

Read Between the Lines: Anger Management Comics



Sofia Figueiredo¹

sfigueiredo@esev.ipv.pt

[Drawing/Characters/Comics]

Abstract

This paper analyzes the webcomic series Anger Management Comics (AMC), or its multiple aspects, trying to problematize current and past processes of creation and reception of autobiographical comics. AMC relies on page composition, image semiotics, text as image, and other textless strategies to communicate, avoiding verbal communication. It is also constituted by single page stories, or strips/4 panel arrangements. As an autobiographic effort, AMC focuses on seemingly unimportant everyday life events, conveying them in heroic, scripted, conventional ways. In this respect it follows in the footsteps of giants, to whom it will be compared. It also functions as a crisis management tool to its author, and, again, will be compared to other works, as a tool for analysis of the work.

Keywords

Autobiographical Comics,
Image semiotics,
Short Comics, Webcomics

Introduction

As comics mature as an art form and a communication device, ideas never before explored by comic artists became appealing and, in time, mainstream. This is the case when we mention autobiographical comics – at first, a rather improbable endeavour; by now, there are autobiographical comics of all sizes, shapes, and tone [1]. As the children who learned how to read the comics language grew, they themselves began to conceive stories in comic form in their thoughts: these children became more and more interested in telling stories through the comics' language. The easiest and most accessible story to each of us is our own. As such, many new comic artists began telling their stories. Since they had a very heterogeneous artistic training, the results of their efforts brought not only a new field of exploration for comics, but also different ways to solve problems in comics storytelling [2].

Some of these artists told epic stories, about their difficult upbringing, the political situation as they grew, their parents' gruesome tales of surviving the Holocaust, their family dysfunctional living [3]. But some told very banal stories – because that was what their life was about. In this paper we try to understand this impulse, of telling our stories not only through the use of words, but also of images we create ourselves of our lives.

Anger Management Comics [4] are such an effort. Having existed in some other form for years, they are the latest concretization of this idea of drawing and writing the seemingly uninteresting and irrelevant

¹ Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, ESE, Departamento de Comunicação e Arte, Rua Maximiano Aragão, 3504-501 Viseu, Portugal, CI&DEI

details of one's life and random thoughts. The expressive quality of the drawings is adequate to its intended meaning: as life is banal, so are the drawable things that compose it. Sometimes no more than a scribble, the main idea is to tell all the stories.

To Hillary Chute [1] [5] and other comics scholars, making autobiographical comics can be a way to deal with crisis situations. The author represents the passing of time, the repressed and unsituated memories, draws the things that s/he cannot say and says the things s/he cannot show. The unique combination of words, drawings, and silences, the complex organization of several competing semiotic systems, the way we can in so many ways point the reader to where we cannot go, helps to convey and make sense of the traumatic experiences, themselves chaotic. As memories don't work the way we thought they did, being more recreation than record, we use the retelling of our stories to make sense of them as we go. Sometimes, the trauma lies in enormous events; sometimes, in the boredom of everyday lives.

Fig. 1. *Anger Management Comics* – 6.



The autobiographical comics artist draws her/himself hundreds of times, maybe more. In this effort s/he constructs her/himself hundreds of times, at least her/his image, what s/he wants us, as readers, to see. Sometimes we, as authors, need several different drawing styles to make sense of who we are. *Anger Management Comics* is an exploration, not a specific search. There are no further objectives than to talk to someone about things that happen. As we make sense of what life looks like in our own created images, we reconstruct ourselves.

As we follow *Anger Management Comics* we discuss themes related to comics and image communication.

Everyone can tell their story

The first and foremost consequence of the appearance of alternative comics, or comix, was that suddenly people who hadn't learned how to draw formally and had weird, disturbing, outside of the mold stories, were telling them. And some people were reading them! Soon, the possibilities seemed endless, and even in commercial comics we began to see stories and art styles that were becoming more and more alternative to the mainstream examples.

At first, the autobiographies were, as their written counterparts, mostly important, dramatic events in people's lives; after *Maus* [6], and the attention it drew to the graphic novel (long form comics), and to a biography told in autobiographical style, everyone wanted to tell their story. And they could, since another important work, *American Splendour* [6], had opened that door. Stories told could be banal events: going shopping, finding a pencil on the floor, changing your child's diapers [7].

