Showing the Unsayable: Trauma and Juxtaposition in Persepolis and A Child's Life and Other Stories

Lauranne Poharec
Lauranne Poharec
Candidate

Foreign Languages and Literatures
Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Pamela Cheek, Chairperson

Lorie Brau

Daniel Worden
SHOWING THE UNSAYABLE: TRAUMA AND JUXTAPOSITION IN PERSEPOLIS AND A CHILD’S LIFE AND OTHER STORIES

by

LAURANNE POHAREC

PREVIOUS DEGREES
BACHELOR IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES

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Lauranne Poharec

B.A., English and American Studies, Université Rennes 2, 2011
M.A., Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, University of New Mexico, 2014

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on two comic books by women that interweave personal trauma with the trauma of historical events: *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, which explores coming of age against the background of memory of the Iranian Revolution, and *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, which explores parent-child incest and coming of age in the wake of the American sexual revolution. It argues that Satrapi and Gloeckner, two women comic artists, push the limits of the comics medium and of memoir by using juxtaposition – of alternative illustration styles, of what is seen and what is not seen, of different tellings of a protagonist’s story – to subvert cultural and sexual roles traditionally imposed on women.
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Introduction

The artform – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images.

– Scott McCloud (Understanding Comics)

When I started writing comics in 1985, ’86, I sort of had this vision of a golden age and it was absolutely Utopian. It had huge golden spires, and in it, comics were right up there with every other medium. You could do anything in comics that you could do in any other medium. And people understood that you could have biography, you could have some history, you could have reportage, you could have whimsy. All of this stuff was valid. And that Utopia did actually come 'round. The fact that a lot of the comics creators are women felt wonderful. It used to be a boys' club.

– Neil Gaiman (vulture.com)

This thesis focuses on two comic books by women that interweave personal trauma with the trauma of historical events: Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi, which explores coming of age against the background of memory of the Iranian Revolution, and A Child’s Life and Other Stories by Phoebe Gloeckner, which explores parent-child incest and coming of age in the wake of the American sexual revolution. It argues that Satrapi and Gloeckner, two women comic artists, push the limits of the comics medium and of memoir by using juxtaposition – of alternative illustration styles, of what is seen and what is not seen, of different tellings of a protagonist’s story – to subvert cultural and sexual roles traditionally imposed on women.

I begin by considering the treatment of memory, identity and resistance in Satrapi’s Persepolis and Art Spiegelman’s Maus, the autobiographical comic that gave legitimacy to the form. I focus on the representation of veils in Persepolis and masks in
Maus and demonstrate that the use of these tropes allows for a multiplicity of points of views. I will argue that Satrapi's engagement with the possibilities of the comics medium facilitates the debunking of assumptions about Iranian women both in Iran and in the Western world via visual representations of Satrapi's insider's point of view.

In my second chapter, building on the analysis of juxtaposition in Persepolis, I explore how Gloeckner, in A Child’s Life and Other Stories, employs a very similar construction to illustrate the abuse of power by a stepfather who dominates his stepdaughter. Both Satrapi and Gloeckner use the technique of juxtaposition, and in doing so they anchor this technique as an indispensable means in the medium for showing relationships between events and for depicting the relationship between representations of events by those who wield power and those who do not. Satrapi use juxtapositions to imply disparities between age, gender, class and to depict different perspectives and/or gazes on the issue of the veil, for instance. Gloeckner focuses on relatively similar events that occurred at different temporal moments to suggest an idea of continuity and repetition.

Both Satrapi and Gloeckner extend the practice of juxtaposition to the borrowing of elements from other genres and influences. So, for instance, Satrapi's style derives from both Iranian and European influences and involves the reader in a direct comparison of the two. Gloeckner is influenced by fairy tales, underground comics and anatomical rendering. These references act as intertexts giving a second layer of understanding and significance to their stories. Because of their multiplicity, they challenge the idea of a coherent self and a single, truthful memory or a unique history. Moreover, Gloeckner uses these juxtapositions highlighting society’s definition of womanhood to subvert the
traditional idea they convey whereas Satrapi visually represents a division between a western and an eastern culture.

Gloeckner and Satrapi also both juxtapose the visible with the invisible. Satrapi uses the veil to point to the different prejudiced gazes of the West toward Iranians and the fundamentalist gaze circumscribing women in Iran. In *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, Gloeckner uses exaggerated representation of the male body and penis as well as anatomical cross-sections to demonstrate the oppressive power of patriarchy over women and challenge the objectifying gaze on women's bodies.

Both Gloeckner and Satrapi have a feminist agenda, but they do not approach it the same way. Satrapi uses layers and transparency to show what outsiders do not necessarily see, such as make-up, clothes and hair styles under the tchador, for example. In a sense, Satrapi's demonstration is pedagogical: she is trying to inform outsiders of the inside situation, in approachable terms. In contrast, Gloeckner perceives images as a means of getting direct access to people's emotions and as such she uses explicit images to provoke outrage. Indeed, in *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, Gloeckner tells and mostly shows stories of incest and parental abuse.

Overall, juxtaposition in *Persepolis* and *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* allows Satrapi and Gloeckner to create a dialogue between different versions of self and also to show subtle alterations in the way events can be portrayed. Both comic artists use this technique to tackle the issue of women’s representation and treatment in society, using the possibilities of the comic medium as feminist tools.
Defining Comics

Funnies, comic strips, graphic novels, etc. are all comics. Scott McCloud defines comics as follows: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). The comic is the medium and not the content. The phrases “graphic novels”, “graphic narrative”, or more specifically “autographics”, “life-writing comics”, etc. may all refer to autobiographical comics. Since these different terms have no other purpose than to confound people and reinforce the already too present distinction between high and low culture, the term “comics” will be used when writing about comics in general, and an adjective will be appended to it to distinguish the different genres such as superheroes comics, romance comics, underground comics or autobiographical comics, to name just a few.

Comics are commonly associated with two stereotypes: first, that the comic book world is largely dominated by the superhero genre with its distorted, hypersexualized characters; and second, that it is still mostly a men's club with very few women readers and creators. These statements might have been true fifty years ago, but the comic book world has changed and is still evolving, welcoming more and more women and new genres. Yet, women's implication in the comic book world remains understudied, even though "herstorians" such as Trina Robbins have started filling that gap. For Paul Williams,

This demonstrates the centrality of women's comics within contemporary comics culture, not as a peripheral presence to be "bolted on" to an understanding of the medium in a fallaciously inclusive gesture. In defining the terms of that centrality
we begin to reevaluate our (invisibly male-centered) paradigm for comics history and the constitution of "women's comics" within that history (136).

**The History of Comic Books: A Short Introduction**

Serial comic books, as we still know them, emerged at the end of the 1930s and early 1940s with narratives based on superheroes such as Superman, Batman or Captain America. Even though this kind of story might seem primarily aimed toward a male audience, women were not actually left out. Women either had their own comics, or, in the case of cartoons, the audience was not gender specific. Indeed, as Williams underlines,

> a unisex readership was assumed for the early comedy and cartoon franchise comics; newspaper strips aimed at girls and women were eventually marketed in their own titles, with *Little Orphan Annie* and *Little Lulu* two of the most popular (. . . .) Aimed at a slightly older teenage female readership (although hosting letters seemingly from young housewives), romance comics boomed in the late 1940s, where the thwarted or hard-fought amorous quests of young working-class women filled the pages. Female characters were also present in comics genres marketed at male readers (Williams 137).

These comics were generally created by men, even though some of them were meant for a female readership. It would take the birth of the underground comix movement in the 1960s and the 1970s before women's expression would be given a voice.

The underground comix movement emerged partially in reaction to the Comics Code that was created during the mid-1950s, following the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist (Gardner 85). In his monograph,
Wertham argued that comic books were dangerous because their use of image and text made them particularly attractive to children (Gardner 70). Therefore, they had the capacity to manipulate young readers' brains and lead them to commit crimes and/or influence their sexuality away from heteronormativity (Gardner 85-96). The media quickly spread these academic statements because they were useful to justify the bashing of comics and anxiety surrounding the power of popular cultural forms (Gardner 73, 95). All this stigmatization of comics helped to put in place the Comics Code in October 1954, that would lead to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1955 (Gardner 102). Censorship occurred marking the end of crime and horror comics and a resurgence of interest in superhero stories that were seen as conveying positive messages as long as they did not have any homoerotic subtext (Gardner 107). As a result, the average age of the audience diminished because there was nothing on the market anymore for older people, and, progressively, changes in society (such as the emergence of rock music and television as compelling popular culture forms) led to a further decrease in readership. This had a negative impact on some publishers who went bankrupt (Gardner 107, 108).

Opposed to this kind of control, members of the underground comix movement found ways to express reactions thanks to a back-door way of circulating comics. Indeed, Gardner explains that "distributed not on newsstands but in head shops and records stores free from the Comics Code Authority ( . . . ), the underground comix movement sought to take the comic form as far as it could go in exploring and representing everything Congress and the doctor did not want them to see" (120). Free from any constraints, comics became more engaged politically and turned into a countercultural means of
expression. Moreover, outside of usual circuits of distribution and not submitted to commercial incentives, comics developed into an increasingly artistic and less commercial medium, as opposed to serialized superhero or romance stories (Chute, *Graphic Women* 14). Inspired by underground newspapers and fanzines, in 1968 in San Francisco Robert Crumb published *Zap Comix*, which marks the beginning of the underground comix movement (Gardner 114-120). Four years later in 1972, Justin Green published *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, which is considered to be the first full-length autobiographical comics and an inspiration for artists such as Art Spigelman who declared once that "without Binky Brown there would be no *Maus*" (cited in Gardner 127).

For their part, women joined the underground movement in opposition to the content of some comix that tended to be misogynist and/or racists (Gardner 125). Inspired by second-wave feminism, a collective of women comic artists, among them Trina Robbins, published in 1970 an anthology of their works that had previously appeared in the underground newspaper *It Ain't Me Babe*. Subtitled "Women's Liberation," this compilation became the first comix to contain drawings and texts entirely by women (Robbins 85-87). On the cover of the first issue, popular female comic characters such as Olive Oyl, Wonder Woman, Little Lulu and Sheena are walking forward and raising their fists. This militant gesture, on top of the depiction of strong women on the cover, is illustrative of the content of the comix.
The year 1972 marked the creation of two collectives of women comic artists in San Francisco, which would both publish their own comix. The publishing company Nanny Goat Production (Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely) produced *Tits 'n' Clits* (1972-1987) as well as *Abortion Eve* (1973), whereas the Wimmen's Comix Collective (Trina Robbins, Diane Noomin, Aline Kominsky, etc.) edited *Wimmen's Comix* (1972-1992) (Robbins 88-94). Even though *Wimmen's Comix* started to contain autobiographical stories, it is really with the publication of *Twisted Sisters* that autobiography became one of the main concerns of women's comix, as the cover of the first issue suggests. Indeed, Kominsky drew herself seated on the toilet and looking at her distorted reflection in a hand mirror, which clearly put the emphasis on the personal and brutally honest content of the comix. The drawing anticipates Satrapi’s and Gloeckner’s thematization of
multiple representations, underwriting power differentials, of the same scene, event or person.

Figure 2: Cover of the first issue of “Twisted Sister”, 1976.

Noomin founded Twisted Sisters with Kominsky in 1976 because she was disappointed by the angle taken by Wimmen's Comix. Writing in the journal ImageText, Noomin explains the reasons that pushed her to create her own comix:

I think maybe the Wimmen's Comix Collective took the path that many women's or political collectives do over the years and became a hot-bed of bickering and power plays. Aline and I found ourselves on one side of a power play and we decided. "Well, fuck you, we'll do our own comic." Basically, we felt that our
type of humor was self-deprecating and ironic and that what they were pushing for in the name of feminism and political correctness was a sort of self-aggrandizing and idealistic view of women as a super-race. We preferred to have our flaws and show them (n.pag.).

