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Beyond the Chronotope

De-Narrativization in Graphic Trauma Narratives (1980–2018)

Lorenz A. Hindrichsen (Copenhagen)

Narratives are often reliant, if not contingent, upon sequentiality, as suggested by etymologies that associate the act of narrating (English *to recount*, French *raconter*, German *erzählen*) with counting (English *to count*, French *conter*, German *zählen*) (etymonline). A wide range of artistic genres such as literature, film, music and dance operate with strings of sounds, syllables, letters or movements that echo numerical lists. Plotlines, cinematographic shots, musical scores and choreographies utilize signifiers whose sequentiality – however fractured or complex – defines narrative strands and lends them meaning (Grabes). By way of contrast, visual genres such as paintings, photographs and sculptures evoke narratives paradigmatically, through a strategic positioning of select signifiers (such as characters or visual symbols) within a given frame, prompting viewers to decode these narratively by constructing storylines around them (Porter Abbot, 6–12).

These two contrasting modes of signification – syntagmatic and paradigmatic – are central to storytelling in comics and graphic novels, where artists may *construct* narratives sequentially, through the gutter (McCloud), or *elicit* them paradigmatically, through an effective *mise-en-page* (Cohn). This second, paradigmatic modality, which is often sidelined in discussions of narrativity in ›sequential art‹, prominently comes to the fore when comic artists suspend sequential narration and signify through iconic panels (such as the swastika crossroads in *Maus* (Spiegelman 2011b, 125)), mesmerizing splashes (in *Watchmen*), reconfigured waffle grids (in Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*) or time-lapsed static frames (in Richard McGuire's *Here*). Artists typically deploy these techniques to accentuate key moments within a given narrative – notably openings, endings or climaxes – lending them poignancy and weight.

Paradigmatic signification is also central to comics which aspire to non-narrativity, such as the experimental and abstract comics promoted by Andrei Molotiu and Thierry Groensteen (Groensteen, 9-16), where core narrative elements like characters, settings and

captions have been erased, and signification is sustained through abstract shapes and the formal apparatus alone. In Derik Badman's *Flying Chief* (discussed in Groensteen 15, cf. Fig. 1), the author's redrawing of backgrounds from a *Tarzan* comic, coupled with the erasing of protagonists, props, scenery and captions, results in a severing of plot-lines, an eroding of character arcs, and a blurring of the spatial and temporal dimensions that govern the original, unmodified »geno-text« (Johnson, 74). As a result, Badman's version weakens syntactic ties between the panels and augments their entropy (or degree of interchangeability within a given sequence). Badman [89] thereby opens up the page to multiple sequential readings: left-to-right, top-to-bottom (like in the geno-text), right-to-left, bottom-to-top (in reverse order), as vertical columns, as horizontal tiers, as a circular text (clockwise or anticlockwise) or in random order. Removing narrative elements, then, fundamentally shapes the structure and modality of a text; if *Flying Chief* is to be taken as a guide, erasure limits or eliminates sequential signification through the gutter while strengthening a text's paradigmatic axis.

A similar superseding of syntagms through non-sequential paradigms can be observed in trauma narratives, where the »slippery, elusive, spectral« nature of traumatic memories renders them largely »unrepresentable« (Davies, 1), giving rise to fragmented, impressionistic, »modernist or anti-realist« texts (Davies, 8). While this »culturally dominant« form of trauma (Davies, 8) represents a stereotype that requires further qualification, there is evidence to suggest that comic artists working on trauma often wrestle with similar challenges of unrepresentability, and adopt shared strategies to meet them. One such strategy consists of a semiotic code-switching from conventional, plot-driven, sequential narration to a looser, paradigmatic discourse that stalls narrative strands and captures the ineffability of trauma through narrative stasis. While similar kinds of fragmentation can be observed in purely sequential genres (such as war poetry), comics – by virtue of their multimediality – can

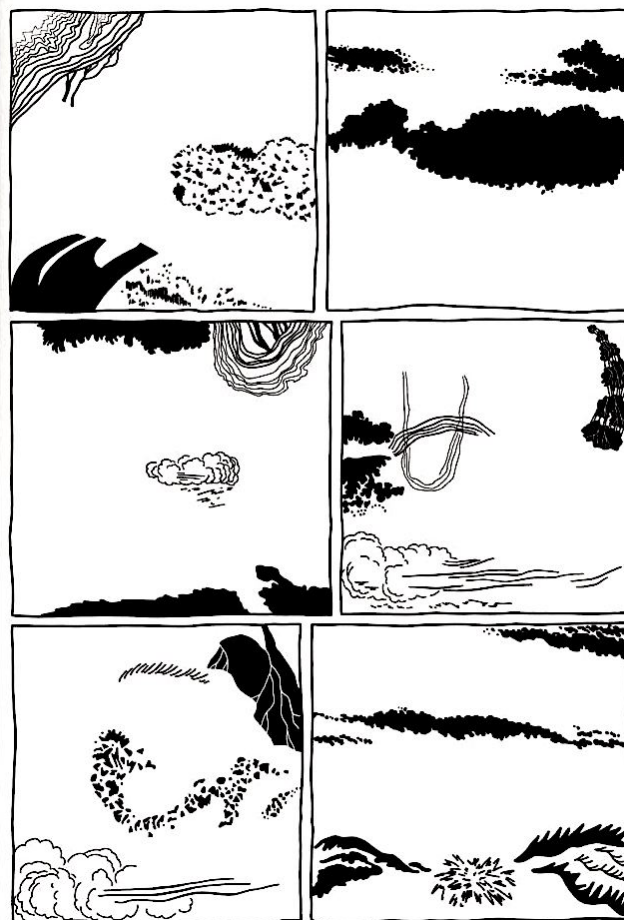


Fig. 1: Derik Badman. *Flying Chief*.

leverage a wider range of techniques to pause narration and articulate the inaccessibility of traumatic memory. It is specifically the ways in which comics may decouple an illustrated page from sequentiality altogether which distinguish the genre from other art forms.

