

W

IBL



INSTYTUT
KULTURY
POLSKIEJ

26

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

Encountering Others through Graphic Narrative. Layers of Empathy in Hanneriina Moisseinen's "The Isthmus"

authors:

Aura Nikkilä, Anna Vuorinne

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 26 (2020)

URL:

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/empathetic-images/encountering-others-through-graphic-narrative>

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Encountering Others through Graphic Narrative. Layers of Empathy in Hanneriina Moisseinen's "The Isthmus"

What does war feel like? Hanneriina Moisseinen's historical comic *The Isthmus* (orig. *Kannas*) was published in 2016 and received quite a lot of acclaim in the media in Finland.¹ Several reviews of the comic appraised it particularly for its touching, deeply moving quality. For instance, critic Harri Röpötti wrote in the largest Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, that "instead of listing historical facts, Moisseinen shows what the chaos of war actually felt like – and does so stunningly."² *The Isthmus* depicts the end of the Continuation War – the name used for the second conflict between Finland and the Soviet Union (from June 1941 until September 1944) during World War II – and the evacuation of the Karelian Isthmus, an area which was ceded to the Soviet Union after the war. Moisseinen's work uncovers this chaotic moment in history by making use of the combination of pencil drawings and archival photographs. Instead of just one protagonist, the story in *The Isthmus* is centered on three viewpoints: those of the traumatized soldier Auvo, who deserts the battle and ends up wandering mindlessly around; the young farm girl Maria, who is forced to evacuate her home; and animals, specifically the cattle Maria tends to.

Reading the reviews of Moisseinen's comic, it seems clear that a work of art has the power to convey the experience of people who lived amidst a conflict almost 80 years ago. But in what ways can a graphic narrative create empathy toward the marginalized others, both human and non-human, of the past?³ In this article, we examine *The Isthmus* within the framework of empathy by focusing on the role of multimodal storytelling – the combination of drawings, text, and archival photographs – in inviting an empathetic response from its readers. We propose

that, when discussing the effects of art in terms of empathy, we should understand empathy as a multidimensional phenomenon of imagination, feeling, and comprehension. Empathy can work through imaginative simulation, emotional affiliation, and embodied interaction, and may entail intellectual reflection. To discuss how Moisseinen's comic elicits different kinds of empathies, we apply philosopher Elisa Aaltola's model of varieties of empathy, which provides a nuanced account for understanding how living beings relate to and understand each other.⁴ We explore the multimodal narrative strategies used in *The Isthmus* to imagine the experiences of others, bring historical events closer to present-day readers, and offer insights into experiences beyond one's own lifeworld. Based on our discussion, we argue that graphic narratives have the possibility not only to foster the reader's capacity to imagine the lives of others, but also to invite them to attend to the experiences of others, through affect, embodiment, and reflection.

Approaching history and empathy in comics

The Isthmus, which is 238 pages long, is Moisseinen's second long-form comic. She previously published two compilations of graphic short stories, the first based on old Karelian folktales (*Sen synty ja muita Vienan hävyttömiä ja huvattomia starinoita*, 2005), and the second illustrating embarrassing stories from different parts of Finland (*Setit ja partituurit - Häpeällisiä tarinoita*, 2010). The comics artist made her breakthrough with the autobiographical comic *Father* (2013, orig. *Isä*), devoted to the disappearance of her father and focused on the sorrow and loss experienced by her family. The manifold dimensions of memory, as well as Finnish history and tradition, play an essential part throughout Moisseinen's work, not only as the main topics of her comics but also as the sources of their inspiration. Moisseinen's background is in the fine arts, which is manifested in

the visual expression of her comics. Both *Father* and *The Isthmus* are implemented with meticulous pencil lines, the cross-hatching creating highly expressive black, white, and gray surfaces. Moisseinen also combines different forms of expression in her comics: whereas in *Father* she includes sequences made with embroidered cloth (borrowing the style from traditional Karelian needlework), in *The Isthmus* an equally important role is given to archival photographs. The comic contains over 60 photographs, all of which are originally from the Finnish Wartime Photograph Archive, a collection of some 160,000 photographs taken between 1939 and 1945 by the Information Company of The Finnish Defense Forces.

The very beginning of the comic includes a page that deploys the conventional panel structure of comics, but instead of drawn images consists of six photographs organized into a grid.

This sequence functions as a prologue, visualizing the themes of loss and departure. We see a family leaving their house on a carriage loaded with their possessions. They stop at a churchyard lined with the fresh graves of fallen soldiers, lay flowers on one of the graves, and leave. Apart from this page, all the other photographs in the comic are spread so that they take up a whole page or, in some cases, a double page. The photos are printed among the drawn story as individual images and also longer series, the most extensive sequence of photographs amounting to 29 pages. Commonly exhibited images of the Continuation War – soldiers either marching or pictured with different kinds of guns – are not included. Instead, what *The Isthmus* exhibits are photographs



Fig. 1 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 16–17.

of empty battlegrounds and the bombed ruins of houses, and most importantly photos of Karelian people fleeing their homes with their animals (see fig. 1).

