

Fun Home and *Blankets*: explaining the affinity between graphic novels and autobiography

The graphic novel genre has seen a rise in critical recognition in the last few decades. Though perhaps spurred on by such seminal literary and historical biographical works as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi exploring the Holocaust and the Islamic revolution respectively, the graphic novel canon has more recently incorporated explorations of personal and domestic autobiography with equal sensitivity and nuance to conventional postmodern autobiographical literature. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* are two such explorations, dealing not with colossal historical tragedy but with the more immediately personal experiences of family, love, sex and coming of age.

You could argue through examination of *Fun Home* and *Blankets* that the Bildungsroman has come into its own new age through the comic book medium. In his seminal critical study of graphic novels, itself in graphic novel form, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* describes narration to be manifested as a "single organism"¹ when relayed through comics, and it is this organic hybridisation of the visual and written arts which perhaps lends the form so effectively to the memorialisation of our own experiences as "single organism"s. *Fun Home* and *Blankets* also operate as Künstlerromane, i.e. narratives about an artist's growth to maturity, thus incorporating the added layer of self awareness which comes when the artist is the speaker of his own work. It is interesting to note that Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is associated with both works, being one of many literary allusions in *Fun Home*, and referenced in Kevin Johns' comment that *Blankets* "might well have been called "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Christian""², gesturing then to an even *further* aspect of self-growth in the religious disillusionment which Craig experiences. It is clear from the seemingly never-ending shifts in focus around the general theme of adolescent self-discovery that these graphic novels truly explore the multifaceted and complex nature of the coming of age process. By harnessing the visual omission, ambiguity, fragmentation, non-linearity and synaesthetics which can accompany the graphic novel form, Bechdel and Thompson utilise the autobiographical framework to new heights of reader engagement.

Both *Fun Home* and *Blankets* acknowledge, and exploit, the unreliable and non-linear nature of human memory, thus relaying an adolescent experience which is not only clearly in retrospective but also poignantly honest in the narrative recognition of its own flaws. In *Fun Home*, we become aware that Bechdel's anxiety about the honesty of relayed narrative seems to stem from an early age, as

¹ McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: HarperCollins (1994), p. 73.

² Johns, Kevin, 'Sexuality, Art and Religion in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*', *Culture Magazine*, http://www.culturemagazine.ca/books/sexuality_art_and_religion_in_craig_thompsons_blankets_.html.

even as a child she begins to obsessively insert “I think”³ in between her diary sentences. She soon replaces this with a shorthand “curvy circumflex” “to save time” (142), a symbol which she then begins to draw over entire words and entries. Looking back upon her childhood she describes this episode as “a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” Here we see a comical juxtaposition between the visual and written elements as Bechdel projects an “epistemological crisis” on her ten year old self; putting forth a quest for narrative truth which is ridiculous with regards to her diary’s content. Events like “I made popcorn. I think There is popcorn left over.” are described in concurrence with Alison’s supposed inability to “bear the weight of such a laden existence”. Bechdel expresses a hyperbolic retrospective shame about her “hubristic” “lies”, with a humorous deadpan sincerity characteristic of the novel’s style throughout, and which introduces a sense of self-mockery that reminds us of the narrative voice’s awareness of its own limitations. The “I think”s are a compulsion which form part of Bechdel’s temporary Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and not only does this context jar against the humour of the passage, but her narrative impulse being borne out of obsessive compulsion begins to explain the analytical and neurotic nature of her narrative tone. The “I think”s do not only recall the pedantic sensibilities of her father but also take on an illegibility which escalates till they become merely “blots”, and then the cursive symbol, an act which predicts Bechdel’s turn away from purely written narrative to embrace visual symbols and images in the graphic novel form. The introduction of images in both cases can be read as a means by which to bridge the “troubling gap between word and meaning”. Bechdel discusses the “signifier” and the “signified”, alluding to complex Saussurean notions of semiotics which again lie at odds with the simple childhood scrawls that are the subject of this passage. The relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” is often explored in both graphic novels through the relationship between visual and the written, allowing for an irony in the narrative voice which is arguably unachievable in conventional written literature.

