University of South Carolina
Scholar Commons

Senior Theses

Honors College

Spring 2022

Drawn In: An Exploration of the Graphic Narrative

Celia Casciani
University of South Carolina - Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

Casciani, Celia, "Drawn In: An Exploration of the Graphic Narrative" (2022). *Senior Theses*. 543.
https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/543

This Thesis is brought to you by the Honors College at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

DRAWN IN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

By

Celia Casciani

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors from the
South Carolina Honors College

May, 2022

Approved:

farzad

Farzad Salamifar, Ph.D.
Director of Thesis

Nicole A. Amato

Nicole Amato
Second Reader

Steve Lynn, Dean
For South Carolina Honors College

Drawn In: An Exploration of the Graphic Narrative

Contents

Thesis Summary..2

Introduction..2

Project Description..3

    Limitations..4

    Point of Clarification: The Elephant in the Room..4

    Going Forward..6

History: The Transformation of Comics, The Rise of Ordinary Stories..6

The Comic Blog..7

Ordinary Stories and Slices of Life..9

How Much is True? Breaking the Autobiographical Pact..11

Visual Communication..15

    Temporal..16

    Emotional..19

Conclusion..20

Reflection..22

References..23

Thesis Summary

This thesis project aims to explore ordinary stories told through the graphic narrative. The goal is to understand what intrigues us about ordinary stories and what is gained through the use of comics form to tell these stories. The project portion of the thesis consists of a website showcasing comics based on narratives told by students at the University of South Carolina. The research portion uses existing literature, as well as reflections from the creation of the project, to answer the above questions. In the end, I found that we are drawn to ordinary stories through the process of identification, or relating to and connecting with the subjects of the story. I also discovered that comics communicate in ways that prose alone cannot, through a cohesion of visual communication and narration. They are a mode well-suited to communicate life stories because these stories are nonlinear, abstract, and emotional.

Introduction

There has been a transition in contemporary literature. Stories about the extraordinary once saturated the shelves of libraries and bookstores, but now, heroes have had to make way for ordinary people and the odyssey has been cast aside in favor of the quotidian. Even comics, with heroic fantasy as the “bedrock genre” of the industry (Hatfield 30), have experienced this transition. Comics now wade into the muddy waters of everyday life, telling stories that are not so black and white as the tales of good vs evil that were once so characteristic of the medium. These stories are often autobiographical in nature, and may be unconventionally distributed, accessible to readers via the internet rather than through a traditional publisher. This paper, and accompanying project, serve as an exploration of these ordinary life stories that are told in comics form. They aim to understand: *Why do we care about ordinary stories?* and *What is achieved by telling these stories through comics rather than prose? What does the melding of the* *visual and verbal in comics communicate that words alone cannot?* The title of this thesis has a double meaning, referencing how we are “drawn in” by ordinary stories and how creators of graphic narratives have drawn themselves into the pages of contemporary literature.

Project Description

To expand on existing literature surrounding graphic narratives, I have created my own series of comics, illustrating “slices of life” based on interviews from my fellow friends and classmates at the University of South Carolina. These comics are autobiographical by nature in two ways, first, they serve as a vehicle by which the interviewees can share stories about their own lives. I facilitate this storytelling by portraying their stories as comics and publishing them in a compilation on the internet, something they may not have the inclination nor the resources to do themselves. Second, as they include depictions of myself as that facilitator, they are autobiographical stories about my life as well as the lives of my interviewees. I appear throughout the comics, surveying a coffee shop (Episode 3), sitting across from my interviewee (Episodes 2 and Episode 3), or with my Zoom panel beside theirs on a computer screen (Episode 1). This makes me an “autodiegetic narrator,” as I intervene in the narrative world. An example of a blatant intervention occurs in Episode 3, where I fact-check a quote cited by my interviewee.

Interviewees were volunteers collected as a convenience sample. By telling my peers about the project, I was able to determine who might be interested in taking part. I found a group of three interviewees who agreed to tell me their stories, all with whom I was already acquainted. Despite this, the group proved diverse in their backgrounds, graduation years, studies, and career goals. Interview dates were then scheduled, and the mode of meeting determined: one via Zoom and the other two at coffee shops. Interviews lasted no more than 20 minutes in length, not including the small talk and conversations had before and after the interview took place and were recorded using my iPhone’s Voice Memo software. Interviews were prompted by the question, “If you could rewrite your college admissions essay, what story would you tell?” The goal of this question was to tie the stories together with a theme, while providing enough creative freedom for interviewees to tell a variety of narratives. Personally, when reflecting on the years since I wrote my college admissions essay, I see how much I have changed along with the world and was curious how others had grown and changed. A college essay generally speaks on an impactful moment of an individual’s life and an accompanying lesson they learned from this moment. It was these moments that I was seeking.