In other words, Noomin and Kominsky disagreed with the glorification of women in *Wimmen's Comix*. They wanted a more authentic and accurate representation of womanhood in its diversity and imperfection and therefore created *Twisted Sisters*, which would become a platform for personal expression (Williams 139).

Some comic artists who gained recognition through their underground work are still active today, such as Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky, and even Phoebe Gloeckner. Art Spiegelman is one of these underground creators whose career exploded in mainstream culture in the late eighties following the publication of *Maus*. It happened during the emergence of what Bart Beaty calls "the second wave of autobiographical comics" (248). Spiegelman's work therefore sits astride the first and the second generation of autobiographical comics. As Beaty points out, the first wave of personal graphic narratives was associated with a school and a place, namely the underground comix movement that emerged in San Francisco during the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, the second wave that became apparent in the late 1980s and early 1990s is not associated with a particular location. Also, its members tend to be "highly self-conscious of their status as artists and have actively sought to articulate interpersonal relationships to the cartooning community through their work as a way of intensifying their self-image as artists at the vanguard of a creative movement" (248). As a matter of fact, it is through the autobiographical genre that comics gained legitimacy, and therefore creators achieve
the status of comic artists. Even though the underground movement faded in comparison to what it was originally, it is still active. Phoebe Gloeckner, who belongs to the younger generation of underground artists, began by publishing her short comics in anthologies such as *Wimmen's Comix* and *Twisted Sisters* before collecting them in first comic book *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*.

**The comic medium as an art form**

Comics are still a medium in need of recognition. Thierry Groensteen in his article "Why are comics still in search of cultural legitimization?" states that "comics appear to be condemned to artistic insignificances" for four main reasons:

1) It is a hybrid, the result of crossbreeding between text and image; 2) Its storytelling ambitions seem to remain on the level of a sub-literature; 3) It has connections to a common and inferior branch of visual art, that of caricature; 4) Even though they are now frequently intended for adults, comics propose nothing other than a return to childhood ("Cultural Legitimization" 7).

Groensteen explains that comics are not seen as literary, first, because they go "against the "ideology of purity" that has dominated the West's approach to aesthetics since Lessing" ("Cultural Legitimization" 9). Second, they are assimilated with paraliterature (such as children's books, detective novel, science fiction books, etc.) because they are popular and published in series (which implies commercial rather than aesthetic value). Third, comics are unjustifiably associated with humor because of their close resemblance with caricature, and so they are not taken as seriously. Fourth, comics are often related with juvenilia and therefore are not considered an as an adult medium worthy of attention (Groensteen "Cultural Legitimization" 9-10).
However, comics are gaining more and more respectability as evidenced in marketing changes. For instance, Ian Gordon argues that while traditional American comics (superhero stories, for instance) were and still are published "on cheap paper sold in pamphlet form" (179) and in series, new comics (such as autobiographical ones) have achieved artistic recognition and are increasingly one-shots printed on good quality paper. He also adds that distribution outlets started to be more diversified in the 1980s, which introduced a broader audience to the comic medium. From being sold in newsstands, or even head shops, comics (or their more prestigious avatars often called 'graphic novels') started to be available in bookstores, where they reached a public most likely adult and educated (Gordon 180).

**Comics and the Academy**

Kukkonen adeptly summarizes critical concerns about the multimodality of the comics medium, "a long-standing prejudice about comics is that they tell their stories in words and images, but in a way that does not fully do justice to either mode. In their use of words and dialogue, they fall short of the novel. In their use of images and composition, they fall short of the fine art" (40). Yet, it is precisely the tension that exists in comics between words and pictures that can enrich academic debates, especially in the field of narratology, or the study of narratives.

The growing interest in comics since the mid-eighties has led to the creation of a comic studies field in the academy, which tries to analyze comics not only from a historical point of view but from a narratological one. Narrative is "the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or a sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (Abbott 16).
Once modern narratology was founded as a field of study in the sixties, it was conceived as inclusive of very diverse media:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story (Bremond, quoted in Ryan “Transmedial Narratology” 1).

However, narratology has mainly focused on words or texts. It was studied as a "language-based," or, in other words, "speech-act approach to narrative" (Ryan "Transmedial Narratology" 2), in which the story is understood as being told from a narrator to a narratee. As a result, this comprehension dismissed other forms of storytelling that could be visual, for instance, which led to only a partial understanding of narrative structures. Yet, as Marie-Laure Ryan argues,

if narrative is a discourse that conveys a story, that is to say, a specific type of content, and if this discourse can be put into a variety of different uses, none of them constitutive of narrativity, then its definition should focus on story. As a mental representation, story is not tied to any particular medium, and it is independent of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. A definition of narrative should therefore work for different media (though admittedly media do widely differ in their storytelling abilities), and should not privilege any literary forms (Ryan "Toward a Definition of Narrative" 26).
Comic artists and theorists Will Eisner (Comics and Sequential Art, 1985) and Scott McCloud (Understanding Comics, 1993) have both analyzed comics in term of their composition and defined the technical properties of the medium heuristically.

European theorists such as Thierry Groensteen (The System of Comics, 1999) and Pascal Lefèvre bring a complex semiotic approach to the same questions. Even though comics studies allow for a multimodal narratology, the method of analysis still resonates with some of the core principles of narratology. Narratologists tend to "explor[e] what only narratives have in common" and therefore "reduce narratology to a far more restrictive science than its most classical practitioners have constructed" (Lanser 86). This means that narratology is so concerned with understanding narrative structures that it forgets that they are "informed by extratextual factors" and are "in a dialogue with the relevant cultural context(s)" (Gymnich 705-706).

One of these extratextual factors is the question of the gender of the author. Indeed, Gerald Prince suggests that "it can be argued that a modification of the narratological corpus [e.g., an inclusion of more texts by women]...may affect the very models produced by narratology; and, should it turn out that such a change does not lead to an alteration of the models, the latter would be all the more credible, all the less open to negative criticism" (78). That is, narratology has for a long time ignored gender-related questions and based its theory on texts mostly written by men. How would the inclusion of texts written by women impact the analysis and understanding of narrative structures?

**Trauma and Memory in Autobiographical Comics**

This thesis focuses on autobiographical comics, with an emphasis on works by women. Even though autobiography and memoirs have slightly different meanings, both
genres belong to the category of life narrative, and so I will use these term interchangeably throughout this thesis. At the core of autobiography lies a reading contract between the author and the readers. In other words, in autobiography, the readers are aware that "[The] identity, no longer being established within the text by the use of "I," is established indirectly, but without any ambiguity, by the double equation: author = narrator, and author = character, from which it is deduced that narrator = character even if the narrator remains implicit" (Lejeune 6). A trusting relationship is built up between the author and the readers thanks to the autobiographical pact that defines autobiography as follow: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune, 4). As a result, the author is seen as relating true events and presenting his life as it really happened. Yet, assuming that autobiographies are authentic would be misleading. Indeed, authors write to an audience and therefore this influences the way they present an anecdote, for instance. They also decide what is said as opposed to what remains personal. The autobiographical pact renders the author accountable for how he introduces himself and what he is writing about. However, even though this pact suggests that the author is honest and reliable, readers must acknowledge the fact that the author is a limited source of information. That is, autobiography, by essence, is necessarily subjective, but the narrator is seen as trustworthy intellectually and mentally because he manages to tell his story from a point of view that is informed and critical. Comics complicate Lejeune's definition because the reader encounters an interplay between text and image. Nonetheless, the insight that autobiographical narrative involves a pact, a relationship of trust and a confrontation with subjective history informs this thesis in its
focus on the broader social, cultural, historical and political implications of women's autobiographical comics.

Homans explains that memoirs have the power to deny the private/public sphere dichotomy by bringing into the public realm personal and private experiences (7). Memoir was and still is a means for women to claim a voice and subtly subvert the binary divisions that tend to associate men with the public sphere and women with the private one. Thus, memoirs have the power to tackle this outdated separation by allowing women to enter a world that has excluded their experience, to bring into the public sphere their recollections of the private one.

Memoirs also undermine the idea of 'the norm'. Western society is based on the division between what is considered normal and what is considered abnormal. Being normal implies fitting in society by following social conventions and the law. On the contrary, being abnormal suggests a refusal of these norms. This division is loosely mirrored with regard to gender. In patriarchal society, men are the norm, the definition of what 'one should be', ideally, whereas women are perceived as 'the other' or, in other words, the abnormal. Memoirs undermine the rule of normalcy by bringing out what is unique about someone's experience, what is out of the usual, the normal. Memoirists write about what is atypical or 'abnormal' about them or the situation they were in. Because both men and women write memoirs, one could argue that their works have the capacity to show the artificiality and the arbitrariness of the norm. By extension, they might have the power to break gender hierarchy by picturing it as an illusion. Since the nineties, memoirs have become more and more popular among writers and readers, and so one might wonder if society is evolving and a change revoking segregation is being
put in place. This optimistic vision is fragile because memoir is still a marginalized popular genre, and therefore, even though it challenges conformity, that which it represents and its means of representation are is still confined to the margins of the hegemonic discourses.

However, in the mainstream male-dominated medium that is comics, women are entering the medium by publishing autobiographical comics. Paradoxically, it is also through graphic memoirs that comics are gaining cultural legitimacy for an adult, and sometimes academic, audience. Women are entering the comic book world through the big door and may have found a way to voice their concerns and experiences in a rising medium.

Comic books are particularly useful when it comes to discussing memory and history. Marianne Hirsh in her article "Collateral Damage" refers to Roland Barthes's argument that pictures have an intensified power to move an audience; if "seeing is a form of wounding and being wounded, a ‘shot of the eye,’ then to see, to be a spectator, is to respond through body and affect, as well as through the intellect" (1211). As a result, readers, viewers, and spectators are more directly affected by what they see than by what they hear or read, for instance, and as such might have a better understanding of the trauma felt by the victims. Moreover, as Hilary Chute explains, "it is through the flexible architecture of their pages, with their stitching of absence and presence, that graphic narratives comment powerfully on the efficacy and the limitations of narrativizing history" ("Ragtime" 270). Comics give the readers pieces of a sequential story (what is illustrated in the frames). The readers understand the whole story through a process that McCloud calls "closure", namely "[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but
perceiving the whole" (63). He adds that in comics, "panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud 67). While reading, people are filling the blank, the white spaces, the "gutter" in between two illustrated moments that guide the reader's perception. Chute argues that the comic medium "by means of manifesting material frames and the absences between them – therefore literalizing the work of framing and also what is excluded on the page – offers a particular poetics" ("Ragtime" 271). That is, what is not displayed matters as much as what is shown. If something is not represented, readers ask themselves if what is left aside is absent simply because it is not necessary to the sequential understanding of the story, or if is it left out because the scene is too horrendous to be depicted, for instance.

Furthermore, the figurative graphic style, which sometimes imitates the real through mimesis, but is never 'the real', or the juxtaposition of anatomically correct drawings with disproportionate ones which disturb the sense of coherence conveyed by the drawing, for instance, as well as the presence of the gutters on the pages visually represent the voids in the stories. As such, comics can accommodate the feeling of unreality, of fragmentation and of competing versions of events that may sometimes be felt by trauma victims. Comics are a useful form for depicting this feeling. In Micciche’s words,

The movement between reality and fantasy ( . . . ) is frequently described by trauma victims as the space they occupy in order to survive the moment of violation ( . . . ). Through the interaction of words and pictures, and the bridging material that readers must supply when reading comic books, the form is
particularly well equipped to represent the time confusion and general
disorientation that characterize the experience of violation and its aftereffects (11, 13).

The comic medium is particularly suited to conveying trauma narratives. Haaken explains the link between trauma and dissociation, and to some extent fragmentation, in these terms:

The theory that the experience of extreme childhood trauma leads to a dual
consciousness or splits in consciousness was initially advanced by Pierre Janet in
the late 19th century ( . . . ). In order to survive emotionally overwhelming
experiences, the individual splits off the memory of the traumatic experience from
consciousness. The dissociated memories are preserved in an alter ego state, or
latent state of consciousness. ( . . . ) The dissociation model asserts that traumatic
memory is preserved in split-off ego formations and emerges over time in a
fragmentary reexperiencing of the trauma (354).