Instances of such code-switching, which I shall call *de-narrativization* (to emphasize the way it minimizes rather than fully eclipses narrativity), can be found in many texts that explore »historical« and »structural trauma« (Bond/Craps, 79–83). *Maus*, an ur-text of comics and trauma theory (Davies, 3–5, Bond/Craps, 83–86), offers an ideal starting point for defining and exploring such practice. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) serves as a useful follow-up to demonstrate the application of such techniques in superhero comics, a genre that teems with traumatized protagonists. Vignettes from *Persepolis* (Iran/France, 2000), *Daytripper* (Brazil, 2010) and *If Einstein is right ...* (UK, 2018) illustrate the prevalence of the practice, and the ways in which cultural, historical and biographical contexts feed into, and shape, de-narrativization. Collectively, the case studies discussed below underline the innovative potential of code-switches, and the ways in which de-narrativization often goes hand in hand with a creative reconfiguration of the formal apparatus.

Overall, de-narrativization emerges as an effective tool that allows artists to disengage from narration while sustaining a compelling visual discourse, thereby mimetically articulating the lacunae that characterize traumatic memory. Used thoughtfully, de-narrativization strengthens graphic trauma narratives by giving voice to the »inexpressible nature of trauma« (Adorno qtd. in Bond/Craps, 48), thereby highlighting comics' ability to articulate complex emotional experiences through a clever redeploying of select visual and verbal components.

Maus

De-narrativization is prominently used in *Maus* (1980–91) to capture the second-generation traumatization the auteur-narrator experiences through the act of relaying his father Vladek's memories of the Holocaust. The narrative stasis evoked in various de-narrativized vignettes attains shock value through the contrast it provides to the dense interweaving of narrative strands in the rest of the novel, where Vladek's testimony intersects with the frame narrative of Art interviewing Vladek, and with shorter embedded stories such as the *Prisoner of the Hell Planet* sequence. The narrator disrupts this multilayered narration through stills that express his difficulties of relaying Vladek's narrative. The poignancy of these moments underscores the close relationship between giving voice to trauma and narrative innovation: as an elusive, spectral memory, trauma defies linear narration, and necessitates new forms of expression beyond Bakhtinian »chronotopes« – the »time spaces« that define self-contained, coherent story universes (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

A prime example where Spiegelman stalls, or ›de-narrativizes‹, storytelling occurs in the opening page of *Time Flies* (Fig. 2), a prologue to the main Auschwitz chapter in *Maus II*, where the narrator offers a surreal portrait of himself working in his studio as he gradually succumbs to an oppressive sense of guilt in the face of his parents' and other survivors' sufferings. In what constitutes the first major authorial disruption of the dominant plotlines, Spiegelman draws four close-ups of a mouse-masked alter ego working at his desk, followed by a massive panel revealing a pile of lifeless mice-humans lying underneath. The disturbing intensity of these frames, coupled with packed speech bubbles that slow down the reading, give the reader pause. The deceleration is intensified through interpretive challenges which are partly iconographic (as readers need time to identify the oversized, fragmented Swastika behind Art, or the watchtower to his right) but even more so semiotic, as it is unclear how the dismantling of narrative conventions (such as the reducing of ›mousiness‹ to a mask, or the overlapping of various spatialities and temporalities) is to be read.

The page also marks a transition from narration to commentary or discourse. While the page is undoubtedly narrative in that it establishes a new storyline chronicling the making of *Maus*, it likewise pauses dominant plotlines and offers meta-commentary rather than furthering the story arcs, as Spiegelman confirms: »I think of *Time Flies* as a *Meta-Maus*-like commentary on the whole project. It sits on top of *Maus* the way my character in a mask sits on top of all those bodies« (2011a, 165). The page's commentary-like feel also arises from Spiegelman's fragmenting of firmly-established chronotopes. Rather than



Fig. 2: Opening page of *Time Flies*, introducing the Auschwitz chapter in *Maus II* (Spiegelman 2011b, 201).

exploring a single spatial setting (such as Reno Park in the 50s or war-torn Poland), the page blends glimpses of an art studio, a watchtower, a propaganda mural, a gas chamber and a film studio in one single panel.

This montage is complemented by a fragmenting of temporalities whereby divergent chronologies move in opposite directions. The first four panels of Art working at his desk pitch a future-oriented timeline tracing Art's and Françoise's artistic success and family life («[we] stayed with him [...] in 1979« / »I started working on this page [in] February 1987« / »In May 1987 [we] are expecting a baby« / »At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out«) against a regressive timeline chronicling Vladek's and other Holocaust victims' sufferings: »[He] died of heart disease« / »[He] started working as a tinman« / »Between May 16, 1944 and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed.« This curious juxtaposition is couched in a vaguely-defined »new layer of time«, a »new present tense« showing the artist in the process of creating the text (Spiegelman 2011a, 147), which feels static and inert. Art's oscillating monologue bumbles on until it culminates in a trauma-laden »In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) / Lately, I've been feeling depressed«, thus effectively draining the page of narrative momentum. Given the scope of the following pages (detailing Vladek's suffering at Auschwitz), such narrative stasis becomes perfectly understandable: reluctant to engage with the horrors of Auschwitz, the narrator chooses digression over narration, and uses delaying tactics in order to avoid having to face Vladek's traumatic memories, which he now relives vicariously through his act of narration.

As he explains in *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman struggled immensely with completing this particular Auschwitz chapter: »[T]he success of the first book [*Maus I*] [...] led me toward a kind of breakdown. I didn't know how to proceed through the gates of Auschwitz [...] It was only after my long sessions with Pavel [Spiegelman's therapist] that I was able to distill the sessions down to a few pages and basically start again« (2011a, 145–46). These »few pages«, which start with the reproduced page (Fig. 2) and stretch over another five pages (Spiegelman 2011b, 202–06), become increasingly plot-driven as Spiegelman's mouse-masked avatar leaves the studio and visits his therapist Pavel, engaging in a lengthy dialogue that explores his sense of guilt. By way of contrast, the opening of *Time Flies* appears far more static in the original draft (Fig. 3), where the excerpted page (Fig. 2) is preceded by another page showing nothing but giant flies moving across a white surface or air, accompanied by the motto »Time Flies« spoken by an unidentified narrator, and delivered by a mouse-masked narrator in a revised version (Fig. 4). Dramatizing how »time moves through panels« through the extensive metaphor of »flies in space or flies in time« (2011a, 165), both drafts decelerate time experientially (slowing down reading time), textually (blurring iconographic indicators of time) and contextually (referencing the long gestation period of *Maus I*, and the premature death of Vladek).¹ Such de-celeration also de-narrativizes the page, since the eight-panel grid morphs from being a syntactic sequence to becoming a single paradigmatic space in

which the gutter – the syntactic narrative core – has been de-activated. This canceling out of the gutter is playfully acknowledged in both versions (Fig. 3–4) through a fly crossing the central gutter in an upward movement, thus again challenging the left-to-right, top-to-bottom directionality of the text.