Thompson’s explorations of uncertainty are more thematically manifested as he struggles with the contradictions and confusions of love, sex and religion. Bechdel stylistically demonstrates the aptitude of the graphic novel format in presenting these disjunctions, exhibiting an impulse to use visual signifiers for expression (as with the “cursive circumflex”) but also a continued obsession with dictionary definitions of words representing difficult concepts in her life, such as “queer” (57) and “lesbian” (74), and in the verbosity of her diction throughout the text. In *Blankets* an analysis of typography elucidates the imperfections and contradictions which accompany adolescence; specifically in Craig’s⁴ fascination with Raina’s handwriting. The affinity of the graphic novel format

³ Bechdel, Alison, *Fun Home*, Random House (2006), p. 142.

⁴ Craig the character- hereafter ‘Craig’, ‘Thompson’ referring to the author.

with the complex Bildungsroman genre is once again evident in the relationship between the written and the visual. Though Thompson's style is more overtly expressive than Bechdel's clinical, analytical retrospective, he too explores the problem of subjectivity by expressing a contrast between his own propensity for expressive lyricism and romantic idealism with a fairly unresponsive world. Raina's looped handwriting style is evocative enough of her spirit to trigger an erotic charge in Craig through her letters. His observation, "(She must have been pressing her pen hard)"⁵ (146) suggests an attention to detail so focused that Craig is propelled to speculative fantasy about the "alluring loops" and physical pressure of Raina's writing, which is in fact enough to lead him to masturbation. Raina's "TRANSCRIBING" of her poems into type saddens Craig, who prefers the "alluring loops" to the new "cold type" (344). In the following passage (346-7) Craig confesses "I love you, Raina" for the first time, and the typographical contrast between the cursive, flowing script of his speech and the capitalised, type-writer "OH... CRAIG..." with which she replies is indicative of Thompson utilising the visual symbolic potential of typography arguably unique to graphic novels to present scenes in a way that ordinary novels cannot. In Thompson's rendering of the scene the relationship between the verbal and written comes into play once more, as we must not only acknowledge the suggestions of the typographical shift across the speech bubbles, but also the dialogue in the context of Thompson's images. Whereas Craig turns away and is surrounded in the final panel with emotionally charged visual swirls, in all four panels Raina's face stands out as a visible, static expression of sadness. Graphic novelist Chris Ware has notoriously described the comic book medium as "that bastard form of half art, half writing"⁶; however, as McCloud has also since pointed out, the art and writing of comics cannot be separated into two halves but rather work inextricably together. In Thompson's experimentation with handwriting and typography within *Blankets* the concepts of "art" and "writing" merge to form something novel (something "graphic novel", if you will). McCloud makes the claim that the unique combination of these two elements is crucial to understanding the literary merit of the comic book format, and that in the blending of the two we read both "art" and "writing" as the same language. He claims that the two elements "demand our participation to make them work"⁷ in a process of holistic comprehension that he refers to as "closure"⁸, and in *Blankets* we see the visual and verbal come together in the "I love you" scene to present all its layers of beauty, love and sadness, allowing for a complex simultaneous emotional reading experience unique to the graphic novel format. With everything in the graphic novel so marked by the subjectivity and personality of its characters, and the writing of the memoir itself marked by the inevitable

⁵ Thompson, Craig, *Blankets*, Top Shelf Productions (2003), p.143.

⁶ Shepley, Nick, (2013, December), *Graphic Novels*, Lecture conducted at University College London, London.

⁷ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

⁸ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

unreliability of retrospective memory, the format is able to play off of visual and aural stimuli as well as diction, and thus arguably it renders a new set of possibilities for the autobiographical genre.

As McCloud states, “our senses only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete”⁹. The collaged, multi-media nature of the graphic novel allows for new literary presentations of such non-linearity, and its “demand” for “our participation” in amalgamating the contents of each page forces the reader to actively engage in this fragmentation; the “audience is a willing and conscious collaborator”.¹⁰ Structural explorations of dissection and digression are again evidence for the graphic novel being well suited to the Bildungsroman narrative, as both *Fun Home* and *Blankets* use this to explore the complexity of human memory and psychology. In an interview with Bechdel Kira Cochrane writes of the “almost forensic quality to Bechdel’s writing methods”¹¹ and this is certainly evident in the clinical way that she dissects her memory, whereas Thompson uses retrospection to amplify human experience through the senses in an effort to transcend its “fragmented and incomplete” nature.