Post interview, I listened to the recordings multiple times while creating the sketches of the comics. Preliminary sketches were created using a pencil and paper, then were transferred to a digital version using the digital art software, Procreate. The final comics were published to the internet using the Wix Website Builder.

Limitations

The transformation from interview to sketch to digital comic proved more involved and time-consuming than I initially predicted at the commencement of this project. Ideally, I would have liked to have a larger pool of interviewees and a greater collection of comics. However, I plan to continue the project through the summer and the upcoming fall semester, as I continue my education at the University of South Carolina as a graduate student. As I create more comics, I anticipate that my observations on visual communication and the importance of telling ordinary stories will only grow.

Point of Clarification: The Elephant in the Room

The COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious historical event that has taken place over the past couple of years, so the idea that the stories would be centered around this event may seem implied.

However, the stories I ended up recording were not pandemic-centric. Masks are not illustrated at all in the stories, except in Episode 2, when Remi expresses his desire to pursue a career as a dentist.

It bears questioning how, when attempting to address changes in the past few years, the pandemic gets glossed over in these comics. Perhaps, like in the poem, *We Lived Happily During the War*, by Ilya Kaminsky, my sample of students are in a place of privilege where the pandemic did not affect us to the extent that we feel the need to talk about it in our personal stories. On the other hand, perhaps we have all been deeply affected by it, maybe even having lost loved ones to the virus, and are simply tired of talking about it. We may seek to spare one another from unloading the emotional burden we experienced and choose instead to focus on enjoying that feeling of reconnection by sharing stories focused on a brighter future. I personally lost many opportunities to travel, connect with family and friends, and make the most out of my college experience, but of course, this is nothing compared to the tragic losses of family, friends, jobs, and livelihoods experienced by many others. When I did have the opportunity to depict anything reminiscent of the pandemic in my comics, I chose not to. By the time I conducted my third interview, mask mandates had been lifted where I live, but I could have depicted the barista in Episode 2 differently, because he did have a mask on at the time the interview was conducted. I think this stemmed from my desire for life to go back to normal: drawing it that way helped me feel hopeful that it would be back to normal one day. Looking back, it would have been interesting to show a masked barista in the first panel of Episode 2 to contrast with the maskless one in the first panel of Episode 3, to better depict the historical context of the comics.

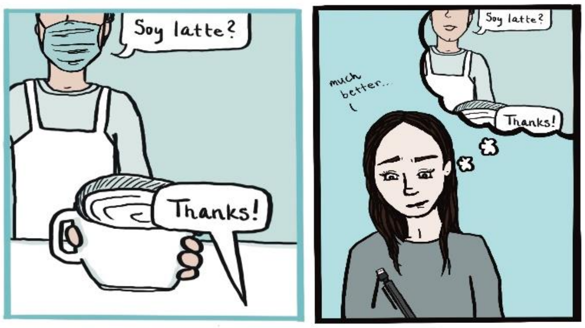
Soy latte?
Thanks!
much better..
Soy latte?
Thanks!

Figure 1: Pandemic? What Pandemic?

Going Forward

Throughout the rest of this research paper, I will integrate my observations from creating this project into existing studies of the graphic narrative. Because the blending of the verbal and visual is so important to communicate in comics, illustrations will also be included.

History: The Transformation of Comics, The Rise of Ordinary Stories

In "Autobiography Meets the Comics," Joseph Witek describes a transition from the traditional comic book fight scene between hero and villain to the "quieter and fiercer combats of self meeting self and self meeting world" (230). In *Alternative Comics,* Charles Hatfield says the comic book industry is now "split between, on one hand, a dominant fannish emphasis on superpowered heroes, and, on the other, an alternative, post-underground outlook from which larger-than-life heroism has been evacuated in favor of heady satire or in-your-face realism" (111). While divided on which is the dominant genre, both agree that the comics medium has evolved to include nonfiction, creating the genre of the *graphic narrative*. In the 1960s and 70s, the underground comics movement made comic books that were intended for adults, leading to the creation of autobiographical comics (Hatfield 7). The 1980s saw the rise of the graphic novel, defined as "any book-length comics narrative or compendium of such narratives" (Hatfield 4), although the term is considered inaccurate and insufficient (Hatfield, Chute) to describe many of the works that may grace the “graphic novel” section of a bookstore. For this paper, I will mainly use the term *graphic narrative*, to encompass the nonfiction and autobiographical nature of the studied works. As Hillary Chute says, “*Graphic novel* is often a misnomer… they are rich works of nonfiction; hence my emphasis here on the broader term *narrative*” (453).

