

(IN) BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE:
READING COMICS

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

By

Rain Newcomb

Director: Dr. Marsha Lee Baker
Associate Professor of English
English Department

Committee Members: Dr. Craig Fischer, English
Dr. Beth Huber, English

April 2011

© 2011 by Rain Newcomb

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, thank you to my committee. Your time, insight, and questions helped shape this thesis. This project was a leap of faith—thanks for taking it with me!

In particular, thank you to my director, Marsha Lee Baker. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your love, dedication, support, and late nights. But mostly thank you for telling me what I needed to hear, even when I didn't want to hear it. (And for never saying, "I told you that two weeks ago, why didn't you listen?" even when you definitely could have.)

Thanks to Craig Fischer for embarking on this project with three complete strangers, for reading early drafts and half-baked ideas (and nicely telling me how much further I needed to go), and for always pointing me to the perfect source.

And of course, thanks to Beth Huber. You were always exactly where I needed you to be, even before I knew I needed you there.

Thanks to many, many people in my life who have helped me with this project directly and indirectly. From my friends in the Writing Center to strangers standing in line for coffee, the number of people interested in this project astounds me. In particular, thanks to:

Murat Yazan, whose door was always open for brainstorming and technological help.

The Thesis Support Committee—I couldn't have done this without you.

Alan Wray, who read Bakhtin out loud with me in the car and talked me through more than one epistemological crisis.

Amanda Rodriguez, who accepted conversations about Bakhtin on Friday nights as "quality time."

My parents, who bought me my first comic book and have always been interested in hearing what I have to say.

And finally, thanks to Shannon, who kept me sane, fed, and told me I could do this. I believe you now. Thanks for putting up with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	4
Abstract	5
Chapter One: Misunderstanding Comics	7
Chapter Two: Look Who's Talking	23
Chapter Three: Revealing Relationships	36
Chapter Four: Comics and the Evolution of Language	00
Works Cited	73

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 “The Whipping,” page 6, panel 2. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.....	10
Fig. 2 “The Whipping,” page 6, panel 2. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.....	10
Fig. 3 “The Whipping,” page 2, panel 5. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.....	14
Fig. 4 “The Whipping,” page 4, panel 4. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.....	14
Fig. 5 “The Whipping,” page 7, panel 3. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.....	14
Fig. 6 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 98, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	24
Fig. 7 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	28
Fig. 8 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	29
Fig. 9 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 125, panel 2. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	31
Fig. 10 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	32
Fig. 11 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	33
Fig. 12 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	38
Fig. 13 <i>Fun Home</i> , pages 100-101. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	39
Fig. 14 <i>Understanding Comics</i> , page 44, panel 9. © 1993 Scott McCloud.....	41
Fig. 15 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	44
Fig. 16 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 57, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	46
Fig. 17 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	47
Fig. 18 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 59, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	49
Fig. 19 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 59, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	51
Fig. 20 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 79, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	52
Fig. 21 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 211, panel 2. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	53
Fig. 22 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 49, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	54
Fig. 23 <i>Fun Home</i> , page 51, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	55
Fig. 24 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	56
Fig. 25 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	56
Fig. 26 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	57
Fig. 27 <i>Asterios Polyp</i> , n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli.....	58
Fig. 28 <i>Fun Home</i> , pages 28-29. © 2006 Alison Bechdel.....	63

ABSTRACT

(IN) BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE: READING COMICS

Rain Newcomb, M.A.

Western Carolina University (April 2011)

Director: Dr. Marsha Lee Baker

In this thesis, I explore what it means to read a comic. Because comics combine words and images, reading a comic involves discovering the various relationships between two forms of language that create meaning. Fundamentally, comics are what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a hybridized construction because they combine two languages. Thus, comics are helping language to evolve.

Historically, the relationship between words and images has been misunderstood, which has led to a misunderstanding of comics. Bakhtin, writing in defense of the novel (another medium that was poorly-received at its inception and criticized for many of the same reasons comic books are criticized), says novels require different things of their readers because of the ways they use language. Similarly, comics use language in new ways and present particular challenges to their readers. There are remarkable parallels between how Bakhtin says we read the novel and how comics scholars such as Thierry Groensteen and Charles Hatfield suggest we read comics.

Using Bakhtin's philosophy of language to read two comics, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, reveals that comics create both visual and verbal representations of Bakhtin's ideas. In particular, comics find new ways to manifest heteroglossia, through the many ways they can visually represent the voices of many speakers, pure dialogue,

language as ideology. Furthermore, hybrid constructions, dialogism, and centripetal/centrifugal forces are an inherent part of comic art.

Reading comics is particularly complex because they are a discourse that intentionally embraces hybrid texts with words and images. Bakhtin shows that hybridized constructions are the primary way language evolves. As our culture becomes more and more accustomed to reading images, comics can help us make the shift to what image/word theorist W. J. T. Mitchell predicts is new paradigm that will transcend the word/image dichotomy.

CHAPTER ONE: MISUNDERSTANDING COMICS

In 1935, three years before the appearance of Superman kicked off the Golden Age of comics, Mikhail Bakhtin finished writing “Discourse in the Novel.” In this essay, a product of his interdisciplinary inquiries into a philosophy of language use, Bakhtin argues that misunderstanding the nature of language has led to a fundamental misreading of the novel. Bakhtin addresses the problem of novels being evaluated according to criteria “not oriented toward the novel as a whole, but only toward one or another of its subordinated stylistic unities” (263), formalist poetry his extended example. Language is heteroglossic, meaning it is made up of many voices speaking at once, using different languages, as he calls them, that overwhelm the meaning of any single utterance. The novel, he explains, has a “fundamentally dialogic relationship to heteroglossia” (399). When the novel is analyzed based on criteria that do not account for heteroglossia (as Bakhtin argues previous analyses of novels do), they are misread, misrepresented, dismissed as “low” and “vulgar” art forms, and “denied any artistic value at all” (260).

Like the novel, comics have “inspired” what comics scholar Charles Hatfield calls “a tremendous degree of cultural anxiety” (*Alternative 6*) since their inception. Even today, comics scholar Thierry Groensteen says, “The legitimizing authorities (universities, museums, the media) still regularly charge [comics] with being infantile, vulgar, or insignificant” (“Why” 3). The stigma of comics is often attributed to classism and sometimes to rising concerns about the negative effects mass media (comics being one of the early ones) might have on culture through their influence on children. The underlying assumption is that reading comics is bad. As Hatfield says, “Anxiety over

comics as an influence on reading, or as ‘competition’ for real reading, dominates the earliest professional writing about the form” (*Alternative* 33). Since the beginning, people have worried that comics will affect our traditional ways of reading, rather than wondering how traditional ways of reading affect comics. Because of the way we’ve been asking about the relationship between reader and text, the images used in comics “arouse...theoretical embarrassment” (Groensteen, *System* 9) and leave comics open to derogatory criticism. By revising the question to ask what reading does to comics, we can expand the intellectual framework that accounts for what happens within a comic.

Misunderstanding how comics are read was particularly evident during the cultural clash over comics during the late 40s and early 50s. During this time period, citizen-organized committees to monitor comics sprung up around the country. According to Amy Kiste Nyberg, a scholar interested in this period of history, the criticism opponents most-often repeated was that reading comics would make children illiterate (23-29). Many people thought of comic books as

just a new kind [of] juvenile literature with too many illustrations and not enough text. But these critics were mistaken. The comic book was a new medium altogether, a medium that relied on the interaction of words and pictures to tell stories in a unique way, with its own highly developed conventions of interpretation... Reading comics was teaching young readers a whole new vocabulary, one that was largely foreign to adults, because adult readers did not immerse themselves deeply enough in this new cultural form to learn its language. (Nyberg 5)

Comics were speaking a language that many adult critics could not understand. In 1948, “librarians...reported that children were ‘almost inarticulate’” when asked to explain what they liked about comics (Nyberg 13). The misunderstanding about what it meant to read a comic continued to grow and there was considerable anxiety over the influence comics were having on young people. The cultural clash over comics came to a head in 1954.

In April of that year, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency convened special hearings about the dangers posed by comic books. One of the comics presented to the Subcommittee was an example of how reading comics encouraged juvenile delinquency. The way this comic was presented demonstrates a fundamental (and to some extent deliberate) misreading of comics.

“The Whipping” published in *Shock SuspenStories* #13 in 1954, tells the story of Ed, a bigoted middle-aged white man, his attractive young daughter, and the Latino Catholic family who moves into the neighborhood. The story follows Ed as he tries to rile the other white men in the neighborhood into harassing the family until they leave, but to no avail. In *Romeo and Juliet* fashion, his daughter starts dating their son. Ed invents a story about the boy attempting to rape his daughter, forms a mob, takes a sleeping body from the boy’s bed, and whips it to death. The final panel reveals that Ed has killed his daughter, as the weeping boy cradles her in his arms and says that they had been secretly married.

According to Nyberg, the Senate Subcommittee did not see the entire comic. They saw only the images and speech balloons within the frames of the panels. The narrative text, printed above the frames, was left off (Nyberg 64). The Senate Subcommittee saw

panels that looked like figure 1. This panel, as printed in “The Whipping,” actually looks like figure 2.



Fig. 1 “The Whipping,” page 6, panel 2. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.



Fig. 2 “The Whipping,” page 6, panel 2. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.

While the image shows three men dressed in Ku Klux Klan robes breaking down a door, the narrative text comments on “the fiction of differently colored skin” and “the illusion of strange accents,” concluding that “these are the fantasies of hate” (6:2). As Nyberg observes, “If a reader skips the captions and skims the dialogue, a much different story is told” (64). The message of the story only comes through when the reader brings the narrative text and the panels into relationship with one another. Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity, in which two forms of language are inextricably linked and cannot be read separately, would never have allowed this reading. Because the Subcommittee did not see the narrative text, they found that “The Whipping” encourages racial hatred and violence, and, as such, will teach children to kill people who do not look like them.

In “The Whipping” racial slurs such as “greasy Mexican” (1:2) and “spick” are used in dialogue by Ed and the other white men. However, the narrative text above the panels describes a “Spanish Catholic family” (2:1). The narrator and characters are using different languages, creating what Bakhtin calls a “double-voiced discourse” (324). According to Bakhtin, novels have been misunderstood because they use more than one type of language. Incorporating many voices speaking different languages is how the heteroglossic nature of language manifests in the novel. Understanding how these languages relate to one another, and how they comment on one another, is crucial to understanding the novel. The same thing happens in comics, which makes them a “complex narrative instrument, and potentially challenging reading experience” (Hatfield, *Alternative* 152).

In “The Whipping,” the anti-racist narrative language contradicts the bigoted language of the characters. However, the Senate Subcommittee’s reading did not

acknowledge the presence of more than one voice. Just as Bakhtin showed critics of the novel misreading when they read as if there were a single, unified voice present, the Senators only heard the bigoted and violent voice. By listening to one voice and ignoring the rest, the Senate Subcommittee discounted the double-voiced discourse in “The Whipping” and misunderstood the comic.

The Senate Subcommittee was also concerned with the violence shown in “The Whipping.” They believed any image suggesting violence will always encourage violence in children, regardless of its narrative context, because images are absorbed quickly and uncritically by readers. The assumption that images are easier to read than words and can shape the reality of “vulnerable” populations (like children) can be traced back to the beginnings of comics’ history.