Because of their fragmented form and use of gutters, comics have the power to mimic the
experience of recollection and flashbacks of memory, as Elisabeth El Refaie points out:

As soon as we begin to describe our memories to ourselves or to others, we turn
them into stories, reconstructing "the events of a life in the light of 'what wasn't
known then,'", highlighting the events which are now, with hindsight, seen as
significant" (King 2000: 22). We also tend to make connections between
experiences that were originally separate in time and space, and that initially were
not perceived to be causally linked. ( . . . ) our recall of painful periods in our lives,
in particular, tends to be confused, unstructured, and "full of gaps, condensations
and substitutions" (Stacey 1997: 98). Inevitably, the process of turning memory fragment into stories will thus involve a degree of imaginative projection, which settles "into the gaps left vacant by recollection, such that we can no longer be certain of the difference between them" (Kerby 1991: 25) (100).

The concept of filling the blank is reminiscent of McCloud's concept of closure, which is one of the particularities of the comic medium.

Comic panels are also organized by the concept of time as space. For McCloud, "in learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same" (100). For instance, one panel could depict a scene where two characters are talking to each other. The panel represents the whole dialogue through speech bubbles that all figure in the same picture, but the readers acknowledge that what is said by the characters is not said simultaneously. Rather, reading the speech bubbles in alternation, readers gain a sense of time within a single panel. The same goes for a very long panel which does not necessarily represent a single moment in time, but rather a situation of cause and effect that contributes to creating a
sequence of events within a contained picture.


Therefore, the size of the panel and the presence of words within can indicate the time length of a scene. The size of the panel can also visually depict the significance of a particular event. It also suggests to the readers that they should stop to look at the details (Groensteen 54). In addition, because readers cannot read big pictures as fast as small
ones, these huge drawings contain a sense of time, as if it were very slow or even stopped, which can be an apt tool for representing trauma and traumatic stories.

The comic medium makes trauma visible by showing the fragmentation of memory that is associated with such experience, but also by giving voice to ‘incomplete’ narratives that might have been left unrepresented because they were unspeakable, or too personal, for instance. Questions of the repressed and the ignored resonate with feminist concerns. Feminist artists such as Satrapi and Gloeckner have found a place in comics to voice and also make people aware of women’s place in society, and to offer alternative modes of women’s, and self, representation.
Portrait of the comic artist as a young man or woman: Spiegelman's

**Maus and Satrapi's Persepolis**

[Maus is] A remarkable work, awesome in its conception and execution… at one and the same time a novel, a documentary, a memoir, and a comic book. Brilliant, just brilliant.


[Persepolis] is an excellent comic book that deserves a place with Joe Sacco and even Art Spiegelman. In her bold black and white panels, Satrapi eloquently reasserts the moral bankruptcy of all political dogma and religious conformity; how it bullies, how it murders, and how it may always be ridiculed by individual rebellions of the spirit and the intellect.

– Zadie Smith (Randomhouse.com)

In the comic book world, works by men comic artists are still used as models to reach. As the two quotes above suggest, Jules Feiffer praises *Maus* (Art Spiegelman) for its innovation and genius, whereas Zadie Smith first acclaims *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi) because it manages to reach the standard set by the works of Joe Sacco and Art Spiegelman, two renowned men comic artists. In other words, she implies that *Persepolis* is not simply an excellent comic as such, and that its value can directly be understood in comparison with Sacco's and Spiegelman's work -- a comparison that does not include any comics by women. Yet women also belong to the comic book world. They are principally attracted to and, when they receive acclaim, praised for autobiographical comics (Singer 39), as the popular and academic success of Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Linda Barry, etc. demonstrates. In contrast, works by men comic artists do not necessarily have to be non-fictional to be noticed, so comics such as *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, Dave
Gibbons and John Higgins, or *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* by Chris Ware, stand alongside *Maus* (Spiegelman) or *Palestine* (Joe Sacco).

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was one of the very first comic book to be legitimized and canonized. The first volume of *Maus, My Father Bleeds History*, was published in 1986, while the second section *And Here My Troubles Began* was released in 1991. Art Spiegelman tells two different stories in this comic. One story is a biographical account of his father's experience of the Holocaust. The other is an autobiographical narrative about the creation of the comic itself and the relationship between Art and his father. Both stories are intertwined so that readers have to navigate between different temporalities without being able to rely on a simple chronology.

Because of its recounting of the Holocaust in a comic book form, *Maus* has received some rare negative criticism such as Hillel Halkins' claim that the medium is not appropriate for such a complex and deep event:

`language may be tyrannically word-bound, but the visual arts are no less tyrannically space-bound and yoking two tyrannies together in such a way that there is a minimum of room for maneuver within either is a poor strategy for overcoming them. All that happens in the comic strip is that one ends up more bound and chained than ever. The division into small boxes limits all utterances to the shortest and pithiest statements, ruling out nearly all verbal subtlety or complexity, while the need to fill each box with a drawing has a similar effect on the illustrations (56).`

Despite such commentary, the reception of *Maus* was a generally positive due in part to growing interest in the history of the Holocaust in the USA and in the question of
memory during the period *Maus* was created and published, as the construction of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. illustrates. By being exhibited at MoMA, the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Spiegelman also gained credentials in the art world. Recognition in the literary world came from the Pulitzer Prize that he won in 1992, when *Maus* became the first comic to get an award. Nevertheless, as Ian Gordon explains, for many critics *Maus* "looked like the exception that proved the rule that comics were not only (by and large) junk: only a rare genius like Spiegelman could pull off a work of quality in the medium" (186). Increasing academic research in the 1980s and 1990s on comics and on artistic and literary innovation in popular culture contributed to giving authority to comic artists like Spiegelman (Loman 218). Scholars interested in the representation of the Holocaust participated in the discussion about the animal portrayal of Germans as Cats and Jewish people as Mice in *Maus*. The canonization of *Maus* became finalized thanks to the inclusion of excerpts from the comic in several Norton Anthologies, from 1997 onwards in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* to the most legitimizing *Norton Anthology of American Literature* in 2007 (Loman 211). More recently, the publication of *MetaMaus* (2011) further contributed to presenting *Maus* as a complex, elaborate work by featuring drafts of panels, recording of the discussion between Spiegelman and his father, and long interviews with the artist.

A commercially and critically successful comic, *Maus* was an inspiration for many comic artists, including Marjane Satrapi. "I knew I wanted to draw and knew I wanted to write. The idea I had was that comics were for adolescents," the author of *Persepolis* said in a 2012 interview for the *Washington Post*, "but then you read *Maus*
and realize comics are just a medium for expressing yourself and it was a revelation. ... You see it’s possible to make that” (cited in Cavna). Consequently, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, published in France in four parts between 2000 and 2003, could be viewed as the female *Künstlerroman* equivalent to *Maus* in its focus on identity, nationality, exile and memory, and with regard to its international success and recognition. The comic captivated the audience partially because of the way it deals with the issue of the veil. *Persepolis* is composed of two parts: book 1 and 2 focus on Marjane Satrapi's childhood in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution. Book 3 and 4 depict Marjane's life in Vienna and her return to Iran after the war against Iraq. *Persepolis* deals with issues of identity, nationality and exile, and is, to some extent, a story about coming of age as an artist. The English translation of the first two volumes entitled *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* appeared in the U.S.A. in 2004, while the last volumes were published as *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* in 2005. The American audience became especially interested in this comic because of the post-9/11 context as *Persepolis* is a comic about Iran. As Julie Rak explains, one "reason why *Persepolis* became such an overnight success in the American book market is connected to the political context of its reception, and to the interest liberal-minded American began to develop in the Middle East because of changes in American foreign policy --an interest that helped to create a specific market for memoirs by Iranian women living in exile in the United States or Europe" (171). The press and her peers acclaimed Satrapi’s work. Indeed, the book received the Angoulême Coup de Coeur award in 2001 for *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (first part) and the Angoulême Prize for Scenario in 2002 for *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (second part) at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. The multiple awards Satrapi
received paved the way for an acclaimed animated movie adaptation very faithful to Satrapi's drawings that came out in 2007. The film received several awards, among others the Jury Prize at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. Moreover, *Persepolis* has received sustained critical attention from comics scholars interested in the feminist aspects of the book (Hilary Chute), the representation of trauma (Leigh Gilmore) and/or transmediality, the study of narrative adaptation (Nima Naghibi).

My comparison between *Maus* and *Persepolis* centers on three main topics. First, I analyze the way both comics deal with the question of history and memory through the relationship between the different layers that are texts, images, temporality and spatiality. Second, I consider how the texts play with expectations and stereotypes about Jewish people and the Nazis in the case of *Maus*, and about Iranian women and Iran in *Persepolis*. Third, I explore how the comic medium helps to undermine these stereotypical assumptions and present acts of resistance vis-à-vis any set identities. Spiegelman and Satrapi both used the comic medium as a means of engaging different points of views on the broad issue of understanding oneself and others in the context of trauma. Specifically, Spiegelman uses the image and theme of mask wearing and Satrapi uses the image and theme of the veil both as emblems of stereotypes, but also as means to disrupt these fixed 'categories'.

The first section focusing on *Maus* is indebted to previous works and picture analysis by comic scholars such as Chaney, Chute, Ewert, McGlothlin, Meneses and Miller. The second section on *Persepolis* builds on the interpretations of Basu, Carrier, Chute, Costantino, Elahi and Whitlock. However, while these previous works were principally interested in the historical and/or narrative possibilities of the comic medium
expressed via *Maus* and *Persepolis*, I address more specifically the question of how concerns with gender (or lack of) and gendered oppression structure these two comics.

**A Story of Cats and Mouse Overlay in Spiegelman's *Maus***

*Maus* approaches the history of the Holocaust and the problem of History more broadly by recounting a personal narrative. Spiegelman plays with the possibilities of the medium to suggest that personal and public histories are intertwined. For instance, he refuses to follow a linear chronology to tell his story. Indeed, one can distinguish three different levels of narration. Erin McGlothlin explains that "the three narrative levels can be viewed as forming a sort of continuum, by which the inner narrative (story) gradually makes its way through the medium of witnessing (discourse) to the outer narrative (narrating)" (184). McGlothlin provides a visual representation of these levels as follows (184):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First (inner) narrative (story)</th>
<th>Second (middle) narrative (discourse)</th>
<th>Third (outer) narrative (narrating)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vladek's Holocaust experience</td>
<td>scene of Vladek’s testimony</td>
<td>memory and representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(epic narrative)</td>
<td>(Bildungsroman)</td>
<td>(Künstlerroman)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the advantages of the comic medium, then, is that the alternation between different temporal contexts can be apparent in the text. Indeed, as Alan Rosen argues, Vladek's broken English in *Maus* is a means of highlighting how past and present conflate:

Although it is but the inflection of an individual voice, Vladek's accent also shapes the aesthetic structure of *Maus*, providing Spiegelman with the means to represent, and distinguish, present and past . . . for episodes in the past, Spiegelman uses fluent, colloquial English to represent the languages of Europe
as spoken by their native speakers; for episode in the present, Vladek's broken, accented English serves as a constant marker . . . within the terms *Maus* establishes, Vladek's broken English becomes the means by which Spiegelman articulates the incommensurability between present and past (257-258).

This intertwining of past and present is equally present in the pictures. The sequence of picture, through closure, has the power to make the readers cognitively assimilate events that are distant in time and space. For instance, in the second chapter of the second volume of *Maus*, "Auschwitz (Time Flies)", Vladek is talking about the "Selecktions" in the concentration camps, when "the doctors chose out the weaker [prisoners] to go and die" (218). While telling his story to Art, Vladek also plays the scene. Spiegelman represented this sequence with four panels.


Through closure, the readers can see how Vladek rotates on himself, as he used to do during the "selecktions". This is made clear by the last frame of the panel, where Spiegelman abruptly passes from representing the present (Vladek showing to Art, in the middle of their walk in the countryside, what he had to do in the camps), to depicting the
past (Vladek naked, in the camp). The revolving movement begun at the opening of the sequence in the present but terminated in the illustration of the past disturbs a linear understanding of History. More importantly, Spiegelman makes the most of the comic medium when he uses superimposition to suggest that the past still has an influence on the present. History cannot be left aside.