In the context of Finnish history writing, Moisseinen's comic can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon of alternative historiography which questions the nationalist and heroic master narrative of wartime military history that has prevailed since the beginning of the 1990s.⁶ In recent years, the experiences of several marginalized groups – from women to war orphans, and from Finnish Roma to Karelian evacuees – have been recognized within the culture of remembrance.⁷ *The Isthmus* also connects to a large corpus of graphic narratives that deal with historical conflict, trauma, and alternative histories. Comics have a long tradition of depicting war, and the form enables an array of techniques to portray traumatic experiences usually thought of as somehow unrepresentable or unimaginable.⁸ Moreover, the dominant conceptions of history and historiography have often been considered critically in alternative comics that exhibit marginalized lives in order to reveal the complexities and power relations of historical understanding.⁹

Archives play a central role in Moisseinen's comic, both in the visual expression of the work and as its source. In her master's thesis, in which she sheds light on the creative process behind *The Isthmus*, she recounts how she spent time in various archives while preparing the script for her comic, reading through thousands of pages of recollections by Karelians who were evacuated at the end of the war.¹⁰ By exploring history through the archives, Moisseinen's comic actually takes part in a larger phenomenon, since, as Hillary Chute notes, the so-called archival turn is so prevalent in contemporary comics that they have become one of its most popular and visible locations.¹¹ *The Isthmus* is a visually oriented synthesis of the archive material examined by Moisseinen, and in her master's thesis she writes of figuring out a way to tell the stories of Karelian

evacuees in a manner that appeals to modern-day readers.¹²

While the potential of literature to cultivate empathy in readers has been widely discussed in narrative studies during recent years,¹³ there have only been a few attempts to explore how comics as a narrative form invite the reader to empathize with the experiences of others. The theorizations of narrative empathy developed in the context of literary narratives can, to some extent, be applied to graphic narratives as well, but as Suzanne Keen points out, to understand how comics – or any form of storytelling – might elicit empathy, it is necessary to take into account questions of medium specificity.¹⁴ In her cognitively oriented discussion on narrative empathy and comics, Keen focuses on the use of anthropomorphic characters in comics, which is a very common feature of the medium. According to her, the use of anthropomorphic characters may work as a strategy to create empathetic attachment in the reader which can then be mobilized – for example, to bring distant atrocities closer to home.¹⁵ While the appeal of anthropomorphism is certainly true, Keen's argument appears controversial in terms of the ideas of contemporary human-animal studies. As has been noted in human-animal studies, conventional anthropomorphic representations often simply project human emotions onto non-human beings, and in doing so fail to produce real understanding of non-human experience.¹⁶ Thus, while anthropomorphic characters may be one of the strategies that comics use to elicit empathy in their readers, it might not be the most sustainable one, especially in the case of human/non-human relations.¹⁷ The possibilities of the comics form to imagine the experiences of others have also been discussed by Katie Polak, who suggests that comics invite their readers to feel others' experiences in particular through focalization and point of view, which can be employed to raise consciousness about historical atrocities.¹⁸ What stands out from these discussions are the multiple and varying concepts of

empathy used. Keen understands empathy primarily in a cognitive sense, as a way to identify the mental states of others, whereas Polak draws on a more affective-oriented definition where empathy is a way to connect with the feelings of others.¹⁹

As our discussion on *The Isthmus* takes its departure from the idea that stories may foster our ability to encounter the lifeworlds and experiences of other beings, we hope to establish an even more nuanced understanding of narrative empathy in graphic storytelling. Our approach is informed by philosopher Elisa Aaltola's theory of varieties of empathy, which treats empathy as a diverse and complex phenomenon of "feeling with or identifying the mental states of another."²⁰ Drawing (mainly) on the rich traditions of philosophy and moral psychology, she introduces a model of six different varieties of empathy: cognitive, projective, simulative, affective, embodied, and reflective. This model draws attention to the complexity of empathy, as the varieties are distinguished from each other on the basis of the human capacities through which they operate: cognitive empathy through cognition, projective and simulative empathy through imagination, affective empathy through emotion, embodied empathy through embodiment, and reflective empathy through intellectual reflection. While it is evident that the different categories of empathy are not easily separated from each other, and ideally support and complement each other, the differentiation helps one to analyze the possibilities and limits of empathy more carefully, and to evaluate its role for moral agency.²¹

Following Aaltola's ideas of empathy, the aim of our analysis of Moisseinen's comic is, firstly, to explore how empathy works in graphic storytelling as a multilayered phenomenon that invites cognitive, affective, embodied, and reflective responses in readers, and secondly, to consider the potential of graphic

storytelling to cultivate “other-directedness and heterogenic openness towards difference.”²² While we draw on discussions of empathy in philosophy, literary, and comics studies, as well as scholarship on photography, the role of our own reading experiences should also be recognized. As critical as we are as comics scholars, there is no escaping the experiences and emotions that reading Moisseinen’s comic stirs in us. Therefore, instead of striving for an objective interpretation – if such a thing is possible – our analysis of *The Isthmus* is guided by a combination of theoretical discussions on empathy and our own experience as readers.

Archival photographs and contexts: from affective to reflective empathy

Photographs have found their way into a large number of comics,²³ especially documentary ones, but the extent of the photos in *The Isthmus* is quite exceptional.²⁴ Many of the photographs in the comic show people facing the camera, the expressions on their faces ranging from numbness to suspicion and bewilderment (see fig. 2). The facial expressions are cognitively perceived, but in addition to observing the mental states of these people, the reader is also invited to feel with them. Their gazes seem like silent pleas directed toward the reader, a call to empathize with their loss, which is represented in the photos by the ruins of their homes in the background or the scarce belongings taken with them on their journeys. These photos show the individual faces of some of the 400,000-plus evacuees, and through the affective qualities of these human faces – or the composition of an appealing gaze, as Leena Romu calls it in her analysis of Moisseinen’s comic²⁵ – the reader might grasp some of the emotions experienced by these people. The response evoked in the reader by these images can be categorized as affective empathy, following Aaltola’s model.

