is predicated upon metaphors of visuality and image as unavoidable carrier of the unrepresentable. From primal scene to flashback to screen memory to the dream, much of the language deployed to speak trauma’s character is emphatically, if not exclusively, visual” (xii). Nonetheless this visual turn is still, obviously, strongly linked with trauma studies’ long focus on language, speaking, and text—particularly where words circumvent, repeat, or fail to represent the traumatic event. Therefore if, to borrow Saltzman and Rosenberg’s words, “we agree that a potential space of trauma is that very domain that exists between the visual and the verbal, between that which is seen and that which is said, if we agree that trauma itself might emerge from the attempt to navigate that space,” then this dissertation takes comics to be the medium par excellence for such navigational feats (Saltzman and Rosenberg xii). Comics rely explicitly upon that space between the visual and the verbal, their intersections, and the blankness surrounding both text and image where invisibility and silence reside.

Analyzing the visual aspects of the works in this dissertation thus draws attention to the construction of vision as such, that is, to the ways by which we understand the exchange of images and gazes both within the texts and between them and the reader. Visuality and vision are two related processes of sight: “vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight
as a social fact,” that is, how we interpret and react to that which we see (Foster ix). Visuality is the constructed, performed side to visual processes, approaching the question of how we see that which is before us. While visuality, like trauma, must be historically specific and not applied as a kind of universalizing brushstroke, it is the purpose of this dissertation to examine the connections, whether divergent or similar, between acts of seeing, acts of trauma, and acts of representation across nations and genres.

In Unclaimed Experience, Cathy Caruth defines psychic trauma as, "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind," and "an event that… is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (3, 4). Looking closely at Caruth’s definition, it is clear that the perception of time is one of the primary functions of the mind damaged, as it were, by the blunt force of catastrophic experience upon what Kai Erikson calls “the tissues of the mind” (Erikson 184). The traumatic event is one experienced “too soon” to be fully incorporated or understood into consciousness, resulting in a psychic and temporal coexistence between the unwanted and unexpected return of the event in the dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks, etc. of the individual in the “present.” Duration and the experience of duration—time itself—no longer function linearly and conventionally, but as disruption and also simultaneity.

The process of psychic trauma conventionally rests on a particular relationship with time. In most definitions, the individual is traumatized because s/he encounters an experience that cannot be fully incorporated into or understood by consciousness at the moment of the event’s occurrence. Again, it is an event experienced “too soon”: “It is not, that is, having too little or too indirect access to an experience that places its truth in question, in this case, but paradoxically
enough, its very overwhelming immediacy, that produces its belated uncertainty” (Caruth Trauma 6). Experiencing something so overwhelming results not in repression of the event but the utter unavailability of the event to consciousness. Furthermore, trauma is bound eternally with the issue of surviving: “[F]or those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (Trauma 9). Leaving the event and coming into “normal” life, in other words, is a kind of crisis in and of itself for the traumatized survivor.

Caruth emphasizes such temporal aspects of trauma in her introduction to the first part of Trauma: Explorations of Memory, saying “[T]rauma is not experienced as mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment” (10). This carrying beyond the initial shock results in a sense of floating between temporal instances—the past of the moment of disaster, and the present moment. In his essay, “Notes on Trauma and the Community,” Erikson expands on this particular quality of the traumatized mind:

[T]rauma has the quality of converting that one sharp stab… into an enduring state of mind…. [T]he traumatized mind holds on to that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again in the compulsive musings of the day and the seething dreams of night. The moment becomes a season, the event becomes a condition. (185)

Thus the moment of trauma endures beyond that individual moment of catastrophe, so that the traumatic moment does not simply return but lives on as a continual process in the individual’s psyche.
These signs of trauma are present in the very structure of comics. Eisner and McCloud both note that there is a substantial amount of cognitive work required of the reader for comics to function effectively; however, this work is all too often overlooked or underappreciated. Carrier demonstrates the trap into which scholars of comics seem all too often to fall: namely, that “when they are successful, [comics] have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined” (Carrier 4). This statement shows the danger and seduction of comics; the apparent “seamlessness” of comics actually covers the complex ways in which they function. Perhaps it is easy to grasp Alex Burgess’s state in between sleep and waking, but to navigate between these contradictory panels, their shaping, their differing framing, and so on, requires a particular kind of reading. Comics perform extremely complicated processes of representation and by extension force the reader to perform processes of suture, “closure,” and identification, all while trying to appear “natural” (much like suture works in film—a “natural” process that masks a complex series of processes in order to create a particular result for the viewer / reader).

Even our biological processes of vision are contingent upon a relationship of presence and absence, of filling in what we cannot see. As Ann Marie Seward Barry writes, there exists an actual gap in our vision anatomically speaking at the optic disc, where the optic nerve meets the retina. While the rest of the retina contains rods and cones, which receive light waves and transform them into data and images, the optic disc is empty, a blank hole in our vision that our brain seamlessly fills in based on experience and context.¹ Our vision, then—our physical act of seeing—is itself a process of filling in, of creating a sense of wholeness from something disjointed.

¹ I should say "almost seamlessly"—when looking quickly from straight ahead to the side, you can see a dark spot, like a quick spasm or stutter in your vision, that disappears as soon as your eyes focus to the side; this is the gap in vision located at the optic disc (Barry 26).
Readers of comics perform a similar narrative process as their eyes move from panel to panel and page to page, "filling in" the gaps in between narrative moments in order to construct a coherent narrative. Scott McCloud calls this process "closure," that is, the act of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). Closure, McCloud argues, is the fundamental principle that allows comics to function, since the gutter (the space between panels) forces the reader to imagine what occurs in that in-between space: “the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). This process demands that the reader perform a significant amount of imaginative work; the reader imagines what happens in the gutters, and in so doing bridges any number of gaps or lacunae in narrative and form. The comic book or graphic novel itself is then riddled with holes (what Pascal Lefèvre calls “extra-diegetic” or “non-visualized space,” 157) that the reader must overcome or fill in by force of her own imagination. Such holes mimic the way in which traumatic events are represented in narrative and memorial form.

The gaps that the reader must take responsibility for bridging are not the only structures that echo the mental and narrative structures of trauma. In Picture Theory, W. J. T. Mitchell breaks down one of the essential tensions between word and image: that text is generally aligned with the speaking and seeing self, while the image is the viewed object, the other (157). Therefore, if text is to self as image is to other, then comics are the simultaneity and spatial coexistence of self and other. If there is no essential difference semantically between the two, as Mitchell argues, then it might be fair to say that comics bring to the fore the crisis of subjectivity, the loss of the self in the sameness of the object—that is, comics allow us one means through which such tensions between subject and object can be represented, or at the very least hinted at.
This same idea connects to the layout of the page (Groensteen’s “spatiotopia”) of a graphic novel: the reader’s ability to see multiple panels on the same page creates a sense of simultaneity, even if those panels are read in a specific order. In fact the very form of the graphic novel itself allows for a near-simultaneous experience of readership. As McCloud writes, “Both past and future are real and visible all around us! Wherever your eyes are focused, that’s now. But at the same time, your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future!” (104). In the mere act of viewing the page, therefore, the reader becomes involved in the concurrence of text and image, panels and captions.

Panels themselves also alter the narrative experience of linearity and temporality: “The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided…. Panel shapes vary considerably, though, and while differences of shape don’t affect the specific ‘meanings’ of those panels vis-à-vis time, they can affect the reading experience” (McCloud 99). Large panels emphasize a sense of time being drawn out or elongated, while smaller panels create a staccato rhythm. Panels might also overlap, rupture, spread over the borders of the page, or perform in other unexpected structural ways. The pages from Sandman pictured above, for example, contain panels of varying sizes and shapes on a black background, creating a sense of overlap; it becomes difficult, at some points, to know when one panel begins and another ends, heightening the sense of being suspended between sleeping and waking. These structural nuances are visual indicators linked to the experience of reading and understanding not just the work’s narrative but its purpose with relation to trauma studies.

The graphic novel itself as a medium allows for such a destabilization of word and image, content and form. In Alternative Comics, Charles Hatfield argues that:
responding to comics often depends on recognizing word and image as two "different"
types of sign, whose implications can be played against each other—to gloss, to illustrate,
to contradict or complicate or ironize the other…. We continue to distinguish between the
function of words and the function of images, despite the fact that comics continually
work to destabilize this very distinction. (36)
Hatfield thus argues that in comics or graphic novels, word and image are not necessarily
exclusive (although one can work against the other) but can simultaneously undermine and
produce coherent meaning. The words in a particular panel may contradict the image, or they
may describe that image in a way that is, or they may be a character’s spoken dialogue or interior
thoughts. It is necessary to think of a graphic novel not as a series of images with textual
elements added, nor as a textual narrative that has been illustrated. Rather, comics are a separate
medium, one that uses both text and image but does not rely on one more than the other.

A line from The New York Times review of Art Spiegelman’s Maus points at another,
more insidious issue associated with the comics medium: what, exactly, to name them.
According to the reviewer, Maus “looks like a comic book” but actually is “pictorial literature.”
There is a tendency to distinguish between comics, comic books and graphic novels, usually
along the lines of “high art” against “low art.” In the last few decades, writers, critics and
creators have expressed varying degrees of difficulty in giving a name in American English to
what Scott McCloud defines as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,
intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). All of
the terms in circulation that fit this definition—comics, alternative comics, comix, graphic
novels, graphic narratives, sequential art, etc.—are problematic for numerous reasons.
The term “comics,” for example, implies that there is something “comical” within the covers of the work, an implication that is uncomfortable not simply because of a common misconception of “comics” as an unsophisticated, juvenile medium. Such an implication might also trivialize more serious works like *Maus*, or many of the other works examined in this project. The term “graphic novel” has complex associations, as well: “graphic” is often associated with nouns like “sex” and “violence,” implying that what is contained within the work will be some sort of an exaggeration or over-the-top rendition. And not all works of this nature are “novels,” either. Works of autobiography like *Maus, Fun Home* and other texts included in this study are not novels, per se, according to the traditional definition of that medium; rather, they are memoirs based on personal and cultural histories. Finally, “sequential art,” the term created and preferred by comics master Will Eisner, excludes both one-panel comics (*The Family Circus*, for example, which McCloud’s definition also excludes, incidentally) and other works that perhaps are not presented sequentially.

Many critics or scholars of comics begin their works by trying to define what comics are, how they function, and what we should call them. Frequently, these discussions begin with references to Eisner and McCloud’s respective works as important touchstones. Eisner and McCloud’s basic definitions of comics have been the touchstones against which others have situated their own work in the years after the publication of *Comics and Sequential Art* and *Understanding Comics*. David Carrier, for example, argues in *The Aesthetics of Comics* that McCloud’s definition ignores the importance of the speech balloon, which Carrier himself considers the crucial characteristic of comics: “The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic from pictures illustrating a text, like Tenniel’s drawings for Alice in Wonderland” (4). Carrier goes on to argue that “[t]he speech balloon is a great philosophical discovery, a method
of representing thought and words. Almost unknown before being exploited by comics artists, the speech balloon defines comics as neither a purely verbal nor a strictly visual art form, but as something radically new” (4). For Carrier, the speech balloon—that is, the insert of text inside an image—is what distinguishes comics from other forms of pictorial art. Accordingly, Carrier views the textual aspects of comics as the more important, in spite of his declarations that comics are in essence a mixed medium. In arguing for the dominance of speech balloons in comics, Carrier implicitly valorizes the text over the image.

Noted French comics scholar Thierry Groensteen, meanwhile, holds the inverse to be true and argues for the primacy of the image over text in comics, saying, “If I plead for recognition of the image as preeminent in status, it is not for the reason that, except on rare occasions, in comics it occupies a more important space than that which is reserved for writing. Its predominance within the system attaches to what is essential to the production of meaning that is made through it” (8). Groensteen maintains that although the “language of comics” necessitates a mix of word and image, the image is the primary arena of producing meaning, while the textual aspect complements and heightens the meaning already conveyed in the image.

The writers above are just a small sample of comics scholars and critics who are caught in a debate over how, precisely, to define comics and graphic novels.² Most agree that, broadly speaking, comics are some combination of word and image, and that this combination differs in meaning from photographs and captions, or paintings and titles. In spending so much energy delineating the characteristics of comics, what all these critics show is a need to define, categorize, and legitimize the medium—a need that is understandable, given the earlier total lack of regard associated with comics in the eras preceding the 1980s. Since comics are a relatively

² For more, see Bart Beaty, Ron Goulart, Paul Gravett, Robert C. Harvey, Charles Hatfield, and virtually every author to write about or critique comics.
new area of interest in literary, artistic and cultural studies, many authors tried to establish their legitimacy and legacy. As the review of *Maus* cited above shows, taking comics seriously breaks the earlier modes and stereotypes of readership. In an effort to combat the frivolity and even illegitimacy associated with comics, writers spent a great deal of time and energy defining, contextualizing, and generally “proving” the validity of both the medium and their work. This drive towards legitimacy coincides with the rise in the publication of graphic novels as such—the standalone narratives contained in a single volume, like *Fun Home*, rather than those published serially over a longer period of time, like the long-running superhero series. Being able to find a sturdily bound graphic novel on a shelf in a local bookstore, as opposed to a flimsy, staple-bound comic book found at a newsstand or specialty store, added increased visibility and legitimacy to the medium.³

In addition, when dealing with this new critical arena, critics and scholars have lacked a preexisting discourse to use in relation to the medium. As such, there was and still is a struggle to find the correct vocabulary when trying to discuss specific elements of comics. Not only concerned with how comics should be named, many writers struggle to find technical vocabulary for particular aspects of comics. As a composite art, comics require a composite vocabulary, using terms from literary studies, art history, and cinema studies to explain various techniques, aspects, and approaches. While words like “panel” seem to belong inherently to the realm of comics, other terms like “frame,” “close up” and “establishing shot” clearly originate in photography and film studies and, therefore, add to the sense that perhaps comics did (or do) not exist in their own right.

Even words like “speech balloon” become contested, with some preferring that term, others “speech bubble,” and still others “word balloon.” Most writers prefer “caption” to refer to text balloons or boxes that are not connected to a speaker, but a few writers call them “narrator boxes.” These variations on the same basic idea demonstrate a lack of a cohesive, “canonized” or official language and set of terms for discussing comics. This unique medium does require its own technical vocabulary and its own discourse, just as much as the medium itself contains its own kind of language and grammar—as Rocco Versaci says, comics are a “graphic language,” the “unique kind of language… to invite us into different worlds in order to help us better understand our own” (6). This graphic language contains terms borrowed from other disciplines as well as words belonging to itself only.

Indeed, the desire to create a discourse unique to the study of comics even leads some to create terms for the sake of creating terms. Groensteen, for instance, argues for the use of certain terms like “spatio-topia” to refer to what is essentially “page layout” (17). “Layout,” of course, sounds less academic and more practical than “spatio-topia;” every design student and budding comics creator knows what “layout” means, while “spatio-topia” is denser and more particular to the study of comics (rather than their creation or production). However, the insistence on such terms indicates a greater anxiety over the legitimacy and the worthiness of comics as a scholarly pursuit. Such anxiety does not actually help to create a greater understanding of comics, but rather alienates and even distracts readers from better comprehending the interesting ways in which comics function.

For the purposes of this work, the problems of what comics are and what we should call them are therefore of less interest than how comics function, and I focus on this latter aspect through the close readings in the chapters that follow. As Douglas Wolk argues in Reading
Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean, “I’m not going to define comics here, because if you have picked up this book and have not been spending the last century trapped inside a magic lantern, you already pretty much know what they are, and ‘pretty much’ is good enough” (17). For simplicity’s sake, in this dissertation I try to limit my use of the words “comics,” “comic book,” and “graphic novel” to the definitions Wolk puts forth: “The industry calls thin, saddle-stitched pamphlets ‘comic books’… virtually any squarebound volume of comics sold on bookstore shelves a ‘graphic novel,’ and the form in the abstract ‘comics’” (61). I also use the term “graphic memoir” to refer to those particular works that are squarebound books but autobiographical in narrative, like *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and others. However, I choose not to engage in the debate over naming and defining comics, as the scope of this project focuses rather on how comics function in relation to trauma and representations of memory.

Nonetheless, it is very important to note the distinction between the medium of comics and the various genres made possible in this medium. Often, as Wolk writes, “the way almost everybody [in America] experienced the medium was intimately tied to a handful of genres” like the superhero and detective genres (11). Historically other genres like Western comics during the “Golden Age” (1930s through late 1950s) and even romance comics in the 1960s and 1970s held wide appeal. And with *Maus* and other recent successful works of memoir like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, recent mainstream understanding of comics has shifted towards something more than—if still separate from—superheroes.

Calling comics a medium emphasizes its formal and structural aspects rather than the content or genre of a narrative. This project therefore considers the question of representing trauma and memory across generic boundaries, rather than confining itself to a single category or genre of narrative. This dissertation thus approaches the comics medium differently than other
recent major works of criticism, like Hilary Chute’s *Graphic Women*, which centers exclusively on graphic memoir written by women, or Charles Hatfield’s work on underground comics, *Alternative Comics*. Similarly, I examine works from multiple national contexts—American, French, Belgian, and Rwandan—to explore what similarities lie between these contexts, without erasing their cultural specificity.

Comics, then, seem to be more than just the combination of two semantically similar media. Meaning is created not just through some kind of additive property, but in the nuanced complexities that arise from using these multiple axes of representation. As Mitchell writes, “Comparison itself is not a necessary procedure in the study of image-text relations. The necessary subject matter is, rather, the whole ensemble of relations between media” (*Picture Theory* 89). This does not, I think, mean ignoring the differences between text and image, nor does it mean eliding these categories into the black hole of undifferentiated semantic function. Rather studying comics requires examining the ways in which image and text—and form and narrative—work together and simultaneously resist one another. The two aspects can be synergistic and destabilizing all at the same time, undermining one another’s narrative power and temporal linearity.

This dissertation thus takes on comics from different genres, forms, and national contexts in order to tease out the underlying issues of visuality and trauma within the medium itself. I concentrate on comics from the American and Franco-Belgian contexts, as these are the two largest and most influential Western traditions in comics. Reflecting the transgeneric approach of this project, the following chapters are organized neither by national tradition nor by thematic concerns. Rather, this dissertation turns from the superheroic to other explicitly fictional works to the autobiographic. The chapters thus move from one national context to another and back
again, illustrating the ways in which the structures and conventions of the comics medium function across national boundaries. Likewise the chapters cycle through concerns about individual trauma to larger historical catastrophes and back to the level of the individual or intimate representations of trauma and memory.

Beginning with the superhero genre means undermining, in part, some of its defining characteristics as action-driven, hypermasculine narratives. However, as the first analytical chapter demonstrates, this genre—or at the very least, one of its primary figureheads, Batman—is fraught with problems of instability and invisibility. Focusing on one of superhero comics' most popular and enduring characters, I argue that Batman's identity is bound not merely to the trauma of his parents' murder but to the complicated intersections surrounding that event and his subsequent crises of identity as a figure between criminality and legality, between justice and vigilantism, and between visibility and invisibility. This chapter takes three Batman texts as the central axis of analysis: Frank Miller's watershed *The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, and *Arkham Asylum*, by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. This chapter also analyzes the recent film trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*), addressing the films as important contemporary cultural touchstones but also discussing the representational differences between the media of film and comics.

Broadening the question of trauma to include both individual and historical levels, Chapter Two examines Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ watershed work *Watchmen*, which has won numerous awards and transcended early on the problematic comics/literature divide, being placed on various “Best Novels” lists (including those created by TIME magazine, Entertainment Weekly, and the Wall Street Journal). Arguing for the necessity of visuality in the text’s
representation of trauma, this chapter demonstrates the important intersections of vision, identity, and memory through the characters’ narratives and the text’s cyclical nature. Strewn with visual and literal references to World War II, the Holocaust, and the nuclear disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, although the action unfolds in a distinctly 1980s setting, Watchmen offers a nonlinear, multifaceted conception of trauma—both historical and individual—that finds its media corollary in the form of comics themselves.

Chapter Three continues to explore the representation of historical catastrophe and individual trauma, looking at the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in three comics: Rupert Bazambanza’s creative memoir Smile through the Tears; Cécile Grenier, Alain Austini, and Pat Masioni’s fictional Rwanda 1994; and another fictional work, Déogratias, by Jean-Philippe Stassen. These works use the trope of landscape to understand the genocide as a national and unnatural disaster. Even as these texts purport to resist both the genocidal and colonial regimes they nonetheless still consider Rwanda in terms of landscape, a landscape that both offers access to the genocide and distances, even exoticizes, it as the texts reproduce the authoritarian, colonial gaze.

In the fourth chapter, the dissertation shifts even further away from explicitly fictional in an analysis of traumatic imagery in Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers, his artistic response to the terrorist attacks on New York of September 11, 2001. This chapter teases out the complex relationship between media images and personal images as intertwining representations of a specific traumatic moment. Moreover, Spiegelman’s difficulty in making sense of the events of that day, and of the media and governmental “co-option” of the event in the days following, is itself part of a knottier issue in self-representation, as Spiegelman simultaneously struggles with his own artistic legacy as creator of the groundbreaking comics memoir Maus. No Towers’
messy, nonlinear narrative thus reflects not only the impossibility of comprehending the disaster itself, but also the convergence of experience, postmemory, and artistic creation in the representation of catastrophe.

Moving back to more intimate or individual, rather than global or national, disasters, the fifth chapter takes up Alison Bechdel’s comics memoir *Fun Home*, which explores the narrator’s relationship with her closeted gay father and her own development of a sexual and independent identity. It is precisely in the gaps provided both in the structure of the comics medium and within the narrative itself that Alison’s “coming of age” story and her understanding of her father occur. Moreover, Bechdel’s redrawn archive of photographs and other *realia* indicates the powerful agency of images—that is, their ability to destabilize and undermine the author and the viewer’s position as spectator.

The final chapter of this project brings many of the issues central to the previous chapters together in an examination of David B.’s *Epileptic*, a memoir of the narrator’s life under the shadow of his elder brother’s severe epilepsy. This chapter argues that *Epileptic*’s central tension lies in the movement of the text between representations of disability and historical trauma, and the witnessing of those various kinds of suffering that ultimately result in a sense of fracture and fragmentation. In presenting the rhizomatic nature of disability, the text suggests that rather than considering individuals and their bodies along a linear scale between two extreme points, we can reformulate our understanding of “normalcy” through a nonlinear, multivalent spectrum of experience.

This notion of a nonlinear spectrum synthesizes the difficult problems of visuality, trauma, and memory that the dissertation explores as a whole, and it offers up a new mode of conceptualizing the narrative possibilities of representing trauma. By taking in to account the
absent, the hidden, the invisible, and the unspoken in these texts, this dissertation brings together the emergent field of comics studies with the recent visual and multidirectional turns in trauma and memory studies. This project offers a new way of understanding individual and historical traumas not necessarily as a question of either/or (either visible or not, spoken or silenced, past or present, etc.), but as precisely a space of contact between those conventional binaries of representation.
Chapter 1: Batman Can’t Die: Trauma, Desire, and the Batman Franchise

The superhero genre is perhaps the most popular and enduring genre traditionally associated with comics, and Batman is one of its most beloved icons. To take up Batman as a figure for analysis is to engage with questions of violence, trauma, masculinity, and memory, even within the presumed levity of the superhero genre. This chapter approaches questions of individual trauma, individual desire, and gendered violence, and the complicated intersections of these issues with Batman’s position as a liminal figure between law and illegality, between private and public spheres. Trauma, I argue, functions not merely as the multifold catalyst for Batman’s existence, but also as an avenue into representations of desire and gendered violence through mechanisms of visibility and vision, both within the narratives discussed below and within the formal structures of the comics medium. Batman’s trauma becomes legible on and through the gendered body, the body as a visible and visual object, which in turn complicates and problematizes the connections between Batman’s desire, his trauma, and his relation to visuality.

As I discussed in the introduction, Cathy Caruth and others conceive of acute individual trauma as a wound inflicted upon the mind, usually occurring from a catastrophic event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, and thus remains outside of conscious memory. Instead the event returns in uncontrollable flashbacks or hallucinations that plague the survivor of the event (Caruth Unclaimed 3-5). Following this definition, the death of Batman’s parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne, would at first appear to be exactly this kind of event for Bruce Wayne. And yet, as this chapter argues, Bruce’s traumatization stems not merely from the death of his parents, but also from that death’s problematic position within Bruce’s own network of desires. This network includes both desires of an individual nature—Bruce’s “pleasure principle,” so to speak,
as well as his formation as subject (how he becomes a person with his own agency)—and of a more social and political nature, involving his moral and ethical feelings of responsibility for those surrounding him at the familial and the public levels.

Indeed, Batman’s status as a heroic exception—the man who fills in the gap in authority and the law through his very position outside the law—and his ensuing community-minded “good doing” are always a foil for Bruce Wayne’s private desires. This tension finds its roots in Bruce Wayne’s childhood trauma, which in itself is a matter more complicated than it may first appear. This chapter traces some representations of this trauma and its connection with Bruce’s desires, Batman’s powers, and ultimately the serial form of the franchise itself. The death of Bruce’s parents is not traumatic merely because it occurred, but also because it simultaneously enacts Bruce’s unrecognized desires, and keeps him trapped within a seemingly inescapable web of familial identification. Bruce Wayne’s position as the heroic exception is not a political stance, but a position stemming from desire, masochism, compulsion, and ultimately his in/ability to reinstate himself in the condition of heteronormativity.5

Few comic book characters are as iconic and enduring as Batman; since his first appearance in 1939’s Detective Comics #27, the Batman character has remained in near-constant circulation, and has been adapted for radio, television, film, and other media to great success.6 With nearly 75 years of publication and media history, Batman has become a major American

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4 See Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*

5 I acknowledge that the use of the term “heteronormative” brings in all manner of questions of sexuality and queerness, like Batman’s relationship with Robin that so threatened Frederick Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Others have thoroughly addressed this issue—see Will Brooker, Andy Medhurst, Nathan Tipton, and even Wertham himself. As my own interests lie in other questions, I use the term to signify Bruce Wayne’s entry into a sanitized, normalized life with a wife / female partner, while well aware of its queer implications.

6 For a more thorough history of Batman and DC Comics, see Les Daniels’s *Batman: The Complete History*, Gerard Jones’s *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*, and Will Brooker’s *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*.
cultural touchstone and one of the most popular superheroes, alongside Superman and Spiderman. Unlike those and many other superheroes, however, Batman’s powers come not from alien planets or science experiments gone awry, but rather from his intellect (he is, after all, “the world’s greatest detective”) and his immense wealth, which allows him to purchase or produce the high-tech gadgets, suits, vehicles, training equipment, and so on that he then uses to fight the criminals and villains of Gotham City, his home.

This basic narrative, consistent across all the iterations of Batman, stems from an “origin story”—the story of how and why Batman came into existence in his fictional universe—which itself has been through countless retellings, dating back to Detective Comics #33 (1939). Bruce Wayne is a billionaire playboy who, as a young boy, witnesses the shooting death of his parents during a mugging, resulting in his later decision to use the family fortune he inherits to become the crime-fighting, justice-minded Batman (also referred to as the Caped Crusader and the Dark Knight). He refuses, in most cases, to use guns or to kill anyone, even the criminals he works to bring down, in an effort to establish a distinction between himself (his illegal vigilantism and brutality) and the villains.

Batman insists on this refusal to kill as one of the ways to maintain distinction between him and the villains he encounters, even as he himself violates the law, terrorizes Gotham and its citizens, destroys public property, and so on. He therefore occupies a position in between legality and lawlessness, an antihero figure who can shift between spheres and blur the lines between justice and illegality in ways that the police cannot. This liminality is brought about in part because Batman is, plainly, a superhero. The superhero figure is usually split in two: the superhero and the “true” or “secret” identity, the “normal” person underneath the mask. Thus Superman has his Clark Kent, Spiderman his Peter Parker, and Batman his Bruce Wayne.
Maintaining these separate identities is the source of both narrative and psychological tension, as many others have noted (see: McGowan 87-90; Brooker 171; Crutcher 65). Yet Batman’s split identity is actually a symptom of a more fundamental tension between Bruce Wayne’s personal or individual desires and his public (that is, his social and political) life.

This chapter centers on select works dating from Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), which revitalized the franchise after a long period of Comics Code-induced levity, embodied perhaps most prominently in the 1960s television series and film starring Adam West. I focus on these works from 1986 and after because they signal a return to the dark origins of comics’ most famous antihero, and because of their complexities and nuances in approaching questions of trauma, desire, and memory. These works are not generally considered “canon”—that is, they fall outside the conventional serial plot line of the Batman comics—but they are nonetheless hugely influential on the series and its adaptations.

Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* begins this revolution with his story of Batman coming out of retirement to fight crime again as a middle-aged man who is still deeply embedded in a struggle with his memories and his desires. *The Dark Knight Returns* posits Batman’s agency as tied to his individual trauma and mechanisms of visuality, both within the text and between the text and reader. I then move on to examine Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s *The Killing Joke*, which centers on the arch-villain the Joker but illustrates Batman’s compulsions and, in its ambiguous ending, hints at Batman’s enjoyment in remaining within his existing structures of trauma and desire. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s horror story *Arkham Asylum: a Serious House on Serious Earth* follows Moore and Bolland’s work both chronologically and thematically, as it concretizes the experience of madness and trauma across temporal boundaries. The chapter finally moves to Christopher Nolan’s recent film trilogy (*Batman Begins, The Dark*
Knights, and *The Dark Knight Rises*) as a contemporary cultural touchstone and an important example of the changes in representations of trauma with a change in media, finally concluding with the problem of romanticizing Bruce Wayne’s trauma and sublimating his desires.

**Batman Becomes Bat, Man, and Batman Again: *The Dark Knight Returns***

Frank Miller’s 1986 short-run series *The Dark Knight Returns* essentially rejuvenated the Batman franchise which, as mentioned earlier, had been entrenched in a camp aesthetic that reached its zenith in the Adam West television show and film (dir. Leslie H. Martinson, 1966). Miller’s work was a financial, popular, and critical success, and effectively returned the Dark Knight to his darker side. There are no more “Holy Bat Traps!” or “cans of Bat-shark repellant” as in the Martinson film, but instead a dark, gritty Gotham City, battles against governments and heroes as well as villains, and a middle-aged man struggling not only with the events of his past but with walking the fine line between justice and revenge.

In Miller’s work, Batman comes out of retirement to help rid Gotham’s streets of increasingly violent criminals, fighting some of his most notorious enemies—Two-Face, aka Harvey Dent, and the Joker—as well as some new foes: the Mutant gang and their monstrous leader (see figure 1.1). Despite this series of victories against clearly delineated “bad guys,” Batman finds himself at odds with the Gotham City Police and the United States Government, which ultimately results in his confrontation with the government puppet Superman. Batman apparently suffers a heart attack in the process of defeating Superman; however, the final pages reveal that he has faked his own death, and the text ends with him beginning to train the Mutants and the young Robin to work for Gotham’s well-being.

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7 Will Brooker convincingly argues for the “campy” Batman’s necessary position within the franchise. See *Batman Unmasked* and *Hunting the Dark Knight*. 
Thus a major pattern at work in the text is one of rising and falling, or a cycle of returning in a kind of vertically-oriented spiral—a cycle, however, that depends on Bruce Wayne’s desires. This pattern appears on the first page, which depicts a fiery car crash and Bruce Wayne inside, thinking, “this would be a good death...but not good enough,” demonstrating the central tension of navigating the ambiguity of binaries that are conventionally thought to be fixed, especially in the superhero universe: between life and death, and between good and bad (10). “A good death” might mean a satisfactory death or a morally right one, and Bruce’s escape from the crash reveals that this death would be neither. The text therefore begins with a last-minute rejection of death, as Bruce escapes the crash at the last second; however, this scene also demonstrates Bruce’s embrace of death, of thrill-seeking, his pleasure at putting his own body at risk: “It (the exploding car) shoves hot needles in my face and tries to make me blind. I’m in charge now and I like it... The left front tire decides to turn all on its own. I laugh and jerk the steering wheel to the right” (10). His enjoyment in the face of danger and bodily harm is clear, and this enjoyment is bound up with his traumatic past in a web of competing desires.
Indeed almost immediately following this scene, Bruce Wayne wanders the streets of Gotham musing on the separation between himself and the Batman persona (figure 1.2):

Batman was a young man. If it was revenge he was after, he’s taken it. It’s been forty years since he was born... born here. Once again he’s brought me back—to show me how little it has changed. It’s older, dirtier, but—it could have happened yesterday. It could be happening right now. They could be lying at your feet, twitching, bleeding... and the man who stole all sense from your life, he could be standing... right over there. (13)

The following panels depict two Mutant thugs preparing to attack Bruce in the alley, until they realize not only that he can fight back, but that he wants to do so: “I don’t know, man, look at him. He’s into it—Can’t do murders when they’re into it—let’s hit the arcade, man” (13-14).
This is the first retelling in *The Dark Knight Returns* of Batman’s origin story, and tellingly he tries to maintain a separation between his competing alter egos, referring to Batman in the third person, but also referring to himself in the first and second person. Visually, these panels contain Bruce Wayne, not Batman; the absence of Batman here foregrounds the tension between the idea that Bruce and Batman are inextricable precisely through Batman’s absence: he is present only through the image of Bruce Wayne. This split between Batman and Bruce Wayne is linked with the moment of trauma; following Caruth’s definition, again, Bruce’s thought that “it,” the event, “could have happened yesterday” or “could be happening right now” illustrates the simultaneity of traumatic memory in the mind of the survivor. And when Bruce conflates the Mutant thugs with the man who killed his parents (“standing right over there”), it is as if time itself has ceased to have meaning in his mind. The possibility of fighting these Mutants appears to be a mental exercise in fighting the criminal responsible for the trauma in Bruce’s past. That is, here trauma effectively cancels time, leaving Bruce suspended between past and present.

The very structure of the comics medium mirrors this suspension, as the panels depicting this scene all exist simultaneously on the page for the reader (cf. McCloud 104, and the introduction to this project). This temporal suspension is also bound up in questions of desire: just as Bruce enjoys the danger he faces in the car crash a few pages earlier, here he is apparently “into” the possibility of fighting the Mutants. He *wants* to be there, in that alley, fighting whomever he encounters there. Moreover, this scene is not a literal flashback to the moment of trauma: the panels remain visually in the present, following the middle-aged Bruce Wayne. He therefore has not been helplessly carried away into the past but instead actively chooses to be there, despite his insistence that “he [Batman] brought me here.”
As I described earlier, Thomas and Martha Wayne’s death is conventionally considered the Batman’s origin story, but Miller also presents another origin story through a dream sequence, in which a very young Bruce Wayne falls down a hole in the garden and encounters a swarm of bats living in the cave below. Bruce’s choice of the bat as his alter ego and his return to the cave as the alter-ego’s home (literally, the Batcave) is a way for Bruce to simultaneously embrace his fear and turn that fear against the criminals he fights; it is a kind of conscious appropriation of terror and trauma. In taking the form of the bat, Batman attempts to move from powerless to empowered via an appropriation of the vision that terrifies him.

The narrative’s return to this boyhood scene, however, illustrates both the psychic break that occurs at this moment and its uncanny return in Bruce’s psyche. The use of red as an accent color to the predominantly black, gray, and white of the page gives this dream sequence a violent, nightmarish quality, culminating in a close-up of a bat’s face as it looms over the six-year-old boy (figure 1.3).
I call this another origin story because according to Bruce, the bat was waiting in the cave and “claim[ed] me [Bruce] as his own;” he goes on to say that Batman “laughs at me, curses me. Calls me a fool. He fills my sleep, he tricks me. Brings me [to the Batcave] when the night is long and my will is weak. He struggles relentlessly, hatefully, to be free...” (19).

Here the text again emphasizes the break between Bruce and the Batman, two separate entities housed in the same body; the bat and the Batman appear here unconscious desires resurfacing through dreams and tricks. Bruce’s struggle to repress this side of himself is equally the struggle between justice and revenge, yet it is precisely in this division between his two “sides” that he is able to both defeat criminals in ways the law cannot, and prevent himself from becoming criminal in the process. This struggle manifests itself as the vision of the terrifying bat, emphasizing both the visual nature of Bruce’s secondary trauma and the necessity of creating an appearance of appropriation. Visible mimicry of the visual trauma becomes a way for Bruce Wayne to both look like he confronts his fears, and to cover over his still-invisible and unspoken terror.

This vision repeats itself later in the text, enacting the cyclicality and repetition that so characterizes trauma itself. After his initial defeat at the hands of the Mutant leader, bloodied and near death, Bruce returns to the Batcave, where he experiences yet another near-resurrection: “I can’t die... I’m not finished yet... and you’re not finished with me” (87). Over the next several panels a bat appears, and the captions repeat from the earlier Batcave origin scene: “Gliding with ancient grace, eyes gleaming, untouched by love or joy or sorrow... breath hot with the taste of fallen foes... the stench of dead things, damned things... surely the fiercest survivor, the purest warrior... glaring, hating... claiming me as your own” (88). The difference between this scene and the earlier one lies in shift from third to second person (“you’re not finished with me;”
“claiming me as your own”), as if Bruce is confronting and accepting the animal part of himself in the scene’s second repetition.

Embracing the bat in himself is in fact necessary for Batman to return successfully to Gotham’s streets, defeat the Mutant leader and, later, the Joker, and even lead the people of Gotham during the pandemonium of the blackout near the end of the text. Indeed, only through fighting these battles can Bruce ultimately decide to let Batman “die,” in order to train and pass on Gotham’s wellbeing to the next generation; and only through accepting the Bat can he successfully fight those battles. Batman is therefore Bruce’s fear incarnate, a simultaneously instinctual and emotional being that Bruce tries to keep separate from himself. For to allow Batman to “break free,” as he says earlier, would also allow Bruce’s repressed desires to be free: his masochistic, compulsive need to fight the criminals who eternally stand for the murderer of Bruce Wayne’s parents. And this is the crux of Batman’s defining tension: Bruce Wayne is continually and nearly exclusively defined through his relationship to his parents. Even here, in his fifties, Batman is still bound up in a compulsion that stems from his lack of a unique identity or subjectivity. (And, as I will discuss in more detail later, this is why the ending of this text is so problematic: it presents a romanticized narrative of Bruce’s resurrection as a teacher/savior, but this narrative is only covering up Bruce Wayne/Batman’s trauma and lack.)

Just before Bruce returns to the Batman costume, the text presents a visual and verbal flashback to the scene of Bruce’s parents’ death. As the scene begins, Bruce Wayne is watching television when the film Zorro appears onscreen. In the blue light of the television screen, the panels move closer and closer to Bruce’s face. The captions read: “Just a movie, that’s all it is. No harm in watching a movie... you loved it so much... you jumped and danced like a fool... you remember...” The narration is then interrupted with Bruce’s memory, in more yellow, brown and
gray tones in contrast with the black and blue of the “present,” and we see the Waynes leaving the cinema. “You remember that night—” reads the following caption, accompanying a close up on the “present” Bruce’s anguished face. The rest of this page and all of the following page are wordless, and show the young Bruce dancing in the alley, a hand holding a gun, Thomas stepping in front of Bruce, the finger squeezing the trigger, Martha’s death, and the mugger’s arm breaking the strand of pearls around her neck (figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: flashback to the night of the Waynes’ murder (Miller 23).
The short, uniformly sized panels and the lack of dialogue create a sense of the slowing down of time within and across the panels. This “slow time” gives the impression of the scene happening in slow motion: The finger pulling the trigger, the bullet casing leaving the gun, the strand of pearls snapping from his mother’s neck—these all happen across multiple panels, with moment-to-moment transitions (see McCloud 70). As such, this scene should “last” mere seconds or, at most, a few minutes, but it feels and looks as if it lasts much longer (a total of three pages). Time, therefore, loses its conventional structure within Miller’s manipulation of the comics medium, and moreover Batman’s sense of identity is bound up in this “slow time.”

This “slow time” flashback then transitions into Bruce watching the news of all the crimes committed in Gotham that night. He then has another split conversation with himself: “The time has come. You know it in your soul. For I am your soul... you cannot escape me” (25). The text then moves to his office, where Bruce is listening to his answering machine messages, disembodied voices from his past: Jim Gordon, Superman / Clark Kent, and Catwoman / Selina Kyle.

Figure 1.5: the bat escapes? (Miller 25).
Bruce is bathed in moonlight from the window and crisscrossed with the shadows of the bars of the windowpane, making it look as though he is in a prison cell (figure 1.5). The hellish bat from the second “origin story” bursts through the window, into and/or out of the “cell” in which Bruce stands, signifying not only his return to crime-fighting (culminating in Batman’s reveal on page 35) but also his acceptance of that portion of his identity he spent the last ten years trying to repress. These panels present an ambiguous image of the cell: is Bruce Wayne imprisoned, or is the bat contained; and when the bat crashes through the window, is he breaking in, or escaping?

This ambiguity, this slippage between competing desires, eventually leads to Batman’s confrontation with Superman, who stands as a kind of super-ego, representing the US government and, more broadly, the institutional and cultural structures that dictate the law. Superman is the Law empty of its complexities; he is the “big blue Boy Scout” who adheres to the structures of authority precisely because they are the structures of authority. If Batman is the heroic exception because he fills in the gap in the Law, Superman fails to acknowledge that a gap even exists. Therefore Superman must fight Batman, not only because the government tells him to do so, but also because Batman is necessarily criminal in his refusal to adhere to the letter of the law.

When Batman finally fights Superman at the end of the text, he argues that “it has to end here— on this filthy patch of street— where my parents died” (190). He returns to the very space of the traumatic event in order to enact his own death: “this… is the end… for both of us” he says later, referring to both Superman and himself (194). Batman’s compulsion to repeat and his masochistic desire thus extend even to his death. In theory, then, this death indicates Batman’s inability to escape the Law of the Father; all his struggles to define himself as separate from his
father lead him to this end point, his death at the very moment he destroys the Law. There is no existence wholly outside of this Symbolic order.

Like the death of his parents that Bruce repeatedly reenacts in memory, however, Batman’s death is not contained to a single time or place; unlike his parents, however, Bruce literally returns to the realm of the living as a physical presence rather than as mere memory. His heart begins to beat again after he is buried, Robin digs him up, and he gathers the Mutant gang plus Robin to him in what was once the Batcave (figure 1.6).

In a paternalistic move, Bruce passes on care of Gotham City to his followers: “Here, in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crimefighter whose time has passed… it begins here— an army— to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers… This
will be a good life… Good enough” (199). This “embracing” of life at the end of the text occurs only after the metaphorical death of Batman, revealing the fluidity between normally fixed boundaries—a fluidity, as we have seen, that characterizes this figure. He can be life and death, justice and revenge, past, present, and future, all in a single body.

This embracing of life, however, presents a fundamental problem with Miller’s depiction of Bruce Wayne’s resurrection. If Batman has both defeated the Law of the Father and, in dying, acknowledged that there is no existing outside of that Law, then in what way can he come back to life? Miller’s Bruce Wayne seems to have given up the Batman persona, and thus given up the split in his identities and desires. Yet hiding in the cave sending others into Gotham to do the “dirty work” of cleaning the city still constitutes a split between public and private spheres, and Gotham still remains as the figure that eternally needs rescuing. Bruce thus remains within the same divided structures against which he spent the entire narrative struggling. Moreover, in drawing attention to Batman’s fluid relationship to normally fixed binary divisions, the text’s ending becomes equally fluid. Perhaps Batman is dead and Bruce will remain below ground, or perhaps he will return to the mask and reenter the world. Like the bat escaping or breaking in to Bruce’s life, the significance of the text’s ending is not “which option will Batman choose?” but the co-existence of these options.

“What Do You Think I am? Crazy?”: Reason and Madness in The Killing Joke

While Batman is himself a figure of multiplicity, his many subject positions are also externalized through the villains he encounters. In Alan Moore and Brian Bollard’s The Killing Joke (1988), the figure of the Joker, with his violent actions and philosophical meanderings, actually reveals aspects of Batman’s psyche as well his own. The Joker’s connection to desire,
memory, and time brings the complexities of individual trauma to the foreground. Unlike Bruce Wayne, however, the Joker is not split in two through his trauma, but rather liberated to seek his desires with abandon. The Joker’s modus operandi is generally constructed as the use of fear, panic, chaos, and wanton destruction based not on some ideological or political stance, but rather out of pure pleasure for the acts themselves. Where the Batman is the embodied desire for the Law, or the need for rule, order, and rigidity, the Joker is the embodiment of chaos and panic. Thus the two characters are often each other’s antithesis; however, they are equally frequently the other’s complement.

The Joker’s villainy reflects the similarities between himself and the Batman, revealing the moral and psychological ambiguity embedded within the text. While the Joker invokes madness as the paradoxically reasonable response to trauma, Batman’s tenacious hold on order speaks to his need to maintain his agency. Moreover, in its depiction of the female body through the violated figure of Barbara Gordon, the text furthers the notion of feminine passivity and masculine agency that so defines Batman and his masochistic desires. *The Killing Joke* renders the feminine body as visible (unmasked) spaces of violence, foregrounding the ways in which both the superhero genre and visuality itself are bound up in gendered constructions of violence and trauma.

*The Killing Joke* begins with the Joker, having recently escaped from The Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, shooting police commissioner Jim Gordon’s daughter Barbara and kidnapping Gordon, taking him to his recently-acquired abandoned carnival. Acting on the double premise that one (very, very) bad day can drive a person mad, and that madness is the only way in which the world makes sense, the Joker tries to induce Jim Gordon to madness through physical and psychological torture, particularly by showing him photographs of his
daughter’s naked, dying body. Jim Gordon does not go mad, however, and Batman arrives in time to chase the Joker through the carnival and capture him. Interspersed with these scenes are flashbacks to the Joker’s own “origin story” as Moore conceives it: a single day during which his wife and unborn baby are killed in a freak accident, and then he in turn is horribly maimed in a chemical accident during a robbery gone bad.

*The Killing Joke* tells the Joker’s origin story through a series of flashbacks colored in black, red, and white, in contrast with the multicolored panels of the narrative’s present. Each of these flashback scenes also features a series of panel transitions, in which the first panel of one scene visually mirrors or repeats the last panel of the previous scene. For example, the first flashback ends with the unnamed man who will become the Joker reaching for his wife; the next panel (in color) depicts the Joker reaching for his reflection in the Laughing Clown machine at the carnival (figure 1.7). This series of almost filmic transitions from flashback to present or vice-versa, in which characters in the present mimic the poses in the flashbacks, makes a visible seam between temporalities.

![Figure 1.7: The use of color and mirroring to reify shifting temporalities.](image)

The use of color in this text thus acts as a visual code for a temporal shift, making time itself visible and emphasizing the possibilities for a visually centered understanding of trauma.
For example, in another instance we see the Joker hold his head in his hands in despair, and then Jim Gordon holding his head in exactly the same pose. These transitions underscore the importance of time’s fluidity: the mirrored panels draw attention to the act of stitching together time within the text; rather than smoothing out time, the text seams it up. This visual echoing and the tangible presence of time do not mean the characters are exact doubles, but that certain aspects and emotional responses between characters and moments mirror one another.

This mirrored status occurs even at the beginning of the text, before the Joker appears. The opening panels of this work depict concentric circles of raindrops falling on the concrete, a geometric motif that recurs throughout the text (figure 1.8). These circles are the visual echoes of a target ring, coupled with the visual signifier of all kinds of other sensory aspects: the sound of falling rain, the chill in the air, even the smell of rain on the pavement. These drops are right in front of Arkham Asylum, which houses some of Gotham’s worst villains (Two-Face makes a brief appearance in a cell, for example). The concentric circles of rain are thus allied with not only nature but also the asylum and the chaos within that it attempts and continually fails to keep at bay.

Figure 1.8: symbolic geometry: circles and lines in *The Killing Joke*. 
As the Batmobile pulls up in front of the Asylum, its headlights shine through the rain, forming strong geometric lines that are juxtaposed with those concentric circles of rain; these lines create an immediate contrast between Batman and his need for order and linearity on the one hand, and nature, chaos, and the Asylum on the other. However, closer inspection of these images reveals that linear drops of rain form the circles, and the linear light beams shine from round headlights; thus even in their apparent contrast the Batman and Joker contain elements of the other’s geometric pattern. Thus the apparent contrast between linearity and circularity breaks down, and, as we will see with the ambiguous ending to the text, this breakdown demonstrates both Batman’s and the Joker’s positions outside of the Law.

Despite their many similarities, however, the Joker is clearly a villain, in part due to his love of chaos and destruction, and in part because he refuses to try to reinsert himself into the dominant social structures, choosing instead to remain in madness. As he begins to torture Jim Gordon at the carnival, the Joker takes a surprisingly Proustian view of the role of memory in madness and sanity:

Remembering’s dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. [...] Memory’s so treacherous. One moment you’re lost in a carnival of delights, with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candy floss... The next, it leads you somewhere you don’t want to go... Somewhere dark and cold, filled with the damp, ambiguous shapes of things you’d hoped were forgotten. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes. Like children, I suppose. Haha. But can we live without them? Memories are what our reason is based upon. If we can’t face them, we deny reason itself! [...] So when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought, heading for the places in your past where the screaming is unbearable, remember there’s always madness.
Madness is the emergency exit… you can just step outside, and close the door on all those
dreadful things that happened. You can lock them away… forever.

The Joker’s monologue is a knot of converging ideas and qualities about memory, reason, and
representation. Memory, particularly involuntary memory, takes on a kind of agency, moving the
holder as it will, and madness becomes the Joker’s only site of resisting memory itself. To reject
reason, he says, is to reject memory and thereby avoid facing the cruelty of the past.

Playing on the popular view of comics as juvenile, the Joker plays up the carnival aspect
of memory as adolescent, but with a dark, cruel side. The aromas and tastes of childhood can
return abruptly, unbidden, traveling through time to produce sensations in memory’s holder, but
those sensations can turn to terror just as suddenly. Memory, according to the Joker, can be thus
a sensory experience, similar to Proust’s tasting the tea and madeleine cookie and flying through
time back to his childhood:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the
things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring,
more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls,
remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in
the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

(Proust 63-64)
The senses thus contain “the vast structure of recollection,” and can pull an individual through
time and space into memory itself, “amid the ruins of all the rest.” And yet, the Joker notes that
“memories are what our reason is based upon;” these very ties to the past, unbidden though they
may be, also demand that the subject situate himself within a web of identification and within
reason, language, and rule. It is this necessary process of identification that the Joker resists,
leaving madness as the alternative.

Throughout this diatribe the Joker’s minions lead the naked and terrified Gordon through the carnival to the Ghost Train ride, in what appears to be a literal enactment of the Joker’s monologue: Gordon is taken from the bright and garish, if terrifying, open air of the carnival to the even more terrifying Ghost Train, “dark and cold, filled with the damp, ambiguous shapes of things.” Having previously examined Batman’s traumatic past in *The Dark Knight Returns*, however, we can also draw a parallel between the Joker’s words and Batman’s experiences. Like the Joker, whose flashbacks pepper this text, Batman experiences “treacherous memory” which leads him back to his parents’ death and to the dark, ambiguous shape of the Bat.

Unlike the Joker, however, neither Gordon nor Moore’s Batman take madness as “the emergency exit.” Indeed, whatever his psychic and physical struggles, Batman resists madness. The Joker, meanwhile, has fulfilled his own prescription; he is cut free from the reason, despite his seemingly reasoned-out thoughts. In his disavowal of memory, the Joker has also disavowed any identity other than “the Joker.” He has no alter ego, no known identity (a constant since his introduction into the Batworld in *Batman #1*, 1940). And therefore it is precisely through Bruce Wayne’s insistent struggle to keep his two identities apart, as we have seen, that Batman keeps hold of his reason and does not become ideologically and psychically unmoored like the Joker.