This idea is further explored in the third chapter of the second volume, "... And Here My Troubles Began...". In one frame, Art, Françoise (Spiegelman's wife), and Vladek are on their way to the grocery store. During their ride, Art tells his father that he read a book about revolts in the concentrations camps and about how some prisoners "killed 3 S.S. men and blew up a crematorium," to which Vladek replies "Yah. For this they all got kill" (239). In the next frame, he adds, "and the four young girls what sneaked over the ammunitions for this, they hanged them near to my workshop" (239).


While Vladek is telling this story to Françoise and Art in the car, the readers can see the legs of four prisoners hung in the trees along the road followed by the car. Because of the superposition of the text and the image, the readers understand that people are not actually presently hung alongside the road taken by Vladek and his relative. Instead, the past and the present share the space of the frame and the past is actually
hanging in the present by three different means. First, Vladek is recounting his past memory in the 'present' of the story, when all the characters are in the car. Second, the speech bubbles are actually shaped so that it looks as if one were hanging from the other, suggesting a temporal (dis-)continuity. Third, the bodies of the girls are hanging on the left of the panel. Because western readers are used to reading from left to right, this gives an impression that the past is unfolding into the present, on the right where Spiegelman drew the car. The effect produced by this superposition of two different temporal moments highlights how this memory is still very vivid for Vladek, how the memory of the Holocaust is still hanging in his mind and influencing his life. Horrendous historical events such as the Holocaust cannot, and should not, be forgotten.

Indeed, history will always be limited because one discourse will always prevail depending on the time and place. By transcribing the story Vladek told him, Spiegelman gives voice to an individual and his own small narrative, to use Lyotard's terminology. The story is personal and therefore subjective, even though it belongs to a collective history. For instance, in the second chapter of the last volume, Art has a disagreement with his father regarding the presence, or the absence, of an orchestra in the camps. Vladek starts recounting his story: "Each day I marched to work and hoped again I'll see Mancie". Spiegelman initially represents this in a frame by drawing on the left side a group of prisoners all aligned and walking to work under the surveillance of a guard, while an orchestra is playing on the right side. Art mentions to his father that "[he] just read about the camp orchestra that played as you marched out the gate", to which Vladek replies "An orchestra?... No. I remember only marching, not any orchestras... ." Art is doubtful of his father's recollection and explains that "it's very well documented" (214).
Spiegelman's skepticism is also visually present on the page. Indeed, he juxtaposes his first interpretation of the situation (a frame with the orchestra playing) and Vladek's memories. The two frames have a similar construction, except that instead of having a clear view of the orchestra on the right side, Spiegelman depicts more prisoners walking to work. The orchestra could have been absent so that this frame matched Vladek's description but, in fact, Spiegelman only hides the orchestra behind the prisoners, and the readers can actually see the top of the instruments above their heads.


By keeping the orchestra in the back despite Vladek's comment, Spiegelman suggests that the dichotomy between what his father said and what is considered official implies that memory is fallible and that a semblance of objectivity can only be reached by multiplying the sources. In relation to this, Spiegelman repeatedly asks Vladek for Anja's diaries in order to have different points of view on a similar event, but they were destroyed. As a result, Spiegelman worries that the story he relates is too univocal and that he is
portraying his father in a light that reinforces stereotypes against Jewish people (*Maus* 204). Yet, by acknowledging this slippery slope, Spiegelman avoids it and make us question our own conception of history.

*Maus* has been extensively studied for its depiction of human beings as animals representing different national and ethnic identities: Jews are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, the Polish as pigs, the French as frogs, Americans as dogs, Swedes as deer, etc. This portrayal is double-edged. On the positive side, Spiegelman allows for a very easy visual distinction between nationalities. The reader, while reading *Maus* can easily distinguish 'the prey' (Jewish people) from 'the predators' (Germans) and the 'neutral'. Even though this is very Manichean, it renders the story clearer by limiting diverging tendencies. In other words, this visual metaphor reinforces a sense of uniformity and unity by representing visually diverse and coherent communities, be they imagined or not.

However, Spiegelman erases a sense of individuality. People are all assimilated within their group by the mere fact that, for instance, all mice are drawn the same way and are differentiated only by their ethnicities, religion and/or ideological beliefs. The effect on the reader produced by this metaphor is a sense of indistinctiveness and collectivity because all the mice are interchangeable. Thus, at first glance his system appears to be inflexible. It is not an omission from Spiegelman but a deliberate act. Indeed, in the first chapter of the second book, Spiegelman is trying to decide how to depict his wife. Spiegelman actually starts by presenting a page of his notebook where he had drawn Françoise as a deer, a rabbit, a frog, a poodle and finally a mouse. This initial frame is followed by a conversation between Françoise and Art about the issue of her
representation. By sharing his thoughts with the reader, Spiegelman underlines his awareness of the limitations of his own system. The restriction of the animal metaphors actually makes the readers conscious of the assimilating Nazi thought. It underlines the fact that the Holocaust was not 'simply' a massacre but a genocide, which further emphasizes the arbitrariness of the Nazi regime. There was no place for individual expression under the Nazi regime and identity was defined according to what other people said they were. Spiegelman translates this idea in the chapter "Auschwitz (Time Flies)". Vladek explains to Art that during their “appels”, there was always an old man who claimed that "[he] d[idn’t] belong here with all these yids and polacks!" (210) and that he was German, like the guards.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150.png)


Following this declaration, Spiegelman draws two frames that are similar, with one exception. Both picture represents a prisoner, one hand on his chest, the other one up in the air as if he were swearing. Yet, on the first picture, the man is depicted as a mouse, that is as a Jewish person, whereas in the second frame, he has a cat face and so appears to be German. The effect that is produced by these quasi-identical depictions resonates with Vladek’s answer to Art’s question: "Was he really a German?"/"Who
knows… It was German prisoners also… But for the Germans this guy was Jewish!"
(210). The construction of these two frames underlines the arbitrariness of nationality;
that people do not have only one fixed identity is obvious to everyone. Instead, people are
plurals, but people are perceived by others as being "one" and, in the particular case just
evoked, as either Jewish or German in the eyes of the Nazis.

Moreover, Spiegelman also finds a way to portray someone pretending to be
someone he is not by using the mask trope. For example, in the chapter “Mouse Trap”,
Spiegelman represents his parents, Vladek and Anja, on their way to Sosnowiec. In order
to avoid the Nazis, they have to pass for something they are not and pretend to be not
Jewish but Polish. This role-play is visually present on the page, as Spiegelman depicts
his parents wearing pig masks. They are also dressed differently, as Vladek explains to
Spiegelman: "I was a little safe. I had a coat and boots, so like a gestapo wore when he
was not in service. But Anja – her appearance – you could see more easy she was Jewish"
(138). This last statement is represented in the frame by the fact that Anja still has a
mouse tail that she cannot hide. Even though she has a pig mask that would make her
appear Polish, the tail implies that she is still very much Jewish in her style and attitude.
The metaphor created by Spiegelman has the power to visually represent disparities in
someone’s notion of identity.
Furthermore, the chapter "Auschwitz (Time Flies)" starts with Spiegelman seated at his drawing table. These pages in the comics call out the readers because Spiegelman is directly speaking to them. His comic character acknowledges the presence of the readers and looks at them, while he is mentioning a contemporary real life event such as the future birth of his daughter, and the "critical and commercial" (201) success of the first volume of *Maus*. These pages are also noticeable because Spiegelman depicts himself as a mouse throughout the entire book, except in this chapter where his character is wearing a mask. He looks upset and even depressed. The corpses piling up near him reflect how deeply the retelling and drawing of the Holocaust events mentioned by Vladek affects Spiegelman. An off-frame voice yells, “Alright Mr. Spiegelman . . . we’re ready to shoot,” implying a disturbing parallel between the work of depicting the deaths of Jews in the Holocaust and the original shooting, gassing, and extermination. Spiegelman is a
witness to and participant in the process of depiction if not to the original Holocaust itself.


This shift in Spiegelman's representation coincides with his depression and moment of self-evaluation, suggesting a causal relationship between the depiction and the feelings. In other words, as soon as Spiegelman question himself and the validity of what he is doing, he is no longer a mouse but is simply wearing a mask. This permutation illustrates his broken, undefined identity. Society might consider him Jewish because of his lineage, so he should always be represented as a mouse. Yet because he is confused about who he is and what he is doing, he only wears a mask because he does not feel Jewish. Surely, he is still Jewish in the eyes of the other, but inside he is 'just him', hence the mask that implies a double, unfixed identity. The shift between the mouse and the "mask-wearer" can be explained by the fact that after hearing the story of his parents, and especially of his dad during the Holocaust, he does not feel like he personally belongs to the Jewish religion anymore, not having experienced the trauma of the Shoah. He has a
Jewish heritage but no longer identifies with Jewish history since he lived a much more secure and comfortable life than the previous generation. He might also be hiding behind a mask because he is having second thoughts about the process of writing his father's biography and making money out of someone else's misery.

The Veil Unveiled: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi uses other techniques to make the reader achieve very similar conclusions about the questions of memory, identity, and resistance. While *Maus* is an auto/biography that plays with chronology, *Persepolis* is the autobiography of Satrapi and is relatively linear in its construction. The first book, *A Story of a Childhood*, is particularly interesting in the sense that history is presented through the eyes of the protagonist Marji as a child. By employing this point of view, in contrast with Spiegelman’s presentation of how an adult comes to grips with memory of the Holocaust, Marjane Satrapi forces readers to question their own assumptions and suggests that people who have not experienced such events cannot fully understand their implications no matter how hard they try. Living and imagining are not the same things at all, and relating to someone else’s story, be it on the literal or conceptual scale, will only be partial and will reflect one's own experience more than the other person’s. Satrapi points to people’s inability to identify fully with a situation, or with each other, by highlighting the visual aspects of atrocious events that she imagined according to story she heard or that she actually witnessed when she was a child. For instance, in the chapter called "The Water Cell", Marji’s mother tells her that her grandfather, a communist, was "put […] in a cell filled with water for hours" (24) by the Iranian regime. Marji has been disturbed by this story and so, twelve frames later, the reader sees her depicted with a blank stare on
her face, while she is taking a bath. God is seated on her side and asking her "What are you doing?" The caption above explains the situation: "That night I stayed a very long time in the bath. I wanted to know what it felt like to be in a cell filled with water" (25). The scene illustrates her understanding of the situation, but the next frame points to the limits of how horror can be conceptualized by a child. Indeed, in that frame, Satrapi depicts herself standing up in a puddle of water after finishing taking a bath. She is looking at her hand. The caption states: "my hands were wrinkled when I came out, like Grandpa’s" (25). That is, from her child point of view, Marji has assumed that if her grandfather had wrinkled hands, it was a sign that he spent too much time in water. In other words, Satrapi as a child does not have a full picture of torture. She can only understand what she has experienced herself, such as wrinkled fingers after taking a long bath, and therefore her conceptualization of torture is limited. She cannot comprehend the suffering associated with being forced to stay in a water cell. The same idea is also present in the chapter entitled "The Heroes". Mohsen, one of the friends of Satrapi’s father, relates the story of how one of their other friends, Ahmadi, was tortured and killed by the regime. Marji hears the whole story, and the reader learns that "in the end he was cut to pieces" (52). Under this caption, Satrapi depicts a dismembered man in a way that is not realistic at all but is a reflection of a children view of the situation. Instead, the Ahmadi appears as a male Ken doll that has been broken apart by a child.
This broken toy conjures a child's understanding and frame of reference for what dismembering means. It is not in any way an accurate depiction; Satrapi suggests that if people have not been exposed to a situation firsthand, they cannot imagine it as it was.