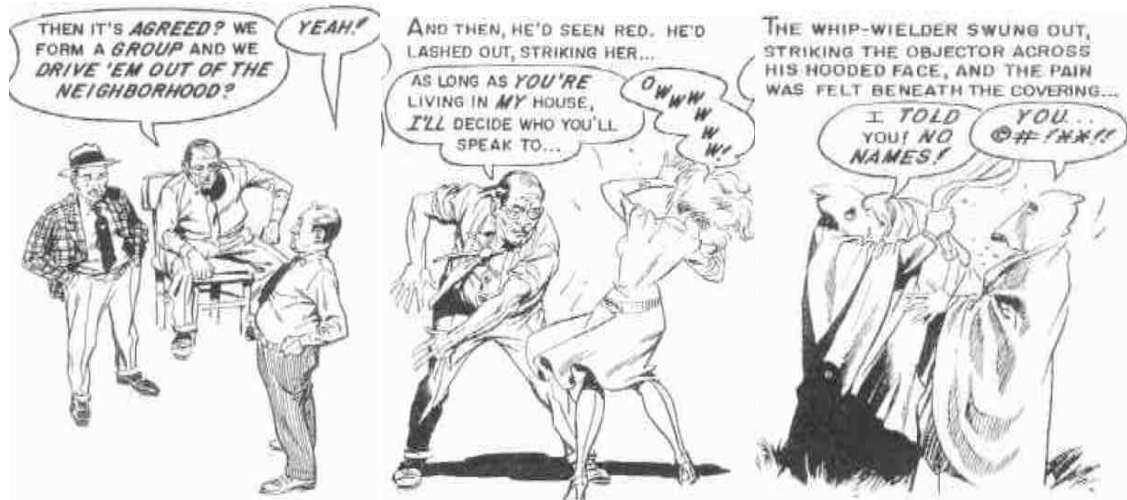
Comics historian David Kunzle unearths the history of comics back to the invention of the printing press. These proto-comics combined words and images, usually conveying some sort of morality lesson to the lower, less literate classes, which has helped form assumptions about images being more suited to text-based communications for people unable to read. One of the key distinctions between the upper and lower-classes (other than money) is that the educated upper-class society can read. Combining words with pictures “simplified” a text, making it appropriate for the far less literate lower class. Thus, the assumption that images communicate messages that either cannot be or are not critically read was created.

This assumption played into how “The Whipping” was read in 1954 and it is still present today. W. J. T. Mitchell, an art historian and theorist of word/image relationships, says that, according to “common wisdom...spectators are easily manipulated by images”

(2). (An assumption he dismantles.) Comics theorist Scott McCloud perpetuates this assumption in his differentiation between words and images: “Pictures are *received* information... The message is instantaneous. Writing is *perceived* information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language” (49).

Literary critic Henry John Pratt echoes the underlying assumption that, “compared to language acquisition, picture recognition is a basic skill” (106). These assumptions lead people to discount what is happening within the images in comics.

A more thorough understanding of what it means to read images in “The Whipping” actually creates a very different story. Looking carefully at what is shown and what is not shown in the panels of this comic reveals “the blows struck by Ed are suggested” in all but two of the panels (Nyberg 65). The two panels containing violence show Ed hitting his daughter Amy and one of his fellow Klan members—both of whom are white. Once the reader has noticed the panels where the violence occurs in “The Whipping,” another visual detail emerges: these two panels have no frame (the outline bordering the panel). Only one other panel in the comic appears with no frame. Because of what Groensteen calls “iconic solidarity” (*System* 17), the lack of a frame links these panels together even though they do not appear on the same page. (I will explore this idea more in Chapter Three.)



(from left to right)

Fig. 3 “The Whipping,” page 2, panel 5. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.

Fig. 4 “The Whipping,” page 4, panel 4. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.

Fig. 5 “The Whipping,” page 7, panel 3. ©1954 Tiny Tot Comics, Inc.

The progression of these panels first shows a small group of men determined to “protect” their community from the threat of outsiders (see fig. 3). They are concerned for the safety of their wives and children. In the next frameless panel, Ed attacks his daughter, the very person he was trying to protect (see fig. 4). Finally, Ed attacks his neighbor (see fig. 5). The message created by these three panels is that fear and hatred of the Other destroys communities, not the outsiders toward whom the fear and hatred is felt.

Critically reading the images in “The Whipping” creates what comics scholar Gene Kannenberg calls “complex and overlapping systems of referral over the course of the narrative” (318). This narrative contradicts the one the Senate Subcommittee found because the Subcommittee misunderstood what it means to read a comic.

The problem is not simply that a single comic was misread in one isolated incident. (Although this misreading did profoundly affect the next 30 years of comics

because the Senate Hearings led to the creation of the Comics Code, a document which codified the perception of comics as “juvenile pap” [Hatfield, *Alternative* 11] and placed strict rules on what could and could not be said in a comic.) The problem is that misreading comics turns them into something that they are not. Disregarding the relationship between words and images and ignoring the many ways panels relate to one another when reading a comic denies comics their unique ontological foundation as a medium. As comics scholar Joseph Witek shows, “to be a comic text means to be *read* as a comic” (149, his emphasis). In other words, the ways a reader creates meaning with the text defines it as a comic. Witek explores the historical use of panel numbers, directional arrows, and regularity of page layout, discussing how these devices have changed as readers become accustomed to them. These shifts indicate reading comics is “historically contingent and evolving” (149). What unifies the heterogeneous and ambiguous medium of comics is how they are read. Misunderstanding what it means to read a comic denies the way comics constitute an artistic medium that uses language and expresses meaning in specific ways.

Many people have studied what it means to read a word-only text. Their insights are a good starting place in looking for what it means to read a comic. Frank Smith, a cognitive scientist who studies how people learn to read, identifies reading as “making sense” or “interpreting experience” (2). Thus, “meaning is not contained within the sounds of speech or the printed marks of writing, conveniently waiting to be extracted or decoded, but rather must be constructed by the listener or reader” (12). Smith’s definition has two important implications: a text can have more than one meaning and the reader is essential to making that meaning. As a rhetorician interested in the pedagogy of reading,

Kathleen McCormick asserts, “Reading...always occurs in social contexts” (69). Readers and texts are complex combinations of ideological formations and individualization. She says, “Readers are socially constructed, interdiscursive subjects...balanced between determinism and autonomy” (60). Furthermore, the texts are also “produced...and...reproduced under determinant conditions” which all “have consequences” (60). As an act, reading is a negotiation between and among these elements.

The reader’s role in the act of reading is complex. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser says, “the reader is not simply called upon to ‘internalize’ the position given in the text, but [she] is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge” (1677). He is intrigued by the way texts invite readers to enter into them by creating gaps, making reader and text “partners in the communication process” (1674). Rhetorician Mariolina Salvatori says, “A reader must accept and carry out the tremendous responsibility of giving a voice, and therefore a sort of life, to the text’s argument” (441). Salvatori emphasizes the responsibility of the reader to “make *those* texts speak, rather than speak *for* them” (444). McCormick echoes this concern: “A text will try to privilege a certain reading by laying down as many directions as possible... But reading is interactive” and the reader has her own “‘framework’ within and through which she reads” (80). Every text contains within it a multiplicity of meanings, and the choices a reader makes “will open the text up to certain readings and close it off to others” (McCormick 86). Understanding the various choices offered to readers of comics will help us understand not only how comics are read, but also what reading comics means for the nature of language.

Bakhtin's philosophy of language is the foundation for these theories of what it means to read. Bakhtin says, "Utterance comes to fruition only in the response" (282) and "the word in language is half someone else's" (293). In order to make meaning, the reader must respond to the text while also letting the text speak for itself. Because reading is an act of both reader and text, reading must take into account the specific ways a genre such as the novel or a medium such as comics uses language. Bakhtin and comics theorists are quite clear that their respective texts require their own forms of analysis. Groensteen says, any "defense of comics depends on recognition of the fact that they cannot be judged by the same criteria as generally applied to literature" (*System* 10). Hatfield insists care must be taken to not "import...comics into prevailing canons of literary value, without regard to their special formal characteristics" (*Alternative* 162). Because Bakhtin's theorizing about reading and readers is grounded in a deep understanding of the nature of language, his work provides insight into those forms of analysis.

Bakhtin and comics scholars have similar concerns about and insights into the problems they wrestle with. Crucially, Bakhtin sees the novel as "an artistic system of languages" (416), made up of "heterogeneous stylistic unities" that "combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole" (262). Therefore, properly understanding a novel involves

uncovering all the available orchestrating languages in the composition of the novel, grasping the precise degree of distancing that separates each language from its most immediate semantic instantiation in the work as a

whole, and the varying angles of refraction of intentions within it,
 understanding their dialogical interrelationships. (416)

Because, as Bakhtin points out, the novel is “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (261), each novel must be examined on its own terms. Looking at the “dialogic interrelationships” between the “orchestrating languages” circumvents the problem of a universal criterion. By focusing on the relationships between the languages within the novel, it becomes possible to see the novel as “an artistic system of languages” (416). Each novel creates its own “artistic system of languages,” and making meaning from the text involves understanding the relationships between the languages within it.

Similarly, Groensteen calls comics “a system in which the components, and their interactions, draw a complex and unpublished totality” (*System* 23). He painstakingly categorizes the different parts of a comic in order to show how they can interact. Over and over, Groensteen points out that all the elements have relationships, and “the relations between the terms” (*System* 5) (their dialogic interrelationships), create the comic itself. Analyzing any particular comic must take into account “the *simultaneous* mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitutes it... The problem posed to the analyst is not which code to privilege; it is to find an access road to the interior of the system that permits exploration of its totality so as to find coherence” (*System* 6). Like Bakhtin’s key to understanding the novel, the “access road” for which Groensteen searches is created by seeing the interrelationships between the elements of comics. Groensteen says braiding, or “arthrology,” is the basis of comics. Braiding means every element in a comic has a potential relationship with every other element in the comic, and a relationship to the comic as a whole. These relationships become actualized

when the reader discovers them. Reading comics is the process of uncovering the relationships that are present. Therefore, developing criteria for reading comics must be based on uncovering these relationships.

Relationships are particularly important in Bakhtin's philosophy of language. Bakhtin says all language is ideological because language is always social; it takes place in a specific context and is filled with the worldview of the speaker (291). In other words, language is simultaneously created by the relationship between a person and her internal world, between two people, and between a person and the external world. The smallest unit of meaning in language is the utterance. Every utterance takes place in "a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment" (276). Furthermore, utterances "are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words" (292). In short, every utterance is ideological and informed by its historical and social context. These languages can be "juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (292). (And, of course, they can have all these relationships all at once.) The utterance derives its meaning from "a background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments... [A] background [which] complicates the path of any word toward its object" (281). The background of utterances overwhelms the meaning of any particular utterance. This is heteroglossia. Heteroglossia can be heard in many voices speaking at once. Bakhtin says, "Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel..., is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324, his emphasis). This creates a "double-voiced discourse" in which the two or more forms of speech are "dialogically

interrelated” (324). Novels use various means to incorporate different voices, including the voices of different speakers, pure dialogue, hybridization, and dialogized interrelations (Bakhtin’s terms).

Dialogism is the process through which an utterance gets its particular meaning. This meaning is always context-dependent and fleeting. Any given utterance is understood by its dialogic relationship to the heteroglossic context constantly occurring in the background. All the uses of the utterance in the past are responded to, things the utterance will mean in the future are responded to, and the utterance responds to all the things it means in the present. The relationship between a particular utterance and all the other utterances is what gives it meaning in a specific setting.

The meaning of an utterance is simultaneously fixed and unstable. It contains one meaning and all possible meanings. This is because language is constantly animated by centripetal and centrifugal forces. The centripetal forces “unite and centralize socio-ideological thought” in their “struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language” (270-271). Bakhtin says, “Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (272). The centripetal forces collapse language into a unitary meaning. The centrifugal forces fling language outward into multiplicity. Bakhtin’s theory of language allows us to apply the instruments of his theory to see further into reading comics.

