

# Objectifying visual language in autobiographical comics

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## ABSTRACT

Critiques of the objectification of female characters in comics have often focused upon depictions within the superhero genre (cf. Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2014; Nelson 2015). Such arguments adopt the framework of Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' (1975) to assess the costuming, physical physique, and narrative role given to such characters. In one comment on similar controversies, Neil Cohn (2014) has argued for a greater emphasis upon the visual language used in objectifying depictions that does not get caught up in debates over realism since, he argues, comics are unconcerned with reality. Autobiographical comics, however, now form a significant part of the comics market and scholarship (cf. Schlichting and Schmid 2019). A tension exists between the rhetorical mode of visual metaphor exploited by comics (cf. Venkatesan and Saji 2021) and the appeal to authenticity made by non-fiction (cf. El Refaie 2012). Focusing on autobiographical comics – here, some published between 1991 and 2018 – allows us to assess how sexual objectification operates within comics without the issue being clouded by irresolvable appeals to reality in the fundamentally escapist/fantastic superhero genre. The visual language in comics by Chester Brown, Joe Matt, and David Heatley are critiqued for reducing the 'other' to a series of more stagnant, occluded, and restrictive graphic patterns than afforded to their author surrogates. Ariel Schrag's work, meanwhile, points towards possible means of avoiding such tendencies in future autobiographical comics.

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## Subject not object

In 2001, three years after the release of Joe Matt's *The Poor Bastard* (1997), which collects issues #1 to #6 of his autobiographical comic *Peepshow*, Rick Tremblee interviewed Dani, the woman who had inspired the character of 'Frankie' in Matt's comic. She was the object of his sexual desire across 1989/1990 – a desire recounted in neurotic, obsessive detail. The interview is fascinating for the light it throws upon the ethics of representation in autobiographical comics, especially in terms of male comics book author representing a woman treated as an object of his gaze. In the interview, Tremblee asks Dani specifically about a fantasy sequence in the comic in which Joe pictures Frankie undressing but then forgoes masturbating, telling her that she is too perfect to degrade herself for his "cheap fantasies" (Tremblee and Dani 2001:17). Tremblee asks Dani whether this reassured her; she replies that it did not because the scene deliberately mirrors an earlier fantasy sequence in which Joe does imagine going "all the way" with other women – as such, it conveniently takes "some of the luridity out of *him*" (2001:n.pag., original emphasis). Dani perceptively notes here that it is not merely the straightforward visual portrayal of Frankie in each panel that determines whether she is being objectified but how such representation functions within the broader context of the comic. We need not merely to look at how her character model is posed, how she is costumed, how much skin is exposed, and so on, but how this objectifying visual language works grammatically, spatially, and temporally.

## Previous critiques of objectification in comics

Critiques of the objectification of female characters in comics have often focused upon depictions within the superhero genre (cf. Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2014; Nelson 2015). Such arguments adopt the framework of Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' – a concept formulated in her 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" – to assess the costuming, physique, and narrative role given to such characters. Bloggers and internet journalists writing outside of academia (cf. Hudson 2011; Romano 2015; Jusino 2016) do not always adopt the structural feminist approach pioneered by Mulvey in their critique of objectification in comics. Instead, they single out scanty or revealing costumes, exaggerated breasts and hips, and passive or victimized roles for condemnation. They take these characteristics as indicative of individual misogynist attitudes on the part of artists and creators (Frank Miller; Milo Manara), companies (Marvel; DC), or Western European and American society, rather than as symptomatic of the underlying ideology that structures superhero

comics. An ideology which, according to Chris Gavalier (2015), is fundamentally eugenicist, Nietzschean, and mythic. The tendency of critics to apply Mulvey's structuralist framework non-structurally when writing about comics is due to a formal mismatch between the two mediums. Since Mulvey's argument was formulated specifically about cinema's mechanics and subject formations, these critiques rarely engage with the formal semiotics of comics language. According to Mulvey's tripartite structure of the gaze, the camera's lens is synonymous with the eye of the cinematographer/director, of the audience prefigured as male even if it consists of women, and one of the film's male characters. However, this does not directly apply to the interstitial and multimodal comic medium.