Affective empathy stems from resonance with someone else's feelings, and is immediate and spontaneous. Although through affective empathy we cannot capture the other's feelings as they experience them, to quote Aaltola, "it enables us to feel something akin to what the other is feeling."²⁶

Theorizations of empathy in relation to photography seem to revolve around the act of photographing, while texts focusing on the empathy created by looking at photographs are far scarcer. Some theorists who do discuss the relationship



Fig. 2 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 172–173.

between empathy and

photography replace empathy with terms such as "compassion" or "sympathy,"²⁷ or simply write about photographs' power to move the viewer, which many theorists of photography seem to agree with. Drawing from Barthes' notion of the "punctum"²⁸ – a piercing or wounding element of a photograph – Kaila Howell, for instance, argues that photographs can evoke empathy by triggering an embodied response in the viewer.²⁹

Following Ariella Azoulay's ideas, we could say that the photographs of the Karelian evacuees in Moisseinen's comic create a space of photographic relations where readers (or in the case of photographs, spectators) are addressed by the photographed people, or, as Azoulay puts it, "[t]he person in the photograph wants something from me."³⁰ Azoulay does not write about empathy per se,³¹ but her theory of "the civil contract of photography" is relevant in its focus on the relation between the photographed and the spectator.³² John Berger, for his part, calls photographs that depict war or other atrocities "arresting,"³³ because viewers are seized by them.

The arresting quality of photographs can be seen at play in the multiple photos of Karelian children, and of young animals such as kittens (see fig. 3 and fig. 4), reproduced in the pages of Moisseinen's comic.

Through these images of infants, the vulnerability of humans and animals alike in times of war is underlined. Barthes has written extensively on the connection between photography and death, and it is the defeat of time and the inevitability of death that,

according to Barthes, move us when we are faced with historical photographs.³⁴ This effect seems to be at stake especially in regard to the photos of evacuee children in *The Isthmus*. These raise questions such as: How old are those children now? What became of them? Are they still alive? Marianne Hirsch writes that photographic images of children "elicit an affiliative and identificatory as well as protective spectatorial look."³⁵

The affective quality of the photographs of evacuee children is due to the vulnerability caused by their infancy (and presumed innocence) combined with the knowledge of their position as evacuees at a certain moment in history. Johannes Schmid notes that "while the refutation of photography's unconditional truth claim has been firmly established in critical literature, western culture at large still widely embraces the notion."³⁶ The photos in *The Isthmus* make use of the truth claim traditionally associated with photography: they are presented to the reader as documents of past events, and thus function as an authentication of the drawn story. They prove that these children were there, that they experienced the war and its consequences.



Fig. 3 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 210–211.

Schmid, among others, has pointed out that photographs are highly ideological in that they always omit something,³⁷ or, as Judith Butler puts it, “[e]ven the most transparent of documentary images is framed, and framed for a purpose.”³⁸ The photographs included in *The Isthmus* were originally taken for the purposes of both documenting the war as well as creating war propaganda.³⁹ In the comic, the images are detached from the frame of the photographic archive and attached to a different kind of context, that of an alternative historical narrative. Although all the photos included in the comic are openly accessible online, the curatorial work conducted by Moisseinen brings to the fore photographic documents of less frequently seen aspects of war. Consequently, *The Isthmus* functions as an archive of alternative perspectives on the war. Chute in fact compares comics to archives, since, according to her, “comics form literalizes the work of archiving: selecting, sorting, and containing in boxes.”⁴⁰

The historical nature of photographs might also pose a challenge to an empathetic response. Writing about photographs and comics, Rebecca Scherr argues that since photographs are inevitably anchored to a particular moment in time, a photo depicting suffering “might affect a kind of immediate emotional charge in the viewer, [but] it is easy for the viewer to then place this image irrevocably in the past.”⁴¹ Jay Prosser calls this effect the helplessness caused by the past tense of photographs.⁴² Azoulay, on her part, dismisses the importance of the temporal aspect of photographs.



Fig. 4 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 210–211.

According to her, photographs not only prove that something, or more specifically, “people were there [...] but that, in addition, they are still present there at the time I’m watching them.”⁴³

That is to say that the photograph exists for the spectator right now, making her acknowledge the existence and plight of the people photographed, even if they are long gone.

However, various theorists of photography argue – echoing Susan Sontag – that instead of cultivating empathy, photographs may even hinder viewers’ emotional identification.⁴⁴ According to Susie Linfield, the great strength of photographs – their ability to conjure deep emotions – is equally dangerous, since it can mislead us so easily.⁴⁵ Through affective empathy we might resonate with the emotions depicted in a photograph so much that they overpower the individuals pictured and their subjectivity. However, narratives that bring forth individual standpoints function as a passage out of this kind of desubjectification.⁴⁶ The plethora of photographs of people suffering which we see today in the media might lead to indifference, as the context of these photos – who, where, when, why – gets blurred, or is omitted altogether. Therefore, many scholars emphasize the role of the narrative contextualization of photographs through captions or stories. The narratives of the traumatized soldier, the farm girl, and the cows in Moisseinen’s comic are key here, as the reader is invited to perceive the war and evacuation through them.

There is actually a two-way contextualization taking place in *The Isthmus*: the archival photographs function as a historical and authenticating context to the fictional story, while the drawn story on its part creates a narrative context for the archival photographs. According to Aaltola, in order to call forth empathy, it is not enough that we recognize the lifeworld of another being, but we also need to become aware of their history and the circumstances they live in.⁴⁷ Aaltola sees narratives as a key element in the construction of simulative empathy,

and underlines the importance of contexts: "Contexts are a doorway towards simulating another, as it is via contexts that the broader ramifications, origins and causes of the other's emotions can be understood."⁴⁸ Unlike photographs, which are firmly attached to the past, drawings, to quote Sontag, show that "things *like* this happened."⁴⁹ Therefore, the empathy called forth by the photographs of evacuees in Moisseinen's work has the possibility of reaching beyond the historical moment captured in the photos, as the hand-drawn story renders the mobility of people in a more universal and timeless manner.