Bakhtin’s philosophy of language, and his discussion of how language is represented in the novel, can help us understand what it means to read a comic. I will use Bakhtin’s theories to read two comics, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and David

Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*. I chose *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel because of how it combines powerful words with obsessively detailed images and, alternatively, *Asterios Polyp* by David Mazzucchelli for its emphasis on using "pictures to carry content" (Mazzucchelli, "Conversations" 109). Every comic makes its own set of choices, choices which foreground certain aspects of the medium while minimizing or back grounding others. This is particularly true of *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp*. The few similarities between *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp* are they are made by a single creator, were not serialized, are created for the alternative comics'¹ audience, and are framed by allusions to Greek myths (the former to Daedalus and the latter to Orpheus). Bechdel and Mazzucchelli's comics find different ways to express the languages of the heteroglossia because they create different balances between word and image. Because image is a form of language in a comic, heteroglossia has a visual representation. *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp* visually represent the voices of many speakers, pure dialogue, and express the ideology of individuals' languages. Bakhtin's ideas about hybrid constructions, dialogism, and centripetal/centrifugal forces are an inherent part of comic art, and the comics I examine illuminate and expand Bakhtin's theories. While traditional reading is an involved and complex activity, comics are even more complex.

¹ The term alternative typically describes comics that trace their lineage back to the self-published, underground comix of the 60s. According to Hatfield, alternative comics tend "to flout the traditional comic book's overwhelming emphasis on comforting formula fiction [and] cultivate... a more considered approach to the art form" (*Alternative x*).

CHAPTER TWO: LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Fun Home, Bechdel's book-length memoir, was published in 2006. Bechdel began her career in comics publishing the newspaper strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* from 1983 to 2008. *Fun Home* is her first book-length work, and it took her seven years to create. The story centers on Alison's relationship with her father Bruce, particularly the ambiguous circumstances of his death, the mysteries of his double-life, and Alison's relationship to both his and her own queer identity. The story uncovers the fiction of Bruce's life as closeted homosexual who has affairs with his male high-school students. Father and daughter are tied together by their shared sexual orientation. The story is recursive, returning to key moments over and over again. Literary allusions form a framework of reference for the themes developed in the story, and the visual representations of books (individual pages of texts and books as objects) are drawn into the panels.

In both popular and academic presses, much critical attention has been paid to the "literary" quality of *Fun Home's* narrative. For instance, *New York Times* reviewer Sean Wilsey asserts, "Very few cartoonists can also write... But *Fun Home* quietly succeeds in telling a story, not only through well-crafted images but through words that are equally revealing and well chosen. Big words, too!" H el ene Tison, a French scholar studying the intersections of literature, culture, and gender, points out that "the link between text and image in *Fun Home* is not a redundant attempt at clarifying; it is, on the contrary, complex, multiple, changing" (34). This multiplicitous relationship forms the core of how a reader makes meaning with *Fun Home*.

Asterios Polyp, Mazzucchelli's book-length work of fiction, was published in 2009. Mazzucchelli began his career in comics at about the same time as Bechdel, but he started out illustrating mainstream superhero comic books. His work with Frank Miller on *Daredevil* and *Batman* titles established his reputation as one of the best cartoonists working in the field. In the 1990s, he moved to the field of alternative comics, self-publishing three anthologies of shorter work in *Rubber Blanket* between 1991 and 1993. In 1994, Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik adapted Paul Auster's novella *City of Glass* into a comic. *Asterios Polyp* is the first book-length comic Mazzucchelli produced by himself, taking ten years to create it. The eponymous Asterios Polyp is the fairly unlikable main character. The story focuses on the evolution and dissolution of his marriage to Hana, his subsequent loss of self, and his journey to self-discovery. It is not told linearly. Thematically, the comic can be read as "a supremely well-thought-out satire on a certain kind of thinking: the dialectical, the linear, the polarizing" (Hatfield, "Review" 242).

While most critics laud *Asterios Polyp's* visual achievements, the plot has not been so well received in a few places. *The Hooded Utilitarian*, an online community of comics scholars, has been particularly vocal about some of *Asterios Polyp's* shortcomings. As comics critic Noah Berlatsky writes in his review, "*Asterios Polyp* takes an impeccable sense of visual design and layer upon layer of sophisticated allusion to tell a clichéd, tedious, poorly imagined, ruthlessly un insightful story." According to many critics, *Asterios Polyp* has chosen to privilege the image over the word, a choice which, as comics scholar Caroline Small finds, "creates a destructive incoherence at the center of the book" by leaving the word/image dichotomy in place.

Comics most obviously express language through the words contained in the narrative boxes and speech balloons that designate the differences between narrator and character voices. Typically, the narrative box is a rectangle while the speech balloon is an oval with an appendix pointing to the speaker. The words “spoken” by the narrator usually appear at the top of the panel (occasionally the bottom), and share an edge with the frame, appearing either inside or outside of it. Figure 6 shows a panel from *Fun Home* that demonstrates narrative boxes and speech balloons.



Fig. 6 *Fun Home*, page 98, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

Alison, Bruce, and Helen Bechdel are all speaking characters. The narrator speaks not only in the text above the panel, but also in narrative boxes within the frame of the panel.

This panel also contains an example of direct authorial language: the two narrative boxes with pointy-arrowed appendixes reading “velvet!” and “least girly dress in the store.” Although this information is thematically linked to the narrative boxes, these interjections are physically separated and contained within their own boxes. Groensteen says the contents of such balloons² are “autonomized and become two distinct enunciations if the author chooses...to place them in two separate balloons” (*System* 83). In this way, “the speech balloon reaches to take on the value of the punctuation mark” (Groensteen, *System* 83). In Bakhtin’s analysis, shifts in a sentence’s construction (within a syntactic phrase or indicated by punctuation) often reveal a new type of language entering the discourse (303). Therefore, these interjections can be read as not simply continuations of the narrative voice or allusions to the conventions used by older comics, but as direct authorial intervention.

When the author intervenes in this instance, she does so to draw attention to specific, visual details inside of the panel. These are details the reader cannot know just by reading the image as it is presented in this panel. According to comics scholar Agnès Muller’s reading, each narrative box “reveals the ultimate inadequacy to the narrative purpose of visual art on its own” (20). But Bechdel could have revealed these details purely through image or dialogue. The insertion of the authorial voice layers added context to the panel. This single panel contains the voices of characters, author, and

² Groensteen calls everything a balloon: narrative boxes, speech balloons, and thought balloons.

narrator. Furthermore, each type of speaker has a unique visual aspect to distinguish his or her voice from the others.

The authorial voice is always refracted through the voices of the narrator and speakers, whether or not she appears as a speaker and, as Bakhtin notes, it is one of the more common ways to discern the authorial voice (314). Because comics represent voices visually, the physical placement of the words on a panel can reveal the authorial voice. In the panel from *Fun Home*, the placement of the narrative boxes in the top section of the panel, as well as the placement of the speech balloons and their appendices, all express a refraction of the authorial voice.

The narrative box reading “Not only were we inverts, we were inversions of one another” takes on an additional layer of meaning because it is positioned outside the panel. It frames the entire contents of the panel, and makes a visual pun of Alison and Bruce looking at each other in the mirror. This text draws attention to a major theme of queer sexuality and gender expression running through *Fun Home*. Moving inside the frame of the panel, the next narrative box in the top right corner (making it naturally the next one in the reading sequence) reads, “While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him...” and is placed within the panel. After this, the reader has two choices of reading sequence. Following the normal left-to-right sequence developed by Western word-based reading protocols, the reader would read Alison’s speech balloon next. Following the normal narrative text to speech balloon sequence more typical in comics, the reader moves to the second narrative box before reading the speech balloons. This reading stratifies the voices, according priority to the narrator over the character, and is cued by how the text visually appears on the page. Put simply: read the

rectangles first, then the ovals. How the reader chooses to make her way through the narrative text and speech balloons creates a slightly different meaning, yet these meanings are set within their relationship to the whole panel, page, chapter, and comic.

Whichever way the words are read (left to right or narrative boxes then speech balloons), the elements in the panel cause the reader to criss-cross, either physically or mentally. Following the left-to-right reading sequence, the crossing takes place mentally, as the voices of narrator and characters alternate and cross over each other. Following the comics reading, the crossing takes place with the eye. Just as Bakhtin discusses the need to uncover the precise distancing of one language to another, a comics panel can place each voice at different physical distances from the others, as this panel shows. How the reader passes through these distances affects the way the voices are read. The creation of the distance between the voices is another way that a comic can refract the author's voice. In this panel, Bechdel emphasizes the underlying theme of Alison and her father being at cross-dressing, cross-purposes to one another, constantly searching for a way to connect. The experience of reading this panel, and particularly the narrative boxes and Alison and Bruce's speech balloons, re-creates the feeling of their attempt to connect with each other within the reader.

The narrative boxes with the pointy-arrow appendixes representing the direct intrusion of the authorial voice are positioned in the lower part of the panel. Using the visually less-privileged lower area of the panel underscores these utterances as a sort of verbal aside. Helen's speech balloon is crowded into the bottom of the panel with these boxes. The placement of Helen's voice on the tier of "less-important" information highlights the implicit (but never quite explicit) marginalizing of Helen. (Again, in a

visual pun, Helen is near the margin of the page.) In her Groensteenian analysis of *Fun Home*, “Spectral Memory, Sexuality, and Inversion,” Adrielle Mitchell says she first thought Helen absent from the narrative, but, on re-reading, found “the mother is actually quite present (visually, at least) in Bechdel’s panels” (*par.* 18). Similarly, I had to go back to Helen’s passport photo to find out her name, which is one of the few places it appears in the comic. (In contrast, Bruce’s name appears in the narrative text, in speech balloons, and in the drawings of *Fun Home*.) The positioning of Helen’s speech balloon creates a dialogic relationship with the panel that also renders Helen’s language in the larger context of the panel. Although Helen says, “You’re going to upstage the bride,” the person really being upstaged in this panel (and in the memoir) is Helen herself.

In *Asterios Polyp*, authorial voice is refracted through the placement of speech balloons in other ways. Mazzucchelli uses the physical relationship between Asterios and Hana’s speech balloons to underscore his message. For instance, in a conversation among party-goers, Asterios constantly interrupts the story he has asked Hana to tell, correcting her “facts” (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

His speech balloons invade Hana's, layering on top of them just as his version of the story takes over hers. In the penultimate chapter, a series of panels shows the interaction between their speech balloons again to tell the story. This time the panels show their reconciliation (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Panel by panel, the speech balloons drift closer together, touch, and then join as their appendices wind around one another. The relationship between Hana and Asterios is manifested physically through the visual space their voices occupy. Readers must read the movement of the speech balloons and their appendices in addition to the words and the drawings of their bodies in order to interpret the characters' reconciliation.

As Groensteen and the above examples show, the placement of the balloons within the panels can lend an additional interpretive frame to the both the dialogue and the contents of the panel. Kannenberg says, “Comics allows for the simultaneous presentation of convergent or divergent information via the arrangement of various visual elements within the unifying space of the comics page” (307). In other words, there is a system for showing the voices of author, narrator, and characters within comics. Each speaker brings a different language from a different context into the discourse, manifesting the heteroglossic nature of language. The visual appearance of these languages on the page creates the potential for the way the words are arranged on the page, specifically their relationships to one another and their dialogic relationship to the whole, to add important information the reader is called on to interpret. As shown by Bechdel’s placement of speech balloons and narrative text, and Mazzucchelli’s use of overlapping speech balloons, authorial voice can be refracted through how the cartoonist works with and against the established system of showing voices in comics.

