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Does Alison Survive the Death of the Author?

“For some artists, their work and their lives are so intertwined, it’s impossible to tease them apart. Alison Bechdel is one such artist.” (Millman) That was Debbie Millman introducing Alison Bechdel on her podcast, Design Matters. In their conversation, Bechdel explains that identifying herself as a lesbian led her to a career as cartoonist, “I became an outlaw at a young age and was very freed up to do whatever I wanted.” When she was ten, it would take Alison hours to write a simple diary entry at the end of every day. Her mother got involved, who then transcribed Alison’s dictation. Bechdel cites this as the moment she became a memoirist. When the subject of her own life became the subject she wanted to capture, “that the thing I was most passionate about was the act of writing down the material of my life. That had become my subject in that moment” (Millman).

Three years prior, when Alison was seven, Roland Barthes wrote “The Death of the Author.” In what is now regarded as a seminal text, he argues against traditional literary criticisms’ practice of incorporating the author’s intentions and bibliographical context in the interpretation of the text. He instead argues that the scriptor—born in the transcription of the text—and the author are unrelated. Barthes sees literary meaning as a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a writer's intentions, rather something that takes shape when a text is read (and that requires a reader to be experienced).

So, how does Alison Bechdel, an author whose life is impossible to tease apart from her work, supposed to vanish from the scene of her novel? With a murderous title like “The Death of the Author,” it may seem that *Fun Home* stands as a complete rejection to Barthes thesis. It’s hard to imagine Alison Bechdel as the ‘dead’ author of *Fun Home*, a novel so beaming her lifeforce, evident in every hand-drawn face, eclectic phrase, and traumatic detail. Would *Fun Home* still be Alison Bechdel’s memoir if her name wasn’t on the cover? Reading *Fun Home* and Barthes’ theory together isn’t as simple as saying it doesn't matter who a text’s writer is; that’s not what Barthes is saying. He’s asking us to readd *Fun Home* To what extent is Alison Bechdel’s authorship of *Fun Home* apart of the experience of reading the comic? Fun Home is uniquely Alison’s, and not just because of the subject matter. Beyond the narrative of Fun Home, stylistically the graphic novel is inseperable from herself. So, one might say, if not in direct opposition to, *Fun Home* at least stretches Barthes’ thesis to its limit. But is it even possible to do the type of literary interpretation Barthes wants us to do to a book like *Fun Home*? A graphic novel, one absolutely so saturated with Bechdel’s authorship. However, in the process or looking at Barthes and Bechdel together, we’ll discover that the two are actually more compatible than they seem. Both of them are concerned with intertextuality, the relationship between texts, especially literary ones; and we’ll explore the ways Alison Bechdel fits within and stretches Barthe’s definition of the author.

*Fun Home*, “a tragicomic,” is a multi-media composition made up of text (captions, dictionary entries, epistles, books) and image (illustration, photographs, cartoons). All these various media create different dimensions of authorship through which Alison can tell her narrative. If we’re considering identity mediation we might also think of the process by which she’s generating the images in *Fun Home*. Alison’s authorship exists at the level of style. Each image in hand drawn by her. In interviews she’s said that she first poses as the characters she wants to be, takes pictures of herself, and then draws from that.

*Fun Home* is distinctly literary and intertextual and this intertextuality contributes towards a very mediated presentation of Bechdel’s experience. Its is filled with allusions to other major works of modern literature. It’s not often that a comic book uses words like, “retroactive mortification,” “cartilaginous,” and “crepuscular.” It’s avante-garde vocabulary makes *Fun Home* a bit inaccessible to the average reader. Why would she do this? Alison says that “my parents are most real to me in fictional terms” (Bechdel 67) this suggests that her sense of self is textually mediated. Allusions to books as well as pictures of books regularly appear throughout *Fun Home*.

As a collager, archivist, compiler, Alison Bechdel fits neatly within Barthe’s conceptual definition of authorship as the act of assembling different influences.Barthes writes, “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God”) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146). The author’s “only power is to mix writings” (Barthes 146). Barthes is saying that we might more accurately consider an author not as some divine creator who makes meaning rom nothingness, but as a sort of collage maker (Nicholas). *Fun Home* is a text built out of the archival material of Alison’s personal life. It’s not just a combination of text and image—the images themselves are textual, and Alison’s reliance on these primary source documents to tell her story make her life inseparable from the text. Blood-smeared diary entries (78), an epistolary exchange with her mother (77), poetry by her first girlfriend (17). There’s a sense that as a reader, you’re perceiving reality, verbatim as Alison once did. For Alison, her sense of self is textually mediated and she’s able to convey that through text to the reader.

Four months before Alison published *Fun Home* in 2006, my parents got divorced, remarried a year later, and didn’t bother telling me any of this. Instead, I found out by accidentally coming across their divorce papers in google search results in middle school. In high school English classes I had the creative assignment of mediating our own identity through comics. The prompt was to make a graphic novel about a moment pivotal in forging our identity, an epiphany, a story, whatever. I wrote about the experience of discovering the details of my parents divorce through rather than talking to them about it. Like *Fun Home,* my comic was uniquely textual. It made up of primary source documents, archival material, and quotations from what I had found digging in my basement. After reading my comic, my teacher introduced me to *Fun Home*, and it felt like reading something written by an older version of myself. I share a lot with Alison—homosexuality, discovering family secrets through text, I’m a bit of a transvestite, occasional introversion—but not everything. My father didn’t sleep with teenage boys, or kill himself. I didn’t grow up in a Victorian mansion. My family didn’t operate a funeral home. How can I relate so much to a book saturated with the details of someone else’s life I have not experienced?

I bring up my own experience reading *Fun Home* because I think it illuminates something key to understanding Barthes and Bechdel together. Barthes understands meaning as being born with the reading of the text and for me, it certainly was. Each reading writes the text anew, because every reader interprets it differently. As an author, Alison had no idea that I had created my own low-def graphic memoir before reading hers. My connection with *Fun Home* was born from something outside of the text, completely independent of Bechdel’s authorial intentions.

So, Alison and Roland aren’t as disparate as they seem. She fits somewhat neatly within Barthe’s conceptual framework of authorship. And both author’s interest in intertextuality makes them an unlikely pair. Most recently, Alison’s life story has been mediated once again as a live action Broadway play. Alison has talked about the foreign experience of watching someone else play a former version of herself. She sold over the rights to retelling of the intimate details of her life. And as an author, she has lost control over the telling of her story, which is itself very Barthinian. The text, her story, her life, has become something independent of Alison.

Works Cited

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