It is impossible to discuss graphic narratives without addressing Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980), which is considered the cornerstone of the genre. *Maus* tells the story of Spiegelman’s father, Vladek, who survived the Holocaust. *Maus* cuts from scenes narrated by Vladek to scenes from Art’s perspective as he records interviews with his father to create the book, often showing the tedious, repetitive moments of daily life, such as his father counting pills, talking about vitamins, etc. (Spiegelman 28). From a narratological perspective, the book is an autobiography of both Art Spiegelman and Vladek Spiegelman and showcases how a terrible event in history was experienced by an ordinary man, and how the repercussions affected his son through generational trauma.

Even before *Maus* came *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) by Justin Green, which is considered the first autobiographical comic ever (Witek 227). Spiegelman even credits this work as inspiration for how comics can be used to tell life stories (Witek 227). Green uses the alter-ego Binky to tell his story, which showcases a debate that will be discussed later in this paper of how true stories can be conveyed through comics: the clash between the autobiographical pact and the “self-caricature.”

The Comic Blog

The internet has provided a means for more graphic narrators to share their stories by self-publishing their work via the comic blog. This has opened the doors for many women, especially, to draw themselves into the world of the graphic narrative. In France, comic blogs first emerged in 2005, with the second generation of comic bloggers in 2006 bringing about the *chick BD*, the French term for the comic-version of "chick lit" (Bozard 39). These "girly comics" contain all the elements of a graphic narrative, with the "*je*," or self, as the subject, and the illustrations showing a succession of "*tranches de vie*," or "slices of life," of the authors (Bozard 43). (Slices of life will be discussed in a later section.) In *Defense et illustration de la chick BD*, translating roughly to *Defense and Illustration of the Chick Comic*- setting aside the discussion of whether the French word *bande dessinée* is a better term to describe comics- Laurent Bozard cites four influential creators who popularized the comic blog movement through their autobiographical "girly comics": Margaux Motin, Pénélope Bagieu, Madeleine Martin, and Diglee. When their artwork was rejected by traditional magazines, their blogs served as a platform to share their work. According to Pénélope Bagieu, women's magazines criticized her style for being too quirky, and suggested she draw fashionable, ultra-thin women to find work (Bozard 44). She chose instead to showcase her work through her blog, "*Ma vie est tout à fait fascinante*." Her efforts, along with those of her colleagues, led to their work being collected into volumes and published as full-length graphic narratives (Bozard 39). The "chick comic" is a shining example of graphic narratives becoming more accessible through the internet.

This journey from self-published blog to the traditional publisher is not restricted to the French nor to women. In "The Diary Comic," from Michael Chaney's *Graphic Subjects*, Isaac Cates describes "diary comics," as an important steppingstone for graphic narrators who are just getting started. He says, "It would be difficult to overstate the ubiquity of diary comics among today's young cartoonists, particularly as a learning exercise or a temporary rite of passage for cartoonists in their teens or twenties" (Cates 210). This comment is extremely relevant in my case: as an amateur artist, creating a blog was the best and most affordable way for my work to reach others. Cates cites James Kochalka's *American Elf* as the "most prominent and longest-running" (210) diary comic, along with many others, including Todd Webb's *Casual Poet*, Vanessa Davis's *Spaniel Rage*, and Ryan Claytor's *And Then One Day* (210). All these autobiographical comics began online and made the journey to the traditional publisher.

Ordinary Stories and Slices of Life

American Elf is the perfect segue into the discussion of slices of life, as Cates describes the work as having "capacity to record the nuances and rhythms of daily life" (211). To avoid a direct dictionary quotation, the New York Times defines a slice of life, also known by the French term "*tranche de vie*," as a "literary representation of ordinary existence" (Safire). Graphic narratives have embraced this style of storytelling, oftentimes illustrating the monotonies of daily life. Narration of slices of life does not usually have a clear plot, with conflict, conclusion, or elaborate development of the character's psychological profile, instead opting to show the "cycles, repetitions, processes without closure, and moments of indeterminate or undetermined significance" (Cates 211). In *The Diary Comic*, Isaac Cates cites a quote from James Kochalka. "The story of my life is not a story at all" (211). Even larger works, who unlike the diary comic, publish their beginning and conclusion all in one go, can embrace the slice-of-life style. For example, Harvey Pekar's *Our Cancer Year*, written with his wife, Joyce Brabner, is cited in Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* as a depiction of the "mundane" (211), and his *American Splendor* is described as having a "keen eye for the minutiae of day-to-day existence (113). Both works depict the monotonies of Pekar's daily battle with cancer. Even *Maus*, as previously mentioned, depicts quotidian events like taking vitamins, going to the grocery store, and arguing about family matters.