Such paradigmatic stasis also connotes a loss of direction and sense of purpose while moving forward – or sustaining narrative momentum – with the process of coming to terms with traumatic memory. Spiegelman’s de-narrativization dramatizes the narrator’s struggle to overcome his paralysis, with his stalling signaling an uncontrollable ›acting-out‹, or compulsive reimagining, of traumatic memory, whereas the resumption of sequential narration conveys an attempt to ›work through‹, or narratively process, trauma (Bond/Craps, 78–79). Spiegelman’s code-switching between narrative (syntactic) and discursive (paradigmatic) modalities thus effectively articulates an inner struggle rooted in intergenerational traumatization.

The alternation between narrative and discursive modes in *Time Flies* also illustrates how closely working-through and acting-out are linked. Trauma theorists contend that a successful working-through inevitably incorporates some acting-out on behalf of the

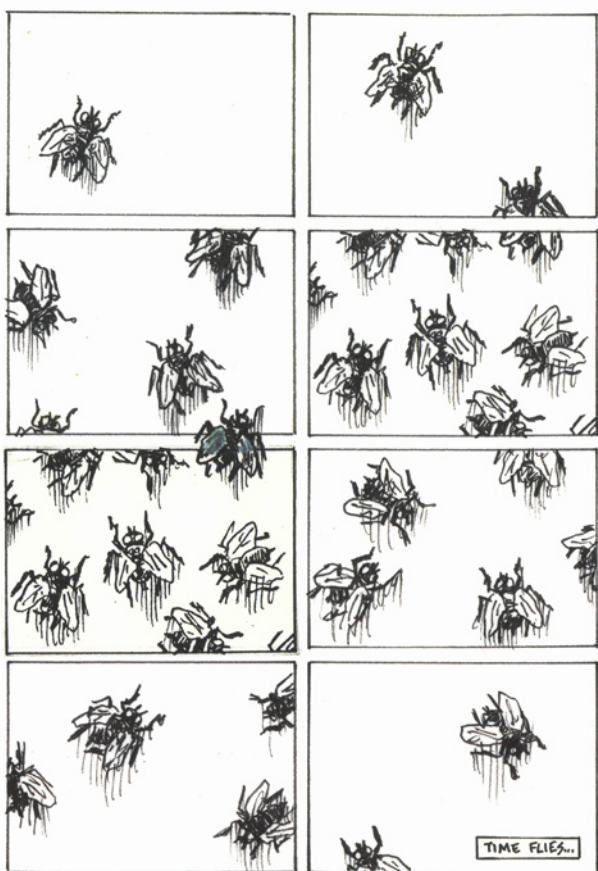


Fig. 3: First draft of *Time Flies* (Spiegelman 2011a, 160).

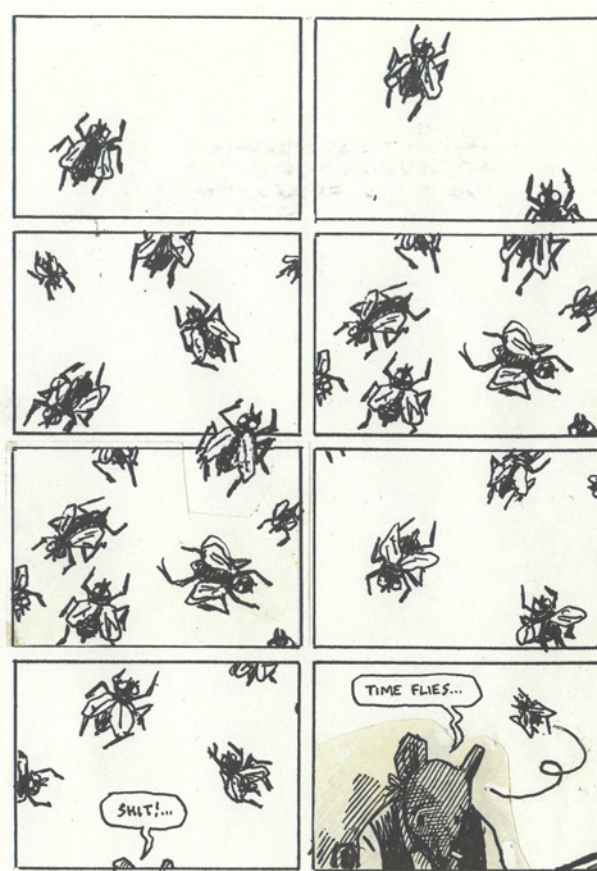


Fig. 4: Second draft of *Time Flies* (Spiegelman 2011a, 161).

trauma victim (Bond/Craps, 79). This interdependence is stylistically accentuated since the page's de-narrativization primarily becomes visible through, and is thus arguably dependent on, the sequential sections that frame it. De-narrativization, then, becomes palpable mainly as an act of erasure arising from a manipulation of a sequential *geno-text*, which differentiates it from ›non-narrativity‹ in more homogeneous, abstract comics.

Watchmen

De-narrativization also features prominently in fictional dramatizations of trauma by Alan Moore. Several of his most iconic figures – eponymous V in *V for Vendetta* (1982-85), Joker in *The Killing Joke* (1988), and Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* (1986-87) – represent traumatized individuals whose geneses are rooted in tragedy and loss. The sociopathic character traits of V, Joker and Rorschach are mythologized through extensive backstories that tell of imprisonment and torture (V), humiliation and economic despair (Joker), physical abuse and sexual traumatization (Rorschach). In perhaps the most intriguing fictionalization of trauma, Dr. Manhattan, the prescient, teleporting superhero who attains supernatural powers in the wake of a nuclear accident, reflects on his death and rebirth while traveling to Mars, thereby showcasing his peculiar relationship to free will, time, and to traumatic memories he cannot erase or meaningfully process.