In *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013), Neil Cohn argues that comics are an iconographic system of graphic patterns. In a 2014 blog article, he tries to move the argument over female objectification in comics in a more semiotic direction by arguing for a greater focus on the visual language used in such depictions that does not get caught up in debates over realism. Cohn is correct in that making recourse to comparisons of male/female body proportions to ascertain when a given representation is objectionable or not is reductive. The fact that the comics of the Hernandez Brothers are roundly celebrated as feminist illustrates this, as do the graphic representations of female bodies in the autobiographical works of women like Julie Doucet (2011) and Phoebe Gloeckner (2001). However, Cohn's argument that male and female figures in comics are equally objectified – evidenced by male superheroes having bulging muscles at a similar rate to female superheroes having large breasts – falls victim to a similar reductionism. The objectification of men and women cannot be straightforwardly analogized because such objectification exists within different contexts and structures of meaning. Even if we were to accept Cohn's equation of the comics medium with fantasy, the fantasy genre does not come to us always already set in stone as a static set of myths and legends but as a flux of conventions inextricably entangled with socio-cultural and political discourses. In *Understanding Comics* (1993:4-9), Scott McCloud cautions against mistaking genre for medium when discussing comics, which Cohn risks doing in his account. Cohn's resistance to the so-called "perceptual viewpoint" (2013:143), which privileges 'realistic' images over more iconic or abstract ones, leads him to assert that "[th]e idea that drawings should somehow mimic our perception and align with 'the way things are in the world' is pure fallacy" (Cohn 2014:n.pag.). For Cohn, existing at the intersection of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, comics are unconcerned with 'real life' – reflecting the misogyny of the American/European Imaginary through their symbolic systems but ultimately disconnected from embodied, quotidian reality.

## Autobiographical comics – definition and problematics

Nancy Pedri asserts that “much can be said to weaken claims that fictionality is inherent to the medium of comics” (2015:129). While Pedri does not follow this claim with examples, the fact that she makes her assertion in a chapter on autobiographical comics implies that the genre challenges any associations between the medium and fiction that might otherwise be taken for granted. Autobiographical comics – increasingly important as a narrative form – necessarily problematize this assertion that comics are inherently concerned with the fantastic since we approach them as a reader – often primed by the book jacket, blurb, and pull quotes (cf. El Refaie 2012:249) – expecting them to align, on some level, with everyday reality. Philippe Lejeune famously referred to this as the “autobiographical pact” (1989:3-30), by which the author gives the narrator and central character of their work their own name and, in doing so, enters an agreement with the reader that there is no essential difference between themselves as an author, narrator, and central character. However, applying to comics Lejeune’s definition of autobiography – which is founded upon this key referential truth claim – is problematic given the tension between the comics’ rhetorical mode of visual metaphor (cf. Venkatesan and Saji 2021) and autobiography’s appeal to authenticity (supposedly) rooted in the author’s everyday life.

Focusing upon autobiographical comics allows us to assess how sexual objectification operates within comics language while avoiding irresolvable appeals to reality within more fundamentally escapist genres such as superhero comics. The visual language in comics by autobiographical comic book writers such as Chester Brown (2011), Joe Matt (1997), and David Heatley (2008) can be critiqued for their reduction of ‘the other’ to a series of more stagnant, occluded, and restrictive graphic patterns than afforded to their author surrogates, while we can witness more progressive tendencies in Ariel Schrag’s recent work (2018). Brown, Matt, and Heatley all represent a tradition of white, male, North American autobiographical comics writers published by Drawn & Quarterly and, as such, belong to a relatively unified group. Schrag, meanwhile, works at a similar level of accessible formal experimentation and narrative invention to those creators so that productive comparisons can be drawn between their varied outputs. To use Hillary Chute’s terminology, her works (like theirs) “model a post-avant-garde praxis” (2010:11), which combines formal self-reflexive techniques with a broadly commercial reach. She also draws inspiration from Robert Crumb, one of the most influential of the original 1960s wave of autobiographical comix artists, alongside his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