Graphic narratives that embody the slice-of-life style do depict historical events: not as we would read about them in a history book, but as they are experienced by an ordinary person. This embeddedness of historical events makes some graphic narratives approach “memoir” territory, which is an alternate term often used to refer to these works. Graphic narratives like Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Jacques Tardi’s *I, Rene Tardi*, which tell the stories of people directly affected by World War II, depict the monotonies of life in concentration camps and prisoner of war camps. *American Elf* includes a strip published post-September 11, 2001, in which Kochalka depicts the burning Twin Towers, then cuts to a scene where he sees a mushroom growing in the corner of his bathroom and decides to let it live (Cates 212), showing how the life and mentality of an ordinary person is altered by a historic tragedy.

My comics also depict slices of life. While Episode 1 describes an event in the subject’s life that can be illustrated with action-packed frames and a satisfying conclusion, Episodes 2 and 3 are purely based on conversation, discussion of the subject’s past, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Both display true *tranches de vie*: a conversation in a coffee shop. In Remi’s story (Episode 2), I wanted to show moments of basic human behavior, e.g., humming to music or taking a sip of coffee (page 4).

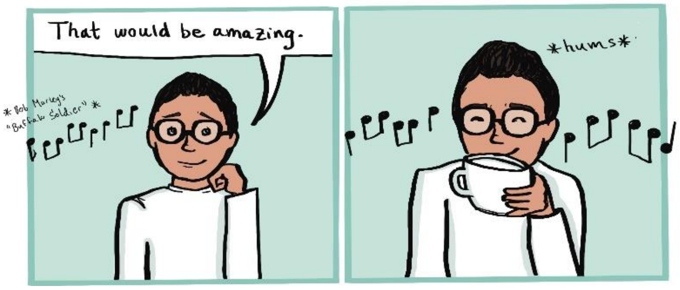

Figure 2: A *tranche de vie* (Episode 2)

A big question that this paper strives to answer is *What draws us to ordinary stories?* There must be a reason for their popularity and prominence in contemporary literature. *Identification,* the process through which a reader relates to the characters in a story, may be the explanation. Generally studied in terms of its relation to fiction (Bley 26), identification stems from the Aristotelian concept of *catharsis*. Aristotle claims that if readers do not have a strong sense of identification with the characters, they will not be able to have a cathartic experience when consuming a literary or theatrical work (Scopa). In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge responded to this idea of catharsis through identification by saying that this process requires a "willing suspension of disbelief" to occur (Ward 441), since works of fiction are, by definition, not real. A convenient characteristic of ordinary stories told through graphic narrative is that they are works of nonfiction, eliminating this problem altogether. The visual aspect of comics may add an extra layer to this identification process. In the comics I created, I related to the shared experiences I had with their subjects. In Episode 3, Sarah describes how she overcame her inability to pursue opportunities, namely internships, for fear of being underqualified. This is something that has plagued me throughout my college career, and I found myself identifying with Sarah' story so much so, that I found as I was drawing Sarah's comic, I had to redraw some of the frames because she slowly morphed to look like myself. As a college student, I can relate to all three of the stories told by my interviewees, but I hypothesize that most people can relate to ordinary stories of overcoming obstacles, whether they be stress or self-doubt, and dreaming of the future. All these daily thought processes of the human mind are displayed in my comic series.

How Much is True? Breaking the Autobiographical Pact

A point of controversy surrounding graphic memoirs is that by nature, they push the boundaries of the old-fashioned *autobiographical pact*. This term, born from Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte* *autobiographique* (1975), describes the unspoken pact between the narrator of an autobiography and the reader. Lejeune defines autobiography as a retrospective account of a person's own existence, told in prose (14). The pact requires that the author is the same person as the narrator, who is the same person as the main character (Lejeune 16). It is also vital that the author's name and the main character's name are the same. "Just as the phrase 'Once upon a time…' defuses belief, the name of an existing person activates it" (Allamand 53). Judging by these criteria, Lejeune would certainly consider graphic memoirs as violating the autobiographical pact. Even the first autobiographical comic, Justin Green's *Binky Brown*, bares a strong "refusal to participate in the empirical and aesthetically realist 'autobiographical pact'" (Witek 229). Justin Green both is and is not his alter-ego, Binky Brown, who is the main character of the story. Lejeune, however, probably never considered the possibility of life stories told through comics. The graphic narrative's divergence from the autobiographical pact insinuates that innovations in modes for telling life stories make this pact outdated.