The opening page of Chapter 4, which narrates his genesis (Fig. 5), shows Manhattan poised on a Martian rock, contemplating a damaged photo of his former self next to Janey while vaguely referring to the two of them as »a man and a woman [...] at an amusement park, in 1959«. Manhattan's curious emotional detachment from the story of his death and rebirth reveals a reluctance to engage with a troubling memory. His impeccable foresight, illustrated through his prediction that he will »drop



Fig. 5: Opening page of Chapter 4 (*Watchmaker*) in *Watchmen* (111).

the photograph in [his] hand [...] twelve seconds into the future«, seems undermined by an unarticulated, residual emotive hurt that exhausts him («I'm tired of looking at the photograph now»). Manhattan's deliberate close-reading of the photograph – a peculiar response given his perfect recall – resembles a futile attempt to deal with, and narrate, emotional pain. The mental roadblock he encounters seems directly related to his cognition: by no longer inhabiting a present – a concept that loses significance in the light of his time-travelling powers – Manhattan has also lost the ability to narrate meaningfully and chronologically, which in turn reduces his utterances to mere discourse, or a running commentary on his actions.

Devoid of a deictic compass that roots him in an experiential human present, Manhattan also lacks the ability to work through trauma – a process that is contingent on an incremental blunting of memories through narrativization (Bond/Craps, 78–79). Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines working-through as a »transformation of trauma into a *narrative memory* that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own and other's knowledge of the past« in order to »lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall« (quoted in Bond/Craps, 79, emphasis added). Manhattan struggles to create such a blunted narrative memory since he recalls events precisely, with undiminished clarity. His mnemonic strength turns out to be a major liability with respect to processing a traumatic past, since his vivid and unchanging recollections of traumatic rupture feed endless narrative loops of emotive hurt – a process symbolically visualized through the circular icon tattooed on his forehead.

Like in the *Time Flies* sequence discussed earlier, de-narrativization turns a protagonist (Manhattan) into a mere commentator who discourses rather than narrates, and observes rather than acts. His loss of agency is effectively conveyed through temporal asynchronies between verbal articulations of physical actions and visual representations of such actions; the second panel shows Manhattan's photograph lying on the ground even though verbally – as the caption states – it is still in his hand. This bifurcation of a unified temporal chronotope forestalls the making a coherent, linear narrative, and thwarts a meaningful emotive response, which – arguably – likewise necessitates being deictically rooted in a present. Manhattan's mechanical countdown («Ten seconds now.« / »I'm still there, looking at it.« / »Seven seconds now.«) depersonalizes his voice, and suppresses any sense of a personal, emotional experience. At the same time, his narrative stasis carries undertones of unprocessed emotive pain, figuratively represented through his statement that the photograph of Janey and him is »still [hanging] there, twenty-seven hours into the past, in its frame, in the darkened bar« – an extended metaphor that encapsulates how Manhattan's recollections of loss and hurt endure. Abrupt visual cuts between panels, echoed through startling use of present tense («The photograph *is*«, »I *drop* the photograph«, »It's still there«, »I'm on Mars«, emphasis added), also suggest that Manhattan no longer perceives actions as dependent on a future-oriented chronology, but witnesses them as discrete moments embedded in an ever-lasting present. Past, present and future

collapse in a sea of signification in which time (years, months, seconds) and place (Mars, New Jersey, a bar, an amusement park) become mere coordinates for locating actions rather than settings that structure a coherent narrative.

Manhattan's achronological perception and his residual trauma are effectively conveyed through a clever *mise-en-page* (Cohn) in which the arrangement of panels undermines sequential narration. While Manhattan's voice-over determines the sequence in which the panels are to be read, clusters of identical and near-identical panels (panels 1-3 are echoed in panels 7-9) evoke a *déjà-vu* that mimics the circularity of Manhattan's prose.² The central positioning of Janey's close-up in panel 5, framed by panels which *all* feature the same photograph in some shape or form – in Manhattan's hand, on the ground, or pinned to a wall – iconizes Janey, and makes her dominate the entire page. The dispassionate tone of Manhattan's voice-over, which downplays the significance of Janey, referring to her as »the woman« rather than his former significant other, is invalidated by his undeniable fascination with the photograph that troubles and tires him (»I open my fingers. It falls to the sand at my feet.«). While Manhattan's emotionless prose and his deliberate dropping of the photo suggests a sense of control, the fetishizing of Janey as the central signifier dominating the entire page suggests the opposite, and bespeaks the power she still holds over him.

Undermining sequential narration through clever visual and verbal effects (voice, repetition and *mise-en-page*), this excerpt from *Watchmen* de-narrativizes Manhattan's narrative by shifting his utterances towards mere discourse while undermining the linearity of his prose through paradigmatic signification. Structuring the entire scene around an old photograph placed iconically at the centre, the page creates a sense of narrative stasis that figuratively represents how Manhattan's residual trauma has become a defining part of his timeless self. The passage's de-narrativization thus effectively contributes to his characterization as it dramatizes his inability to work through the trauma that gave birth to his persona.

Persepolis

An artist who adapts Spiegelman's and Moore's paradigmatic code-switching to convey autobiographical memories of childhood trauma is Marjane Satrapi, whose *Persepolis* (2000-04) regularly suspends narration through slow-paced, contemplative panels that articulate the confusion and hurt the persona-artist sustained while growing up in post-revolutionary Iran. A memorable instance where de-narrativization comes to the fore occurs in a splash of »Marji« floating in space (Fig. 6), which constitutes the final page of Part 1 in the original, quadripartite French edition. The page marks a crisis point triggered by the execution of Marji's uncle Anoosh – her personal hero – by the Iranian regime. On the double spread preceding this panel, Marji has just learnt of Anoosh's death through a

newspaper propaganda piece («Russian Spy [sic] Executed»), which leads her to violently reject the imaginary God figure that comforted her in earlier crises («Shut up, you! Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again!«). Directly following a narrow, crammed and emotionally intense panel in which Marji tells God to «Get out!«, the expansive splash of Marji floating in space powerfully captures the spiritual and emotional void she feels after losing Anoosh and her faith in God.