Although limitations of space do not allow appraising the work of other female comics artists to the same extent, the selection of Schrag as a case study has not been arbitrary. Her work is in the same slice-of-life vein as Matt, Brown, and Heatley’s – unlike Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) or *Are You My Mother* (2012), which as graphic

novels are closer to literary memoirs. It is also of a similar level of formal experimentation, not reworking the form in ways as radical as Phoebe Gloeckner's or Lynda Barry's work. Neither it is as sexually explicit or challenging as Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (1998) or Debbie Drechsler's *Daddy's Girl* (1996). In choosing Schrag over other female comic artists, the aim was to compare like with like, ensuring that her approach's ethical and aesthetic differences are more clearly emphasized.

Andrew Kunka, in *Autobiographical Comics*, references Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune 1989:4). He notes that this definition is "problematic" for comics due to their multimodal nature often requiring multiple contributors (Kunka 2018:6). The difficulty of settling upon a single coherent definition for autobiographical comics is convincingly explained by Michael A. Chaney as being due to the "pictorial presence of the autobiographical subject of comics," undermining the "seemingly substantial" 'I' of written autobiographies (Chaney 2011:7). Chute situates autobiographical comics amid a similar dialectic of embodiment/fragmentation by insisting upon the stubborn materiality of the comics creator via the on-page presence of her self-drawings (Chute 2010:2) and perceiving comics as a "hybrid and spatial form" suited to "narratives of development [which] present and underscore hybrid subjectivities" (5). Chaney doubles down on this argument in his later 2017 monograph when he posits that "aspects specific to the [comics] form complicate any such thing as an autobiographical authority and enable productive variations on the theme of the split or fragmented subject" (2017:9-10). This does not prevent, of course, consistent self-stylization and a coherent mapping of space/place from providing a decent illusion of a continuous subject. For instance, in the twenty-five-year retrospective anthology of *Drawn & Quarterly*, Michael DeForge reflects that during the eight years in which he graduated, he went to college, had his first relationship, and so on. Still, each new release of *Peepshow* found Joe Matt "still the same, still editing porn and peeing into jars and jacking off in his room. It was very comforting, almost like an anchor" (DeForge and Matt 2015:636).

## Autobiographers drawing each other

In the anthology, there are several full-color reproductions of photographs of Matt alongside Chester Brown and Seth/Gregory Gallant (DeForge and Matt 2015:9-11, 16-19, etc.). All three have a similar build and complexion, with prominent chins and foreheads; they wear round spectacles, are shaven, and tend to smile with their mouths closed. In the 1990s, all three cartoonists lived in Toronto and would represent themselves and each other in their autobiographical strips. In Matt's *The Poor Bastard*, Brown is depicted with a long, teardrop-shaped head that draws the eye

downwards to the curved near-horizontal line of his chin (cf. Matt 1997:7, 22, 59, etc.). More often than any other secondary character – excepting Matt’s landlady and his comics book dealer – his eyes are depicted as two convex curves (cf. Matt 1997:6-7, 24, 60, etc.), indicating that they are closed. The radial lines at the sides of the two curves of the landlady’s eyes (cf. Matt 1997:91, 111, etc.) give her drawing the impression of squinting. By contrast, Steve, who runs the comic book shop, has two thick downwards curved eyebrow lines, giving him the impression of anger, impatience, or malevolence (cf. Matt 1997:62-63, 123, etc.). Brown, however, is otherwise given very little detail on his face. This, combined with the fact that his face is often shown angled slanting downwards (cf. Matt 1997:17, 60, 63, 98, etc.), gives Matt’s rendering of Brown an impression of passivity, even blankness. When placed in conjunction with the infantilizing laugh Matt gives Brown – “TEE HEE” (Matt 1997:76) – he even seems child-like, innocent.