It has frequently been argued in comics scholarship that graphic narratives are inherently self-reflective and artificial in their construction. Chute, for example, posits that "[w]ith comics, images carry an immediacy and proximity, while the form overall is deeply, self-consciously artificial, composed in discrete frames; it thus necessarily flags a certain aesthetic distance, an interpretation of depicted events."⁵⁰ This inherent artificiality or self-conscious constructedness of comics has often been linked to their ethical potential with regard to representation and reading. Bringing together the ideas of artificiality and empathy, Polak argues that "[t]he very constructedness [of graphic narratives] that makes the reader aware of the gulf between his own experience and that which is depicted also cues the reader into an engagement more ethically nuanced than he might have had otherwise."⁵¹ Although we are not entirely convinced that graphic storytelling is *inherently* more artificial and open to reflection than any other medium, the alternating of graphic and photographic expression in Moisseinen's comic seems to accentuate the constructedness of the comics form, along with highlighting the different traits of the two media: the expressiveness of the hand-drawn pencil lines on the one hand, and the marriage of light and shadow that creates a photograph on the other. Nevertheless, the combination also discloses their similarities, as the materiality of photographs

becomes visible in the scratches and marks on the surface of the old photos (see fig. 2), or when registering that some of the drawn panels are so detailed that they could almost be photographs. Most of the photographs in Moisseinen's comic portray the locations where the story takes place; they set the scene for the fictional story. At the same time, the photographs function as intervals in the narrative, and by interrupting the drawn storyline they create a pause in the reading process. Inserting photographs into comics "naturally causes tension" with the narrative, as Schmid puts it.⁵² The constant alternating of the two forms of expression distances the reader, making her aware of the constructedness of the comic, and therefore preventing unrestricted immersion in the story. A longer sequence of photographs near the end of the comic serves as an example: here, the transition between the drawn page and the photographs is rather discreet, since the first photograph of the sequence includes the same motif as the previous page – cows. In addition, the transition occurs when turning a page, and therefore the two different types of image are not visible simultaneously. But as the sequence of photographs continues for almost 30 pages, the reader seems to recede from the individual storylines narrated through the drawn panels and moves to a more general perspective of the war. Here, the immersive and simulative quality of the narrative gives way to the affective quality of the archive photographs, and to their function as authenticators of the story.

The alternating between photographs and drawings carries the possibility of making the reader reflect on the differing ways these forms call forth empathy: the simulation created by the graphic narrative, and the affective and contextualizing qualities of the photographs. At best, this reflection and the awareness of the constructedness of the story lead to a reading experience characterized by *reflective empathy*. In Aaltola's view, empathy

is not “only a feeling,” but a mode of intellectual comprehension and understanding. According to her, in the two-way process of reflective empathy we first empathize – that is, perceive or feel the emotions and subjectivity of another being – and subsequently meet this empathy with reflective interpretation. The constant movement between the two stances, the immediacy of empathy and the meta-level of reflection, is beneficial in that “it enables awareness of with whom, why and on what grounds we empathize. It points attention to the process of empathy in itself and helps us become aware of the limitations and benefits of [...] of empathy.”⁵³ What characterizes reflective empathy is thus a critical and active attitude that, in our view, is also at play in the narrative dynamic of *The Isthmus*. The combination of the hand-drawn panels and the archival photographs creates what Hanna Meretoja has called “a readerly dynamic based on the interplay between emotional participation and distanced reflection.”⁵⁴

Non-human experience and embodied empathy

So far, we have explored the ways in which *The Isthmus* elicits empathy in order to create affiliation and understanding across a temporal divide. Yet, the comic not only describes marginalized human lives, but sets its focus on the non-human world as well. Probably the most marginalized lives that *The Isthmus* portrays are those of animals, more specifically the lives of cattle. In the beginning of the comic there is a long passage depicting the evacuation (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). Here, photographs alternate with pages of drawn panels showing young women tending their cattle on the road. By portraying animals and humans side by side, the comic shows that the evacuation of Finnish Karelia wasn't just the mass transportation of human inhabitants from the midst of the war, but also a mass transportation of the animals who were an important source of livelihood. Indeed, in the 1940s Finland was still an agrarian

society, where about half of the population made their living from agriculture. Cattle and other animals were an inseparable part of daily life in the countryside, where people were used to taking care of animals even from a young age.⁵⁵

As the scene picturing the evacuation makes evident, the animals in *The Isthmus* are not primarily represented as a source of livelihood, but as individual beings sharing the same lifeworld as the humans. Moisseinen even draws the cows with special care, detailing almost every hair on their muzzles. Central to the story are the cows of a farm girl called Maria Shemeikka, who live together in an almost-deserted village while awaiting evacuation. By setting the focus on non-human lives and the non-human experience *The Isthmus* raises an important question: is it possible to empathize with those who are in some way very different to humans?⁵⁶

In *The Isthmus*, the possibility of interspecies empathy is explored through both the story and the narrative devices. Encounters between the human and animal characters constitute an important part of the story. Perhaps the most important of these takes place between one of Maria's cows and Auvo, the shell-shocked soldier. This completely wordless passage portrays the two characters as they try to find a way to communicate with each other (see fig. 7 and fig. 8). The scene begins when the cow finds Auvo, who has escaped from a field hospital, collapsed in the middle of a deserted graveyard. At first Auvo is afraid of the cow, who wakes him with her muzzle, but the gentle presence of the animal calms him down. In the graveyard,



Fig. 5 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 24–25.