Just like in the excerpts from *Maus* and *Watchmen*, the composition of the page takes the reader beyond previously established chronotopes as various spatialities and temporalities are merged in one single frame. The random assortment of celestial bodies – drawn in childlike simplicity and featuring Saturn, an all-time children’s favourite – accentuates her age, and her incipient agnosticism. By substituting a religious signifier (God) typically located in heaven with celestial bodies expressing a secular view of the cosmos, the unlit space enveloping Marji visualizes her rite of passage. Her distinct body language – floating at an angle, with arms stretched out – mimics that transformation by showing her appropriate a common Christ-like pose (with arms outstretched) to capture the individualized suffering she undergoes at that point.³ The same posture is used four panels earlier when Marji is shown lying at an angle on a white bedspread, crying. By replacing the white bedspread with an expansive dark space, and the emanata signifying emotional release with an expressionless face signaling a repression of emotion, the excerpted splash dramatizes her interiorizing of trauma, and – arguably – a temporary de-coupling from linear time. Silent and only signifying through her body language, Marji has become voiceless and inert. The disruption of her dialogue with God, which will prove final – the bearded God-figure does not appear again later on in the narrative – signals a rupture with her surroundings, triggering a deep-set trauma.

Mimicking effects observed in the excerpts from *Maus* and *Watchmen* above, the splash de-narrativizes the scene by decelerating pace (through augmenting panel size) and privileging paradigmatic signification over linear sequentiality. The normative left-to-right syntax

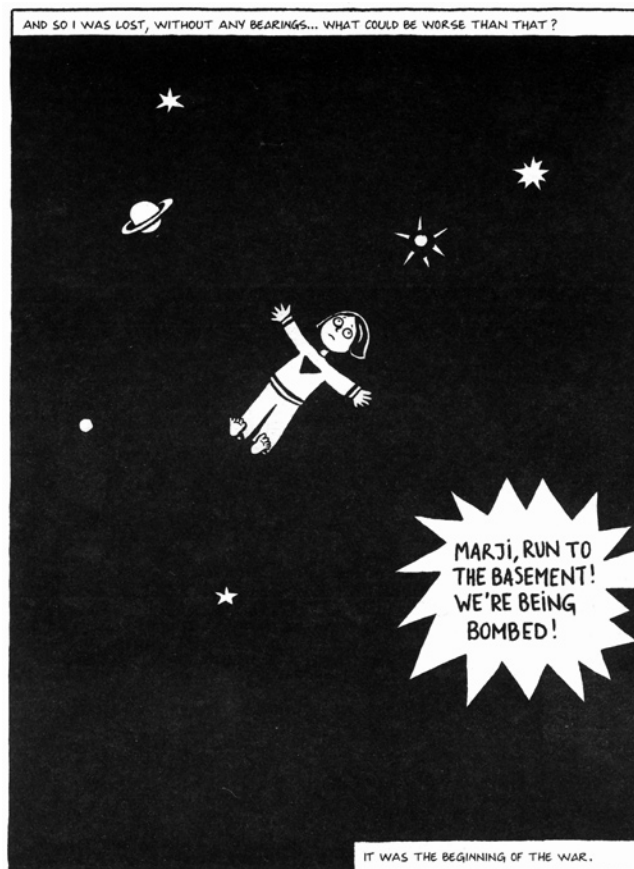


Fig. 6: Marji floating in space (Satrapi, 71).

is largely suspended and only faintly sustained through minimalist captions framing the image, which elicit a diagonal reading of the page from the top left-hand corner towards the bottom right. The extensive use of negative space and the random assortment of planets and stars encourage a non-linear, paradigmatic reading similar to the exploration of a visual art piece. The deployment of ambiguous visual elements further decelerates the page, and amplifies the de-coupling of the narrative from sequentiality. Several subtexts – notably the darkness that envelops Marji (signifying what exactly?), her pose (meant to evoke Western culture?), and the childlike assortment of stars (a universe that comforts or deracinates?) – remain largely unexplained, as are the causal links between Marji's trauma and the range of possible triggers (the execution of Uncle Anoosh, her loss of faith, the bomb raids). As in the passages from *Maus* and *Watchmen*, de-narrativization shifts the onus of constructing a coherent narrative onto the reader, as the page paradigmatically elicits possible narratives instead of narrating sequentially.

Temporal ambiguity is likewise present, albeit to a lesser extent than in the previous excerpts. The chronological arrangement of the three main signifiers – the captions describing Anoosh's death and the beginning of war, Marji's dejection, and the bomb warning – is quite vague, making the reader wonder whether Marji's paralysis precedes, coincides with, or follows the bomb warnings. The dramatic progression to the captions (»And so I was lost, without bearing ... What could be worse than that?« / »It was the beginning of war.«) suggest that Marji's life changed from bad (Anoosh's death) to worse (the beginning of war, characterized by bomb raids). Then again, by representing some of the stars in shapes that resemble the large jagged speech bubble announcing a bomb warning, the splash panel suggest that Marji's visual metaphor of a secular sky might be informed by the experience of bomb raids she may be partially unaware of, or may be trying to suppress. Satrapi's handling of temporalities becomes unreliable at this point, as unresponsive Marji, along with the ambiguously defined room or space she inhabits, blurs the chronotopes that offer clear linear guardrails in the preceding section of her narrative. The temporal stasis articulated in this panel attains further significance in the light of the historical trauma Marji is experiencing. Trauma theory suggests that trigger events are often incompletely witnessed when they occur, and only belatedly »assimilated or experienced« (Bond/Craps, 56). A similar time lapse is articulated here by representing Marji as passive and unresponsive to either bomb raids or warnings, illustrating how her mental anguish temporarily stalls the progression of her own narrative.

This excerpt from *Persepolis*, then, decelerates the page compositionally (through an effective use of panel size, negative space and the positioning of elements within the frame) and iconographically (through deploying ambiguous elements such as the spiky stars, which may represent unheeded bomb warnings). By feeding a fast-paced, conflicted dialogue into an expansive still that shows Marji entering a trauma-induced state beyond

time, the page achieves a modal switch from syntactic narration to paradigmatic signification that echoes similar effects in the previous examples. By leveraging de-narrativization for a powerful cliffhanger ending, Satrapi underscores the power invested in such code-switching, and demonstrates how effectively comics can express the corrosive effects of traumatic experiences in artistic form.