The cartoonist can choose to use the shape, placement, and style of the speech balloon to express additional information. The thought balloon is the simplest example of how a cartoonist can enclose a character’s speech (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9 *Fun Home*, page 125, panel 2. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

The appendix indicates the speaker, a visual representation of “she says” or “Alison thinks to herself at the funeral.” (Some experimental novels use different font treatments to convey this idea.) Because thought balloons and appendixes have become standard conventions and have moved beyond the realm of comics into mainstream culture, cartoonists often play with them, working with or against them to create new ways of expressing the socio-ideological language being used by a particular speaker.

Groensteen elucidates many ways the speech balloon can be created and put in relationship with other elements within the comic. Although McCloud points out that speech balloons are “the most widely-used, most complex and most versatile of comics many synaesthetic icons” (134), he glosses over their complexity and versatility, writing a scant page on them in his 215-page book. (By using “synaesthetic” in this context, McCloud means that speech balloons are a visual representation of sound.)

Another example of how speech balloons distinguish different voices comes from *Asterios Polyp*. Each character’s speech has a unique balloon shape and font. Comics scholar Matthias Wivel sees Mazzucchelli’s choice to “letter...each character’s voice

distinctly and var[y] their graphic appearance on the page” as a way “to match their individual personalities.” The visual representation expresses their individual socio-ideological language, mirroring each character’s worldview. (Of course, their socio-ideological outlook is also expressed through their words.) Figure 10 shows the voice of Asterios Polyp.



Fig. 10 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Like the rectangular shape of his speech balloon, Asterios has a very linear, clear-cut worldview. He breaks the world into dichotomies with clear delineations. For example, in this speech balloon he says, “Musical composition is either primarily rhythmic or primarily melodic,” breaking all forms of musical expression into two categories. Similarly, the lines of his speech balloon are either vertical or horizontal. (Except, of course, for the appendix which necessarily must point at him. Nonetheless, even its lines are very straight.) Furthermore, the outline of Asterios’s speech balloon is always of a consistent weight. The font used within his speech balloon is stripped down, radically sans serif. As a hand-written version of Helvetica, it does not draw attention to itself. Visually, it is a very normative font. It is so bland it is hard to notice it is a font, in the same way normative ideas present themselves as so normal they cease to be noticed. The normative font in turn reflects Asterios’s overbearing belief that his own view of reality is

reality itself. Using all capital letters underscores his authority. In his review of *Asterios Polyp*, Derik Badman astutely points out, “Asterios’ rectangular balloons can take on the appearance of the traditional rectangular narrative captions at the top of panels.” In this way, the shape and placement of the speech balloon gains new significance because of its relationship to the panel as whole and how it plays with comics’ conventions.

Mazzucchelli varies all these elements in other characters’ speech balloons. For example, figure 11 shows a speech balloon from Willy Ilium, an extremely egotistical choreographer.



Fig. 11 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Willy enters *Asterios Polyp* when he commissions Hana to design the set and costumes for his reinterpretation of the story of Orpheus. Willy’s brash egotism and continual reinvention of himself rub Asterios the wrong way. (Asterios calls him “Willy Chimera.”) The outline of Willy’s speech balloon is comprised of fluid, curving lines, in direct opposition to Asterios’s linear speech balloon. Whereas Asterios’s speech balloons only change shape enough to accommodate the number of words he speaks, the outline of Willy’s speech balloons expand, creating more white space around his words. Willy’s speech balloons have the tendency to fill any existing space in the panel, just as his prima

donna personality tends to take up as much space as possible in a room. Like Asterios, Willy speaks in all capital letters, constantly grandstanding and self-aggrandizing. (Less egotistical characters, particularly Hana, mix lowercase letters in with their capitals.) The line weight of Willy's font is one of the heaviest in *Asterios Polyp*, just as his personality (and probably his voice) is the loudest in the room. Unlike Asterios, the thickness and thinness of Willy's letters change, and they do not have a consistent registration. The letters do not align with an imaginary horizontal line drawn beneath them. Instead, the letters jump up and down like dancers on a stage. Similarly, his letters do not have a consistent vertical orientation. The w in "wouldn't" leans to right, but the w in "with" is straight up and down. Similarly, the p's in "happen" are different sizes. Willy's ideology is similarly inconsistent. The contrast between Asterios and Willy's speech balloons and fonts show the ideological clash between the two characters. Asterios's authority is based on his consistent and clear-cut ideology. Willy's authority is based on his fluid and adaptive ideology.

Bakhtin says when characters speak in "pure dialogue," or their own language, they are bringing a particular socio-ideological view of the world into the novel (358). Cartoonists can use the visual appearance of words on a page to express a character's socio-ideological view. As the simplest way language appears in the novel, Bakhtin doesn't spend much time discussing "pure dialogue." He is more interested in how the language used in "pure dialogue" comes into relationship with other languages. The examples used above show how the visual representation of "pure dialogue" in comics can add additional layers of meaning to this "simple" concept.

Bechdel and Mazzucchelli demonstrate just a few of the ways comics can express the languages of characters through the placement and shape of speech balloons and fonts. Groensteen identifies two types of cartoonists: the pragmatic, who alter aspects of the speech balloon in order to best serve the story; and the systematic, who always repeat the same structure. Groensteen says these two types represent “two fundamentally different approaches to the language of comics” (*System 79*). Although his categories may be a little overly deterministic (for instance, Bechdel and Mazzucchelli have both pragmatic and systematic tendencies), Groensteen’s larger point remains true: cartoonists make different choices with their speech balloons. These choices have consequences for how speech balloons express different types of language within a particular comic. By only analyzing a few panels from two comics, I have merely scratched the surface of all the ways comics can visually represent the voices of speakers and the “pure dialogue” of their individual languages.

CHAPTER 3: REVEALING RELATIONSHIPS

In the last chapter, I explored how comics manifest heteroglossia by incorporating Bakhtin's three types of speakers and "pure dialogue." Comics unfold layers of meaning through the physical representation of languages on the page. The way languages appear in comics becomes more complex as the languages enter into different relationships with one another. This chapter examines how comics create relationships between languages through hybridized constructions, dialogism, and the physical representation of the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language, all of which affect how readers make meaning with a comic.

According to Bakhtin, "A hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs...to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances...two 'languages'" (304). A hybrid construction must take place within the limits of a syntactic whole and is characterized by an unresolvable "double-voicedness," in which "one language is rendered in light of another" (362). Here is a simple example of a hybridized utterance from *Fun Home*: "After a week or two, finished with passing sperm and laying eggs, the locusts—more properly known as periodic cicadas—shuffled off this mortal coil" (157:2). Scientific ("passing sperm," "laying eggs," and "properly known as periodic cicadas") and artistic/literary ("shuffled off this mortal coil") languages are present in a single sentence spoken by the narrator.

In this utterance, an "unresolvable tension" is created through the juxtaposition of the scientific and the artistic languages. Using the scientific language of "passing sperm and laying eggs" turns heterosexual reproduction into a very clinical act. The "shuffled

off this mortal coil” phrase refers to Bruce’s death. Lurking within this single utterance, created by the juxtaposition between these two types of language, is a commentary on Bruce’s life. Masquerading as a straight man, he “passed some sperm” before “shuffling off the mortal coil.” The first act takes on an oddly clinical tone, while the second is perhaps his greatest artistic act. Yet this is only one possible reading of many that can be drawn out of this hybridized construction.

Comics are an inherently hybridized construction, because they combine the language of words and the language of images. Kunzle’s work detailing the history of the proto-comic in Europe shows that the hybridized construction of word and image is fundamental to the medium. For example, Kunzle discusses Gustave Doré’s *History of Holy Russia* written in 1854, which satirizes the reforms made by the Empire. The words are taken directly from the government’s propaganda, but the images show the devastating effects the policies have on the Russian people. Thus, the official version of history contained in the captions “collides” with the “cruel and cynical reality” of the drawings (Kunzle 23). The language of words and the language of images create an intentional “double-voicedness.” Although this example shows word and image opposing one another, there are many possible relationships for word and image in comics. As Kannenberg says, “Verbal and visual themes meta-narratively magnify, undercut, or otherwise comment upon each other” in comics (313).

Hybridization also takes place on a smaller scale in comics. In *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp*, hybridized constructions are created within words, within images, and within panels showing words within images.

As the example from *Fun Home* shows, comics can use words to create hybridized constructions. Mazzucchelli adds a layer of visual information to this hybridized construction shown in figure 12.

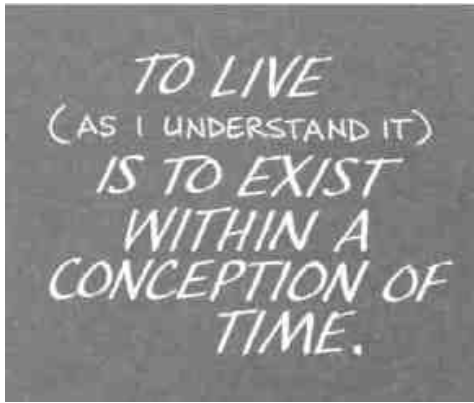


Fig. 12 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 1. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Asterios Polyp's narrator Ignazio, Asterios's twin who died at birth, frequently makes statements containing more than one language. The change in the language is visually represented by a smaller font size. In this example, "to live is to exist within a conception of time" is spoken in the language of sweeping philosophical generalization. The smaller parenthetical insertion "(as I understand it)" is personal, subjective language. The "double-voicedness" in this utterance is magnified by the change in font size. The subjective voice undercuts the heady, philosophical language of the first two statements. This unresolvable tension simultaneously gently satirizes and brings a small (literally), niggling doubt to the broad philosophical statement. The change in font size creates a visual representation of the hybridized utterance. Because words are always a visual element in comics, cartoonists can use the appearance of words on a page to help underscore the hybridized construction.

Comics can mix two drawing styles in a single panel to create another type of hybridized construction. Figure 13 shows an example of mixing drawing styles from *Fun Home*.

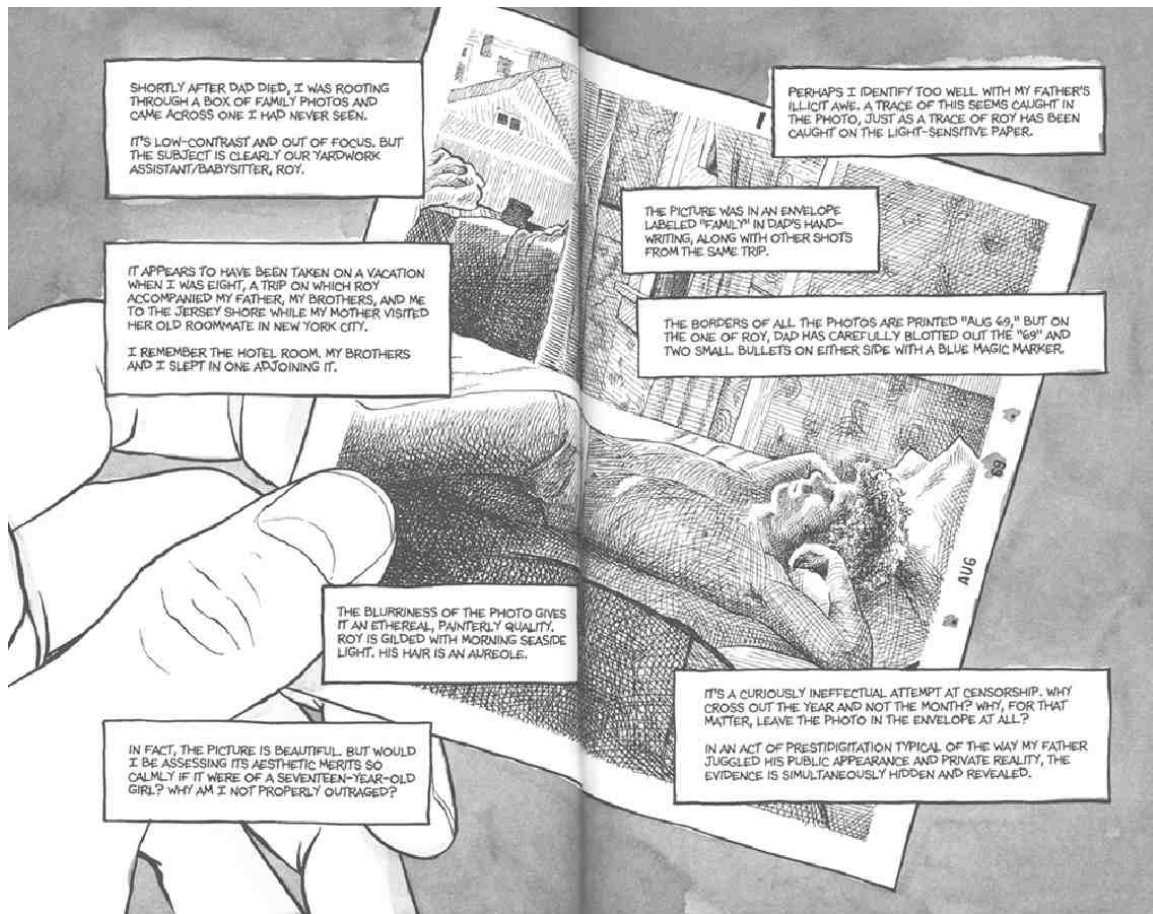


Fig. 13 *Fun Home*, pages 100-101. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