In *Blankets* both Craig and Thompson the author evoke the mind’s mutability through a fluid and elegant drawing style which often crosses over panel borders and bleeds out of the pages with what Douglas Wolk describes as “an incredible sense of flow”.¹² Craig often admires Raina’s beauty as she sleeps over the blanket she has made for him, and its patterns continuously come alive and curl over the panel edges, the “RHYTHM of her movements curling -- -- sprawling”, “Her contours lapping like waves around the BLANKETS” (310). A montage of multiple Rainas are depicted amidst the patterns as Thompson freely indulges his memory in a kind of aesthetic visual explosion. Thompson reveres Raina, once picturing her as an angel (306), other times describing her as “sacred, perfect, and unknowable”, “crafted by a DIVINE ARTIST” (429). As religious diction and Biblical passages are appropriated in reverence not to God but to her, we see Craig beginning to fall out of love with his faith and deeply in love with Raina. Already developing a growing hesitancy toward church doctrine, Thompson envelops Raina in intricate patterns, heavenly clouds and a chorus of angels, and thus we see in these artistic indulgences his allegiances also shifting away from God to art. He himself becomes the “DIVINE ARTIST” (429), celebrating the human ideals of love and beauty on a personal level free from the “MASS MENTALITY” of religious institution (107). The intensity of Thompson’s visuals is supplemented by the other senses, in the claim that her skin “yielded a palette of TASTES”

⁹ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p.62.

¹⁰ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p.65.

¹¹ Cochrane, Kira, *Putting It On Paper*, The Guardian,

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/may/19/alison-bechdel-graphic-family-memoirs>.

¹² Wolk, Douglas, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Da Capo Press (2008), p.209.

(422) as well as the timeless silences conveyed in the couple's moments together. McCloud notes how in the absence of dialogue readers must themselves assemble the moment together from its fragments, and "time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations".¹³

Participating in these senses amplified through the narrative framework of memory we can see how Raina, through Thompson's "loving brushstrokes and... minimalism", "serve[s] as a stand-in for all of our first loves".¹⁴

In the non-linear nature of both *Blankets* and *Fun Home* we are able to absorb a visual "surrounding landscape of past and future".¹⁵ *Fun Home* is described by Wolk as able to "flutter forward and backward in time"¹⁶. As Bechdel jumps between her young childhood and pubescent teenage years we get a meandering, holistic understanding of her growth which mimics the digressive nature of the mind, a theme heavily explored in the fragmentary aspects of conventional modernist and postmodernist literature. Wolk argues, "*Fun Home* isn't really about Bechdel's slow discovery of her father's hidden life; it's about her investigations of her own memories of that discovery".¹⁷ Wolk's suggestion that "investigations" and "her own memories" are the focus of the memoir is reflected in the stylistic explorations of the human mind. The text sees Bechdel literally inviting us into her "*Fun Home*" and leading us into an analysis of her family dynamic, and on a pursuit to discover and understand the "minotaur" secret that is her father's identity which lay within the "labyrinth maze" of the house. Bechdel states, "Sometimes... I think my father actually enjoyed having a family." "Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children." (13) The association of the visual with the written takes on a brutally painful tone here as the image of the family at Christmas works in uncomfortable tandem with the accompanying captions. The large Christmas tree seems not only contrived but formidable in the panel as the silhouette of Bruce Bechdel observes the scene as a "still life with children" from the foreground. The suggestion that his children hold only a decorative value to him allows the graphic novel's own utilisation of art to take on an extra layer of irony. It is clear from Bechdel's clinical tone throughout the text that the rejection of such aesthetic indulgence as we see in *Blankets* in preference for a slightly green-grey, washed out palette is her "utilitarian" reaction to her father the "aesthete" (15).

Bechdel utilises extensive literary references throughout the graphic novel, comparing her father to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and her mother to Henry James' *Isabel Archer*. Bechdel picks at literary and philosophical allusions as a means of understanding the events of her adolescence, though these

¹³ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p.82.

¹⁴ Johns, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ McCloud, *op.cit.*, p.104.