Daytripper

De-narrativization need not necessarily dramatize an acting out of traumatic memory, but may also signify a successful working-through, or processing, of trauma. *Daytripper* (2011) by twin artists Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá offers a prime example illustrating such usage: de-narrativized sections facilitate disturbing cliffhanger endings but also serene passages in which the text acknowledges, articulates and addresses residual traumatic memory.

Daytripper bears striking similarities to a fractured trauma narrative, both thematically and structurally, as the serial deaths of protagonist Brás at the end of every chapter are neither foreshadowed nor explained in the following sections, forcing the reader to interpret, or narrativize, how these catastrophes relate to the various narrative strands. Seemingly out of the blue, Brás gets shot at a bar (32), drowns during a local folk festival (56), gets run over minutes after he has fallen in love (80), dies from a heart attack shortly after having become a father (104), electrocutes himself while flying a kite as a child (128), or is stabbed by the long-lost friend he has come to rescue (174). These oddly unmotivated shock endings are followed by short mock obituaries that drily state the cause of death (e.g. »He died at the age of 33 in a car crash on his way to Rio« (152)), followed by often quite cynical interpretations of how one may read his life in the light of these catastrophes: »He was 38 and died because he believed in friendship.« (176) / »Some might say [...] God works in mysterious ways« (152). The bitter tone of these codas suggests a superficial registering, and emotive suppressing, of the impact of these catastrophes, likening the entire text to a trauma episode in which tragedies are recorded, but only assimilated and experienced belatedly.

Unlike the previous examples, where traumatic events are linked to genocide (*Maus*), oppressive regimes (*Persepolis*) or nuclear accidents (*Watchmen*), the agent inflicting trigger events on the protagonist is – in an existentialist vein – life itself. Reconciling oneself to mortality is the key theme of the penultimate chapter in which Brás, now an octogenarian who has chosen to terminate his cancer treatment, dozes off in a day-dream in which he remembers snippets of memories from his childhood, adolescence and adulthood, amalgamated into a stream-of-consciousness-like medley composed of assorted vignettes from earlier chapters. The fast-paced rollercoaster of Brás's frag-

mented memories comes to a halt in a serene page where he converses with his son at his grandparent's farm, a bucolic idyll celebrated in a previous chapter (Fig. 7). Like most vignettes in this chapter, the scene blends disparate temporalities by imagining an encounter of grandfather, father and son, thus breaking with the main plot's chronotope, since Brás's father passes away the very day Brás's son is born.

Mimicking the manner in which an ageing, dreaming Brás comes to terms with his impending death, the scene shows Brás teaching his son to accept or even embrace mortality. Visual cues connoting death – notably the kite, with which Brás electrocutes himself as a young boy, but also the grandfather, whose appearance in the preceding chapters regularly coincides with lethal freak accidents – are counterpointed by Brás's soothing allegory comparing death to a good book ending: »Life is like a book, son.« / »And every book has an end.« / »No matter how much you like that book ...« / »... you will get to the last page...« (Fig. 7). Delivered by a character who once made his living writing obituaries, whose life ambition consisted of matching the writing skills of his father, and who is now standing elusively underneath a tree representing continuity across generations, Brás's analogy seems perfectly in keeping with his character, and particularly pertinent. By aligning Brás's embracing of life as a book ending with the structural ruptures defining each chapter ending, the text asks readers to accept the finality of artistic narratives, including the book they are reading. This clever multimodal switch from narrative (Brás's imaginary monologue) to paratext (the material physicality of text at hand) stalls narration, and invites readers to reflect on their own attitudes towards mortality and the narrative at hand. Delivered in front of a tree where Brás's late father sought inspiration, one can see multiple ways in which the panel bridges writing and the materiality of books on the one hand, and mortality, death and endings on the other: verbally (by articulating the



Fig. 7: Excerpt from Brás's dream sequence (Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 218)

analogy), iconographically (with the tree connoting intergenerational continuity), intra-textually (through the kite referencing a premature death), compositionally (by placing the page shortly before the book ending), and perhaps even etymologically (the words for *book* are cognate with the word *beech* in many languages).⁴

Formally, the stalling or de-narrativizing of Brás's daydream on the excerpted page (Fig. 7) is also achieved through a skillful handling of the formal apparatus. In the dominating panel, Moon and Bá go diametrically against Will Eisner's advice to keep speech bubbles short and concise (60). They construct an elongated, multi-sectional speech bubble whose pentapartite arc traces the shape of the tree, and slowly guides the reader through the image. The unusual partitioning of Brás's utterance into smaller, easily digestible bits decelerates the reading, and draws attention to unusual visual choices, such as the surreally defoliating, evergreen tree offering shade to the mysterious presence of the grandfather. Contrasting the meditative right-to-left arc of the extended speech bubble is a thinner, contrapuntal line of the kite's string, running from Brás's raised hand to the panel's top right-hand corner, which connotes his happy childhood and its transience, as the kite's string electrocutes Brás when it touches a power line. Speech bubble and string, then, effectively frame the multigenerational vision evoked in the dominating panel, imagining a never-experienced harmony of childhood and old age in a bucolic rural setting.

This soothing de-narrativization which may be considered a working-through of multiple structural traumas – Brás's loss of his father, and his deeply conflicted relationship to his father – is also achieved through a minimizing of the gutter, which is either absent due to the bleed running from the top panel to the smaller satellite panels, or mitigated through large panel sizes that reduce the total number of frames and the gutters separating them. Sideline gutters reduces sequentiality and augments paradigmatic signification, like in the examples from *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Persepolis*, though the intended effect is very different. While the previous artists de-narrativize to evoke a sense of narrative (and perhaps cognitive) stasis, Moon and Bá evoke a contemplative, accepting stasis signaling the protagonist's embracing of his mortality.