This spread, which Bechdel refers to as “the centerfold” of *Fun Home* in an interview with Hillary Chute (1006), shows a pivotal moment. Going through a box of family photos after her father’s death, Alison discovers this photograph of Roy, her babysitter and her father’s lover. Alison’s hand, drawn in the clear line style, dominates the left-hand page. Between her thumb and forefinger, she holds a cross-hatched photo of a

nearly naked Roy, reclining on the bed in a hotel room. This photograph was taken during a family vacation: Alison and her brothers are playing on the beach outside the hotel room window. In her analysis of *Fun Home*, Tison describes the contrast between “the reproduction of the blurred photograph” and “the narrator’s very neatly drawn hand” (37). The iconic clear line style of cartoons and a hyper-realistic, cross-hatched style are in tension with one another.

The juxtaposition of these two styles of drawing is used so frequently in comics that McCloud dedicates a few pages to discussing it in *Understanding Comics*. He examines the prevalence of using “cartoony” characters set against realistic backgrounds, concluding that the technique “allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world” (43). McCloud’s idea of “masking” has been the subject of much debate. More compelling here, though, is his brief discussion of how cartoonists combine cartoony and realistic styles to bring attention to specific details (44). In a single panel, McCloud shows a realistic sword held in his cartoony hand (see fig. 14).

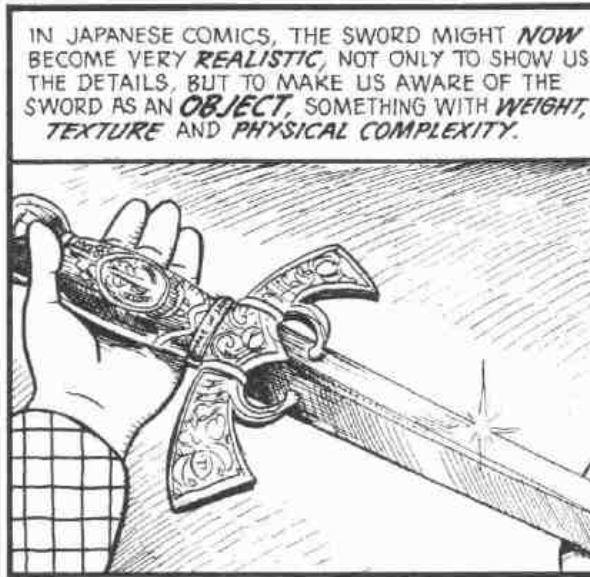


Fig. 14 *Understanding Comics*, page 44, panel 9. © 1993 Scott McCloud

He says the difference in drawing style “make[s] us aware of the sword as an object, something with weight, texture and physical complexity” (44) in a way that would not have been possible if both hand and sword were drawn using the same style. In Bakhtinian terms, the realistic language used to draw the sword is rendered in the cartoony language used to draw the hand. McCloud only reads this hybridized construction going one way. Bechdel’s hybridized construction can be read going both ways, so that either language can be interpreted in the light of the other.

Following McCloud’s reading, Alison’s cartoony hand makes the photograph of Roy more real, which makes Bruce’s secret affairs with teenaged boys more real. Tison reads the realism of the photograph as “the desire to convince the reader of the authenticity of the document,” and also of “the two different times and spaces in which it appeared, its two creators, and the very different meanings it takes on and incorporates in

those contexts” (37). For Tison, the hybridized construction authenticates reality, time, and space.

Reversing McCloud’s reading, the realism of the photograph draws attention to the cartoony language of Alison’s hand. Reading the hand rendered in light of the language of the photograph extends the realism through the cartoon. Although *Fun Home* is a comic, its subject matter is very real. Bechdel uses the comics medium to hand a sophisticated and complex experience to the reader, challenging dominant perceptions about appropriate subject matter for comics.

Reading the centerfold’s hybridized construction as realism rendered in light of cartoon is encouraged by the lack of frame around this entire spread. The clearly demarcated edge of the photograph, combined with the margin of white space between the paper and the picture, draws attention to the missing frame and margin around the centerfold. This is the only spread in *Fun Home* without a panel frame or margins, and has been discussed by many critics. Tison says, “The exceptional absence of margins...creates a sense of immediacy, of suddenness” (37). Because there is no frame around the page, Julia Watson reads this image as a reminder “of our complicity as viewers in this intimate glimpse, as our hand holding the book overlaps hers” (39-41). Ann Cvetkovich collapses even more boundaries between characters and reader, saying, “The image of Roy’s photo inverts this structure as Bechdel draws herself holding the photograph that provides access to what her father saw, as though *she* is looking over *his* shoulder” (119). Holding the photograph blurs the lines of distinction between Alison and her father, a distinction at the heart of *Fun Home*. Moreover, it blurs distinction between reader and comic.

The photograph has a boundary around it, made by the edge of the paper the photograph is printed on. This creates another frame inside the photograph. Karin Chabani describes the margin between the edge of the paper and the picture itself as “soft edged,” which “suggests instability” (12). The instability between the interior frame and margin allow Alison to cross over many boundaries to connect with her father’s erotic desire. As the narrative text says, Alison recognizes the beauty of the image. She compares Roy’s hair to “an aureole” (120), revealing that she is “identify[ing] too well with [her] father” (121). The hand holding the photograph makes the reader “acknowledge that s/he is seeing through the eyes of a similar kind of beholder” (Chabani 14). Alison identifies with her father, and the reader identifies with Alison.

As Groentseen finds in his analysis of many comics, an exterior frame (created by the margin around the entire page) “autonomiz[es] the work, ... isolat[es] ... the exterior reality” (32). The exterior frame separates the reality of the story from the reality of the reader. By leaving out the exterior frame, Bechdel gives the reader incentive to read the hybridized construction of the centerfold as realism shown in the light of a cartoon.

Asterios Polyp takes hybridized construction of drawing style in a different direction. Asterios and Hana are drawn in radically different styles at pivotal moments in the narrative, as shown in figure 15.



Fig. 15 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 4. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Hana is shown with cross-hatched magenta lines highlighting contour and volume. Asterios is outlined with clean blue lines depicting the anatomical structure of form. In this scene, they are fighting. Hana is winning, so her drawing style has spread out to encompass the background around them. (When Hana and Asterios fall in love, their styles overlap and harmonize.) Mazzucchelli uses different drawing styles within a single panel to develop one of his underlying themes: our perceptions of the world create the reality we see. This hybridized construction appears when the interplay of the two main characters' ideologies is key to the narrative.

Different styles of drawing represent different socio-ideological worldviews and thus correspond with different languages. Comics scholar Pascal Lefèvre says, "A drawer does not only depict something, but expresses in his drawing at the same time a philosophy, a vision" (159). The cartoonist's style of drawing creates a filter through which the story is seen. Using more than one drawing style gives the reader more than one filter to see through. The reader can choose to look through one filter and then the

other. Each one alone, and the movement between the two, gives new possible meanings to the utterance.

Comics also create hybridized constructions by incorporating words into the image. Because, as Groensteen says, there is “an opposition between the ‘textual zone’ and ‘image zone’” (*System 69*), placing words within the “image zone” creates a hybridized construction.³ There are several ways to do this. Bechdel draws pages from books, journals, advertisements, maps (which contain their own complex combination of visual and verbal elements), and more within the frame of the panel.

³ Images can also be placed in the “textual zone” to create hybridized constructions. Neither Bechdel nor Mazzucchelli provide a good example of this. They include symbols, such as “@&*!” and “!” in speech balloons. However, these symbols are too closely associated with words to provide grounds for good analysis of this type of hybridized construction.

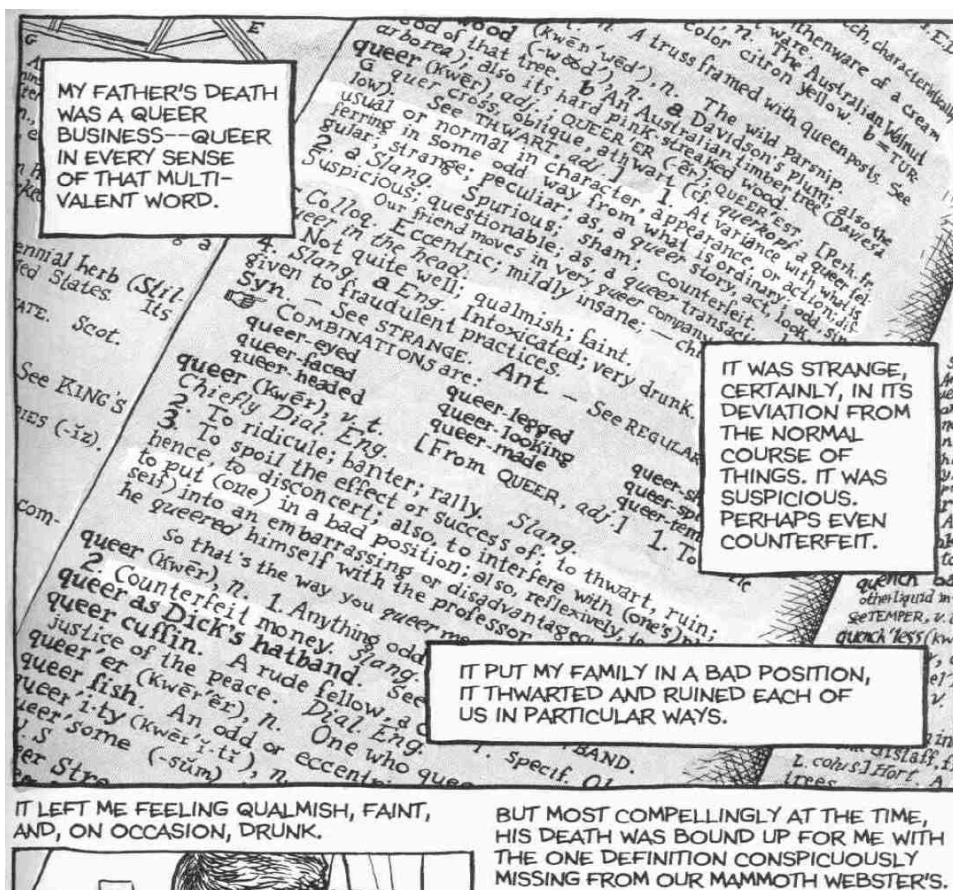


Fig. 16 *Fun Home*, page 57, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

Figure 16 shows the “mammoth Webster’s” dictionary at Alison’s family home (57:3) opened to the definition of the word “queer.” Rather than reading every word of the drawn text from left-to-right, the reader can choose to gloss over the panels or linger. Words contained within speech balloons and narrative boxes are “perhaps the only element of the paginal apparatus on which the gaze definitively stops” (Groensteen, *System* 79). When the words are not contained in the “textual zone,” there is no obligation to stop and read them as words. The drawn words in this image only catch the eye’s attention when a visual element makes the words stand out. Narrative boxes float on the surface of the panel near relevant parts of the image, and gaps in the ink wash

reveal particular aspects of the definition to be read. These words are also repeated in the narrative text. This reverses cartoonist and early comics theorist Will Eisner’s famous dictate, “Images read as text” (10), by creating text that reads as image. (However, the reader can choose to read every word if she wants.)