*The Killing Joke*, however, undermines the Joker’s own arguments, as his memories return despite his rejection of reason and embrace of madness. The text proceeds to work against part of the Joker’s claims as the panels depicting the above monologue transition immediately to another one of the Joker’s memories, when he learns of his wife’s death. These panels do literalize the Joker’s characterization of memory as something dark, cold and ambiguous, through the use of the monochrome palette and heavy shadows covering faces, rendering them
nearly unidentifiable. On the other hand, the flashback’s very appearance in the text, and its use of the mirrored transition panels described earlier (here, the doors of the Ghost Train ride become the doors in the bar where the Joker is finalizing his robbery plans), indicate that the memory of his wife’s death has not been “locked away forever.” Instead this memory appears seemingly unbidden, and the temporal structure of comics allows for the near-simultaneity of that scene and the narrative’s present, further illustrating the futility of active repression. Despite his madness the Joker cannot fully escape his own memories, even if he does disavow them. Trauma and memory are here linked in an intricate web of the visible but unspeakable, the memories rejected by the character yet embraced by the text. To visualize memory and trauma is to be between visibility and invisibility, to see only a part of the whole. Speaking to the potential for comics to represent, in their state in-between, trauma and memory, *The Killing Joke* situates the Joker’s madness between images and temporalities.

Later, as he runs from Batman through the carnival attractions, the Joker asks Batman what happened in his past: “what is it with you? What made you what you are?” He then continues: “Something like [the crime he imagines for Batman’s origin] happened to me, you know. I... I’m not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!” In admitting this, the Joker puts the entire text into question: are the flashbacks to the Joker’s origins “true?” Or are they merely a version of the truth? The Joker’s very existence shows that the events themselves, in his case, matter less than their effects; it is ultimately not important how the Joker went mad, only that he did. Memory is indeed treacherous, as the Joker says, but not solely in the way he describes. Not only does *The Killing Joke* prove the Joker cannot “lock [memories] away forever,” it also proves that those memories are fallible, inconsistent, inherently fragile.
Moore and Bolland’s text parallels memory’s fragility with the female body, binding memory, passivity, and violence together in a knot of visual representation. In contrast with the Joker’s overwhelming verbosity throughout the comic, Barbara is mostly silent, a voiceless blank space on which violence and trauma become visible. Near the beginning of the work, the Joker shoots Barbara in the stomach, sending her crashing through a coffee table and landing her in the hospital for the remainder of the narrative (figure 1.9).
After shooting Barbara, the Joker launches into an extended metaphor / pun in which Barbara is a text to be read—and this is exactly what happens to her later, when the Joker uses a series of photographs of her body to torture her father. After shooting Barbara, which forces her to crash through the coffee table behind her, the Joker says:

Please don’t worry. It’s a psychological complaint, common among ex-librarians. You see, she thinks she’s a coffee table edition... Mind you, I can’t say much for the volume’s condition. I mean, there’s a hole in the jacket and the spine appears to be damaged. [...] Frankly, she won’t be walking off the shelves in that state of repair. In fact, the idea of her walking anywhere seems increasingly remote. But then, that’s always a problem with softbacks.

The female body thus becomes a text on which the narrative of violence, madness, and trauma is written. Moreover the female body is a material object whose value lies not in its content—after all, the plot of the “book” goes unmentioned in the Joker’s metaphor—but in its appearance, its physical condition, and its value as an object of collection. To be an object of the gaze is thus to be a victim of violence, a space on which violence is written—but this written narrative of violence is of less importance than the appearance of the object itself.

The female body thus functions differently than the hypermasculine bodies of Batman and Jim Gordon. While the Joker does torture Jim Gordon, and humiliates him by stripping him naked and chaining him up, the Joker intends for this violence to have a specific psychological effect (figure 1.10).
The sight of Jim’s masculine body is not that of an image of passive victimhood, but of a resistant body echoing Jim’s resisting mind. Barbara, meanwhile, becomes multiple images, her body framed and broken into many different pieces for the viewer of the Joker’s photographs. The many images of Barbara’s broken body find an echo in the multiple viewers of her photographs: Jim, the Joker, the Joker’s camera, and the reader all partake in the network of vision that establishes Barbara as an object of the gaze, whose body is not an active site of resistance but a blank space, where violence and trauma become the narrative that speaks for and through her.

Physical violence thus occurs on the feminine body, leaving Barbara to be nothing more than an image to be looked at, a book to be collected but not read. The Joker’s attack on Barbara leaves her likely paralyzed from the bullet passing through her spine, thereby rendering her nearly motionless for the remainder of the narrative. When Batman wakes her up in the hospital, she is in a state of panic: “It’s not okay! He’s... he’s taking it to the limit this time... You didn’t see. You didn’t see his eyes” (figure 1.11).
Figure 1.11: Barbara as passive witness to her own suffering.

As she says this, the panel contains a close-up of her face, tears spilling from her wide, blue eyes, which are the central focal point of the panel. The horror of all she has encountered is therefore bound up in the act of looking, as she is forced to witness her own suffering. Her body, meanwhile, cannot respond, act, or resist in any way; she must rely on Batman for vengeance and justice. However, she accuses Batman of not being able to see, of being unable to witness and therefore unable to understand the Joker’s madness.

Thus the Joker’s senseless violence draws our attention to the total passivity of the female body in the text, which is in direct contrast with Batman’s hyper-masculine, yet paradoxically blinded, agency. Indeed, immediately following this moment Batman travels around Gotham interrogating all the criminals he can find in order to discover the Joker’s location. Barbara, meanwhile, is doubly confined: first to the hospital bed, and secondly within the frames of the photographs the Joker displays in order to torture Jim. She becomes purely a visual object, inert and passive (note: even though her image causes pain in Jim Gordon, it does so precisely because she has been rendered as an inert image; therefore even the agency one might want to
restore to her as the one who provokes a reaction from Jim is undone), and although she is one of the catalysts for Batman’s entry into the search for the Joker, any agency she may conceptually have in that position is cancelled out by her total incapacitation.

Barbara thus comes to function in a similar way to Bruce’s mother Martha in Morrison and McKean’s *Arkham Asylum* and Nolan’s film trilogy. That is, Barbara Gordon, Martha Wayne, and even to a certain extent Catwoman / Selina Kyle, are all passive figures who, like Gotham City herself, are “damsels in distress” whom Batman wants to “rescue.” Thus it is through the female figure that Batman remains entrenched in his network of desires, as the violence written on their bodies continually prompts Batman into action. The female body becomes a site of trauma and violence, a space onto which men write the struggle between heroism and villainy, justice and crime.

**Batman and Bates: Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth**

Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) follows close on the heels of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke* both chronologically and thematically, and it takes the violence and madness of those earlier texts to an even more horrific level. In a thin but convenient plot line that allows for a veritable procession of some of the Gotham City’s best-known villains, the Joker leads the inmates of Arkham Asylum in a coup, holding the staff hostage until Batman agrees to enter the asylum and fight its residents one by one.

This story arc is interspersed with a second narrative, that of Amadeus Arkham, the asylum’s founder, and his experiences between 1901 and 1921. Arkham believes the family home is cursed after he and his mother both suffer from hallucinations of a large bat that haunts
the house and leads his mother to suicide. However, through a series of flashbacks, Arkham’s diary reveals that he actually killed his mother and then repressed the memory until one of his inmate-patients escapes and viciously murders Arkham’s wife and daughter. Traumatized anew, Arkham falls further into madness, eventually ending up incarcerated in the very asylum that he founded, where he apparently casts a spell to contain the evil spirit of the bat that haunted him and his mother. Dr. Cavendish, the present director of the asylum, finds Arkham’s journals and believes Batman is the evil spirit incarnate; taking it upon himself to finish Arkham’s work, the final scenes reveal that Cavendish organized the inmate’s rebellion in an effort to contain and defeat Batman.

Clearly, then, this text’s primary occupations are with issues of trauma, temporality, and cyclicality. Madness and horror are embodied in McKean’s distinctive artwork, in the page layouts, and in the letterings used. The art—which is, according to then-DC/Vertigo director Karen Berger, a mix of graphite and painting along with mixed media like “photography, sculpting, [and] an assemblage of odd objects” (“Afterword”)—is disorienting in its abstraction. Perspective and scale are fluid, and the blurry, shadowed figures are simultaneously recognizable and alienating, creating a sense of the uncanny within each panel. For example, the Joker still bears his trademark green hair, white skin, and disturbing crimson grin; yet McKean varies these features from panel to panel—in some moments the Joker’s smile takes up almost his entire face, while at others his eyes dominate, and at still others extreme lighting or shadow erase most of his facial features (figure 1.12). This shifting artwork effectively undermines the reader’s familiarity with the characters and makes reading a more challenging task.
Gaspar Saladino’s extraordinary lettering also disorients and challenges the reader. He uses a distinct font or color for many of the characters, from the beautifully ordered and conventional diary entries of Arkham that belie the madness underneath his words, to the electric blue, Greek-inspired speech of the villain Zeus. The Joker’s speech (pictured above), bright red and full of splatters, borders on illegible and reflects not only his violence and madness but also his position outside of reason and the Symbolic order; that is, language no longer visually functions as it does for the other characters. Moreover his speech is not contained within conventional bubbles, as is the case with the other characters, but instead scrawls across panels unrestrained.

Batman’s speech is white on a black background, indicating his presumed order and control—that is, his “black and white” view of the world, and the rigid morality against which the Joker, with his wild and uncontrollable language and actions, continually pushes—as well as his position as exception (his speech is a literal inversion of the “normal” minor characters’, which is the conventional black on a white background). However, *Arkham Asylum* soon undermines this alleged control: when Batman tells the Joker “I don’t take orders from you” and tries to refuse the Joker’s demand to participate in a perverted game of “hide and seek” with the
inmates, the Joker shoots one of the hostages and threatens to shoot Dr. Ruth Adams, pushing Batman to play the game and run through the halls of the asylum. Like Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke*, the female body is both passive impetus for Batman’s action and space for the possibility of violence. However, *Arkham Asylum* presents a second, alternative vision in which Batman himself becomes a feminized body, thanks in part to the way the space of the asylum itself functions.

The space of the asylum underscores Batman’s position in between law and criminality, and between enjoyment and compulsion. Arkham Asylum is a liminal space both temporally and spatially, which allows Batman to act out his violent desires under the guise of the Law in a place where legality is suspended (after all, he enters the asylum because the police cannot). Yet his entry into this literal and psychological space can also be a mark of his darker, desires, which bring him closer to the asylum precisely because he mimics those whom he seeks to defeat. Just as the Joker can indeed force Batman to act, so Batman is equally susceptible to the space of the asylum itself, whose supposed purpose is to simultaneously contain and rehabilitate those gone mad.

However, this is Arkham Asylum, a space with agency, and a history of both causing and containing madness. The violence of madness within its walls is a violence whose temporal aspects are unmoored, reflecting the temporal dimensions of trauma itself. Within the confines of the asylum, time is an abstraction and a condensation, a reality and an impossibility; that is, time functions within the asylum in a way similar to that of the traumatized subject, who is suspended between past and present. The two narrative arcs demonstrate the fluidity of time within the space of the asylum, as thematic, symbolic, and narrative elements repeat and recur, cut free from their conventional temporal restraints.
The Joker’s grand entrance into the asylum as he accompanies Batman demonstrates this temporal unmooring (figure 1.13). As he pushes the doors open, he says, “You’re in the real world now, and the lunatics have taken over the asylum. ‘April sweet is coming in.....’” The following page is a splash page, on which the artwork bleeds all the way to the edge of the page. The central image is of the Joker grandiosely gesturing over a group of inmates seated in a dining room, but the accompanying panels of esoteric images and references—including the Star of David and a clock face—render the scene barely comprehensible. While certainly each of the images holds significance, their individual meanings (or possible meanings) take a secondary position to the overwhelming and erratic effect of their cumulation. The uneven, nearly unintelligible speech of the inmates adds to the chaotic and disorienting impression of the page. The lack of uniform panels and the complicated abstract images create the feeling that the order and organization of the “outside” no longer applies here “inside.”

Figure 1.13: “Let the Feast of Fools begin!”
Indeed, although one panel on this page depicts a part of a clock face with Roman numerals marking time, the clock’s appearance here is not to indicate time’s *passage* but rather its *existence*. Like the mirrored transitions in *The Killing Joke*, the appearance of timekeeping devices here brings our attention to the seam of time, or time’s abstraction and lack of linearity. In fact many of the violent events in *Arkham Asylum* occur on April 1, from the present-day inmates’ coup to the deaths of Arkham’s mother and, later, his wife and daughter. Time and space thus thicken into something like Bakhtin’s chronotope, so the asylum becomes a space in which conventional time condenses, pauses, and takes on agency (Bakhtin 84-85). The house is a place of nightmares, where dream-time becomes a real, lived temporality as the narrative itself moves back and forth between moments in the present and the past.

Amadeus Arkham’s journals, and his recovery of his repressed memory, further complicates the space of the asylum as not only a place of horror, but a place of violence on the female or feminized body. When Arkham enters the building on April 1, 1921, he finds the bodies of his wife and daughter, murdered at the hands of his former patient, “Mad Dog” Hawkins. As Arkham encounters the gruesome scene, he “finds it all to be perfectly rational,” and then “almost idly, I wonder where [his daughter’s] head is. And the I look at the doll’s house. And the doll’s house. Looks. At. Me.” The panels depicting this revelation depict an exchange of gazes between Arkham and the doll’s house; Arkham does not merely look at the doll’s house, but the object of the gaze returns that gaze back to the subject (figure 1.14).
The daughter’s face is framed within the doll’s house, itself framed within small panels, so the horror of her death takes up the entire space-in-miniature of the house itself. While the daughter becomes a doll, an object, she also seems to become the house itself, an object with agency. This exchange of gazes between Arkham and the house is a moment of “slow time” similar to Bruce Wayne’s flashbacks in *The Dark Knight Returns*. As a cuckoo clock strikes—again, marking time’s *existence*, not necessarily its linear progression—the panels alternately “zoom in” on the clock and between the eyes of Arkham and his daughter. The clock therefore marks time and Amadeus Arkham’s move into madness as he “goes cuckoo.”
After his daughter’s death, Arkham puts on his mother’s wedding dress “and I kneel down in that nursery abattoir. It all seems perfectly rational. Perfectly, perfectly rational” (figure 1.15). The visual motif of blood-soaked lace appears here, signifying the violence enacted on the female body, but also, as we learn during the revelation of his mother’s murder, of Arkham’s taking on the feminine, victimized position. At one point earlier in the text he notes that the Japanese clownfish have the ability to change sex from male to female when the dominant female dies. If Arkham’s mother is the dominant female, when he kills her while wearing her dress, it is as if he also changes sex to replace the mother. Therefore when his daughter dies, he
again puts on the dress, and becomes simultaneously the victimized female body, and the body with agency, the body that can look back.

The miniature doll’s house is thus a visual repetition of the larger house metaphorically filled with the horror of death—specifically female death. As Arkham wanders the house in an ever-worsening state of madness, the house becomes increasingly more active: “I feel that I have become an essential part of some incomprehensible biological process. The house is an organism, hungry for madness. It is the maze that dreams. And I am lost.” Arkham thus not only figures the house as a living organism, even though this “life” springs from death, but also conceptualizes this organism’s agency in reproductive terms.

The house therefore becomes a perversely maternal space, giving birth to Arkham’s madness, and ultimately revealing to him, in a moment of Proustian involuntary memory, his own past: “And suddenly, the longed-for revelation comes, in the form of a memory my mind had suppressed.” Arkham then recalls that one year prior to his wife and daughter’s murders, he killed his own mother in an effort to “save” her from the apparition of a giant bat. He literally remembers in these panels the body he dismembered in the first place, and then conflates the space of the house with his own life and life force: “I understand now what memory tried to keep from me. Madness is born in the blood. It is my birthright. My inheritance. My destiny.” Arkham then becomes incarcerated within the asylum he founded, the prison of his own making, in which he attempts to control the “spirits” in the house.

Arkham’s position is, then, a figure between sexes, between victim and perpetrator, between reason and madness, between memories and the present. Grant Morrison’s narrative makes clear Arkham’s symbolic echoes with Batman, the ultimate liminal figure in the Batworld, whose state of heroic exception is also a state of traumatic exception, and whose masochistic
enjoyment of pain is a symptom of his compulsive need to battle this trauma. It is no coincidence, then, that the catalyst for Batman’s entry into the Joker’s game is a gun, a phallic weapon responsible for the violence enacted on the body of Bruce Wayne’s mother; the image of the weapon involuntarily triggers Batman’s memory of his parents’ death, like the sight of Arkham’s daughter triggers the beginning of his descent into madness, and that madness in turn triggers the memory of his matricide.

Batman’s flashback covers four full pages, and over the first two, the panels alternate between memory and present as Batman confronts himself in a mirror while remembering the night of his parents’ murder. We see Bruce Wayne and his parents in front of a movie theater, whose marquee reads “Bambi,” as Bruce’s mother admonishes him for crying during the movie: “How dare you embarrass me in that way, Bruce! It’s only a movie, for God’s sake! It’s not real.” The next flashback panel shows a very young Bruce with a bright white tear coming from his eye, as a hand points accusingly at him; above his head floats an image from Bambi of the baby deer curled next to his mother. Martha Wayne’s admonishment continues: “Bruce, I’m warning you! If you don’t stop crying and act like a grown-up, I’m leaving you right here.” The following panels echo those final words—“leaving you right here”—as Batman stares at his reflection and then violently smashes the glass, while his memory continues to interrupt this sequence. The mugger shoots his father, and as Batman picks up a large shard of glass, the mugger then tears the pearls from his mother’s neck.
In Morrison’s retelling of this Batman’s origins, Bruce Wayne feels guilt for his parents’ deaths, since his emotional reaction to *Bambi* has forced the family to leave the cinema early. The mugger’s attack on the Waynes is a realization of Bruce’s fear of his mother’s death, which the (here untold) story of *Bambi* first enacts. Thus the trauma of Martha Wayne’s death is fully unmoored from linear temporality, as the mother is killed first in the film, then in reality; moreover, Martha’s admonishment that she will “leave him right here” becomes literal with her death a moment later.

However, instead of seeing the gunshot that kills her, as the panel depicting Thomas Wayne’s death does, Batman instead stabs himself through the hand with the glass shard he just picked up from the smashed mirror (figure 1.17). Batman’s wounding of his hand is not only an act of self-flagellation for the guilt he feels at having put his parents in the situation that results in
their death. It is also a way for him to both return to and mitigate the pain of loss: “I’m leaving you right here,” the refrain of this scene, is not merely a parental threat but a prophecy fulfilled moments later at the hands of the muggers. Like “Mad Dog” Hawkins, who, while in treatment, wounds himself “just to feel something,” so Batman wounds himself to feel physically the psychic wound of the loss of his mother—a loss that, should he express it in words or tears, would be an act of disobedience to his mother’s final words to “stop crying and act like a grown-up.” Wounding his body and spilling his blood thus aligns Batman with the female victims of violence in this text: Arkham’s mother, wife, and daughter, whose bodies are all cut into pieces.

![Figure 1.17: Batman’s self-wounding.](image)

The self-wounding serves as the punctuation to the flashback, and on the following pages a series of nearly wordless panels makes this moment of self-torture slow down, similar to the “slow time” of the Waynes’ death in *The Dark Knight Returns* and Arkham’s discovery of his
daughter’s head in the doll’s house. Indeed, the similarities between Batman’s flashback andArkham’s moment of trauma furthers the fluidity of time: within the chronology of the narrative,Arkham’s experience occurs before Batman’s; but within the text, the reader encountersBatman’s flashback first. Thus the text itself mimics the temporal disorientation of the traumaticexperience.

This mimicry extends in the “slow time” representation of Batman’s self-inflictedwounding. The first three panels show the slow movement of the blade through Batman’s hand,followed by panels alternating between drops of blood splashing in a pool and Batmanwithdrawing the blade, grimacing in pain and then staggering down a hall. In the final panel, theblurry silhouette of Batman says “Mommy?” Turning the page, the first panel the readerconfronts depicts Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho, making clear the link betweenthe violence and blood enacted on Martha Wayne, Mrs. Bates, and Arkham’s mother anddaughter, and the men who then take their places in self-inflicted torture.

Morrison and McKean thus transform Batman from a figure of order and rule to a dreamlike figure of unstable identities, who belongs as much to the space of horror and madness as he does to the position of heroic exception. Batman’s traumatic experience as it is represented here keeps him trapped in a compulsive cycle of repression and involuntary resurfacing. Because he cannot “work through” this trauma in the conventional sense—again, to do so would be to violate his mother’s final command—Batman is destined to repeat it, much as the space of theasylum is destined to remain a space of feminized horror. This text thus resists the notion ofBatman “working through” his trauma, that problematic notion that Miller’s Dark Knight Returns posits in its conclusion. Arkham Asylum instead asks the reader to linger along with
Batman inside the asylum, the space of madness, memory, and trauma, without resolving its questions of violence and representation.

Indeed, the text remains somewhat ambiguous at its ending as it resists easy categorization of hero and villain, as does *The Killing Joke*. Dr. Cavendish, the asylum’s current director, reveals himself as the mastermind behind the inmates’ coup, since he found Arkham’s journals and believes Batman is the bat-spirit that haunts Arkham and his mother. Dr. Ruth Adams kills Dr. Cavendish, and Batman’s reaction to his death—“he got what he deserved”—at first appears to be a violation of one of the major tenets of the Batworld, namely, that Batman abhors killing. However, as some critics have noted, Batman’s earliest stories are much more morally ambiguous than his later strict ethical code; in his very first appearance, he throws a criminal into a vat of acid and says this death is “a fitting end of his kind” (DC #33), a line that Morrison’s Batman echoes here.

Thus Morrison and McKean not only take Batman to a more horrifying level than earlier texts and move him to a visual and psychological ambiguity, they also return him to his earlier state of moral ambiguity. In the notes accompanying the fifteenth anniversary edition of *Arkham Asylum*, Morrison says, “I wanted to approach Batman from the point of the dreamlike, emotional, and irrational hemisphere, as a response to the very literal, ‘realistic,’ ‘left-brain’ treatment of superheroes which was in vogue at the time, in the wake of *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and others.” More than this, however, the text underscores the blurred line between madness and reason that began in *The Killing Joke*. The Joker’s parting words to Batman—“Enjoy yourself out there. In the Asylum. Just don’t forget—if it ever gets too tough... there’s always a place for you here”—reinforce this liminal and ambiguous position of Batman, as the spaces of madness and reason become inverted. Inside the asylum, Batman can endlessly
enact his compulsion to assert his masculinity in an attempt to square his desires with the social demands of the world outside of the asylum.

**Christopher Nolan’s Resurrected and Recycled Batman**


Just as Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* covers up the silliness and camp, to a certain extent, of the earlier comic books and Adam West show, fans and critics alike frequently, and nearly obsessively, credit Nolan’s films with wiping the slate “clean” of the ludicrous and ridiculous Schumacher films, returning Batman to his grittier, darker past. Taking on the structure of the return through patterns of resurrection and falling, similar to those in Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Nolan’s films engage with Batman’s struggles with his past and his repeated, compulsive desire to fight injustice and save Gotham City; in their depictions of this

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8 Although I am aware of the reclaiming of “camp” in queer studies, and in the reappropriation of the campy Batman and his relationship with Robin, I use the term here to draw attention to the ways in which the Nolan films try to *erase* that same campiness, instead reinscribing Batman into heteronormativity, just like Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* does. That is, Nolan’s films attempt to cover up not only Schumacher’s terrible and campy films, but they also attempt to cover up Batman’s own queerness.
desire, however, the films actually hearken back to the problematic depictions of desire in
*Arkham Asylum*.

I consider the Nolan films as a trilogy; while each film certainly can stand alone, they belong to the same discursive reality, and since they refer to and build upon one another, certain elements deepen and take on new meaning when the films are considered as parts of a cohesive unit. I also recognize that the technical and formal aspects of film are vastly different to those of the comics medium, and therefore, certain formal structures function differently (for example: framing, diegesis, and perhaps most pertinently timing and layout). However, as these films now stand as the texts to redefine Batman for a larger contemporary audience, they contribute to the current understanding of the Batman figure and hint at the dangers of the cultural imagination that produces not only the Batworld, but the superhero genre more broadly.

The three films follow a certain pattern of movement: the first and third films, in their long series of exchanges between resurrection and fall, demonstrate Bruce Wayne’s struggle with both his (traumatic) past and his political and psychic desires. The second film, meanwhile, is more preoccupied with Batman’s “state of exception” and his struggle to remain precisely in that liminal space of paradoxically being included through his exclusion from the law—a space, as the two other films show, which is afforded him precisely through his personal traumatic experiences and a complicated network of proscribed desires.\(^9\) Functioning like Agamben’s sovereign who exists in a state of exception, Nolan’s Batman remains outside the regular social and political hierarchy. This section traces the ways in which the first two films serve to establish Bruce Wayne’s various forms of struggle with his desires as he seeks to remain the exception,

\(^9\) Even Bruce Wayne’s domestic spaces of the narratives follow this pattern, with the first and third taking place in Wayne Manor, family home and place of legacy, while the second has Bruce living in a penthouse in Gotham proper, “the safest place in Gotham,” a place, again, of exception.)
while the third film attempts to reconcile those desires through a kind of self-realization and, ultimately, a fallacy of a “clean slate” from which Bruce Wayne can begin life anew.

That is, the trilogy attempts to sanitize Bruce’s trauma in two ways: by presenting the death of his parents as grief, fear, and loss rather than trauma as such, and additionally demonstrating Bruce’s consciousness and willingness to work around those emotions; and by re-inscribing Bruce into dominant heteronormative ideology wiped clean of political implications by the end of the third film. Accordingly, the death of Thomas Wayne is necessary in order for Bruce to assert his own subjectivity. Martha Wayne’s life and death, meanwhile, allows Gotham City to take her place as both a maternal object and an object of desire, as the city simultaneously creates and comforts Batman, yet still needs protection (a position Selina Kyle / Catwoman fills at the trilogy’s end). Thus the ultimately Oedipal and conservative project of these films becomes clear, as the political and public acts of the Batman are subsumed in the private struggles of Bruce Wayne.

_Batman Begins_, from its very title, posits itself as a reimagining of the entire Batman franchise, and the opening sequences reinforce that notion. The film opens with a scene featuring a young Bruce Wayne falling into a well, injuring himself, and consequently being attacked by the bats nesting below the earth. There is an abrupt cut to an adult Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) snapping his eyes open, having apparently dreamed of this traumatic childhood moment. Like Miller, then, Nolan envisions a Bruce Wayne who is not only traumatized but who has experienced two “origin scenes,” two scenes of trauma that return to haunt his adult life. Compare this with the opening sequence of Schumacher’s _Batman Forever_, in which heavy orchestral music accompanies short, choppy shots of various iterations of the Bat-symbol, Batman suiting up, and entering his overly phallic and fantastic Batmobile: the focus here is on
Batman as icon, not Bruce Wayne as individual; on spectacle, not narrative. In the opening of *Batman Begins*, meanwhile, the Bat-symbol occurs only fleetingly in a sequence immediately preceding the initial well scene, as thousands of bats fly across the screen and eventually coalesce into a vague Bat-symbol, only to immediately dissolve again. Right from the beginning, the film’s focus is not the icon, but the individual.

The film follows this individual, Bruce Wayne, as he lives among criminals and ultimately trains with Ra’s al Ghul’s (played by Ken Wantanabe) League of Shadows in order to learn how to conquer his fear of the criminals of Gotham City. But when the League reveals its plan to raze Gotham, Wayne instead burns the League’s monastic training facility and returns to the city to fight criminality and injustice there. Once home he, with the help of his butler Alfred (Michael Caine), creates the Batman persona, battles the corrupt Gotham police force while enlisting the help of “good cop” Lieutenant Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), takes on a mob boss, fights the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy) and his terror-inducing toxin, and ultimately saves Gotham from complete destruction at the hands of the “resurrected” Ra’s al Guhl, revealed to be Bruce’s erstwhile League of Shadows mentor and surrogate father-figure, Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson).

The depiction of the Waynes’ death in *Batman Begins* effectively moves what is elsewhere a traumatic event, as we have seen, into the realm of suffering rather than trauma as such. Instead of representing the death of Thomas and Martha Wayne as something incomprehensible, a psychic breaking point that uncontrollably resurfaces, Nolan’s Batman is fully aware of both his loss, and his emotional responses to that loss. He is so aware, in fact, that even as a child he can name his emotions and feel responsible for their deaths, saying “it was my fault. I made them leave the theater. If I hadn’t gotten scared...! I miss them, Alfred, I miss them
so much.” The young Bruce can verbalize both his feelings of guilt and his recognition of the absence now present in his life, as “missing” his parents necessarily construes an understanding of their absence. In the following scene, as he trains with Ducard, a now adult Bruce can more fully articulate his emotions, saying “my anger outweighs my guilt.” There is no unspeakability of trauma here, no unstated or misunderstood emotions, as there are in Morrison’s text discussed above. The films make Batman’s past legible and understandable.

Bruce can also recognize his own fear stemming from these murders and from his earlier, more primal fear of the bats—a fear which, in turn, prompts the young Bruce to insist on the family leaving the theater, thus binding the fear of bats with the loss of his parents. When he nears the end of his training with the League of Shadows, Bruce Wayne must “breathe in his fears,” as Ducard / al Guhl asks him to inhale a hallucinogenic drug (figure 1.18).

![Figure 1.18: “Breathe in your fear;” the bats appear immediately after.](image)

The film intercuts the image of Wayne inhaling the smoke, eyes closed, with a very fast shot of the earlier CG bats and of the gun shooting his parents. Unlike the comics medium, where time functions both within the panels themselves and across the page as a larger unit, in film, time functions more or less equally for all viewers. That is, the film speed, largely dependent on the frames per second, or, in the digital era, dependent on the whim of the director and editors, ensures that the framed images of film present themselves to us sequentially and within a fixed temporal dimension.
Thus the ways in which film can represent trauma are vastly different from comics. (This is not to say one way is better or worse, or that film cannot represent trauma at all—there are quite a few excellent examples of the latter, like Michael Haneke’s 2005 film *Cache.*) Here, however, Bruce’s fears are presented to us as linear, logical, controllable—after all, the purpose of this hallucinogenic experience is so Wayne can “face his fears and learn to control them,” in order to fight injustice (an ideological project explored in more detail in McGowan’s *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*). Unlike the comics texts, in this film there is very little involuntary memory; instead Bruce actively chooses to remember his parents’ death, turning it into a controllable, comprehensible narrative.

*Batman Begins* operates through a system of metaphorical and literal sequences of rising and falling, of pairings forming and dissolving, of elements first breaking down and then rebuilding—all of which signify Bruce’s struggles to articulate his own desires and his own subjectivity. One of the most literal instances of this cyclicality is the space of Wayne Manor. During a flashback near the beginning of the film, when he returns home for the parole hearing of his parents’ murderer, Bruce tells Alfred that the house “is a mausoleum; if I had my way I’d pull the damn thing down brick by brick.” Yet by the end of the film, after Ra’s al Guhl has burned Wayne Manor to the ground, Wayne determines to “rebuild it, just the way it was, brick for brick” (echoing, indeed, Batman’s repeated injunction in Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, “this is a good life—good enough”). Bruce Wayne arrives at this new, more nostalgic, more messianic view of his own home, and by extension, his family legacy and his own role therein, precisely through his home’s destruction and his own active re-inscription within that space and legacy—after all, he intends to take this as “a good opportunity for improving the foundations,” as Alfred suggests, thereby ensuring a space for Batman in the old/new home.
This pattern repeats in various iterations throughout the film, and most of these instances involve Wayne’s Oedipal struggle to take his father’s place in Gotham City. Thomas Wayne appears to be a near-saintly doctor whose goal is to cure Gotham of its diseases, both literal and metaphorical. With Wayne Tower at the very center of Gotham, and the elevated train connecting all parts of the city to that tower, Thomas Wayne effectively refigured the Gotham skyline to reflect his wealth and his legacy. *Batman Begins* is thus a story not only of Bruce Wayne becoming the Dark Knight, but of a man establishing himself in relation to his father. Bruce apparently idolizes Thomas, who tellingly rescues him from the well he fell down, who comforts him and protects him, and whose death not only leaves a psychic and physical absence in Bruce’s life but also lends to endless comparisons of the son to the father. All of the flashbacks to Bruce’s childhood involve Thomas Wayne; he is the guiding force in Bruce’s life, the Law of the Father incarnate.

The film thus pivots around a series of scenes in which Bruce/Batman falls and rises, dies and is resurrected, simultaneously destroys and saves himself, his family, and his city. Bruce Wayne attempts to take his father’s place, just as when he lowers himself into the well to discover the Batcave in a shot that visually mirrors the earlier scene of Thomas Wayne repelling down to retrieve the young Bruce. To list some more of these resurrection scenes: his rise from crouch to standing in a swarm of bats inside the Batcave; his return to Wayne Enterprises (as Mr. Earle says, “Bruce! You’re supposed to be dead!” to which Bruce responds, “sorry to disappoint”); his awakening in bed after a two-day fight to survive the Scarecrow’s poison, which occurs on his birthday, playing even further on the rebirth/resurrection theme, especially as Alfred offers him “many happy returns.” These references to resurrection create a sense in
which Bruce Wayne must assert his individuality, his new life as separate from his parents’ legacy.

To escape this legacy, however, proves to be a destructive act. Crucially, Batman must destroy the elevated train, Thomas Wayne’s crowning achievement, in order to save Gotham from Ra’s al Guhl, who intends to ride the train into Wayne Tower and therefore destroy the entire city. According to McGowan, “Thomas views the public transportation system not only as a way to accomplish good ends with his wealth, but also a path to unity” within Gotham (Fictional 92). Thus when Batman destroys the train, and Ra’s al Guhl along with it, he also destroys a symbol of his father’s legacy. Moreover, he simultaneously ensures that Gotham will not be united, that the League will not establish its desired, and paradoxically violent, balance. In this destruction, then, Batman both asserts himself as a subject in the Symbolic order, as he tears down his father’s position and places himself therein, and also ensures his own resulting state of exception as the savior of Gotham. Once Bruce’s father’s legacy and his one-time father figure are destroyed, Bruce can return to his manor and promise to rebuild it “brick for brick.” In exerting his own hypermasculine, theatrical agency, Bruce also rescues Gotham City, still functioning as the eternal damsel in distress. He therefore now can assume the place of his father, which he does literally by buying Wayne Enterprises back from Mr. Earle, who took the company public, and metaphorically, in his rebuilding of the family home.

Therefore Batman must destroy his own family’s legacy—as a Wayne executive comments after Bruce’s “drunken” insults at his birthday party, made in an effort to save the partygoers from Ra’s al Guhl, “the apple’s fallen very far from the tree, indeed”—in order to save the city and, paradoxically, uphold that same legacy. In an article in Jump/Cut, McGowan writes that “the act of wearing a mask leads the superhero to believe that there is a true identity
that the mask hides, and this true identity is necessarily individual.” (“Risen”). Here, Batman as a
masked figure saves Gotham, which reinscribes Bruce Wayne, the identity beneath the mask,
into the narrative of his father’s legacy as guardian of Gotham. However, in doing so, a
performed Bruce Wayne, drunken billionaire playboy, must insult his friends and associates,
which simultaneously removes that image of Bruce Wayne from his father’s legacy (“the apple
has fallen far from the tree”).

*Batman Begins* therefore brings the tension between the mask and the hero’s “true
identity” to the fore, something Rachel Dawes can see better than anyone as at the end of the
film she tells Bruce that his “everyday” face is now his mask. That is, in attempting to establish
himself and simultaneously grapple with his own fear and trauma, Bruce Wayne has allowed the
Batman identity to become the “primary,” leaving Bruce as the “secondary” identity— but
nonetheless leaving the trace of that man underneath the mask. This trace will prove to be
Batman’s undoing in the third film, as McGowan argues, but Rachel’s association of this trace
with the faint hope for a heteronormative future for Bruce provides the tenuous thread to which
he desperately clings throughout the first two films, as she tells him that “your real face is the
one criminals now fear. The man I loved, the man who vanished, he never came back at all. But
maybe he’s still out there somewhere. Maybe someday, when Gotham no longer needs Batman,
I’ll see him again.”

Ensuring not only a sequel, but also a continued threat to Gotham, *Batman Begins* ends
with the promise of a new adversary, the Joker, which in turn ensures Batman’s compulsive need
to save the city—after all, once Gotham is saved, Bruce can presumably heal himself, return as a
“normal” man, and achieve the promised future with Rachel. In Nolan’s follow-up *The Dark
Knight*, Batman faces two of his toughest and simultaneously most popular and enduring
adversaries, the Joker (Heath Ledger) and Two-Face (Aaron Eckhart). Because of Batman’s intimidation and efficient presence in Gotham, the city’s criminals are far more limited, pushing the various crime syndicates to turn to the Joker to rid the city of Batman. The Joker wreaks a fair amount of havoc on the city to entice Batman to reveal himself; at one point, however, Harvey Dent takes Batman’s place in order to maintain Batman’s secrecy and simultaneously lure the Joker into a trap. Once arrested, the Joker blows up the police station and orchestrates the explosions that maim Dent and kill Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), who is now Dent’s girlfriend. Because Batman still refuses to give up his identity, the Joker proceeds to blow up a hospital, and then arrange an ethical dilemma in which ferry passengers must decide whether or not to destroy another ferry—one full of convicted criminals, the other with average citizens. Neither ferry destroys the other, Batman apprehends the Joker, and arrives just in time to save Jim Gordon’s son from the vengeful rage of Dent/Two-Face. Dent dies in the process, however, and in order to maintain the illusion of Dent’s moral uprightness, Batman takes the blame for Two-Face’s earlier murders.

Therefore as with the comics discussed above, the Joker functions as Batman’s complement: chaos to Batman’s order, bright colors to his black, laughter to his straight-man, unchecked destruction and murder to his rigid ethics of life. Two-Face, meanwhile, spends most of the film as Harvey Dent, “Gotham’s White Knight” in obvious contrast with the Batman’s “Dark Knight;” Dent is the public face of good in Gotham until he is disfigured, and Rachel is murdered. Thus the Joker acts on a mass scale, while Two-Face’s violence is on a much more private level; nonetheless both villains act to maintain Batman’s heroic exception, a position motivated through his masochistic desires.
The Dark Knight opens with a shot of city buildings in muted sunlight; suddenly a center window of the shiniest, most central building is shot out, so the center of the screen and, visually, the city, is punctured by the Joker’s scheme, chaos, and violence (figure 1.19).

Figure 1.19: Breaking Gotham’s façade.

That is, Gotham’s newfound wholesomeness, its decreased criminality, proves merely a façade, hiding dark, chaotic violence underneath. Batman’s efforts have petty criminals running scared from the Bat-signal, and in an effort to return Gotham to the criminal playground it was before, the mob bosses turn to the Joker for help.

Nolan’s Joker is a man apparently hell-bent on chaos; as he says explicitly to Two-Face late in the film:

Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it! You know? I just—do—things. The mob has plans. The cops have plans. Gordon’s got plans. They’re schemers, schemers trying to control their little worlds. I’m not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are.
This monologue is completely at odds, however, with the Joker’s actions and appearance on-screen. In this scene, he is dressed as a hospital nurse, complete with carefully arranged wig and cap. And indeed in all of his “chaotic” scenes, every last detail is minutely planned: the timing of the phone call that causes the explosion inside the Gotham Police Department, the abductions of Rachel and Dent, the opening bank heist, and so on. The Joker’s weapon is not chaos but panic, and therefore we might think he can never be the true opposite of Batman, and can never be a sovereign exception.

However, the Joker’s real power lies not in the panic he sows but in his absence of an alter ego. Like the other texts, this Joker has no alternate identity; indeed, when Jim Gordon interrogates him, he is lit and filmed so that he appears as just a head floating in blackness, to emphasize the answer to Gordon’s earlier question, “What’s he hiding under all that makeup?” (figure 1.20).

![Figure 1.20: The Joker’s head as empty signifier](image)

The answer, that is, is nothing—the absence of anything to be hidden, the lack of “true identity” under the mask. For Batman, this “true identity” continually pulls him back from fully embracing his alterity; for the Joker, he is only the disembodied head, he is nobody outside of the makeup—
until, at least, the lights in the interrogation room flip on and Batman stands in sharp contrast to
the Joker’s messy, colorful appearance. That is, the Joker stands as Batman’s ideological
opposite precisely in his absence of identity, in his lack of fixity.

Even the Joker’s past is unfixable in this film. At multiple points, he poses the question,
“Do you wanna know how I got these scars?” and the varied answers (from his father, self-
inflicted, etc.) match with The Killing Joke’s problematizing of memory. The importance of the
scars for Nolan’s Joker is not how he got them, but that he was scarred at all, and that he uses
these scars as a signifier of his madness, to incite fear in others, and to signal memory’s
fallibility. Moreover, Batman breaks the Joker’s narrative of the scars at the end of the film;
when the Joker asks “do you know how I got these scars?” Batman responds, “No, but I know
how you got these,” and then proceeds to fire his small metal “batarangs” into the Joker’s face.
Batman not only breaks the Joker’s narrative (which, in its repeated variations, is itself a
patterned repetition) but also adds to his disfigurement. While the Joker’s story seemingly
transfixes other characters, Batman can remain outside it and break it. Although this ability to
resist the Joker’s stories might seem to indicate Batman’s ultimate control over both the narrative
and the Joker, the latter’s final observation as he dangles off the edge of a building speaks to
Batman’s compulsion to enter battle after battle. “I think you and I are destined to do this
forever,” the Joker laughs, and since Batman immediately races off to fight Two-Face—a villain
the Joker created—that destiny is fulfilled, and Batman’s compulsion to fight crime and seek
justice lives on.

While the Joker poses the greatest threat to Gotham herself through the panic and
destruction he enacts, Harvey Dent actually poses the greatest threat to the Batman as a symbol
of the hero who could take Batman’s place as Gotham’s savior. Early in the film Dent claims that “the Batman is looking for someone to take up his mantle,” implying that he could be the person to do so, but the film proves the opposite: not only is the Batman not looking for someone to take his place, the very public and very wholesome Dent can never be that person. In fact, Wayne does let Dent take his place as the Batman, but only as a ruse leading to the Joker’s arrest; Batman’s “true identity” remains a careful secret. In his open desire to become the public Batman, Dent threatens Batman’s own carefully constructed state of exception, his position outside the law.

Batman recognizes the need for Dent to remain within the structures of the law, which simultaneously allows for his own desire to remain outside the law: “you’re the symbol of hope I can never be. Your stand against organized crime is the first legitimate ray of hope in Gotham in decades” (my emphasis). This is also why Dent’s accident and his transformation into Two-Face is so threatening: not only would he effectively undo Dent’s “White Knight” good deeds in Gotham, he would also force Batman to become legitimate, that is, within the law. Thus when Two-Face dies, Batman turns his face so the “good” half is visible and takes the blame for Dent’s death and the murders Two-Face committed. In so doing Batman not only ensures that he will be hunted and vilified by the Gotham police and public, but that he will remain in his state of exception. As Alfred says, Batman must “endure, Master Wayne... They’ll hate you for it, but that’s the point of Batman. He can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make. The right choice.”

With Two-Face’s death and the Joker’s defeat, Batman effectively solidifies his position as the sovereign exception; he has become “the hero Gotham needs” even if the general

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10 For a detailed exploration of Batman’s status of heroic exception in this film, see Todd McGowan, The Fictional Christopher Nolan.
population now thinks of Batman as a murderous villain. Taking up this narrative eight years later, Nolan’s final film in the Batman trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, traces Batman’s rise back to symbol of hope and protection—a rise that is only possible through Batman’s quasi-sacrifice and Bruce Wayne’s total reinscription into a heteronormative life. Like *Batman Begins*, this film arrives at its conclusion through a series of falls and resurrections, ultimately illustrating the impossibility of remaining in a permanent state of exception and, as McGowan notes, upholding an essentially conservative view of Batman as an ideological figure. If *Batman Begins* demonstrates Bruce Wayne’s usurpation of his father, *The Dark Knight Rises* solidifies this position through its attempt to erase Bruce’s split identity.

Taking place eight years after Harvey Dent’s death, Batman has retired and Bruce Wayne has become a recluse. Lured out of this seclusion by Catwoman, aka Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway), Batman soon finds himself entangled in a messy plot to destroy Gotham involving the villain Bane (Tom Hardy) hijacking the stock exchange, arranging for a ring of explosives around Gotham, and building an underground army. Bane and his army take over Gotham and arrange for an impending nuclear explosion that would decimate the city. Batman, meanwhile, enlists Catwoman’s help to confront Bane, who defeats Batman and imprisons him in a pit. After escaping the pit, Batman returns to Gotham and, with the help of Catwoman, Jim Gordon, and the police force, defeats Bane and flies the nuclear bomb away from the city over the bay. The bomb detonates at a safe distance from the city but Batman appears to have died in the explosion; the final scenes, however, reveal that he has escaped and is living elsewhere with Catwoman.

McGowan argues that the butler Alfred is the true villain of this film because of his insistence on bringing Bruce Wayne back from the Batman persona, maintaining that the film
“concludes with [Wayne’s] retreat into an authentic identity beyond the mask. When he does this, he fails to recognize that the mask or the fiction contains in itself his true identity. Bruce’s lifelong servant Alfred leads him into the illusion of the true self beneath the mask, so we might say that Alfred is the villain of Dark Knight Rises” (“Risen”). Alfred’s overly romanticized wish for Bruce Wayne demonstrates this “villainy” (although as we have seen, Rachel Dawes plays the same role in the other films). In an effort to bring Bruce Wayne “back to the world,” Alfred tells him:

Remember when you left Gotham? Before all this, before Batman? You were gone seven years. Seven years I waited, hoping that you wouldn’t come back. Every year, I took a holiday. I went to Florence, there’s this cafe, on the banks of the Arno. Every fine evening, I’d sit there and order a Fernet Branca. I had this fantasy, that I would look across the tables and I’d see you there, with a wife and maybe a couple of kids. You wouldn’t say anything to me, nor me to you. But we’d both know that you’d made it, that you were happy. I never wanted you to come back to Gotham. I always knew there was nothing here for you, except pain and tragedy. And I wanted something more for you than that. I still do.

Alfred’s speech, which ultimately comes to fruition at the end of the film, puts Bruce Wayne firmly back in the world outside of Gotham as a “normal” man “with a wife and maybe a couple of kids.” Alfred tempts Bruce, therefore, with what McGowan calls “the fantasy of a life without the mask, the fantasy of a true life lived elsewhere” (“Risen”). By the end of the film, Bruce and Alfred literally enact this fantasy, as Bruce and Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway) sit at a table at the same cafe pictured during the above fantasy scene.
In order to achieve this fantasy, Bruce must not only give up the Batman persona but also once again assert his dominance over his father and reinscribe himself into heteronormativity. He does so by paradoxically taking his father’s advice to heart. When the young Bruce falls down the well in the first film, Thomas Wayne comforts him, saying, “Why do we fall, Bruce? So we can learn to pick ourselves up.” This line is repeated in various ways in both *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises* as both films navigate this pattern of falling and rising (figure 1.21).

Eventually, Bruce literally enacts this advice, as he declines the aid of a rope in order to climb out of the pit in which he has been imprisoned. No longer needing his father or anyone else to rescue him, it therefore appears Bruce has indeed picked himself up, allowing a final return to Gotham and a showdown with the villains Bane and Talia al Ghul, after which he fakes his own death and winds up at a café in Florence.

The perverse irony of the film, however, is that Bruce never truly escapes Gotham, but rather trades her for another object of desire, Selina Kyle / Catwoman. After all, as Lacan says, our desire is the desire of the Other. Thus despite symbolically destroying Thomas Wayne in *Batman Begins*, despite learning to “pick himself up” and thereby healing himself, Bruce still remains trapped in a web of culturally dictated desire in which he now occupies the place of his father. If Gotham City replaces Martha Wayne as the decorative yet maternal object that needs saving, then Selina’s wearing of the mother’s pearls and her appearance at the cafe in the end
would seem to indicate that she has become the new maternal object. And so the ultimate fantasy of the film’s romanticized ending reveals itself: Bruce has not escaped, but rather entered into a less political, less public form of the same Oedipal structures; the Batman, meanwhile, also appears to live on, as the final shot of the film is of John “Robin” Blake atop a rising platform in the Batcave, implying yet another resurrection of the Dark Knight.

Therefore one danger of the fantasy of overcoming that *The Dark Knight Rises* ends with is that it unsuccessfully covers up the traumatic past. It does not erase it since, as Selina Kyle repeats, a clean slate “doesn’t exist.” Selina here refers to a computer program that would erase a criminal’s record and, indeed, entire identity, allowing someone (namely, herself) a fresh start under a whole new identity. Batman offers Catwoman this program near the end of the film, and the implication of the final sequences is that both Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle have used this program and begun their lives anew, under new identities, as they now relax at a cafe in Florence (figure 1.22).

![Figure 1.22: the “clean slate” fails.](image)

At the surface level, then, it would appear that Selina is wrong; the “clean slate” program seemingly both exists and works. However, at the level of the film more broadly, the “clean slate” ultimately fails: both Alfred and the audience see Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle in this idyllic scene, and recognize them as precisely those identities (whether Bruce and Selina or Batman and Catwoman, those names are linked with their narrative identities, not with this
“new” clean slate). That is, rather than erasing Wayne and Kyle, the two have merely covered up those names and identities, and Alfred’s and the audience’s gaze brings them right back into the realm of the visible and legible, so that Bruce therefore doubly remains within the same structures he has been struggling with, even while the film pretends to disavow those structures. Moreover, this network of gazes emphasizes vision’s centrality to trauma and memory, as it is precisely in the exchange of gazes that the past reappears, unbidden, like memory’s repetition.

More problematically, the films themselves also try to be this kind of “clean slate” erasing the memory of the Schumacher films, as Brooker addresses extensively. The films perform exactly the same kind of covering-over of its serial past as Bruce and Selina perform on their identities as “Bruce” and “Selina.” And this is the great failure of the films: in sanitizing the trauma of Bruce’s loss; in creating a fantasy of wholesomeness and successful overcoming of the dark, gritty, criminal Gotham; in pretending the Schumacher films, Adam West TV show, and campy ’60s comics do not exist—all of this imagination only serves to remind us of that which is covered.11

The sanitized and romanticized endings of The Dark Knight Rises and The Dark Knight Returns speak to the problematic position of trauma studies in the superhero genre. In inscribing Bruce Wayne back into heteronormativity (Nolan) and in his repositioning as the Law of the Father (Nolan and Miller), these texts offer a fantasy of overcoming trauma, of covering it up without necessarily fully healing. This fantasy is one of the most problematic aspects of the superhero genre: Batman is immensely traumatized, and compulsively follows his masochistic desires, and yet he is idolized and envied precisely because of this narrative of overcoming, this fantasy of erasing his trauma and masochism, that which creates Batman in the first place.

11 See, again, Brooker’s Hunting the Dark Knight.
Part of this problematic approach stems from the very creation of the best-known superhero characters themselves, as Gerard Jones argues in *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. According to him and other comics historians like Douglas Wolk, many of the creators of superheroes were young first-generation Jewish Americans who used figures like Superman as a way to enact fantasies of overcoming or escaping their own difficult lives. Yet in offering an escape, these superhero characters also problematically romanticize trauma, figuring it as the necessary condition for a hero.