Even if the author goes to great pains to maintain the autobiographical pact, their story can only be as true as they remember it. In a *New Yorker* article, David Kortava summarizes some of neuroscientist Lisa Genova's research on how little the human brain actually remembers: "To remember an event is to reimagine it; in the reimagining, we inadvertently introduce new information, often colored by our current emotional state. A dream, a suggestion, and even the mere passage of time can warp a memory." In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi gives her side of the story as a young girl growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. She states in the introduction that one of her goals in creating *Persepolis* was to combat stereotypes about Iranian civilization and culture: "As an Iranian who has lived more than half my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth" (Satrapi). As a narrator, she sets herself up to enter tumultuous territory, ready to recount childhood memories of politically charged, controversial events as an adult. The reader may wonder how much of her story is true since so much time has passed between the experience and the recounting of the story. Satrapi, however, makes an effort to establish trust with the reader throughout her narrative. When she knows she does not remember or understand an event, she makes it clear. For example, she replaces dialogue with scribbles in an overheard conversation between her mother and grandmother (Satrapi 29), showing she did not hear or understand what was happening in that moment. She also makes it clear when she is certain of accuracy, for example, using phrases like “Those were her exact words to me” (Satrapi 86). These efforts establish trust with the reader, and as they are drawn into the story, Satrapi’s goal to dispel stereotypes about Iranian culture is one step closer to completion.

The autobiographical pact aside, comics can be a mode for self-invention, via *autofiction,* a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky as a reaction to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact (Allamand 53). Autofiction does not require an autobiographical pact, because it is implied that the story being told about oneself is not entirely true. Charles Hatfield believes autobiography naturally and inevitably blurs fact and fiction, describing the genre of autobiography as “protean” by nature and saying autobiography “applies the narrative techniques of fiction to stories implicitly defined as ‘true’” (112). In *Fun Home,* Alison Bechdel navigates the process of mourning her father, with whom she had a complicated and even traumatic relationship, by comparing her parents to fictional characters throughout her narrative. She does this as a way of trying to understand them. As narrator, she says, “I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms” (Bechdel 67).

Another opportunity to blur fact and fiction when personal narratives are told in comics form is through self-invention, because the author must create what Hatfield calls a “self-caricature,” saying, “We see how the cartoonist envisions him or herself; the inward vision takes on an outward form. This graphic self-representation literalizes a process already implicit in prose autobiography” (114). This “self-caricature” gives graphic narrators the opportunity to exert control over their identities, leaving potential for autobiography to become autofiction. However, I argue that this adds an extra layer of truth to graphic narratives. We may not see the subject exactly as they are, or how they appear to others, but we do see them exactly as they see themselves. As Hatfield says, “A cartoonist may actually find him or herself through a broad, cartoony, in some sense stereotypic self-depiction” (115). He calls this creation of the cartoon-self a form of “objectification” that “enables self-understanding and self-transformation” (Hatfield 116). I found that as I created my own cartoon-self, I could not escape certain realities. While I do not know what I look like to other people, I had to draw myself as I see myself. I even included features that I would rather gloss over, i.e., the size of my nose and forehead. While I could have drawn myself with a glamorous, magazine-cover-airbrushed sort of look, I thought this would be an ineffective way to get my readers to believe my narratives to be true. My self-caricature from Episode 4 (Figure 3) furthers intimacy with the reader as it depicts the two sides I see in myself, the creative and the analytical (a play on the myth of “left brain = analytical, right brain = creative”), and my struggle in deciding which side to let guide me in deciding my future career path.

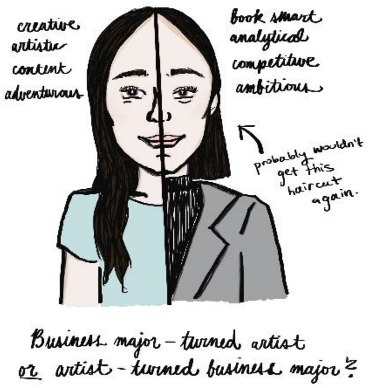
creative
artistic
content
adventurous
book smart
analytical
competitive
ambitious
probably wouldn't get this haircut again.
Business major - turned artist
or artist - turned business major?

Figure 3: My Self-Caricature (Episode 4)

Visual Communication

A unique aspect of the graphic narrative is that it communicates by blending both the visual and the verbal. Hillary Chute, who uses the term "graphic narrative," specifically, defines comics as a "hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially" (452). Verbal communication has been favored in Western culture, which has hindered comics from becoming a respected form of storytelling. Graphic narrators and researchers alike have worked to demystify visual communication and bring comics to the level of esteem reserved for literature written in prose. One of these pioneers is Nick Sousanis, who wrote *Unflattening,* his 208-page dissertation, entirely in comics form. Sousanis describes "flatness" as rigid thinking that words take primacy over images in communicating ideas, an idea deeply rooted in Western culture. Sousanis "believes that verbal language alone is a poor vehicle for capturing the multidimensional, many-layered fullness of human experience… It's not so much that a picture is worth a thousand words, but rather that a picture is worth concepts that can't even be put into words" (Hodler). In his Paris Review interview with Timothy Hodler, Sousanis says, "We make sense of the world in ways beyond text – teaching and learning shouldn’t be restricted to that narrow band.” Based on current research and supplemented with examples from my own work, I have identified two categories of information, temporal and emotional, that are communicated differently, and possibly more thoroughly, through comics than through prose.