Asterios Polyp contains an example of words indicating sound and motion drawn into the “image zone” (see fig. 17).



Fig. 17 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

Hana’s cat Noguchi jumps onto Asterios when he walks into her studio. It contains both a sound effect (Noguchi’s “mmraow”) and a word indicating motion (“jump”). Sound is always conveyed through image in comics, because characters’ voices appear inside speech balloons. However, Noguchi’s speech is not contained within a speech balloon. As part of the “image zone” of the panel, it can take on more meanings besides the fact that Mazzucchelli is making a distinction between human speech and cat speech. The way the letters of the “mmraow” gradually grow larger show not only Noguchi’s

intonation, but also the force of his impact on Asterios's chest. The word "jump" is drawn three-dimensionally, so it springs off the page just as Noguchi springs into Asterios's arms. It is also registered on a curve that echoes Noguchi's motion lines. The visual design of the word illustrates the cat's flight path. These readings, and other possible interpretations, are created by the hybridized construction that renders the word in light of the language of image.

Hybridized constructions created by words placed within the "image zone" have received a fair amount of critical attention. Hatfield examines how these constructions blur the dichotomy between word and image, showing one through the lens of the other so "word and image approach each other" (*Alternative* 36). Their hybridized construction "collapse[s] the word/image dichotomy" (*Alternative* 36-37) and create[s] the possibility of new sets of relationships. Kannenberg cites "comics' innate ability to create complexity through the multivalent interpretive possibilities engendered by the form's presentation of structured text/image combinations" (306). Words and images can be used in many ways and form many relationships with one another. There are "ever-expanding possibilities for text/image relationships upon the comics page" (Kannenberg 318). Hybridized constructions allow a single utterance to contain many possible relationships between word and image.

In addition to creating hybridized constructions, languages can also be dialogically interrelated. Bakhtin admits that distinguishing between these two categories is often difficult (362). Basically, dialogized languages are constantly interacting, and their meanings shift within the context of the whole (426). Comics manifest dialogism through the concept Groensteen calls braiding (or "arthrology"). Of the many ways

braiding occurs in comics, I am going to focus on four in *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp*: repetition of a single element, repetition of an entire image, site of a panel, and repetition of a layout.

In *Fun Home*, some version of Sunbeam bread appears six times. Its obvious narrative significance lies in the fact Bruce Bechdel was killed by a truck delivering Sunbeam bread. A loaf of Sunbeam bread first appears on the counter in the background of a family dinner scene. In the foreground, Bruce hurls a plate onto the floor, shattering it. The surrounding panels give no explanation for his outburst. The narrative text says the family never knows “if the Minotaur lay beyond the next corner” (21:1). The loaf does not draw attention to itself, yet it is linked to an inexplicable feeling of ominousness and non-sensical acts of violence.

The second time the Sunbeam bread appears, it is on the side of the truck that runs Bruce over and kills him. However, in this alternate reality scenario, the truck safely passes behind him (see fig. 18).



Fig. 18 *Fun Home*, page 59, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

The narrator says, “(Yes, it really was a Sunbeam bread truck)” (59:2), using words to draw attention to the Sunbeam bread advertisement at the center of the panel. As Groensteen says, “Every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others” (*System* 146). The panels’ relationship is not actualized until the reader recognizes it. In this example from *Fun Home*, Bechdel helps the reader make the connection.

The bread loaf reappears on the table in the kitchen again on page 67 without drawing a lot of attention to itself. Next, it appears in an advertisement, smushed between the two blue-collar men Alison “measured [her] father against” (96:1). Then her father purchases a bag for their camping trip with yet another of Bruce’s paramours and brings it to the car (112:2). Finally, the bread loaf appears on the kitchen counter, lurking over Helen’s left shoulder as she says, “I can’t stand it any more. This house is a tinderbox” (217:2). The bread loaf overshadows Helen and suggests she may be manifesting the death of her husband.

By repeating this element, each panel echoes the previous and future panels. The Sunbeam bread is hidden in plain sight, like Bruce’s hidden homosexuality. The reader first notices it in a single panel, and then its appearance in all the other panels suddenly surfaces. In her analysis of the braiding of the Sunbeam bread loaf, Tison says:

All those contexts establish a very strong link between Bruce’s death / suicide and violence, sexuality (threatening heterosexuality in particular), lies, fiction (the family fiction mainly). Furthermore, all of these themes are niched within the narrator’s own complex relation to “reality.” (36)

The repetition of the bread loaf throughout many contexts of the story creates a network of interlocking relationships laid on top of the background of the whole story.

Another pivotal moment in *Fun Home*, when Alison discovers her father's hidden homosexuality, is shown three times using the same image. The panel shows Alison curled up on the floor with the telephone in her dorm room as her mother calls from home to reveal her father's secret homosexual affairs. Although the overhead perspective stays the same, the panel zooms in and out, showing more or less of Alison's dorm room floor each time. The first panel is utterly silent and tightly cropped (see fig. 19). Its frame nearly touches Alison. She is completely hemmed in by it.

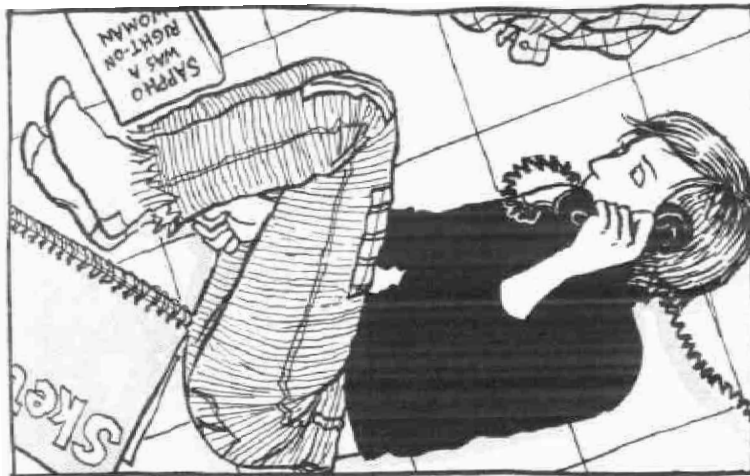


Fig. 19 *Fun Home*, page 59, panel 1. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

The first time the image appears, Alison does not speak. The news of her father's homosexuality steals her voice. Moreover, it steals her own coming out story. The phone conversation was going to be about Alison's homosexuality, but news of Bruce's closeted life shocks and supplants her. She is "pulled [her] back into their orbit" (59:1), as her own

coming out story becomes a footnote in the drama of her parents' crumbling marriage. The tight framing of this panel expresses these unspoken meanings.

Sidney Abbott's *Sappho was a Right-On Woman* and a sketch pad are also framed in the panel. Alluding to Sappho, a woman whose own life story has become a palimpsest as groups of people throughout history write their stories on top of hers, underscores how Alison's story is being written over by her father's. Just as Sappho left only fragments of her poetry to tell her own story, Alison has only a sketch pad to record hers.

The second time the image of Alison curled up on the floor appears, it takes up the width of the page, showing much more of Alison's dorm room (see fig. 20). In this panel, she speaks, exclaiming, "Roy, our **babysitter?!?**"



Fig. 20 *Fun Home*, page 79, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

This panel frames much more context, showing us the objects surrounding Alison. The speech balloon also fills in the words missing from the first panel. At this point, the story has introduced Roy, so the reader has context for the outrage and betrayal conveyed by

Alison's punctuation. Her father had an affair with the young man who babysat Alison and her brothers. Alison has regained her power to speak. The Sappho book is out of focus but almost the entire sketch pad is shown, implying that Alison's power to speak comes through her art.

The last time the image appears is near the end of the book. It is the most tightly cropped of all the repetitions of this image (see fig. 21).



Fig. 21 *Fun Home*, page 211, panel 2. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

Parts of Alison's body are cut off by the frame, and she again says, "Roy, our **babysitter?**" The exclamation point has been dropped from her speech balloon as this panel repeats information both Alison and the reader have assimilated. It is no longer shocking, yet the news of Bruce's affair with Roy will always frame Alison's own

coming out story, as shown by the frame of the panel. Both Sappho and the sketch pad barely appear. They are only recognizable because the reader knows they were in the previous two images.

Each time the storyline returns to this crucial moment, a different context of knowledge surrounds it. The repetition of the image braids the panels together across the narrative of *Fun Home*, creating recursive layers of meaning. The experience of revisiting the same moment three times, each with a slightly different context, allows the reader to understand the many different emotional reactions and the lasting repercussions of this moment.

Comics can also use the placement of the panel on a page to braid moments together. A panel with similar content appears in the bottom right-hand corner on pages 49 and 51 of *Fun Home* (see figs. 22 and 23).



Fig. 22 *Fun Home*, page 49, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel



Fig. 23 *Fun Home*, page 51, panel 3. © 2006 Alison Bechdel

In the first panel, the body of a dead doctor lies on the table. Bruce stands in the background, with his back to the reader, as he prepares the body for the funeral. When the reader turns the page, Bruce's body replaces the body of the doctor at the bottom of the right-hand page as he lies in a coffin at his own funeral. The positioning of the panels braids these images together and dialogizes their individual meaning. The message is fairly simple: one minute you are alive, the next you are dead. The words do not convey this message, the placement of the images does. Reading these panels within the context of their relationship to one another creates meaning.

In *Asterios Polyp*, Mazzucchelli uses layout to braid two spreads together (see figs. 24 and 25). The spreads tell the story of Asterios and Hana's first meeting from different perspectives. (Using layout to braid does not necessarily need to be linked this closely in terms of its content.)

AT A FACULTY PARTY IN 1984, ASTERIOS WAS REGALING THE ASSEMBLY WITH HIS INSIGHT INTO COMMUNICATION,



HIS UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR,



AND HIS SENSITIVITY.



HE WAS QUITE CAPABLE OF HOLDING FORTH ON A VARIETY OF TOPICS.



HE TOOK IT UPON HIMSELF TO GREET THE NEW ARRIVAL,



AND TO MAKE HER FEEL WELCOME.



Fig. 24 Asterios Polyp, n. pag. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

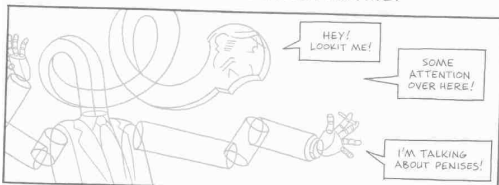
IN 1984, HANA SONNENSCHN ATTENDED HER FIRST FACULTY PARTY.



SHE DIDN'T KNOW ANYONE THERE,



BUT ONE PERSON CAUGHT HER EYE.



DON'T ASK ME TO EXPLAIN THESE THINGS.



AND WHEN HE CAME OVER TO INTRODUCE HIMSELF,



SHE FELT SHE WAS STARING STRAIGHT INTO THE SPOTLIGHT.