The ambiguous endings to *The Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum*, however, provide a more nuanced approach to this superhero fantasy. Both texts end with a sense that the entire juro-political system in the Batworld lends itself to the danger of endless repetition and traumatization, as well as the blurring of the lines between good and evil, sane and mad, legal and lawless, order and chaos. Because they cannot offer an alternative to those systems without romanticizing Batman’s position, nor without erasing and undermining the very problems and experiences of trauma, these texts instead end on difficult, ambiguous notes. Thus these texts reflect back the same mechanisms by which trauma functions, relying on the spaces between images and between gazes to linger in the zones where trauma, memory, and visuality meet.
Chapter 2: “As If I’ve Been Here All the Time”: Trauma, History, and Temporal Suspension in Watchmen

The only graphic novel included in TIME Magazine’s “All-TIME 100 Novels,” Watchmen, since its publication in 1986, has simultaneously delighted and frustrated comics fans, casual readers, and literary scholars alike. Written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, Watchmen takes generic superhero conventions and pushes them to extreme limits: the superbeing as an amoral god, the sexualized female crime-fighter, the power-hungry totalitarian, the sociopath, and so on. In doing so, the text challenges our own notions of heroism and fantasy, as the problems encountered in the text take on frighteningly real historical echoes. Through its cyclical, repetitive structure, its oblique historical references, and its destabilizing of the visual realm, Watchmen makes trauma a particularly visible and visual crisis.

Set in an alternate Cold War era world, Watchmen follows a group of crime fighters who come out of retirement following the death of a former colleague, the Comedian, who was also working for the US government. Believing the Comedian’s death to be one in a series of acts to eliminate superheroes entirely, Rorschach, who takes his name from his shifting, inkblot-test inspired mask, sets out to convince Dr. Manhattan, his girlfriend the Silk Spectre, and their former crimefighting partners Ozymandias and Nite Owl, to join him in investigating his conspiracy theory. With relations between the Americans and Soviets dissolving and nuclear war imminent, a monstrous alien appears in New York, killing thousands. Rorschach and Nite Owl discover the person behind the creation of this monster is their former colleague Ozymandias, and the novel ends with a confrontation between him and the other remaining superheroes.

Dense, layered, fragmented, and nonlinear, Watchmen is a text that, as Iain Thomson notes, demands rereading:
Watchmen was written to be reread; indeed, it can only be read by being reread… [T]he parts all fit into a whole one only grasps in the end… Because that end is so unsuspected and surprising… the parts are given a new and different meaning… This new meaning, moreover, immediately strikes home as the true meaning of the work, thereby subverting and displacing the first reading. (103)

Every character, every secret identity, every symbol, every theme, is endlessly reflected, refracted, mirrored, and doubled, so that each individual character or symbol becomes a site of convergence for multiple thematic interventions on the individual, textual, and historical level.

This interconnectedness demonstrates what the god-like Dr. Manhattan calls the multifaceted jewel of time—each facet or moment is just part of a whole—and it emphasizes the notion of interdependence that persists between human beings and their world, their neighbors, and their selves. Each character in Watchmen is a site for exploring larger issues of trauma, history, temporality, and identity. Time, trauma, and memory all function in this text as links between the personal and historical, opening up individual experiences as political and historical arenas of representation. Moore and Gibbons create a multidirectional approach to the historical traumas of the Holocaust and the nuclear disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rather than claiming them as independent historical events, Watchmen asserts the interconnectedness of these moments, illustrating the compelling ways that individual and historical traumas overlap. In the repetition of historical disasters on a large scale and at the level of individuals, trauma is made present through the paradoxical upending of conventionally linear time.

Writing about her experiences during, and interpretation of, the Holocaust, Charlotte Delbo famously stated, “Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit” (45). Often translated as “I died at Auschwitz and nobody sees it,” the original French is less fixed; “je suis morte”
could be either “I died” or “I am dead.” The ambiguity in the original phrase indicates one fundamental aspect of the traumatized individual: a kind of suspension in time (“I” both “died” in the past and “am” in the present). By “temporal suspension,” I mean the manner in which time appears to “stand still” so that the individual’s perception of time is not linear but cyclical and even erratic, so that multiple events and multiple states of being appear to be simultaneous. This perception of time, this “died” and “am dead,” is at once a psychic suspension between the present and the past (and even, in certain cases, the future) and an experience of those moments as simultaneous. Such a perception of time characterizes many of Moore and Gibbons’s costumed crime-fighters, namely Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, Ozymandias and the Silk Spectre. These individuals, who experience trauma in various forms, do not deal with a linear return of the repressed, but rather a constant coming and going of moments known too soon to be understood by consciousness.

That historical crises anachronistic to the text’s Cold War setting appear almost subliminally in Watchmen is testament to Caruth’s argument about the fluidity between trauma and history, or the failure of linear temporality in the face of historical trauma: “[W]hat trauma has to tell us—the historical and personal truth it transmits—is intricately bound up with its refusal of historical boundaries; that its truth is bound up with its crisis of truth” (Trauma 8). Thus World War II—and especially the disasters of the Holocaust and Hiroshima—”refuse” the “historical boundaries” and appear like a ghost of history haunting a text set firmly in the Cold War (though it is an alternate-reality Cold War) and in a world of crime-fighting (and sometimes criminal) superheroes.

Watchmen emphasizes the role of vision and visuality in these representations of time, trauma, and history, as the traumatic encounters depicted are all of a particularly visual nature.
Moments in narrative time become visible and legible, and yet, through the juxtaposition of panels with their contingent gutters, the blank spaces where presence and absence meet, these moments also conceal as much as they reveal. As the characters experience trauma often as a visual encounter, so too do the readers experience those moments as simultaneously visible and invisible, hidden and revealed, in various different ways. The comics medium thus allows for a textual and visual enactment of the structures of trauma and memory; *Watchmen* performs an exchange of gazes within the text and between the text and its readers, allowing for an encounter at the intersection of time, memory, and trauma. Filled with half-visible signs and symbols, moments and memories, *Watchmen* concretizes the tension between what can be seen and what can be understood and reflects the visual structures of trauma and memory.

**An Intricately Structured Jewel: Dr. Manhattan’s Acute Trauma**

Dr. Manhattan is the only real “superbeing” in *Watchmen*—at least, in terms of being something more than human, though his actions are questionably heroic. Formerly known as Jon Osterman, Dr. Manhattan is a nuclear scientist who in 1959 was trapped in an “intrinsic field chamber” and disintegrated. Miraculously, something of Osterman’s consciousness remains behind and he manages to reconstruct himself, atom by atom, into a glowing blue humanoid with a deep understanding of atomic structures and systems. He is able to alter matter itself and otherwise defy common laws of physics (he can walk through walls, dismantle rifles without touching them, and cause objects to explode into atomic particles with a mere wave of his hand, among other feats).

With this deep understanding of the mechanics of the world, Dr. Manhattan also comes to a different understanding of time. While the other characters generally experience time linearly,
for Dr. Manhattan, the past, present and future exist simultaneously. In Chapter IX, he explains: “There is no future. There is no past. Do you see? Time is simultaneous, an intricately structured jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time, when the whole design is visible in every facet” (IX.6). Readers are already familiar with Dr. Manhattan’s temporality, as Chapter IV focuses on demonstrating this jewel, the perception of “the whole” of time. In this chapter, Manhattan narrates his formative moments from childhood and from his life pre-accident, while insisting on their simultaneity with one another and with his post-accident superhuman life.

Chapter IV opens with a splash image of an old photograph lying in reddish-purple sand between some partial footprints. The first actual panel of the chapter shows Dr. Manhattan’s hand holding the same photograph, with captions—like conventional speech bubbles, only these are not connected to a speaking face, but instead function much like a voice-over in film—narrating his thoughts: “The photograph is in my hand. It is the photograph of a man and a woman. They are at an amusement park, in 1959” (figure 2.1, IV.1). Over the next eight panels, Dr. Manhattan’s captions continue:

In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away. It’s already lying there, twelve seconds into the future. […] I found it in a derelict bar at the Gila Flats test base, twenty-seven hours ago. It’s still there, twenty-seven hours into the past, in its frame, in the darkened bar. I’m still there looking at it. […] It’s October, 1985. I’m on Mars. It’s July, 1959. I’m in New Jersey, at the Palisades amusement park. Four seconds. Three. I’m tired of looking at the photograph now. I open my fingers. It falls to the sand at my feet…. (IV.1)

12 Reflecting the original serial publication of *Watchmen*, citations are given by chapter (Roman numerals) followed by page (Arabic numerals).
Dr. Manhattan’s countdown to the dropping of the photograph thus tries to illustrate his sense of simultaneity, of the wholeness of time, by concurrently narrating Dr. Manhattan’s existence in multiple places at multiple times alongside the narration of the falling photograph.
According to the captions, Dr. Manhattan is on Mars in 1985 and in New Jersey in 1959 at the same time—yet eight of the nine images are of Dr. Manhattan on Mars. The sole exception is the fourth panel, in which we see part of Dr. Manhattan standing in the crumbling building at Gila Flats, the same image from a previous chapter (III.20). Thus between the third and the fifth panels, the text returns to an earlier narrative moment; the effect is less of a flashback than it is a subtle insertion to make the reader feel as though Dr. Manhattan is simultaneously on Mars and in Arizona. Time, that is, is made visible on the page. This same effect occurs on the following page: panel four shows 16-year-old Osterman’s hand arranging the cogs of a watch in 1945, and this panel is surrounded by panels of scenes on Mars. Moreover, the effect of simultaneity is heightened on this page by the eerie resemblance of the silvery-white cogs on a piece of black cloth to the starry sky visible in each image of Mars, creating a visual bridge between space and time. After establishing this pattern of synchronicity, Dr. Manhattan’s narration continues through a series of flashbacks (or flash-elsewheres, if we are to believe that the events are, in fact, happening at the same time); each fragment illustrates a key moment in his development as both Jon Osterman and Dr. Manhattan. This narration is interspersed visually with non-sequential images of Mars and of the watch cogs, reinforcing the sense of synchronicity, and the connection between time, trauma, and vision.

This visual synchronicity is further encoded in the textual narration (the captions) of this chapter, which emphasizes Dr. Manhattan’s ability to experience “normal” linear time non-linearly. While comforting one-time girlfriend Janey Slater, for example, he says, “As I lie I hear her shouting at me in 1963; sobbing in 1966. My fingers open. The photograph is falling…” (IV.11). Not only the content, but also the grammar, of such captions work to call our attention to the concurrence of events. Through the insistence on the present progressive (shouting,
sobbing, falling) the text itself is caught up in a seemingly unending moment of suspension between times and places, all ongoing and all simultaneous. In fact the very form of the graphic novel itself allows for a near-simultaneous experience of readership. As McCloud writes, “Both past and future are real and visible all around us! Wherever your eyes are focused, that’s now. But at the same time, your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future!” (104).

Indeed, as we read Dr. Manhattan’s caption, we are peripherally aware of the preceding images and panels. In merely viewing the page, therefore, the reader becomes involved in the concurrence of text and image; panels and captions; pasts, presents, and futures.

This synchronous understanding of the world exists precisely because of Dr. Manhattan’s acute traumatic experience of disintegration. Curiously, some scholars like Jamie Hughes and Bryan D. Dietrich tend to attribute this perception of time to Dr. Manhattan’s understanding of the atomic structures of the universe, without exploring the fact that this understanding is a product of what Dr. Manhattan repeatedly calls “the accident”—that is, from a moment of extreme catastrophe that structures his entire being and consciousness. Like the rest of Dr. Manhattan’s past, he remembers the accident as the present: “The light is taking me to pieces,” he says, as the reader sees a disintegrating skeleton eerily similar to those images of shadows burned into buildings at Hiroshima (figure 2.2, IV.8).

Figure 2.2: “The light is taking me to pieces” (IV.8).
This image literally returns later in the text—a physical repetition of the traumatic moment, not just a repetition in dreams or flashbacks—when Adrian Veidt attempts to destroy Dr. Manhattan in the very way Jon Osterman was destroyed the first time, in an “intrinsic field chamber,” but with slight alterations: the background is slightly altered; his head leans the other way; the last trace of the human eye in the first image becomes the last trace of the hydrogen atomic symbol on his forehead; and most noticeably, a genetically engineered cat joins him in his second disintegration. But despite these differences the effect is the same: Dr. Manhattan disintegrates, and then physically repeats this disintegration, in effect living (and dying) as a symbol of acute traumatic experience (figure 2.3).
Dr. Manhattan’s synchronous and relative conception of time, therefore, stems not merely from his superior understanding of atoms, but from the traumatic moment, so that “the accident(s)” exist(s) with Osterman’s past, present, and even future, suspending him in time, in much the same manner as he physically floats above his former colleagues when he first appears after reassembling himself. Caruth writes that “[the] impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). Dr. Manhattan himself rejects the boundaries of common perceptions of time and place as a direct result of his accident. Likewise, in response to Janey Slater’s offhand comment that he’s “arrived!” (oddly enough, in the fashion world), Dr. Manhattan says “Have I? Sometimes I feel as if I’ve been here all the time” (IV.13).

Yet despite these perceptions of simultaneity, of being there “all the time,” Dr. Manhattan also experiences a split in identity between pre- and post-accident, meaning that although concurrent, moments and identities are still separate and distinct units. Moreover Dr. Manhattan’s disastrous accident seems to literally separate his identities into Jon Osterman and Dr. Manhattan. Looking again at the first panel of chapter IV, Dr. Manhattan uses a distanced third person to describe the photograph, as if the image in the photograph does not correspond to his own identity (see again figure 2.1): “It is the photograph of a man and a woman. They are at an amusement park, in 1959” (IV.1). His post-traumatic identity becomes separated from his pre-accident identity; he is no longer Jon, but Dr. Manhattan; that is not Dr. Manhattan in the photograph but a third-person “man.”

This separation becomes clearer at the end of the novel after Dr. Manhattan experiences the second disintegration. Reappearing almost instantly after this second “accident,” again an unexpected and quite literal return of the traumatic moment, Dr. Manhattan says, “Restructuring
myself after the subtraction of my own intrinsic field was the first trick I learned. It didn’t kill Osterman… did you think it would kill me?” (XII.18). The split between Osterman and Dr. Manhattan is clear in the second sentence here; referring to Osterman in the third person indicates the total separation between Dr. Manhattan and his pre-accident identity. The accident thus creates a traumatic moment in which the self splits, like Charlotte Delbo, who “died at Auschwitz” and yet is alive to write about it.

These multiple if separate identities are linked in Dr. Manhattan through the flashbacks that are scattered throughout his parts of the narrative. Such flashbacks are a form of involuntary recall that interrupts conscious thought; the (traumatic) past enters consciousness unbidden (Caruth Traumatic 152). Flashbacks also reflect the medium of the graphic novel, in their position within multiple panels viewed at once. These flashbacks are a kind of paradox: on the one hand they indicate Dr. Manhattan’s traumatized, but oddly liberated, view of time. On the other hand, these moments from his life seem to appear unbidden, at the expense of conscious or willed memory. Like the Joker’s understanding of involuntary memory and its power discussed in the previous chapter, Dr. Manhattan seems to be both aware of and still subject to memory and time’s structuring of existence.

Yet like Dr. Manhattan’s flashbacks connecting his current and rejected identities, “[c]omics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). Creating a “unified reality” from broken images smoothes out the narrative and creates the impression that “in the world of comics [and of Dr. Manhattan], time and space are one and the same” (McCloud 100).
Moore and Gibbons exploit these structures of fragmentation and repetition inherent in comics to further entwine notions of personal and historical trauma. The accident that causes Dr. Manhattan’s destruction and reconstruction appears at least superficially to be anomalous and intensely personal. In 1959, Osterman is trapped in an intrinsic field chamber when he returns to retrieve the watch he has repaired for Janey Slater; his personal, romantic relationship thus figures as the catalyst for his accident. Later, in one of the many prose inserts in the novel, a certain Professor Milton Glass declares that Osterman’s accident is “certainly unplanned and just as certainly unrepeatable” (n. pag.). However, the text implies that Dr. Manhattan’s experience of synchronicity is not actually limited to his superhuman self. In fact, that accident is both repeatable—near the end of the text, he is once again disintegrated— and planned—at least in the sense that Dr. Manhattan’s death fits a pattern established earlier in the text.

Figure 2.4: Jon Osterman meeting Janey Slater (IX.5).

This pattern is visible when Jon Osterman “first” arrives at the Gila Flats military base and nuclear research center. When he is introduced to Janey, his future girlfriend, she remarks, “Ohh, the new guy! You’re replacing Hank Meadows, right?” Osterman responds, “I am?” “I guess so. Hank died last fall, some kinda tumor. There’s his picture behind the bar there. The guy

\[\text{13 For a closer look at the intersections of personal and national trauma in Watchmen, see Brandy Ball Blake’s Watchmen: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction.}\]
with the glasses.” Janey says, gesturing to the same frame from which Dr. Manhattan earlier removed the photograph of him and Janey (figure 2.4, IX.5). Osterman is therefore already doubled—he is there to replace someone else—and furthermore this doubling hints at his own eventual appearance behind the glass of the frame dedicated to the employees of the base who die while working there.

More than just a pattern, predestination or a fragmented sense of time, however, Dr. Manhattan’s accident and identity are also bound up with larger historical traumas. Dr. Manhattan’s name, of course, links him with issues of atomic power. The US government assigns him this name, chosen, as the text says, “for the ominous associations it will raise in America’s enemies.” Taken from the Manhattan Project, which led to the creation of the first atomic bomb, Dr. Manhattan becomes a figure of the US military’s power, its ruthlessness, its questionable moral treatment of those very enemies. As Dr. Manhattan’s narrative unfolds, it seems he fulfills this role as he destroys VC soldiers in Vietnam and carries out other militaristic and scientific feats on behalf of the US.

And yet Dr. Manhattan’s relationship with his name and his governmental role is more complicated and resists such an easy categorization. In fact, while his assigned name aligns him with the perpetrators of total destruction, the accident itself aligns him with the victims of that destruction. Even as he explains the choice of his name, the text recalls another moment in Osterman’s life—1945, when he learns of the detonation of the atomic bomb in Japan. The connection between Manhattan and Hiroshima appears over and over again in the text. For instance, the image of Osterman’s disintegration described earlier visually echoes other moments in the text that refer to the atomic catastrophe of Hiroshima: the “Hiroshima Lovers” graffiti seen throughout images of the streets, the monster’s destruction of New York, and Dan’s dream of
Laurie (figure 2.5). Though he is a victim of a nuclear disaster on a small individual scale, Dr. Manhattan represents all the unease with nuclear weaponry that forms the basis for the Cold War, and he is thus visually linked to larger portrayals of nuclear destruction.

Figure 2.5: Various nuclear images (IV.8; VII.17; XI.28).

Furthermore, the text links the moment of Manhattan’s accident to the moment of Hiroshima’s bombing through the juxtaposition of a Time magazine cover commemorating “Hiroshima Week” with an image repeated from the moment of the accident (figure 2.6). This second image is of Osterman’s hands brushing Janey Slater’s as he takes a glass of beer that she’s offering in 1959. This image appears numerous times throughout Manhattan’s narrative; it occurs when Janey and Osterman meet for the first time, and it repeats in the panel just before Osterman disintegrates. The captions link this image with the preceding one of the magazine cover: they read, “on the cover there is a damaged pocket-watch, stopped at the moment of the blast, face cracked… Hands frozen” (IV.24). While the textual narrative refers to the damaged watch, the “frozen hands” also allude to Manhattan’s memory of the cold beer from Janey,
visually repeated in the panel following.\textsuperscript{14} Even in the instant before his death, Osterman “wishes for a beautiful woman to hand him a very cold beer,” but instead of the beer, he holds Janey’s watch.

Figure 2.6: Panels 1& 2 from Dr. Manhattan’s accident, IV.8; panels 3 & 4 from the end of the chapter, IV.24.

The text’s title, then, means more than just a group of vigilantes. The motif of the watch occurs throughout the text and connects Dr. Manhattan with Hiroshima, but also with WWII and the Holocaust. As a child, Osterman wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a watchmaker. However, upon reading about the bombing of Hiroshima, Osterman’s father forces his son to give up watch-making and enter the hard sciences. Here we see Osterman’s father interrupting his son’s work, throwing away the watch cogs. He says: “Ach, these are no times for a repairer of watches. There will be more bombs. They are the future! Shall my son follow me into an obsolete trade?... Professor Einstein says that time differs from place to place. Can you imagine? If time is not true, what purpose have watch-makers, hein?” (IV.3). Much of Manhattan’s narrative therefore can be read as a kind of response to his father’s sudden rejection of both his profession and identity, and of time itself. Rather than agree with his father that “time

\textsuperscript{14} This image also contains a number of intervisual references, including Alain Resnais’s film version of \textit{Hiroshima mon amour}, further emphasizing the image as a potential space for the intersection of memory, trauma, different histories, and representation.
is not true,” Manhattan instead illustrates its everlasting truth, that all events always exist. Even his father’s words indicate this: “[nuclear bombs] are the future,” he says, an uncanny echo of Manhattan’s still-impending accident and his literal transformation into a living nuclear weapon (IV.3).

While it is obvious that the nuclear disaster of Hiroshima is one catalyst for Osterman’s turn toward physics and nuclear power—a turn that will lead uncannily to his accident—Osterman’s father also implicitly makes Osterman’s individual story resonate with the other theater of World War II, and with the Holocaust. Referring to Albert Einstein here brings together not only the issues of relativity and even nuclear weaponry, but of the Second World War and the Holocaust—Einstein also fled the Nazi regime and moved to the US in order to escape persecution. Like Einstein, it is implied that Osterman’s father emigrated from Germany or Eastern Europe: “Ach” and “hein” mark his father’s speech with an eastern European accent, and his English is not structured like a native speaker’s. Even the name Osterman is Jewish and resonates with the word “ost,” or east.

The references to Einstein in this chapter and elsewhere are not merely ways to underscore Manhattan’s experience of relativity. This section ends with a quote from Einstein, which reads “The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking…the solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker” (IV.28). This citation illustrates Dr. Manhattan’s need for human contact in order to remain ethical—a need later fulfilled by Laurie, who reminds him of the “thermodynamic miracle” of human life. Here, however, Dr. Manhattan is in crisis, alone on Mars, distanced from humanity. While he posits that existence is a “clock without a craftsman,” he does so while sitting in front of the clock-like palace he has created on Mars. And throughout
this section, the watch cogs on their black background resonate with the stars above Mars, bringing the individual past into the present (figure 2.7). Einstein’s quote also indicates his own discomfort at having encouraged the real Manhattan project early on, claiming had he known what it would mean, he should have become a watchmaker. Thus his story and Dr. Manhattan’s are brought together again: both men “should have become a watchmaker;” and in a way, both do, through their understanding of time itself.

![Figure 2.7](image)

Figure 2.7: “a clock without a craftsman” (IV.28); the watch cogs from the beginning of the chapter (IV.2).

The visual elements of comics conceal and reveal this understanding of time, even while bringing together nuclear disasters and the Holocaust through Einstein. The Asian and European theatres of WWII thus are drawn together and embodied in a single figure. Embodying multiple historical traumas in a single acute accident, Dr. Manhattan stands as a figure for the interconnections between historical disasters and an individual’s lived experience. Moreover, this accident permits a vision of temporality that is both a symptom of individual and historical trauma, and a reflection of the comics medium itself.
Everything Imbalanced: Rorschach’s Chronic Trauma in a Cyclical World

Dr. Manhattan’s “jewel of time” might appear at first to be unique to his position as a “superbeing.” However, *Watchmen* illustrates just how pervasive this experience of simultaneity is among different kinds of traumatized subjects. For example, functioning on some level as a foil for the acute trauma of Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach’s trauma is of a longer, more chronic nature. Like Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach is another nexus of personal and historical disaster. However, while Dr. Manhattan brings the personal into the historical and then up to the cosmic scale through his move to Mars and his relationship to the starry sky, Rorschach takes the same historical trauma of the Holocaust down in scale, bringing it from the astronomical to the earthly, even downright dirty.

Yet unlike Dr. Manhattan, who appears to be aware of his position as traumatized subject if only through his perception of time and his recognition of the dangers of history, the masked vigilante Rorschach, “real” name Walter Kovacs, remains outside of reconciliation with his position as traumatized subject. Rather, he seems to relish in his extreme and violent attempts to establish himself as anti-criminal, in a world in which, to him, there can be only morally good and bad, without any relativism. Rorschach takes his name from his mask, made from the rejected dress of a woman who is later murdered, “viscous fluids between two layers of latex… Black and white moving, changing shape, but not mixing. No gray” (VI.10). From this material he makes “a face that [he] could bear to look at in the mirror,” and with this new face he attacks, captures and often kills the violent criminals of New York City (VI.10). Rorschach is a character of extreme binaries—black and white, high and low, right and wrong, good and evil, etc.—and a man for whom compromise is never an option, “not even,” as he says, “in the face of
Armageddon” (XII.20). Unfortunately for Rorschach, what he faces is ultimately Armageddon, and his unwillingness to bend or to see shades of gray prevents him from surviving.

At one point in Chapter V, to escape capture by the police, Rorschach throws himself out of a window, landing, alas, at the feet of those very police. In the chapter’s penultimate panel, we see Rorschach’s feet in a puddle, one shoeless, exposing a tattered, holey sock (figure 2.8). “Everything balances,” claims the caption, spoken by one of the policemen, as if Rorschach’s vigilantism will be “evened out” by his incarceration.

Figure 2.8: “Everything balances” (V.28).

The irony, of course, is that Rorschach—indeed, the entire Watchmen world—is completely imbalanced. Even the panel’s composition, itself a kind of Rorschach test, resists that balance. One foot, neatly encased in its “elevator shoe,” brings Rorschach up to great heights, and one foot poking through its tattered sock reflects the lowly Walter Kovacs, poor, dirty, and insane. Behind the feet lies Rorschach’s hat, giving greater visual weight to the Rorschach identity over the Kovacs; however, the nearly identical coloring of the hat and shoe
also make the shoeless foot stand out as distinctive and different. Rorschach’s extremism takes him to soaring heights (sometimes literally, as the window and the elevator shoes show) and, as Walter Kovacs, to the lowest depths—son of a prostitute, father unknown, foster child, smelly, poor, unkempt apocalyptic sign-bearer and street wanderer who ends up facedown and exposed on a rainy sidewalk.

The extremity of Rorschach’s life is tied to his prolonged suffering as a child. While one could say, as Jamie Hughes does, that “because society is cruel and merciless, so is he,” Rorschach’s stark and uncompromising worldview and extreme behavior result, at least in part, from a series of damaging incidents from his childhood culminating in a single complicated disaster (Hughes 552). In discussing these incidents, Brent Fishbaugh maintains that “[Rorschach] joins the fad of costumed crime-fighting not for fun, but out of guilt—guilt over what his entire race has become, guilt spawned not just from the events [that] surround Kitty Genovese’s death, but from his own misbegotten upbringing’’ (193). Yet it is not merely guilt—both social and personal—that “creates” Rorschach, but a splitting of his own sense of subjecthood and his identification with the perpetrators of crime. Even after Genovese’s murder, Rorschach accepts his earlier given name of Kovacs: “I wasn’t Rorschach then. Then I was just Kovacs” (VI.14). It is only after a particular incident, which I shall discuss in detail later, that the character himself draws a distinction between his pre- and post-trauma identities: “All Kovacs ever was: man in a costume. Not Rorschach. Not Rorschach at all” (VI.15).

The younger of these identities, Walter Kovacs endures beatings at the hands of his mother and taunting by other children and teenagers, leading to a fight in which Kovacs burns an older boy’s eye with a cigarette, which, in turn, leads to him being placed in foster care. Upon

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15 Kitty Genovese is the woman who ordered the fabric from which Rorschach later makes his mask.
leaving foster care at age sixteen, he manages to lead a relatively stable life until he learns of the murder of Kitty Genovese, at which point he creates his inkblot mask and takes on crime-fighting. Genovese’s murder is a historical anchor in the fictional world: in 1964, she was stabbed to death near her home while bystanders did nothing to help. In the New York of *Watchmen*, Rorschach is convinced that Genovese is the same woman who ordered a dress from the shop he worked at earlier, the fabric of which becomes his signature shape-shifting mask (figure 2.9). Wearing it becomes not only a sign of Rorschach’s moral, black-and-white worldview, but also a declaration of his own agency, his unwillingness to become a passive bystander.

Figure 2.9: Kitty Genovese’s dress; “black and white. Moving, changing shape… but not mixing. No gray” (VI.10).

Unlike Dr. Manhattan, who experiences one acute, life-altering disaster, Rorschach’s history is a slow build-up of multiple instances of emotional and psychological damage, culminating in a sharp psychic break, which causes him to reject entirely his previous identity and fully become Rorschach. Dr. Long, the psychiatrist who takes on Rorschach’s case, even recognizes that “It’s not [Kovacs’] childhood, his mother or Kitty Genovese. Those things just
made him over-react to the injustice in the world. They’re not what sent him over its edge. They’re not what turned him into Rorschach” (VI.16). Initially distracted from Rorschach’s story by his need to reach the “primal scene” of his childhood, Dr. Long eventually realizes that Rorschach is perhaps not responding to his treatment (despite Rorschach’s initial lies on the blot test) and attempts to discover the moment that truly damaged Rorschach. While this event is not from Rorschach’s childhood, as Erikson explains, not all physically or mentally violent events are necessarily traumatic, depending on the individual’s reception of them:

The historian who wants to know where a story starts, like the therapist who needs to identify a precipitating cause in order to deal with the injury it does, will naturally be interested in beginnings. But those are no more than details to everyone else… because it is how people react to them rather than what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have. The most violent wrenchings in the world, that is to say, have no clinical standing unless they harm the workings of a mind or body, so it is the damage done that defines and gives shape to the initial event. (Erikson 184)

In Rorschach’s case, all the violence of his childhood and early adulthood, while damaging, is not the cataclysmic wound that causes him to fully split from his former identity.

While Genovese’s murder does provide the catalyst, as Fishbaugh notes, for Kovacs’s entry into the world of costumed heroes, it does not cause his psychic break. The key moment, according to Rorschach and others, occurs while Rorschach investigates the kidnapping of a young girl in 1975. Told through a series of mostly wordless panels, we see Rorschach entering a disused dressmaker’s building, where he sees two large dogs resembling German Shepherds, fighting over a bone. A quick search reveals the remains of pink clothing covered in teddy bear images in a furnace, and a freshly used cleaver in the kitchen. Realizing the child was murdered
there, Rorschach kills the dogs, themselves guilty participants for consuming the bones of the
girl. When the perpetrator arrives, Rorschach handcuffs him to the furnace and sets the building
on fire. According to him, this murder of the criminal is the formative moment, the moment
when he ceases to be Walter Kovacs and fully becomes Rorschach: “Was reborn then, free to
scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach” (VI.26).

Triggering this narrative by Rorschach is an inkblot test that Dr. Long administers; in the
first blot Rorschach sees a “dog with head split in half” (figure 2.10, VI.17).

Figure 2.10: Rorschach’s Rorschach test (VI.17).

The image of the dog here causes the recall of the memories of the night in question, but it also
links this moment with an earlier memory: that of Kovacs fighting with some other boys. This
memory is also delivered via flashback; the taunting Rorschach hears in prison causes him to
flash back to his childhood, when two older boys mocked him and his mother and then smashed
a piece of fruit in his face. In response, young Kovacs burned one boy’s eye with a cigarette and
then jumped on the second boy, biting his cheek. As he is pulled off of the second boy, someone
(outside the panel) calls him a “filthy little animal” and, as he is restrained, another voice calls
him “an animal. Like a mad dog” (VI.7). Rorschach’s own animalistic tendencies, therefore, are
mirrored in the presence of the German Shepherds, and this leads to a recognition and then
rejection of his self in the criminal. Recognizing Kovacs’ connection to the dogs, Rorschach kills them: “It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again” (VI.21).

More than just Rorschach’s personal trauma, the dogs in this scene are one tie to a larger historical metaphor. In a post-Holocaust world, the snarling dogs fighting over the bone of a small child call to mind the attack dogs used at the Nazi concentration and death camps. That these dogs look like German Shepherds only furthers the association; a “pure” German breed, the German Shepherd was often the guard dog of choice at concentration camps, and Hitler owned and cherished several dogs of this breed. This connection might be considered tenuous were it not, however, for the presence of ashes, fire, and the smell of burning flesh. The ashes, found in the furnace along with scraps of the child’s clothing, recall the chimneys and ovens of Auschwitz and other death camps. Rorschach chains the criminal to this furnace and sets the place on fire, then “stood in street. Watched it burn. Imagined limbless felt torsos inside; breasts blackening; bellies smoldering; bursting into flame one by one” (VI.25).

Literally turning the building into an oven for burning humans, Rorschach’s imagining of multiple bodies inside also creates a sense that this scene echoes a larger human bonfire, linking the dressmaker’s forms with the passive bodies of crematory victims. The image of the furnace takes on genocidal implications, as Walter Kalaidjian argues in “The Holocaust at Home”: “Presenced in the cinder is the phantom trace of what has been rendered absent by industrial murder and its subsequent cultural repression” (Kalaidjian 74). And while Rorschach’s use of the plural here might indicate simply the dress forms, the man’s body and his dogs, there is nonetheless an unsettling connection with multiple bodies burning “one by one” as if mechanically being fed into an oven.
Moreover, following the panels discussed above are three panels, each of which shows nothing but a close-up view of orange, yellow and red flames with Rorschach’s narration in captions above them. This fire enlightens (in a very literal sense) Rorschach to the absence of God and to the randomness of existence (figure 2.11):

Stood in firelight, sweltering. Bloodstain on chest like map of violent new continent. Felt cleansed. Felt dark planet turn under my feet and knew what cats know that makes them scream like babies in night. Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hell-bound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else. (VI.26)

The absence of preordained meaning in Rorschach’s life opens him up to a quasi-nihilistic view of the absurdity of existence.

Figure 2.11: smoke and ash (VI.26).

This absurdity, this absence of meaning in life, is both pregnant with Holocaustal imagery (the burning human fat, the smoke, the oblivion) and reflects the destruction of meaning in a post-Holocaust world. As Kalaidjian writes:
With the Holocaust… light as a guarantor of truth suffers a profound trauma. In place of the lichtung… we encounter [Elie] Wiesel’s ‘small wood in Birkenau’ and its ghastly backlighting from the burning children. This latter blaze cannot be fixed as an imaginary fire for theoria or contemplatio. Rather, its fire befalls the symbolic order of things, incinerating the everyday world of knowing subjects and representable objects.

(Kalaidjian 50)

Although this fire “enlightens” Rorschach, it does so only to reveal the absence of productive, meaningful, helpful light in the world—an absence echoed in Roschach’s pronouncement that “God was not there” (Moore and Gibbons VI.26). Like Dr. Manhattan, then, Rorschach is partially aligned with the historical victims of trauma, but also with the perpetrators: he experiences “oblivion” and also causes it; he begins killing criminals rather than imprisoning them.

That Nazi death camps appear, if obliquely, in the middle of a Cold War graphic novel is perhaps less jarring when one considers that:

[t]he history that a flashback tells… is, therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence. (Caruth Trauma 153)

The appearance of camp imagery here indicates not only Rorschach’s personal trauma, but a failure on a larger, historical level to fully comprehend the disaster of the Holocaust, leading to its reappearance in unlikely places, as I shall discuss later in this chapter in conjunction with Ozymandias. Linking the Holocaust with nuclear disaster through the figure of Dr. Manhattan
and with the psychotic Rorschach, *Watchmen* creates a web of disasters that is doomed, to a certain extent, to repeat itself. In what Kalaidjian terms “the terminal present after Auschwitz, where ‘eternity’ has become retrospective,” bringing Auschwitz into the narrative serves a greater social purpose and indicates the inescapability of this historical moment of crisis in contemporary imagination (51). As the world of *Watchmen* stands on the brink of nuclear annihilation, this possibility owes its existence to earlier moments of historical annihilation.

Moreover, Rorschach becomes trapped in the same unending temporal structure as Dr. Manhattan, despite Dr. Manhattan blasting Rorschach into pieces at the end of the novel. In removing the Rorschach “face” to reveal the Kovacs “mask,” at the instance of his death, Rorschach implies that while Dr. Manhattan might kill Kovacs, he cannot eliminate Rorschach from the world (figure 2.12).

![Figure 2.12: Rorschach’s death (XII.24).](image-url)
Indeed, Rorschach’s experience lives on, presumably, in his journal; the final panel of the whole text shows a newspaper employee reaching for Rorschach’s journal, opening the text up to the possibility that Rorschach’s desire to expose the truth may, in fact, come to fruition after all. And since the first words of *Watchmen* come from Rorschach’s journal, one wonders if the whole book, the very object the reader holds, is not some form of that journal. As Iain Thomson argues, “Rorschach’s Journal… serves as both an homage (ironic or not) to the tradition of the detective’s voice-over in *film noir*, and, more importantly, as a symbolic stand-in for the projected fantasies of the comic-book as such” (112).

Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan, then, both embody the text’s own cyclicality, as their respective stories of trauma mimic the structure of nonlinear, traumatized time and the structured layering of the text as a whole. References to the Holocaust and Hiroshima appear only obliquely, however, as both narrative and visual background. These historical references serve a dual purpose: they enter the text as a way of setting up these characters’ own stories, so that Hiroshima appears as a means of illustrating Dr. Manhattan’s existence, or that the oblique Holocaust references in Rorschach’s story only demonstrate the gravity and sweep of his individual actions. But the individuals’ stories also serve as avenues into larger questions of history and cyclicality, as their actions and emotions reflect the same patterns of repetition and visibility as the historical moments revealed in the text.

**Swallowing Hitler’s Lies: Look on Ozymandias’ Work and Despair**

The text’s cyclical nature also indicates the frightening possibility for history to repeat itself, and, indeed, the monster’s “invasion” at the end of the novel is itself a kind of repetition of the Holocaust. The perpetrator of this monstrous crisis is Adrian Veidt, alias Ozymandias, “the
smartest man in the world.” Golden haired, physically exceptional, a self-made multimillionaire, Adrian Veidt presents an appearance of near-perfection. Yet underneath this surface Veidt is a homicidal megalomaniac, a man willing to sacrifice the many in the service of the many more or for “the greater good;” in his worldview, casualties are the necessary price for harmony, for a cleansed society, for the preservation of humanity. Veidt is a man who destroys half of New York City “for the greater good,” using rhetoric eerily similar to Hitler’s. In fact, as he reveals his plan to Nite Owl and Rorschach in Chapter XI, Veidt says, “Hitler said people swallow lies easily, provided they’re big enough” (XI.26).

Done presumably to save humanity, Veidt’s disaster also provides an opportunity for his own financial growth: while planning this destruction, he also plans to invest in erotic products, baby food and maternity goods, and in the post-disaster world Veidt releases a new perfumé, “Millenium” (X.8). More than just self-serving greed, however, this business-mindedness indicates Veidt’s investment in the very future of humanity—a future his plan, he hopes, will ensure. Literally investing in future generations and the continuity of the human race, Veidt appears to be of conflicting impulses: destruction and rebirth; charity and greed. Humanity’s future, Veidt argues, can only be assured through the interference of one man “all alone… just me and the world” (X.8). Thus Veidt reveals his megalomania, his misguided sense that he alone can save the world from itself, echoing again Hitler and his “thousand year Reich.”

Veidt, like all characters in Watchmen, is a figure of dualities. Seemingly genuinely concerned with bettering Earth and the people living on it, Veidt donates to charity and sells self-improvement plans, including the “Veidt Method” advertised in various panels. In these ads

16 “What we are doing is making a sacrifice in the interest of peace. We make this sacrifice, but we, at least, want to have peace in exchange for it” (Hitler’s speech at the Berlin Sportspalast, January 30, 1941). http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitler013041.html
appears the slogan, “I will give you bodies beyond your wildest imaginations,” which, after the catastrophe he inflicts on New York City, takes on extra meaning. Along the same lines, Veidt’s plan to save the world involves destroying millions of innocent civilians; he creates a monster, teleports it into New York where it explodes, killing millions, and as a result the US and the Soviets set aside their struggle and unify against what they assume is an impending alien attack. Veidt thus embodies the fallibility of the visible, or the disconnect between appearance and reality. While he appears to be the “golden boy,” he is a villain on a vast scale.

*Watchmen* visually enacts this same fallibility through Moore and Gibbons’ structured use of repetition and perspective. As Iain Banks notes, *Watchmen* demands re-reading, and after the text reveals the culprit at the end, the reader can return to earlier moments and discover visual or narrative hints about Veidt’s villainy. For example, early in the text a man tries to attack Veidt in the lobby of his company building. Veidt disarms him and tries to convince the man to reveal who hired him, but the attacker instead takes a cyanide pill and dies instantly (figure 2.13).

![Figure 2.13: the death of Veidt’s would-be assassin (V.16).](image)
In the final book, Veidt reveals that he shoved the cyanide pill in the man’s mouth, eliminating him as witness to Veidt’s plan. In concealing the truth of this moment, or in only partially revealing it, *Watchmen* underscores the shifting, unstable relationship between image, narrative, and trauma. The text contains the trace, belatedly revealed, of Veidt’s evil, and, in its hiding or altering of facts within those events, is ultimately implicated in the deception of the reader. That is, the text performs the same deceptions on the reader as Veidt performs on his world. These deceptions are of an explicitly visual nature—the panels and images themselves lie to us—emphasizing the potential instability of the visual elements in comics.¹⁷

Veidt’s Hitler-esque destruction of New York is itself a Holocaustal moment, as the text reveals other oblique references to the Nazi’s regime of extermination at the moment of the monster’s appearance. Pepered throughout the text, always in the background, are veiled references to a particular moment of history—posters advertising a November 2 concert at Madison Square Garden, “Pale Horse in concert with Krystalnacht” (XII.2). This misspelled “Krystalnacht” refers to the infamous *Kristallnacht* of 1938, a Nazi-led pogrom in Germany and Austria. As Doris L. Bergen describes, on the night of 9-10 November (the same month, not coincidentally, as the concert in *Watchmen*), “[c]rowds smashed the windows of businesses owned by Jews…. The attackers did not spare Jewish homes. They forced their way in, robbing, beating, raping and demolishing…. They burned scores of synagogues all over Germany and Austria and killed about a hundred Jews. Nazi authorities rounded up some twenty-six thousand Jewish men…” (Bergen 84-86). The misspelling of “Krystalnacht” does nothing to diminish the implications of including such a name in the text; as the concert starts, a newsvendor even

¹⁷ For more discussion on the potential for images’ unstable relations with reality and with one another, see the later chapters on Alison Bechdel (chapter five) and David B. (chapter six).
complains, “Holocaust comin’, goddamn knot-heads gotta party! I can hear their music coming from Madison Square!” (XI.6).

Although these “Krystalnacht” posters remain in the background, and are almost always partially obscured by other figures or objects in the panels, the inclusion of such a name for a band is not only deliberate, but also indicative of the ever-disappearing yet still present memory of the Holocaust (see figure 2.14 below). The fact that the posters are always obscured may also indicate the inaccessibility of this past to the contemporary imaginary; the total memory of the destruction of the Jews remains unavailable, or available only in pieces to be later constructed (here, by the reader) into a whole. After all, as Bergen notes, *Kristallnacht* “marked the last open pogrom they [the Nazis] organized in Germany and annexed Austria,” and the bulk of the violence against Jews from this point on moved out of the public arena, and into the geographically removed spaces concentration and death camps (87). The obscured posters mirror this attempt to remove from sight the destruction of the Jews by restricting the reader’s access to the posters. Existing in that zone between revelation and concealment, these historical references occur precisely because of the representational possibilities in comics, that zone of contact between text and image, presence and absence. The graphic novel thus exhibits its own traumatic structure, with its nonlinear temporality and its repetitive imagery—including these “Krystalnacht” posters. *Watchmen* thus captures the pervasive sense that the Holocaust and World War II are always present, yet always at the margins, of popular culture itself.

The historical implications of this “Krystalnacht” band name are brought to the fore near the end of the text, when Chapter XII (the final chapter) opens with large images of utter destruction wrought by Adrian Veidt’s “alien” monster’s arrival and immediate explosion in New York City. The first six pages of the chapter are full-page panels (a rarity in a comic that
mostly restricts itself to the use of the nine-panel page) showing nothing but piles upon piles of
dead bodies and gutted buildings. The first two of these six pages are, presumably, at and near
(respectively) Madison Square Garden and the Pale Horse / Krystalnacht concert. The first page
shows a close-up view of bodies hanging out of broken windows, echoing the “Night of Broken
Glass,” as Kristallnacht is known in English, while the second page shows the same scene from a
more distant angle, so that the Madison Square Garden sign is (mostly) visible and the
destruction of the surrounding buildings and people evident (figure 2.14). Thus the haunting past
of the Holocaust returns in the annihilation of the population of New York City, bringing the
historical disaster inside the narrative’s immediate one.

Figure 2.14: the destruction of New York; note the obscured Krystalnacht posters (XII.1-2).
Veidt in fact consciously tries to situate himself in a long historical tradition of global conquest and violent conflict: he follows Alexander the Great’s warpath, adopts Rameses II’s Greek name, and cites Hitler in his attempt to save humanity from itself. He seems to operate under a long-term vision of the world (however perverse): he anticipates the fall of the masked vigilante in the late 1970s a decade before it happens, he solidifies his reputation and quits the vigilante scene, willingly revealing his hidden identity, well before vigilantism is outlawed, and he builds an intricate, pyramidal system of companies in order to carry out his plan. However, as the cyclical system of the text and Dr. Manhattan’s expansive view of time indicate, Veidt deals only with the symptom of humanity’s propensity toward disaster, not its cause. Lacking Dr. Manhattan’s more cosmically oriented view, Veidt’s world becomes surprisingly limited.

The final irony of Veidt’s chosen pseudonym, Ozymandias, echoes the cyclical nature of the text itself and Veidt’s inability to recognize his own limitations. While Chapter XI ends with the famous line from Percy Bysshe Shelly’s poem “Ozymandias” (“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”), it excludes the bulk of the poem, in which the statue of Ozymandias is described as a “shattered visage” in utter ruin, whose “two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert.” Shelly’s poem calls into question the notion of permanence; a statue of a former conqueror is reduced to pieces half-covered by sand in a vast desert, where the work upon which we are to gaze and despair is nothing but the dominance of nature and time over the works of humanity. Likewise, Veidt fails to acknowledge the possibilities of both his own fall and of the spiraling journey of humans toward destruction. He vainly demands we look on his work and despair, while remaining blind to the prospect that his own kingdom might one day cease to exist—a prospect, as discussed earlier, that the text itself makes all too clear. Veidt’s demonic plan to save the world through destroying half of New
York is thus a thematic and visual hearkening to the Holocaust and Hitler’s tyrannical vision. Through the comics’ disorienting visual structures and textual omissions, Veidt’s narrative demonstrates the fallibility of images and the ways the text can manipulate the reader.

**Mirror, Mirror: Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, and Destruction’s Future**

Laurie Juspeczyk, alias Silk Spectre, is the only active female vigilante in the novel, and her alias is both seductive and ephemeral. Laurie herself, however, fully and utterly resists the spectral. Dr. Manhattan calls her his “last link with humanity,” and ultimately, with Dan Dreiberg (Nite Owl), she reaffirms the domination of the body and the human over the spectral. Indeed, Laurie and Dan appear to be humanity’s triumph over disaster, a triumph realized only in their acceptance of the base, the carnal, the physical—in short, in their very flawed humanity. For Dan and Laurie, this humanity is not the insignificant nuisance it is for Dr. Manhattan, nor the self-destructive misguided mass Ozymandias sees, nor the meaningless cesspool of Rorschach’s view. Rather, for Dan and Laurie, life is sweet—“so damn sweet,” says Laurie (XII.22).

Indeed, much of Dan and Laurie’s narrative rests on individual desire and subjectivity, on their unconscious wishes finding visual expression while remaining “unspoken.” Moore and Gibbons employ the trope of the mirror to bring the unconscious to light, demonstrating the ways in which desire and memory work together to form subjects’ identities. This mirroring is not always found on a mirrored surface, but often rather within the text’s structure. On page nine of Chapter V, for example, we turn from a close-up of a pirate’s face eating a raw gull to a close-up of Dan’s face, reflected in a mirror, eating a chicken leg on page 10 (figure 2.15).
The literal darkness of the image—everything in the panel is in a brownish sepia tone—echoes the thematic darkness of the pirate story, as well as the darkness of Dan’s own unconscious, his unspoken desires, which play out later in his apocalyptic dream scene (which shall be discussed later). Like the queen’s mirror in “Snow White,” mirrors and reflections reveal otherwise hidden truths about the characters, and in so doing, bring their unconscious wishes into both the realm of possibility and a larger network of personal and historical subjects intricately linked together.

Here, this particular series of panels moves from the mirror to reality and back to the mirror, an example of both the “fearful symmetry” from the title of chapter and the visualization of Dan’s desire for Laurie. Dan is the “nice guy,” the one who helps Laurie through her separation from Dr. Manhattan, and who, it seems, genuinely fights crime out of a sense of honor rather than guilt, self-aggrandizement or megalomania. That the page begins with such a dark image is thus all the more unnerving; the unassuming Dan apparently harbors dark, unspoken, consuming desires. In the center of the page Dan offers her a place to stay, resulting in Laurie’s silhouette reflected alongside Dan’s in the mirror (figure 2.16).
Thus on this page, Dan’s unspoken, unacknowledged desire for Laurie structures his actions and the resulting narrative, which brings him and Laurie together, while his outward actions remain friendly, even chivalrous.

Two pages later a mirror appears again in an image of the pirate gazing at himself in the sea: “a madman with blood-caked lips gazed back at me,” the pirate says, as if Nietzsche’s abyss stares back (V.12). “The Tales of the Black Freighter” comic, which appears at various intervals in the text, serves as a many-layered allegory for various narrative strands in *Watchmen*. In the “Black Freighter,” a man attacked by pirates goes mad and kills various individuals in an effort to save those very people from the pirates he believes have already arrived. What the “Black Freighter” depicts, then, is a man who becomes the thing he is trying to avoid, that reflection of a madman with blood-caked lips, despite his well-meaning intentions.

Lacan tells us that an individual’s own sense of subjectivity is structured through reflection. The subject sees itself in the mirror and, in misrecognizing the reflection as itself, identifies as a whole, unified entity like the image in the reflection. This stage is in fact a process repeated throughout a subject’s life; the subject takes on as identity the image it sees “in the mirror” or in the gaze of the other. In *Watchmen*, this creation of subjectivity is further
complicated by the ways in which the mirror shows both what the characters want, and want to avoid.

In Chapter XI, Veidt refers to his tropical vivarium retreat in Antarctica as “[t]wo alien universes, separated by a membrane of fragile glass.” One may extend this metaphor to apply to all the instances of reflection and mirroring in the text; the reflective surface separates two worlds of conscious and unconscious desires, two subjects inhabiting the same body. When Laurie appears in the mirror of Dan’s guest bedroom, then, the mirror brings together multiple pairs of “alien universes”—among them, Dan and Laurie, the unlikely couple, and each character’s unacknowledged desires against their actual behavior. This page begins with “heaven” for Laurie and ends in “hell and damnation” for Dan (figure 2.17). Here, the mirror is again Dan’s projection of desire on Laurie; we see her undressing in the mirror, while our view of her in “reality” shows her fully-clothed back. Yet perhaps this mirror also reflects Laurie’s desire for Dan. She seems to try to deny her sexual side, especially in her rejection of her costume, “with that stupid little short skirt and the neckline going down to my navel? God, that was so dreadful” (I.25). Later, however, she voluntarily dons the costume to rescue some tenement residents caught in a fire, and the act of donning the costume for both Laurie and Dan gives expression to their unarticulated sexual desires.
Dan and Laurie’s relationship, especially its sexual realization, is linked with the performance of simultaneous virility and violence. In Chapter III, the two of them experience a quasi-sexual moment while fighting some street thugs, Laurie naked under her overcoat, Dan without his glasses, both breathing heavily (figure 2.18).