Auvo finds a helmet for milking, and the cow, who on some level seems to sense Auvo's exhaustion, lets him milk her to ease his thirst and hunger. By milking the cow, however, Auvo relieves not only his own situation but also the cow's, since it seems likely that the lost cow is feeling uncomfortable with her udders full of milk.

The importance of the embodied encounter between Auvo and the cow becomes even more evident when compared to Auvo's encounters and attempts to communicate with other humans, which fail because of his fragile mental state. As a result of his trauma, Auvo has lost the ability to speak, and is unable to communicate verbally with fellow human beings. In the field hospital where he was taken after he was found under a pile of bodies at the front, he can only express his pain through incomprehensible mumbling. Later, after escaping the hospital and meeting the cow in the graveyard, Auvo encounters the farm girl Maria, but this encounter also ends badly. Auvo forcibly enters Maria's house and sexually abuses her.⁵⁷ In his encounters with other people, language fails Auvo and he cannot answer the questions asked of him or verbalize his pain and needs to others. With the cow, however, language is not the primary form of communication, and this grants Auvo the possibility of intersubjective connection when the basic means of "human communication" fail him.

In the abovementioned passage, the communication between Auvo and the cow happens entirely through embodied interaction, indicating the possibilities of embodied empathy



Fig. 6 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 24–25.

– that is, our ability to relate to and understand the mental states of other beings through embodiment. Embodied empathy differs from the other varieties of empathy in its notion of the shared embodiment of all beings. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, according to which we relate to other beings through bodily communication, Aaltola defines embodied empathy as “our ability to express, interpret, and understand mental states on account of embodied interaction.”⁵⁸ The wordless passage utilizes the embodied and corporeal quality of graphic storytelling, explored especially in feminist and cognitive comics scholarship. In comics, the bodies and the bodily movements of characters are brought constantly into display, which, according to cognitive scholars, activates our body schemas and draws us into a story through bodily simulation.⁵⁹ Additionally, according to feminist scholars, the recurring images of bodies in comics can draw attention to the ways in which bodies and bodily norms are constructed in our culture.⁶⁰

In *The Isthmus*, the corporality of comics plays a pivotal role, especially in regard to the portrayal of animal lives. The carefully rendered wordless sequence of the bodily encounter between Auvo and the cow points to the possibilities of embodied interaction and understanding between different species. And if we follow the ideas of comics scholars on the corporeal dimensions of comics storytelling, we might even hypothesize that *The Isthmus’s* embodied approach to non-human lives can work as a strategy for establishing embodied empathy between the

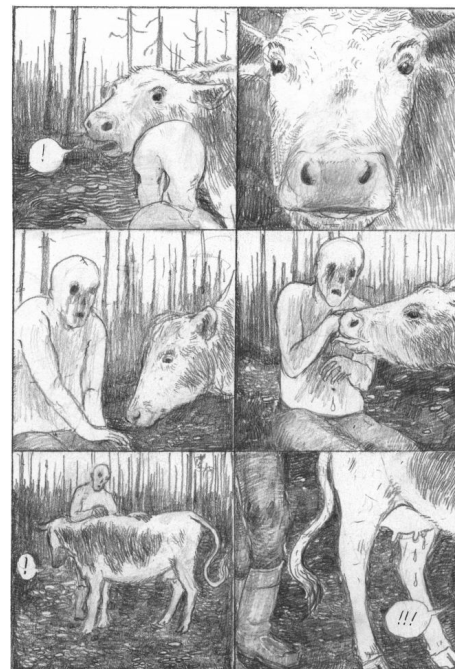


Fig. 7 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 77.

reader and the comic's animal characters. The most heartbreaking representation of the vulnerability of the animal lives occurs in the second half of the comic. Maria has just received the order to leave her house and evacuate the cattle when a cow called Peace ⁶¹ starts calving (see fig.9 and fig.10). The birth of the calf is depicted over several pages: we see the tiny creature coming out of the vagina of her mother, the mother cow petting her baby, and the calf taking its first steps. The slow, detailed visual narration invites the reader to carefully observe the behavior and the bodies of the mother cow and her baby, and in this way to recognize their being, their individuality in the world. Although the humans take care of the calving cow and her baby at the moment of birth, they know that the newborn calf is too weak to be taken on the long evacuation journey. The only possibility is to kill the calf, and so it is taken away from its mother and shot behind the barn. On the pages following the shooting, the comic focuses on the portrayal of the loss experienced by the mother cow.

Moisseinen herself argues that it is the power of storytelling which makes the death of the calf grievable for the reader: "Although the reader understands that the narrative is fiction, it is precisely the narrative that makes the calf a sympathetic and a vulnerable animal. The death of the calf touches; it becomes the turning point of the whole story." ⁶² Moisseinen's argument for the narrativization holds true. The death of the calf becomes a decisive and emblematic point in the story precisely because of the dramatic plot construction,



Fig.8 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 79.

which fuses together the final evacuation of the village with the birth and death of the calf. Moreover, as we have argued, the corporality of the scene also plays a crucial role in making the reader recognize the experiences of the cows and feel with them.