Similarly, in the chapter called "The Shabbat", Satrapi recalls the bombing of her neighborhood and points to the impossibility of rendering visually the emotion and the trauma she went through. The house of their friends, the Baba-Levys, was completely destroyed. Satrapi writes, "Something told me that the Baba-Levys had been at home. Something caught my attention. I saw a turquoise bracelet. It was Neda’s. Her aunt had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday…"(142). The readers then read the caption "The bracelet was still attached to… I don’t know what…"(142) while Marji is depicted in the frame with tears in her eyes. The next picture shows her with her hands on her face, preventing herself from seeing more than what she already saw. The last frame of the chapter is all black, and the caption states "no scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" (142).
By representing a traumatizing memory with a black frame, Satrapi implies that a "stylized form can represent "reality" better than realism itself" (Chute, "Ragtime" 270). That is, by not showing anything, this frame affects the reader more strongly because it makes its depiction more real in the feeling it transmits. Indeed, the fact that Satrapi chose not to represent that scene suggests that she would rather not remember this horrendous event and that what she could have drawn in the frame would never have been powerful enough to represent her suffering at the viewing of such a scene. No matter how realistic the scene could have been, the effect of its representation would not have been strong enough to translate the situation so that people would have the feeling of having experienced it. So, the distorted understanding of torture by Marji and, to some extent, the unrepresentability of horror evoke the artificiality of history because nothing
can be understood or explained if one does not experience it directly. It implies that history should be understood as punctuated with absences and that these should be registered as such.

In Satrapi’s account, history is a matter of interpretation that is more or less accurate. Satrapi emphasizes this point with the substantial representation of newscasts on television, radios and newspapers throughout *Persepolis*. The media are portrayed as corrupted and only reporting what have been allowed by the totalizing Iranian regime. For instance, in the chapter entitled "The F-14s", Satrapi talks about the war between Iran and Iraq. In one frame, the TV reporter explains that "140 Iranian F-14s carried out bombing raids on Bagdad tonight" (83), to which Marji replies to her parents "well, there’s your proof that our army is still strong!" (83) Her father disagrees with her statement and argues that “you can’t always believe what they say" (83). He decides to listen to the BBC radio to confirm what was said on TV, in order to have a more accurate overview of the situation. Through this juxtaposition, personal history acquires value as a means for understanding better the disparities and gaps in official history.

*Persepolis* underlines that history is not the same for everyone; it depends on their social class, gender, and, to some extent, luck. Satrapi uses visual parallel construction to denote that people are in a privileged or unprivileged situation. For instance, in the last page of the chapter called ",The Key", Satrapi superposes two frames that are very different in their content but relatively similar in their constructions. The top frame represents Iranian young men "explod[ing] on the minefields with their keys [to paradise] around their necks" (102), whereas the bottom frame represents Marji and her friends at their first party. She is wearing "a necklace with chains and nails" (102).

While observing these two frames, the readers cannot ignore the fact that both depict people jumping and exploding, which in one case is a synonym of fun (the party) and in the other represents death. Marji’s upblown hair visually echoes the upward thrust of the explosion in the superposed scene. The dichotomy that is created by the juxtaposition of these two frames, which are visually similar but contextually opposed, suggests that people are unequal: some financially privileged people get the chance to
party whereas the less privileged ones end up being war victims, the young men go to the
front, whereas the young women stay home… Moreover, by contrasting events occurring
more or less in the same time, Satrapi underlines the fact that we only have a partial,
limited understanding of historical events. An accumulation of a multitude of little stories
and personal anecdotes offers a more complete picture of historical events. Thus, Satrapi
uses other peoples’ narratives to provide a more diversified, and therefore more accurate,
understanding of the events, including, for example, recollections of the story of her
grand-father in the chapter "The Water Cell", the torture endured by Ahmadi in the
chapter "The Heroes", and the experience of her uncle Anoosh in "Moscow", to name just
a few.

In the same vein, but regarding the question of identity, Persepolis subverts the
idea of (negative) uniformity: there is no identity that has a fixed component, be it
nationality, personality, etc. Satrapi underlines uniqueness and changes, and to some
extent (positive) instability, on three levels: the body, the personality and national
identity. Persepolis is a coming-of-age comic, physical changes associated with
adolescence are represented. Satrapi dedicates the entire first page of the chapter entitled
"The Vegetable" to giving a detailed account of how her body changed during puberty.
After that point, she is not the same person anymore. She turns rebellious, gets a punk
haircut, starts wearing make-up and, for a short period, wears safety pins as necklaces
and earrings. This phase does not last though, and actually comes to an end when Marji
goes back to Iran after living in the street and almost dying. Once back, and after her
attempted suicide, she chooses styles that emphasize femininity. Here again, Satrapi
dedicates an entire page to showing closely the changes she made to her body image
(Chapter "Le Ski"). Ultimately, she returns to her "usual self", a compromise between her punk-self and her feminine-self. By pointing to this shift in characters, Satrapi demonstrates that she did not remain the same person throughout her life and that she evolved over time, for the better or for the worse. Visual transformations in the representation of Marji, most notably in the changes between pants and dresses, among different hair styles and in veiling and unveiling suggest that even if she is Iranian, Marji is the only person in control of her body, that she is free to do what she wants with it. This contradicts some western assumptions who believe that Iranian women are not independent and liberated, but rather all subjected to patriarchal powers which dictate them how to dress and behave. She can embrace all sorts of identities and personal characteristics, even if she is Iranian.

The way Satrapi deals with her nationality is even more evocative of the impossibility of a fixed and unique identity. For instance, at the very beginning of Persepolis volume 1, Satrapi represents herself in a frame that is divided so that it represents her division between a modern and Iranian influences.
This idea is also present in her drawing style which is very controlled and minimalist. Satrapi draws upon the fundamentalist banning of representational images and depiction of the woman's body when she was still in art school for instance, to challenge the regime and show the forbidden. It is representative of the repression she was subjected to in Iran, and how she felt when she was the victim of prejudices against Iran in Europe: she felt empty, and controlled by people in a culture she was not familiar with. In addition, her style in this frame, but also throughout the book is actually the product of two different influences. In her book *Graphic Women*, Hilary Chute explains that "[Satrapi's] style locates itself along a continuum of Persian art" (144), but that "[her] insistence on black and white marks a difference from the color-rich classic tradition of Persian art" (145), not to mention the fact that, in the manner of traditional Persian manuscript culture, the illustrations representing people were surrounded by text, as if they were proto-comics. Chute also adds that "the minimalist play of black and white is part of Satrapi's stated aim, as with avant-garde tradition" (145). This balance between
European and Middle-Eastern influences emphasizes Satrapi’s multiple identity that is split between two cultures, a western and an eastern one. Similarly, by choosing a medium that uses both images and texts, she subverts fixed categories, and the hierarchy that exists between words and pictures, east and west. Rather, she celebrates differences and marginality. So Satrapi refuses the set identity which is ascribed to her.

Moreover, rather than making the readers see the world through fundamentalist eyes, for instance, Satrapi forces them to question their own assumptions regarding the western world but also the eastern one. In the introduction to the American edition, Satrapi states that her work was clearly meant for a western audience, and thus throughout the whole comics she plays with western stereotypes of Iran and Iranian women. One of the central points is the question of the veil. In the western world, most people believe that the veil ruins women's sense of self and individuality by making them all look alike. Repeatedly through the book, Satrapi portrays groups of Iranian school girls who, even though at first glance they might appear identical because of their clothing style and the veil, are actually different. Satrapi highlights this individuality by slightly modifying the shape of the hair that is showing on their forehead.
Satrapi also points to the fact that for a culture that is used to seeing women wearing a veil, people get used to perceiving differences: "With practice, even though they were covered from head to foot, you got to the point where you could guess their shape, the way they wore their hair and even their political opinions. Obviously, the more a woman showed, the more progressive and modern she was" (Story of a Return 140).
Satrapi illustrates this statement by comparing three women wearing a covering outfit (hijab), side by side with a sectional view showing how they are actually dressed and how their hair is styled. Outside, women all look very similar, but in reality, once the veil is removed, they are all unique individuals with their own style and values.

Furthermore, Satrapi suggests that the western world and Iran are much more similar than one might think. Indeed, the Austrian nuns with their black veils who run the school Marji attends in Austria are very much like the fundamentalist religious in Iran both in their look and attitude. This is a subtle criticism of western orientalism because it backlashes against itself: the biter is bitten, and the West does not have any right to impose its values on the rules to follow and the goals to reach.

Some westerners also assume that everybody in Iran is a religious fundamentalist. *Persepolis* challenges these received ideas by depicting daily acts of resistance by Iranian girls and women. Concerning the wearing of the veil, Satrapi emphasizes the fact that it is something that has been imposed on the population by the regime in place, and that people did not necessarily agree with it, even though they had to submit to the rule. The first page of *Persepolis* is particularly revealing. Satrapi explains that in 1980 Iranian girls started being forced to wear the veil at school. Yet even though they had to follow the law, Satrapi depicts the girls in the school playground innocently playing with their veils. They use them as a jump rope, a monster mask, or as reins. The girls do not follow the rule, and by doing so, they appear as rebellious, free minded human beings.
Satrapi implies that on some occasions personal history complicates the collective one. Nothing is really what it seems. Indeed, the drawings repeatedly feature doors that represent the frontier between the inside and the outside. To some extent, this also stands for the depiction of windows. This visual delimitation suggests that people have a public persona that does not necessarily correspond to the way they act and behave in the private. For instance, women are forced by the totalitarian Iranian regime to wear a scarf to cover their hair. Women have to follow the rule, and they do it when they are in a public space, but in their own homes, they refuse to do so. Indeed, most of the main women characters in *Persepolis* are represented not wearing a veil, and even at some point Marji’s grand-mother strongly opposes it: "Don't you want to take off that pain-in-the-ass of a hood?? It makes me claustrophobic!" (*Story of a Return* 179). Similarly, even though parties and the consumption of alcohol are forbidden by the regime, people rebel against this totalizing decision (cf. chapter "The Wine"). Satrapi highlights that people

![Image of a drawing from Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood](image)
have particularities as well as a sense of themselves and are able to make political claims even if they are subjugated to a totalizing political system.

Moreover, Satrapi highlights Iranian women's individuality, despite the veil, in several ways. Rebelling against the totalitarian regime means embracing what is forbidden by the power, namely western values and style. So for instance in the chapter "Kim Wilde", the readers are made aware of the fact that Marji wears a Michael Jackson badge, Nike sneakers and a Denim Jacket. She has a style that is westernized, but is still very much Iranian (she has a scarf on her head, covering her hair, for instance). Her apparel simply involves self-fashioning. This idea is further explored by Satrapi in the chapter "The Joke" dealing with her return to Tehran and the subsequent visits of family and friends. Marji realizes that many young Iranian women who have not traveled abroad are no less westernized than she is; they wear make-up and want to live a western life (105, 148). They want to have careers, to marry for love, to have access to cultural and social life, etc. From her perspective, her friends have adopted a superficial American lifestyle, in the sense that for Marji "they all looked like the heroine of American TV series, ready to get married at the drop of a hat, if the opportunity presented itself" (105). She does not understand that adopting a western lifestyle is a way for them to rebel against the regime because they refuse to be subjected to the law: "much later, I learned that making themselves up and wanting to follow western ways was an act of resistance on their part" (105). Consequently, claiming western values as their allows Iranian women to gain back a sense of self that is different from what the Iranian government asserts as proper conduct for women. In other words, national identities and cultures are performed. Iranian women who refuse to perform the traditional, 'coded' role that is
imposed on women by their culture and their political regime, point to the arbitrariness of such performances. That is, they are undermining the idea of a set Iranian identity as well a defined western female identity. These identities are performed, they are roles to which people don't need to submit themselves.

Masking and Veiling: points of view in *Maus* and *Persepolis*

This chapter initially started from the impulse of finding if there are visible gender differences in comics. My comparison between *Maus* and *Persepolis* suggests that differences in the graphic style of comics cannot be generally ascribed to gender. However, the content of the comic itself, what is told and what is visually presented, sometimes hint at a particular gender by representing a gendered point of view.