Figure 2.18: Dan and Laurie’s pre-coital violence (III.15).
Laurie lights a cigarette, a post-coital action repeated later after the two do finally have sex in Archie, Dan’s airship. The adrenaline rush of fighting criminals here foreshadows the necessity for Dan and Laurie to once again don their costumes in order to achieve physical intimacy.

Their sexual relationship is dependent upon that very adrenaline, and as a result, that relationship is also dependent upon exterior stimuli, and dependent upon greater political and historical catastrophe. In the absence of such stimuli, Dan and Laurie’s “normal” lives are not enough to sustain that relationship. In Chapter VII, there is a slight play on the Clark Kent / Superman trope with Dan taking off his glasses and immediately attracting Laurie: “Why, Mr. Dreiber, you’re dashing,” she says (VII.13). But this is not Superman; this is just poor, inept Clark Kent without his glasses on. Although Laurie is attracted to Dan in this scene, their attempt at lovemaking is awkward, stilted and ultimately unsuccessful in the face of Dan’s inability to “perform” (there is an ironic, almost sarcastic juxtaposition of Laurie and Dan on couch, and Ozymandias’ “flawless” gymnastics routine on the television).

The problem, Laurie says before kissing Dan on the couch, is inhibition; yet the continual emphasis on mirrored desire makes it clear that suppression is not the sole factor in Dan’s reticence. Rather, his impotence appears to be a combination of helplessness and inhibition on both an historical and personal scale, as well as a fractured sense of identity. Immediately after this failed attempt at sexual intercourse, Dan experiences an apocalyptic dream, in which his former admirer, the “Twilight Lady” embraces Nite Owl (figure 2.19). The two peel off the other’s exterior to reveal Silk Spectre and Nite Owl underneath; the two masked vigilantes kiss and immediately explode in an image that echoes Dr. Manhattan’s nuclear disaster and the Hiroshima Lover’s graffiti discussed earlier. The dream posits Dan’s subjectivity as split between the naked human and the costumed vigilante; the mask becomes the interior core of
identity. Here, Dan’s unconscious expresses its inability to form a coherent sense of self, of desired object, and even of personal place in history.

In response, Dan dons Nite Owl’s goggles as an action against that very impotence. Indeed, once Dan and Laurie reenter the world of helping hapless citizens, Dan is able to realize his other desires. Their successful consummation echoes the dream sequence, with short, choppy, wordless panels, so that Dan’s real life and unconscious desires are now aligned (figure 2.20). Laurie observes that “there’s no quitting,” only “pauses between relapses” in “dangerous habits;” this observation applies to her smoking, but also to the crime-fighting she and Dan just engaged
in, and their resultant sexual relationship. Dan now feels “confident” like Ozymandias; costumes lead to potency and a realization of desire.

Like Batman and Rorschach, then, we must ask: which is Dan’s true identity? Once he takes on Nite Owl’s mask, Dan is able to indulge in his desires, to become the mirror. In so doing he also positions himself in a narrative tied to larger stakes, both in terms of the world of *Watchmen* (he must go to Antarctica to confront Ozymandias) and in the apocalyptic vision of desire put forth in his dream. Individual desire, claims *Watchmen*, is always, if unconsciously, tied to a larger political and historical world—and a world of tension between the visible and the masked.
Although Dan and Laurie both don the mask to allow themselves a certain amount of liberation, Laurie’s freedom as her alter ego functions slightly differently than Dan’s. Mark D. White reads Dan and Laurie’s respective reentries into vigilantism as indicative of different life philosophies: “[Dan] is deliberate but not headstrong; he is cautious but not foolhardy. We can contrast his behavior with the Silk Spectre’s, who joins him in these endeavors but makes clear that she does it more for the excitement and to make up for the boredom of her sequestered life with Dr. Manhattan” (White 84). White’s reading of Dan and Laurie’s motives rightly acknowledges the role that personal desire plays for both characters; however, limiting Laurie’s motivations to reluctant boredom ignores and undermines her struggle throughout the text to claim an identity of her own.

Forced into the Silk Spectre identity by her mother, Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre, and later, acting as a “kept woman” (as she says) for Dr. Manhattan, Laurie has been molded to fit other people’s desires for most of her life. Laurie’s donning of the costume is also done for the possibility of sexual and romantic affair with Dan, creating a relationship in which she takes a more dominant role than she does with Dr. Manhattan. Although it might seem as though Laurie moves from (super)man to man without defining herself as an independent subject, it is precisely within her triangular relationship with Dan and Dr. Manhattan that she is able to face her past and begin to understand her own desires.

This separation of subjectivity, the separation between unconscious and conscious desires, or between the image of Laurie and her interior life, echoes Dr. Manhattan’s sense of the wholeness of time. Rather than multiple moments occupying the same space—the same timescape—multiple levels of subjectivity occupy the same corporeal space. When Laurie travels with Dr. Manhattan to Mars in Chapter IX, the conflation of timescapes and desires becomes
tangible. While on Mars, Dr. Manhattan asks her to recall her earliest memory (figure 2.21). The text then *shows* us that memory; it is not solely textually narrated, like Dr. Manhattan’s story begins in Chapter IV, nor is it drawn from some outside perspective, like Rorschach’s silent flashback, but her memory is visible from Laurie’s point of view. That is, the viewer occupies the same literal viewpoint as the young Laurie (see again figure 2.21).

Moreover her memory becomes the present, again illustrating a sense of simultaneity and the possibility for comics to demonstrate that sense of coexistence. From one panel to the next, the narrative moves at least twenty years into the past, but it does so *as if* that past were happening right then, in the present of the panel, even though the captions narrate Laurie’s memory in the past tense.
Within Laurie’s retelling of the memory itself—a memory of her parents fighting, when she learns her mother’s husband is not her father—Laurie demonstrates an early understanding of time’s relativity. Staring at a snow globe, she explains: “There was this toy, this snowstorm ball, with a tiny castle inside, except it was like a whole world; a world inside the ball… it was like a little glass bubble of somewhere else. I lifted it, starting a blizzard. I knew it wasn’t real snow, but I couldn’t understand how it fell so slowly. I figured inside the ball was some different sort of time. Slow time” (IX.7). Within Laurie’s memory—her very first memory, in fact—she recognizes the possibility for a temporal experience outside of the standard. This description of another world inhabiting “slow time” is precisely the way her own memory functions; the text shows us a different world, a world of the past, in which events occur and then recur in fragments.

What the world of the snow globe ultimately reveals is the Comedian as her father; the same man who tried to rape her mother later became her mother’s willing sexual partner. Remembering the snow globe leads to the recovery of this repressed knowledge. As soon as she tries to deny repression (“There’s n-nothing to avoid…” she stammers) the text brings fragments of captions and repeated images together in a series of panels that culminate in her face reflecting in a bottle of Nostalgia perfume (figure 2.22). Attempting to deny her own realization, she throws the bottle against Dr. Manhattan’s glass palace, destroying both as the captions repeat Laurie’s memory of the snow globe’s “slow time” (IX.24). The fragments of glass visually resonate with the fragmented text; the pieces of earlier captions break apart and re-form to create a new meaning, a new narrative for Laurie’s life.
Indeed, Moore and Gibbons employ this strategy throughout *Watchmen*, using the essentially fragmented nature of the comics medium to form new meanings from repeated objects, symbols, images and words as the narrative develops.

One such object is the very perfume bottle Laurie shatters. It is “Nostalgia, by Veidt”—a perfume that is advertised throughout the streets of *Watchmen*’s New York. Nostalgia, the longing for a past that never existed, is shattered along with Laurie’s illusions surrounding her childhood and the glass of both bottle and castle. As Laurie and Dr. Manhattan stand among the glass splinters of the wreckage of Manhattan’s Martian palace, Veidt unleashes his monster on New York. Thus two *Kristallnachts* occur: Veidt’s monstrous, large-scale destruction is simultaneous with Laurie’s very personal crisis. Yet this crisis allows for an opening of desire in Laurie; as her individual problems with identity align with the larger tragedy she encounters in
Chapter XI, Laurie is able to turn to her relationship with Dan Dreiber and investigate her personal desires previously kept at bay behind her need to please others.

In their post-catastrophe embrace, Dan and Laurie project a gigantic shadow reminiscent of the Hiroshima Lover’s graffiti and of a Rorschach inkblot, so that the very moment of affirming what I earlier called the “triumph of humanity” becomes a spectral link to past and future disasters (figure 2.23). It might seem odd, after the previous discussion, to now say that Dan and Laurie’s affirmation of life is also an affirmation of death, of disaster larger than life. Yet the text itself insists upon the convergence of the personal with the historical and the cyclical, just as it does for the characters of Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, and Ozymandias. Dan’s apocalyptic dream and the enormous shadow of Dan and Laurie serve to connect them to the same historical catastrophes discussed earlier, just as Laurie’s shattered bottle of perfume links her personal memories to the shattering of Kristallnacht, heightening not only the traumatic
nature of Laurie’s memories, but also the interconnectedness of the individual’s experiences with the historical or social memory of catastrophe.

More horrifying, however, are the ways in which Dan and Laurie seem to actually turn towards the same pattern of history at the end of the novel. When they appear at Sally Jupiter’s retirement home, they have both dyed their hair blonde, and have created new identities that allow them to live as normal citizens again. As they leave, Dan says, “Y’know, maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea of your mother’s…” to which Laurie responds, “Children? Forget it. Not yet. You were talking about adventuring, and I’m not staying home changing diapers” (XII.30). Here, Dan and Laurie discuss implicitly the possibility of creating another “thermodynamic miracle,” the miraculous birth of an individual against the millions of other possible individuals (figure 2.24).

Laurie’s act of reminding Dr. Manhattan of these miracles is enough to bring Dr. Manhattan back to Earth, despite his earlier disparaging of “life insisting on life’s viewpoint.” Paradoxically, however, Dan and Laurie’s discussion of perhaps creating those same thermodynamic miracles means that they are now just as future-oriented as Adrian Veidt was when he was planning New York’s destruction. Both now blonde and planning for a future, the
two of them look like Veidt’s “Millennium” forward-looking ad campaign (figure 2.25) and like Veidt himself, the only other blonde character.

Sarah Donovan and Nick Richardson read Laurie’s transformation at the end as an affirmation of her new-found independence, arguing that in redesigning her costume and changing her appearance, Laurie asserts her independence from her mother and moves towards self-determination (Donovan and Richardson 183). However, reading Laurie’s transformation this way ignores the associations her appearance and future-oriented outlook raise with Ozymandias. Moreover, the costume design to which Donovan and Richardson refer also has ominous associations; for one, the Comedian also wore leather and a mask—is Laurie now following in her amoral father’s footsteps, rather than her overly sexualized mother’s? The leather costume and mask also fits the depiction of Dan’s past admirer, the Twilight Lady, who appears in Dan’s apocalyptic dream as the woman under whose skin Laurie is “hiding.” I said
earlier that Laurie begins to understand her own desires, and that beginning does deserve such emphasis. Her new costume, new name, and blonde hair might offer the appearance of independence. However, in exploring these newly uncovered desires, Laurie also uncovers their darkness, their ties to larger historical struggles and the possibility for future catastrophes.

What is terrifying about *Watchmen*, then, are the ways in which the text indicates the all-pervasive temporal suspension, characteristic of the acutely traumatized individual, and expands it to include the most “normal” of humans. Although it appears that Dan and Laurie continuously act on their own personal relationships and their own navigations of desire, *Watchmen* makes it clear that every personal negotiation is also in some way political and historical. The text insists on drawing together individual and historical crises, so that when the individual emerges, she or he fits again into the same pattern, if at different places. Laurie and Dan’s appearance at the end of the novel indicate the multiplicity of possible futures, although some of those futures are ominously “golden” and reminiscent of Ozymandias’ desired utopia. In such ways, the future may not be a future proper, but a spiraled return to a catastrophic past—one in which the lessons presumed learned from the original disaster are forgotten.

This conflation of past historical trauma with the (then) imagined contemporary trauma of a massive attack on New York City creates multiple and multidirectional levels of trauma. *Watchmen* is full of echoes of cultural or historical trauma within the individual and within text, all of which serve perhaps as a warning of the impossibility of fully moral actions in an immoral world. Perhaps, then, the inclusion of traumatized characters and subtle Holocaust images works to alert the reader to the importance of striving for memory and for moral action in a world quickly moving away from both. Veidt’s destructive monster and the disaster at the end of the novel put into question the sacrifice of many for the good of many more (the monster essentially
averts imminent nuclear war). But the inclusion of these images problematizes even further this sacrifice: at what point does it become criminal to sacrifice one group for “the good” of another? And what basis do we use in determining these groups?

Moore and Gibbons thus draw our attention to the possibility that historical trauma may once again occur. As Dr. Manhattan says to Ozymandias at the end of the novel, “‘In the end?’ Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (XII.27). This sense of continuity pervades *Watchmen*, which itself is that same “intricately structured jewel” of temporal and narrative fragments, visual repetitions, and historical conflations. The oblique Holocaust and nuclear references in the text reflect the insidious nature of historical trauma, as it penetrates all layers of the narrative and the characters’ experiences. Moreover, these references also exploit the notion of visuality itself—the constructed, historically and discursively determined ways of seeing. Although the characters’ actions described here often seem to align them with the perpetrators of extreme violence even while they claim to be its victims, the text itself, in its visual and narrative presentations of these moments, renders visible those actions and their historical echoes. Thus the reader learns to see differently, due to the text’s insistence on both showing us and, paradoxically, hiding from us the subtle pervasiveness of the Holocaust and other traumatic historical events. Thus while the text insists on continuity, repetition, and the unending cycles of trauma, *Watchmen* simultaneously provides for the opportunity to recognize and rethink those cycles through its insistence on active readership and visibility.
Chapter 3: Paradoxical Visions: Traumatic and Colonial Landscapes in Comics of the Rwandan Genocide

Moving from *Watchmen*’s oblique references to historical catastrophes to works whose central focus is genocide, this chapter investigates how the comics medium represents such extreme violence in the Rwandan context. This chapter is also a moment of shifting from fictional narratives to historical ones. Unlike Batman and *Watchmen*, which are clearly fantastic and fictional imaginings of the world, the texts I examine in this chapter take as their focus a real, historical moment. Discussing such texts means we are moving away from the role of traumatic historical moments in popular culture more broadly, to the specificity of the Rwandan genocide and its possibilities for representation through the comics medium.

Over the course of approximately one hundred days from April to June, 1994, the small African nation of Rwanda experienced an explosion of genocidal violence perpetrated by one ethnic group, the Hutus, against another, the Tutsis. During this short time period, the Interahamwe (the militia whose sole purpose was to exterminate Tutsis), the Rwandan army, and Hutu civilians killed hundreds of thousands of Tutsis; estimates range from 500,000 to over one million victims of the genocide, in a country whose population numbered approximately 7.5 million that year.\(^ \text{18} \) The rapidity of the violence and the brutality of the massacres have fixed the Rwandan genocide among the worst atrocities in recent memory.

Three graphic narratives take up these one hundred days of genocide, often in compelling, if disturbing, ways. Rupert Bazambanza’s memoir, *Sourire malgré tout* (*Smile Through the Tears*, trans. Lesley McCubbin, 2004), centers on the experiences of Bazambanza’s

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\(^ \text{18} \) Death toll estimates vary depending on the source; cf. Lemarchand, Melvern, Bazambanza, Lyons and Strauss, Prunier, etc.
neighbors, the Rwanga family, most of whom fall victim to the genocide. The fictional *Rwanda 1994* (2009), by French writers Cécile Grenier and Alain Austini, and Congolese artist Pat Masioni, similarly takes place during the one hundred days of genocide as it follows one woman, Mathilde, as she tries to save her family both during and after the genocide. Finally, Jean-Philippe Stassen’s fictional comic *Déogratias* (2000, English translation 2006) follows the titular character in the aftermath of the genocide as he wanders the city, and his participation in the genocide appearing as flashbacks within the text. Each *bande dessinée* takes up similar issues of madness, trauma, memory, and visuality, specifically though their use of the Rwandan landscape to signify the tensions between vision, trauma, and power within the narratives. These comics delineate three ways of seeing and depicting landscape: in *Smile*, the land is a lost Eden, a paradise and curative space that needs to be purged of the stain of genocidal and colonial violence. Similarly, *Rwanda 1994* figures the land as a protective space of redemption, although the text also maintains that the landscape can be a place of terror and violence, and that its construction as a visible and visual space is an inherently colonial project. Finally, in *Deogratias* the landscape has lost its restorative qualities and instead is an ominous, threatening space, but also a space that disturbs and undermines the privilege of the distanced seeing eye.

These three works are thus symptomatic of a certain visual tension present in the representation of genocide and trauma, particularly in a postcolonial context. These comics both conceal and reveal their narratives of trauma, much in the same way their landscapes both display and cover the bodies of the genocide’s victims. They also reveal the inherent possibility for violence in the act of seeing, while paradoxically still participating in that violence, by very nature of the visual medium. It is precisely this paradox of visuality that makes the comics medium so intricately wedded to the representations of trauma and memory. Moving between the
frames of the panels through the gutter spaces to construct the narratives’ progression, reading these texts and images creates a sense of a visible and legible space into which the trauma and violence can be written—and here, this space is that of the land itself. For all of these texts, then, the Rwandan landscape is thus a space onto which the symptoms of the genocide are rendered visible.

Moreover, the manipulation of the landscape both echoes and complicates the construction of Rwanda as a land of ethnic antagonism—a construction developed and exacerbated through European colonialism. In binding representations of the Rwandan genocide and its trauma so inextricably to the (imagined) landscapes of the country, these texts reiterate the centrality of land to conceptions of Africa in the Western imaginary. Rather than some kind of alternative vision of Rwanda, these texts adopt the authoritarian gaze so strongly linked with the colonial eye. *Smile* and *Rwanda 1994* explicitly argue for Rwanda’s victimization through its colonial legacy; simultaneously, however, the use of landscape replicates that same colonial legacy through the visual positioning of the reader. *Déogratias*, meanwhile, problematizes and inverts this privileged vision, destabilizing the victim-perpetrator binary and ultimately bringing the complex tensions between trauma, violence, and vision to the foreground.

The colonial history on which these texts rests begins in the early twentieth century, when Belgium gained colonial control over Rwanda from Germany following the latter’s defeat in World War I. Under the Belgians’ colonial policy of “divide and rule,” Rwandans found their quasi-ethnic, economic divisions amplified and racially stratified into a hierarchy of privilege. The Belgians cast the Hutu, the largest ethnic group or class (approximately 84 percent of the population), as the less privileged class, and the Tutsis, a smaller ethnic group (approximately 15
percent of the population), as the ruling class. These categories of identity had existed before colonial rule, as the Tutsis were historically the wealthier ethnic group who traditionally raised cows, the most profitable agricultural product in the area; indeed, Tutsi kings and chiefs ruled the long-standing Kingdom of Rwanda (11th century c.e. - 1959). However, these categories were fluid and apparently mostly class-based, given that a Hutu individual could become Tutsi through substantial economic gain (Lyons and Strauss 25-26).

The colonial powers of Belgium and, earlier, Germany ascribed racial characteristics to each group in addition to these economics-based divisions, stratifying and codifying them into something more fixed, more essentializing. The Belgians ascribed darker skin, shorter statures, and wider noses to the Hutus, while the Tutsis purportedly had longer noses, lighter skin, and longer necks—features considered of “Caucasoid” descent and therefore more desirable than the those of the Hutus. Under Belgian rule, Tutsis enjoyed greater privileges than their Hutu counterparts, including positions in government and access to education. After the Rwandan revolution of 1959, however, the Belgians enacted a power reversal, leaving control of the nation in the hands of the Hutu majority.

From 1959 until 1994, the essentialized divisions between Hutus and Tutsis (and Twas) continued to play a substantial role in the Rwandan political sphere, even while many Hutus and Tutsis intermarried, lived next door to one another, and encountered one another in schools.

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19 The third ethnic group, the Twa, is such a small minority—just one percent of the total Rwandan population—as to be nearly entirely excluded from Belgian racializing policies (indeed, only one Twa character appears in the three works examined here). Considered a “pygmy” race, the Twa were defined as nomadic peoples, who hunted in the forests and traded with the other groups in Rwanda.

20 The reasons for this reversal are also hotly debated among historians. Possibilities include the Belgians beginning to find parallels between the Hutu-Tutsi situation and the Flemish-Wallon divide in Belgium, and thus their reversal of power in Rwanda reflects the Flemish politicians’ own positions at home; and the (white) Catholic Church’s authority being threatened by Tutsi priests (Melvern).
businesses, and churches. In 1973, ethnic tensions intensified when Juvénal Habyarimana led a successful coup against the government and became president; Habyarimana’s regime is credited with fortifying the Rwandan army and ordering massive amounts of weapons—mostly machetes—from other countries, as well as with intensifying the racialized divisions within Rwanda. With the start of a civil war in 1990 between the exiled, and mostly Tutsi, Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Rwandan government, official propaganda became more intense, inciting virulent emotions against the Tutsis.

Although the two sides of this civil war signed a tentative peace accord in 1993, on April 6, 1994, President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down over Kigali (the Rwandan capital) as he returned from further peace talks. The genocide against the Tutsis, who were blamed for the attack, began that same night, as radio broadcasts urged the Interahamwe to take up arms against their neighbors. While press coverage in the West often portrayed the genocide as spontaneous violence—a New York Times article from May, 1994 carefully avoids the word “genocide” altogether, referring instead to “massacres”—evidence later showed that the slaughter of the Tutsi population was planned well in advance (see: Power, Lemarchand, Melvern, etc.). This lexical sidestepping in journalism mirrors the US government’s unwillingness to name the genocide as such, in an attempt to avoid political or military intervention in Rwanda (especially following so close on the Black Hawk crisis in Somalia shortly before).

Many have critiqued the international community’s response—or lack thereof—in the years since the genocide (see: Melvern, Bazambanza). The United Nations actually removed troops from Rwanda during the genocide, and ordered the remaining contingents not to intervene militarily. It was not until France began its “Operation Turquoise” near the end of June that the UN sent additional troops. When the genocide unfolded, international scrutiny increased as the
slaughter became more and more devastating, and especially as the violence began to have an impact on neighboring countries and, in particular, their natural resources. One of the striking images to come out of neighboring Burundi involved corpses of Rwandan nationals washing up in their lakes, contaminating the water supply of many areas. In some sense, then, the Rwandan genocide became visible to the rest of the world only once the surrounding lands began to “exhibit symptoms,” so to speak.

The Rwandan genocide is, therefore, inextricably bound up with its landscape and its natural resources. Rwanda is “the land of the thousand hills,” a moniker itself resting on the landscape’s significance to nationhood; the propagandist radio station Radio Télévision Libre de Milles Collines refers to those same “thousand hills,” as does the Hôtel de Milles Collines, made famous in the Academy Award-winning 2004 film Hotel Rwanda. Just as the European powers in the nineteenth century saw Africa as a slab of land to carve up, redistribute, colonize, and exploit, so is the understanding of Rwanda in the 1990s still linked to such grounded—literally—conceptualizations of the nation as the land.

This is not to say necessarily that there is such a thing as an “authentic” view of the land against which colonial vision situates itself. However, as this chapter lays out, the comics creators—whether Rwandan or European—adopt, whether consciously or otherwise, the structures of this authoritarian, colonial gaze. The conceptualization of the land as a visible marker and symbol of both nation and violence is one of the central concerns of the three texts examined here. Smile through the Tears and Rwanda 1994 both open with an image of the Rwandan landscape; Déogratias closes with one. Each text emphasizes the interplay of the natural and animal worlds with the human, and in doing so each uses the landscapes as a means of narrativizing the traumatic events of the genocide. All three of the comics examined in this
chapter conceptualize the nation and its violence in relation to its natural beauty and resources, thus feeding into a long-standing and colonial construction of Africa not as a continent of humanity but of primal nature: a space to be exploited and “civilized” (converted, Westernized, etc.). These comics use the landscape of Rwanda—its hills, mountains, rivers, and sky—to configure the genocide not solely as a massive, horrifying, and deplorable act of ethnic cleansing, but in part also as a fight over the landscape itself, over the nostalgic, idealized, precolonial “Natural Rwanda.”

The covers of all three books demonstrate the centrality of landscape to the narratives contained within (figure 3.1). On the cover of *Smile Through the Tears*, a tearful Rose Rwanga stands next to one of Rwanda’s famed gorillas; between them one sees a tree with blood pouring from a machete wound in its trunk, and in the far background, the hills and countryside that the memoir opens with in its first panel. The covers of *Déogratias* and *Rwanda 1994*, meanwhile, are images and panels lifted from the narratives themselves: on one, Mathilde cowers in the river under some reeds, hiding from a fire in the background; on the other, Déogratias crouches by a river in tattered clothing, with the night sky above him taking up most of the cover’s space.

Figure 3.1: the book covers and their landscapes.
On each cover, the landscape and the violence of the genocide are linked through the inclusion of the human figure. And yet each cover also illustrates the very different manipulations of landscape within each narrative: in *Smile*, the perpetrator has attacked the landscape and must be purged from it; in *Rwanda 1994*, the landscape is both threat and shelter; and in *Déogratias*, the landscape dominates and encroaches upon the character and the page.

The term “landscape” encompasses two related concepts: a natural scene, the land, that the human eye gazes out upon; and a painting or representation of that scene. Yet landscapes also incorporate acts and ways of seeing, and W.J.T. Mitchell charges us to “think of landscape… as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (Mitchell *Landscape* 1). Drawing on the Enlightenment and colonial project of conquest through categorization, Mary Louise Pratt notes that “[t]he landscape [of colonial Africa] is written as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricized, unoccupied even by the travelers themselves” creating a “fantasy of dominance and appropriation that is built into this otherwise passive, open stance. The eye ‘commands’ what falls within its gaze; mountains and valleys ‘show themselves,’ ‘present a picture;’ the country ‘opens up’ before visitors” (51, 60). As such, the connection between landscape and colonialism is clear; as Harry Garuba writes, “colonialism as a regime of power was largely organised through spatiality and subjectivity: spaces to capture, subjects to control… Colonial conceptions of space and people, and thus colonial mapping, were premised on a Cartesian logic which foregrounded the fantasy of an autonomous subject with a privileged view casting his eye over transparent space” (87).

To this understanding of the framing of natural spaces as a structure of privilege and dominance, Brett Kaplan adds a characterization of landscapes as a physical and mental space that can simultaneously witness and conceal atrocity: “The landscapes in which traumatic events
happened, or where perpetrators dreamed up violent scenarios, can bear only unstable witness. On the one hand, visible traces of the past remain; on the other hand, an inevitable covering up of these traces by the movement of the landscape as nature either reclaims it or human desires reshape and repurpose it occurs” (Kaplan 2). Landscapes—“spaces and their representations, including man-made artifacts or portraits,” and I include broadly speaking the animal and natural here as part of the landscape, especially in their status as objects of the white, authoritarian gaze—thus can become also “timescapes,” spaces that capture and remain marked by traumatic events (Kaplan 3, Kluger 67).

These two approaches to landscape—the postcolonial and the traumatic—cross over and complement one another in the comics discussed here. Even as these texts purport to resist both the genocidal and colonial regimes they nonetheless still consider Rwanda in terms of landscape, a landscape that both offers access to the genocide and distances, even exoticizes, it. Landscape “naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” (Mitchell Landscape 2). As I will show below, these graphic works actually reproduce those very structures of privilege they wish to disavow. In these texts, the trauma of Rwandan genocide remains embedded within and covered by the landscapes contained within these pages, and as such the genocide also remains the thing circled around rather than directly confronted. In adopting and maintaining the colonizing eye/I to varying degrees, the texts examined here relegate the trauma of the genocide to a position of a specific and visually determined land. Through their uses of landscape, each text ultimately undermines its own supposed message by
reiterating the colonial gaze of exoticism and primitivism, keeping Rwanda as a land “over there,” and “of them."

**Smile Through the Tears**

Rupert Bazambanza’s “creative nonfiction” account of the genocide, *Smile Through the Tears*, is a stylized graphic memoir, first published in Quebec as *Sourire malgré tout* in 2004. Himself a survivor of the 1994 genocide, Bazambanza chooses to center his memoir of this catastrophe on the lives of his neighbors, the Rwanga family, before and during the events of the genocide. Through the avatars of Charles and Rose, and their children Wilson, Degroot, and Hyacinthe, *Smile Through the Tears* aims to honor and memorialize the genocide’s victims, and to work towards preserving the historical memory of the genocide. Bazambanza explicitly lays out the text’s purpose in the introduction: “I dedicate Smile Through the Tears to the Rwanga family, to my father, my loved ones, and the nearly one million other victims of the Tutsi genocide in homage to their martyrdom. And I invite my fellow survivors to continue with this sacred task” (intro.).

Indeed, Bazambanza views his very survival of the genocide as intricately bound up with a verbal and visual “mission” to speak and to offer testimony, in both the legal and the religious senses, to the atrocities of 1994: “I was spared so I could be a witness. My mission was to be town crier” (intro.). However, Bazambanza transfers this dual act of witnessing and speaking—crying, even—from his own experiences to those of his beloved neighbors:

My story is told from the point of view of a family very dear to me whose near-total annihilation I witnessed: the Rwangas… I was in hiding with them and I lost them, without understanding why, one beautiful April morning in 1994. A morning as luminous
as any other: one of the characteristics that had made Rwanda the little African Eden so
vaunted by tourists. I lost them, and the only thing I could do was to make them the
heroes of this bitter tribute. (intro)

Bazambanza thus appears to be aware of both the centrality of the Rwandan landscape to his
conception of the nation, and of the significant absence in his work in choosing to focus on the
Rwangas rather than on the Bazambanza family. However, Bazambanza’s strongly-held
Christian beliefs and his overwrought, affected language make it difficult to identify at what
points his words might be ironic rather than genuine; here, as in other places in the narrative
itself, it is difficult to distinguish between melodramatic sentimentality and ironic self-reflection.

Just as humanity lost Eden, and as Rwanda lost its paradise-like qualities, so did Rupert
Bazambanza lose the Rwangas, and so did he apparently lose either the ability or the desire to
write his own story. Bazambanza omits the story of his own family— he appears only briefly, in
a few panels, as a character in the memoir— in favor of relating the story of the Rwangas. Thus
the traumas of the author’s own experiences remain only in the background of the story of the
martyred and saintly figures of the Rwanga family, through whose lives and deaths lie
Bazambanza’s— and, by extension, Rwanda’s— redemption and the return to a lost paradise.
The text’s dialogue and captions are so obviously constructed that they draw attention to the
memoir’s fictitiousness, even while insisting on the veracity of its own story. This story of the
Rwanga family and their suffering is a real, individual experience of the genocide, but the
memoir also wrangles with the nostalgia for both the lost family members and the lost ideal
construction of Rwanda.

This twofold nostalgia thus drives the narrative’s construction of the land itself as the
vessel through which Rwanda can be reclaimed. In *Smile Through the Tears*, landscape functions
as something emotional, feeling, and highly visible, an idealized space within which both sorrow and redemption are legible. The Rwandan landscape acts as a “holy landscape”: “The holy place is a paradise from which we have been expelled, a sacred soil that has been defiled, a promise yet to be fulfilled, a blessed site that lies under a curse” (Mitchell *Landscape* 261-62). Thus this memoir transforms the victims of the genocide into saintly martyrs, the Rwandan landscape into an Eden defiled by those who perpetrated the genocide, and the acts of committing and atoning for these crimes embedded within the landscape into a particularly visual and visible performance. Such a view is problematic in that it repeats and reinforces the colonial structures of religion and vision, linking them together even while repudiating the Western construction of Rwanda’s ethnic divisions.

The memoir opens with an extended panel depicting a lush landscape, with a second panel containing a close-up of two eyes crying superimposed over the top of this landscape (figure 3.2).

![Figure 3.2: “Why such a river of tears in this enchanting country of a thousand hills?” (1).](image)

Visually, the text thus begins with an emphasis on a very specific kind of vision—one that is not only emotionally invested, and not only a vision of landscape and individual humanity linked together, but also of a blurred state of vision (looking through tears is not a sharp, direct form of vision). This blurry vision is in part heightened through the text’s italicized font and its
noticeable wordiness: the captions and dialogue boxes, all using the same italicized font, tend to visually overpower any given page. The narrative overwhelms the landscape of the page, just as the events of the genocide come to function as a kind of blot on the Rwandan landscape, obscuring or distorting it and the nation that it comes to represent.

In *Smile*, everything is visible, but at a slant, inflected with an emotionality and, as Michael Chaney describes, a hagiographic, overtly ideological bent. The landscape, taking its place within this system of text and ideology, is a means through which the text can access that ideological vision. The text problematically configures the landscape as an Edenic space, hearkening to an image of Rwanda and its land as a lost paradise and as the center of the Christian mythology of creation. Doing so places Rwanda squarely within that matrix of Western ideology, rather than creating a space for Rwanda as resisting Western hegemony.\(^{21}\)

Rwanda as a naturalized, Edenic space is also the verbal entry into the memoir of the genocide, as it opens with a visual and textual meditation on the Rwandan landscape:

Why such a river of tears in this enchanting country of a thousand hills? The genocide of the Rwandan Tutsis took place under the shocked gaze of the international community. One million slaughtered. Those who could have stopped the horror did nothing, seemingly indifferent to the drama. Rwanda, it was often said, is too small, too poor and too black to elicit compassion. Faced with the unbelievable, the martyred Rwandans could only wonder. (1)

\(^{21}\) Interestingly this same paradox exists in Rwandan national politics post-genocide. For example, the creation of the *gacaca*, the grassroots, village-level “courts” in which perpetrators of the genocide would step forward and ask their neighbors for forgiveness. These courts are a version of their precolonial equivalent, and signify Rwanda’s attempt to find solutions outside of Western structures of the law. However, these same movements of forgiveness are often phrased in Christian terms, as wronged individuals are expected to extend grace to confessed perpetrators. I am indebted to Tim Wendig for this valuable insight; cf. Stover and Weinstein, *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*. 
This text, meanwhile, literally “takes place under” the sorrowful gaze of the survivor, whose tears spill from her eyes into the landscape below (see again figure 3.2). *Smile* thus rests itself on those same naturalized imaginings of Rwanda as the “enchanting country of a thousand hills,” where a human tragedy is figured as a bounded and natural catastrophe. The eyes at the beginning of the memoir—eyes that indicate a problematic slippage between Rwandan and Western gazes—are not active, watching eyes, but something to be looked at. The image of the eyes undermines the agency associated with the gaze in this instance, as these eyes do not look out at anything, do not see anything, but rather emote, or become themselves signifiers of a certain pathos. The Rwandan landscape into which these eyes are inscribed is, therefore, the product of a more distanced perspective, one whose gaze can encompass both the land and its pathos simultaneously.

The text poses the Rwandan landscape as Edenic, and European colonization and later the genocide as the sins for which the nation must atone in order to return to paradise. This Edenic landscape of the opening page quickly reveals itself to be a landscape in need of purification, most often in the depiction of President Habyarimana’s airplane, which typically appears as a mechanical blot in an otherwise idyllic scene. It is an element that needs purging or extracting from the landscape in order to return it to its “natural state.” The images that depict Habyarimana’s plane all place it in relief with the natural surroundings. In one panel—one that stretches across the top of the page—two Rwandans watch the President’s plane as it flies above another brilliantly green landscape (14). A small bird appears in the sky near the plane; the sharp relief of a radio control tower breaks the scenic horizon in the right of the panel (figure 3.3). This tower stands in contrast not only with the green tree in the foreground of the left of the panel, but with the small, corrugated-roofed buildings that dot the landscape in between the large tree and
the tower. This visual arrangement seems to suggest that humans and nature might peacefully coexist, were it not for the disruptive, technological blots that the plane and the radio tower present.

Habyarimana is represented as a figure who disrupts the “natural” order of the Rwandans, inciting violence and enforcing racial divisions where, according to the text, none existed originally. In another example, the final panel of the page shows three children in the foreground in a tree (one eating a banana), staring at a plane as it flies at sunset above the green countryside (figure 3.4).

“Look! Habyarimana’s plane! He’s fleeing with the State coffers!” exclaims one child. Another responds: “The opposition says it’s his fault we’re homeless. We ought to take down his plane!”
In the right of the panel, a small bird flies level with the plane, but moving in the opposite direction. The plane and the bird—the man-made and the natural, the man charged with increasing the racial tensions and disrupting the natural order next to an animal figure representing the “real” Rwanda—occupy the same visual plane, but move in opposite directions. In this panel he is charged with displacing the humans, turning the children homeless.

Despite the insistence on Habyarimana’s responsibility for the suffering of the Tutsis, his death—again, the event that signals the start of the genocide—is a kind of traumatic wish fulfillment. The day Habyarimana’s plane is shot down, time literally becomes inscribed inside the panel, with the date (6/04/1994) appearing underneath the caption box but within the frame of the panel next to the flaming plane making its steep descent (figure 3.5a, 39). It is also the top left panel and its “timescape” contrasts with the final panel of the page (lower right), which depicts the corpses of the ten Belgian UNAMIR soldiers who were protecting then-prime minister Agathe Uwiringiyimana (figure 3.5b). The motion of the falling plane contrasts with the utter stillness of the dead bodies. Therefore although the text at several points foreshadows Habyarimana’s death and even hints that his death would solve Rwanda’s problems, when this wish does come to pass it results in a terrible destruction.

Figure 3.5: Panel A shows Habyariman’s plane crashing; panel B depicts the UNAMIR soldiers’ bodies (39).
The landscape—the “natural” Rwanda—is thus the site and sight of violence, while humanity is the scourge that has soiled the nation. If Rwandans and the rest of the world atone for their sins—of genocide, of violence, of racial discrimination, of exploitation of other humans, animals, and the natural world—then harmony will be restored and Rwanda will once again be a paradise on Earth. In the final panel of the text, Rose Rwanga stands with a war orphan and with her son Wilson’s girlfriend; a path through the verdant countryside stretches before them towards the pale blue hills in the background (figure 3.6). “Our country is a paradise!” Rose proclaims. “But its own people have sullied this Eden. You young people, your mission is to restore harmony so that your children never know the meaning of the words ‘racial discrimination.’ You must work to ensure that no parent or child will ever again suffer what we’ve suffered. But the road is long. Take all your courage and go!” (64).

Figure 3.6: “Our country is a paradise!” (64).

One problem with this view is its overwhelming nostalgia for an idealized, naturalized, and paradoxically sanctified past. In the text’s eagerness to sanctify the Rwanga family and, more broadly, all the victims of the genocide and demonize the perpetrators of the genocide, it engages in a construction of the nation and of the land that itself perpetuates the same representational structures that it claims to disavow: All the Tutsi characters have lighter skin,
long noses, long necks, and tall, slim builds; all the darker-skinned Hutu characters are short and stocky with wide noses. In an effort to combat the institutionalized racism that his children encounter at school, Charles Rwanga narrates his version of the early history of Rwanda: “First those called the Twas came here to hunt in the forests. Then came farmers to clear the fertile fields. Those were called the Hutus. And then came the cattle breeders, seeking pasture for their herds. These were called Tutsis. These three peoples complemented each other with their different skills. Since cattle dominated the economy, certain Tutsis became powerful chiefs” (6). Rwanga, and by extension, the text, imagines the Rwandan past as idyllic and firmly connected with the land and its uses. Rwanga’s narrative of Rwanda’s origins rests on an economic, not ethnic, division, based on the economies of working the land (figure 3.7).

![Figure 3.7](image)

*Figure 3.7: the land produces the Rwandan peoples (6).*

Moreover, as Michael Chaney notes, Bazambanza’s text does not move away from those naturalized and nostalgic visions of race (95). The illustrations accompanying Charles Rwanga’s version of history visually preserve those racialized elements that Rwanga’s verbal narrative discounts. The Hutu and Tutsi figures in these panels display stereotypical racial characteristics even as Rwanga insists on the economic, not ethnic, construction of Rwanda’s internal divisions. In this way, Rwanga’s narrative matches the longstanding historical dissonance between the economic and ethnic understandings of the structures in Rwanda. Even the preeminent African
history scholar Gérard Prunier, writing in 1995, perpetuates the racialized divisions between Hutu and Tutsi: “[The Hutu] had a standard Bantu physical aspect…. But the Tutsi were something else altogether. Extremely tall and thin, and often displaying sharp, angular facial features, these cattle-herders were obviously of a different racial stock than the local peasants” (5). Prunier thus subsumes the economic divisions between these groups of people into a larger, more “significant” category of race. Significantly, this same racialized account of the peoples of Rwanda occurs within a larger historical and framework, in which Prunier posits that Rwanda’s physical landscape, its geographical situation, is a defining factor in allowing the genocide to occur (3).

These conceptualizations of the racial and of the geographical are intimately connected in the colonial and postcolonial imaginary. Indeed, the use of stereotypical, racialized images and figures finds its counterpart in the continual return of the landscape as visual trope, signifying at once the pseudo-natural existence of a constructed notion (the bounded landscape of the nation, the bounded image of the panel) and the idolized, Edenic myth of paradise and return. “Landscape is quite capable of becoming an idol in its own right—that is, a potent, ideological representation that serves to naturalize power relations and erase history and legibility” (Mitchell Landscape 262). This idolatry is exactly what Bazambanza’s text enacts: it transforms the vistas of Rwanda into idealized and ideological spaces that naturalize the nostalgic ideal of a unified Rwandan past even while insisting on the need to purify that same space of the plague of “racial discrimination.” Rwanda is a land that needs to be reclaimed from both the Hutu extremists and the colonial powers, to return to the natural, harmonious order that the characters and the text imagine.
However, in its insistence on this Edenic space, the text reenacts the same power relations connected with the colonial gaze. After all, what is Eden but a Judeo-Christian (read: Western) mythological space? The spread of Christianity into Rwanda owes itself to those same colonizing missionaries against whom the text rails. The overt Christian tones and references, the saintly portrayal of the Rwangas, and the invocation of the Christian God at numerous moments point to the tension within the text between struggling against Rwanda’s colonial legacy and decrying the West’s (lack of) reaction or intervention, and the ideological and religious structures that Bazambanza adheres to and inherits from that same colonial legacy.

Not only does Bazambanza reproduce a significant aspect of colonial and religious ideology, but also the insistence on using the landscapes in the text as a signifier for the nation actually reproduces the European privileged gaze. As I mentioned earlier, the opening panels reify both the landscape and the African gaze into objects within a more distanced field of vision. That opening page then continues on to present the European (that is, colonial) gaze, as we see two (rather dandy) Europeans looking through cameras—one video, one still photography—at a large gorilla set against a backdrop of mountains, echoing the mountains in the first panel’s landscape (figure 3.8). This misdirection extends to the portrayal of the UN soldiers present in Rwanda who failed to stop the violence: “As for the UNAMIR, the Interahamwe had long noted that the troops were only there as observers, and scorned them” (45).

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22 Although Christianity in Rwanda can sometimes be considered a “folk religion,” with practices outside of official Church doctrine, I would argue that Bazambanza’s use of religion in this memoir is along traditional lines.
One UN soldier asks, “Why do you take such pleasure in showing off these crimes you’ve committed against your own countrymen?” to which an Interahamwe member responds: “Isn’t that what you came to do— contemplate their deaths? So don’t be shy! Go ahead and look! Open your eyes wide and take lots of photos! Then send your reports” (45). The text acknowledges both the supposed passivity inherent in the role of audience, and the position of the European gaze as the defining perspective. The UNAMIR appears to fill the same role as the Western (read: white) tourists, while the black bodies of the genocide’s victims are now the tourist attraction to be looked at.
The conflation of the genocide’s victims with the object of the European gaze pervades this text, often with highly problematic results. At one point, Habyarimana says, during an early radio interview, “we need our gorilla habitats more than we need these refugees. The parks bring in foreign currency. For this reason, I can never allow refugees to come and occupy our only uninhabited land. Let them stay where they are. I don’t want to lose everything that we gained during the 1959 revolution” (2). Habyarimana uses the gorillas—a national emblem—as a reason to keep Tutsi refugees in exile, while later comparing those same refugees to other kinds of animals, namely vermin: “When I give the signal, Hutu civilians shall begin eliminating Tutsis while we take care of those cockroaches, the invaders!” (14). Using language that echoes the Nazi’s linguistic dehumanizing of their victims as “vermin,” Habyarimana thus stands as the coercive figure who vilified the Tutsi and orchestrated their extermination. Yet in his exploitation of the gorillas as representative of Rwandan identity and his intertwining of this image with that of his dehumanized victims, Bazambanza’s portrayal of Habyrimana also situates him firmly within this privileging, determining, and violent network of land-oriented signification.

Habyarimana’s privileging of the gorillas thus at first seems to be part of the ideological propaganda machine working to devalue the Tutsis. More so than its human citizens, gorillas appear to be the avatars of the “true” Rwanda; as one RPF soldier remarks, “It seems even these gorillas are begging us to right the wrongs they’ve suffered at the hands of the MRND—young ones kidnapped and sold to strangers, and adults killed trying to protect them!” (figure 3.9, 19). Thus gorillas occupy a twofold space of signification in the memoir: on the one hand, they are, as Michael Chaney says, the silent and perhaps strange witnesses of the genocide; on the other,
they are also the symbol of the Rwandan nation as something natural, endangered, and spectacular.

Figure 3.9: the gorillas as national symbol and witness (19).

However, the text’s representations of the gorillas is highly problematic, since it deploys the figures of the gorillas in the same colonial and specular / spectacular way that it claims to be working against. One panel, for example, shows a gorilla lying in a pool of blood, mimicking the position of so many of the dead human bodies throughout the text and in fact mirroring, in a very disturbing way, a panel from the previous page in which a woman lies dead (figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: the position of the gorilla parallels the position of the murdered woman (60-61).
Visually, then, these two separate panels equate the gorillas with the human victims of the genocide and, by extension, the inverse. While the memoir does deploy the gorillas as a kind of national and natural witness (cf. Chaney), the degradation of African peoples to apes and monkeys is a longstanding and hugely problematic racist allegory. Thus the echoing of the human and ape victims’ deaths in these panels is an ambiguous moment. Adding to the ambiguity here is the fact that the human victim on the opposite page is a Hutu; the racist overtones become thus even more heavy-handed.

The caption of this panel featuring the gorilla also remains relatively ambivalent:

Following their defeat, the criminals in power went on a rampage of destruction to ensure that nothing remained for the new government. Even the gorillas—an endangered species the world seemed to care more about than the human victims of discrimination it consistently ignored—were destroyed to prevent their being a source of income. In the end, racial discrimination benefited no one. Had it only known, the world might have at least saved the gorillas! (61)

Is the text being ironic or sarcastic here, or earnest? Due to the ideologically heavy-handed prose throughout the work, it is difficult not to take this statement at face value. The lamentation over the loss of Rwanda’s gorillas therefore actually reaffirms the Hutu propaganda and the exoticizing, fetishizing Western vision that both so celebrate the gorillas over the humans of Rwanda.

That Western gaze so distant as to focus on the tangential aspects of the genocide thus infiltrates much of the narrative. To return to the final panels of this memoir, then, is to return to the question of the colonial gaze and its inherent blindness. As Rose Rwanga exhorts her young companions to “take their courage and go,” there is a literal turning away from the land as that
which covers atrocity and toward the land as that which extends into a paradoxically nostalgic, Edenic, utopian future (see again figure 3.6). Not only do the characters turn away from the mass grave sites where their loved ones are presumably buried, but the reader must literally turn the page away from these graves (also visible in panels on the previous page) to view the Edenic promise. Rose Rwanga’s smiling face, turned toward both the child audience within the panel and the readerly audience without, is the antithesis to the crying eyes that open the memoir. As Mitchell writes, “landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era” (Landscape 20). Smile’s longing for the redemption of an Edenic Rwanda is precisely that impossible nostalgia for a pre-colonial ideal past—one that cannot possibly be reclaimed, even as it attempts to cover over and turn away from its traumatized present.

**Rwanda 1994**

Like Smile, the 2009 two-album fictional bande dessinée Rwanda 1994, written by Cécile Grenier and Alain Austini, and drawn and colored by Pat Masioni, posits the Rwandan natural landscape as a space where the genocide and its aftermath are suffered, written, and healed within the land’s physicality. However, unlike Smile Through the Tear’s vision of the land as Edenic, Rwanda 1994 places Rwanda’s landscape within a complicated dualism of (post)colonial understandings of visibility and trauma. The land is both threat and comfort, shelter and exposure, present and past.

The first part of Rwanda 1994, “Descente à l’enfer” (Descent into Hell) follows a mother, Mathilde, fleeing the genocide with her two children, Paul and Marie. Mathilde’s friend Rose and her French fiancé, Jacques, manage to escape Rwanda on one of the last UN transports while holding Mathilde’s third child, an unnamed infant son, but the UN truck drives away
before Mathilde, Paul, and Marie are able to climb aboard. After their abandonment, Mathilde and the children alternate between the relative safety of the wilderness and the dangers and violence of their town. During one attempt to flee into the jungle, Marie is killed, and Mathilde and Paul are separated from each other. Mathilde wanders the riverbank in an attempt to find Paul, but instead is “rescued” by a Hutu man who keeps her as essentially a slave while posing as her husband in a group of Hutu militia. Paul, meanwhile, hides near the bridge over the river until he can safely return home after the genocide, at which point begins the second part, “Le camp de la vie” (The Life Camp).

Once home, Paul navigates cadavers, cholera, land mines, theft, near-starvation, and child predators with the help of other orphaned survivors. Jacques, the Frenchman who rescued Mathilde’s infant son, returns to Rwanda and flies his small plane in search of Mathilde and her family, and eventually finds her in the midst of the Hutu refugee camp. Upon learning that her son is alive, Mathilde poisons her captors and, with the help of a young Hutu boy, fights her way to the waiting airplane. The text ends with Mathilde, the orphaned Hutu boy, and the pilot Jacques flying back toward Mathilde’s home to find Paul.

If Smile’s aim is to sanctify Rwanda and the genocide’s victims, then the apparent aim of Rwanda 1994 is to vilify the European—specifically French—involvement in and perpetration of the genocide. This aim is undermined, as I will show, in the text’s inclusion of the Frenchman Jacques who acts as the “white savior” of the African woman, and in the text’s uncritical adoption of the Western gaze and construction of the landscape. However, the French soldiers in this novel are portrayed as even more hateful and aggressive than the Hutus who carry out the genocide.
These French soldiers uphold the racial divisions between Hutu and Tutsi (and the associated stereotypes and power dynamics), punishing Tutsis while privileging Hutus. At one point, a group of French soldiers stops a van full of Tutsi civilians on the road, and force the men to wait in the van or at the side of the road while the soldiers rape the women, including Mathilde (42-43). At other moments, the French say they will take care of an area’s remaining Tutsi “vermine,” employing the same dehumanizing language of those who orchestrate the genocide; they shoot escaping Tutsi victims; and they exhort the Hutus to “cleanse” (“nettoyer”) the land where dozens of Tutsis are hiding from the genocide (58, 51). These are only a few examples of the utterly reprehensible behavior of the French soldiers in the text. *Rwanda 1994* therefore represents the French as in some ways worse than the Hutu genocide regime; they are one of the most threatening forces in the Rwandan landscape of this novel.

The land of *Rwanda 1994* contains and conceals many life-threatening dangers, from buried mines, to choleric water, to camouflaged French soldiers, to gasoline poured on the reeds next to the river and set alight. However, none of these dangers is “natural;” rather they are all man-made and inserted or insinuated into the landscape, dangers that seem to originate with neither the Tutsis nor the Hutus, but with the Europeans. Thus the text creates the sense that, as in *Smile*, the violence of the genocide and the violation of the land are products of Rwanda’s colonial legacy. The horrors of the genocide do not spring from the land itself, but from the human manipulation of the land.