Especially interesting in the scene is the way in which the visual narration goes beyond the representation of non-human behavior and toward the representation of non-human feelings (see fig. 11). In the panels following the shooting, the experiences Peace undergoes are represented by speech bubbles including only exclamation marks, and by tears in her eyes. The image of the crying cow could be seen as an anthropomorphized representation of animal experience. As Keen has argued, identifying the conventionally pictured mental states of anthropomorphic characters and responding emotionally to them may enable a “fast track to narrative empathy.” According to her, that is because people have a tendency to attend to the suffering of an animal character more easily than to the suffering of a realistically drawn human character.⁶³ Problematic to Keen’s proposition is the fact that she is primarily interested in the transference of human experience, and does not see the issue of emotional projection entailed in anthropomorphism. While anthropomorphic characters might illustrate human emotions in an appealing manner, they tend to do so at the cost of non-human emotions. Therefore, with regard to non-human lives, anthropomorphism appears as one of the most problematic features of comics storytelling. Instead of producing empathy directed toward animals, anthropomorphic characters erase the uniqueness and alterity of non-human experience.⁶⁴

However, the tears of the cow could also be interpreted as emanata – the pictorial elements used in comics to represent the feelings of characters on a symbolic or metaphoric level. Combined with the realistic and insightful representation of animal behavior, the tears of the cow as symbols of pain and loss seem to encourage the reader to contemplate the emotional similarities between humans and animals. The comparison that the scene makes between the loss of



Fig. 9 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 142–143.

the home and the loss of a baby invites us to grasp the experience of loss as a fundamental affect shared by humans and cattle. In doing so, the comic makes the cattle part of what Jouni Teittinen has called “the community of the suffering, of those whose pain – or fear, or death – brings us to grief.”⁶⁵ Moreover, by including the lives and pain of the cattle in its focus, the comic invites the reader to recognize the cattle, in the terms of Judith Butler, as grievable and precarious beings.⁶⁶ By utilizing the non-verbal and corporeal dimensions of comics storytelling in its portrayal of the cattle’s lives, *The Isthmus* seems to affirm the notion made by several scholars that comics may have interesting possibilities for imagining and comprehending non-human experience.⁶⁷ *The Isthmus’s* focus on the corporeality of its human and non-human characters shows the reader the shared embodiment of all living beings. In doing so, it suggests that embodied interaction lays a common ground for encountering animals as thinking and feeling individuals, and of grasping their experience, even if their emotional lives as such are unknown to human beings. In addition to its focus on

embodied communication between humans and non-humans, the comic also reaches toward non-human emotions and reminds us of the similar, albeit not identical, affective capacities of humans and animals.

Empathizing with the vulnerable others of today?

The Isthmus invites its readers to empathize on diverse levels: the drawn narratives activate a simulative reading, while the appealing archive photographs call forth an affective response. The alternating of graphic and photographic expression enables a reflective stance, and the representation of animals as individuals encourages us to empathize through embodiment. Furthermore, by approaching non-human experience, which has often been claimed to be beyond our language or even beyond our comprehension, *The Isthmus* challenges the idea that we can only empathize with those who (and whose experiences) are similar to us. To argue that the reading of a comic has made readers more aware of the perspectives of others would, of course, require a study on the reception of the work and the readers in question. A comprehensive study on the reception of Moisseinen's comic is outside the scope of this paper, but to conclude and to consolidate our argument on the empathy-evoking qualities of *The Isthmus*, we will return to the reviews of Moisseinen's comic published in the Finnish media.

Reviews of *The Isthmus* demonstrate well how a historical narrative is always read and interpreted in the present moment. Moisseinen's comic concludes with an epilogue that moves the story from the past to the present: the farm girl Maria is now an old lady, living physically in the urban surroundings of Helsinki, but mentally in her memories. Through the epilogue, *The Isthmus* invites the reader to make connections between the contemporary moment and the historical events depicted in the comic. In addition to applauding the emotionally engaging power of the comic, almost all the reviews of Moisseinen's work make a comparison between the comic and contemporary events. Critic Jyrki Mäki, for example, writes in the culture magazine *Kaltio* as follows: "Reading *The Isthmus* makes one see our history from a new perspective: it shows individuals and people fleeing great threats, not just in Finland in the wartime but also right now, globally. This mobility has always existed, still exists, and will always exist, somewhere in the world, near and far."⁶⁸ Indeed, the comic was published in 2016 when the so-called "refugee crisis" was a major topic in the Finnish media and debated in political discussions. Other reviewers have drawn connections between the Karelian evacuation and present-day forced migration. In the newspaper *Savon Sanomat*, Jokke Saharinen writes: "One can't think of a better moment for Hanneriina Moisseinen's comic, which deals with the Karelian evacuees and desertion. Similarly, people who come to Finland today have had to flee from war. In that regard, one would think that Finns would have understanding



Fig. 10 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 142–143.

toward those in need as well.”⁶⁹ In *Helsingin Sanomat*, Harri Rämpötti notes that Moisseinen’s “[n]arrative experimentations serve their purpose and take the reader to a place that is possibly quite similar to the one experienced by the Syrians and others who have fled the war and arrived in Europe recently. It is not worthwhile reading *The Isthmus* solely from a national perspective. The comic is, unfortunately, very topical at the moment.”⁷⁰

In the discussions of narrative empathy, it often remains an open question as to what the relationship between the empathy evoked by reading and the reader’s moral sensibilities is. Can empathy experienced while reading a story cultivate a reader’s morals and lead to caring and responsible behavior toward others in the real world? The most skeptical voices, such as Megan Boler, warn about “passive” or “entertainment” empathy, which does not guarantee any basis for social change.⁷¹ Still, as we have suggested following Aaltola’s notion of reflective empathy, narrative empathy may be characterized by active reflection, and in doing so enhance critical thinking. Moreover, it should also be noted that moral judgements are not based only on rational thinking but on emotive responses as well.⁷² The reviews illustrate well how the comic not only manages to elicit empathy toward vulnerable lives in the past but also toward vulnerable lives in the present. What stands out from these reviews is the power of graphic storytelling to imagine the experiences of others and create empathy that might be extended from the