Rather than delaying the narration of traumatic events, *Daytripper* dramatizes a coming-together of narrative strands (key episodes defining Brás's life) and a healing of emotional pain (felt by Brás, those around him, and vicariously shared by the reader). By switching from syntactic narration to paradigmatic signification and from text (Brás's narration) to paratext (the materiality of the graphic novel itself), Moon and Bá leverage the multidimensionality of comics to articulate a life-affirming, existentialist view of mortality. By skillfully deploying speech bubbles and gutters to support those modal switches, Moon and Bá also underscore the ways in which the formal apparatus is key to achieving de-narrativization in a given text.

If Einstein's right ...

A recent graphic trauma narrative which adapts some of the de-narrativizing techniques identified earlier, *If Einstein's right ...* (2018) by Alan Moore, illustrated by Melinda Gebbie, attempts to acknowledge the pain and hurt sustained by an entire community. A tribute to the victims of the Grenfell Towers Fire, the comic uses 24 panels referencing the 24 floors of the building to memorialize the 72 victims who perished in the blaze. The elegy blends unusual verbal choices (enclosed rhyme) with striking visual ones that mimic techniques discussed above. Written to comfort a hurting community in the wake of a preventable disaster, the comic illustrates how code-switching allows artists to reach beyond conventional chronotopes, and find a language that can verbalize and address collective trauma.

Like the *Time Flies* excerpt discussed above, the Grenfell tribute comments rather than narrates. The actual events at Grenfell surrounding the blaze and its devastating effect on the inhabitants remain unspoken.

Instead, it is the pain felt by the survivors, and the neglect by key decision-makers, whose lack of oversight arguably caused the fire, which move into the foreground. The text clearly intends to contribute to an ongoing discussion rather than establish a sequence of events; the opening line »Don't fret« (Fig. 8) roots the passage in prior responses to the Grenfell fire, turning it into a meta-commentary similar to Spiegelman's reflection on the relaying of Vladek's memories in *Time Flies*. Barbed attacks on perceived culprits such as Boris Johnson – »A Bullingdon Club Clown« who unconscionably »cu[t] [fire services] to the bone« – continue in this vein, and propose that the »disgrace and shame« of failed leadership will not be forgotten, a claim visually reinforced through static black and white mug shots that signify paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically, and conjure up a narrative that is elicited rather than told.

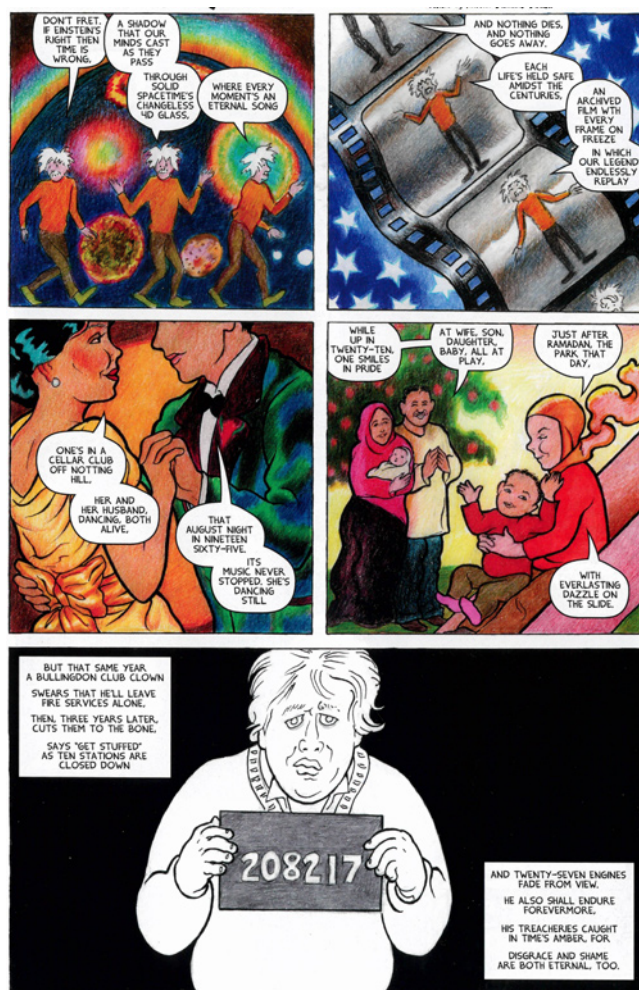


Fig. 8: Opening page from *If Einstein's right ...* (Moore et al., 57).

As in *Watchmen*, temporalities play a key role for such de-narrativization. Whereas the opening to the Mars chapter erodes sequentiality to illustrate Manhattan's latent trauma, *If Einstein's right ...* evokes a static, timeless present to celebrate the indelible mark the Grenfell victims left on the minds of their communities. The notion of linear time, according to which a life cut short represents a tragedy, is a fallacy, Moore and Gebbie suggest: »If Einstein is right«, the opening panel states, then »[the popular perception of] time is wrong«; seen »through solid spacetime's changeless 4d glass«, the moment of parting becomes irrelevant, as »every moment's an eternal song« (Fig. 8). Here the skillful use of a metaphysical conceit cleverly blurs the traumatic narrative at hand, and defamiliarizes the anticipated narrative of grief and loss by depriving readers of a conventional, stable chronotope, substituting it with a more elusive, four-dimensional »spacetime«. By delivering this inspirational monologue through an Einstein figure whose multiple bodies – inhabit the first panel in three physical shapes, and appear four times on film in the second panel, Gebbie's illustration cleverly visualizes Moore's mind-boggling conceit. »If Einstein's right«, then presence and absence, simultaneity and asynchrony, are interchangeable. Lives do not pass; they simply are. From such a vantage point, grief loses its justification and purpose, since – as the second panel states – »[N]othing dies. And nothing goes away.«

Echoing the *Daytripper* excerpt above, de-narrativized stasis is also facilitated through a skillful reconfiguring of the formal apparatus. While comics conventionally use speech bubbles to attribute a particular utterance to a clearly definable character, or perhaps a group of characters speaking in unison, Moore and Gebbie construct a monologue which initially appears to be Einstein's, yet is gradually sustained by an ever-expanding chorus of characters representing deceased Grenfell victims: »One [memory]'s in a cellar club off Notting Hill«, the smiling female dancer in yellow chimes in, seamlessly continuing the mellow musicality of Einstein's voice. Her turn ended, the narrative is continued by her dance partner (»That August night in nineteen sixty-five«), who hands over to the cheering family in the following panel. This highly unusual, musical-inspired use of speech bubbles as a means of connoting a shared chorus attains significance in the context of the Grenfell fire, as it figuratively offers victims a voice, and signals their importance, status and the right to be heard. Such an imaginary turn-taking among various victims also de-narrativizes the sequence: since the order in which characters speak seems quite random (there is no reason why e.g. the dancers in panel 3 should not swap with the speakers in panel 4), the visual elements within the panels become interchangeable. While the verbal syntax of the discourse stabilizes the directionality of the text, the entropy of their visual elements undermines the panels' sequentiality, similarly to the ways in which the *Watchmen* visuals undercut the linearity of Manhattan's discourse.