*Rwanda 1994*, like *Smile*, opens with an image of the Rwandan landscape; while *Smile* emphasizes this landscape’s timelessness or its eternally Edenic qualities, *1994* opens with a landscape stamped with a caption giving a place, date, and precise time: “Arusha, 6 avril 1994, 17h50” (figure 3.11, 7). The image in the foreground is of a plane marked with “République
Rwandaise,” and a crowd of people lining the red carpet leading to the plane; given the time, place, and national airplane, we understand that this is the moment before President Habyarimana flies back to Rwanda, and to his death. Over half the panel, however, is the landscape behind the plane at sunset. By including the crowd in this panel and the explicit temporal marker, the landscape lacks any sense of the Edenic timelessness of Smile. The figures are frozen in a particular moment, and including the hour and minute in the caption lends a sense of precision to the “timescape.”

Figure 3.11: Rwanda’s opening panels (7).

There is a sense of anxiety and waiting encapsulated within this panel due not only to its suspension in time but also to its suspension in visual duality. The particularity of the moment before the plane’s takeoff is at odds with the expansive landscape featuring the massive Mount Kilimanjaro. Indeed, while three sides of this panel bleed all the way to the edge of the page, so that the sunset extends outward and creates a sense of expansion, the bottom edge of the panel is framed and cuts the crowd of people off. Even a portion of the crowd is covered by the intrusion of the panel below into the space of this first panel. Thus the first panel contains within it a series
of contradictory or conflicting elements: the natural scene and the manmade; the Rwandan plane in the Tanzanian capital Arusha; the expansiveness of most of the panel and the abrupt boundary of the lower edge; the brightness of the sun-streaked landscape with the darkness of the tarmac. These doubled contradictions hint at the likewise doubled connection between land and humanity in the novel: the purportedly “civilized” human will destroy and/or manipulate the natural landscape for its own violent purposes, but the land also can offer protection and redemption to those who respect it and remember its pre-colonial past (I will return to this latter point later).

This conflict between the human and the natural returns as the family finds shelter in the nearby forest after their abandonment at the hands of the UN. On one page, the first panel depicts the forested countryside; the two panels set inside the first and on the right show Paul, Marie, and Mathilde sleeping under cover of the vegetation during the day, and preparing to leave at night (figure 3.12, 23).

![Figure 3.12: the land as protection and shelter (23).](image)

There is thus a sense in which the landscape protects, covers, and resists the surrounding violence. However, the final panel, also a landscape, is much more ominous. As the tiny, brightly clothed figures make their way through the moonlit hills towards their hometown, the valley below is shrouded in mist, the river and the bridge crossing it hidden from view but the buildings
of town clearly visible (figure 3.13). The following panel— the first on the next page— reveals the same landscape in the daylight, devoid of human figures and pitting the nondescript, brown and gray landscape of town against the blue and green of the hills across the river. The night’s fog hides the “natural” landscape while keeping the manmade landscape visible; it is this manmade landscape that provides the threat rather than the safety and security that the three encounter in the earlier panel.

These complicated landscapes demonstrate *Rwanda 1994*’s attempts to provide an alternative vision of the land, one that in some ways resists the colonial gaze: “Spatial arrangement thus becomes strategic and plays a determining role in the unequal economy of exchange between the observer and the observed. If, for the colonised, visibility is a trap, concealment and/or continual mobility become a strategy of escape” (Garuba 88). Garuba concentrates on structures of mapping as a geographical and ideological project of Western dominance; however, his point can extend to visibility across visual media, from maps to landscapes to portraiture. To be visible is to be controllable, to fit into a category, whether one

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23 Think, for example, of Manet’s *Olympia*, in which the Black servant is both visible and hidden, with little differentiating her face from the dark background of the curtains behind her,
speaks of mapping land or imagining (that is, image-ing) it; thus to be invisible is to resist or escape those same authoritarian mechanisms. Mathilde’s hiding in the forest and, later, hiding in the reeds near the river are not only desperate acts of immediate self-preservation, but also the text’s attempt to demonstrate the fallibility of the authoritative gaze as it fails to see everything the land contains.

Yet this representation of the land remains ambiguous. Hiding among the reeds from the Hutus who chased and wounded her the previous night, Mathilde slips into unconsciousness while calling for Paul, blending with the landscape to such an extent that in the penultimate panel, neither her nor her words are visible: the speech balloon reads “P...l?” (37). The panel depicts the landscape from a more distant vantage point, while Mathilde is so well hidden that she is now invisible (figure 3.14).

Figure 3.14: Mathilde hides at the river’s edge (37).

her gaze directed not boldly at the viewer, as the white woman’s, but at the other woman herself. Likewise has this servant’s role in the painting often diminished in critical, scholarly, and popular responses to the painting (an Internet search reveals a third as many scholarly references to “Manet Olympia Race” or “Manet Olympia Black” as to simply “Manet Olympia).
This panel embodies the tension between the privilege, distanced eye and the landscape that eye beholds. Viewing the landscape from afar means on the one hand that Mathilde remains hidden from those who would harm her, both Hutu and French. On the other hand, it also means a silencing of her voice and an invisibility, an erasure. To hide in the landscape is to be safe from physical danger, but paradoxically victim to the ideological danger of the colonial gaze.

The landscape’s ambiguity is further heightened through the intrusion of traumatic memories into the safety of Mathilde’s hiding space. As Mathilde lies in these reeds by the river, a series of memories, visions, or flashbacks appear around her (38-39). This large, two-page spread is in a very different style to the rest of the book. The flashbacks—mostly wordless snippets of time—are all tinted red, and drawn in a sketchier, less refined mode than the rest of the graphic novel (figure 3.15). Paul and Marie play in the river as Paul pours gasoline on Marie’s head; the Hutu woman who murdered Marie talks to a rat; two hands draw a knife close to a man’s uniformed chest; a doctor leans over Mathilde as she gives birth; Mathilde and Jacques meet for the first time; and the lower central panels depict the newborn baby. Even the few captions on these pages are printed with a shaky, unstable lettering. Every visual mark on this page is unlike the rest of the text, emphasizing this moment’s departure from physical, temporal reality and our entrance into the realm of memories, dreams, and nightmares.
These memories are not head-on confrontations with the traumatic event, but snippets, fragments that hint at, approach, allegorize, or stand in for the actual event. Most of these panels of fragments do not make much sense until one reads the rest of the novel. The hands rising to stab the man’s chest, for example, come from a later flashback when Mathilde recalls her rape by a French soldier. Mathilde is impregnated by this rape, and in the memory here, the doctor tells her “Il est beau ce bébé, Mathilde! Tu vois, tu vas pouvoir l’aimer, même s’il est un bébé d’un viol” (38). This is the first time that Mathilde’s youngest child appears in the narrative since Rose and Jacques’ escape with him in the UN convoy. Mathilde’s loss of her child goes unmentioned in the narrative and in Mathilde’s emotions, as if blocked from her conscious mind while she focuses on saving her remaining children. With Marie’s death and Paul’s disappearance, Mathilde is at last able to give some acknowledgment to the loss of her youngest,

24 “He’s a beautiful baby, Mathilde. You see, you’ll be able to love him, even if he is the baby of a rape.” (All translations from French from Rwanda 1994 are mine.)
even if this acknowledgement is only the delayed, convoluted, and fragmented memory that returns unknowingly during her sleep.

Mathilde’s memories, returning unbidden at a moment of crisis, function thus as allegories for reclaiming and restructuring the broader historical and national memories lost to time. Just as Mathilde disjointedly remembers her past, images of which appear over her own hidden body, so too the text itself remembers (that is, re-members, re-figures, restructures) the forgotten or ignored European intervention in recent Rwandan history, and especially in the genocide itself, in its obsession with vilifying the French. The blurred visions of the traumatic memories also coincide with the text’s ambiguous representation of the landscape as redemptive and dangerous: Mathilde’s rape—allegorical, one might say, for Rwanda’s violation—at the hands of the French nevertheless result in the “beautiful baby;” and the landscape, even while protecting Mathilde, allows space for the resurfacing of these memories and visions.

While searching for Paul, Mathilde finds a child on the brink of death, arm nearly hacked off and bleeding from the head and mouth (46). She asks the child’s name, and the child responds, “amazi,” which the text translates as “de l’eau” (“water”). In this way the child, whose body is intertwined with the landscape, utters what might be a demand for water, and what simultaneously might be her name. Mathilde pours some water in her mouth, and then, crouching next to the river and the child’s silent body, prays to Nyabarongo, the river, addressing it as a god or a person: “Nyabarongo, toi qui bois le sang des hommes, dis-moi le nom de cette enfant. Rassure-moi, dis-moi que tu ne connais pas le gout de mon fils. Imana tout-puissant, faites que Paul ne connaisse pas la torture, faites qu’il meure vite, sans souffrances, ou qu’il vive sans avoir
“rien vu...” (46). Unlike *Smile Through the Tears, Rwanda 1994* makes explicit claim to the pre-colonial religion of Rwanda; Mathilde’s entreaty is not to the Judeo-Christian god but to the river and to Imana, the creator-deity of pre-colonial Rwanda. It is the land itself that has the power over life and death, safety and danger, shelter and visibility.

In this way the text tries to draw attention to the violence of the European gaze. The last sentence of Mathilde’s entreaty to the river captions a purple-hued landscape view of the river, still and quiet, save for a flock of birds rising from the bank to the left of the panel (figure 3.16).

Figure 3.16: The landscape at dusk; the violence of vision (47).

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25 “Nyabarongo, who drinks the blood of men, tell me the name of this child. Reassure me, tell me that you don’t know the taste of my son. Imana the all-powerful, make it so Paul is not tortured, make it so he dies quickly, without suffering, or so he lives without seeing anything...”

26 In contemporary Rwanda people sometimes use Imana to refer to the Christian God, but *Rwanda 1994* specifies that Imana refers here to the “dieu des Rwandais” (“the Rwandan god,” 44).
The river thus becomes the calm image of a possible savior, a link to the pre-colonized Rwanda. However, this landscape vacillates between savior and destroyer, between a space of peace and nurturing and a space of violence and disruption. Despite the calm appearance, the reader knows that this landscape conceals not only Mathilde and other victims of the genocide, but also the genocidaires themselves. Indeed, the flock of birds rising from the corner of the panel begs the question: what has disturbed these birds? What event or being has caused them to take flight?

The next panel wordlessly depicts a close-up of the bird flock taking flight, followed by a smaller panel of one bird within a rifle’s targeting eyesight. Our eye—the reader’s eye—now is complicit and situated in the same position with the hunters’ eye. And the next page (48) reveals that this is indeed the eye of a French soldier, the colonial eye, the Western eye of the tourist, the ones complicit with and even responsible for the genocide as much as the Hutus, at least according to this text. This vision of both landscape and its inhabitants, human and animal, is thus revealed to be inherently violent and simultaneously determining: the target is a literal and visual enactment of the gaze that defines, and the gaze that threatens.

Along with the inherent violence of the colonial eye, *Rwanda 1994* also exploits the violence and trauma inherent in the act of reading its own text and images. At one point, as Mathilde and her children hide in town from their pursuers, one page’s uppermost panel depicts a nighttime vista, view of the road with a couple cars near the river (figure 3.17). The following panel reveals the horror not shown in the landscape: that one of the cars drags the bloodied and bound body (“the stiff,” as they call it, “le macchabée”) of Tutsi leader Senyoni through the street (32).
Figure 3.17: The violence concealed in the expanse of landscape. The body is barely visible in the first panel behind the first car (32).

Returning to the first panel, the body appears only as a tiny black shadow or stain near the car, and it is visible only through close inspection; in fact, one only knows to look for it after reading the following panel. However this blot, this small dot of a corpse is still present on that page, even as the reader’s eye first ignores and then, a moment later, returns to it. In this way the landscape covers and nearly erases the violence, and yet the comics medium and its visual simultaneity forces the violence to resurface in that image as the reader returns to it. The act of reading *Rwanda 1994* is thus itself an act of uncovering and recovering violence.

Part of this violence of reading stems from Cécile Grenier’s own determination to atone for her postcolonial, post-genocidal guilt on behalf of France, as her demonization (perhaps rightly so) of the French feels like an ideological attempt to shock the reader into understanding the French role in the genocide. The question of the French role in the genocide is a source of
guilt for Grenier, the text’s primary author and the founder of the charity “Rwanda à la main” (“Rwanda in hand): “La question de la présence de la France au Rwanda reste délicate et encore sous embargo. Mais plusieurs enquêtes mettent certaines responsabilités au jour. Des militaires français commencent à parler et des documents sortent de leurs abris…”27 (136). Grenier’s ellipsis at the end of this sentence reflects both the uncertainties surrounding the historical narrative of France’s complicity and/or participation in the genocide and the author’s inability to articulate fully her own version of that narrative.

The inclusion of the date in the title of Rwanda 1994 reveals some of the tensions between time and trauma at work in the narrative itself. On the one hand, the use of the year marker extends the genocide to last the entire year, rather than the extremely brief 100 days of genocide that actually transpired. On the other hand, marking the year also functions as a temporal punctuation mark, confining the genocide to a specific time and, perhaps, implying that the genocide is "over," not just temporally or historically but also in terms of its traumatic legacy. That is, in relegating the Rwandan genocide to a specific moment, the title also implies it is something "over," in the past. This paradoxical containing of the genocide to a specific time and its extension of that time into something longer than its actual 100 days is one way the text itself renders its own guilt over the genocide and France's involvement therein.

Indeed despite its explicit claim against the privilege and power of the Europeans, however, Rwanda 1994 still reproduces those same structures of privilege and power in its insistence on equating Mathilde with the landscapes of Rwanda. The novel ends with Mathilde’s determination to be the nurturing mother to all who need her; Mathilde thus becomes the human

27 “The question of the French presence in Rwanda remains delicate and under embargo. But numerous inquiries bring certain responsibilities to light. Some French soldiers have begun to talk, and some documents are no longer protected…”
equivalent of the protective landscape, the redemptive mother ushering her fellow refugees home: “tous les enfants qui frappent à ma porte seront mes enfants”\textsuperscript{28} (126).

This declaration is sandwiched between two panels depicting the pastel and pastoral countryside: in the first panel, the unnamed orphaned Hutu boy who helped Mathilde sits in the foreground, presumably awaiting Mathilde’s return to Jacques’s airplane. In the final panel of the novel, the plane carrying Jacques, Mathilde, and the Hutu boy leads the crowd of Rwandan refugees back into their homeland (figure 3.18).

Regardless of all its attempts to the contrary, then, the text ultimately reiterates the privileged seeing eye of the West in its representation of the trauma of the Rwandan genocide. Mathilde is figured as the nurturing mother/land, who welcomes not only the single orphaned

\textsuperscript{28}“All the children who knock on my door will be my children.”
boy but also “tous les enfants,” including all the refugees following her. Moreover, she has had to rely on the white savior, Jacques, who after nobly rescuing her youngest son returns to search for her and whose plane also ushers the crowd of refugees back home. And finally, this last panel retreats to the perspective of the dominant gaze, distanced and privileged, above both the crowd and the plane, taking in the sweeping vista of the land in need of healing and recovery. Such an ending indicates the ways in which, despite its explicit desire to work against the colonial imaginary, *Rwanda 1994* cannot escape those same structures of power and nostalgia that so characterize the colonial gaze.

*Déogratias*

*Déogratias*, written and drawn by Belgian comics creator Jean-Philippe Stassen and first published in 2000 (translated in 2006), centers on the titular character after he finds himself swept up in the events of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. A teenaged boy, Déogratias is an ethnic Hutu, while his three objects of desire, prostitute Vedette and her two daughters Apollinaire and Bénigne, are Tutsis. Caught up in the genocidal regime, Déogratias participates in the Hutu violence against the Tutsis, including the rape and murder of the three women. Driven mad shortly thereafter, the panels depicting Déogratias’s post-genocide timeline show his quest for vengeance against those whom he views as responsible for the deaths of his friends and love interests, from the militia leader who executes his friend Augustin to the French soldier who failed to prevent the genocide. While on this murder spree, the text shows the full extent of Déogratias’s madness, as he wanders around the outskirts of Kigali begging for food and Urwagwa (Rwandan banana beer), and envisioning himself as a dog, whose enemy is the night sky that encroaches on his senses of self and space. Déogratias thus is figured, however
problematically, as both perpetrator and victim, exposing the precarious and ambiguous nature of the binaries on which the other texts so heavily rely.

Stassen’s technical mastery of both the artwork and the comics medium’s possibilities reveal the processes by which the form of the graphic novel can represent trauma in startling ways. The text flows from scenes post-genocide to scenes from before and during the genocide. These two tracks move in roughly chronological order; that is, the post-genocide scenes move chronologically, and the pre/during-genocide scenes also move chronologically. The two temporal tracks, however, cross over one another and move back and forth throughout the text. To help distinguish between these two tracks, Stassen frames the panels of the post-genocide scenes, but leaves the pre/during genocide panels unframed. Thus there is a sense in which the pre-genocide narrative remains unbounded, free of constraint, a reflection of the traumatic events that bind Déogratias’s psyche so deeply after the genocide.

This effect is a very subtle way of depicting to which temporal line a given panel belongs, even as the visual style remains virtually unchanged. Indeed, there are very few content and context markers to indicate time, especially during the transition from one time stream to another. Déogratias’s clothing is sometimes the only indicator within the panels to clue the reader in to the temporal situation: in the pre-genocide scenes, his clothing is clean, while post-genocide he wears tattered rags and has a more disheveled appearance. Time, in this novel, is therefore a looser construct, losing its rigidity in the face of the trauma and violence of the genocide and Déogratias’s participation therein.

Juvénal, the local Interahamwe (Hutu militia) leader, recruits Déogratias into his patrol. This group of men is apparently responsible for many deaths, including the rape and murder of Venetia and, a little later, Apollinaire and Bénigne as well. (If Juvénal is to be believed,
Déogratias himself raped both Vedette and Apollinaire; it is never made explicit who is directly responsible for their deaths.) Déogratias manages to leave the Interahamwe, but in doing so he encounters the horrifying pile of bodies, on top of which lie the bodies of Apollinaire and Bénigne, being eaten by dogs (figure 3.19).

Bosco, the Rwandan Patriotic Front officer, and his patrol arrive, shoot the dogs, and find Déogratias: “Another madman... All that’s left are corpses, madmen, and dogs...” (76).

Déogratias apparently relates all this to Brother Philippe after taking revenge on Bosco, Juvénal, and the Frenchman. He then charges Brother Philippe to drink the poison as well, ostensibly for learning the truth of Déogratias’s actions both during the genocide and after.

Each of the characters whom Déogratias poisons plays a role in Déogratias’s own dehumanization, and they reiterate to him his madness. Early in the text, Déogratias meets the
French ex-soldier in a café in town. The Frenchman regales Déogratias with his stories of meeting prostitutes, and then says, “A propos, Déogratias, tu te souviens de Vedette?” (7). As he says this, the panel depicts a close-up of a cockroach on the table (figure 3.20). The next panel is at table-level, facing the cockroach but looking up at the Frenchman and Déogratias, as if the reader is situated in the position of another cockroach. In the following panel, the perspective shifts to above the shoulder of the Frenchman as he says “sale bête!” and tries to squash the roach, while Déogratias says “non!” and blocks his hand, spilling the beers on the table.

Figure 3.20: Déogratias’s attempt to save the cockroach (5).

The transition between the dialogue about Vedette and the image of the cockroach recalls the Hutu racial slur against the Tutsis, a dehumanizing vision of the Tutsis as roaches and vermin. The Frenchman’s attack against this roach is a condemnation not only of the soldier’s allowing of Vedette’s murder, but of France’s complicity in the attacks on the Tutsis more broadly (though not quite as vehemently as in Rwanda 1994).

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29 “By the way, Deogratias, do you remember Venetia?” (trans. Siegel 5).
Déogratias’s thwarting of the Frenchman is a belated resistance, a belated act of saving Vedette, when, as the text reveals at the end, Déogratias actually is at least somewhat responsible for her death. However, stopping the Frenchman’s attack on the roach seems to trigger Déogratias’s madness, as in the following panel he responds to the Frenchman’s surprise with “les chiens… ils mangent les cadavres…” (7).30 Déogratias’s words, like the attack on the roach, do not make sense until the climax of the story is revealed near the end (see again figure 3.18). The belatedness of Déogratias’s attempt to save the cockroach and his ensuing failure of language refer again to the shifting temporality at play in the text, creating a sense of narrative destabilization that mimics, in some small way, the chaos of Déogratias’s experiences.

It is not until later in the text that Déogratias begins to literally morph into a beast, however. Déogratias becomes that image he saw earlier, upon first seeing the victims after fleeing Juvénal, of the dogs consuming the dead bodies of the victims, paralleling the way he consumed Vedette and her daughters (figure 3.21). His madness is thus a mirroring of the trauma of the genocide, and of Déogratias’s failure to comprehend his own role in the violence until it is too late. Significantly, when Déogratias turns in to a dog, it is not a hallucination. Déogratias transforms before the reader’s eyes from one panel to the next; his transformation is both visible and literal within the panels. The reader can see his hands and feet shift into paws, his body contract and his face elongate, and his posture move to being on all fours. Either Déogratias’s transformation is literal, not figurative or not merely symptom of his madness, or the reader is equally as mad and destabilized.

30 “The dogs... they're eating the corpses...” (5).
Déogratias’s use of landscape likewise shifts the visual emphasis away from the authoritarian gaze of the Westerner and towards a postcolonial vision. One of the dominant and recurring images in this text is of a starry night sky above a minimalist landscape. The sky is so full of stars as to feel crowded, even threatening or overbearing (figure 3.22). Apollinaire explains to Brother Philippe and his parents that the ‘primitive’, precolonial Rwandans “believed the spirits of the dead filled the underworld, where they schemed spitefully against the living; and at night they lit up the sky over Rwanda” (Siegel 44). The starry sky, therefore, is a kind of reference to the thousands of dead, including the recent victims of the genocide. The terror that this sky incites in Déogratias—”j’ai peur de la nuit,” he admits frankly—is thus a fear not only of
the night but of the dead, and particularly, a dead signified through a pre-colonial mythology (29).²⁹

This image of the sky complicates the dominating gaze of the colonial. Although distanced, the panels depicting the sky are more threatening than inviting, especially as the sky takes up the bulk of those panels. When Déogratias admits his fear of the sky, too, there is also a shift from seeing Déogratias’ words in speech bubbles, as if coming from some internal or diegetic location, to the text being outside the frame of the image. This second viewpoint removes both Déogratias and his words from the image itself, placing the reader in the position of Déogratias; we see what he sees, but his voice is disembodied, as if it cannot connect with the image before us. Therefore the text itself cannot be a part of this image of the sky, which remains separate from language and which, in its vastness, encroaches on Déogratias’s consciousness.

The graphic novel as a literary medium allows for such a destabilization of word and image, content and form. In this instance, the words and image are in fact separated, disjointed, marking a break between the two forms of representation. The sky itself comes to function like both a

²⁹ “I’m afraid of the night” (Siegel 27).
picture and a window—a terrifying and overwhelming image, and an indication of the boundary with the Real, which is ever further encroaching on Déogratias’s psyche.

Déogratias attempts to fight off this encroachment of the sky and his transformation into a dog by drinking Urwagwa (traditional banana beer), which serves several narrative and metaphorical purposes. On the one hand, Déogratias uses the beer to poison his enemies; it therefore serves a very practical purpose in the novel. However, Urwagwa is also what keeps his insanity at bay. Instead of using language to express his trauma—which he is unable to do until his “confession” at the end of the novel (and once again, only with the help of his beer)—he instead wanders the town begging for this Urwagwa. Functioning similarly to Derrida’s phærmkon, that is, as both poison and cure, the beer simultaneously staves off his complete madness, and keeps him from healing or coming to terms with his trauma: it is both inhibitor and liberator.

After receiving some beer one night, Déogratias proudly proclaims, “Hey dogs, you don’t scare me! You can laugh all you want! / My Urwagwa… I am not a dog” (figure 3.23, Siegel 49). The second half of this statement is accompanied by an image of a vast expanse of starry sky—the same sky that overwhelms Déogratias earlier, the same sky that is a representation of the Real, that “pulsing of the pre-symbolic substance in all its abhorrent vitality” (Žižek 19). Yet here he denies his identity as a dog, or as one who is responsible for his crimes. With the help of his Urwagwa, Déogratias is able to fight off the encroachment of the threatening space of the sky and remain human, although he then must also remain incapable of facing his traumatic experiences.
Urwagwa and intoxication thus function much like a dream, keeping reality at bay by prolonging a kind of “sleep” or altered state, which prevents Déogratias from fully confronting his trauma. In “Tuché and Automaton” Lacan discusses Freud’s reading of a particular dream—that of a father dreaming of his child, whose dead body in the next room is burning from a fallen candle. Lacan emphasizes the act of awakening as perhaps more important than the act of sleep, which Freud says is a two-fold response to the pleasure principle. Discussing both Freud and Lacan’s treatment of this dream, Caruth claims that “[a]wakening... is itself the site of a trauma, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another’s death” (Caruth 100).  

For Déogratias, this impossibility is two-fold: he cannot save Apollinaire and Bénigne’s lives; nor can he admit that he is (at least partially, if not totally) responsible for their deaths. Sobriety

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32 See again the earlier discussion in the introduction of this dissertation about Neil Gaiman and Sam Keith’s manipulation of comics in *Sandman* to illustrate this movement between waking and sleeping as a site of trauma.
is like the traumatic awakening, which reveals these impossibilities and allows his madness to overwhelm him.

As mentioned earlier, Urwagwa is also a carrier of poison, a means for Déogratias to eliminate those who know his crimes. The same instrument used to keep the past and its horrors from overtaking his consciousness is used to eliminate the people who would be able, theoretically, to confront Déogratias about his crimes. Moreover the poison Déogratias employs is “the product farmers use to fight parasites on cows’ hides,” a kind of allegorical condemnation of those who feed off of Rwanda and its people as parasites (Stassen 77). This actually situates Déogratias’s murders not only as acts against those who know of Déogratias’s guilt, but as revenge against all who participated in the systems of institutional racism and violence. Stassen includes scenes of rural farmers raising cows for European businessmen who reap the profits.

This dual function of Urwagwa is further complicated by Déogratias’ last (and unsuccessful) murder attempt against Brother Philippe. Brother Philippe is a Belgian priest who arrives in Rwanda just before the genocide. When he first arrives in Rwanda, Philippe is taken to a bar by Déogratias to sample Urwagwa, because “[y]ou really have to taste banana beer if you want to understand our culture” (Stassen 9). Urwagwa becomes a kind of double for Rwandan culture, to be experienced by the new and naïve Belgian presence. And it is Brother Philippe who hears Déogratias’ “(non)confession,” the only time when Déogratias is able or willing to talk about the events of the genocide. However, even here the reader remains unaware of how much Déogratias says; instead his confession is interrupted—like the rest of the novel—by flashbacks to the night of Augustin’s death.

In bringing in the Belgian missionary, Stassen moves the genocidal catastrophe into a larger framework of colonial violence, institutional racism, and perpetrator guilt. Brother Philip
has the last words of the comic, placing the agency of speech firmly within the colonial voice, rather than the African. As such Rwanda remains entrenched in a system of institutionalized and global violence, the passive space into which racist violence is written. The other major European figures are the uncouth French soldier mentioned above and the lecherous Brother-Prior Stanislas, both of whom exploit, sexually and otherwise, the Rwandans they claim to serve. These figures of the colonial legacy—one religious, the other military, but both responsible for different forms of the same cultural and racial discrimination—are so despicable as to be near caricatures of the Europeans involved in Rwanda.

Acting as a figure who is someone largely overlooked by both Rwandans and the colonial regime, Augustin encapsulates the racial dynamics at work between Rwanda and Belgium. Augustin is Twa, or “pygmy,” the third quasi-outsider race within Rwanda, and as such belongs outside the constructed Hutu-Tutsi binary. He is also the only African father figure in the text. At one point, he is with Brother Philippe, the brother’s parents, and Apollinaire at a museum of Rwandan artifacts. The cultures of Rwanda are thus exoticized and displayed for the (white) tourist’s gaze—after all, why are the parents of Brother Philippe at this museum, rather than out in Kigali, “experiencing” the current Rwandan cultural tableau?

Augustin troubles this well-ordered gaze, however, by noting the land’s resistance to conform to the white colonial vision of Rwanda as exploitable soil hiding untold riches: “Ici, nous n’avons pas d’or, pas de cuire, pas de diamants mais nous avons des blancs. Il suffit de se baisser pour ramasser l’argent qui tombe de leurs poches… Le problème, c’est précisément que nous avons à nous baisser” (47-48). Rather than defining the land as something the Europeans

33 “Here we have no gold, no copper, no diamonds, but we have whites. You just have to bend down to pick up the money falling from their pockets... The drawback, of course, is the bending down part” (Siegel 45-46).
can exploit, Augustin inverses this dynamic, transforming the whites themselves into resources for the Rwandans, with the “only drawback” to this source of wealth being the personal debasement it means to be subservient to another person.

Déogratias thus tries to undermine the colonial gaze and to provide for a space that is not pre-colonial, as in Rwanda 1994 and especially Smile Through the Tears, but decidedly postcolonial. Déogratias’ actual transformations (not hallucination), the reader’s failed vision in the face of Déogratias’s murder attempts, the parasite poison, the whites as resources, and so on, all contribute to a visual encounter that is disorienting and unstable, rather than authoritative and categorical. Even with all these manipulations, though, Déogratias cannot fully escape the problematic construction of Rwanda as inheritor of a colonial legacy. After all, Déogratias is arrested not for the murder of Juvénal or Bosco, but for the murder of the Frenchman; likewise the final words of the novel belong not to a Rwandan but to Brother Philippe.

Figure 3.24: “une créature de Dieu.” Note also Stassen’s self-inscription into the landscape in the lower left (78).
As the police take Déogratias away, one of them asks Brother Philippe: “c’était un ami à vous, ce fou?” to which Brother Philippe responds on the following page, “C’était une créature de Dieu” (79-80). Willingly or not, Déogratias is at least reinscribed into a Western religious and cultural system, in which the murder of a white man is more punishable than those of a black man, and in which the last dialogue belongs to a white man—dialogue that reduces a man to a “creature.”

Perhaps most telling of all, however, lies barely visible within the final panel (figure 3.24). After Brother Philippe’s regretful lamentation of Déogratias, the following two panels depict the sun setting behind the hotel where the characters last gathered; with the setting sun, the stars begin to reveal themselves in the sky. The final panel of the text is another vast starry night sky, a panel so immense that it overwhelms the rest of the page. There is a sense in which that threatening sky overtakes the page and the narrative, signaling perhaps the Rwandan spirits’ victory over Déogratias. However, in the lower left corner of the panel against the black background of the landscape, reads the author’s inscription: “Jean-P. Stassen. Goute d’Or. Août 2000” (80). Thus Stassen actually insinuates himself into this landscape, writing the European gaze into the landscape and undermining in part its resistant power.

**Conclusion**

The use of extended panels with broad, sweeping landscapes in all three of these works gives the sense of these being moments in which time slows down, as we pause, view the scene, take in the vista, play the awestruck tourist or Romantic painter. “Landscape… doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power” (Mitchell *Landscape* 1-2). The continuing obsession with landscape in these texts shows just how embedded notions

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34 “Friend of yours, that madman?” “He was a creature of God” (Siegel 77-78).
of colonialism remain within the conceptualization of Africa, even in such a small nation and at such a contemporary moment.

Moreover, using the landscape in this manner often underscores the traumatic reality of the genocide, whose effects cause a kind of undoing of time, leaving characters and spaces temporally adrift and causing memories and present moments to become intertwined. It is problematic, then, that the visual and temporal pause we as readers take as we view the landscape is a kind of domination over that same traumatized arena that the genocide presents. The graphic works here allow for the tensions between time, trauma, memory, and visuality to come to the fore, as the networks of the colonial, the traumatic, and the visible intersect within their panels.
Chapter 4: The Falling Man: Resisting and Resistant Visual Media in Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers

The previous chapter outlined some of the ways that the act of seeing can be negative and even violent in its tendencies towards an authoritarian, determining gaze. Building on that notion, this chapter addresses the inverse of this dynamic, examining the role of images themselves and their reception within graphic narratives of trauma. In moving to talk about Art Spiegelman’s work, this dissertation moves away from the frenzied superheroes and the fictionalized madmen of the previous chapters to individual lived experiences and the realm of autobiographical graphic memoirs. However, as we will see, this generic shift does not mean the use of the comics medium is itself any less frenetic. In the Shadow of No Towers, an oversized and unconventional work of comics centering on Spiegelman’s experiences with and reaction to the terrorist attacks on New York of September 11, 2001, is a chaotic, problematic book. It is disjointed, overworked, difficult to follow, and perhaps dissatisfying in the end, but Spiegelman’s experience cannot allow it to be otherwise, as No Towers exposes the intricate, often disavowed, bonds between instances of personal trauma and public disaster.

Although he claims throughout the text to use No Towers to “work through” his responses to 9/11, what the text actually demonstrates is Spiegelman’s deeply conflicted and complex position between individual and collective experience, a position negotiated through competing mediated images. No Towers draws together the trauma of Spiegelman’s experience during 9/11 with Holocaust postmemory, working within and against the legacy of his earlier magnum opus, Maus (1986, 1992), a comics memoir of his father’s experiences in the Polish

35 As with all the comics memoirs discussed in this dissertation, I distinguish between “Spiegelman,” the author, artist and narrator, and “Art,” the character and avatar.
ghettos and the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. In so doing, the text demonstrates the complicated network of trauma and memory within the multiple layers of visual representation in the text.

The visual elements of No Towers both create and resist the transformation of trauma into narrative. Spiegelman uses many different visual styles and “interpictoral” (like intertextual) references in a messy, nonlinear framework. Rather than pursue a conventional or linear narrative, Spiegelman creates No Towers as a way to “sort out the fragments of what I’d experienced from the media images that threatened to engulf what I actually saw” (“Sky” n. pag.). Thus the text lingers in its own fragmentation, as the pieces of Spiegelman’s memories rub against the “Master Narrative” of terror that emerged in the days, months, and years following the attacks—a narrative created with and through a variety, even an overabundance, of images. No Towers demonstrates the very ways in which those “engulfing” media images inform Spiegelman’s reactions to and understanding of the events of 9/11. Moreover, he situates these experiences in relation to his father’s experiences of the Holocaust, forcing a comparison—though not necessarily an equation—between the two events, and between direct experience and what Marianne Hirsch calls the “postmemory” of experience.

The overarching problem in No Towers, therefore, lies in the convergence of multiple traumatic moments and experiences, which results in a confounded, confusing, disorganized, nonlinear text whose very physicality makes for an uncomfortable reading experience on the level of materiality, narrative, and subject matter. Indeed, the act of reading Spiegelman’s text is itself a complicated, uneasy affair. The book is oversized, measuring the same as a tabloid newspaper spread. Unlike a newspaper, however, this book has thick cardstock “pages” (I refer to “plates” rather than “pages” in this chapter, because the text’s pagination refers to the two-
page plate rather than to the individual page; each plate was originally published individually before being collected as a single volume). Each plate is oriented so that the spine of the book runs horizontally, rather than vertically, shifting again the standard reading approach from one of right to left page turning to bottom to top. Reading No Towers requires space, patience, and adaptability.

This unorthodox presentation is a physical corollary to the thematic interventions of Spiegelman’s work. No Towers brings together multiple traumatic elements into a single, if not cohesive, work: Holocaust postmemory; Spiegelman’s immediate (as in, un-mediated) lived traumatic experience of 9/11; the secondary trauma of the US government’s co-opting of the attacks for its own agenda; the tertiary pain of the hypermediation of the attacks through the overabundance of imagery played out in television, newspapers, films, billboards, etc; and ultimately the impossible act of creating comics out of this event. The visual and the traumatic are thus intimately bound up with one another, as Spiegelman navigates both media images and his own visions and artistic creations, weaving them into a patchwork medley of visible fragments.

**Sorting the Fragments of Memory and Narrative**

In his introductory essay to No Towers, “The Sky Is Falling,” Spiegelman writes that in the aftermath of 9/11, “I was slowly sorting through my grief and putting it into boxes” (n. pag.). He frequently refers to the act of creating No Towers as an artistic response to his experiences, his trauma, and his political ire. Thus the act of “putting [his grief] into boxes” works as a metaphor not only for processing his own memories but also for creating comics, where the panels are like boxes containing the narrative of those memories. These “boxes,” however, do
little to make narrative sense of the 9/11 terrorist attacks or of Spiegelman’s own trauma; the ten plates of the work display a kind of frantic choppiness, a fragmentation of both image and memory.

This fragmentation and lack of linearity creates an almost tangible experience of temporal suspension and confusion on the page. As earlier chapters have discussed extensively, the experience of time is often suspended in representations of trauma. The first series of panels across the top of the first plate, under the heading “The New Normal,” depict three people watching a television (figure 4.1). In the first panel, a calendar behind them reads “Sept 10” and the family lolls on the couch disinterestedly, expressions blank. In the second panel, the calendar reads “Sept 11” and the family stares at the TV screen, hyperbolic shock and disbelief on their faces, with their hair standing on end. The final panel in the series includes the family, with hair still remaining standing on end, returning to their earlier catatonic states in the exact same lethargic poses from the first panel. In this final panel, the calendar has been replaced with an American flag, whose white stripes are tinted bluish from the television screen’s glow. This off-colored flag becomes its own panel, half hidden by another panel depicting the orange “glowing bones” of the second tower that permeate the text.

Figure 4.1: “The new normal” (1).

While this blue-tinted flag is undoubtedly a reference to the ubiquitous presence of the Stars and Stripes after 9/11, it has also quite literally replaced time (the calendar) in this panel. That is, in a “post-9/11” world—a world whose very verbal designation marks a temporal and conceptual
break with a “pre-9/11” world—time seems to cease to progress linearly. Instead the world of the text—Speigelman’s world—is now suspended in a kind of timelessness, where uncritical patriotism and hypermediated images reside alongside the trauma of the terrorist attacks.

Spiegelman’s response to this timelessness, to his traumatic experiences, is both to resist the co-option of 9/11 images by insisting on his own memories and their distinctly visual nature, and to overemphasize the fragmentary nature of these images. Doing so leads to a major disruption of a more traditionally linear reading experience. Hillary Chute notes that “the publication of ‘No Towers’ as a serial comic strip, appearing in print at irregular intervals, reflects the traumatic temporality Spiegelman experienced after 9/11, in which a normative, ongoing sense of time stopped or shattered; he feels that these pages represent what he calls ‘a slow-motion diary of the end of the world’” (“Temporality” 230).

The layout of the plates heightens this feeling of suspended time. Instead of a traditionally linear panel-to-panel approach (see, for example, *Maus*, or most of the other works examined in the other chapters here), the plates in *No Towers* are instead chaotic, jumbled and confusing, and they complicate the traditional approach to reading comics. For example, the first plate is a jumbled mess of panels, reading both horizontally and vertically, often without any visual cues telling the reader where to go next (figure 4.2).
Figure 4.2: Plate 1.

The digitally created image of the North Tower as it disintegrates appears in a series of five panels falling along the right-hand side of the plate, but also appear in two panels on the lower left of the plate (figure 4.3). The captions’ extensive use of ellipses and em-dashes lend even more confusion— to which elliptical phrase does a given caption belong: the phrase following, or the phrase to the right?
In terms of appearance, there are at least six different visual styles employed on this single plate: the “standard” contemporary cartoon style in the first panels; the 19th century cartoon style of a series labeled “etymological vaudeville;” the digitally altered and overly pixilated image of the Twin Towers, drawn to mimic a television screen; the orange-colored, digitally created image of the North Tower collapsing; the horror movie poster-esque, brightly colored, central panel below the fold of the page depicting a crowd running in panic; and finally, the superimposed photograph of a shoe inside that lower middle panel. This mismatch of styles coupled with the nonlinear and non sequitur page layout indicate not only Spiegelman’s experience of trauma as a kind of psychic shock and unmooring, but also his attempt to navigate visuality in the aftermath of the event’s over-mediation (a point to which I shall return later).

However, the fragmented narrative of No Towers is not limited to the visual; it finds a textual equivalent in the shifting use of perspective. The second plate and most of the following plates switch between first and third person, as if the only way for Spiegelman to narrate the
actual events of 9/11 is to distance himself from them pronominally. For example, the third plate alternates between third and first person narrative, as rows of panels alternate between depictions of Art Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly, trying to find their daughter Nadja at her high school at the foot of the Towers, and Art as a Maus mouse speaking to the reader while smoking and reflecting on the poor air quality and negative health conditions in New York City following the attacks. Running the length of the plate lie two columns bordering these two narrative arcs: the left column is the orange tower, grainy and pixilated; the right is an oversized cigarette, equally grainy; from both images rises a plume of orange smoke (figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Plate 3.
The third-person narrative series of this plate follows Art and Françoise as they arrive at Nadja’s school: “They were the only parents allowed inside. Hysteria has its uses…” (3). The captions’ insistence on the third person throughout this narrative and visual arc reflect Spiegelman’s distance from his memories, his need to retell the story of what he saw and did on 9/11 as if it occurred to someone else. Just as Art and Françoise are the exception among a crowd of parents, “the only parents allowed inside” and separated into some other space, so too does Spiegelman’s reaction to 9/11 separate him from himself. Paradoxically, this distance actually brings the text and the images closer together, as the reader always sees the avatars of Art (whether in human or mouse form) as visual objects, rather than from a first-person perspective. In this way the reader and the author mimic one another’s positions as outsiders looking in on one man’s memories. The problem with this distanced perspective is that it actually undermines to a certain extent Spiegelman’s insistence on presenting his memories as a personal narrative that resists the “Master Narrative” of terror and patriotism.

Spiegelman uses a similar distancing technique on the following plate, where a third-person narrative in two linear strips sandwiches nine scattered panels in a different style, depicting the children and onlookers at Nadja’s school and culminating in the fall of the North Tower (figure 4.5). The captions in these panels are written in script, as if in Spiegelman’s own handwriting. The artwork in these panels is less cartoony, lacking the black borders around figures and done in a more “painted” style; with their white frames inside black frames, and with the captions written directly onto the images rather than contained within boxes, this series of panels feels more like a representation of a collection of photographs than the comic book.

36 There are indeed works in which the artwork in panels is depicted from a first-person perspective, wherein the viewer occupies the supposed position of the character in the narrative. Alison Bechdel uses this technique fairly extensively, as I will discuss in the next chapter. See also the earlier discussion of Laurie Juspeczyk’s memories in Watchmen.
narrative surrounding it. These panels thus function as snapshots of Spiegelman’s experiences during his search for Nadja—the computer screen with Nadja’s information, the children crying or talking in the hallways, the tower’s collapse. In trying to capture and hold on to his own memories, Spiegelman transforms them into stylized photograph-like snapshots, mirroring both the construction of narrative from memory and the fragmented nature of memory itself. These memories become objects on a page, just as the use of third-person narrative in the captions of the other narrative arc emphasizes the object-ness of Art as a character, a figure in this fragmented narrative.

Figure 4.5: Plate 4. Note the photographic and handwritten quality of the images in the center of the plate.
Even slightly more conventional-looking plates, like plate 10, disrupt standard reading patterns. Starting as a reader of English naturally would, in the upper left, the reader then moves from left to right through the first set of panels in the first column (figure 4.6). The thick black line indicating the end of the column might indicate that the reader at this point should move to the next set of panels in the first column. The artwork in the next column, however, carries with it the same motifs—the same figure of Spiegelman holding his patriotic alarm clock—as in the first set of panels in the first column. Is the reader therefore supposed to jump across the gap between the columns and read the first set of panels in the second column? Or, as stated before, should the reader instead move from the first set of panels in the first column to the second set of panels in that same column? Either approach might actually work for the first few sets of panels, until it eventually becomes apparent that the two columns actually contain two different narratives, and therefore each column is to be read separately.

Figure 4.6: *No Towers*’s confusing layout makes for a disruptive reading experience (10).

The ambiguity and confusion here stem from Spiegelman’s revisions and manipulations of the traditional ways comics function. As Scott McCloud illustrates, the gaps between panels indicate usually that something in the narrative has happened—something the reader cannot see or read—between the first and second panel (94-98). Continuity in artwork and in text helps lead the reader to make certain conclusions about what has happened in the lacunae or the gutters between panels (cf. McCloud, chapter 4). This process of navigating the black spaces of the
gutters is what McCloud calls “closure.” In this instance, however, continuity in artwork does not indicate continuity in narrative; in a way the text resist the very act of both graphic and narrative closure.

*No Towers* intentionally disrupts conventional comics form as an expression of Spiegelman’s experiences. In fact, many of the panels do not actually have a traditional gutter of blank white space. Instead they appear on a background image, as in plate two—the shadows cast from the towers at the top right of the page fill in the spaces between panels across the rest of the page (figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: Plate 2. Note the shadows from the upper right filling in the gutters.
Thus the spaces between panels, the necessary gaps in narrative, do not exist. The text attempts to fill in (or even overfill) the blanks, so to speak, with earlier images and shadows. One might even read the use of the towers’ shadows as background as a kind of attempt to force the reader in a particular direction, toward a particular image of simultaneous disaster and absence. This obligation to return to the towers actually undoes the insistence on the towers as the moment to which we should return. Like Freud’s patient loudly proclaiming that his dream is “not about his mother,” the text’s stubborn insistence that this narrative is about the towers seems to conceal rather than reveal. Rather than allowing the reader to return on her own to that moment, as one might do within an empty gutter, the filled gutter actually leads one to wonder what the shadow itself is covering.

This manipulation of traditional comics narrative devices emphasizes again the fractured nature of Spiegelman’s personal narrative of trauma, as well as his rejection of the use of a traditional narrative to look at these events. In her article “Collateral Damage,” Marianne Hirsch maintains that “[c]omics highlight both the individual frames and the space between them, calling attention to the compulsion to transcend the frame in the act of seeing. They thus startlingly reveal the limited, obstructed vision that characterizes a historical moment ruled by trauma and censorship” (1213). The traumatized narrator cannot help but relate his story in a disjointed fashion; likewise, the comics creator shapes the structure of his text to reflect this “limited, obstructed vision” caused by the traumatic moment. Spiegelman simultaneously resists and embraces this “compulsion to transcend the frame” by disrupting the narrative flow of the pages, and by disfiguring, expanding, filling in or otherwise shifting the spaces of the gutters. The fourth plate, for example, contains practically no room for closure, no visual “rest” or pause between panels, since the gutters are filled with the Lichtenstein-esque oversized newsprint
pixels that form an image of one of the “Tower Twins,” Spiegelman’s parody of 19th-century newspaper cartoons (see again figure 4.5). This pixilated background represents both the Towers themselves and their overabundant media presence haunting the page and the narrative, making it impossible to escape the presence of the Towers at any moment, even between the narrative moments.

At other moments the text renders itself semi-invisible as it covers its own panels, indicating both Spiegelman’s insistence on a story that cannot (or should not) fully be told, and his troubled relationship with the comics medium itself. For example, as he and Françoise wait for Nadja in the school, “they couldn’t see the maelstrom outside, but they could hear the guard’s radio,” which reports in Spanish on the attack on the Pentagon of that morning: “un aeroplano acaba de estrellarse en el Pentágono!” In the following panel the guard translates the radio’s transmission (“They saying a plane just bomb into the Pentagon”), but a Mars Attacks bubblegum card covers up whatever image might have been accompanying this translation (figure 4.8).
Art and Françoise’s responses to the guard are unclear and, perhaps more significantly, invisible and silenced: one of them, presumably Art, “speaks” an exclamation point in a speech balloon, while the other (Françoise) “thinks” “Nadja?” in a thought balloon. These two image-texts symbolize real-life responses but do not signify them. They indicate to the reader that the two characters respond in some non-verbal way to the news of the Pentagon attacks, but they relegate that knowledge to the realm of the unseen and unarticulated. Mirroring the distance between Art and the attacks on Washington, this series of panels distances the reader from Art.

The Mars Attacks card depicts “Washington in Flames” and under attack from an alien flying saucer. “When I was Nadja’s age, in 1962, I loved those Mars Attacks cards published by TOPPS GUM, INC. Funny how things turn out. I worked for Topps for 20 years, from the time I finished high school till Nadja was born” (3). Spiegelman’s career as an artist and the terror attack on Washington come to a visual convergence here, through the bubblegum card and its covering up of Art and Françoise. Spiegelman visualizes the attack on Washington as a cartoon-y, alien event, despite his firsthand experience of the attack on New York, and thus he uses this card as the replacement for his own reaction to and understanding of the attack on the Pentagon.

In the panels below, Spiegelman muses, “He figured the Martians had invaded, that Paris was burning and Moscow was vaporized […] . It was hard for puny human brains to assimilate genuinely new information… and it remains just as hard now, these many months later…” (3). This last panel contains the principal’s announcement coming from the intercom: “Due to today’s unusual conditions, absolutely no students will be allowed outside for lunch” (3). The disconnect between the principal’s announcement and the events of the day parallels the disconnect between Spiegelman’s understanding of the attack on Washington and that event. In both cases, moreover, Spiegelman relies on comics and cartoons to visualize the events, but in
both cases these visualizations fall short of representation: the intercom and the bubblegum card act as intermediaries of the dissonance of that day’s events.

Another “external” image covers a panel on this lower half of the third plate. This image hides both the caption and the image of the underlying panel, creating a sense that the reader is missing an entire section of the narrative. The mouse-Spiegelman in the final row of the plate holds a protest sign that extends up into the preceding panels. It reads “NYC to Kids: Don’t Breathe!” and features an image of two young children from the 1940s or 1950s wearing massive black gas masks. This poster, which Art designed for a protest at the school after 9/11, appears as if it is layered over or covering the panel beneath it, allowing just a corner of a caption and a piece of the loudspeaker to show. In this instance, the emphasis is not on the attacks themselves interrupting and disrupting narrative and vision, as above, but rather on Spiegelman’s own need for artistic and political expression. The poster, he explains, was not used at the air-quality protest at the school, because “some parents protested my poster for being too shrill” (3). In this instance, Spiegelman’s own creation gets in the way of his narrative, covering up a panel, keeping the reader at a distance, echoing the way that Spiegelman’s outspoken political views are met with reluctance in the public arena after 9/11. No Towers thus illustrates the complicated ways in which personal narrative and memory work with and against one another, drawing the reader and the narrator together while simultaneously insisting on their distance from both the text and one another.

Memory and Image Construction

Comics critic Douglas Wolk describes No Towers as “a god-awful mess”: “Its ten tabloid-sized pages pastiche the iconography and style of early-twentieth-century comic strips as
a response to the fall of the World Trade Center, but Spiegelman’s drawing is overworked and overcomputerized, and there’s no sense of drive or closure to it—it just kind of ends after a while” (346). Part of the disjointedness so disliked by Wolk comes from Spiegelman’s attempt to reject absolutely the images of 9/11 that pervade the mainstream media and are appropriated by the government and the media to serve their own purposes. As he writes in the introduction, “I [Spiegelman] had anticipated that the shadows of the towers might fade while I was slowly sorting through my grief and putting it into boxes. I hadn’t anticipated that the hijackings of September 11 would themselves be hijacked by the Bush cabal that reduced it all to a recruitment poster.”