¹⁶ Wolk, *op.cit.*, p.361.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.364.

ring with the same falseness attributed to high art throughout the novel as embodied by the decorative Gothic facade of the house itself. Bechdel writes of employing literary allusions “not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the Arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison” (67). We can get a sense of the analytical nature of Bechdel’s narrative voice here, which comments on its own “descriptive devices” as it is narrating, introducing a degree of self consciousness above that of *Blankets*. Whereas Thompson is interested in creating and mythologizing his past into what Johns calls an almost “fairy-tale-like feel”¹⁸, Bechdel’s mythologizing of her parents as literary heroes and antiheroes only serve to express the “Arctic” and impersonal nature of their relationship, creating an emotional distance which paradoxically feels more “real” to her. The “cool aesthetic distance” she employs stands in direct contrast with the aesthetic vibrancy and celebration which is found in *Blankets*, and thus Bechdel’s family relationships appear to have affected her ability to personally engage with art; we can identify the resulting anxiety in her attempting to relay her own story through aesthetic means. Such expressions of uncertainty, however, continually lend themselves to the ambivalent hybrid medium of the comic book. The fruitless search for objective truth is further reflected in her frustrated obsessive returns to certain episodes of her life, such as in the recurrence of the foetal image of Alison in her kitchen upon learning that her father is gay, which she constantly revisits not only in the hope of understanding the revelation itself, but also her own reaction and feelings in response to the discovery. In some ways the “forensic”, analytical nature of the memoir almost resembles that of a detective story. On discovering a photo taken by her father of Roy, a babysitter with whom he was having an affair, Bechdel spreads the image over an entire page of the novel and scatters it with captioned analyses (100-1). Rhetorical questions such as “Why cross out the year and not the month? Why, for that matter, leave the photo in the envelope at all?” are indicative of Bechdel’s neurotic “forensic” analysis in the pursuit of closure from her past, provoking us to do the same by presenting the photograph from a perspective which allows for Alison’s hand to act as our own. McCloud describes the interactive potential of graphic novels as turning the reader into an “Accomplice”, an “equal partner in crime”¹⁹, and here in the detective-story-like nature of the memoir we see this device in its most literal sense.

Bechdel herself concedes that her method of writing is “primarily transcription”²⁰; further indication of a preference for objectivity over the subjective creative explorations of Thompson’s *Blankets*. Despite this, Bechdel acknowledges the ultimate impossibility of objective truth despite her best

¹⁸ Johns, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ McCloud, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁰ Bechdel, Cochrane, *op. cit.*

“forensic” efforts; this forms a key narrative tension within the text, and is a crucial characterisation of Alison’s personality and own understanding of her past, for through the hesitant, retrospective and self-analytical tone employed by Bechdel we are invited to experience Alison’s psychological anxiety ourselves. Bechdel’s books about her parents will in some respects always be frustrated by an inability to engage their own subjects, her father being dead and thus unable to read her work, and her mother merely responding to the sequel *Are You My Mother?* with a dismissive “Well, it coheres.”²¹ Thompson in fact faces the same problem, declaring “I come from a very stoic non conversational MidWest family” who responded to *Blankets* with a distanced coldness.²² However, despite the “stunted” and fruitless nature of the authors attempts at parent-child dialogue, through engaging their other readers in their own self-discovery and past experiences, Bechdel and Thompson create an author-reader connection which has a potential for limitless universal reach.

Whereas Bechdel’s notations of uncertainty seem borne out of a narrative anxiety on an authorial level, in the conclusion of *Blankets* Thompson appears to accept and even delight in the unreliability of language, turning away from the hard-and-fast rules of the Christian faith which had brought him such guilt as a child. In accepting the ambivalence of life by relishing the fallibility of religion in this way we experience a sense of closure along with Craig the character and presumably Thompson the author himself. The challenges in translation which occur in the Old and New Testaments introduce a sense of doubt in the faith, and Craig the adult muses, “I like “OR”s. Doubt is reassuring” (563), commenting upon a particularly “beautiful “OR”” by imagining Jesus proclaiming that “the kingdom of God is WITHIN and/or AMONG you.” (564-5). This humorous undermining of the legitimacy of Biblical script is relayed through Thompson the author, once again amusingly emphasised through a disjunction between the revelatory power of the Christ image and the contrasting unreliability of his diction. Thompson’s ability to apply humour to his doubts about religion, whereas in the memoir’s earlier stages this causes him only distress and shame, thus becomes suggestive of the growth and maturation of the narrative voice as the graphic novel progresses. In a passage in which Craig sleeps with Raina’s blanket many years after the end of their relationship, he dreams of their time together again in a series of images centring around an imaginary embrace, each encompassing an entire page (568-70). The embrace appears at first threatened by a cluster of demonic hands at the bottom of the page, but is saved from the fall by ghostly angelic figures in Raina’s likeness, and ends with the couple entangled amidst the free-flowing swirls of the blanket’s patterns. The lack of caption or dialogue add a silent poignancy to the callbacks of old motifs such as the angels and the patterns, and we see the redemptive progress that Craig makes through the graphic novel in this microcosm