Fig. 25 Asterios Polyp, n. pag. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

The placement of panels and the narrative text occurs in the same way on both spreads. In the first spread, Ignazio, Asterios's dead twin, narrates the story, focusing on Asterios. Ignazio uses language that should be complimentary to describe Asterios, but Asterios's speech and behavior create a contradictory message. For example, the narrative text above the first panel reads, "Asterios was regaling the assembly with his insight into communication," while Asterios's speech balloon reads "...so when a man says, 'I don't sleep with a woman I can't talk with afterwards' ... what he means is, 'I don't talk with a woman I can't sleep with afterwards.'" This is not a great insight into communication. It is a tedious cliché. When Asterios goes to greet Hana, Ignazio says, "He took it upon himself to greet the new arrival, and to make her feel welcome." The panels show him mistaking and trivializing her ethnicity, making fun of her name, and then blowing smoke in her face. On this spread, Asterios's words and actions are hybridized with Ignazio's speech. The scene is repeated with the same layout four pages later, making the two spreads dialogically interrelated.

One panel is repeated in both spreads with the same content (see figs. 26 and 27).



Fig. 26 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

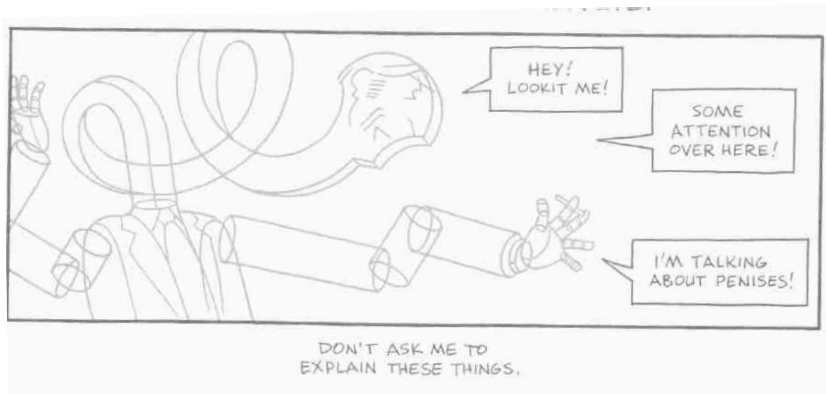


Fig. 27 *Asterios Polyp*, n. pag., panel 3. © 2009 David Mazzucchelli

In the first spread, Asterios says, “Me? I like wearing a condom. It means I’m having sex. I already spend most of my time not wearing one. It’s like a tuxedo – I enjoy putting one on for special occasions.” In the second spread, Asterios’s speech is reduced to “Hey! Lookit me! Some attention over here! I’m talking about penises!” Asterios’s “clever” dialogue is replaced by a desperate plea for attention. By braiding these two panels together, Asterios’s cocky, egotistical self exists alongside his desperate plea for attention, showing a depth of character that Asterios rarely achieves in *Asterios Polyp*. These spreads contain many similarly rich moments of braiding.

Braiding is dialogism at work within comics. Bakhtin uses the word dialogism to describe all the ways discourse can happen within language. Meaning comes from the dialogic relationship between an utterance and the greater whole. In a comic, the context of panels affects the meaning of an individual panel. This context can be created either within a page or within the entire comic. As Groensteen says, braiding “allow[s] a dialogue *in presentia*, a direct exchange between images that are in a situation of co-

presence under the gaze of the reader” (*System* 148). This type of braiding often does not follow the linear progression of panels on the page. If the braided images are spread over multiple pages, “the relation establishes itself in absentia, at a distance” (*System* 148).

The examples from *Fun Home* and *Asterios Polyp* show the latter type of braiding.

Dialogism moves from within the comic to outside its pages in *Asterios Polyp*.

From the raw cardboard edges of the cover to the lack of traditional publishing information inside, *Asterios Polyp* draws attention to its format as a book. In an interview done after *Asterios Polyp* had been shipped to the printer, Mazzucchelli admits that he is “still thinking about book format” (“Conversations” 99). By format he means, “Choosing paper, and the size of the book, and what kind of binding it’s going to have, and what it’s going to feel like in the hands of someone reading it” (“Conversations” 110). The format of the book creates a dialogizing context for the color used within it. Cyan, magenta, yellow, and purple dominate everything but the last two chapters of the *Asterios Polyp*. The “printer’s primaries” of cyan, magenta, and yellow are the undiluted pigment used in the CMYK printing process. Because of this, they interact dialogically with the format. Hatfield points out that the colors

Blue [cyan] and magenta [are] marshaled to tell the story of Asterios and Hana (the past) and yellow [is] designated for everything that happens to Asterios after the fire (the present); thus Mazzucchelli introduces a dialectic tension even on the global level of novelistic structure.

(“Review” 243)

The other color used in *Asterios Polyp* is purple (the combination of cyan and magenta ink on the page). It is used in the flashback scenes both as a replacement for the color

black and to illustrate the moments when Asterios and Hana overlap their ideologies. In the present scenes, purple is the complement of yellow. As in the flashback scenes, purple is also used in place of black in the present scenes. (Black is typically used to create outlines, highlights, panel frames, and speech balloons.)

Although Hatfield reads the two color schemes as designating time, other readers have latched onto Mazzucchelli's use of "blue" to show Asterios's perspective and "pink" to show Hana's perspective in the flashbacks. Reviewer Domingos Isabelhino calls the use of "magenta (hot) for Hana and cyan (cold) for Asterios...stereotyping." However, color takes on a different meaning when dialogized by the format, instead of through culturally informed symbolism.

The four-color CMYK printing process is based on a subtractive model of color theory. When light bounces off the white page, the ink filters out all the wavelengths of light that do not appear within its particular color spectrum. For example, when the cyan ink is applied to the white page, all non-cyan wavelengths are filtered out so that only cyan reflects back. Color functions as ideology in *Asterios Polyp*. Ink lies on top of reality so that what we see is ideology rather than reality. Near the beginning of the book, Ignazio wonders, "What if reality (as perceived) were simply an extension of the self? Wouldn't that color the way each individual experiences the world?" Mazzucchelli makes this "abstract idea...graphically vivid" (Hatfield, "Review" 244) through the use of color.

Setting the use of color, particularly cyan and magenta, within the dialogizing background of *Asterios Polyp's* format as book gives the color a different meaning. Instead of symbolizing gender binaries or cultural associations, it is possible to "think

about [color] formally... Different colors mean different things in different contexts” (Mazzucchelli, “Conversations” 101).

In his review of *Asterios Polyp*, Badman notices “greenish tones enter” the story when Asterios wakes up in the hospital after losing his eye. Green is made from yellow and cyan, two inks that have not previously mixed in the story. However, Badman notices

The greenish blue seems to become more bluish green over the course of a few pages until Asterios is in his solar-powered car leaving town, and a bright green interstate sign jumps forward at the very top of the page. This green sign is in itself a sign that a fuller color palette has arrived. We can easily connect this expanding palette with Asterios’s new perspective and all the commentary in the book about perspective and “coloring” the way we experience life.

The most diverse color palette appears during Hana and Asterios’s reconciliation in the penultimate chapter. Their ideologies are expanding and overlapping with each other’s and with yellow, showing a more vivid, colorful reality. It is beautiful until they get hit by an asteroid in what reviewer Vom Marlowe terms the “rocks fall, everybody dies” ending. But the story includes a brief coda, showing Jackson in the tree house with his parents. (Jackson and his parents are the people Asterios finds himself with in the yellow and purple present scenes of the story.) The family sees a shooting star, presumably the asteroid that hits Hana and Asterios, in the distance. Ursula says, “Make a wish.” The last section is most significant because of its color palette, which is more toned down than the previous chapter, but more diverse than the rest of the comic. Reading the colors as indicators of ideology dialogically related to the format helps makes sense of the ending.

The yellow and purple asteroid destroys the fuller color palette achieved by increasingly overlapping ideologies. Yet the world *is* a slightly different color after the asteroid hits. The colors are subtler than they were immediately before it hit, but there is some change.

Just as comics are able to create hybridized constructions and enter into dialogic relationships with one another, comics visually represent the centripetal and centrifugal forces that create a constant, dynamic tension in language. Centripetal forces move language toward unity of meaning while centrifugal forces move language toward fragmentation and multiplicity of meaning. According to Bakhtin, as soon as one of these forces presents itself, the other is called into being to counteract the first. Centripetal and centrifugal forces are represented in the breakdown and layout of panels on the page. (In Groensteen's concept, breakdown corresponds to the creation of individual panels and sequences; layout refers to the panels spread across a page.) The narrative is simultaneously unified and fragmented.

The spread from *Fun Home* shown in figure 28 demonstrates how the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces is visually represented on the page.

to tell a story. The reader can either see the unity of these panels, creating connections between them, or the fragmentation between them. Ultimately, the reader can think about the relationship between the unity and the fragmentation.

A reader can choose to read this page linearly, following the left-to-right, zig-zag sequence of the panels. To cross the gutter (the blank space between two panels) between the first panel showing the page from Camus and the second panel showing Bruce reading a book, the reader constructs a relationship that unifies these two panels. For example, the page shown in panel one could be the one the book is opened to in the next panel. As Lefèvre says, “The reader knows the cues to construct a space: he recognizes the linear perspective depth cues, he is conscious of the unseen but virtual space outside the panel borders, and to link the panels together, the reader is looking for overlaps” (159). The words in the narrative box inform the relationship and further link the panels together. But in this example, they also open up the panels to multiple interpretations. The narrative text above panel two reads, “But Dad was always reading something. Should we have been suspicious when he started plowing through Proust the year before?” Suddenly, the book Bruce is holding may not be Camus’s *A Happy Death*, and the time lapse between the two panels may not be seconds but months. As soon as the reader starts looking for the centripetal relationships between the panels, the centrifugal forces of language assert themselves.

The other option is to read tabularly, a term first used by comics scholar Pierre Fresnault-Deruelles in 1976 (qtd in Fischer). To read tabularly means to read the whole spread at once. The reader starts by seeing the panels scattered across the page. There are an infinite number of possible relationships between the panels. In this way, tabular

reading can begin with a recognition of the centrifugal forces of language at work. But almost immediately, the centripetal forces of language reassert themselves and the panels link up. For example, in the spread from *Fun Home*, all the panels containing an image of writing are unified, guiding the eye diagonally across the left-hand page (through panels one, three, and five) and stopping on the writing on the tombstones in panel three on the right-hand page. Although the reader started by discarding the presumption of a unified linear reading, the recognition of a multitude of possible relationships led to choosing one from many.

Comics scholars use the language of centripetal and centrifugal forces when they describe the breakdown and layout of panels on the page. Groensteen discusses “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated...and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in presentia*” (*System* 18). McCloud says, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm or unconnected moments... [The reader] connect[s] these moments and mentally construct[s] a continuous, unified reality” (67:2). For Hatfield, the dialogic relationship between centripetal and centrifugal forces means “from the reader’s point of view, then, there is always the potential to choose: between seeing the single images as a moment in sequence and seeing it in more holistic fashion” (*Alternative* 52). Groensteen, McCloud, and Hatfield are all describing how the interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces takes place on every spread in every comic.

In this way, comics are able to create a visual representation of the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language at work within them. Because the interplay between the

forces is represented visually using the panels (elements which profoundly affect the path a reader takes through the comic), the reader can read in two different ways: linearly or tabularly. The former begins with a recognition of the centripetal forces of language, and the latter recognizes the centrifugal forces. But whichever way she chooses, the opposite force is immediately and inevitably present. As Groensteen says, “If there is a vectorization of reading, there is no unidirectional vectorization in the construction of meaning” (*System* 110). In other words, there are many paths a reader may choose to take in reading a comic. The making of meaning comes from all directions at once. The reader can choose to read a comic both linearly and tabularly, constructing meaning by negotiating the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin argues that language is evolving.