Hirsch endorses Spiegelman’s view of the widespread photographs—Spiegelman’s “recruitment posters”—from 9/11, saying: “In the work of cultural memory, their [photographs’] multiplicity may be overwhelming, and thus the archive of atrocity photos is quickly limited to just a few emblematic images repeated over and over. In their iconicity and repetition, they may lose their power to wound” (1212). The well-known images of 9/11—the burning World Trade Center towers with smoke billowing from their wounds—have begun to lose their power, according to both Hirsch and Spiegelman, due to their prevalence in the mainstream media and in most other representations of the attacks since.

Spiegelman therefore tries to actively work against such images in his work; his trauma will not allow him to accept the proliferated images and the desensitization they provoke. His insistence on other, more marginal images also tries to place emphasis on the person rather than the public sphere. Moreover, this insistence also indicates Spiegelman’s attempts to distance himself from the Bush administration and its appropriation of those images for its own political agenda. Instead, Spiegelman creates and obsesses over a new image—the disintegrating orange
tower—that stands for his personal experience at Ground Zero (figure 4.9). He writes: “The pivotal image from my 9/11 morning—one that didn’t get photographed or videotaped into public memory but still remains burned onto the inside of my eyelids several years later—was the image of the looming north tower’s glowing bones just before it vaporized” (“Sky”). That this particular representation of the Twin Towers was not captured by photography or video camera reinforces the personal nature of this image for Spiegelman. It is what he saw, personally, not what was presented to him through the media, and his explicit, adamant claim to this image serves, at least superficially, to reclaim 9/11 not as a national disaster, but as local and personal.

Figure 4.9: Detail of the orange tower that repeats throughout the text (1).

The repetition of the image of the glowing orange tower indicates the ways in which this image continues to haunt Spiegelman. It is a marker of that which he cannot escape and yet cannot fully express. That the tower is present on each page is a kind of repetition that serves to further emphasize Spiegelman’s trauma. Furthermore, in insisting upon this image, Spiegelman also insists upon the moment of trauma itself, on the instant “the world ended” rather than on whatever happened before or after the attacks (1). In fact, Spiegelman himself defines his own trauma: “I insist the sky is falling, they roll their eyes and tell me it’s only my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder… That’s when Time stands still at the moment of trauma…which strikes me as a
totally reasonable response to current events!” (2). The representation of the orange tower indicates precisely “Time stand[ing] still at the moment of trauma;” it freezes one instant—literally mid-eruption—and repeats it, so that the instant becomes fixed and repeated, rather than a fluid movement forward in time. In addition, as Karen Espiritu writes, “the ‘obsessive’ labor involved in creating a graphic novel parallels the harrowing interminability not only of grief itself, but also of attempting to ‘master’ or understand—though never completely—a particularly traumatic experience” (182). In obsessively recreating this image, Spiegelman is attempting to work through his trauma, but the repetition of the image also indicates the “interminability” of such work.

Katalin Orbán interprets the repetition of the orange tower as a representation not only of trauma, but of the nearly unrepresentable sublime:

This oversize and at times fragmented image shows the tower at a particular moment of lightness that Spiegelman tries to reproduce visually in an admittedly manic and obsessive way: at the moment when the tower is poised on the border of material being and abstract nothingness, glowing and almost floating translucently before collapsing into itself—an image Spiegelman did see and found “awesome.” (81)

The orange tower appears at least twenty-seven times across all ten plates, echoing Spiegelman’s compulsive attitude toward this image.

Spiegelman’s creation of this orange tower speaks to the visual nature of memory in this text; Spiegelman relies on the use of images to resist the co-option of other images. The orange “glowing bones” of the tower come to stand for Spiegelman’s personal memory, his own experiences, to which he clings desperately in the face of the mainstream media barrage and the US government’s co-option of the disaster for its own ends. The image of the disintegrating
tower that so disturbs Spiegelman haunts also his work; one can find the digital representation of
the tower’s glowing bones in each of the ten plates that comprise No Towers. In emphasizing this
image—one not captured by camera, nor appropriated by mainstream media—Spiegelman
actively rejects the now-iconic images of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Whether or not this tower
actually disintegrated in the manner Spiegelman depicts is a moot point, as Orbán argues: “the
issue is not whether the visual representation of the subject can be appropriate and authentic at
all, but rather whether there can be a visual alternative to the infinitely light and repeatable
mediatized images, imitating overly familiar film scenes and intimating presence as a convention
of genre” (72-73).

For Spiegelman, the “alternative to the infinitely light and repeatable mediatized images”
is the image he creates of the orange tower; he “came close to capturing the vision of
disintegration digitally on [his] computer” (“Sky”). The orange tower is thus admittedly a
construct, without the presumed authority of a recorded or documented image, like those
proliferated in the mainstream media. Instead the image is intensely personal, one that reflects
Spiegelman’s position in relation to the collapse of the Twin Towers, his own traumatic
experience.

**Media Images and Mediated Terror**

Despite Spiegelman’s obsession with his own created image of the “glowing bones” of
the Towers, the profuse media images that Spiegelman tries to resist also appear throughout the
text. Plate 10, for example, is organized into two different columns of panels. These columns are
outlined in black; one has a spire extending up into the white border of the page (figure 4.10). A
proportionally small plane flies between them, just entering the black border of the right-hand
column. The layout of the page here very deliberately corresponds to the Twin Towers, and the inclusion of the small plane echoes those very images against which Spiegelman acts. In spite of his insistence otherwise, Spiegelman is haunted not only by the image of the disintegrating orange tower, but by those now-iconic media images that, to quote Hirsch again, lose “their power to wound.”
Early in the work Spiegelman describes his reaction to the now-iconic media images of the burning towers:

Those crumbling towers burned their way into every brain, but I live on the outskirts of Ground Zero and first saw it all live—unmediated. Maybe it’s just a question of scale. Even on a large TV, the towers aren’t much bigger than, say Dan Rather’s head…. Logos, on the other hand, look enormous on television; it’s a medium almost as well suited as comics for dealing in abstractions. (1)

Spiegelman thus argues that the images of the Twin Towers have become smaller, less impressive, and less powerful through their overexposure on television (they are now the same size as Dan Rather’s head, for example). Moreover, most people in the United States and elsewhere experienced the 9/11 attacks through these mediated images. “Mediated” here has a double sense—the images reach us indirectly, through the television, newspapers or the Internet; and they are images appropriated by the media (the mainstream media, at least). In the first panel in this series, Spiegelman presents a pixilated image of the Twin Towers billowing smoke (see plate 1), as if to reinforce this double mediation of images like this.

Using these hypermediated images might also be one way for Spiegelman again to claim to be moving past his trauma in the very act of creating these comics, as he maintains in the introduction. After all, as Patrick Bray shows, the media images of 9/11 also freeze and repeat the trauma of that day:

These mass-distributed images, broadcast the world over at the speed of light, managed to shock and awe while the only information they transmitted was the continual disappearance of the Twin Towers. The towers were hit, fell, and reappeared in an eternal
The image of the Twin Towers as icons of world capitalism were never more present than after their physical destruction. (4)

As images, then, of both disaster and the conservative capitalist approach he attacks so vigorously, it is little wonder that Spiegelman might explicitly define his own work in opposition to these images.

Even so, various versions of these iconic images appear in four panels in the first two plates alone; the mainstream images penetrate Spiegelman’s work even as he rails against them. Perhaps, then, the final panels of the text indicate not only some kind of personal or psychological response in Spiegelman, but also his eventual surrender to the imposition of mainstream images. On the same page, several panels show Spiegelman holding a kitschy green clock depicting an eagle hovering over the Twin Towers, with a policeman and a fireman standing at their base (figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11: “on 9/12 the clock began to tick again” (10).
In two later panels, the towers become sticks of dynamite, which then blow up in the narrator’s face. The text accompanying these images reads, “Still, even anxious New Yorkers eventually run out of adrenaline and—BOOM! …You go back to thinking that you might live forever after all!” (10). Spiegelman thus appears to be struggling between remembering the attacks of 9/11 as he would like to remember them (the orange tower), and acknowledging the fact that the iconic images in the mainstream media construct his memories and his relationship to the events just as much as his personal vision.

Indeed, as Bray points out, the orange tower that Spiegelman insists is his personal traumatic vision of 9/11 is also the “overworked and overcomputerized” creation so disliked by Wolk:

[The tower] calls attention to itself as visually different from the surrounding hand-drawn comics. At the same time, within the image itself, its own status as representation of lived memory is undermined by the exaggerated size of its pixels, which guarantee the readability of the image’s technical origin. The fleeting memory of the moment just before the collapse of the north tower, a memory threatened by the devastating force of media images, can only be represented by an image that exposes the danger of vision machines. The computerized illustration offers a vision of disintegration (of the tower and of memory), which itself disintegrates into pixels. (Bray 15)

Thus both the mass media images and the personal images offer a doubled disintegration of the towers: once as the moment of the attack fixed in time, and once through the pixilation of the images themselves, indicating a disintegration (and dis-integration) of those images as representations of the event. In this way, the tension between the public and personal images of
the disaster becomes blurred, causing the individual and collective experiences of 9/11 to come into contact with one another.

Perhaps the most problematic of these over-mediated images occurs on the sixth plate, in a panel that runs the entire length of the plate. This panel depicts what the reader recognizes as the “glowing bones” of the North Tower, the image discussed above, but here its color palette is muted (figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12: the falling man (6).
The tower appears brown instead of orange, set against a slate gray background. As the reader moves down this panel, we see Art’s avatar tumbling along its length, as if he is falling out of the tower. Spiegelman here conflates memory with a kind of haunting, drawing parallels between his own personal experiences and the images he did not see: “He is haunted now by the images he didn’t witness… images of people tumbling to the streets below… especially one man (according to a neighbor) who executed a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act” (6).

The “falling man” image is perhaps one of the most controversial images coming from the days immediately following 9/11. One image in particular, taken by photographer Richard Drew, juxtaposes a man who looks almost vertically suspended in air against the vertical lines of one of the towers behind him (figure 4.13).

![Figure 4.13: Richard Drew’s “Falling Man.”](image)

According to Tom Junod’s 2003 article in Esquire magazine, this photograph appeared in numerous newspapers around the country on one day, and never appeared again, due mostly to public outrage: “In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo—the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes” (n. pag.). Spiegelman’s inclusion of himself as the falling man points to an anxiety over co-opting this image and over becoming
this image. Even the muted brown of Spiegelman’s tower mimics the coloring of Drew’s photograph. That is, in a link between “falling man” and “sky is falling”—the title of his introductory essay and a line he repeats throughout the ten plates of No Towers, Spiegelman worries about his own work becoming like those very images he despises and by which he finds himself simultaneously trapped.

Moreover, his own memory of the orange bones of the North Tower is here muted—both literally, in the color palette, and figuratively, in its position as background—and layered underneath the haunting image of what Spiegelman never saw himself. One of the central crises of the text, then, is not the exclusive encroachment of horrifying yet overabundant, desensitizing images, but the battle for memory itself, its visibility in tension with the imagined but invisible—paradoxically rendered visible in Spiegelman’s own work—narratives of catastrophe. Indeed, the image of the “Falling Man,” particularly Drew’s photograph, actually attests to the mutability of images, their fallibility, their constructedness—that is, the ways in which they undermine themselves in the confrontation between fixity and fluidity.  

Post Maus, Postmemory

No Towers situates Spiegelman’s individual experiences among larger public and collective experiences not only of the same event, but also of the transgenerational trauma of the Holocaust. The mouse icon from Maus appears in six of the ten plates, indicating both the convergence of Spiegelman’s Holocaust postmemory and his primary experience of 9/11, and Maus’s enduring legacy and even inescapability. The mouse imagery first appears as early as the second plate, not coincidentally alongside a brief shift from first to third person narration in the

37 For a more detailed analysis of photography’s subjective qualities, see chapter 4.
captions, where Spiegelman muses, “Equally terrorized by al-Qaeda and by his own government…. Our Hero looks over some ancient comics pages instead of working. He dozes off and relives his ringside seat to that day’s disaster yet again, trying to figure what he actually saw…” (2). Art, wearing a mouse mask, sits slumped over a table, with a comics sheet dangling from his hand, as caricatures of a terrorist and an American politician (looking somewhat like George Bush, with a dash of Ronald Reagan) leer over him from either side (figure 4.14). The *Maus* reference brings this moment into a complicated network of perceived victimization, as the lethargic and passive Art looks as if he has given up under the doubled weight of this “equal terrorism,” the convergence of two historical traumas (9/11 and the Holocaust), and the doubled legacy of *Maus* and early comics.

Figure 4.14: “issues of self-representation” (2).
Alongs
de this first image of the artist-as-mouse is a vertical series of panels, in which Spiegelman openly wonders about “issues of self-representation” as he looks in a mirror, and which culminates in the figure of the smoking Art-mouse from Maus: “I was clean-shaven before Sept. 11. I grew a beard while Afghans were shaving theirs off. But after some ‘bad reviews’ I shaved it off again. Issues of self-representation have left me slack-jawed!” (2). As Art shifts from bare-faced to bearded then back to clean-shaven and ultimately to mouse, the text reveals the repeated intrusion of the Holocaust in Spiegelman’s contemporary moment. Unable to decide on how to represent himself both within and without the text, Spiegelman ultimately falls back on the mouse—an avatar and uneasy metaphor of the victim.

Using the Maus iconography creates a kind of transgenerational victimhood in which Art’s own trauma comes into contact with the legacy of his father’s trauma, and with the “postmemorial,” intergenerational trauma of living under the Holocaust’s shadow as the child of a survivor. That is, individual experiences—Spiegelman’s experiences—rub up against and try to find their places within a larger social and historical network. Yet the particular influence of the Holocaust on this narrative points to the problematic notion that the Holocaust is often considered the trauma par excellence of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the standard against which other catastrophes are measured. However, Spiegelman’s references to the Holocaust are less in terms of defining 9/11 in relation to the concentration camps themselves—though he does perform that connection to a certain extent—and more in terms of navigating the interstices of individual, familial, and social networks of trauma and catastrophe that converge in this particular image.

One way this conflation between the historical and the individual occurs through the motif of the cigarette. In well over half the panels in which Spiegelman appears, he is smoking a
cigarette, and this addiction takes a central role in the third plate, in which the smoke from the cigarette is linked with both Auschwitz and Manhattan. On that page, a cigarette runs the entire length of the right side of the plate, and mirrors the orange tower running the length of the left side (see again figure 4.4). At the top of both of these images, orange smoke curls from the objects (cigarette and tower). Thus a visual equation is made between the public attacks and the individual addiction (though choice) of the narrator. This equation is furthered near the end of the page, when Spiegelman laments the New York air quality: “I’m not even sure I’ll live long enough for cigarettes to kill me,” he states fatalistically as the smoke from his cigarette fills the panel.

Near the top of the page, Spiegelman appears in Maus form, saying “I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like…. The closest he got was telling me it was ‘indescribable.’” Spiegelman then “pauses” for a panel to smoke his cigarette, and then looks out to the reader in the following panel, saying, “That’s exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after Sept. 11!” (3). The Holocaust and 9/11 are brought together in extra-textual sensory ways at this moment in No Towers, as Versluys notes, with the smell of the air during both catastrophes mingling in the cigarette smoke-filled air above Art’s head (figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15: Art smokes while talking about smoking (3).
This caption also pulls the Holocaust and 9/11 into the same zone of contact precisely through their *unrepresentability*; it is not that the smoke from the camps and the smoke from the Towers smell alike, but that they are both “indescribable,” outside of representation and language. Visually, moreover, these panels bring together multiple points in the past, as the *Maus*-mouse pulls both the Holocaust and Spiegelman’s earlier work into the present, while filling the panels with the smoke from his cigarette. With the smoke and ash of 9/11 mingling with the smoke of Auschwitz and the smoke of Spiegelman’s cigarettes, the text seems to imply that Spiegelman is in fact inhaling the smoky remnants of historical moments themselves—and that any one of those moments or choices might prove fatal.

The “private” act of smoking cigarettes combining with the “public” smoke of the Holocaust and 9/11 thus ties Spiegelman’s precarious position within both private and public spheres with his familial and Jewish heritage. In fact, in the introduction he notes, “In those first few days after 9/11 I got lost constructing conspiracy theories about my government’s complicity in what had happened […] Only when I heard paranoid Arab Americans blaming it all on the Jews did I reel myself back in.” Indeed, the act of publishing *No Towers* in the Jewish newspaper *Forward* is labeled as a “Right of Return” in that same essay—”it’s ok, you’re Jewish,” the editor says when Spiegelman warns the series may not be explicitly concerned with Jewishness. The tenuous position as both victim and as “special interest” coincides with Spiegelman’s similarly precarious position between survivor and only peripheral survivor—as some critics point out, he was not actually *in* the towers—and between individual and collective experience.

This tension between the personal and the public is further complicated in Spiegelman’s inclusion of visual rhetoric from *Maus*, the autobiographical comics masterpiece of Holocaust postmemory for which he is best known. Spiegelman’s father’s experiences in the concentration
camps during WWII inform Spiegelman’s own understanding and interpretation of his psychological responses to the fall of the towers. Indeed, Spiegelman makes the connection explicit from the very beginning, citing his parents’ advice to always keep a suitcase packed in case a disaster strikes in the opening paragraph of the introduction. *No Towers* thus accents the circulation of traumatic events in terms of the familial and the individual coming up against and inside the larger historical context.

Interwoven with this troubled navigation of traumas is a meditation on Spiegelman’s “issue of self-representation” in terms of representing himself as more than the creator of *Maus*—which is in and of itself a definition in terms of *Maus*. As I discussed, Spiegelman’s self-representation and his conflation of the personal with the historical are not a “working through” of trauma itself, so much as a labor of reclaiming that trauma as both personal and historical. Kristiaan Versluys calls *No Towers* “a narrative that serves to reintroduce trauma into a new network of signification without normalizing or naturalizing the event,” an apt description that might include collective and individual aspects (980). This network, however, is tightly bound to Spiegelman’s position vis-à-vis the medium of comics and its potential for reproducing those very mechanisms against which he struggles.

In the opening series of panels in the second plate, Spiegelman’s avatar addresses the reader directly as he laments his “post-traumatic stress disorder” while an eagle wearing an Uncle Sam hat hangs from Art’s neck (figure 4.16). The first panel in this series is a standard, flat panel, but the following panels shift or rotate to reveal a three-dimensional aspect, eventually themselves forming an image of the Twin Towers, complete with fire streaming from the top of the North Tower in a visual echo of the iconic, overly circulated images of the disaster in the media. More significantly, however, the transformation of the actual panels of the narrative into
the Towers creates a sense in which the act of creating comics, for Spiegelman, is linked with and a product of disaster; creating comics and narrating the experience actually fixes the moment of trauma as such. Moreover, as apparently three-dimensional objects and not flat two-dimensional panels, the shifting frames themselves trap Spiegelman inside both the comic and the tower. Just as he feels trapped by 9/11, and by its cooption by the Bush administration, so does it seem comics themselves trap Spiegelman.

That comics as a medium here visually ensnares Spiegelman echoes his inability to escape the artistic and historical legacy of *Maus*—that is, not only the legacy of the Holocaust as postmemory, but also the legacy of a groundbreaking, Pulitzer-winning work, and the legacy of a medium so frequently sensational and sensorial. As the panels on plate two shift from panels to towers, Spiegelman displays his discomfort with the idea that this form is becoming as overdone as the media images he tries to resist. There is thus a twofold concern with the possible disaster of creative response, and with artistic creation out of disaster.

The text itself, then, is a conflation of public and private, despite Spiegelman’s continued verbal claims that he rejects the public and dominant narrative of 9/11. The inescapable comparisons with *Maus* and the very fact of the text’s initial serial publication in international presses attest to Spiegelman’s involvement—reticent or not—in the public arena. While clinging
almost desperately to his personal vision and experiences, Spiegelman’s text nonetheless demands he situate those experiences in conversation with the larger national and historical framework of the catastrophe. *No Towers* itself thus presents comics as a means of survival in a world that demands both personal and public responses. Mixing text and image, presence and absence, it is the perfect medium for also expressing the tensions between subject positions. In the introduction, Spiegelman writes that “the unstated epiphany that underlies all the pages is only implied: I made a vow that morning to return to making comix full-time despite the fact that comix can be so damn labor intensive that one has to assume that one will live forever to make them.” While it does appear to trap Spiegelman, this is a trap consciously chosen as a means to reclaim his experiences and as a way of remaining in the in-between space. The very act of creating *No Towers*, then, becomes an act of survival, of both “sorting out” and remaining fragmented, of remaining invisible and simultaneously of rendering visible.
Chapter 5: The Photograph Looks Back: Agency, Vision, and Loss in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*

While one of Art Spiegelman’s main concerns lies in the ways others use the images of tragedy and disaster for their own agenda, this chapter argues that the power of images in and of themselves lies at the heart of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Bechdel’s graphic memoir is an intricately structured narrative examining her relationship with her closeted gay, manic, obsessive father, Bruce. Bechdel’s first autobiographical long-form work grapples with profound issues of gender, sexuality, memory, and family in intertwining, convoluted ways. *Fun Home* nonlinearly narrates Bechdel’s childhood and her relationship with her father, who took up the family mortuary business after his father (the title comes from the family’s macabre nickname for the Bechdel Funeral Home). Drawn mostly in a heavy-lined, cartoonish style in black and white and lightly colored with a grey-green wash, *Fun Home*’s sparse appearance belies the intricacies of the visual and textual narrative. The text weaves together references to literature, art, and historical events with the intensely personal and private stories of Bruce, Alison, and their respective sexualities.

When Alison was nineteen, Bruce was hit by a truck; Bechdel insists this act was a suicide, although others in *Fun Home* call it an accident. Bruce Bechdel’s death occurs just a short while after Alison comes out as lesbian to her parents, an event somewhat eclipsed by the ensuing revelation that Bruce had a series of gay affairs. His death thus ensures that Alison can never have the chance to fully engage with him about their shared aspects of identity; Bruce’s past and his death remain mysteries around which *Fun Home* circles. Bechdel’s investigation

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38 As with the other graphic memoirs studied in this dissertation, I use “Bechdel” to refer to the author/artist, and “Alison” to refer to the character/narrator within the text.
into Bruce’s life and death illustrates the fluid, shifting nature of memory, as the past takes on new meaning with each new discovery. This kind of “retroactive memory,” that is, changes the way that Alison Bechdel remembers certain moments from her past, like family vacations, once her father’s double life comes to light. The prolonged suffering under which both she and Bruce lived as a result of this double life, and Bruce’s unending attempts to hide or quell his homosexuality, also changes meaning as Alison looks back on her life often with something more like compassion than accusation. *Fun Home*’s relationship to images is also a relationship to memory, loss, and suffering, as the past retroactively takes on new emotions and new forms through the now adult Bechdel’s perspective.

In tracing Bruce’s and Alison’s personal and familial histories, Bechdel relies heavily on an archive of memorabilia redrawn by hand: diary entries, personal letters, newspaper clippings, and, perhaps most significantly, family photographs. Layered along with these objects and her personal memories are Bechdel’s intertextual references, retellings of Bruce’s childhood, and Alison’s own journey of identity formation through childhood and adolescence into young adulthood. Bechdel weaves together these many formative threads of her past to create a cohesive narrative not only of her father’s life but also of her own development as a subject; *Fun Home* is equally concerned with Bruce’s life and relationship with Alison, as it is with Alison’s own coming-of-age and her development of gendered and sexual identities.

In this chapter I argue that *Fun Home*’s anxiety over who looks, who is seen, and how much is available to sight reflects a larger problem in the comics medium itself, of the agency and power of images with and against text. Pictures and words both act as agents on the audience, as W. J. T. Mitchell writes in *What Do Pictures Want?*: “Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the ‘sign,’ or to
discourse.” (47). *Fun Home* concretizes the “complex field of visual reciprocity” and its ability to constitute social relations, particularly, in this case, through the relationship between memory and image (Mitchell *What Do Pictures Want* 47).

Memory itself therefore becomes an unstable category of experience, as Bechdel’s visual representations of her past function as Proustian re-visittings through different lenses. Bechdel’s memory, aided by the archival evidence she presents, thus continually shifts and re-imagines itself, presenting a zone of contact between self and other, visible and hidden. Obscured or partial vision in both the structure and content of the panels, as well as the emphasis on redrawn archival elements, thus play an essential role in developing the text’s anxiety about who looks, and who is the object of the gaze— an anxiety closely linked not only with photography and memory, but also with the power and agency located within images themselves.

**Agency In and Through Images**

In her book *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute defines what she terms the “idiom of witness” in graphic memoirs as “a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form” (3). Jennifer Lemberg, too, maintains that *Fun Home* “makes a strong and explicit claim for the power of graphic narrative as witness” (129). *Fun Home*’s fundamental anxiety about the visual and the visible, however, forces us to ask what happens when this “idiom of witness” becomes mutable, partially hidden, or withheld. The verbal and visual modes in *Fun Home* each offer only a partial representation of Alison’s memories and experiences, in part due to the complex nature of Bruce and Alison’s processes of identity formation.
From the beginning of the text, Alison and Bruce both struggle with a surface appearance at odds with what is “underneath.” For Bruce, a closeted gay man, this anxiety is almost tangible, as he obsessively restores the Gothic-style family house. In the first chapter, Bechdel enumerates the ways in which her father’s fixation with the ornate and ornamental reflects the same artificial covering-over of his secret desires: “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (16). Bechdel, herself openly gay since age 19, appears opposed to her father’s aesthetic taste as well as his affinity for appearing impeccable. However, while working against this artifice in her work, she also explores moments in which Alison’s exterior appearance and demeanor contrast with her interior wishes, desires, and emotions.

Yet Alison often appears to be Bruce’s “inversion,” as Bechdel herself notes: “While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him… he was attempting to express something feminine through me” (98). The two characters acknowledge the “open secret” of the other’s desires, even while themselves struggling to maintain the illusion of another desire under the other’s gaze. Even the expression of these desires is inverted: while Bruce tries to keep his homosexuality a secret, Alison wants to express that desire; while Alison wants to reveal her desires but feels she should not under the gaze of the other, Bruce wants to conceal his own desires from that gaze, but ultimately cannot. Fun Home continually pivots around the anxiety of who is looking, who is being looked at, and what is shown to or by both parties: what might one discover if one looks hard enough? The act of looking itself becomes a menace to the established public identities of Bruce and Alison.

The act of looking is bound up with desire, especially in Fun Home. In one scene, for example, Bruce and Alison both look at a magazine ad, occupying what Bechdel calls “a slender

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39 See also the above chapters on Batman and Watchmen.
demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But [...] the objects of our desire were quite different” (99). Accompanying these captions, we first see Alison reading a copy of Esquire magazine while Bruce takes a book off the shelf behind her (and a humorously placed copy of Kenneth Clark’s The Nude rests just below a phallic obelisk on the lower shelves) (figure 5.1). The following panel, in a kind of cinematic shot-reverse shot, shows the magazine ad as if the reader is now in Alison’s position, with her hand holding the lower corner of the magazine. The ad is of a male model, torso bared underneath an unbuttoned suit jacket, vest, and shirt, with a woman’s hand caressing—or undressing—his chest. The final panel is another cinematic move, this time zooming out, so that the reader now positioned above Bruce’s shoulder and we see him, in turn, looking over Alison’s shoulder at the magazine.

Figure 5.1: “our shared reverence for masculine beauty” (99).
Bruce and Alison’s actual conversation focuses on the suit, although the aesthetic pleasure of the man himself is the focus of both the advertisement and the gaze of Bruce and Alison. In this kind of mis-en-abyme of looking, Alison’s and Bruce’s desires are manifest. Yet as Bechdel notes, these desires enacted within the gaze are different: while Bruce wants to have the object (the man) in the image, Alison wants to be the object. Neither Bruce nor Alison verbalizes their underlying desire; instead, *Fun Home* relies on the reader’s own involvement in this exchange of looking in order to reveal what is hidden.

In the very act of reading *Fun Home*, then, the reader is pulled into this complex dynamic by engaging in the act of looking. Valerie Rohy notes, “Even its [the archive’s] aesthetic is evidentiary: objects are displayed in their panels like museum exhibits under vitrines” (342). The logical, if extreme, extension of this claim is that *all* the panels in *Fun Home* act as “museum vitrines,” displaying their content to the eyes of the visitor-reader. The physical objects, spaces, and characters that Bechdel draws are indeed framed and displayed for our viewing pleasure, as if they are museum exhibits or even evidence entered in a courtroom; however, these objects are always only partially displayed, obscured not only through their framed and flat twodimensionality, but through Bechdel’s own interpretation.

The museum metaphor, however, fails to take into account the agency within the images themselves. Consider Zizek’s reading of the Bates’ house in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* as the terrifying object that looks back at the subject (*Looking Awry* 117-119). In the same way, at one point the Bechdel home looks back at Bruce, as he carries a post in a manner similar to Jesus carrying a cross (figure 5.2). It is as if the house is saying, “I am looking back at you, Bruce; if you let the exterior (the house) slip, I will betray your secrets.” If objects—both inanimate and human—can look back, they can also reveal the subject’s own fears and imperfections, the
fractures in the subject’s smooth exterior appearance of a unified identity. The image of the house acts upon both Bruce and the reader, beckoning both to look and to be looked at. This active imaging resists the presumed passivity of images as evidence underneath the museum glass, and instead calls our attention to the ways that images create, act, and enter into networks of vision and memory.

Figure 5.2: the house looks back.

Photographic “Proof”

The power of images as agents is manifest most prominently in the redrawn photographs, particularly the central photograph of the text: Roy’s centerfold. As I have written elsewhere,40 photography enjoys a peculiar position among the arts; both impartial and subjective, it has become a journalistic necessity and an artistic mode of expression. Photographs can show the existence of a specific physical object in a particular temporal moment, yet the existence recorded on film (or, today, digitally) is not necessarily a perfect reflection of “reality” as such. Though usually proof that something was there in front of the camera lens to be photographed in

40Jennifer Anderson Bliss, “Writing as Flat as a Photograph.”
the first place, the photograph also distorts the relationship between object, time and place, creating a reference to and reflection of reality, but not reality itself.

Concerned with the uncanny feelings associated with viewing photographs and with being photographed, Roland Barthes claims, “[t]he Photograph… represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter” (14). The conflation between life and death, and between subject and object, creates the feelings of the unheimlich that penetrate both the viewer and the photographed object. The reality of the photographed object corresponds to an emotional response in the viewer provoked precisely by the recognition of the objectified and distanced past, which photographs attempt to render static and enduring. Photographs signal the past and its reality, while simultaneously drawing our attention to our exclusion from that photographed moment.

The redrawn archive in Fun Home allows for Bechdel to represent a Proustian understanding of the past, because the temporal fracturing produced by the photographs simultaneously allows for a cohesive narrative. The cross-hatching style that Bechdel uses to draw the photographs as simultaneously abstract and realistic is also a carefully constructed visual ambiguity onto which Bechdel writes her own narrative. Drawn in a more abstract yet paradoxically more “realistic” style than the overt cartoon of the main narrative, the photographs and other realia of the redrawn archive speak across time and space to their role in Alison’s life and in Bechdel’s reimagining or reinterpretation of her past.

At the center of the text lies a photograph Alison found after her father’s death in a box of family photographs: “It’s low-contrast and out of focus. But the subject is clearly our yardwork assistant / babysitter, Roy. It appears to have been taken on a vacation when I was eight, a trip on
which Roy accompanied my father, my brothers, and me to the Jersey shore while my mother visited her old roommate in New York City” (100). In an uncanny echo of a Wyeth or a Collier Schorr portrait, Roy lies half-naked on his back on a hotel bed, facing the ceiling, with his hips turned toward the camera, and the picture (or at least Bechdel’s redrawing of it) is so blurry that Roy’s face lacks sharp detail (figure 5.3). The photograph and Alison’s oversized hand holding it are the only images on the page; behind them, a washed background color bleeds to the edge of the page, so that these dark pages are visible as a line down the center of the closed book edge.

Figure 5.3: the centerfold (100-101).

In an interview with Chute, Bechdel reveals:
In fact the whole story was spawned by [this snapshot of Roy]…It was a stunning
glimpse into my father’s hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our
regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because
I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I
shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn’t start working on the book
then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It’s literally the core of the
book, the centerfold. (Chute, “An Interview with Alison Bechdel” 1005-1006)

This “posthumous bond” serves as the catalyst for *Fun Home*, which presents Bruce and Alison
as simultaneously opposing and converging force. While critics like Anne Cvetkovich argue that
“one of the biggest representational challenges for Bechdel is not so much the mystery of her
father’s suicide as the secret of his sexual attraction to young boys and the messy question of his
sexual identity,” *Fun Home* actually explores the mysteries of Bruce’s death and sexuality as
fundamentally intertwined (Cvetkovich 114). Rather than the “unsettling” image that Cvetkovich
reads, Bechdel presents the photograph of Roy more as an uncanny object through which she and
her father can belatedly share an appreciation for masculine beauty and “unconventional”
desires, even if Alison’s desire is mimetic while Bruce’s is erotic.

Positioned as it is at the center of the book, visibly demarcated even when the book is
closed, Roy’s photograph is indeed a major pivot point in the text. It acts as a kind of hub from
which the rest of the narrative seems to radiate. The photograph is a centerfold in both a literal
and erotic sense: it is in the middle of the book, spanning two pages with a fold down the center;
and it is an erotic image of a partially nude man, a secret image hidden from Bruce’s
“respectable” world, an intimate moment on display for the viewing public. The erotic power of
centerfolds more generally is bound up with the process of a present absence; Hugh Hefner,
whose success depends on *Playboy*’s own centerfolds, defines the form as an image where “‘a situation is suggested, the presence of someone not in the picture.’ The goal was to transform ‘a straight pinup into an intimate interlude, something personal and special’” (qtd. in Young, “*Playboy: the Hugh Hefner Story*” n. pag.).

The photograph of Roy fits this definition of the centerfold precisely, even as the photograph both implicates the reader in the father’s sexual “deviance,” and, in its mediated, redrawn form, presents Bechdel’s interpretation and experience of the photograph as an aesthetic and evidentiary object. The subject of the photograph—it’s content—crosses between the categories of family memento and erotic photograph; it also demonstrates Bruce Bechdel’s own double life of heterosexual family man and closeted homosexual. And in its stature as redrawn photograph, it also bridges the gap between evidence and experience, between truth and interpretation.

I choose here to focus, for the most part, on areas other than the problem of Roy’s age. Although authors like Cvetkovich have misguidedly interpreted Roy as a young adolescent, he is actually seventeen (and there is a difference—though not legally—in the taboos around sexual relations with a thirteen-year-old and a seventeen-year-old). Since Bechdel’s interest in Roy lies more in what he signifies for Bruce’s double life and less in his age, I will also largely ignore the “pedophilic” aspects here; however, the relationship between Bruce and Roy does raise problems of age, authority, and advantage along with Bruce’s closeted sexuality. *Fun Home* does not attempt to solve any of these problems, but instead foregrounds them as knots around which the narrative turns.

Alison holds in her hand visual proof of her father’s thrice-illicit relationship with Roy: Roy is male and legally underage, and Bruce is married. With the photograph in front of her, it
seems Bruce and Roy’s relationship is no longer in the realm of hearsay; the photograph acts as evidence, a record of time and of presence. However, Bechdel complicates Roy’s photograph by redrawing it in a larger scale and offering her own interpretation of it, visually and verbally. The size of Alison’s hand holding the photograph indicates the manipulation of the photograph away from “reality” and toward a representation of Alison’s experiential truth—her interpretation of the photograph, and its enormous impact on her and her understanding of her father.

Additionally, this photograph embodies multiple temporal moments; as discussed earlier with Watchmen, photographs are physical objects that metaphorically travel backward and forward in time simultaneously. They are objects from the past in the present, while their content hearkens, if not transports, back to the past, to the moment of the photograph’s taking. The photograph of Roy here is like a temporal prism through which multiple timestamps are refracted. The photograph is stamped with the development date along one edge, so the physical object is marked with the time of narrative / content (the moment frozen on the film) and the development time. Bruce’s futile attempt to blot out the year is a third temporal marker, indicating Bruce’s act of viewing the image. Alison’s hand holding the photo—a visual echo of a similar moment in Art Spiegelman’s Maus—is yet a fourth temporal marker of her discovery of the image in the shoebox. And finally the photograph’s appearance in the text is due to Bechdel’s act of redrawing the photograph, of constructing the narrative as a whole as she looks back on multiple instances of her past (the childhood vacation with Roy and moment she discovered the photograph).
And yet, because this composite image is the only panel of the page, narrative time also freezes at this moment. Indeed, because Bechdel includes multiple captions on this one single image, the reader is forced to slow down, to contemplate the single image as she reads through the narrator’s commentary. Not only does the photograph itself “capture” time and hold it hostage, but the text likewise necessitates a different temporal approach at the site of the photograph’s reproduction. While these redrawn objects do allow for a kind of access to the past, *Fun Home* shows that these visual markers serve Bechdel’s speculative narration rather than deepen our understanding of a factual past. The photographs bring the act of looking to the foreground, highlighting that perpetual anxiety about who looks at the photographed object, and what that object reveals under the gaze.

Bechdel draws her hand holding this photograph; it is larger than life, and it is positioned so that the reader’s hand might fall into the same position, superimposed over Alison’s hand. While Julia Watson notes that this superimposition implicates the reader as voyeur to Bruce’s “intimate glimpse,” the reader is voyeur to both the photograph of Roy and to Alison’s discovery of it (41). Moreover the position of the hand implies that the reader is in fact embodying Alison’s position; we stand as she does, see what she sees, we hold the photograph as she does. The photograph is presented as the material object of truth (of Roy’s relationship with Bruce) and as acts of interpretive experience (Bruce’s attempt to blot the date, Alison’s reactions to the photograph, Bechdel’s redrawing of it, the reader’s reception of the page). Alison’s hand, meanwhile, is presented as the material object of experience and interpretation: “Alison’s hand holding the photograph as a reminder that there is a witness here, for whom this photograph

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41 Thus this photograph in *Fun Home* is unlike, say, when one reads a panel in a series, which, as I discussed in the chapters on Batman, *Watchmen*, and *No Towers*, makes past, present, and future coexist simultaneously on a single page.
leaps out of the past in an odd version of Benjamin’s notion of history as that which ‘flashes up at a moment of danger’” (Cvetkovich 115-16). The power of this page, however, rests on the shock of twice-occupying the space of the gaze: Alison looks from the position of her father, the looking and photographing subject, and the reader looks as if from Alison’s position.

The size of the photograph and its style complicate the power relations at work in and through this image. Although the photograph is larger-than-life, and the cross-hatching style more “realistic” than the thick, monochromatic lines of the cartoon hand, the closer we approach the photograph the less is actually revealed. Although the photograph might initially appear to be more realistic, it is paradoxically more abstract than the style of the rest of the book. The “painterly” quality of the photograph as Alison sees it is reconstructed through the cartoon version’s use of a different style. The visual dimension of this moment is thus destabilizing, as the photograph resides in the space between the “reality” and the “impression.” This optical illusion reflects the problem of not knowing who took the photographs, of not seeing the person seeing—that is, of needing to rely on (invented) verbal narrative so that the images can “speak.” Even though Hefner’s “presence of someone not in the picture” here is understood to be Bruce, the fact remains that Bruce is absent from the content of the image, although not in its production.

Bechdel must therefore invent the presence of the photographer, of the person looking at Roy, in the gap of the camera’s gaze. Bechdel’s captions and images work together to reveal her own interpretive acts as she presents us with this archival evidence: “Perhaps I identify too well with my father’s illicit awe. A trace of this [awe] seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper” (101). What Bechdel narrates is not Roy’s emotions but Bruce’s (his awe), not Roy’s experience posing for the photo but Bruce’s emotional
experience taking it, and developing it. Indeed, Roy remains a purely physical, aesthetic object; part of Roy becomes the photograph, the paper itself.

Meanwhile Bruce’s awe is caught in the narrative that Bechdel creates for the photograph, not in the object of the photograph itself. Bechdel admits she identifies with Bruce, with the viewer, with the one who gazes, and not with the object of gaze (the subject of the photograph). This identification leads to a doubled interpretive act: Bechdel interprets how Bruce felt while looking at Roy, and she reinterprets the photograph by redrawing it in her work. “The blurriness of the photo gives it an ethereal, painterly quality,” she tells us, and this quality is mimicked in her cross-hatched style that she employs when recreating many of the photographs in the text (100). The object of the camera’s gaze is constructed as essentially “other” both visually and in terms of the desire implied in the photograph itself. Bechdel’s redrawing of the photograph is thus a third kind of “trace,” this time of Alison’s reaction to and interpretation of the original photograph upon its discovery.

The “otherness” of this photograph comes into sharp relief on the following page, where in a series of film negatives, the negative of Roy follows three images of the Bechdel children playing on the beach on the bed (figure 5.4). This negative strip is a series of inversions: “bright” photos of the children on the beach appear dark, while the “dark” photograph of Roy appears very light. Roy’s image simultaneously breaks and belongs to the chronology of the family vacation; the public beach space moves to the private space of the bedroom. Bechdel lists a series of qualities associated with Proust’s “Swann’s way / Guermantes way” metaphor: “Bourgeois vs. aristocratic, homo vs. hetero, city vs. country, eros vs. art, private vs. public. But at the end of the novel the two ways are revealed to converge—to have always converged—
through a vast ‘network of transversals’” (102). In *Fun Home*, what appears to be divergent eventually converges, mimicking this “network of transversals.”

Through the inclusion of the negatives at the top of the page, Bechdel simultaneously establishes and collapses the dichotomies of public/private, hetero/homo, open/closeted—the very dichotomies her father so artfully kept in place for most of his life. Trying to make Roy’s negative fit in with the family narrative of this vacation is similar to making Roy fit in with the
family narrative of Alison’s experience, and it parallels the act of making Roy’s centerfold fit
with the text itself: “the proximity of these ostensibly disparate images offers evidence of her
father’s capacity to inhabit different worlds simultaneously” (Cvetkovich 116). Indeed, the
inclusion of the negatives reflects not only Bruce’s fluid identity but the text’s own movements
between dichotomies.

Without ceremony, Bechdel’s musings on Proust and his transversals switch to her
memory of this beach vacation: “After a few days at the beach, we drove to New York to pick
Mom up” (102). The lower panel depicts the family—plus Roy, minus Helen—driving through a
tunnel connecting (and dividing) New York to (or from) New Jersey (see again figure 5.4). This
panel captures the moment of the car approaching the line literally in between states, a literal
instantiation of Bruce’s seemingly dichotomous life. New York is where his wife and mother of
his children signifies Bruce’s superficial but heteronormative life; New York is also connected
seamlessly to and yet divided from New Jersey, where he and his lover shared a room. Roy,
meanwhile, occupies Helen’s position, as both Bruce’s lover and as caregiver for the children; as
babysitter, he fills something resembling a maternal role. This scene in the tunnel exemplifies the
notion that the supposedly fixed borders—in Bruce’s life, between states in all senses of the
world, between memory and present, between fiction and reality—are permeable; like Proust’s
novel, the dichotomies on this page converge into one tunnel both between and dividing places
and identities.

Between the negative strip and the panel of the tunnel, Bechdel draws a pile of printed
photographs from the negative strip; the reader can recognize the brothers bending down in the
surf and Alison adjusting the straps of her suit. But the topmost photograph of this pile is not
included in the negatives at the top of the page. This central photograph shows Bruce lying on
his side on the beach, propped on his elbow, reading a book (figure 5.5). The pose is reminiscent of a photograph at the end of this same chapter, where Bruce leans on his elbow while on a rooftop (120).

The inclusion of Bruce’s picture here is an instance of Thierry Groensteen’s “braiding,” or the visual echo of one image or panel in another, unrelated or distanced panel. Although the two photographs of Bruce are not placed next to each other, nor are they referenced directly, the visual similarities in the pose forces the reader to retroactively reinterpret the beach photo of Bruce. In the second photograph, Bechdel explores the similarities between her father and herself both aesthetically (in the photos) and personally (in their relationships to the photographers). Including the first photograph of Bruce brings that same questioning to the page, the same wondering about his relationship to the photographer.

The final page of this fourth chapter (entitled “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” after Proust’s work), contains two large panels, both of which contain redrawn photographs, which in turn function like smaller, interior panels (figure 5.6). One is of the photograph described above; the other, of Alison in a robe outside a brick building. Bechdel’s anxiety over who is looking at the photographed subject comes to the fore: “In another picture, he’s sunbathing on the tarpaper roof of his frat house just after he turned twenty-two. Was the boy
who took it his lover? As the girl who took this polaroid of me on a fire escape on my twenty-first birthday was mine?” (120).

She (verbally) forms a connection between the photographs, even as the photos themselves do not—cannot—speak to the narrative link of the photographer. There is no textual reference to the second young man in the rooftop photograph; Bechdel’s narration ignores him entirely, focusing instead solely on her father and what his face might express.

What Bechdel does here is, again, read her own memories and emotions into the photographs, demanding that the facial expressions be read a certain way: “The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of the shadow falling across our faces— it’s about as close as a translation can get” (120). One might ask, for example, what makes the grins
on Bruce’s and Alison’s faces “pained?” With their impressionistic cross-hatching, Bruce and Alison do look like they are smiling, but any more information requires an interpretive act; I am not sure that I would have read their faces in this way without Bechdel’s instructions to do so. The impressionistic quality of the redrawn photographs add to this confusion, since the imprecision and the blurring of the details in the photographs mean we must rely on Bechdel’s verbal authority to understand the photographs. In their redrawn states, the images do not stand alone or speak for themselves; rather, they take on specific meanings according to Bechdel’s interpretations. In fact, Bechdel acts as the translator of these images, putting their meaning into a new language (that is, into the verbal over the visual); Bechdel as narrator tells the reader how to interpret the photograph.

In the first panel of this page, Bechdel reproduces the same photograph that appears on the chapter’s title page, a photograph that only now takes on meaning for the reader due, once again, to Bechdel’s narrative intervention (figure 5.7). Above this photo, a caption reads: “What’s lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself. In the same box where I found the photo of Roy, there’s one of Dad at about the same age. He’s wearing a women’s bathing suit. A fraternity prank? But the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant” (120).
In this panel, Bechdel repeats the layout of the centerfold: her hand holding the photograph at the same angle, thumb on top, with the contrasting drawing styles marking the photograph as archive and the hand as cartoon imagining. However, the size of this panel is closer to a one-to-one ratio corresponding to a life-sized hand. Bruce, posing in the women’s bathing suit, is drawn in the now-familiar cross-hatching, giving us the impression of details while simultaneously rendering them more abstract, less precise. Like the photo of Roy, the closer we get to the image, the less is actually revealed; facial details are blurred, foreground blends into background. Indeed, when it reappears in the following panel (the final one of the chapter), the photograph is even smaller, even less clear, and Bruce’s face looks more like a religious icon than a “lissome” young man in drag.

Unlike the “centerfold,” however, this photograph does not dominate the page in the same way. This is connected to the final panel of the chapter, in which Bechdel examines the similarities between herself and her father. The image of Bruce in drag acts as a structural bridge between the two other photographs, even as it remains in the background. Bruce’s
uncharacteristically playful performance of gender acts as a posthumous link between father and daughter—a bridge that both joins together and divides, like the tunnel between New York and New Jersey, like the centerfold marking the book itself, like Proust’s “network of transversals” that seemingly pull apart while in actuality draw closer together.

One is therefore left with the question: of what are these photographs evidence? After all, Bechdel’s work is explicitly, obsessively, preoccupied with archival evidence, with circling around a moment or a situation from multiple angles until the most complete picture appears. The redrawn photographs as individual, independent images do not necessarily contain the facticity to demonstrate any kind of truth about Bruce or Alison in and of themselves. Rather, the rooftop photographs are evidence of the effect of subjective memory and experience in creating narratives to understand the images. They speak to Bechdel’s own anxiety, her need to know who is looking, her desperation to make sense of her father’s life, death, and sexuality as well as her own identity. While this photograph “reaches out,” as it were, across time and space, ultimately it is only Bechdel’s reading of the photograph that we receive in *Fun Home*. The power of this image, then, rests in its impact on Bechdel and in her emotional reaction to and interpretation of it.

**Looking and Feeling**

Beginning with the early image of the family’s house mentioned above, Bechdel visually encodes the act of looking through the use of the black-filled silhouette as a menacing act and a signifier of repression. More than just drawing attention to the act of looking, as Chute

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42 I should add, however, that the use of the silhouette with the house really only takes on this associated meaning of the look once the visual code is repeated later in the text, in another example of Groensteen’s “braiding.”
explores, this technique is also a visual indicator of a studied indifference or emotional blankness, one that often occurs at moments of confrontation during which Bruce’s or Alison’s emotional reactions are repressed and the threat of the gaze becomes tangible (Chute 197). For example, Bechdel illustrates her father’s short fuse with a Christmas scene: her brother holds the Christmas tree while Bruce observes him and Alison, in the foreground, polishes furniture and watches *It’s A Wonderful Life*. As her brother lets the tree fall—“the needles are sharp!” he says—Bruce approaches him aggressively, shouting “God damn it!” Her brother then cries, “don’t hit me,” and rushes past Alison, jostling her as she carries a tray of glass bottles. Bechdel’s accompanying captions read, “But in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone… it’s out of the ordinary,” implying, of course, that Bruce’s violent outbursts are routine (11).

In the first panel on the next page, Alison is caught holding the stopper to one of the bottles, which broke off when it hit the others as her brother bumped into her (figure 5.8). Bruce’s blacked-out silhouette looms over her threateningly as Alison cowers in fear; he is the one who sees her, who catches her in the act of destruction and imperfection— and however accidental that destruction might be, (in Bruce’s eyes) it warrants punishment, as the previous page demonstrates. The threat in this panel is contained entirely within the act of looking and being seen (no physical punishment follows this particular incident).
On the page following, however, the blackened silhouette is repeated in what might at first seem like a much more benign manner: Bruce stands back, looking at his three children seated at the base of the illuminated Christmas tree (figure 5.9). However, Bechdel’s narration once again shifts our understanding of this idyllic scene: “Sometimes,” Bechdel writes, “when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. Sort of a still life with children” (13). Thus Bruce’s act of (active) looking is linked with the affirmation of “normalcy,” with the repression of his homosexual desires in favor of the superficial tableau of heteronormativity. Bruce’s gaze constitutes the children as objects in this tableau; the children, especially Alison, are now positioned within the normative family structure.

Figure 5.9: “a still life with children” (13).

Moreover, Bruce’s gaze also constitutes the scene itself as what he aesthetically desires while simultaneously erasing his other libidinal desires, which would disrupt, even negate, the image before him. These two moments in silhouette, then, are both about the threat of looking and of being seen, as Bruce represses what he can in order to maintain the superficial appearance
of the ideal nuclear family.\textsuperscript{43} The underlying threat of looking, for Bruce and for Alison, is that if one looks carefully enough, one might discover the surface is artifice, as Bechdel so artfully demonstrates in her depiction of her father’s behavior throughout the first chapter. Looking itself thus takes on a dual role: of ensuring the appearance of normalcy, which in turn requires a studied repression of the “abnormal” underneath.

At key moments Alison also appears as a silhouette, internalizing this dual role of looking as Bechdel simultaneously conceals and reveals her own experiences and emotional reactions. In the second chapter, Bechdel depicts an encounter between Alison and Bruce in the embalming room, where Bruce is working on the cadaver of a dead man, “bearded and fleshy, jarringly unlike Dad’s usual traffic of desiccated old people” (44). \textit{Fun Home} presents this encounter as if this is Alison’s first time seeing a dead body on the examining table: “I didn’t normally see the bodies before they were dressed and in a casket. But one day Dad called me back there” (43). The sight of the dead man is shocking multiple times over: Alison rarely sees the dead; the man is young and unlike the “usual” cadavers she has encountered; the man’s genitalia is on full display; and “what really got [Alison’s] attention was his chest, split open to a dark red cave” (43). Alison’s reaction to this spectacle is really no reaction. Her face, when visible, remains neutral, and when her father asks her for scissors, she hands them over without comment (figure 5.10).