Spiegelman and Satrapi use the same trope of covering, either with a figurative or representative animal mask or a veil. In *Maus*, Spiegelman use the animal figures as a means of conveying a sense of the intertwining of personal and collective history by making all the people from a same nationality or ethnicity look the same, even though they remain individuals. He also uses stereotypical representations of national characters as a way to give the readers the impression of a reductive thinking that mirrors the way the Nazis assimilated Jewish people and considered them as 'vermin'. In opposition to this Nazi conception, and taken as a whole, the metaphorical depiction of Jews as mice implies that they are the prey, the victims of the German predators that are the cats. In addition, the passage where Spiegelman draws himself as no longer a mouse but rather as wearing a mouse mask, points to Spiegelman's realization of a (dis)continuity between his father and him. That is, there is a heritage, a continuity between Spiegelman and his father as suggested by their depiction as mice, up until the moment of writing and
drawing the comic. At that time, Spiegelman realizes that he is even further apart and
different from his father than he thought he was initially, partially because his father
survived the Holocaust, whereas he feels as if he is making money out of some else’s
suffering. In short, in *Maus*, Spiegelman plays with the idea of looking at and being
looked at, being looked at as a Jewish Mouse by Nazis, for instance, or looking at people
as Jewish (the readers, the Nazis). Similarly, being looked at as a Jewish artist by the
readers, the public, stands in opposition to looking at oneself as an 'incomplete' Jewish
person and a disputable artist. This perspective that Spiegelman has on his own works, as
well as the carefully crafted overlay of past and present to suggest that Holocaust
memories are unforgettable are what make Spiegelman a great comic artist.

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi uses the veil to unveil and conjure western stereotypes
about Iranian women, as well as to unveil and conjure Iranian state interpretation and
enforcement of Sharia. She illustrates cases where the veil is used inappropriately and
becomes a tool for resistance and she also demonstrates how Iranian women perform
western attitudes in private or underneath the veil. In contrast with Spiegelman's
assimilating depiction, Satrapi chose to depict individuality to counter-balance the
western idea of veiled women as 'being all the same'. Satrapi’s artistic education enabled
her to see what is unique about people’s physical appearance and so, in spite of the veil
that could make everybody look alike, she managed to represent people with their own
particularities. Indeed, she represents people as having different haircuts, different
expressions, clothing styles, eye shapes, choices about wearing make-up or not, etc. She
is also an insider to the female Iranian culture and as such gives readers the opportunity
to see behind closed doors, behind the veil, and undermines their assumptions vis-à-vis
Iranian women's lifestyle. To sum up, like Spiegelman, Satrapi mobilizes several points of view in her comics. She manages to show both the insider’s and the outsider's views. That is, she illustrates the arbitrariness of Iranian and European performed identity and reveals Iranian women under the veil they wear. Her particular position as being torn between two cultures, a European and an Iranian one, gave her enough distance on the subject to present an overlay of perspectives between the two cultures, which, in spite of several differences, also have common points. So, where Spiegelman’s usage of the medium is particularly noticeable for this temporal overlay of past and present, Satrapi goes beyond. She uses the medium as a mean to offer both temporal and spacial perspectives. Her experience of both worlds allows her to points to the similarities and differences that exist between the west and the east, even though they are not visible at first sight. Furthermore, her position as an insider, so in her story as a women, gives her the opportunity to have an understanding and a point of view on the situation that a man might not have. That is, she pays attention to little details of resistance, such as make-up for instance, or the way the veil is worn, that an outsider might be less prone to notice.
Show and Tell: Sexual Abuse in *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* by

**Phoebe Gloeckner**

It's possible that the incest scene could be made new, but at this late date we can't help suspecting that the scene is the product of cultural opportunism, a sign that the author has lost sight of what separates literature from *Melrose Place*. Beneath the swelling prose, the panties and the nightgowns, one feels the selling principle at work. Sex sells and perverse sex sells more...

– Katie Roiphe ("Making the Incest Scene")

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* was praised as an autobiographical comic because of the way it gave westerners a glimpse of what growing-up in Iran from the late seventies to the early nineties was like. This comic also encouraged readers to question their assumptions regarding the veil, for instance, and the role and place of woman in Iran. The socio-historical aspects of the book greatly contributed to its success, and the book was subsequently translated from French and exported to the UK, the USA, etc. *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, by Phoebe Gloeckner, created more controversy, especially because of the chapter "Minnie 3rd Love, Or: Nightmare on Polk Street" which depicts scenes of incest, rape and drug abuse. This story, previously published in the anthology *Twisted Sisters* 2 was considered as child pornography by British customs in 1995. Similarly, the comic was described has a "how-to for pedophiles" by Gary Podesto, the mayor of Stockton, California, who decided to ban *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* from the library after an 11-year-old child borrowed the book by mistake. In 2000, the comic was also seized at the French border and since then figures on the list of French forbidden books (Chute 77).
Phoebe Gloeckner (1960 - ) was born in Philadelphia and raised in San Francisco during the seventies, where she met several underground comic artists such as Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky. Like her avatar Minnie, Gloeckner was abused by her mother’s boyfriend, abused drugs and had a destructive love affair with ‘Tabatha’. In spite of this difficult adolescence, Gloeckner studied art and biology at the San Francisco State University and subsequently received a Master’s degree in medical illustration from the University of Texas in Dallas. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan. When it comes to her comic career, Gloeckner started publishing as an underground artist in anthologies such as Wimmen’s Comix and Twisted Sisters, which she collected later on in her book A Child’s Life and Other Stories. In 2002, she published “The Diary of A Teenage Girl,” a book recounting in greater detail some of the stories told in A Child’s Life and Other Stories. It is currently being adapted as a movie and is supposed to be released in 2015. In 2008, Gloeckner received a Guggenheim Fellowship rewarding her “exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts” (John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, “The Fellowship”).

The revised edition of A Child’s Life and Other Stories, by Phoebe Gloeckner, was published in the USA in 2002. This comic book is composed of five different parts, themselves divided into several little stories that are mostly semi-autobiographical. In A Child’s Life and Other Stories, Gloeckner alternates more or less regularly autobiographical stories and fictive narratives. When she talks about her personal trauma, she uses an alter-ego. In most of the stories, the alter-ego is called Minnie, and looks like a young Phoebe Gloeckner whose photographs are present on the last page.
of *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*. Adolescent stories, told via the character Mary or Minnie, are also doppelganger of Gloeckner when she was a teenager. The two first parts introduce the reader to the troubled relationship Minnie (one of Gloeckner aliases) has with her stepfather. The third part is probably the most disturbing one as it deals with teenage stories of sexual discovery, drug abuse, rape and incest. In the fourth part, entitled “Grown Up Stories”, Gloeckner focuses on difficulties that might arise in adult life, notably cases of undesired pregnancies, adultery, etc. Finally, the last part contains paintings and drawings which, for the most part, represent parts of the human body that draw on the visual rhetoric of medical illustration, a field in which Gloeckner has a Master’s degree. *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* is composed of a multitude of different stories that encompasses different visual styles, in part because Gloeckner wrote and drew it over a span of twenty years. Gloeckner borrows her visual rhetoric from various sources. She drew early inspiration from fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood. The underground comix movement influenced Gloeckner’s primarily cluttered style in black & white as well even as she reacted to its misogynist depictions of sexual themes. Her illustrations at the end of the book recall anatomical drawings. The chapter ""En Famille," or Beggar's Banquet," is printed in color on a glossy paper and by these technical qualities is reminiscent of American mainstream comics. In addition, in two stories at the end of the book, "The Bob Skoda Story" and "Tommy and Darryl," the watercolors style of the comics emphasizes an artistic feeling and implies lightness and almost frivolity, as opposed to the detailed and precise drawing in the sequences preceding these.
The quotation of Katie Roiphe with which this chapter opens suggests that incest stories are told partly because they are marketable due to their sensationalism. This vision is demeaning for artists who have found in books a place to deal with their trauma and inform other people of the issues at stake. I will analyze *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* to demonstrate that Gloeckner found in the comic medium a space where she can visually represent traumatic memories of incest and rape, voice the abuse of power she was subjected to, and undermine popular assumptions regarding female sexuality.

**The Little Red Riding Hood Intertext**

Gloeckner also uses the visual rhetoric of fairy tales to suggest that it is not sex in itself that traumatized Minnie, but rather the fact that she was forced to have sex against her will when she was still a child. Gloeckner implies that, more than the legal age, it is the experience of trauma (under the form of abuse, for instance) that marks the entry point into adulthood. Indeed, the title page of the section about childhood recollection, "A Child's Life: an Account in Words and Pictures" represents this transition. It evokes upcoming traumatic sexual events. The title of the chapter is written on a banner reminiscent of glory and apotheosis. However this heraldry presages the end of this glorious time of childhood. This is also reflected in the drawing. In the background, one can distinguish a bright city landscape with huge buildings, a park, and the silhouette of what could be perceived as a church or a castle. Birds are flying, and in general the ambiance in the background is reminiscent of lively, lighthearted happy times.
Gloeckner places Minnie at the edge of the wood that is very dark and scary. The path is getting narrower, progressively disappearing under the wild vegetation that constitutes the forest. Minnie is smiling and blushing. Here, Gloeckner draws her inspiration from illustrations of Little Red Riding Hood. Indeed, Minnie is wearing a dress, holding a bouquet and wearing a braided bag that evokes a basket. However, contrary to popular representations of Little Red Riding Hood, in which a wolf a represented hiding in the background, Minnie is not directly threatened by it as there is no animal hiding from her. Red Riding Hood, illustrated by R. Andre and published in 1888
explains the intentions of the wolf who stands as an analogy for the 'invisibility of danger' as well as the fact that appearances are misleading.

Bruno Bettelheim, who analyzed fairy tales extensively, explains that Little Red Riding Hood is a tale about the sex.

Little Red Cap's danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough. The person who is psychologically ready to have sexual experiences can master them, and grow because of it. But a premature
sexuality is a regressive experience, arousing all that is still primitive within us and that threatens to swallow us up (173).

By referring to this popular tale, Gloeckner suggests that Minnie is about to have the same faith as the Little Red Riding Hood. Her future looks dark, frightening, and inescapable. Minnie is turning her back to her childhood and is about to enter the adult world, but this is going to be at the cost of traumatic events. She will encounter the 'wolf' who might look as a trusting person (such as a stepfather should be) even though he is not. Her portrayal implies that she is still a child on the verge of being the victim of sexual abuse.

In the tale, Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf before being taken advantage of.

Figure 18: Gustave Doré. Little Red Riding Hood, 1964.
This picture by Gustave Doré (1864) illustrates the first time they meet. The wolf is turning his back to the viewers and appears as menacing, looking as the little girl with desire. In contrast, Red Riding Hood also looks at the wolf. She seems captivated by it,
but does not show any sign of fear. She has no clue that the wolf is planning on eating her.

Minnie's first encounter with Pascal's sexuality occurs when she is still very young. The chapter "Hommage à Duchamp" depicts this story in three pages. On the first panel taking up the entire page, Minnie and her sister are in a corridor. There is a door with a broken window in the background. They are both looking at it, and Minnie says: "Hey, look! The glass has been knocked out of the door! We can see in the bathroom!", implying that they will do peek through the window. The readers are then invited to turn the page to read the rest of the story.

Figure 19: Gloeckner, Phoebe. A Child’s Life and Other Stories. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: Frog, 2000. 28.

The next panel is also the size of a page, and represent a disturbing, unanticipated scene. In the foreground, the readers see the two little girls who are looking at the scene. Because the readers are place at their level, they actually look at what the two girls are
seeing through the window. Pascal is masturbating, seated on the bathtub, and has an ecstatic look on his face. Minnie and her sisters have their mouth and eyes wide open, and looks both fascinated and disgusted by what they are watching. The readers who could be considered as a potential 'third sister' does not know how to react either. Not knowing what to do, the two girls run away and hide in the leaving room. Drawing upon the Little Red Riding Hood analogy, they just faced Pascal's, and perhaps their own, sexual desire, but they do not know it yet as they both believe that he was "washing his penis" (29).