Temporal

Time is communicated differently through the collaboration of the visual and the verbal than through words alone, and comics are better disposed to communicate nonlinearity. Comics can be read in all directions, as opposed to the strict left-to-right of Western writing, depending on the author’s “spatial construction of the page” (Chute 460). Hillary Chute argues that because of this, reading comics requires a “high degree of cognitive engagement” (460). This freedom to construct the page as the author wises makes nonlinear stories “perfect for comics” (Sousanis, Hodler), consequently making the graphic form perfect for life narratives, which are nonlinear. Recalling the quote from James Kochalka, “The story of my life is not a story at all” (Cates 210), we see that life narratives are not like fictional stories that follow the traditional plot structure of problem, action, climax, resolution. They consist of “cycles, repetitions, processes without closure, and moments of indeterminate or undetermined significance” (Cates 211). This is true in my comics, especially Episodes 2 and 3, which have no defined exposition, action, or conclusion. Instead, the pictures communicate the narrative in different ways, such as a literal illustration of a metaphor in Episode 3, when Sarah uses the metaphor of lining up for a race to discuss the inner turmoil one might experience when decided whether to pursue an opportunity.

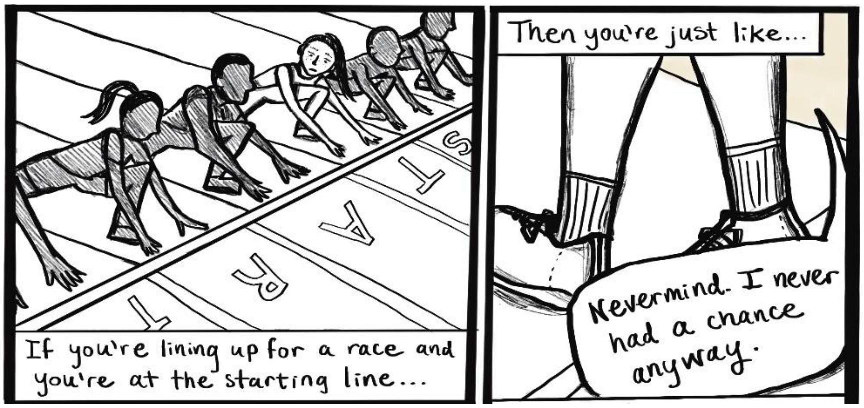
If you're lining up for a race and you're at the starting line...
START
Then you're just like...
Nevermind. I never had a chance anyway.

Figure 4: A Literal Illustration of a Metaphor (Episode 3)

Episode 2 also pushes the narrative forward in different ways. This episode departs from traditional panels (see Figure 5), and it is up to the reader to follow the direction of the story. The page below, in particular, breaks the bounds of the traditional rectangular panel format with a coffee cup-shaped panel and a calligram. Some images overlap slightly, and the reader's eyes move in a zig zag pattern to follow the direction of the images. This aligns with Hilary Chute's statement that, "A reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning" (452).

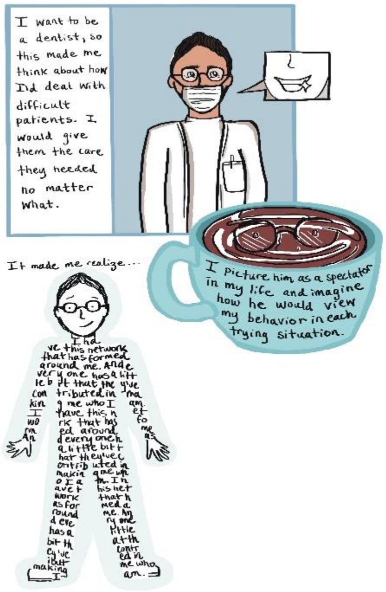
I want to be a dentist, so this made me think about how I'd deal with difficult patients. I would give them the care they needed no matter what.
It made me realize...
I picture him as a spectator in my life and imagine how he would view my behavior in each trying situation.
I have this network that has formed around me. And everyone has a little bit that they've contributed in making me who I am.

Figure 5: A Nonlinear Narrative (Episode 2)

Another depiction of the repetitive, cyclical nature of life stories in my comics is shown in Episode 4, which depicts the repetitiveness of my life during my summer internship (See Figure 6). Throughout the progress of the week, labelled “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,” the picture stays the same, the only alteration being that of my posture, showing how tired I became with the same daily activity of sitting at my desk at the computer. The combination of the verbal, the labels of the days of the week, and the visual, the repetitive images, show the passage of time and the repetitiveness of my life during those two months that would be difficult to communicate through words alone.