\textsuperscript{43} These seemingly dichotomous modes of looking (the threatening look over and against the “satisfactory” but repressed appearance) encoded in the same visual sign (the blacked-out silhouette) repeats frequently in \textit{Fun Home}. I will not enumerate all of them here, but suffice it to say that the same occurs on page 18 (Bruce’s threatening look demanding the children look, too, at a vase too close to the table’s edge) and page 21 (Bruce’s benevolent singing to Alison). While part of Bechdel’s use of this visual code is aesthetic, coding foreground and background actions occurring simultaneously as somewhat cinematic in nature, the fact that this visual mode occurs at moments of crisis between looking and identity make it notable.
In the first panel of this page, however, Alison appears at the bottom right as a black silhouette. This panel stretches across the whole of the top of the page, the cadaver on the
examining table spanning most of the panel, with Alison’s silhouette in the corner as if to highlight her act of looking at the scene before her. Bruce’s face, meanwhile, is covered in a surgical mask and glasses, and the frame of the panel cuts off the rest of his face from view. While the panel presents the gaping cadaver as a whole, unbroken vision, Bruce’s and Alison’s faces, the spaces on which emotion might be read, are hidden from sight. Alison takes in the tableau before her, reflected in the stretched-out panel size and the diagonal lines that the body and the table form along the same trajectory as Alison’s assumed sightline.

Underneath her silhouette lies the caption for the third panel of the page, in which Bechdel explains that she “studiously betrayed no emotion” during this encounter. Due to its position between the panels, the caption is visually linked to the image above as well, so that the blacked-out silhouette mirrors the repression of whatever emotion she may have been feeling. The blankness of the silhouette, its erasure of interior details, leaves only the surface-level outline of Alison, echoing other moments when the act of looking means also an act of hiding, of repressing, as when Bruce looks at the Christmas tree.

Chute reads the open chest cavity as a kind of empty yet horrifying signifier indicative of a similar gap in representability: “Bechdel identifies the most terrifying aspect of the body as not the penis but its split-open chest (this “cave” creates a wobbly triangular shape evocative of Alison’s curvy circumflex symbol). The absence at the center of the body—its gapingness—is what shocks” (Chute 198). However, the completely solid blackness of Alison’s silhouette is far less visually complex than even the dark, horrifying chest cavity, which is not precisely an absence but rather contains the shadowy traces of inner organs. On the following page Bechdel acknowledges that “the emotion I had suppressed for the gaping cadaver seemed to stay repressed,” and Alison’s silhouette is even emptier than the “gaping” emptiness of the body—
that is, the cadaver holds more visible complexity than she does at this moment, a visual indicator of the forced “neutrality” of Alison’s look (45). Moreover, the cadaver itself is displaying what is literally, corporeally the most interior of physical existence. That which is normally contained and hidden within the confines of the body—the intestines and other organs—actually appears in (shadowy) view. The physicality of the body finds its inverse, then, in the visually and emotionally erased figure of Alison’s silhouette.

As the page continues to display this cadaver and the interaction between Alison and Bruce, Bechdel also speculates onBruce’s reasoning for visually “testing” her in this unexpected and seemingly emotionless way: “Maybe this was the same offhanded way his own notoriously cold father had shown him his first cadaver. Or maybe he felt that he’d become too inured to death, and was hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of. Or maybe he just needed the scissors” (44-45). Bechdel places Alison within a genealogy of emotional distance (and just a few panels later, she discusses her own vicarious living-out of emotion in others), but she also underlines the ways in which the visible does not necessarily show the truth, nor does it reveal a complete understanding. Bruce’s motives are as hidden as his face behind the mask and glasses, and it is up to Bechdel to create—or impose—a narrative upon this scene.

In fact, throughout Fun Home, the silhouettes are never whole, complete figures. Just as Bruce’s face is hidden in this scene, and just as the silhouettes do not display the figure’s complexity, they are also always fractured in or by the panel and its frames. The reader’s view of the silhouette is therefore as obscured or as incomplete as narrative’s representation of the scene. Not only must the reader “fill in the gaps” of the gutter space when reading from one panel to the
next, one must also take the fragmented pieces of figures within the panels, and from these fragments, form a coherent vision.

Alison’s own diaries ultimately work with this notion of a present absence, a blankness that both produces and conceals. The final panel of Chapter Six centers on Alison’s blank diary: “By the end of November, my earnest daily entries had given way to the implicit lie of the blank page, and weeks at a time are left unrecorded” (186). Yet these empty pages are contextually related to Alison’s coming of age story. The blankness of the diary—its omissions and repudiations—are linked with femininity, Alison’s changing body, her closeted desires, and her strained relationship with both parents. Unable or unwilling to speak her desires even once she learns the words “orgasm” and “lesbian” (apparently through casual perusal of the dictionary), Alison’s diary entries exhibit hesitation, even willful omission.

Toward the end of Chapter Six, which chronicles Alison’s first menstrual period and the Watergate scandal alongside Bruce’s encounter with the law after buying beer for underage boys, Bechdel notes, “My narration [in the diary] had by this point become altogether unreliable” (184). The accompanying panel features a diary entry reading “Um… er… We went to church. I wore a dress… YERK! We got the men’s fashion section in the New York Times. So what? Big deal. I forget what else we did.” Drawn next to that final disavowal in the diary is a cartoon profile of a man. Bechdel goes on to say that her “forced nonchalance about the men’s fashion supplement… was self-repudiation of the basest kind,” and she depicts Alison and her father shopping for a man’s suit together. The visual narrative thus maintains that Alison’s verbal negation of her interest in menswear is a lie. Even the diary page contradicts itself, as the young Alison draws the profile of a man in a suit next to her supposed disinterest in men in suits, so it appears that pictorial elements speak to the desire hidden under the verbal repudiation.
This blankness extends to the visual as well: the penultimate panel of the chapter depicts the reserved discussion of Alison’s menstruation between her and her mother, while the image is of the exterior of the family home. The panel’s visuals move away from the characters, excluding them from the images, precluding the reader from seeing Alison and Helen interact. Instead the panel depicts the house’s exterior, giving the scene a sense of remoteness, exclusion. Even on the preceding page, the panels focus on Helen’s studied expressionlessness; Alison appears from behind or in silhouette, with the barest hint of her own facial expression (figure 5.11). The visual is therefore equally implicated in the blankness Bechdel laments, just as previously the silhouetted Alison showed no emotion when confronted with the cadaver.

Figure 5.11: Alison’s stilted conversation with her mother (185).

Alison’s silhouette here again encodes the act of looking, and again the verbal narration accompanying the visual is more speculative than certain; for example, Bechdel wonders if her mother’s hands were shaking when Alison finally tells her mother she began to menstruate. Moreover, in this series of panels after Alison’s confession, Helen refuses to look at her daughter, even while Alison’s silhouette implies her own invested act of looking. When the text then moves outside on the following page, it is as if Alison and her mother are now equally engaged in acts of repression and avoidance: the reader can no longer see the characters nor
where those characters might be looking. At this moment, when her mother’s gaze might constitute Alison’s subjectivity, Helen instead studiously looks away, leading to the text’s similar shift away from the personal, interior, potentially intimate moment to the public, faceless exterior of the house.

And yet, in moving from the characters to the house, Bechdel’s work in fact reveals Alison’s feelings behind this moment (figure 5.12). As I mentioned above, throughout *Fun Home* the house stands as an object representative of the family’s simultaneous unity and splitting, the tension between external appearance and internal experience. So when Bechdel shifts from Alison and her mother to the house, what we get is a reflection of a personal moment (Alison’s admission that she’s started to menstruate and Helen’s reaction) rendered cold through the stilted interactions of the characters. The house takes us from the interior to the exterior, from the intimately personal to the forced public. In so doing Bechdel gives us an impression of the
distance enacted between herself and her mother; therefore although the panels visually preclude knowledge of the physical details of the scene, the reader still retains an impression of the nature of the relationship between mother and daughter. The image of the house simultaneously obscures the visible reality and evokes or reveals Alison’s emotional experience.

The use of this fragmentation along with the visual absence within the silhouettes indicates Bechdel’s position vis-a-vis the crisis of representation. Through highlighting these acts of looking, Bechdel hints at both the instability of a subject’s experiences, memories, and reactions, as well as the impossibility of fully representing those experiences. What is visible within the panels does not necessarily reflect a visible truth, so much as a visual encoding of experience. The visual thus becomes an unstable, uncertain form of representation, adding to the verbal skepticism that permeates Bechdel’s text.

**Facing Death**

The skepticism with which Alison approaches her experiences, and with which Bechdel approaches the act of artistic creation, reflects her uneasy relationship to the image of death as a signal of both trauma and loss. Bechdel uses the visual possibilities in comics to represent the experience of being alive, but facing the death of another. In a scene in which Alison’s father shows her and her siblings the body of a dead child, the obscured vision of the reader echoes the limited understanding Alison experiences as a child facing mortality and impermanence (figure 5.13). In this panel, Alison and her brother stand in front of the dead child, blocking part of the body from the reader’s view; likewise, a caption partially blocks the Bechdel children from view (148). The panel’s arrangement thus hinges on inhibiting the view of the dead child at the center of the panel. Using the captions and panels in this manner is therefore a way of representing—of
re-presencing—death through the obscuration of vision. This panel literalizes the process of transforming experience through memory into an incomplete narrative: the dead child is mediated through Alison’s experience (Alison looking at the child and simultaneously blocking the reader’s view of the body), which in turn is mediated through language in order to convey a cohesive if incomplete meaning to the reader (the caption blocking the reader’s view of Alison).

Figure 5.13: Obscured image of death (148).

At the knotty center of what is blocked from both the reader and from Alison, then, is death itself. *Fun Home* circles around death many times, unable to fully represent what is, in essence, always unknowable. *Fun Home*’s essential problem is not just a question of Bechdel reflecting on her own life, but on her encounters with death, facing the once-living bodies of others that lie in contrast with her own still-living body. The mystery of her father’s death is not solely the mystery of how he died, but also the enigma of death itself. The dead child in Chapter Five brings the mystery of death to the foreground; Alison sees the body of a once-living subject now reduced exclusively to an object. That this person is “a distant cousin of [hers], a boy exactly [her] age” serves as a concrete encounter with Alison’s own mortality; because he is so
like her, his death implies that she, too, could be an object, a motionless body on an examining table— that she someday would both understand and experience the enigma of death (147).

In the face of this death, Bechdel notes simply that her trademark circumflex nearly obliterates her diary entries for that weekend; language again, to use Bechdel’s earlier phrasing, cannot “bear the weight” of this encounter. The panel with the dead child is one of only two panels on the page; the other is of the blotted-out diary entries. Bechdel’s accompanying captions give no indication of Alison’s emotional reaction to the sight: “Dad explained that he had died from a broken neck. His skin was gray, which gave his blond crewcut the effect of yellow tint on a black-and-white photograph. My diary entries for that weekend are almost completely obscured” (148). Unlike other moments in *Fun Home*, here Bechdel does not offer an interpretation of the scene through her narration. Not only is Alison’s face turned just enough away from the reader as to render her expression unreadable, Bechdel does not tell us how she felt or what she thought. The description of the scene rests at the level of the surface, withholding Alison’s emotional response to the scene.

This panel illustrates—literally— the failure of both verbal language and visual forms as one encounters death. As Chute notes, the form of the sheet that Bruce pulls up to reveal the corpse is similar to the inverted V Alison scrawls in the diary; the mirroring of this shape hints at the uncertainty within the visual scene (Chute 193). That is, if the written circumflex indicates Alison’s skepticism at language’s ability to represent reality, the shape of the sheet combined with the incomplete, obscured visual layout of the panel might likewise indicate skepticism at the image’s ability to represent reality. What is excluded from this panel both verbally and visually is Alison’s reaction, her experience— how she understands death when she looks at it before her.
Therefore when Bechdel says that she “represses” her feelings for the dead man on the examining table in the earlier Chapter Two, I would argue that what she is actually repressing are her feelings for the dead child from Chapter Five. She does not narrate her reaction—or even her lack thereof—in the same speculative manner as she does with the dead man (as I discussed above). In fact, in that scene from Chapter Two, this chronologically earlier encounter with death goes completely unmentioned, as if Bechdel is unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge her own memory. While the dead man is on full display for both Alison and the reader, here the dead child is mostly hidden; while the scene in Chapter Two contains Bechdel’s admission that she represses her own emotions, in Chapter Five, there is no recognition of her repression.

Although Bechdel avoids clearly defining Alison’s reaction to the dead child, doing so only serves to bring presence and absence together in both structure and narrative. While the image of and the reaction to death are obscured from view, their absence profoundly creates the sense of repression and loss that so characterizes Alison’s experiences throughout *Fun Home*. Bechdel circles around these moments of death—her father’s and the child’s—creating a sense of continually approaching and then retreating from the unknowable instances of death. In doing so, however, Bechdel does not seek to smooth out or cover up death’s mystery, but she instead draws attention to its incomprehensibility: “all the years spent visiting gravediggers, joking with burial-vault salesmen, and teasing my brothers with crushed vials of smelling salts only made my own father’s death more incomprehensible” (50). *Fun Home* does not seek to erase this incomprehensibility but to represent it as such.

While these earlier instances of death are significant, the loss threading all of *Fun Home*’s chapters together is Bruce Bechdel’s death. The text situates Alison in a chain of events culminating in her confronting her father’s death: Alison first sees the dead child, when she looks
at but understands neither death nor her emotions; she then sees the dead man with his chest open, when she deliberately masks her reaction, mimicking her father’s literal mask. Finally she sees her own father in his casket, and cannot mourn: “Dry-eyed and sheepish, my brothers and I looked for as long as we sensed it was appropriate… The sole emotion I could muster was irritation” (52).

When Alison looks at Bruce in the casket, the sight of him looking so unlike himself leads to a kind of misrecognition not only of Bruce but also of Alison and her emotions: “I wasn’t even sure it was him until I found the tiny blue tattoo on his knuckle,” Bechdel notes (figure 5.14, 52).

Unsure that the body-object before her is her father, structured within a long history of careful avoidance of emotional displays, Alison’s emotional response here seems again to illustrate the repression that occurs at the moment of looking. The man who so often and so threateningly constituted Alison as the object of his gaze is now himself reduced to an object laid out in a casket for Alison to view. The image of Bruce in the casket and Alison looking at him with her back to the reader is split in half by the gutter between two panels, emphasizing not just Bruce’s
splitting from life to death, and his postmortem appearance so unlike him while alive, but
Alison’s own fracturing. She does not outwardly grieve in part due to this misrecognition, but
also in part due to her complicated relationship with the sometimes-tyrannical Bruce as well as
her lifetime spent hiding (consciously or otherwise) her emotions.

*Fun Home’s* conclusion does not bring us any closer to understanding the mysteries
contained within its narrative, or to bridging the distance of misrecognition; rather, the text
embraces these mysteries as a kind of necessary gap in knowledge. The final page “provides an
aesthetic feeling of wholeness and circularity, but does not solve the mystery of her father’s long
silence or his suicide” (Freedman 138). The penultimate panel depicts the front of the Sunbeam
Bread truck head-on, as if from Bruce’s (imagined) perspective just before the fatal accident.
Contained within the frame of the panel, the truck that killed Bruce is endlessly fixed and
endlessly bearing down on him and, in its ominous head-on perspective, on the reader (figure
5.15).

![Figure 5.15: the truck, head on (232).](image)

Echoing photography, this panel suspends death and life atemporally through the act of looking.
Bruce’s mysterious death will never be understood fully, yet including this panel forces Bechdel
and the reader to occupy his position, to face oncoming death from his perspective, even while
we never see the accident (the event) itself. Ultimately, in *Fun Home*, the act of looking lacks the power to bridge the gaps in individual experience and representation.
Chapter 6: A Spectrum of Embodiment: Disability, Identity, and Suffering in David B.’s *Epileptic*

This chapter brings together the three forms of visuality developed in the previous chapters—the problem of looking as an act of categorizing, the problem of images as themselves traumatic, and the power of images to act on the viewer—and offers a way of synthesizing those forms into a new and productive way of imagining the possibilities for comics. David B.’s memoir *L’ascension du haut mal* (*Epileptic*, trans. Kim Thompson), originally published in six volumes from 1996-2002, uses the comics medium as a vehicle to represent a nonlinear spectrum of experience that can avoid a conventional and hierarchical understanding of memory, trauma, and identity. This memoir follows David (né Pierre-François Beauchard) from age 5, in 1964, through adulthood into the late 1990s / early 2000s, intertwining his relationship with his brother Jean-Christophe, his family history, and his development into one of the most prominent contemporary French comics artists. Jean-Christophe’s epileptic seizures begin at the age of 7, and from that point on his disorder simultaneously disrupts and structures both Jean-Christophe’s life and the lives of his family.

As it depicts the family moving from one possible cure to another, B.’s work in turn becomes more and more surreal and sophisticated, mirroring both his inability to fully understand his brother’s illness, and his increasingly complex view of the world. This chapter argues that *Epileptic*’s central tension lies in the movement of the text between representations of disability and historical trauma, and the witnessing of those various kinds of suffering that ultimately result in a sense of fractured and fragmented subjectivity. In presenting the rhizomatic nature of disability, the text suggests that rather than considering individuals and their bodies along a linear scale between two extreme points (e.g. the normal and the abnormal), we can
reformulate our understanding of “normalcy” through a nonlinear, multivalent spectrum of experience.

The physical and social realities of epilepsy figure prominently in the structure of the Beauchard family’s lives. Jean-Christophe experiences only brief moments of remission, and throughout most of his life he endures multiple seizures per day. The seizures scare away the boys’ childhood friends, who say he’s “nuts” and “violent” (35); the neighbors, meanwhile, “are concerned about his seizures. They want my parents to keep him indoors” (63). In an effort to lessen the stress on Jean-Christophe, the family moves to an isolated house in the country, away from prying eyes. They then embark on a seemingly endless search for relief for Jean-Christophe, from Western medicine and hospitals to macrobiotic communes to Ouija boards to Swedeborgian analysts to countless other emotionally intrusive, disruptive treatments, most of which could be qualified as quackery and none of which are successful long-term.

Under such isolating and perplexing circumstances, it is little wonder that David finds solace in the violent, the bizarre, and the surreal. The epilepsy afflicting his brother is incomprehensible, but so too are the reactions of the people around him, from strangers in public spaces to his playmates to his own family. Pierre-François finds solace in drawing and fantasizing about warriors and battles; as he grows older, he turns more toward surreal fiction and artwork. At one point he admits: “If the whole world is going to reject us, then let this [fantasy genre fiction] be my world” (186). One can clearly see the influence these stories have had on David, as B.’s artwork throughout the memoir is characterized by its surreal qualities. Entirely in black and white, the text consists of heavy line work in most of the panels, which are usually framed in regular, straight-ruled rectangles. B. employs images of the fantastic throughout, in order to represent the emotional conditions of his life, his experiences as helpless
audience to his brother’s illness, and the more subtle project of situating disability within a nonlinear spectrum of experience.

In addressing these issues, B. manipulates the comics medium to convey and reflect a particular autobiographical perspective— that of someone who is relegated to the position of passive observer to an overwhelming, disabling illness. Surreal imagery alongside disorienting formal and narrative structures reflects the Beauchard family’s desperate situation, and more particularly David’s feelings of helplessness and confusion in the face of an incomprehensible, uncontrollable, and enduring illness. Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy contorts not only his body, but also his mind, and his relationships with his family and with the public more broadly. Likewise B. contorts and manipulates both the historical and familial contexts of the boys’ lives, and the medium of comics itself, in order to defamiliarize and destabilize certain categories of identity and experience. This chapter thus attempts to answer the following questions: in what ways does the text represent Jean-Christophe as disabled, and in what ways does he resist that? To what extent is that disability socially imposed? What role does the visual play in the confrontation with the fragmented body? And finally, how does David B. situate himself and his brother within a wider web of fragmented subjects, and what are the implications of doing so?

To adapt the words of gender and sexuality scholar Judith Butler, one of the underlying currents of *Epileptic* is “the recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects” (2). Because of disability’s inherently trans-categorical nature, Butler’s work on gender and bodies is just as applicable to representations of ability and bodies. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note, disability studies is in an exceptional position among such areas of identity studies, since disability is both
a quality that can apply across other identity boundaries, and because “[t]he question put to the
representation of disability differs from that of other identity-based studies: can one possess a
physical or cognitive anomaly that does not translate into a belief in one’s social inferiority?” (4).
Thus disability is distinctive paradoxically in its potential universality, and in its
acknowledgement that anomaly exists. To explain this last point further, much of the work in
gender studies, for example, was not exclusively done with the aim of proving that women are
equally as capable as men, but also to dismantle ideas of gendered hegemony in which the
masculine is the standard and the feminine is the deviant from that standard. And similarly,
disability studies works at dismantling the notion of “normalcy,” embodied in the idealized
notion of the able-bodied, as the standard against which other bodies are measured. This
dismantling tendency is particularly suited to the comics medium, whose intersections of the
visual and the textual and simultaneity of presence and absence likewise undermine the tendency
toward narrative normalcy.

Following this project of dismantling the conception of the normal, *Epileptic* situates
Jean-Christophe and his disease within a nonlinear spectrum of experience, in which the
materiality of the disabled body (usually Jean-Christophe’s) is both an embodied and a socially
created “deviance.” *Epileptic* shows both the very real and lived physical constraints that Jean-
Christophe must live with, but it also shows how some of those constraints are socially
constructed and externally imposed limitations. Moreover, B. includes his brother’s particular
experiences within a wider network of embodied and social experiences, from David’s own
socially formed limitations to the coincidence of disability with historical trauma. While
*Epileptic* does not present a way of overcoming the social limitations of disability, the text does
depict tensions between the bodily limitations and the social. B.’s work shows, as Susan M.
Squier writes, “not only the seizures that leave Jean-Christophe impaired by bruises and disorientation, but also the social response to those seizures that render his epilepsy a pervasive, intractable disability” (Squier “So Long” 75). In responding to and representing his brother’s experiences of impairment and disability, B. creates a text that actually offers an alternative model for understanding many forms of embodied difference.

**Envisioning Embodiment: Witnessing and Representing Jean-Christophe’s Physical Disability**

Epilepsy is indeed a physical affliction, one that remains in some ways a mystery to contemporary medicine, and Jean-Christophe’s case is particularly severe. Save a few periods of remission, Jean-Christophe experiences on average three seizures a day. The text opens with the two adult brothers meeting in the bathroom at their parents’ house in 1994, and the physical effects of epilepsy are manifested in Jean-Christophe’s bodily form (figure 6.1): “There are scars all over his body. His eyebrows are crisscrossed by scabs. The back of his head is bald, from all the times he’s fallen. He’s enormously bloated from medication and lack of exercise” (2).

Figure 6.1: the brothers as physical opposites (2).
This description and the accompanying images, however, focus on the secondary physical effects of epilepsy, that is, on the damage inflicted as a result of the seizures, not the seizures themselves.

While the very first page of the memoir sets up the brothers as near-total opposites, with Jean-Christophe as a huge, slow, almost monstrous-looking bulk next to David’s “normal” frame, the text immediately switches on the following page to the near-identical appearance of the brothers as very young boys. It thus appears that the central project of the memoir is to explain how the image of the brothers on the first page came to be, given their similarities in the second page. B. offers a complicated and conflicting view of his brother, at times rejecting Jean-Christophe’s disability entirely, while at others portraying with a deep sensibility the limitations and frustrations he encounters, along with David’s utter disgust with the “outsiders’” reactions to his brother. B. resists the idea that a disease or disorder—in this case, epilepsy—reflects the inherent spiritual, mental, or emotional qualities of a person.

Describing Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy as a disability is somewhat problematic—and that very problematic nature is something B. addresses explicitly in the memoir. Today, in 2013, epilepsy is considered not a disease (which connotes contagion) or an illness (which connotes weakness and lifelessness) but a disorder. The following section outlines the mechanics of epilepsy from a contemporary medical standpoint, followed by a very brief explanation of the historical understanding of epilepsy as a spiritual ailment made physical. This section provides a context for understanding Jean-Christophe, whose epilepsy is a disorder that does not limit itself to the moment of seizure but creates a host of attendant biomechanical and psychological processes.

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I use the term “disorder” to refer to Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy throughout this chapter because, while it is negative, it is at least slightly less problematic than “illness” or “disease.”
The term “disorder” still has some negative implications, most notably its characterization of normalcy versus deviance and its associations with chaos (literally, a lack of order), and to re-label epilepsy as a disorder is to situate it within a spectrum of both physical and psychological anomalies. “The word ‘epilepsy’ has a long history of social stigma. But epilepsy is nothing more than a brain disorder caused by uncontrolled, excessive synchronous electrical activity” (“What is Epilepsy?”). The actual biomechanical processes of a seizure are understood as too many axons in the brain becoming “excited” (that is, neuro-electrically charged) at once, causing falls, spasms, muscular contractions, or broadly speaking, a lack of fine and gross muscle control. During the post-ictal phase (that is, the moments directly following the actual seizure), the brain is in a state of recovery from its excessive excitation. As a result, the individual may be tired, sluggish, disoriented, depressed, or angry as their brain recovers; “a person’s level of awareness gradually improves during the post-ictal period (“What Is Epilepsy?”).

In a video intended to help newly diagnosed patients or people who are just beginning to learn about epilepsy, a doctor calmly explains that “although these seizures are distressing to watch, the person having them is unaware. We don’t believe that seizures are painful” (“Understanding Generalized Seizures”). While the doctor is undoubtedly very calm and well-meaning, his words still indicate the peculiar position epilepsy holds in the medical community and in social arenas more broadly. Seizures remain within the realm of mystery, at least to some extent, as those who have seizures cannot describe them; they can only describe their feelings before and after to varying degrees, depending on the seizure’s severity and type, and the person’s experiences in the post-ictal phase. Moreover, the doctor’s insistence that “we don’t believe” seizures are painful actually implies “but they might be.” Treatment of epilepsy is
equally convoluted, as we can see from the long list of treatment options in the contemporary
for use by medical practitioners and clinicians treating patients diagnosed with epilepsy. Anti-
seizure medication has varying degrees of success and a vast range of side effects, both physical
and psychological; the *Handbook* spends over 300 pages detailing treatment options.

Epileptic seizures still remain within the realm of mystery, at least to some extent, as
those who have seizures cannot describe them; they can only describe their feelings before and
after to varying degrees, depending on the seizure’s severity and type, and the person’s
experiences in the post-ictal phase. Thus one of the fundamental stumbling blocks for B.’s work
is the necessary distance between his position as a spectator to his brother’s disorder and his
brother’s actual experience. Of course distance always exists between lived and narrated
experiences, as I discussed above in the chapter on *Fun Home*. However, epilepsy’s physical and
psychological realities render this distance even more pronounced. Jean-Christophe cannot
remember his seizures, much less describe them to someone else, keeping his disorder
mysterious and unspeakable.

Due in part to this enigmatic nature of the disorder, *Epileptic* simultaneously works
within and against the historical and stereotypical understanding of epilepsy. Harriet Murav
describes the historical conception of epilepsy as divided between a spiritual ailment, like the
demonic possession that Jesus cures, and a reflection of the individual’s personality:

Medical literature in the 1860s and 1870s developed a profile of what was thought of as
the epileptic personality. The intervals between seizures became subject to medical
investigation, since it was believed that as a consequence of repeated attacks, the
epileptic patient underwent a profound change in his character and moral convictions…
[Dr. A. U.] Freze noted abrupt mood changes in his patients, from gloomy silence to cheerful expansiveness. Pervading these mood changes is an undercurrent of violence. 

Epileptics were characterized as deceitful, sly, and hypocritical. (78)

This historical understanding of epilepsy creates a kind of epileptic “type” or “personality,” an indicator of an underlying violent or depressive disposition.

Contemporary medical thought now believes the inverse relationship is true, and the Handbook does in fact acknowledge the social and psychological effects epilepsy may have on an individual. It briefly addresses the increased suicide rate among sufferers of epilepsy as well as the vastly increased likelihood of psychological comorbidity (that is, the likelihood of having or developing a psychological disease like depression or psychosis in addition to one’s epilepsy).

And while earlier medical literature characterizes epilepsy as caused by these underlying psychiatric or psychological maladies, contemporary medicine notes that some factors—both medical, like side effects from therapeutic drugs, and social, like employment and driver’s license restrictions—can increase a patient’s likelihood of developing psychosis, depression, or anxiety (Shorvon 75-80). Even so contemporary experts remain unclear on the exact nature of the relationship between the seizures themselves and psychological comorbidity.

The unknown and uneven relationship between the psychological and the physical vis-à-vis epilepsy plays a substantial role in Epileptic. While today’s understanding and treatment of epilepsy seems daunting and reflects a complicated intertwining of the physical and the psychological, in 1964, when Jean-Christophe has his first seizure, medical practices were even less straightforward. B.’s depiction of Jean-Christophe’s seizures early on is clinically detached (figure 6.2):
Suddenly [Jean-Christophe] stops talking and freezes up. He turns all red, a foolish grin spreads across his face, and his eyes seek us out, as if to cling to us. Suddenly, he falls off to the side, whimpering. His limbs go taut, his eyes roll back in his head, he drools a little. Sometimes the seizure ends there. Sometimes he comes back, relaxes, but his eyes remain unfocused. It looks like he’s pausing on the frontier between the two worlds. Then he falls again. When he comes out of it, he looks surprised. (33)

The language and the image here are both straightforward, factual, without emotional involvement, as if B. is playing the role of clinician.

Figure 6.2: First full description of Jean-Christophe’s seizure (33).

Despite this early straightforward depiction of epilepsy and what his brother endures, B. often questions the extent of Jean-Christophe’s physical and mental faculties, by turns convinced of his brother’s able-bodied-ness, and suspicious that there is a deeper underlying condition that, if treated, would ameliorate Jean-Christophe’s condition. And yet B. also, in subtle ways, echoes his understanding of Jean-Christophe’s experiences through various characters’ visual encounters with social and historical hardships. That is, B. enacts what Mitchell and Snyder call
“the disruption of a reader’s identification with fictional ideals of normalcy through encounters with ‘transgressive disabilities’” (40). Jean-Christophe’s body and mind present us with an image of an “unwhole” body, a subject in pieces, and this image reflects back to us our own versions of fragmentation. In proposing a nonlinear spectrum of embodied and visible human experience, B. undermines those problematic categories of “normal” and “disabled.”

As Squier writes, “In its juxtaposition of narrative to a range of realist and surrealist images, this graphic memoir conveys both the terrible facticity and the nearly-mythic nature of Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy and treatment” (“Literature and Medicine” 132). The text moves between these two poles: the reality, or the embodied experience; and the “mythic” or the mysterious nature of the illness that takes away from Jean-Christophe’s own sense of self. As noted earlier, Jean Christophe’s epilepsy is severe and debilitating. Beginning at age seven, he starts experiencing seizures, which routinely become more and more regular, until he has them about three times a day, “like clockwork, imposing a rhythm on our lives” (79).

Figure 6.3: “the endless round of doctors” (11).
With his first seizure “begins the endless round of doctors, for my brother and my parents,” literalized as a chain of doctors dancing and holding hands forms a menacing ring around Jean-Christophe and his parents (figure 6.3), a visual representation of the encroaching and confusing Western medical approach to treating the disease with little regard for the “associated” patient (11). The family first turns to their French doctors and standard Western medicine, and within the rapid space of three short panels the family has already visited three different doctors, each of whom is unequipped to treat Jean-Christophe and refers him onward. One of these doctors even determines that Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy is a result of his being a “bad boy,” seemingly a holdover from nineteenth-century belief in the “epileptic personality” (11).

In 1969, at the age of thirteen, Jean-Christophe’s parents bring him to the hospital for testing under a neurological specialist. There, “[the doctors] perform gaseous encephalograms on him. They shoot gas into his brain to inflate it so they can take photos, in which they hope to find traces of a lesion or a tumor. When my parents tell me about it, I visualize my brother in the clutches of mad scientists” (41). Pictured with his head shaved and dozens of tubes and pieces of machinery encircling him, Jean-Christophe appears a passive victim of an intrusive procedure (figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4: Jean-Christophe as body and symptom (41).
His bald head, visibly signifying Jean-Christophe’s change from “normal” to “patient,” occupies the center of the elongated panel, with only the crown of the head to the bridge of the nose visible. This panel thus presents Jean-Christophe as body and symptom—and therefore the focus of medical intervention—rather than as an individual, an image that reflects the doctors’ attitudes towards him. Indeed, the specialist (Professor T.) does not even answer the parents’ questions; “It’s always a brusque doctor who answers for him” (41).

The attitude of this doctor perfectly encapsulates the cavalier manner with which the medical establishment treats Jean-Christophe. When asked if the encephalograms cause him pain, the “brusque doctor” responds: “They injected gas into his brain. Of course it hurts!” (41). This disregard for the pain of the patient is an indication of the doctors’ general lack of feeling for the patient as an individual; to them, he is not Jean-Christophe Beauchard but “the case”: “He will allow Professor T. to perform a brilliant operation. What do the results matter so long as the surgeon cuts with elegance and precision under the admiring gaze of his assistants?” (44). Indeed, the original French is even more damning: “Jean-Christophe est le ‘cas.’ Il va permettre au professeur T. de réaliser une brillante opération” (43). The pronoun “il” could be either “he,” referring to Jean-Christophe, or “it,” referring to “le cas,” “the case”, thus further removing agency and personhood from Jean-Christophe.

Surgery— and even the discussions about surgery— thus become a kind of performance of “elegance and precision,” and in this respect B. draws parallels between the practice of medicine and the more esoteric and alternative methods of treatment the Beauchards explore in their quest to heal Jean-Christophe. Many of the paths the Beauchards explore involve a performative aspect, from chewing one’s food a certain number of times in the macrobiotic commune, to the “magnetization” rituals in which each family member must shake and turn a
small canister every half hour, to the Catholic exorcism, and so on. All of these treatments have several common aspects: they all rely in some way on the exploitation of the Beauchard family for their own gain (be that financial gain or, as with Professor T., a gain in reputation and prestige), and they all involve a visible act that corresponds with an invisible treatment for an invisible disease. Illness or disability becomes not only a bodily affliction to be normalized and rectified at any (financial or emotional) cost, as the memoir depicts the family’s desperate search, but the treatments are a means of bridging the visible gap between the disabled body and the “normal” one.

The very medium itself is thus a way of echoing this performance, as Squier notes: “Comics can show us things that can’t be said, just as they can narrate experiences without relying on words, and in their juxtaposition of words and pictures, they can also convey a far richer sense of the different magnitudes at which we experience any performance of illness, disability, medical treatment, or healing” (“Literature and Medicine” 130). By performing—importantly, for an audience—a given act of healing, the family and the treatment practitioners also perform acts of defining Jean-Christophe’s illness as disruptive and therefore as “abnormal” and inferior.

Indeed, the doctors seem far more concerned with the prestige and the success of the specialist than with the safety and well-being of their young patient. After a long discussion of the procedure they propose to perform, which would entail cutting into a removing a small portion of Jean-Christophe’s brain, they nonchalantly reel off the potential side effects of the surgery:

With the help of slides, he shows us how he’s going to open his skull and take away the ‘thing’ that, according to him, is causing the epileptic seizures. He goes into a big
medical show-and-tell. He explains that this is a very delicate operation, that if his scalpel is off by so much half a millimeter, my brother will be blind. He lists all the possible outcomes if his knife slips. If he cuts here, my brother loses the use of all his limbs. There, he loses the use of his right arm, there, he’ll be deaf. My mother faints. Professor T. reassures her: None of this will happen because he’s a man of such exceptional skill. (43)

Again, B.’s artwork heightens the feeling of anxiety and the traumatic visual encounter at the hospital (figure 6.5). The first three panels depict Professor T. pointing at the enlarged images of Jean-Christophe’s brain, with the silhouettes of the parents as captive audience. The parents—and by extension, the reader—are now viewing the images acquired through the painful encephalograms, the process that transforms Jean-Christophe into the traumatized victim. So on the one hand the sight of these slides is horrifying, as evidenced by the mother’s fainting; yet on the other hand the text is still, perversely, participating in the same system of visual violence.

Figure 6.5: Dissecting Jean-Christophe (43).
Equally important are the ways in which Jean-Christophe is also caught in a visual exchange during this same visit to the hospital. Jean-Christophe “finds himself in a room with a boy who’s been operated on by Professor T. It’s his third operation. He’s got a 105-degree fever and his right side is paralyzed. Professor T. has claimed that the paralysis is temporary. But he’s been like this for fifteen days” (40-41). Bald, emaciated, and sweating profusely in striped pajamas, the boy presents a disturbing image of the specialist’s results (figure 6.6).

In an image that contains a number of visual echoes with the victims of the Nazi concentration camps—a point I will return to in more detail later—the striped pajamas and shaved head recall the Nazi persecution of the disabled. B. draws our attention not only to the victimization of disabled bodies in modern medical practice, but to the intersections of this victimization with specific historical moments. The young patient is, in a way, a prisoner of the hospital, and the doctor’s cold demeanor mimics, to a certain extent, the extreme detachment and dehumanization of concentration camp medical practices. Like Watchmen and No Towers, in Epileptic, the Holocaust functions as an aesthetic and thematic touchstone employed in order to emphasize
both individual suffering and the historical context and implications for this kind of victimization.

At this moment in the hospital, the narrative slows down as both reader and characters linger on the image of the young patient; the five short sentences cited above appear as captions above four panels, as each panel shows the boy lying in the hospital bed, the image rotating from “west” to “north” to “east” to “south.” It is as if the narrative slows down and spins around the boy and his weak, incapacitated body, a portent of what Jean-Christophe might become. This sense is heightened as the first two panels of this series are larger than their preceding panels, creating a sense of time slowing and space expanding. The third and fourth panel—with the patient pointing “east” and “south”—is the first panel on the following page, so the reader’s eyes must travel from the bottom of one page, across the binding seam of the book, and up to the top of the next page to continue this scene. (In the original version, the reader must actually turn the page to continue this scene, creating an even slower reading experience and affecting the sense of time, since the impression of the whole scene is blocked.)

The larger panels echo and enhance Jean-Christophe’s act of watching the patient—made even more complicated as the reader also watches Jean-Christophe in that first panel. Indeed, in the first panel of this scene, Jean-Christophe stands in the background, staring at the boy (see again figure 6.6). B. presents no hint at what he might be thinking as he watches. Interestingly, then, Jean-Christophe is here put in the same position of viewer that David occupies throughout most of the text. The patient is a visible and visual indication of what Jean-Christophe’s body might become, in much the same way as the disabled body is often configured as confronting the viewer with one’s own lack of bodily whole-ness. John Berger summarizes the reciprocal relationship between viewer and object of the gaze: “We never look at just one thing; we are
always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger 9). Jean-Christophe’s visual encounter with the other young patient is therefore an encounter between the two boys, in which Jean-Christophe and the patient are visually and metaphorically associated with one another. This section of *Epileptic*’s opening chapter thus reveals the paradox of Jean-Christophe’s illness: the visual shock of encountering another sick body reveals that body as simultaneously powerless and threatening.

The scene in the hospital further exemplifies David’s own response to Jean-Christophe’s illness. He can only visualize his brother, making sense of the unexplainable through visual imagination. Just as the doctors examine Jean-Christophe, so too the memoir examines him, dissects him—sometimes literally as the panels break his body into pieces (43, 226, 317). Although it may seem that the text exoticizes and medicalizes Jean-Christophe’s body, rendering him disabled and limited even while B. proclaims to be working against this, B. is actually creating a reflection of the medical establishment’s approach in order to emphasize its horrific qualities. While such panels do indeed dissect Jean-Christophe’s body, they do so not from a place of morbid fascination or performative healing, but to move feelings of shock away from the sight of the disabled body and on to the sight of the medical and social mechanisms by which that body is constructed.

B. seems to want to reclaim this notion of disability, using it to complicate the notions of “normal” and “abnormal,” but the text nonetheless offers a complicated relationship between the body and the self, a notion bound up with the act of looking. Like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, looking, gazing, and watching form the acts of identity formation interwoven with moments of shock, violence, and sometimes trauma. Although B. seems to want to resist the categorization of his brother as disabled, much of the memoir is dedicated to showing the ways that Jean-
Christophe, David, and the family are indeed socially limited by the disease (or, inversely, the ways that the family is limited by society’s understanding of the disease).

**Disorder in Drawing: Destabilizing Images to Represent Disability**

Paradoxically, from his position of witness, B. cannot portray Jean-Christophe from any other perspective than that of the outsider examining the patient. However, B. does try to find ways to resist overly stereotypical literary depictions of disability while still employing visual and literary devices. For example, B. concretizes the “unseeable” disease by depicting a dragon or a monster simultaneously springing from and attacking Jean-Christophe as he has a seizure. Alongside the actuality (the lived experience) of this disease portrayed in the panels described earlier, then, B. also anthropomorphizes it and makes it fantastic. At one point, Jean-Christophe goes to a boarding school for handicapped students, where “they show him a locker where he can put his stuff” (141). The accompanying panel image shows him literally stuffing the epilepsy-dragon into the locker; epilepsy is thus rendered as a physical object that he must carry with him (figure 6.7). Doing so both depicts epilepsy as concrete and tangible—the dragon endures long after the seizure has passed—and emphasizes its incomprehensible, uncontrollable nature.

Figure 6.7: “a locker where he can put all his stuff” (141).
David understands through visual metaphor the experience of his brother’s illness: epilepsy is figured as both a monster emerging from and attacking Jean-Christophe, and a mountain that Jean-Christophe and the family must climb up with every seizure (figure 6.8, 78). Both of these visual metaphors represent different aspects of the brother’s epilepsy: on the one hand, the dragon is the disorder’s paradoxically ephemeral physicality, a bodily affliction hidden inside the brain that cannot be pinned down and cured—its mythos, its incomprehensibility, its mutability, its viciousness, and its disruptiveness. On the other hand, the mountain is epilepsy’s insurmountability, its largess, and also its naturalness, its lack of surreality, its concreteness, its real and normal, un-alien appearance.

![Figure 6.8: epilepsy as dragon and mountain (78).](image)

Although both of these images—the dragon and the mountain—clearly function as metaphor, in his visual depictions B. turns these metaphors into something more tangible, making his interior interpretations into the visible exterior experiences of the family. Through his
particular use of metaphor, B. resists the overdetermination of epilepsy as something that stands for all experience of difference or abnormality. He subtly points to the ways in which David is as flawed as his brother, rather than enacting what Susan Sontag calls “punitive notions of disease:”

Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease meaning— that meaning being invariably a moralistic one. Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival.

B.’s use of these metaphors functions, in part, as a kind of resistance to the stereotypical use of disability in literature: that is, rather than using disease and disability as a metaphor or allegory for something else (e.g. political commentary, emotional or moral stances, etc), here metaphor works in the service of the illness itself, making its widespread effects more concrete and, paradoxically, more obscure.

Likewise the very form of the graphic memoir allows for a way of representing disability and its effects, while also maintaining a necessary (visual) ambiguity. *Epileptic* thus foregrounds the potential within the comics medium to undermine conventional narrative limitations and represent trauma and memory through its ability to function in between spaces of vision, text, and image. Near the end of the book in particular, B. designs several panels with the body or the head of Jean-Christophe or himself as the frame (figure 6.9, 301). On this page, for example, Jean-Christophe’s body is twisted around the set of images in the center of the page. The body-as-frame depicts Jean-Christophe in one of the stages of a seizure, recognizable from earlier
passages in the text that depict such scenes within panels (see, for example, page 235). B.’s normal pattern of orderly, regularly spaced and framed panels does not exist here; instead, the panels within the frame of Jean-Christophe’s body themselves have rough, wavy edges set against a black background. It is as if Jean-Christophe’s body contains these panels—or this narrative—within itself, indicating the inescapability, both narratively and physically, of the body, especially the disabled body. The body appears to literally bind and contain the narrative.

Figure 6.9: Jean-Christophe’s body as frame (301).
Here, moreover, the narrative that this body contains indicates the kind of emotional, unpredictable, and unstructured (or differently structured) experiences of both Jean-Christophe and David. The black background and the ill-defined boundaries between panels (see, particularly, the two panels in the center) give the impression of a loss of order and structure, pointing instead to the lack of distinction between episodes and discrete units. Indeed, as the text becomes increasingly chaotic and B. begins drawing his own dreams, his fantasies, and his brother’s “prophecies,” these moments remain confined within the physical body, as on pages 278-279, where David’s head forms the border around panels depicting the subjects of his short stories that he wrote in the 1970’s.

The physicality of the body thus plays a central role in B.’s complex depiction of disability. B. in some ways does exoticize the disabled body, thereby maintaining the normal/disabled binary, yet he is simultaneously complicating this binary, demonstrating its failures and nuances, especially as he uses his own head as the frame of some panels. Thus even his own body becomes the limit of the narrative, just as Jean-Christophe’s is the limit at other points. And yet, in using Jean-Christophe’s body as the frame of the panel, B. paradoxically resists the characterization of Mitchell and Snyder that “[t]he effort to narrate disability’s myriad deviations is an attempt to bring the body’s unruliness under control” (6). Rather than bringing Jean-Christophe’s body under narrative control, the comics medium allows a representation of that which the body itself controls and contains.

However, Epileptic does not make either Jean-Christophe or epilepsy itself more understandable, but rather both concretizes and communicates David’s own experiences as the one relegated to the position of a passive viewer. At several different points, David wonders what goes on in Jean-Christophe’s mind: “What happens to my brother when he has a seizure?
Does he depart from his body and go somewhere else? Or does he instead plunge deep down inside himself? Does he float into the fourth dimension? Or does he visit other worlds ruled by geometries unknown on Earth…?” (226). These questions are never resolved; David (and, it appears, Jean-Christophe) remain ignorant of the exact mechanisms that occur in the mind during a seizure. Epilepsy remains unknowable and enigmatic, or, to be overtly Lacanian, within the realm of the Real, that which exists outside of language and comprehension.

In an effort to resist our becoming accustomed to its tricks, B. employs these ever-changing techniques to destabilize and disorient the reader. *Epileptic* thus places us in the same position as David, watching a seizure and being helpless to do anything, and searching for an impossible cure for an incomprehensible disease. As Michael Chaney proposes:

The narrative positions readers as epileptics by forcing us to see chaotically, frenetically, wildly… the narrative design of *Epileptic* may leave readers feeling overwhelmed by panels teeming with inky, overwrought visual details of marauding samurai and prancing chimera. The urgency of reading is not for the cure, however, but for a stable paradigm (a sinthome) that will help us to make sense of and perhaps find pleasure in the disorienting surplus, hyperreal in its signifying yet garbled plenitude. As we strive to distinguish the miniature effects of weapon-brandishing warrior hordes, or the yin from the yang elements in various panels, so too must Pierre François (David B.) and his parents labor to distinguish hoaxes from healing, hypocrisy from hope. (141)

The overwhelming visual aspects of the narrative serve this multifold purpose of mirroring the Beauchard family’s experiences searching for a cure on the one hand, as Chaney describes, and the impossibility of either curing or fully understanding Jean-Christophe’s disorder on the other. Relegated as he is to the position of external spectator to Jean-Christophe’s seizures, B.’s only
recourse are his fantastical pictures, his surreal imagery that can help him, and in turn the viewer, render the chaos of his life tangible.

Thus when I say the text interrupts itself and becomes disorienting, I want to make it clear that I do not mean that these textual elements give us a similar effect to a seizure. Rather, the text employs various slips, symbols and structures to reflect B.’s own life experiences as the audience to the seizure. Using these techniques reveals again the propensity of the comics medium toward the possibilities for representing trauma—here, both familial and medical—through the intersections of text and image and through the structure and ordering of panels on a page. The comics page allows for multiple images and notions to be present simultaneously, with each panel functioning both like a window onto David B.’s life and like a knot into which the various threads of the narrative are tied. The text’s propensity towards interrupting itself, then, is a function of its medium. Because comics allow for the space between image and text to become a tangible presence on the page, those ambiguous spaces become sites for potential narrative and representational instability and disorientation.

Furthermore, these interruptions become one of the organizing principles of the narrative, again echoing the organization of the family and David’s identity around Jean-Christophe and his disease. Like the seizures that interrupt daily life, the text interrupts itself, disorients us, and leaves us as viewers momentarily stunned. The very structure of the panels themselves at times takes on a kind of visual agency, the result of which is at times disorienting and confusing. For example, when B. introduces the Swedenborgian church that their mother turns to after the Ouija boards fail to offer any relief for Jean-Christophe, he does so in a thoroughly confusing manner (figure 6.10, 155). If we begin reading this page along the standard trajectory for French and English readers, we become lost: the second “panel” does not logically follow the first. Linearly,
the captions read: “Despite the séances, the memory of my grandfather continues to haunt my mother. Swedenborg is born in 1688 in Stockholm. He studies philosophy, algebra, engineering, and physics. He is accepted into the Royal Academy of Uppsala and writes a number of papers there. She contacts the pastor referred to her by Abellio. He is a member of the Swedenborgian church” (155).
Instead the reader must realize the “third” panel (the third sentence above) is actually the second, and the “second” panel belongs to the large image that takes up the rest of the page. Because the upper section of this page looks identical to the previous page, with a trio of uniformly spaced and sized panels, we assume these panels are to be read in the same manner as previously (and as is standard). B. then undoes our complacency, resisting the easy flow of narrative, by undermining this standard practice and leaving the reader momentarily disoriented. That is, formally speaking, the text deviates from “the norm,” the standard reading trajectory.

In a similar fashion, B. employs a technique that borders on illusion for the layout of other pages, creating an almost Escher-like confusion in the viewer. At the end of book five and the beginning of book 6, for example, the panels visually perform in a way that resembles a blivet or the “devil’s tuning fork” illusion, or the rabbit/duck illusion (164-65). The devil’s tuning fork is an impossible figure, one whose position shifts as we look at it; at one end, it appears to have three tines, while at the other end, it can obviously only support two tines. The rabbit/duck illusion, meanwhile, is a single figure that contains two potential images (either a rabbit or a duck, depending on perspective and how one’s eyes focus).

A similar illusory effect occurs here in *Epileptic* (figure 6.11). To look at these pages from one perspective, it seems that the central panel covers or obscures the two side panels; yet from another perspective it seems the two side panels cover up the outside edges of the central panel. The visual stability of the page layout is disrupted, mirroring the disorientation that David and Jean-Christophe experience. Destabilizing the reader in this way echoes David’s instability as the spectator to his brother’s disorder, a visual instability made possible through the comics medium.
Figure 6.11: the layout of the page echoes the “devil’s tuning fork” (164).

Picturing Impairment: the Social Imposition of Disability

The disorientation discussed in the previous section is not solely a physical experience for Jean-Christophe and, to a certain extent, David, but also a social one. Sontag notes “[t]here is a peculiarly modern predilection for psychological explanations of disease, as of everything else. Psychologizing seems to provide control over the experiences and events… over which people
have in fact little or no control” (Sontag 55). *Epileptic’s* form and content not only demonstrate how both characters encounter this kind of psychologizing, but they also illustrate the social construction of impairment and the resulting physical, social, and psychological limitations.

David B. offers a complicated and conflicting view of his brother, at times rejecting Jean-Christophe’s disability entirely, while at others portraying with a deep sensibility the limitations and frustrations he encounters, along with David’s utter disgust with the reactions of public spectators to his brother’s illness. In part because he views his brother as at times choosing to be ill, David sometimes ascribes moral and psychological reasons and causes to Jean-Christophe’s disorder (142, 213, 342). That is, David sometimes fulfills Sontag’s caution against psychologizing illness: “Illness is interpreted as, basically, a psychological event, and people are encouraged to believe they get sick because they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will” (Sontag 56-57). In creating such a moral and psychological link to his disorder, Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy moves beyond a physical limitation and becomes a social impairment.