This panel is the first one of the book to be explicitly sexual, and so the readers are not used to such representation. So, like Minnie and her sister, the readers are torn between fascination (what is this comic book really about?) and disgust (why do we have to actually see the sexual scenes?). In other words the readers who did not anticipated such a graphic representation are put in the place of Minnie or Little Red Riding Hood. That is, because the readers were not prepared to see Pascal masturbating in his bathroom, they might be shocked by this picture and feel 'abused'.

Ultimately, this chapter in the comics where the girls conclude that Pascal is “washing his penis”, but also the other chapters which consist of stories Minnie tells to herself, highlight how the abused child makes up a ‘fairy tale’ an alternative story to explain and make sense of an abusive reality.

**Challenging the Misogyny of Crumb's Underground Comics**

Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* is in the lineage of works done by the underground comic artists of the seventies and eighties. Her comic book actually contains an introduction by Robert Crumb, in which he states that "when she was
a fledging teen-age cartoonist Phoebe admired the comics of me and my mate, Aline Kominsky. We were some kind of underground-cartoonist-heroes to her. Later she confessed that she’d had dreams of running away to live with us!” (5). Crumb and Kominsky were therefore an inspiration for Gloeckner, and this can be found in her style as well as the themes she addresses, such as sex. Crumb has been described by his feminist wife as a "sexist, racist, anti-semitic misogynist" (Guardian Weekly, "I always knew I was weird"), something that can also be seen in his drawings. In her comics, Gloeckner challenges Crumb’s representation of women and, more generally, the patriarchal power and misogyny that are still pervasive in the comic book industry. She denounces the way women are treated in popular media and society by making people read stories about male domination and female subordination, told from a feminine perspective.

*Figure 20: Crumb, Robert. Illustrations for the first issue of Snatch Comics, 1968.*

Robert Crumb published the two illustrations above in the first issue of Snatch Comics in 1968. They are representative of Crumb’s depiction of sexual relationships throughout his works. The two scenes depict scenes of sexual abuse as if they were
supposed to be light-hearted. The picture on the left represents a man who lifts-up the skirt of a woman passing by and touches her genitalia. While the woman seems shocked, the man is giggling while saying "excuse me!", as if his abuse was innocent. The second drawing shows two naked characters, a man and a woman, having sex. The woman is choking because the man is strangling her while penetrating her aggressively. The man is smiling and has an ecstatic look on his face while abusing his partner, as if the pleasure he has would justify in itself the abuse. As such, both images suggest that women do not have a word to say when it comes to sex, and that they are at men’s mercy, subjected to men’s desire.

In contrast, Gloeckner demands that the reader focus on the issues of abuse of power in sexual relationships and the traumatic effect it has on victims. By putting on display the issue of incest that is morally forbidden in society, she attempts to draw a connection between the issue of incest and the bigger issue of sexual abuse. In *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, Gloeckner complicates our general understanding of incest as being wrong simply because it is a sexual relationship that occurs in a familial context between relatives linked either by blood or by marriage. In other words, the representation of incestuous child sexual abuse by a step-father toward a girl offers an extreme case of male domination and female subordination – an extreme case that is nonetheless symptomatic of sex as patriarchy defines it. This restricted understanding of incest as an abusive sexual relationship between an underage girl and her father leaves aside the question of power relations that are at the roots of sexual abuse. In patriarchal society, men are considered as being more powerful than woman, and women as being subjected to this power and passive. This is an abusive situation that works in favor of
men because sex tends to be taken for a masculine qualities. That is, sexual pleasure is supposed to derive from the sentiment of domination that men might feel and the sentiment of submission for women. At the core of Minnie’s incestuous relationship lies not the problem of sex between two family members, but the issue of patriarchal power and sexual abuse.

In the chapter "Fun Things to Do With Little Girls," Gloeckner draws three scenes of domination sequentially, each with the same formal composition. The parallel composition points to different sorts of abuse: the domination of the big sister over the little one, the domination of the stepfather over the stepdaughters, and the abuse of his paternal position.
One is submitted and on her back, whereas the other one is on top of the first one, attacking her. The characters represented change, but it is either Gloeckner submitted to the stepfather while having sex; Gloeckner dominating her sister in a fight; or the stepfather forcing wine down the throat of the younger sister. In this particular chapter, Gloeckner points to the repetition of abuse which can take different forms. She also suggests a sense of attemporality associated with the events. In other words, these three panels are not organized chronologically: while temporarily, the scene of sexual abuse is the one that happens last, it is the first represented on the page, for instance. The precise time is not what matters. Rather, it is the juxtaposition of several panels representing a similar pose that is revealing. The repetition emphasizes the wrongness of abuse in all its forms. Indeed, even the smallest instance of abuse can influence the way people see themselves and perceive and evaluate the formative events. In addition, the multiplicity of the scenes of abuse could suggest the general climate of abuse in which the two girls
grew up. That is, being influenced by Pascal's domination over them, the little girls might have reproduced the same abusive pattern in the way they interact with each other.

The abuse comes from the violation of trust and of the sentiment of protection that a paternal figure should incarnate. In the same story, before the violation happens, Pascal is having dinner with the two girls.

![Figure 22](image_url)

*Figure 22: Gloeckner, Phoebe. A Child’s Life and Other Stories. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: Frog, 2000. 66.*

They are seated at the table, the father at the very end and the two girls on each side of the table. Pascal is clearly dominating the two girls, as his depiction suggests. His head is very big, and, in comparison, the two girls look as if they were toddlers even though the youngest one is already six years old. What could be perceived as the paternal protection over Minnie and her sister, actually anticipates the future abuse of power and the betrayal of trust that is about to happen. Pascal creates a setting in which he forces the two girls to collude with him in excluding their mother from their tastes and relationship;
he deprives them not only of someone to talk to but also of any world view alternative to the one he is imposing on them. The juxtaposition of the three scenes of pinning the child down invoke the pervasive and corrosive effect of Pascal’s abuse of power. His abuse of Minnie sets the stage for later abuse by her girlfriend Tabatha.

The parallel composition of domination and subordination recurs with a shift in a later scene, when Minnie has been drugged by Tabatha, who as the frame explains, "acted as a procuress for low-life drug dealers. She’d bring fucked-up kids to have sex with such creeps and she’d get liquor and drugs in return" (74).

Figure 23: Gloeckner, Phoebe. A Child’s Life and Other Stories. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: Frog, 2000. 75.

In the panel containing this explanation, the readers can see Minnie unconscious, naked and lying on a bed, while a man is naked too and about to rape her. The porn magazine open on the bed suggest that he might have been inspired by what he has seen in the media. In the background, Tabatha is watching TV and having a casual conversation with another man. This image further emphasizes the sense of betrayal by putting in the same frame Tabatha who has taken advantage of Minnie’s love for her and
who clearly cares less about her than drugs, and Minnie, who trusted Tabatha, and who is now a rape victim.

For Crumb, committing rape seems to give him the opportunity to write a comic about it. In his memoir *My Troubles With Women*, Crumb decided to incorporate a chapter entitled "Memories Are Made of This!" in which over four pages he recalls the time he decided to visit a woman who fancied him in order to feed his sexual needs. The woman got drunk, and, as a result, Crumb took advantage of her while knowing she was not in full possession of her faculties. Because he knew she liked him, and because she was not capable of verbalizing her refusal to have sex with him, Crumb abused her. The last panel shows an older Crumb looking back at that scene and commenting on it in a very light-hearted way, making the events appear as if they were forgettable.
Figure 24: Crumb, Robert. "Memories Are Made of These!" My Trouble With Women. 1992.
Gloeckner shifts the emphasis in the frame to the victim by focusing on her body and its state. The bloody tampon held up by the rapist registers his complete violation of Minnie’s body and, at the same time, offers a disturbing reminder of her individual embodied existence. Where the raped and drugged woman depicted by Crumb is generic and the male rapist is individualized as “Crumb,” the raped and drugged Minnie in Gloeckner’s work is depicted as an individual undergoing degradation by an anonymous man. Gloeckner’s representation suggests that abuse is painful and should not be treated lightly. Men who use their psychological or physical power to have sex with women who are in a weak position are guilty of rape. The presence of Tabatha and another man in the background who are having a casual conversation, acting as if nothing was happening, stands for society in general which might still ignores numerous cases of sexual abuse. Here Gloeckner suggests that the readers who might be shocked by the lack of reaction from Tabatha and the other man, or even their complicity in the rape, should distance themselves from the situation and realize that this is what still happens in contemporary society.

The picture in the laundry room in the chapter "Minnie's 3rd love, or: nightmare on Polk street" is particularly representative of the abusive situation Minnie is in.
In this panel that takes up 3/4 of a page, Minnie is kneeling and crying, while talking to her stepfather. She is sad and begs Pascal to "love [her]" because she "love[s] [him] -- [she] really really love[s] [him]" (73). She is also probably drunk, as the bottle of "good cheap California wine that makes girls cry and give blowjobs to jerks" (73) implies and she asks him if he loves her. Pascal is standing up, half naked, one of his hands on top of Minnie's head, the other one holding his penis, while he replies to her "Of course I love you -- what man wouldn't give anything to be fucking a 15-year old? Tell me again how you love to suck my dick -- you love to suck it -- don't you?" (73). Part of this answer is almost word for word the same reply Pascal gives to Mary, Gloeckner's alter-ego, in the chapter "It's Mary the Minor," which emphasizes the haunting memory of the scene.
for Gloeckner, as well as how Minnie/Mary understands the experience differently than Pascal. Indeed, Minnie/Mary believes she is in a love relationship, whereas for her stepfather it is simply some sexual adventures with a teenager. The trust relationship between an authoritative adult figure and an adolescent has been broken once again.

This panel is one of the most powerful of *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* because of its composition. Gloeckner highlights the abuse of power of Pascal over Minnie by several means. First, he is standing up, and therefore is higher than Minnie who is kneeling. This creates a visual hierarchy and conveys the powerlessness of Minnie in face of the power of her stepfather. This is reinforced by the hand that he puts on her head, which has the power to control her action and keep her under his domination.

Second, the body of the stepfather is not contained within the frame, but bleeds into the gutter like the body of the anonymous rapist in the scene in which Minnie has been drugged by Tabatha. Pascal’s presence is so imposing; and he has so much power over Minnie that his body goes outside of the frame. Since the gutter is the space of memory and the creation of closure, by bleeding the step-father’s body into it, Glockner suggests that this scene controls Minnie and that she cannot escape from the memory of it. Rather, it will omnibilate her, as it is already taking too much visual space. Third, Gloeckner's drawings of the characters’ faces and Pascal's penis are hypertrophic rather than anatomically accurate. This has a shocking effect on the readers who perceive the emotion felt by Minnie and the threat of Pascal's weapon-like penis which literally dominates the frame. Indeed, Pascal is pointing it in the direction of Minnie's head, almost as if he was pointing a gun at her, and menacing her with it. Thus, this panel illustrates the sexual act that is about to happen as a manipulative and depraved moment.
There is nothing erotic whatsoever about this scene, and all the reader can see is pain, false hope, and abuse. It also creates disgust for the readers who are forced to identify with Minnie. As Deman argues, if the readers identify with Pascal, then they identify with a sexual abuser. If they do not identify with anybody, they are actually complicit in seeing Minnie as a disposable sexual object (57) The readers are therefore confronted with sexual abuse by seeing it through the eyes of Minnie, which might make them conceptualize better the abuse of power at stake in the relationship between Minnie and her stepfather. So, contrary to Crumb who make abuse appears as funny or even sexy and organized around the consciousness of the abuser, Gloeckner condemn such depictions by portraying the suffering of the victim and, by organizing the scene around the experience of the victim, makes it a serious topic to be discussed.

Moreover, Gloeckner tries to subvert the traditional expectations about comics, especially when it comes to gender representation. In comics, when women are present, they are often hypersexualized. They have very long legs, prominent breasts, and a voluminous bottom. Crumb actually does not hesitate to reduce women to these body parts only, going sometimes as far as depriving women from their head in some of his illustrations.