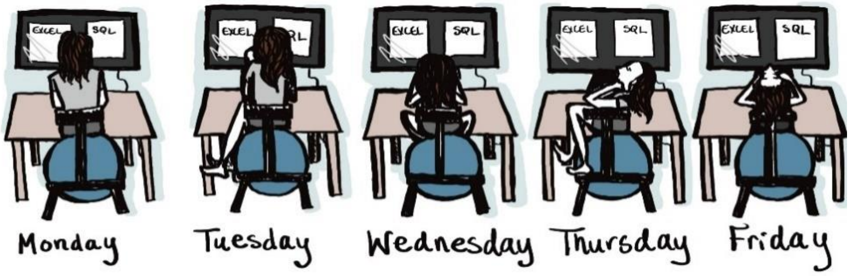

Figure 6: The Repetitiveness of a Desk Job (Episode 4)

Emotional

Sousanis says, "We tend to think of images as emotional things, irrational, because the scaffolding of language doesn't fit them very well. Not because they're actually irrational, but because we don't have the ways to hold them in. Our language can't fully contain them" (Sousanis, Hodler). From the moment we are born, we learn that it is difficult to use words to describe how we feel. We may get better at expressing ourselves as we get older, but some emotions surpass the bounds of language. Visual communication approaches this process from a different angle than verbal communication, working from the outside-in rather than the inside-out. In *Alternative Comics,* Hatfield cites William Lowell Randall, who says that this is the difference between autobiography in prose and autobiography in comics form. Comics depict events happening outside the self to communicate an experience that is happening inside (Hatfield 115). This is theoretically how emotions are communicated in comics, but what does it look like in practice? In my experience creating the comics for my project, I learned that as my artwork is far from realism, emotions shown on faces must be communicated through a few simple lines. Even a miniscule change in the direction of a person's eyebrows or mouth can change feelings of thoughtfulness to confusion, or confusion to anger. Recall Figure 4 (from Episode 3): the face shown is drawn very simplistically, but subtle changes to its facial expression - the whites visible at the top of the eyes, the slight upturn of the eyebrows, and the slight downturn of the mouth - communicate a complex set of emotions. In prose, perhaps, the description of what the subject is feeling would go something like this, “I surveyed the other runners. There were so many of them, all stronger and faster than me. I began to wonder if I was really cut out to be in this race in the first place…” but the reader senses this inner turmoil without it needing to be stated. Episode 3 also demonstrates that emotions need not only be communicated through facial expressions. Throughout the comic, a muted, muddy yellow color is used in the background whenever Sarah is experiencing feelings of self-doubt. This signifies the conflicting emotions and thoughts that are clouding her mind. In the last frame (see Figure 7, below), the sky is a clear, cloudless blue, showing how she has overcome these thoughts and can see her own self-worth, along with her future success, clearly.

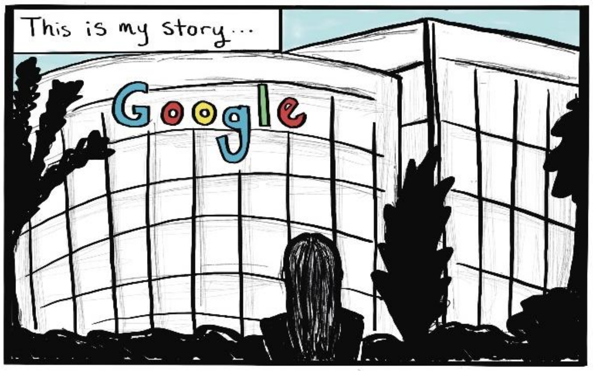

Figure 7: I Can See Clearly Now (Episode 3)

Conclusion

Let us return to my research questions: *Why do we care about ordinary stories?* and *What is achieved by telling these stories through comics rather than prose? What does the melding of the visual and verbal in comics communicate that words alone cannot?* While these questions, like all other studies of art and literature, bear further exploration, this paper points the direction to some potential conclusions. As far as the first question, *Why do we care about ordinary stories?*

goes, there is something to be said for being able to see reflections of oneself in a narrative. When we identify with the subject of a story, that connection draws us into their narrative, no matter how ordinary or mundane the depictions of their life may be. My comics depict young people who struggle with anxiety and self-doubt, who exhibit resourcefulness and resilience, and who have hopes and dreams for the future. No matter how jaded a reader may be, many can identify with these qualities and see themselves as they are now, or perhaps as they once were, in these slices of life. In a world where the past couple of years have isolated us from one another, the creation of graphic narratives like these proves an important way to help us reconnect.