²¹ Cochrane, *op. cit.*

²² Thompson, Craig, Pedal Powered Talk Show: Craig Thompson, *Interview*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBPF-e8v52g>.

that moves through the re-appropriation of religious imagery in love, finally to find refuge in aesthetic immersion. The graphic novel ends in the snow, ruminating on the “satisfaction” of making “a mark... a map of my movement -- -- no matter how temporary” (580-2). Though Craig and Raina’s relationship was brief- “We both knew that nothing existed for us outside of the moment”(404) – Thompson in his adulthood returns to this “moment” as well as his familial, educational and religious past in celebration of human experience despite its “movement”, despite its painfulness, and “no matter how temporary”. A sense of closure comes at the end of *Fun Home* also in the embracing of uncertainty and transience, with Bechdel turning away from the pursuit of her father’s “erotic truth”(230) and presenting perhaps the only successfully evocative literary mythologisation in the text, wherein Bruce Bechdel stands ready to catch a leaping Alison in a swimming pool, described by Hilary L. Chute as an “ideal version of paternal Daedalus”²³, in an inversion of the Icarian games at book’s beginning. Despite everything Bechdel ends *Fun Home* in a touching recognition and acceptance of her father’s tortured, homosexual, emotionally fraught, temporary presence in her life. Bechdel and Thompson do not invoke explicit catharsis in the traditional, Aristotelian sense of the word; merely a sense of emotional closure which we too can understand on a basic, human level.

Both *Fun Home* and *Blankets* harness the graphic novel format to make tangible the intangible; reenvisioning the modern adolescent experience in a style which is as complex, confusing, multifaceted and occasionally uncomfortable as the process which it delineates. Uncertainty, ambivalence and anxiety are utilised both thematically and stylistically through the comic medium to capture the intricate machinations of human memory as well as to create an all encompassing aesthetic experience; both offer a rich and actively engaging landscape of a memorialised past. It is in this way that the graphic novel presents new potential for reader identification. In *Fun Home* we share in Bechdel’s sense of frustration and analytical obsession, and in *Blankets* we too surrender to Thompson’s emotional and aesthetic indulgence. We the reader, the “accomplice”²⁴, relate to these autobiographies despite their idiosyncrasies as if they were our own, as Bechdel and Thompson exploit the hybridisation of the visual and the written to evoke the universal experience of growing up in a way which is visceral, cerebral, painfully honest and forcibly interactive. Even in the graphic memoir canon itself Bechdel and Thompson are forging a new paradigm of autobiography; Thompson claims to have been “reacting against ... the over-the-top, explosive action genre...But I also didn’t want to do anything cynical and nihilistic, which is the standard for a lot of alternative

²³ Chute, Hilary L., *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Columbia University Press (2010) p.214.

²⁴ McCloud, *op. cit.*, p.68.

comics”, “specifically autobiographical books”.²⁵ It is in Bechdel and Thompson’s use of the graphic novel’s propensity for sensitive, ordinary and ultimately uplifting storytelling which has resulted in the resounding global success of *Fun Home* and *Blankets* and illuminated the literary potential of the comic format. In an age where conventional literature is becoming increasingly experimental and aware of its own limitations, a considered analysis of the graphic novel’s unique implementation of coming of age narratives could not be more necessary. As McCloud states, we must “clear our minds of all preconceived notions about comics” and embrace them into the realm of literary credibility in order to truly “discover the ... possibilities comics [can] offer”.²⁶ In demarcating the process of human maturity through the comic book, a medium which has itself only recently shaken free from stereotyped associations of immaturity, the Bildungsroman can be said to have entered a new era; one that is “graphic” in every sense of the word and therefore, indeed truly “novel”.

²⁵ Thompson, Craig, *Interview: Craig Thompson Pt. 1 (of 2)*, The Daily Cross Hatch <http://thedailycrosshatch.com/2007/05/07/431/>.

²⁶ McCloud, *op. cit.*, p.199.

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