Heteroglossia, in which many voices participate in making meaning, causes language to evolve because meanings are constantly being created and destroyed (292). Bakhtin believes novels facilitate the evolution of language, and the old, bad way of reading novels (reading based on the centripetal conception of language) tries—ineffectively, but still—to keep language from evolving. Novels allow for the evolution of language because each novel is an “artistically organized system for bringing different languages into contact with one another” (361). These languages stratify along socio-ideological lines. As they come into contact with another, they affect one another and evolve. Comics similarly find new ways of “bringing different languages into contact with one another” (361) and go further by adding a visual layer to the representation of words and by using images as language. Readers are asked to engage with and respond to them all.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, comics have specific ways of showing the speaking voices of heteroglossia. Choices the cartoonist makes, such as the placement, size, and shape of speech balloons, provide ways above and beyond those available to a novelist (or any word-only medium) to refract her authorial intention. Hybridized constructions and dialogism are inextricable from the form and unfold even more relationships between the languages in comics. Reading the breakdown and layout of panels on a page involves moving back and forth between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language. In these ways, comics not only express all of Bakhtin’s theories of language, they expand them.

The way comics create hybridized constructions is important to both reading comics and how language evolves. Because hybridized constructions bring two types of language into unresolvable tension, it is the primary way language evolves (358). Hybridized constructions create a paradox by not privileging one language over another. Paradox draws the reader in, asking her to make connections, inferences, and give meaning to the text. The reader's role as an active participant in the creation of heteroglossia is highlighted by paradox. The comics medium is founded on a hybridized construction: using words and images together. Furthermore, hybridization of drawing style dominates comics and can be one of the medium's most recognizable traits. Main characters in comics such as *Bone*, *Cerebus*, *TinTin*, and *Maus*, as well as the characters in *Fun Home*, are cartoony yet set against a realistic, detailed background. Mixing these distinct drawing styles creates another layer of hybridized construction. Comics use many more ways to create hybridized constructions within the panels. Thus, languages are constantly brought into tension with one another. Because hybridized constructions are crucial to the comics medium, comics constantly create paradox and provide the opportunity for language to evolve.

The hybridization of word and image in comics is particularly relevant to how language is evolving in our culture. New technologies (advances in printing, photography, film, television, and more) have made the reproduction and distribution of images easy, fast, and cheap. We are living in an increasingly image-oriented society. Mitchell argues that our culture is on the verge of a major "postlinguistic, postsemiotic" shift in worldview, one in which we are becoming more visually oriented (16).

Understanding how to read the hybridized construction of a comic can help us make this shift and influence the shift's outcome.

One of the largest barriers to the cultural evolution of understanding images as language is that “we still do not know exactly what [images] are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them” (Mitchell 13). Assumptions about the nature of word and image have been enshrined in “the corporate, departmental structure of universities,” which sees the two “as distinct, separate, and parallel spheres” (Mitchell 85). If we accept the word/image dichotomy, consciously or unconsciously, then any attempt to puzzle out—to read—the relationship between words and images is like “rearrang[ing] the deck chairs” on the Titanic in that we will only “reiterate existing dominant paradigms of analysis” (Mitchell 99). Any conclusions we come to will simply confirm what we have already decided is true, and, as Nietzsche says, “When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding” (1175). Nor is anything worthwhile discovered in the activity. Word and image are caught in what rhetorician Ann Berthoff would call a “killer dichotomy.” Berthoff argues that we invent either/or dichotomies as a tool for investigating reality, but then we forget we invented them and mistake them for reality (13-14). Because, as Small points out, the word/image dichotomy is “inherently, and inescapably false in comics more than in any other medium,” reading comics can help transform this dichotomy into a dialogic relationship that, in turn, helps us to understand how to read them.

Mitchell says words and images must be recognized as different so that the two can be brought into a non-hierarchical dialectic. Recognizing the difference between words and images is tricky, because the usual ways in which we do so “do not provide a stable theoretical foundation for regulating comparative studies of words and images” (88). Mitchell says the question to ask “is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ but ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’” (91). This pragmatic approach recognizes word and image are different, but does not get stuck in the difference. Instead, they are brought into a dialectical relationship, giving us “not a template to reduce...things to the same form, but a lever to pry them open” (105). To read a comic is to create a dialectical relationship between word and image. When word and image are dialectically related, Mitchell compares their relationship to “a theoretical *figure* rather like Derrida’s *difference*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation” (106). In order to create this dialectic, a reader must look at “the whole ensemble of *relations* between media, and relations can be many other things” (89). When making meaning with a comic, the reader is looking at the relationships not only between words and images, but also among all the parts of a comic that create “a complex and unpublished totality” (Groensteen, *System* 23).

Understanding comics as a complex set of relationships helps the reader make meaning with a comic. Groensteen and other comics scholars have begun the work of categorizing many different elements and the relationships between them. As Ernest Fenollosa, philosopher and student of Eastern art, reminds us, “Relationships are more real and more important than the things which they relate” (qtd. in Turner, 14). Reading

comics teaches us to look at relationships rather than the things being related. Comics' use of hybridized constructions and dialogism (through braiding) insist on it.

Readers of comics “uncover...all the available orchestrating languages” (Bakhtin 416), witnessing relationships, while simultaneously participating in the creation of the reader-text relationship—in short, making meaning. Reading comics involves what Groensteen calls an “active cooperation provided by the reader” because “comics is a genre founded on reticence” (*System* 10). What is left out is vital to the medium. In this way, the reader is “offer[ed]...a story full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning” (*System* 10). Comics “use diverse means to solicit and guide reader participation and always involves *choosing* among different options—different strategies of interpretation, different ways of understanding” (Hatfield, *Alternative* 66). Every comic “works up a language local to itself” (Hatfield, “Review” 242) and “only actualize[s]... certain potentialities of the medium, to the detriment of others that are reduced or excluded” (Groensteen, *System* 12). As Hatfield, Groensteen, Kannenberg and other comics scholars point out, as a reader reads comics, she becomes fluent in their languages. Then, the reader discovers more possible ways to make meaning with a comic and becomes a more knowing reader.

Reading comics does more than just make the reader a better reader of comics though. Bakhtin says, “What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own horizon within someone else's horizon” (365). The more an individual is exposed to heteroglossia through the novel (or using language in social discourse), the more aware

she becomes of reality, her place in it, and others' places in it. Thus, she becomes a self-actualized, socialized individual. As Bakhtin says:

Languages of the heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror. (414-415)

By creating new ways of representing language, comics provide us with more mirrors to reflect the "tiny corner[s] of the world." Although we will always be guessing and grasping at the true reality the mirrors reflect, having more mirrors brings us a little closer to understanding reality, each other, and ourselves. Language, reality, and humanity are imbricated in a continually evolving dialectic.

WORKS CITED

- Abbott, Sidney. *Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism*. New York: Stein & Day, 1972. Print.
- Badman, Derik. "Hooded Polyp: Rampant Formalism." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon*. N.p. 31 May 2010. Web. 4 Feb. 2011.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: U Texas P, 1981. 259-422. Print.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Syndicated comic strip, 1983-2008. Print.
- . *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Bertlatsky, Noah. "Hooded Polyp—Stupid Spaces." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon*. N.p. 30 May 2010. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.
- Berthoff, Ann. "Killer Dichotomies: Reading In/Reading Out." *Farther Along: Transforming Dichotomies in Rhetoric and Composition*. Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly, eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1989. 12-25. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *A Happy Death*. Richard Howard, trans. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Chabani, Karin. "Double Trajectories: Crossing Lines in *Fun Home*." Spec. issue of *GRAAT: Anglophone Studies* 1(2007): 1-14. Web. 27 Dec. 2010.
- Chute, Hillary. "An Interview with Alison Bechdel." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. 52.4 (2006): 1004-1013. *Project Muse*. PDF.

- Cvetkovich, Ann. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1-2 (2008): 111-128. PDF.
- Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Expanded ed. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1990. Print.
- Fischer, Craig. "Logos and the Story World of Jack Staff." *The Panelists*. N.p. 11 Feb. 2011. Web. 11 Mar. 2011.
- Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. Print.
- . "Why are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, eds. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2009. 3-11. Print.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- . "Asterios Polyp." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Comics Journal* 300 (2009): 240-245. Print.
- Isabelhino, Domingos. "Hooded Polyp: Smart Cardboard?" Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon*. N.p. 4 June 2010. Web. 5 Feb. 2011.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "Interaction between Text and Reader." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Vincent B. Leitch, ed. New York: Norton, 2001. 1673-1681. Print.
- Kannenberg, Gene, Jr. "The Comics of Chris Ware." *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, eds. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2009. 306-324. Print.
- Karasik, Paul and David Mazzucchelli. *Paul Auster's City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*. New York: Picador, 2006. Print.

- Kunzle, David. "Rudolphe Topffer's Aesthetic Revolution." *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, eds. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2009. 17-24. Print.
- Lefèvre, Pascal. "The Construction of Space in Comics." *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester, eds. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2009. 157-162. Print.
- Marlowe, Vom. "Rocks Fall, Everybody Dies: Asterios Polyp." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon*. N.p. 3 June 2010. Web. 6 Feb. 2011
- Mazzucchelli, David. *Asterios Polyp*. New York: Pantheon, 2009. N. pag. Print.
- . *Rubber Blanket* #1-3. Hoboken, NJ: Rubber Blanket Press, 1991-1993. Print
- Mazzucchelli, David and Dash Shaw. "Conversations." *The Comics Journal* 300 (2009): 88-117. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. Print.
- McCormick, Kathleen. *The Culture of Readings & the Teaching of English*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Print.
- Miller, Frank (writer) and David Mazzucchelli (artist). *Batman: Year One*. #404-407. New York: DC Comics, 1987. Reprinted 2007. Print.
- . *Daredevil: Born Again*. #227-233. Feb.-Aug. 1986. New York: Marvel Comics, reprinted 2010. Print.
- Mitchell, Adrielle. "Spectral Memory, Sexuality and Inversion: An Arthrological Study of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. 4.3 (2009). Web. 18 Feb. 2011.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. Print.

- Muller, Agnès. "Image as Paratext in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." Spec. issue of *GRAAT: Anglophone Studies* 1(2007): 15-25. Web. 27 Dec. 2010.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* 2nd ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds. Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2001. 1171-1179. Print.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1998. Print.
- Pratt, John Henry. "Medium Specificity and the Ethics of Narrative in Comics." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1 (2009): 97-113. *Project Muse*. PDF.
- Salvatori, Mariolina. "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition." *College English* 58.4 (1996): 440-454. *JSTOR*. PDF.
- Small, Caroline. "Hooded Polyp: Parallax Review." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon*. N.p. 6 June 2010. Web. 4 Feb. 2011.
- Smith, Frank. *Understanding Reading*, 6th ed. Mahaw, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Print.
- Tison, Hélène. "Drag as Metaphor and the Quest of Meaning in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*." Spec. issue of *GRAAT: Anglophone Studies* 1 (2007): 26-39. Web. 27 Dec. 2010.
- Turner, Elizabeth Hutton. *Georgia O'Keeffe: The Poetry of Things*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1999. Print.
- Watson, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 31.1 (2008): 27-58. PDF.

Wilsey, Sean. "The Things They Buried." Rev. of *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel. *New York Times: Sunday Book Review*. 18 June 2006. Web. 11 March 2011.

Witek, Joseph. "The Arrow and the Grid." *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2009. 149-156. Print.

Wivel, Matthias. "Respect the Architect." Rev. of *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli. *The Metabunker*. N.p. 19 Sept. 2009. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.

"The Whipping." *Shock SuspenStories* #13. Tiny Tot Comics: EC Comics, 1954. Reprinted in Nyberg.