Disability studies began early on by “distinguishing between impairment—the individual limitation linked to a medically based problem that impairs one or more basic life functions—and disability—the individual limitation produced by society’s failure to accommodate to the impairment” (Squier “So Long” 73). *Epileptic* explores the lines between these approaches to illness within the character of Jean-Christophe, whose physical body as we have seen is in some ways able and whole, yet simultaneously fractured and limited, and who must also grapple with the socially imposed limitations of his situation.

The text presents a split in the disabled person between the weak and the powerful, the victim and the perpetrator. Both Jean-Christophe and David enact this dualism, as each is victim
and perpetrator. Jean-Christophe is undoubtedly epilepsy’s victim, and by extension (although through very different mechanisms) so is David. However, B. also presents Jean-Christophe as an individual who perpetuates physical and emotional violence both intentionally and unintentionally. As he gets older, Jean-Christophe becomes more violent, at various points throwing hot soup at his mother, punching his father, threatening his siblings with knives, shouting angry heavy metal lyrics, attempting to destroy all of David’s artwork, and so on. B. portrays Jean-Christophe as sullen, awkward, and socially stunted; he cannot seem to make friends his own age, and near the end of the memoir David and his sister Florence have to leave their parents’ house, where they’re gathered for the holidays, because their presence upsets Jean-Christophe too much. In addition, Jean-Christophe never finishes his high school degree, even after moving to a school for handicapped students after his seizures become too disruptive for “regular” classrooms.

Indeed, several other characters construe Jean-Christophe as other, and more than that, as inferior (though to be Othered is often also to be made less than or deviant). The boys’ own grandmother tells David at one point that Jean-Christophe “got the slows,” conflating the

Figure 6.12: A crowd looking at Jean-Christophe’s seizure (107).

Indeed, several other characters construe Jean-Christophe as other, and more than that, as inferior (though to be Othered is often also to be made less than or deviant). The boys’ own grandmother tells David at one point that Jean-Christophe “got the slows,” conflating the
physical disease with its associated but misunderstood psychological and mental issues (227). At one point the police even arrest Jean-Christophe as he has a seizure and then beat him, believing him to be on drugs rather than actually sick (299). Spectators who gather to watch Jean-Christophe’s seizures in public offer such helpful advice as “He ought to be locked up!” and “He’s crazy!” (figure 6.12, 107). B. often draws these spectators with heavy emphasis on their eyes (see pages 107, 235-36, etc), accentuating their participation in the social spectacle of disability. That is, B. entwines their physical appearance and their part in constructing the disabled body as spectacle, making their own bodies as visible and legible as the body they disparage.

Early on, Jean-Christophe’s seizures are treated with some success with a macrobiotic diet, massage, and acupuncture. However, after approximately six months of being seizure-free, Jean-Christophe experiences one while on a train with his mother; “the man sharing the compartment with them gets up to leave, furious... slamming the door behind him;” the man’s anger is visible on his face (71-72). Here B. presents us with one scene of public disgust and suspicion in the form of this man’s (over)reaction, literally depicting the social construction of disability as not just deviant or “abnormal” as a personal affront.

The scene continues with a narration of the mother’s reaction: “My mother is devastated by this seizure, which comes after six months’ respite. In her mind, this sends us all the way back to square one. She has a vision of her son back in the hospital, his head shaved. It’s as if she’s being pulled backwards” (72). The text thus presents a convergence of public disgust and anger with the mother’s despair, but nowhere on these pages do we have Jean-Christophe’s feelings or reactions. While the mother’s reaction is obviously much more sympathetic, this particular scene emphasizes that Jean-Christophe’s family is indeed searching for that which will make him
“normal,” even while simultaneously trying to find a way to adapt their lives to include his difference. In addition, the total absence of Jean-Christophe’s reaction to this scene has a twofold effect: on one hand, it keeps epilepsy—and, unfortunately, by extension Jean-Christophe—in the realm of the unknowable and unspeakable; and it places the emphasis on the social web in which Jean-Christophe finds himself defined as epileptic, as inseparable from his disorder.

Much later, during a family vacation, Jean-Christophe has a seizure on the parapet of a castle. As David and the boys’ father try to take care of him, a crowd forms. Their faces and, especially, their eyes grow larger, filling the background of the panels, so that their stares create a sense of crowding, oppression, and claustrophobia within the panels. At one point the reader is positioned as one of the members of the crowd, implicating the reader in the construction of Jean-Christophe’s body as spectacle (figure 6.13).

Indeed, the focus here is much more on the spectators as spectacle than on the seizure as spectacle. Significantly David no longer blames or resents Jean-Christophe for this scene, but the public around them: “God, I despise people like that. These nice, normal people—their gaze is burned into my memory” (236). This perhaps is a reflection of David’s growing awareness of the
role society has played in Jean-Christophe’s experience of disability. That is, while David is perhaps more accustomed to the sight of a seizure by this point (he is now in his late teens) he is still unaccustomed to the spectacle his brother produces.

At this moment, David realizes his mother has disappeared as Jean-Christophe has this seizure, because she couldn’t take the pressure of being surrounded—yet again—by onlookers. David characterizes her actions here as a kind of betrayal, saying that while he understood her desire to leave, he had forced himself to stay, in order to not abandon Jean-Christophe: “I’m upset at her for letting us down at that moment. But I would dearly have loved to do the same. I would dearly have loved to be elsewhere. I forced myself to stay. She should’ve stayed too. We owe my brother this solidarity” (238). The mother’s escape is both a betrayal to the sense that she has been the nurturing figure throughout most of the text, and an indication of the ways in which the spectacle of the disabled body is not limited to Jean-Christophe, but extends to those who care for him. The family members are the ones who must deal with the paramedics and the police, who must calm the crowds that gather, who feel the gaze of the spectators at least as much as Jean-Christophe feels them.

After touring the castle, the family visits a school for disabled children, where a friend works and teaches. Passing by one room, the boys see another child having a seizure in a bed: “I’ve never seen anyone other than my brother have a seizure. It fascinates me” (247). The panel shows the two boys standing in the doorway, gazing intently at the figure on the bed in the foreground. This image echoes the earlier scene in which Jean-Christophe faces the paralyzed young patient recovering from brain surgery. Interestingly, whereas David’s position as mere spectator to Jean-Christophe’s seizures is the source (or symptom) of much of David’s distress, here he seems to almost exalt or take pleasure in his role as spectator. He stands “fascinated” by
the sight—the visible encounter—of someone else going through ostensibly the same motions his brother goes through daily.

Thus while the sight of Jean-Christophe’s contortions disturbs David’s sense of power and his sense of full-bodied-ness, the sight of this other person actually serves as an un-alien act; David is fascinated not by the boy’s otherness, but by his “sameness,” as it were. (A similar phenomenon occurs much later, when David meets a college friend’s epileptic friend: “I thought all epileptics were like my brother, their lives chopped into little bits by their seizures. And now I see someone who’s at peace. That does me good” [312]). In this way, the visual encounter with disability places Jean-Christophe within a web of relative “able-ness” and within the same passive gazing position as David. Within this single panel, then, Jean-Christophe and David are both situated within the nonlinear spectrum of embodied experience; Jean-Christophe is no longer the exclusive example of the disabled or “extreme” body, nor is David the exclusive audience member.

Reacting to the boys’ stares, their mother offers the following piece of insight: “He’s probably upset that you’re looking at him like some strange beast;” to which David, in the captions, responds: “In the state he’s in I doubt he can tell, but whatever. I go back to my drawings [for the children]. Parents are always trying to shield us from sights that might traumatize us” (247). The mother here seems to find the act of looking to be a kind of violation; while David interprets her response as a protective measure for her own children, there is also an element of protection for the epileptic sufferer, as if she wants to shield him from their eyes. What is it about looking at the suffering patient that would be so traumatic? Indeed, this encounter seems to have the opposite effect on David. Accustomed as he is to the position of
viewer, his fascination is short-lived as he responds nonchalantly and returns to drawing—that is, he returns to another kind of visual encounter.

Jean-Christophe’s reaction, meanwhile, is somewhat more complicated and more ambiguous. On that same page, he declares that he wants “to be an educator for handicapped children” (247). It is as if this encounter—where he faces a body like his own, at a school similar to the one he attended in his late teen years—creates in Jean-Christophe a need to assert his own abilities rather than his disability, his wholeness rather than his fragmentation. Moreover, Jean-Christophe’s declaration also connects him—however briefly—to the disabled “community” (such as one exists) and to the label “handicapped.” He wants to teach others, and presumably to help them. In this way Jean-Christophe does not exactly embrace or even admit to his limitations—embodied or constructed—but he does express some form of desire to belong to a collective.

Unfortunately, his mother’s response to his declaration actually isolates Jean-Christophe even further, pitting him, however unintentionally, against his brother: “Oh, come on, Jean-Christophe, think about that. You can’t even take care of yourself. You didn’t interact with the children at all. At least David did some drawings for them” (247). The mother’s response seems a little harsh, especially as it deviates somewhat from the nurturing role she’s occupied for much of the memoir. At the school, as she did at the castle, she betrays the role of nurturer in her somewhat uncharacteristic confrontation with Jean-Christophe. While at other points she urges Jean-Christophe to study or to find a job, at this moment she actively works against his expression of a wish for a career. Granted, given the fact that he has not even received a high school diploma, and given his medical and social history, it does seem unlikely that Jean-
Christophe would ever be a special education instructor. Nonetheless, the mother’s response is somewhat troubling.

One part of what is so troubling is the dissonance between the mother’s attempts to protect from sight but not from the verbal. In one short response to her son, the mother has both undermined Jean-Christophe’s agency—he “can’t even take care of [him]self”—and placed him in isolation, separating him not only from the children he proposes to educate, but also from his own brother. In this moment, Jean-Christophe belongs only with himself, a position the panels reinforce through their depiction of Jean-Christophe glaring at David in the corner (figure 6.14). Just as the public gaze orients, defines, and limits Jean-Christophe, so to a certain extent does his family’s gaze.

Figure 6.14: an exchange of gazes (247).
At certain moments, Jean-Christophe rails against the isolation that results from his socially constructed impairment, even as his physical limitations increase. Current medical research shows that the more seizures an individual experiences, the more prone s/he becomes to have further seizures: “The risk after prolonged seizures (e.g. status epilepticus) is quite a different matter, and severe status can result in significant cerebral damage and consequent cognitive decline, a risk that is probably greatest in children and that increases the longer the seizure persists (Shorvon 79). Jean-Christophe is thus caught in an endlessly debilitating cycle, as his seizures remain uncontrolled and epilepsy affects his physical and mental health. As Jean-Christophe ages and lives with his disorder even longer, he becomes increasingly violent and confrontational with the members of his family. At one point he rages at David: “Us handicapped folks gotta stage a revolt! We’re gonna take machine guns and we’ll shoot normal people in the legs, so there! Then they’ll see what it’s like bein’ handicapped when they’re in a wheelchair… They treat us like dogs. We gotta revolt, like Gandhi” (272). In this somewhat misguided statement (as David points out, Gandhi was a proponent of non-violent protest, not gunning people down in their knees), Jean-Christophe verbalizes what the memoir tries to show—that is, all the various ways that those individuals considered disabled can be “treated like dogs,” condescended to, and viewed as sub-human or animal.

Moreover, Jean-Christophe seems to want to identify with a larger group, the “handicapped folks,” thus both reiterating the construction of a group identity defined in relation to the normative standard (the able-bodied), and reinforcing the notion that Jean-Christophe is searching for a sense of belonging, rather than a sense of being the bodily extreme. Unfortunately, that need for belonging also seems to manifest itself in violence, itself a bodily extreme. Around this point in the narrative, Jean-Christophe’s anger and violence becomes
worse, as evidenced here in his desire to shoot people in the legs. Notably, however, this is a violent threat which, were it enacted, would transform “normal” bodies into visibly handicapped ones. Jean-Christophe exhibits a need to render visible the invisible limits of the body, a need that is perhaps connected with Jean-Christophe’s own mostly-invisible disability.

David’s response is somewhat problematic in his dismissal of Jean-Christophe’s bodily experience: “But you don’t have a physical handicap. You can walk, you can move! If you’d just put your mind to it you could start things, turn your life around!” (272). This response plays into the notion of Jean-Christophe’s illness as something incomprehensible, but also something moral, a form of laziness that he could “put his mind to” and overcome. He disregards the lingering effects of the seizures on Jean-Christophe’s mental, emotional and physical well-being, instead placing the blame on Jean-Christophe for not overcoming this disorder on his own. Yet just a few panels later on the following page, David reveals that his brother “is at the Salpètrière Hospital in Paris, for some tests” (273). The memoir thus depicts a disconnect in David’s mind, between refusing to recognize his brother’s impairment and in nearly the same breath recognizing that his life is severely limited by the disease and necessitates a visit to a special facility. The contradiction between David’s argument that his brother does not have a physical handicap, and Jean-Christophe’s visit to one of the most famous medical facilities in France indicates David’s own inability to reconcile his understanding of normalcy with his brother’s experiences.

Thus even as B. depicts his brother’s struggle with both embodied and socially imposed limitations, he himself struggles to navigate his own conception of Jean-Christophe. That is, David has a particularly difficult time recognizing Jean-Christophe’s physical or embodied experience. Near the end of the text, there is a visual return to the opening page, as B.’s portrayal
of Jean-Christophe’s body undergoes a substantial change: “Suddenly I realize that the illness has been affecting him physically. He didn’t become this way from one day to the next but I didn’t want to see it. I refuse to see him sick. I won’t accept it. I’m callous” (341). The text reflects David’s sudden shift in viewing his brother, as literally from one page to the next Jean-Christophe undergoes this physical transformation from thinner and unscarred to bloated and marked. This shift occurs through a visual encounter— the one depicted earlier, on the opening page— and David must actually embrace seeing his brother as he is. It is as if David had until this point enacted a willful blindness, itself an embodied limitation, in order to maintain the illusion that his brother is not disabled.

The following page continues: “I’ve got this notion that we shouldn’t see him as a sick person but treat him as a normal one [...] But his seizures, the drugs, the wounds that resulted from his falls gave him little choice. His options were necessarily more limited than mine. Seeing him as he is now, with his face marked by the disease, I can accept this evidence” (342).
These dialogue balloons are inscribed within the oversized image of Jean-Christophe’s swollen face, the familiar dragon of epilepsy forming his eyebrows; the face itself becomes a page-sized panel. The avatars of the young brothers and the older David wandering around the surface of this face; the physical body here becomes a kind of landscape (figure 6.15). Yet while the disordered body becomes the physical space of the narrative, it also breaks down the neat panel divisions that characterize much of B.’s spatio-topia (layout). This image contrasts greatly with the opposite page, where a disturbing and non-verbal dream occupies nine evenly spaced panels; the representation of the physical, embodied reality becomes more chaotic and overwhelming than the dream world.

Within the landscape of the disabled body, time and space collapse, as several different avatars of David wander across Jean-Christophe’s face, narrating the monologue quoted above. Thus the comic collapses distinctions between past and present, body and space, representation and reality. As Jean-Christophe and David navigate separately the social and physical ramifications of epilepsy, their struggles simultaneously bring them together and hold one another apart. In appearing as several selves on this landscape, B. illustrates his own fragmentation literally in the face of his brother’s illness. This scene thus acts as one of several moments in which B. insists on both his similarities with his brother and their fundamental differences. Doing so ultimately serves to create a sense in which the text as a whole undermines the convention of a bodily standard of “normal” against which everyone must measure themselves.
Family Trees and Embodied Histories: Undermining Normalcy and Difference

B. weaves his brother’s illness together with instances of David’s own sense of victimhood, as well as with historical trauma, in order to express the social and embodied limitations of disability as a messy web that stretches to include many people, not just the singular disabled body. Disability thus becomes a looser category, as the comics medium emphasizes the similarities between David’s able-bodied self and his brother, both of whom experience limitations of the body and the social. The split necessarily embodied in Jean-Christophe, due to the incomprehensible nature of his seizures, forces the confrontation—always visual and visible—with David’s own emotional and bodily split. B. then also shows the same fragmentation in various narrated historical encounters, implying that the disabled body in pieces finds its corollary in a history riddled with aporetic gaps.

Although throughout much of the text, David seems to enact the same kind of social stigmatization of disability, as he grows older (and, confusingly, becomes B., the artist and creator) his views become much more nuanced and complex. At one point, B. writes “I observe him. I study him. I cling to the idea of not being like him” (214). Like the doctors who create images of Jean-Christophe’s brain, B. visually focuses on his brother’s illness, turning it into both an object of study and a confrontation through which he can try to assert his own bodily coherence. Ultimately, however, the text questions the notion of bodily coherence through the similarities between the two brothers. Indeed, drawing our attention to these similarities simultaneously undermines the very notion of a “norm” or a bodily standard, and instead plays upon the very instability of the physical body as a way of configuring identity more broadly.

In fact, from the beginning of the memoir, B. both asserts and undermines epilepsy’s “abnormality.” Even within the first few pages of the memoir, a very young Pierre-François
recounts his experiences with “typhoons” that sweep him up as he sleeps, so that he wakes up in a different place in his bedroom and must either grope his way back to bed in the dark, or ask his sister Florence to open her door so he can see his way back. When Pierre-François then asks about Jean-Christophe’s first seizure, he says, “Actually, I know what has happened. He got carried away by a typhoon—I’m sure of it! But that’s bizarre! I didn’t think typhoons came around in the daytime! From now on I’ve gotta be really careful” (10). Thus, despite the initial declaration of difference between the brothers, B. almost immediately undermines that same difference, declaring each brother equally susceptible to epilepsy or “the typhoons.”

These typhoons or “little explosions,” as he calls them elsewhere, return as a notion of a similar physical experience in the brain repeatedly, in an effort to establish a kind of shared physicality between the brothers. As a young adult at university, David falls into a depression, at one point fantasizing about forcing himself to have a seizure. He claims “I am an epileptic! Those electrical discharges in my brain, like explosions, that’s what they are! They’re tiny epileptic seizures!” (287). B. draws himself in these panels in a stylistically similar manner to Jean Christophe, covered in wavy lines, drooling and contorting, in ways that signify his “being taken” by the disorder. Within these panels, then, David and Jean-Christophe do share a kind of physical experience, one that David claims is both fantasy (“I could pretend to be epileptic,” he says [287]) and reality (“I am an epileptic!”).

The comics medium thus allows for the slippage between the two bodies that David seems to crave, if only in an effort to understand his brother. B. literalizes this shift from one body to another, or the fragmentation of Jean-Christophe’s body, and its shift to David’s body (figure 6.16, 317). The panels depict stylized close-ups of sections of Jean-Christophe’s face, and there is a subtle shift in style as B. employs finer lines and something closer to gradient shading
than he did earlier in the text, again reflecting his adult perspective and his more nuanced understanding of the world.

Despite “clinging to the idea of not being like him,” David ultimately comes to recognize his own fragmentation, both bodily and emotionally. This realization comes about during David’s own encounter with the medical world. The now adult David is in a relationship with a woman, and they decide to try to have a baby. Unfortunately, they have difficulty becoming pregnant, so David goes to the doctor for some testing. The hospital space functions in the same threatening way as it did in the first section of the book, where Jean-Christophe also underwent testing; “This universe brings back too many bad memories,” David claims (325). And like Jean-Christophe, David experiences various forms of failure from medicine to diagnose and treat him: “A cold and distant doctor performs my examination [...] Apparently there’s nothing wrong with me” (325). David is then sent to a fertility doctor, who claims that David’s sperm are bifurcated,
and therefore they are not fast enough to reach his partner’s egg. David’s reproductive cells, that is, are literally split in two; the genetic material that he would pass on to the next generation—his bodily, genetic legacy—is fragmented; “the doctors can’t explain this phenomenon” (325).

B.’s response to this news is, of course, to use his signature surreal style to explore the emotional and bodily ramifications of this news. Fantastic images reminiscent of the fantasy genre stories he illustrated earlier surround these central panels revealing David’s initial diagnosis. Within this frame of bizarre creatures, he envisions his sperm with two heads or two tails, and on the following page he draws a two-headed sperm with one of his own face, and one his brother’s (figure 6.17). “Am I a double myself? Or am I always just half of these monsters? Then who is the other half?” (326).
Thus Jean-Christophe visibly occupies one half of David’s genetic material and, by implication, one half of David’s embodied infertility, thus underscoring that disability is an unfixable category that can occur in anybody (and any body). Moreover, as David’s infertility eventually leads to the dissolution of his relationship with his girlfriend, the text offers us yet another instance of an individual’s embodied experience existing within a larger social web, reminding the reader that one person’s embodied experience is rarely limited in social practices to that same lone individual.

For Jean-Christophe, deviations from the norm are a source of tension, as they seem to heighten his sense of bodily threat. Jean-Christophe’s increasingly troubling social and mental issues and his general inability to function in “normal” social situations both stem from and impact his position as victim of the disease and the instability it has wrought on his life. Complicated issues of victimhood appear throughout the text, and apply to both Jean-Christophe and David. In the sequence including page 337 cited above, for example, Jean-Christophe first declares his intent to become a Muslim (an intent given up once David threatens to circumcise him), then insists on learning “La Marseillaise” in response to his encounters with some immigrants.

This scene (and many others) connects Jean-Christophe’s limitations with his desire to belong to a group or an identity larger than the disabled body. Seemingly unaware of the link between Islam and the Algerian immigrants he rails against, Jean-Christophe’s desire lies not with a specific ideology, but with the stability and sense of belonging that come with adhering to a particular identity, be it religious or national. Moreover, David’s offer to circumcise Jean-Christophe “cuts to the heart of the matter” (“j’ai tranché le vif de cette conversation...” 6.25) and silences him further on the subject of conversion. The ultimate barrier, for Jean-Christophe,
is the threat to the already-disabled body. Identifying outside of that body is one of his greatest desires; encountering any additional threat to that body is one of his most crippling fears. Indeed, from the beginning of the text, B. depicts Jean-Christophe as someone desperate for approval and needing to belong to a stable and strongly delineated group.

Figure 6.18: Jean-Christophe’s obsession with Hitler (21).

Throughout Jean-Christophe’s life, this need for stability and control takes the form of an obsession with Nazi Germany and Hitler (figure 6.18). Indeed, unlike the implicit Nazi tendencies of Ozymandias in Watchmen discussed earlier in Chapter Two, Jean-Christophe’s turn to Nazism is overt. Later, B. is careful to note that “there’s nothing particularly Nazi-ish” (309; “il n’y a pas grande-chose de nazi...” 6.33) about Jean-Christophe’s fascination, but rather, a bizarre enactment of the desire for control and stability in his continually destabilized life. As B. writes early on: “Seized by this sudden weakness, he (Jean-Christophe) develops a huge craving for power and domination. Where I’m an anonymous crowd of Mongols, he’s a supreme leader. His dream is that of an eternal parade by an army that worships him...” (21). B. thus
rationalizes Jean-Christophe’s fantasies and turns them away from any kind of actual racism, making them instead about a fantasy of control in response to his lack thereof.

B.’s explanation, however, does not directly take into account the complicated web of familial and global history, victimization, and racism surrounding the two brothers. In fact, the historical trauma of war and the personal experiences of medical trauma, for Jean-Christophe, and passive witness, for David, are threads of identity converging and weaving together in the two boys. Where Jean-Christophe resists his position of passivity that results from his disease by engaging in fantasies of control, David inverts his physical “superiority” and his position of passive audience to his brother’s suffering, along with his own precarious tendencies to cover up his own suffering in order to spare the others around him. He does so by identifying both himself and Jean-Christophe with the victims of moments of trauma, particularly the Holocaust and the Algerian War. Drawing the genocide against the disabled during Nazi rule of Germany with French colonialism and with the Nazis’ other victims, particularly the Jews, creates a network of historical victimization that situates Jean-Christophe and David as two complementary figures.

In opposition to his brother’s fixation with Hitler, David purposefully takes the side of the victims of genocide. Pierre-François first learns of the Holocaust in his paternal grandfather’s four-volume history on World War II. As a young boy obsessed with battles, war, and violence, the books hold a deep attraction for him: “I’m little when I first plunge into these books. They’re awesome, they’re loaded with battleground photographs” (172). This statement accompanies a panel crammed full of tank guns and helmeted soldiers, with a small Pierre-François mostly hidden behind a large book in the lower right corner. On the following page, however, the caption reads only, “At the end of the fourth volume…” as the crowded war scene shifts abruptly to a solitary figure in striped pajamas, head bald, cheeks emaciated, hands clawing at the
blackness behind him (figure 6.19, 173). This figure looms over young Pierre-François in the right corner as he was in the previous panel, and it seems the concentration camp victim is the visual end to the caption’s textual sentence (that is, the image literally completes what the ellipses leaves unwritten). Since Pierre-François lacks the vocabulary to speak of what he is confronting, the only recourse is to draw what he sees.

Figure 6.19: David learns of the Holocaust (173).
This image proves to be central for Pierre-François and his conscious formation of identity. When he is a little older, Pierre-François learns his mother wanted to name him David, but his paternal grandfather protested, thinking the name “too Jewish” (170). This revelation proves to be key for Pierre-François, who decides to change his name to David not only as a rebellion against his grandfather, and not only as a means of consciously constructing an identity and becoming an adult, but also as an act of solidarity with the historical victims of trauma, particularly the Holocaust. “Suddenly this first name, David, takes on enormous importance, far beyond my brother’s disease. It becomes a way of staking out a position. I was on the side of the glorious Indians against the lowly, shabby cowboys. I’d be on the side of the skinny Jews against the fat Nazis” (173). B. draws David as a thin boy wearing a headdress, ribs protruding and riding a stylized horse.

David thus makes a connection between himself, the victims of the Holocaust, and the Native Americans. B. presents these distinct historical and personal moments as both convergent and concurrent: the Nazi genocide, the genocide in the Americas, and David’s life exist simultaneously within one panel. Such a connection is a potentially problematic one, as David runs the risk of equating massive historical genocides with one person’s private, individual experience. The difference in scale and enormity alone might make one uncomfortable with the link David makes. However, the text makes it clear that David’s connection between himself and victims of historical catastrophe is not one of usurpation, or a vertically-oriented hierarchy of pain and shame. The looming presence of the concentration camp victim, and its literally unspoken horror, precludes the assumption that David is making any equalizing or trivializing claims to victimization and trauma. While he is “staking out a position,” as he says, doing so is
not at the expense of others’ pain; in this way, David avoids undermining his brother’s specific experiences and their still-mysterious nature.

In fact, he also visually allies Jean-Christophe and the concentration camp victim twice, through Groensteen’s “braiding” (that is, non-linearly associated images or metaphors that form patterns or motifs). Two pages after B. depicts the concentration camp victim and changes his name to David, Jean-Christophe forms an almost-perfect mirror image of the Holocaust victim. Jean-Christophe’s body contorts and floats above David’s head against a solid black background in a similarly tense position as the camp victim, though he faces the opposite direction (figure 6.20).

![Figure 6.20: Jean-Christophe’s body echoes the Holocaust victim’s (175).](image)

Having the two bodies echo one another in this way indicates not only that Jean-Christophe, despite his fantasies of control and domination, is in fact victimized; these images also indicate the ways that both historical and local traumas literally hang over David’s head. Moreover, David and Jean-Christophe both become figures associated with different groups of victims during the Nazi regime—the Jews and the disabled, respectively—and David’s appropriation of a quasi-Jewish identity draws him marginally closer to Jean-Christophe’s position of victim.
This position is further reinforced with the similarities between the earlier appearance of the young patient in Professor T’s hospital and the image of the Holocaust victim David encounters (see again figure 6.6). Visually, the two victims are strikingly similar, with their strained faces and emaciated bodies clothed in stripes. While this first scene is initially one of foreboding, once we see the later scene of David’s encounter, the earlier scene takes on further meaning, as the Holocaust prisoner looks like the epilepsy patient. That is, B. presents this as a moment of non-consecutive visual confrontation with the victims of trauma: medical trauma in Jean-Christophe’s case, and historical trauma in David’s. The comics medium thus serves as one way of expressing the aporetic confrontation of both medical trauma and historical trauma, and the ultimate unknowability that epilepsy and the Holocaust present. B. uses the visual as a kind of continuation or punctuation to the verbal component of the memoir at certain points, combining verbal and visual not to bridge or fill the gap in his knowledge, but rather to draw our attention to the gap’s existence. Indeed, the scene with the young paralyzed patient and the scene with the Holocaust victim are both instances in which the visual punctuates the verbal story, forcing the narrative to pause while simultaneously completing the thoughts begun in the captions.

Thus, B. creates a web of identity in which his experience is but one point or one pixel—and Jean-Christophe’s is another, since, as discussed earlier, his fantasies of control manifest themselves as a fascination with Adolf Hitler. Thus Jean-Christophe and David place themselves on the opposite sides of that particular catastrophe; yet in their day-to-day interactions, it becomes clear that David and Jean-Christophe fluctuate between dominating and submitting to one another. David can physically dominate his brother, beating him up, playing tricks on him (like stealing his dessert at meals, urinating into his bathwater, etc.), and even aggravating him
into having seizures. However, Jean-Christophe clearly dominates David’s life as well, as epilepsy forces both of them into communes, therapies, diets, encounters with gurus, pilgrimages, and so on, as well as into the eyes of the public.

Paradoxically, the spectacle of Jean-Christophe’s body is precisely B’s attempt to avoid that same dominance, to de-exoticize the disabled body, to render Jean-Christophe’s experience more relatable, and to expose the complex social web that surrounds the encounter with the disabled “other.” This text configures the historical and social as interactive and multidirectional; understanding the past is a way of understanding the present. While he insists that epilepsy is not hereditary, B. simultaneously proposes that the web of the unspeakable trauma that surrounds Jean-Christophe is similar to the web of historical trauma that infiltrates so many other layers of the boys’ life. Therefore the suffering of both men is historically and socially situated and constructed, and it opens up the possibility for understanding the disabled body on a spectrum rather than as the extreme exception as so many other works of literature posit it. If those “normal” people—members of his own family, friends, colleagues, even David himself—understand themselves as victims in some capacity, then everyone else is also disabled, indeed, as trauma literally un-ables these people from speaking their experiences. Rather than being “normal,” Epileptic proposes that everyone is “aberrant” to some degree, with Jean-Christophe merely being at one point in a nonlinear model of ability.

B. includes some of the major wars of the 20th century in this complicated web of embodied suffering, from the two World Wars to the Algerian War (1954-1962) and the Indochina Wars (roughly 1954-1979, including what in the US is called the Vietnam War). Learning of the World Wars through huge tomes of history, what might be called “Official History” coincides with the familial history (maternal grandfather’s involvement in WWI,
The grandparents’ stories take their places within and against the official History of the World Wars, positing the individual and the familial as situated inside the authoritative version of larger historical movements. The books that Pierre-François reads are, for the most part, unconcerned with the individual (at least as far as B. portrays these books). When he describes reading one on WWII, he calls them “loaded with battleground photographs,” and the panel is packed full of artillery, tanks, and other weapons, along with some faces in profile of the soldiers, all of whom look vaguely similar and stand for part of the nameless crowd of soldiers.

In contrast with these books, B. includes stories of his grandfathers’ individual experiences during the war, which emphasize the personal over the global. “My grandfather served in that war... He tells me a few boring anecdotes, but what I want to hear are tales of hand-to-hand combat with bayonets” (22). Pierre-François’s early fascination is with the battleground depictions in the large history books, and his grandfather presents a split with that narrative. His grandmother admonishes him: “You shouldn’t ask Grandpa about all that. He suffered, you know.” Crucially, “It’s my mother who tells his story, in July 1996” (22). His grandfather remains silent about his experiences, and thus the second-hand narration is filled with the absence of personal details; speaking the war is an act of only partial closure of the gaps in both family and history.

B. then tells the story of his mother telling the story of her father during WWI, a story that focuses on the grandfather’s experiences and emotions while in the trenches. This story, however, is not situated within a larger picture of the war as one would learn about it through a volume of history like the Larousse mensuel illustré or Le Panorama de la guerre, the massive books Pierre-François so avidly reads when he visits his grandparents. That is, B. recounts the
personal experiences of his grandfather, the scenes he witnessed, but he does not situate these scenes with any specificity. The grandfather goes “the front” and “the trenches,” but there are no particular locations, military names, or other features of historical specificity to ground this story until the end of the scene, when B. recreates a letter his grandfather’s cousin sent home during the war. This letter contains specific dates and place names, but it is still so short and so very specific as to only reinforce the particularity of B.’s grandfather’s experiences, rather than move them into the sphere of a larger political history.

The grandfather’s actions, too, are related as particular and personal incidents rather than politically significant points in a global war. B. portrays his grandfather as someone detached from, and disgusted by, his fellow soldiers’ vulgar behavior both in the trenches and in the homes they occupy. At one particularly important moment, his grandfather’s company “snuck all the way to the German trench and slit everyone’s throats. I don’t know how he managed it, but my grandfather avoided taking part in the massacre. He kept an awful memory of this episode and claimed, after the end of the war, that he’d never killed a German” (27). The grandfather is thus somewhat removed from the violence of war as active participant, yet he is simultaneously involved as active witness. The suffering that B.’s grandfather experiences is thus not limited to his physical encounters during the war, but to his role as witness—a position echoed, as we have seen, in representations of both Jean-Christophe and David throughout the memoir. Thus B. creates a web of familial and historical interstices of experiences and witnessing.

B.’s paternal grandfather is also situated within this web through his experiences in WWII. “The war also invades Bourges, at the house of my grandparents on my father’s side. They’ve got four big books on the Second World War. The minute I get to their house I plunge into them. My grandfather André fought in that one. He guarded the bridges in Mehun” (29).
This grandfather’s service is also a story of gaps, as the Germans had already crossed the bridge he was guarding, and he and his company finished the war without entering into combat, without ever seeing a German, and without even a lieutenant after theirs deserts their company after a few months of service. This story of doing practically nothing again contrasts with the “official” history, whose pages are full of action and combat.

The dissonance between “official” and lived history mimics the distance between Jean-Christophe’s lived experience of his disorder and what remains for David B. to narrate. Like B.’s story of his brother’s disorder, the war is a narrative of gaps, missed opportunities, and divergence from the norm. Moreover, the familial involvement in the war raises questions of David’s role in History itself, and his position as spectator to or even perpetrator of acts of violence against those who deviate from “the norm.” *Epileptic* thus questions the stakes and responsibilities of those who witness, who are drawn into a web of memory and suffering without directly experiencing those events.

**Implicated in the Visual and Historical: Gaps in Representing War and Trauma**

Following Michael Rothberg’s recent adaptation of the term “implication,” which he uses “in order to gather together various modes of historical relation that do not necessarily fall under the more direct forms of participation associated with traumatic events, such as victimisation and perpetration,” I argue that *Epileptic* positions David as a point in this spectrum of implicated involvement in both the history of violence and the history of disability (“Implicated” 40). This category of “implication” includes “bystanders, beneficiaries, latecomers of the postmemory generation and others connected ‘prosthetically’ to pasts they did not directly experience” (“Implicated” 40). Just as David is the outside spectator to his brother’s disorder, as discussed
above, so too is he in some ways a spectator to larger historical moments and legacies of trauma, which brings him further into a hierarchical system from which he, consciously or not, has benefited.

Figure 6.21: the Algerian War and David as belated witness (30).

While understanding the official and the familial histories requires a certain amount of work for Pierre-François, it is even more difficult for him to reconcile with the Algerian War: “But there are no books on the Algerian War to be found” (30). Official history has not yet caught up with the lived traumatic experience of this war. Instead, Pierre-François must rely on overheard conversations in order to visualize this war: “I overhear conversations that demolish
the pretty history-book images I’d drawn.” The images here depict Pierre-François as very small, below very large adult faces speaking about the Algerian War and atrocities encountered there. Then there is a shift to a stylized image of a black man, torso nude, and face in an expression of immense pain (figure 6.21). Behind him lurk three perversely smiling white faces. The caption reads, “They tortured for practice, or just for the hell of it, not to get any kind of confession” (30). Though not explicitly labeled as such, it is apparent that the three men are French, torturing an Algerian—and enjoying the sight of this torture.

In the following panel, there is another stylized black body, this time pictured in silhouette; while this figure visually echoes the tortured body of the previous panel, from its heavy blackness to the white outline of the lips, it is actually not a physically tortured body, but the image of an adult relaying an anecdote—there are two points of a shirt collar visible (a detail easily missed by a hasty reader). A very small Pierre-François appears here, looking intently at the blacked-out figure, with his head at the same angle as the central French soldier from the preceding panel. The suggestions arising from this visual echo are somewhat disturbing: that Pierre-François, even at age four or five, is somehow implicated in the torture of Algerians; that the act of watching is an act of perverse violence; even, perhaps, that the recitation of horror after the war is painful in a way that is similar to, if distinct from, the pain of the tortured body. He is also a belated witness to this pain, so that his connection with history mimics the structures of trauma itself.

These implications, however, remain ambiguous. This ambiguity is itself a product of that same perplexing incompleteness in representing war that pervades the text. On the second page, in the same panel that visually establishes the brothers as nearly identical in their youth, the Algerian War already appears as something outside of time and outside of understanding: “1964.
I’m living in Orléans with my parents, my brother, and my sister. The Algerian War ended two years ago but I’m not even aware of its occurrence yet. I do know that De Gaulle is the President of the Republic” (2). Within this narration we can see that the Algerian War operates as a “hiccup” in both knowledge and narration; the caption draws attention to its own nonlinear construction through B.’s later factual knowledge of the war’s existence juxtaposed with the young David’s ignorance. Indeed, the images in the panels do not show the war or De Gaulle, but the siblings standing in a row. The historical thus functions here as textual but not visual background.

However just a little bit later, David responds to the neighborhood children’s use of a racial slur: “ ‘Raghead.’ There’s a word I never heard at home. My dad hadn’t served in the Algerian war but I’d heard about it” (14). The War itself as an abstract concept occupies an uneasy, unstable position in David’s world, reflected in the narrative’s negation of itself (which is true? Has David heard of the Algerian War at this age or not?) within a few pages. Moreover, B. situates this instability within a familial network, as Pierre-François’s understanding of the Algerian War rests on the absence of his father’s service.

Indeed, this war forms a kind of narrative, familial, and historical gap, where Pierre-François’s knowledge comes only from bits and pieces overheard from his parents and their friends. The story of the war can first only be told through overly simplified illustrations and sentences, a reflection of Pierre-François’s childlike understanding of the war: “Algeria is a desert full of fortresses with legionnaires inside. One day the Beduins got fed up and, mounted on horses and camels, they came and attacked the fortresses. Little by little they took over all the fortresses. The legionnaires fell back in Algiers. The Beduins attacked Algiers and the legionnaires got on the boat and came back to France. The Algerian war was over…” (14-15).
The images in these panels are reminiscent of Pierre-François’s early drawings of Mongol massive battles, with near-identical soldiers and very simple buildings, backgrounds, and linework. This narration of the Algerian War lacks any mention of France’s colonial legacy, of the intense political situation in the 1950s and 60s, of decolonization, or any of the other nuances one might read in a more “official” history. This history of the war, like boys’ understanding of race, war, and politics more broadly, is both juvenile and filled with unknown aporia.

Figure 6.22: War and illness as gap; Pierre-François and David together in final row (32).
Something of a more nuanced understanding of the Algerian War occurs a little later in the first part, but it requires a massive narrative shift forward in time, to the present-day David B. listening to a colleague describe his trip away from Paris (figure 6.22). Even here, the actual acts of war remain completely unknown; the colleague describes leaving Paris and then leaving France, but cuts his narrative off after leaving France, saying: “And then there was the war” (32). Those who speak about the war do so against a solid black background; visually the focus becomes the speaker rather than an illustrated history, as we see with B.’s depiction of his grandparents’ experiences. These panels render the lacuna of the Algerian War, making the absence of this narrative visually present, by focusing instead on the faces of the people speaking.

This lacuna is even more pronounced, as B. depicts the speakers fading away—just faint, broken white outlines of faces against the same black background—as the captions explain that both David’s colleague and his father’s friend die of cancer shortly after relating their experiences to him. Cancer almost becomes, by association, the punishment for speaking about the Algerian War. Moreover, through the visual erasure of the speakers, B. emphasizes the ephemeral nature of the body, and visibly establishes the ways in which disability and disease can manifest themselves on any body.

The unrepresentable Algerian War and the cancer that strikes the two survivors here find their analogue on the opposing page, which describes both textually and pictorially Jean-Christophe’s seizures (see again figure 6.2). Paradoxically, B.’s depiction of the seizure is perhaps the most straightforward, literal rendering of Jean-Christophe’s illness in the whole memoir. It is as if the absence within the narrative of the Algerian War and the confrontation with the fluidity of disease actually helps give words to the disorder the boys face. As mentioned
above, this ability stems in part from the link between disease and war, as speaking the war and disabled bodies intertwine. “Indeed, [gangrene] was used in one important moral polemic—against the French use of torture in Algeria in the 1950s; the title of the famous book exposing that torture was called La Gangrène” (Sontag 85). There is thus a chain of signification weaving together illness and violence: torture in Algeria is allegorized though gangrene; speaking about the war is silenced with cancer; and these aporetic histories, both familial and global, help undermine notions of normalcy and aberrance. All of these movements allow for epilepsy and other experiences of embodied difference to become not a linearly defined extreme, but rather a point within a spectrum in which no body nor history is the standard or median.

Immediately following this confluence of disease and the Algerian war, B. shifts to the Indochina Wars as he depicts a confrontation of avatars past and present, as the young Pierre-François speaks with the older David B. (see again figure 6.22): “1914-1918. 1939-1945. 1954-1962. Even if I didn’t live through them, these dates are part of my life, too” (32). The older David interjects: “We’re forgetting about the Viet Nam wars,” to which Pierre-François responds, “No... we’ll be talking about them later on” (32). In actuality, the Vietnam War appears only briefly, almost by way of omission: “I begin my military service in Chalons sur Saire and end up in Paris, hidden away in an office. I’m discharged with the rank of private first class and make the rounds at the magazines with my pages.” (316). It is unclear whether David remains in France between these two time-places, or whether he goes to Vietnam. The Indochina Wars are ambiguously located as absence, be that as absence from B.’s narrative, or as absence of service all together. David’s military service is also a hole in the narrative, one that occasions a confrontation between the avatars of Pierre-François and David—a visual literalization of the fragmentation that plagues both David and his story of Vietnam.
From his grandfathers to his colleagues and even himself, B. creates a social web through which war and illness intertwine. David’s fragmented body, his visual encounters with history, and the presence of the glaring absences in narratives of war all work together to undermine the notion that Jean-Christophe’s body is the extreme. While it is obvious that Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy is overwhelming, incomprehensible, and disruptive, his disorder is but one point within a complex labyrinth of embodied suffering.

**Conclusion**

War and illness thus coexist in the narrative without signifying or functioning as metaphor for one another, and without erasing the other’s significance. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg proposes a way of understanding “memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (Rothberg 3). In *Epileptic*, not only memories but also embodied experiences become multidirectional, as the fragmentation inherent to the comics medium allows for a sense of disorder to permeate the text as a whole.

Epilepsy does not usurp historical catastrophes like the Holocaust, nor personal crises like infertility. Rather, B.’s interweaving of these moments illustrates the fallacy of the norm. That is, everyone is in some way “disordered,” and drawing our attention to this construction does not undermine the individual significance or related suffering of each experience. As B. notes, “there is no order in this world, poor brother, since nothing can cure you. There is only disorder” (310). B.’s observation is coupled with an image of Jean-Christophe’s distorted body in mid-seizure, while the once-orderly script from the cover of *Mein Kampf* now swirls around him in disarray. The perverse order of the Nazi regime, responsible for the catastrophic
destruction of so many victims, is thus shown as “disordered” alongside the disordered and disabled body. 

*Epileptic* demonstrates that Jean-Christophe’s disorder can be figured on a continuum of human experience, rather than as an example of disability’s total alien-ness. Western medicine still places the onus of recovery from epilepsy on the patient, saying “[t]he overall aim [of treatment] is to encourage as normal a lifestyle as possible, and to balance risks and benefit” (*Handbook* 75, emphasis mine). The patient must become as “normal” as possible, perpetuating the idea that disability is some extreme position that deviates in unacceptable ways from the standard. Rather than forcing the patient to adapt to this arbitrarily defined standard, *Epileptic* suggests, perhaps we can adjust our understanding of bodies and experiences to be more inclusive: “If one argues that the current predicament of, and social attitudes toward, people with disabilities are inadequate, then demonstrating the kaleidoscopic nature of historical responses to disability is an important tool for interrogating the ‘naturalized’ ideology hiding behind current beliefs” (Mitchell and Snyder 44).

Focusing on the representation of the physical body and Jean-Christophe’s limitations and abilities, B.’s memoir thus actively works against the stereotypical use of the trope of disability in literature, which Mitchell and Snyder describe as “to engage oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of ‘recognizable’ human experiences… It is the narrative of disability’s very unknowability that consolidates the need to tell a story about it” (Mitchell and Snyder 5-6). While David never presumes to “know” his brother’s experience, the memoir does not set out to control Jean-Christophe through an act of so-called “narrative prosthesis” or narrative normalizing. Rather, B. depicts the complex ways in which Jean-Christophe’s body is “deviant” and uncontrollable by questioning the very notion of normaley to
begin with: he and his brother are both physically and psychologically similar, and both are victims and perpetrators of suffering.

In a narrativized experience so bound up with the act of looking, *Epileptic* also forces us as readers to look and to read in challenging, unsettling ways. “When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed… it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (Rothberg 5). Indeed, as *Epileptic* challenges notions of a standard against which both histories and bodies should be measured, it opens up possibilities for a refiguring of disability not as the limit case, but as one point in a more inclusive model of difference and commonality.
Epileptic’s nonlinear model of identity and history offers a new framework for conceptualizing the relationship between trauma, memory, and visuality in comics, and even for understanding comics themselves. As the redrawn photographs in Fun Home, Batman’s flashbacks, and Epileptic’s shifting panels all demonstrate, images can be disorienting, destabilizing, and unfamiliar all while simultaneously drawing us in to a narrative both contained within and escaping from the text. To consider these elements of text, image, and the extradiegetic space of the page as working in tandem rather than competitively is to consider them as related yet differentiated representational mechanisms. That is, the verbal, the visual, and the “in-between” could become different but related points in a nonlinear spectrum of representation, particularly in relation to trauma and memory.

Comics seem to be caught in endless deliberations of origin, definition, and structure, as creators, scholars, and fans try to create a critical language appropriate for discussing the medium. As I laid out in the introduction to this project, various critics prioritize or lay claim to one aspect of comics over another, like David Carrier’s privileging of the speech balloon or Groensteen’s emphasis on the image over the textual. Epileptic’s nonlinear model can provide a way of de-centering comics, drawing them out of their recent scholarly hierarchical struggle. Instead, this model asks us to return to W. J. T. Mitchell’s claim that pictures want “an idea of visuality equal to their ontology,” a way of seeing and understanding that grants pictures “equal rights with language, not… turned into language” (What Do Pictures Want 47). Allowing image and text equal grounding, equal space to “speak” through the comics medium, can result in this kind of visuality.
This new kind of visuality, in which we recognize visual media’s equal role with text in the creation of social relations and in the performance of narrative, also allows for a simultaneous consideration of the textual itself. Reading, that is, becomes a visual performance as much as it becomes an interpretive act. Reading comics means reading not only for plot but also for space, for the textual’s visual appearance and layout on the page. For example, the specific use of lettering in *Arkham Asylum*, Bechdel’s use of captions to deliberately conceal parts of her images, and Spiegelman’s movement between print and script move the textual into the realm of the visual, rather than seeing the text as mere conveyor of information.

Equally significant to this decentering, multidirectional project is the space between word and image, both literally and figuratively. Comics’ particular relationship to trauma and memory lies precisely in this gap, where the reader transforms the panels’ content into narrative. Creating a whole from the sum of the parts glosses over of the fractured and fragmented structure, so that reading comics means both active participation and willing suspension of the recognition of that activity. Comics thus mimic the act of eliding the traumatic event, as we often ignore or repress the cognitive and visual work we do in the act of reading comics. Moreover in their spatio-topical structure, comics also mimic the temporal suspension of trauma itself. Past and present, visible and absent, all exist simultaneously on the comics page. Thus when Spiegelman, for example, crowds out the gutter space with background images or shadows and thereby confounds and confuses the reader, he also creates a sense of crowding, of busyness, that is both spatial and temporal. Works like *No Towers* actually draw our attention to the cognitive and narrative work the reader does in other comics.

Although Will Eisner calls the separation between word and image “arbitrary” in comics, I believe it is not arbitrary but necessary, in order for comics to represent trauma, memory and
loss in complicated and innovative ways. However, this project leaves open several avenues for future work. For example, a broader historical perspective, involving an examination of works from the significant “ages” of comics, would create a fuller and deeper understanding of the mechanisms of trauma and memory discussed here as inherent to the comics medium itself, regardless of genre, history, or national tradition. Likewise further analysis within other national traditions would help enlarge our understanding of these mechanisms. Do trauma and memory function in the same way in Japanese manga, for example? Do the formal differences between manga and so-called Western comics reflect other, culturally specific conceptions of memory and trauma? Do South African comics speak to these issues in the same ways, or are the constructions of the verbal and the visual different in works by artists like Joe Daly and Anton Kannemeyer? Are these constructions dependent on or reflective of issues of colonization and, in the case of Daly, immigration? Can we take up this last question in conjunction with other comics of migration to the US, including works by the famous Los Bros Hernandez?

Considering such questions echoes the turn in recent decades to the question of “world literature” and global networks. This dissertation points out some of the ways in which comics speak to one another across national boundaries, and, by extension, questioning the role of national identity in the creation of comics themselves. If a quintessentially American superhero like Batman, for example, can be placed in conversation with comics from France, then likewise we can open up the question of what “American” means to include a global network.

Moving to more thematic rather than contextual concerns, Robert Loss’s forthcoming work on what he calls “profluent lingering” provides a new, valuable intervention into the notion of how comics function. Profluent lingering is the need to progress forward through the narrative in a comic in tension with the desire to stay and linger on the images and panels of the page:
While we push forward, we're aware of the urge to stop and look; while we stop and look, we're aware of the urge to push forward. This give-and-take is what I call “profluent lingering”: the experience of reading a comic which is the result of the variable tensions between a generally narrative progression and a quality of stillness, both of which manifest in multiple media—pages, panels, images and words—that are arranged sequentially. We might also think of it as the constant negotiation that goes on in the reader's mind between the forward momentum of narrative and the temporary stasis of looking at a single image. (2)

This notion of the medium itself as agent, acting on the reader, resonates with the work done in this dissertation. Clearly, the tensions in the representation of and response to time itself here have greater implications for the representation of trauma and memory, where the past loses its temporal fixity and moves into the present. Caught, as the reader is, between past, present, and future thus extends to the very act of reading comics as a whole, not just on a given page, as discussed above. Teasing out these connections between profluent lingering, trauma, and visuality in comics would have valuable resonance in trauma, memory, and comics studies.

This dissertation, then, is a move forward in several directions among many possibilities for the future of trauma studies and of comics studies. Raising questions of how we see, picture, imagine, and narrate personal suffering and historical catastrophe, this project considers the shifts and similarities in ways of seeing trauma and memory across admittedly limited national and generic contexts. Issues of disability, postcolonialism, sexuality, and desire, among others, are brought into a multivalent consideration of comics, illustrating the medium’s propensity toward narratives of struggle, loss, and trauma, a propensity that rests on the very structure of the comics medium itself.
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