The hypersexualization of the feminine body come from the fact that comics were principally targeted towards men. So, the multiplications of the representation of sexualized characters in comics have entered the norm. Like Crumbs and also mainstream comics, *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* features sexualized characters, but bodies, with the exception of men’s genitalia, are not hypersexualized. Therefore, as Hilary Chute argues, while we are used to seeing women portrayed as ostensibly
sexualized, often in a degrading, submissive way, we are not accustomed to seeing men in such a light. By representing men as women usually are, Gloeckner highlights the manner in which women tend to be negatively depicted in the media. She explains,

Gloeckner is wary of the idea that what people react to with fury in her work is an erect penis, rather than to the intimate images of degraded women that have now become so culturally familiar. And while her texts do represent degradation and abuse, her work also focuses on sexual desire, as I will discuss, which is yet another reason Gloeckner wants to fight the cultural edicts that bans the representation of erections in any nonmarginalized work (Graphic Women 68).

In spite of picturing sex, *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* is not sexy. Gloeckner manages to create this difference by two means. First, as I said above, by forcing readers to question their own consumption and views on comics and sex. Second, she also uses the form of the medium to further undermine any remaining trace of erotic scenes. She does so by creating a dissonance between the sexualized visuals and the horror of the stories told and by emphasizing systemic abuse through recurring parallel composition. On the one hand, the pictures sexualize the characters and make them appear as human beings with sexual bodies and sexual needs. Gloeckner's drawing style actually invites visual pleasure for the readers by representing people in a very beautiful manner. On the other hand though, the texts create a sense of unease for the readers when they realize that actually the events depicted do not represent a love relationship, but rather the power of an abusive stepfather over his stepdaughter. The captions and the text bubbles present the horror of this psychological abuse. The readers might be conflicted between the
pleasure they might feel while looking at the illustrations, and the horrendous story that is actually told by the text.

As a result, Gloeckner shifts this gaze away from the female sexual objectification towards the creation of a female subject. She manages to do so by presenting the story via a woman's point of view. Gloeckner both wrote and told the story, and so she was able to control the way she represented female bodies, and her own in particular. So, she depicts women as sexual beings, but in a very figurative manner. Besides most of the character's heads, women do not have exaggerated features, and their sexual organs seem regular. However, men's penis appear disproportionate in comparison to the rest of their body. Consequently, were women's body type tend to be exaggerated to represent some sort of ideal object for the male gaze, it is the contrary that happen in *A Child's Life and Other Stories*, were it is the men's bodies that are objectified. This create a dichotomy, a certain discomfort that points to the issue of self-representation. It also presents to the readers the effects of sexual objectification.

**Anatomical drawings in *A Child’s Life and Other Stories***

As seen previously, *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* "makes the hidden visible" (Chute Graphic Women 91) by showing and telling stories of abusive sex and abusive relationships. Gloeckner show what is kept a secret through fairy tales analogy and challenging misogynist comics, but she also does it 'literally' by showing the hidden via anatomical cross-sections. In the three panels comic's "The Sad Tale of the Visible Woman and her Invisible Man", she represents in the same picture at the same time the inside and the outside of a woman as if she was drawing for an anatomy textbook.
In the first panel she is looking for love, in the second one she is being abandoned at the altar, and in the third one she is pregnant. The woman is disproportionally drawn, naked, and her face is very big on two of the three panels. Though, what is striking about these pictures is that the woman's stomach, intestine, brain, carotid, and a fetus, to name just a few, are also depicted by transparency cross-section, as if the readers were looking at a medical book. Gloeckner used the same process in most of the illustrations in the last chapter of the book. She does so in an even more figurative manner. Her illustrations do not look like drawings anymore, but are so well done that they could be taken for photographs they rely on the conventions of anatomical drawing. Traditionally, anatomical books contain very precise illustrations as opposed to photographs, distinguishing anatomical parts under study through the use of a range of techniques, including a thin black line delimiting the different parts of a cross-section. Photography does not have the same capacity to isolate, emphasize, separate, in short, objectify, the
anatomical part. In other words, the contours of the different organs, for instance, are more visible in drawings than in photographs. They are also in colors. San Bruno Mountain, 1991, is an instance representing in color both the inside and the outside of a woman performing fellatio.


In her book Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Ludmilla Jordanova dedicates a chapter to the "Medical Images of the Female Body." She suggests that medicine is associated with the private realm, and that pictures are kept in private or in secret. Anatomical pictures are not usually displayed in museums or gallery for a general public. Phoebe Gloeckner, who publishes anatomical illustrations, goes against the tradition of keeping medical data confidential. She also goes against what would be considered decent and/or appropriate to represent because it might be pathological, 'impure', unhealthy, etc. and therefore can be perceived as shocking. The fact that Gloeckner chose to depict the images above as cross-sections is particularly startling at first, but actually serves as an allegory for the theme of abuse. Indeed, as Jordanova puts it, "medicine is most obviously allied with sexual power because of stereotypical associations between the professions and men"
Jordanova goes on to quote Richard Selzer, a surgeon who became essayist, "Selzer himself was eloquent on the nature of medical, or rather surgical power: 'the flesh splits with its own kind of moan. It is like the penetration of rape.' Despite his comments on the aggression implicit in Western medicine, Selzer is far from critical of the sexualizing of medical relationship" (152-153).

Surgery happens behind closed doors, and except the surgeons, and the complicit assistants and nurses, nobody knows what happens in the operating room. In addition, surgeons also dispose of the patient's body that they can cut open and penetrate with surgical tools. As such, the surgeons have power over the subjected patients. The patients have lost any sense of properties, of owning their own bodies. So, Gloeckner's cross-sections add another layer of commentary regarding the theme of abuse of power in the comic. These drawings imply that the person represented and cut-open, is a simple body dissected by the surgeons. It mirrors the way abusers, such as rapists, might see their victims, namely as bodies rather than as human beings. Therefore, sexual abuse is represented as a power relation.

However, Gloeckner points to the fact that women are more than bodies, more than a "thing". Gloeckner's drawings are disturbing because they have not lost what make the people depicted still human beings. In the manner of the painter and anatomist Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty (1716–1785), she plays with the tension between the macabre, dead dissected body, and the eroticism of the portrayal.
The painting above represents a woman showing her cut-open back to the viewer. This image is disturbing because the character depicted still looks very much like a woman. Indeed, nowadays beholders are used to anatomical drawings which depict the body without any signs of personality. That is, the bodies depicted do not have hair that they styled or are not wearing any accessories, for instance. Gautier d'Agoty and Gloeckner challenge this pure anatomical depiction by showing that a body is also a person. In *L'Ange Anatomique*, Gautier d'Agoty painted a naked seductive woman, her hair tied up by a blue ribbon and looking away. In the same vein, Gloeckner's cross-sections represents people and not bodies. In the fellatio picture, the woman has blond hair, purple eye-shadow and is wearing earrings. She is more than a dissected body; she is a woman. As Gloeckner puts it: “The illustrations (...) are cold but soft. I wanted them to be harmless and approachable, like doing a fuzzy animal, so they have some humanity. It isn’t because of what they are but because of that softness, not rejecting of humanity. I tried to make them beautiful. I didn’t want it to be horror. It has impermanence but this is beauty as we live it” (Holme, “Varoom 25: Phoebe Gloeckner and J.G. Ballard’s *The..."
Atrocity Exhibition”). The hair, the make-up and the accessories also suggest that it is thanks to these additions that women gain a social face that would attract men, implying that they are attractive because they perform femininity and objectify their body as a place to display these additions that would please the male gaze.

By pointing to the fact that women are more than bodies and placing this picture in a sexual context, Gloeckner aims to undermine this misconception by shifting the place of women from being seen as sexual objects to being perceived as sexual subjects. She normalizes women's sexuality, which is traditionally controlled and restrained, while criticizing abusive sexual relations. This normalization of women sexuality undermines patriarchal assumptions which assume that female sexuality should remain ignored and limited. Sex is seen as power, and is associated with a lexical field that tends to be associated with the masculine in our society, such as "conquest", "domination", etc. Gloeckner criticizes this understanding that is conveyed by comic artists such as Crumb, fairy tales and anatomical drawings. This understanding of sexuality based on a binary division between the dominant and the dominated is negative because it favors hierarchy and indirectly justify abuses.

Visual rhetoric in A Child’s Life and Other Stories

Gloeckner tackles the issue of sexual abuse using three different visual rhetorics that are the fairy tale, underground comics, and anatomical drawings. Moreover, her drawing style evolved considerably over the span of twenty years it took for this comic to be created. As a result, A Child’s Life and Other Stories look like a comic patchwork, or rather as an anthology composed of the work of several artists. Yet, the entire comic book has been created by Gloeckner, and so the diversity of influences and lines illustrates her
evolution as an artist and as a person, from the pure underground influences, to the intertextual illustrations, and to finish the anatomical ones. The way her drawing style gains in complexity in terms of line but also subtext mirrors her maturation into an adult who progressively detaches herself from parental figures such as her abusive stepfather, but also her 'adoptive' cartoonist parents Crumb and Kominsky. In other words, the evolution of her drawings illustrates Gloeckner's growing subjectivity and a sense of self in constant evolution.

The instability of Gloeckner's style also represents the evolution of the representation of memory over time. That is, there is not one fixed way to show an event, but rather multiples ways, because memory is a human construction and as such is subjected to changes over time. We do not have a single definite record of memories, but actually, the way we understand experiences and have a sense of self comes from the creation of narrative itself. Life is a story, it is made out of narratives. In Jerome Bruner's words, "Life [...] is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as 'a narrative' is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination [...]. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing psychologically as 'life itself" (Bruner 13). It means that a life memory is a construction, and as such prone to adjustments and re-creation. In contrast with books, where the words follows each other without too much interruption and thus suggest a sense of continuity, comic books with the presence of the gutter in between each frame emphasize the alteration of memory and the blanks people fill with their own narrative. They undermine the idea of a single "truth", a single "memory". There is not one way to look at an event. In the cases analyzed before, what could appear as a consensual sexual act between a teenager and her
stepfather in the eyes of the perpetrator Pascal is an abusive situation from the victim's and an outsider's perspective.

Moreover, by using various intertexts which all deal with women's abuse, Gloeckner suggests that there are just so many ways in which women's sexual role is constructed by society. For instance, she implies that fairy tales teach children to be prudent vis-à-vis strangers but also indirectly that little girls are represented as sexual prey. She also suggests that Minnie finds in ‘fairy tales’ a means to explain the abuse to which she is subjected. Gloeckner also challenges depictions of women in comic books who are often objectified and hypersexualized. Finally, Gloeckner draws an analogy between cross-sections, surgery, and rape to suggest how in the eyes of the surgeons, like in the eyes of the abuser, a (woman’s) body is nothing more than a body. Yet, Gloeckner challenges that perception by keeping any indicators of subjectivity (hair, earrings, etc.) on her anatomical drawings. That is, she creates a tension between the abusive, yet ‘mechanical’ depiction of the cross-section, and the personal, human aspects that are still conveyed in these illustrations to remind people that rapists are abusing people and not bodies. Her illustrations, which are not crude, as opposed to Crumb’s comics for instance, reinforce the distance and independence Gloeckner took vis-à-vis his influence on her art.

*A Child’s Life and Other Stories* is disturbing because of the tension that is created between the use of a juvenile medium and a very adult content. That is, the comic book form suggests childhood, light-hearted stories and innocence. Paradoxically, Gloeckner chose the comic medium to address the issue of incest. Minnie grew up in a climate of sexual abuse, and so, by using a 'standard' childhood form, Gloeckner suggests that for Minnie, it is being raised in an abusive setting that was the norm. The two sisters fight
against each other, mirroring what they are both subjected to by their abusive stepfather. Incest is such an important part of Minnie's life – it damages her and shapes the way she behaves, that it is not surprising to see her as a child in her bedroom still full of toys reading passionately but undisturbedly Nabokov' *Lolita* (47).
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