De-narrativization is also achieved through distinctly anachronistic language. By expressing its tenets through mellifluous enclosed rhyme rather than plain prose, the narration achieves a timelessness arising from the anachronism of describing a current event through

iambic pentameter, evoking a sense of continuity across the ages. »If Einstein's right«, the text seems to say, communicating in enclosed rhyme is perfectly normal, since neither the victims nor such language will ever »g[o] away«. The same archaic verse assumes more bitter and accusatory notes in the sarcastic panels where neglectful politicians are mercilessly skewered through antiquated language, suggesting that their failures, too, »shall endure forevermore«. The clever switching from speech bubbles to voice-over disempowers the caricatured politicians portrayed, and lends weight to the physical representation of their guilt – their prison number – which assumes their voice. Whereas the Grenfell victims are commemorated for their virtues and community spirit, political culprits shall be remembered not for who they are, but for their »treacheries«, which »are [...] eternal, too.«

The static de-narrativization achieved through a timeless celebration of victims, and an equally permanent staining of political culprits, reveals this text to be more invested in discourse, opinion, judgment and commemoration than in any narrative endeavor as such. The tribute evokes narratives without narrating; it commemorates by jogging memories; it praises and accuses to do justice; and it proposes a balancing compulsive narrative loops of grief with loops of praise and shame – an approach resembling a constructive working-through, or processing, of a trauma episode by blunting the original narrative. By countering the traumatic narrative of Grenfell with a metacommentary celebrating the victims while holding those responsible to account, the artists powerfully demonstrate the multimodal capacity of comics to engage with audiences by moving beyond established chronotopes and conventional narrative structures. Playing with clever conceits of timelessness, asynchrony and polyvalence, their tribute acts as a well-timed panacea for the pain and hurt sustained by the Grenfell victims.

Conclusion

De-narrativization constitutes an effective strategy enabling comic artists to comment on, and articulate, the lacunae inherent in trauma narratives. Unlike the non-narrativity aspired to in abstract comics, such de-narrativization is temporary, and serves as a code-switching that disrupts, though never completely displaces, a dominant, sequential narrative. This hierarchy between dominant sequential codes and supplementary de-narrativized sequences is well expressed by Art Spiegelman, who claims that

if Maus was overloaded with visual stunts and ideas it would become something else. I had to use such things sparingly. In one panel, on page 127, when Vladek and Anja are in hiding, they walk along a road, not knowing where to go for safety, and the branches of the road form a swastika. It's quite visually dramatic, but that kind of metaphoric use of space couldn't be allowed to overwhelm the literal use of space, because then you wouldn't believe in the space anymore. (2011a, 185)

Spiegelman's statement that a »metaphoric use of space« (corresponding to the de-narrativized examples discussed above) may not supersede a »literal use of space« (corresponding to sequential narratives), aligns with the examples discussed above, where de-narrativization emerges as a disruptive tool that modifies rather than completely rewrites a given text through strategic interruptions.

De-narrativization also represents a core strategy allowing an artist to come to terms with the unrepresentability of trauma. By de-coupling an entire page from sequentiality, comic artists tap into paradigmatic modes of signification that offer more latitude to articulate signifiers than straightforward narration. By mimicking endless narrative loops through an effective reconfiguration of composition and parts of the formal apparatus (notably speech bubbles), graphic artists give voice to a narrative stasis that eludes sequential narration. In the excerpts discussed, acting out becomes palpable as a loss of directionality, and an increase of a panel sequence's entropy – patterns which empower readers through the loosening of authorial control over how a particular sequence is to be read. However, de-narrativized sequences may also be deployed to model a successful working-through of trauma, as in the excerpts from *Daytripper* and *If Einstein's right ...*, where a temporary suspending of chronotopes and sequentiality serves to acknowledge and process mental hurt rooted in residual traumatic memory.

As a hybrid medium combining sequentiality with paradigmatic signification, comics offer a particularly rich gamut of modalities to convey traumatic experience. The modal switches described above testify to the ways in which graphic artists stall narration while sustaining visual discourse, thus underscoring the potential of comics as a powerful artistic medium. While writers and artists working in other genres have likewise attempted to narrate beyond conventional chronotopes, it is the multimodality of comics which lends such modal switches particular significance, and elevates de-narrativized sequences to poignant, memorable moments.

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Fig. 8: Moore et al., »If Einstein's right ...« In: 24 Panels, 57.

- 1] Both drafts also echo »more abstract«, »experimental« (2011a, 165) single-page comics like *Don't Get Around Much Anymore* (1973) and *Day at the Circus* (1975) (Spiegelman 2011a, 169, 188), which Spiegelman – inspired by »nonnarrative films« (2011a, 169) – created during intense bouts of depression. One works like a board game-like maze which pretends to offer significantly different paths from panel to panel, only to loop them all back to the opening panel (2011a, 188); the other consists of a page where semi-identical panels create visual echoes and cross-references that decelerate the pace to a crawl (2011a, 169).
- 2] More panels are repeated throughout the first three pages. On the significance of panel repetition in that very sequence, see Rantala (24-40).
- 3] Note that Satrapi tells of a similar appropriation of a Christian *topos* when describing how she used Michelangelo's *Pietà* as the template for a mandatory Iranian propaganda piece when applying for an art exam in Teheran (Satrapi, 283).
- 4] See the etymologies of English *book*, German *Buch*, Dutch *boeken* and Danish *bog* (etymonline).