Fig. 11 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *The Isthmus* (2016), 148.

fictional world toward real-life individuals.⁷³ The problem of comparisons between past and present migrants is, of course, that they may erase the specificities of the different groups and their circumstances. However, we would like to think that a comparative attitude toward the experiences of different others could also serve as a premise for reflection on historical similarities and differences. Our readings of historical narratives are inevitably shaped by the present moment and fueled by analogies, and while not all analogies are politically or ethically sustainable, they can render new insights into what is happening today.

Summing up the ideas of various theorists of empathy, Aaltola claims that empathy does indeed lead to moral agency: it develops our social concern and can result in a greater eagerness to help others. Or, to quote Aaltola: “Simply put, empathy makes us care about the harms and distress suffered by others and pushes us to act on behalf of those others.”⁷⁴ In line with this, we argue that reading *The Isthmus* could be considered as an exercise in empathy: since empathy functions on various levels in the comic, evoking both emotion and thought, the reader is invited to approach it both emotionally and analytically. By inviting the reader to understand the experiences of others and to associate with marginalized lives, *The Isthmus* strives for solidarity – between people in different circumstances, and between human beings and animals.

1 Hanneriina Moisseinen, *Kannas [The Isthmus]* ([Lahti]: Kreegah Bundolo, 2016). The English translation of *The Isthmus* is by Pauliina Haasjoki. Moisseinen’s comic has not been published in English, but the original Finnish version includes English subtitles on the bottom margin of the pages, a fairly common feature of Finnish independent or alternative comics. See Ralf Kauranen, “De-bordering Comics Culture: Multilingual Publishing in the Finnish Field of Comics,” in: *The Aesthetics and Politics of Linguistic Borders: Multilingualism in Northern European Literature*, eds. Heidi Grönstrand, Markus Huss, and Ralf Kauranen (New York & London: Routledge, 2020), 67.

- 2 Harri Röpötti, "Hanneriina Moisseisen uusi Kannas-sarjakuva kertoo, miltä sota oikeasti tuntui vuonna 1944," review of *Kannas* by Hanneriina Moisseinen, *Helsingin Sanomat*, May 31, 2016, <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/kirja-arvostelu/art-2000002903804.html>. Translated by the authors.
- 3 Graphic narrative is a concept usually used to describe "a book-length work composed in the medium of comics." Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3. We use the terms comic and graphic narrative synonymously, while graphic storytelling and comics storytelling refer to the medium-specific ways comics tell stories.
- 4 Elisa Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).
- 5 See Olli Kleemola, "From Propaganda Instruments to Memory Aids. Propaganda Photographs from the First Year of the Continuation War (1941–1944) in Finnish Photobooks," in: *Photographs and History: Interpreting Past and Present Through Photographs*, eds. Olli Kleemola and Silja Pitkänen (Turku: k&h, 2018), 123–126.
- 6 See e.g. Tiina Kinnunen and Markku Jokisipilä, "Shifting Images of 'Our Wars': Finnish Memory Culture of World War II," in: *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretations*, eds. Tiina Kinnunen and Ville Kivimäki (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012), 451.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 474–475.
- 8 Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 11, 17; Harriet Earle, *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 46.
- 9 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 157; Martha Cutter and Cathy Schlund-Vials, *Redrawing the Historical Past: History, Memory, and Multiethnic Graphic Novels* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 2.
- 10 Hanneriina Moisseinen "'Mielikuvain yllä vuodatan kyyneleitä...'" Ihmisen ja eläimen suhde sarjakuvateoksessa *Kannas*" (Thesis, Aalto University), 20–21.
- 11 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 192.
- 12 Moisseinen, "'Mielikuvain yllä vuodatan kyyneleitä...'", 29.
- 13 See e.g. Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*

- (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 14 Suzanne Keen, "Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization in Graphic Narratives," *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (Issue 124, *Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory*, 2011), 135.
 - 15 Keen, "Fast Tracks."
 - 16 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 33.
 - 17 While conventional uses of anthropomorphism often prove to be problematic, there are also examples of using it as a tool for the critical exploration of human/non-human relations. See e.g. John Simons, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 116–137; Jouni Teittinen, "Passing the cattle car: Anthropomorphism, animal suffering, and James Agee's 'A Mother's Tale'," in: *Affect, Space and Animals*, eds. Jopi Nyman and Nora Schuurman (London: Routledge, 2015), 176–188.
 - 18 Katie Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter: Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017).
 - 19 Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 17.
 - 20 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 25.
 - 21 Ibid., 24–25.
 - 22 Ibid., 24.
 - 23 Nancy Pedri, "Thinking about Photography in Comics," *Image & Narrative* 16, no. 2 (2015), 2.
 - 24 *Le Photographe* (2003–2006) by Emmanuel Guibert, Frédéric Lemercier, and Didier Lefèvre might be the only apt point of comparison regarding the sheer number of photographs used as part of the graphic narrative. However, Moisseinen's manner of deploying archival photographs differs slightly from the interdependence of photos and drawings in *Le Photographe*, where the drawn narrative has the function of "contextualizing and bridging the chronological gaps in the photographic body of work," as Nina Mickwitz puts it in her *Documentary Comics: Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 52.