The second, two-part question, *What is achieved by telling these stories through comics rather than prose? What does the melding of the visual and verbal in comics communicate that words alone cannot?* proved extremely complex to navigate. While some see comics as a subordinate form of literature to prose, comics' unique ability to meld visual and verbal communication through a combination of images and narration should earn them a place of honor in the literary field. Their disposition for nonlinearity makes comics the perfect form for telling life stories, as these stories are often repetitive and cyclical, without a defined plot structure. The author's use of space, movement, color, and other visual elements are assisted by the text to thoroughly communicate the passage of time or to convey emotions that are more easily perceived by the reader. These complex emotions, which would be difficult, or even impossible, to explain with words, may be felt cathartically by the reader, thus enhancing the process of identification, and further drawing the reader into the story. This is the cycle of communication and connection created by the graphic narrative.

Reflection

Many have asked me why, as a business student, did I choose to pursue a creative project so strongly rooted in the humanities field for my senior thesis. I initially believed, and told people, that the sole reason was that I felt more strongly motivated to draw than to conduct research. However, as the project and research progressed, my eyes were increasingly opened to a stronger connection between this project and my chosen field. As an international business major, one desires to develop a “global mindset,” or the ability to analyze a situation outside the bounds of our native culture. We seek to understand differences within and between cultures, and to learn how best to communicate with different people across the globe. Visual communication, while in some respects neglected in Western culture, has the power to transcend the confines of language barriers and connect diverse groups of people. It is impossible for me to learn every language, but it may not be impossible to learn how to touch the lives of people with whom I could not communicate verbally.

The connection of the project and research is evident, as my drawings are embedded throughout the paper. After all, it would be difficult to explain important aspects of comics, a visual-verbal hybrid, using only words. As the project progressed, my techniques for comic creation were influenced by my research. I was lucky to have a linear narrative to draw for Episode 1, but from Episode 2 onward, the narratives I had to illustrate were nonlinear. From my research on visual communication, the unconventional temporal structure of life stories, and the process of reading comics, I began to learn how to modify my spatial construction of the page and convey metaphorical or hypothetical situations in creative and interesting ways. Evidence of my progress in learning how to represent life narratives through comics is present on the website I created. With that being said, I invite everyone to explore cascianicomics.com, whether you have read this whole research paper or simply looked at the pictures. Whatever your preferred mode of communication, be it visual, verbal, or a combination of the two, I hope I have been able to reach you.

References

Allamand, Carole. “The Autobiographical Pact, Forty-Five Years Later.” *The European Journal of Life Writing,* Vol. 7, 2018. doi: 10.5463/ejlw.7.258.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.* Mariner Books, 2007.

Bley, Edgar S. “Identification: A Key to Literature.” *The English Journal*, 34(1), 1945, pp. 26-32. https://doi.org/10.2307/806995.

Bozard, Laurent. “*Défense et illustration de la chick BD.*” *Alternative Francophone* 1(9), 2016, pp. 36-49. http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/af.

Cates, Isaac. “The Diary Comic.” *Graphic Subjects*, Chaney, Michael, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp. 209-226. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=3445147.

Chute, Hillary. “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative.” *Modern Language Association*, 123(2), 2008, pp. 452-465. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25501865.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=619216.

Hodler, Timothy. “Thinking Through Images: An Interview with Nick Sousanis.” *The Paris Review,* 20 July 2015. Web: https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/07/20/thinking-through-images-an-interview-with-nick-sousanis/.

Kaminsky, Ilya. “We Lived Happily During the War.” Poetry Foundation, 2013. Web: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/91413/we-lived-happily-during-the-war.

Kortava, David. “A Neuroscientist’s Poignant Study of How We Forget Most Things in Life.” *The New Yorker,* 30 March 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/read/a-neuroscientists-poignant-study-of-how-we-forget-most-things-in-life.

Lejeune, Philippe. “*Le pacte autobiographique.*” *L’Autobiographie en France,* 1971. Print.

Safire, William. “On Language: Tranche.” *The New York Times Magazine,* 24 February 2009. Web: https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/magazine/01wwln-safire-t.html#:~:text=A%20tranche%20de%20vie%2C%20%E2%80%9Cslice,historically%20protecting%20a%20military%20position.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis.* Pantheon Books, 2004.

Scopa, Sally. “Catharsis.” LitCharts LLC, 2022. Web, https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/catharsis.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale.* Pantheon Books, 1980.

Tardi, Jacques. *Moi, René Tardi, prisonnier de guerre au Stalag II B.* Casterman, 2012.

Ward, Graham. “Narrative and Ethics: The Structures of Believing and the Practices of Hope.” *Literature and Theology,* 20(4), 2006, pp. 438-461. https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frl057.

Witek, Joseph. “Autobiography Meets the Comics.” *Graphic Subjects*, Chaney, Michael, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp. 227-230. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=3445147.