As the digital age came upon us so the comics world was digitalized, like every other thing: and webcomics, leaving out the middle man, provided an easy way of publication. Some people could now talk and

draw about events they couldn't ever tell anyone, as if no one was looking at them, and yet everyone could be. The cathartic element in this public, if anonymous, journaling, proved itself very appealing, as the number of overcoming crisis webcomics multiplied [1].

In particular, Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* [10] shows us how a silly diary drawn childishly on Paint can evolve over time to a recognizable depiction (words and drawings) of depression, still drawn childishly on Paint. If Allie had felt she shouldn't draw because she couldn't draw and her story was banal, we would have never been able to laugh with her at stuff.

Anger Management Comics attempt to manifest a quality of drawing that is coherent with its theme. They aren't meant to teach anyone how to draw. They are an attempt to manage anger (laughing sometimes), caused by the little things, through comics. If anything at all, *Anger Management Comics* tries to be an heir to the punk ethos of do it yourself that motivated, among other interesting developments, the comics boom in the UK in the 80's [6]. AMC's author identifies Eddie Campbell's *Alec* series [8] as an inspiration and motivator for their autobiographic efforts.

If everyone can tell their story, won't some of them be boring by nature? Can't boring people tell their stories? What if the events are dramatic, but the way they are told is boring? What if the event is boring, but told in epic fashion?

Anger Management Comics is about nothing. It's about everyday, a way to comment on unimportant things, and somehow construct a narrative that isn't boring – to avoid telling a boring life in a boring way. It can even be about avoiding having a boring life entirely, as it is reconstructed and retold. *American Elf* [9] is, just the same, about things that happen, and, over the whole story, many small, irrelevant stories build a whole life.

Speechless

Anger Management Comics relies on text as an image, at the same time stripping it from its meaning and allowing some of it to seep into the meaning of each individual comic.

Attempts at arriving at a usable comics definition usually rely on some combination of what each author identifies as its defining characteristics, text and image figuring prominently on such a list. Their importance as separated elements of comics isn't seen as always equal, and most authors usually consider that the importance of text or image in each moment of a comic doesn't have to be balanced along the entire work. Still, the combination of words and drawings is the most common definition of comics we encounter. What to do with a comic that doesn't have reliably understandable text?

As comics use several concurrent sign systems – texts; drawings; conventioned signs, such as motion lines, speech balloons, and others – it is possible to create a comic without text, or in which text is (almost) just another drawing. Several examples exist [11].

Text as an image, and one that is hardly understandable but still very visible, conveys the idea of cacophonous sounds and thoughts, something that anger seems to create in AMC's author mind when it erupts. We manage anger, but not always our thoughts.

Abstract autobiographic comics Can comics be abstract?

To Andrei Molotiu [12] they can. His blog showcases several examples. They are abstract pictorially, but maintain the comics cadence by using panels, balloons, sequences of images arranged carefully. There is still a narrative that conducts the comics, it just isn't expressed – it is inferred by the reader, mostly thanks to the page composition and progression of panels.

Can comics whose objective is to tell a life story be abstract? Comics have always lived a strange duality in regards to abstract/figurative, reliant as they are on semiotic conventions, more or less abstract, such as the proverbial speech balloons and motion lines [11].

The autobiographic comic artist draws her/himself multiple times. This is an important element of the comics construction, for at least two reasons we can identify: the first one, already mentioned above, is that this repeated exercise of construction and synthesis of who we are helps us to reorganize how we see our life. The second important consequence of this action is that it helps to reinforce Lejeune's [3] pact, the autobiographical pact we establish with our readers: we signal to them the story is about our life by signing with our name, allowing our drawing hand to leave its gesture, using materials from our everyday lives as support and material in our comics [13]. It is, of course, arguable whether we are telling truth or fiction, but, in autobiography, such a question is always at least lurking on the background. Are autobiographical comics documentary or fiction? If we tell our stories as we perceived them – as we remember them – are we telling new, reorganized stories or relating the truth?