- 25 Leena Romu, "Dokumentaarisuus, historiallisuus, eläimet ja kokemus Hanneriina Moisseisen sarjakuvateoksessa 'Kannas'," *Mustekala3* (2017), <http://mustekala.info/teemanumerot/sarjakuva-3-2017-vol-68/dokumentaarisuus-historiallisuus-elaimet-ja-kokemus-hanneriina-moisseisen-sarjakuvateoksessa-kannas/>
- 26 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 82–84.
- 27 Aaltola explains the difference between these three as follows: "Whereas sympathy refers to 'feeling for' (we feel, for example, pity or sadness for another's suffering), empathy is often defined as 'feeling with' (we do not pity the other but instead share her suffering), while compassion can be positioned as one of empathy's subcategories, akin to affective empathy." Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 25.
- 28 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 26–27.
- 29 Kaila Howell, "Time, Loss, and the Death of the (M)other in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Sally Mann's *Deep South*," *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 28, no. 1 (2015), 108.
- 30 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 375.
- 31 Azoulay actually rejects the term empathy altogether, along with emotions such as shame, pity, and compassion, used by other theorists to describe the encounter between the spectator and a photograph (or the photographer and the photographed), but empathy does seem to play its part in what she theorizes as the civic duty of the spectator toward the photographed persons. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 16–17.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 33 John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 38.
- 34 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
- 35 Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in: *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1999), 13.
- 36 Johannes Schmid, *Shooting Pictures, Drawing Blood: The Photographic Image in the Graphic War Memoir* (Berlin: Christian A. Bachmann Verlag, 2016), 10.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 25.

- 38 Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London & New York: Verso, 2009), 70.
- 39 See e.g. Marika Honkaniemi, "Analysing Ambiguous War Art: Photographs of the 1942 Finnish-German Exhibition *War in Pictures*," in: *Photographs and History: Interpreting Past and Present Through Photographs*, eds. Olli Kleemola and Silja Pitkänen (Turku: k&h, 2018); Kleemola, "From Propaganda Instruments to Memory Aids."
- 40 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 192.
- 41 Rebecca Scherr, "Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46, no.1 (2013), 26.
- 42 Jay Prosser, "Introduction," in: *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, eds. Geoffrey Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 9.
- 43 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 16.
- 44 See e.g. Wai Kit Ow Yeong, "'Our Failure of Empathy': Kevin Carter, Susan Sontag, and the Problems of Photography," *Think Pieces: A Journal of the Joint Faculty Institute of Graduate Studies, University College London* 1, no. 1 (2014), 12.
- 45 Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Violence* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 50.
- 46 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 91.
- 47 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 37.
- 48 Ibid., 34.
- 49 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 42.
- 50 Chute, *Graphic Women*, 92.
- 51 Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 14.
- 52 Schmid, *Shooting Pictures, Drawing Blood*, 11.
- 53 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 131–132.
- 54 Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 131.

- 55 For more on agriculture and human-cow relationships in Finland at the turn of the 20th century, see Taija Kaarlenkaski, "Cattle tending in the 'good old times': Human-cow relationships in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Finland," in: *Affect, Space and Animals*, op. cit., 43–59.
- 56 By focusing on the entangled lives of cattle and humans, the comic follows in the footsteps of the Finnish artist-activist duo Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson. Moisseinen mentions their exhibition *The History According to the Cattle* (2013), which explored the non-human experience of the world through art, as an important inspiration for her own work. Moisseinen's dedication to understanding the lives of cattle is aptly demonstrated by the fact that she spent some time on a cattle farm in order to be able to represent the cows accurately in her comic. Moisseinen, "'Mielikuvain yllä vuodatan kyyneleitä...'," 25, 30–31.
- 57 This particular passage is depicted in a manner that leaves readers in uncertainty about what actually happens in it. We see Auvo entering Maria's house, groping her while she pleads with him not to. The page ends with a murky panel showing only Auvo's ghost-like face, and on the next page spread Auvo first apologizes to Maria and then leaves the house.
- 58 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 103–104.
- 59 Karin Kukkonen, *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 7–9.
- 60 Elisabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 51–84; Chute, *Graphic Women*, 1–28.
- 61 Rauha, which means "peace" in English, was a somewhat popular woman's first name during the first half of the 20th century. Name service of the Finnish Digital and Population Data Services Agency, <https://verkkopalvelu.vrk.fi/nimipalvelu/>.
- 62 Moisseinen, "'Mielikuvain yllä vuodatan kyyneleitä...'," 70.
- 63 Keen, "Fast Tracks."
- 64 Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 31.
- 65 Teittinen, "Passing the cattle car," 181.
- 66 Butler, *Frames of War*, 13–15.

- 67 See e.g. José Alaniz, "'In the Empire of the Senses' and the Narrative Horizons of Comics," *Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2017); *Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives*, ed. David Herman (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 68 Jyrki Mäki, "Pääosassa riipaiseva tunnelma," review of *Kannas* by Hanneriina Moisseinen, *Kaltio* 5/2016. Translated by the authors.
- 69 Jokke Saharinen, "Hanneriina Moisseinen: Kannas," review of *Kannas* by Hanneriina Moisseinen, *Savon Sanomat* July 28, 2016, <https://www.savonsanomat.fi/kulttuuri/kirjat/Hanneriina-Moisseinen-Kannas/807531> Translated by the authors.
- 70 Rämpötti, "Hanneriina Moisseisen uusi Kannas-sarjakuva."
- 71 Megan Boler, "The Risks of empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's gaze," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997), 256–258.
- 72 See Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 2–5.
- 73 See Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 39.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 18.