It is also a fair point of discussion if we must always draw how we look like on the outside. To Hillary Chute [1], comics are specially adequate to autobiographical efforts because they show what we cannot show any other different way – the way our thoughts become real and invade everything we experience. It is then possible to draw how we look like on the inside? To draw our wildest thoughts and fantasies? To have them fight for importance on a page or a panel? Can we represent our every thought in a figurative manner? Is it possible to use metaphor and create abstract comics that are, as well, autobiographic?

One page comics

Finally, something will now be said about the choice between long and short format comics. As comics became a more mature medium, they seemed to envy the long book form that written novels were published in, and the graphic novel appeared. Sold as a more complex, more complex comic (part of its adoption as a nomenclature seemed to be motivated by the conscious effort to get as far away as possible from the word - comics), the graphic novel soon became interpreted by its intended audience as another publicity gimmick to sell more comics. Nowadays, comics scholars try to adapt the term, or use comics exclusively, or create their own label for works that have more space – are longer – to tell stories with more depth.

Soon, short comics – the strip, the single page comics – became the easy target for comics enthusiasts to blame for comics public image as children’s things.

However, as *American Elf* and numerous other examples show us, it is possible to approach serious, deep, complex subjects in a short comic, or in a collection of short, somehow (although, never completely) disconnected comic strips or panels. A non-autobiographical example of this is *Calvin & Hobbes* [14], a critically acclaimed and general public love in comics. As the short, independent comics are read in succession, they allow us to tell different stories – small, everyday stories, and the whole of them, in an arch that, more or less, tells our whole life. Short comics allow us to experiment in ways that the graphic novel complicates. In autobiography, it makes complete sense to tell small stories, as personal journals can attest.

Conclusion

Anger Management Comics are fruit of an impulse to explore several different aspects of comics, such as: autobiography in comics; comics for crisis overcoming; wordless comics and storytelling; image semiotics; abstract comics; short format comics; among others. They are a way to understand how can all these elements play together as they do in several comic works – a pretext that allows us to research these topics. As this is a necessarily short document, they cannot all be fully explored: any of them could reasonably be the subject of a paper such as this one (or a book, or several...).

Autobiographic comics seem to have exploded in number and possible shapes, philosophies, and popularity. They share a number of interesting characteristics that opened the comic scholar field – namely, the fact that they are created by a very heterogeneous group of authors, with different artistic trainings, that brought to the field a number of diverse solutions to problems it didn’t seem to know it had until the birth of alternative comics, in the decade starting in 1970. As such, we embark in a discussion of such questions as – how do we represent our thoughts? How to convey meaning with or without words? How do we organize our memories and restructure our stories to be told? Why do comics seem to be such an agreeable medium for such explorations?

We conclude nothing, as the answers to such questions are as different as their manifestation in comic works, beyond that the comics medium is now richer having birthed such examples of exploration, curiosity, necessity, and wit. If any conclusion is even possible, is that more work is required; creating comics, and reading about comics. However, in an effort to not leave this document uselessly open ended (it should be usefully open ended), we will try to approach each of the subjects discussed above and see how to integrate them with the comic being created.

Comics rely on several linguistic systems – although the language may be based on images, and not so much on words – and can exist as a complex intertwining of drawings and words, or just drawings. As such, it is possible to create comics that don’t rely on words to tell their message. For the same reasons, we can imagine abstract comics, keeping the rhythm and the usual conventions of comics to tell a progression, a narrative, even if it is an not explicit one.

Autobiographical comics are created by very different people – not always trained artists; this allows them to be, sometimes, more exploratory than commercial endeavours. We see autobiographical comics in long form, short form, daily journaling, memoir, and other assorted efforts. We can thus explore these concepts – not new at all, maybe forgotten or discarded as comics attempted legitimacy through the graphic novel.

Autobiographical comics also allow us to tell boring, banal stories, what we live everyday, in dramatic, epic fashion, thus allowing us to overcome boredom in our lives, in a similar way as (regrettably) victims of difficult circumstances, disease, war, overcome their trauma – by reconstructing and making sense of our experiences and memories.

Autobiographical comics are, lastly, by their sheer number and variety of expression, a fertile ground to explore the new (and not so new) frontiers of storytelling. As we see new formats being born everyday (the webcomic; the webtoon; interactive comics; animated panels in comics), we cannot but wait in trepidation to see the comics of the future.

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