In stark contrast, Matt depicts himself – or, at least, the avatar of himself used for authorial insertion (from here on referred to as ‘Joe’) – through grotesque and stylized caricature. On almost every page of *Peepshow*, he is rendered more dynamic than surrounding characters through motion lines (cf. Matt 1997:8-9, 23-24, 39-40, etc.) and sweat beads (cf. Matt 1997:3, 6-10, 12-15, etc.). Often, panels are pushed into full-blown expressionism. When Joe orgasms while masturbating, wavy radial lines almost fill the entire background (cf. Matt 1997:3 and 78); the wall of his comics studio is obscured by black ink that frames a bright burst of anger before he gives his girlfriend Trish a black eye (cf. Matt 1997:10); and when he rushes up the stairs in his eagerness to plug in a VCR for watching pornography, a zigzagged diagonal line accentuates his eagerness and haste (cf. Matt 1997:92). In his seminal text *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud asserts that distorted panel backgrounds can produce physiological effects in the reader, but the reader “will ascribe those feelings, not to *themselves*, but to the characters they *identify* with” (1993:132, original emphasis). Matt thus engineers audience identification with his authorial avatar, even while he seemingly undercuts this sympathetic alignment through bathos and self-deprecating humor.

Meanwhile, Chester Brown in *Paying for It* (2011) – his account of paying for sex with prostitutes from the late 1990s to the 2010s – depicts Joe Matt with round, soft curves which make him look boyish and paunchy (cf. Brown 2011:17-19, 50-53, 79, etc.). Brown’s lines are steady and precise compared to Matt’s neurotic, noodling lines. When combined with the rectilinear lines and angles with which Brown draws his authorial avatar, the character ‘Chester Brown’ looks less than passive, almost *impassive*. Brown draws his mouth as a straight horizontal line. In an interview with Sean Rogers for *The Comics Journal*, Brown states that his tendency not to show himself smiling was a deliberate stylistic choice which reflects his tendency to

“drain emotion from [his] drawing style” (Brown and Rogers 2011:1). This chimes with Seth’s reflection in his notes in the appendix of *Paying for It* that Brown “seems to have a minimal emotional range compared to most people” (quoted in Brown 2011:255). However, while this limited emotional range leads his friend Joe to depict him as enigmatic and introverted, this limited emotional range is depicted as rational, even elevated in Chester’s comics. As made clear above, this is communicated as much by linework as by dialogue.

## Lines of empathy

In chapter five of *Understanding Comics*, “Living in Line,” McCloud declares great faith in the power of linework, asserting that “all lines carry with them an expressive potential” (McCloud 1993:124). McCloud’s rhetorical maneuver shifts the reader’s focus from the present physicality of the line as a mark upon the paper to the expressive potentiality of the line as experienced by an unseen, imagined reader, reflecting McCloud’s tendency towards Platonic idealism. Cohn’s writing (2013; 2014) also presents a similar shift due to his structuralist insistence upon form over content. Vincent Haddad notes – though not disapprovingly – that Cohn focuses upon “the shared language of comics artists, rather than on their idiosyncratic differences” (Haddad 2015:295). This allows for an approach to the comics form, which is as systematic as McCloud’s but neglects the *affective* quality of comics captured as much by McCloud’s art as by his writing. An ear as drawn by Scott McCloud may function as a morpheme identically to an ear as drawn by Chester Brown. However, the energy and purpose expended into that drawing also register through the reader’s sense of how steady the line is, how fast it was drawn, how hard the pen or pencil was pushed against the paper, etc. This is partly what Chute means when she refers to handwriting as “a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker” (Chute 2010:10) that “underscores the subjective positionality of the author” (Chute 2010:11). This sense of the metonymic authenticity of the comics artist’s handwriting is expressed brilliantly in a passage from Jan Baetens’ and Hugo Frey’s *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*:

Lines display a story world in which the act of drawing cannot be separated from the drawn result. And lines [...] inevitably manifest themselves as narrative agents and vehicles of storytelling. To an extent, one does not have to study anything other than the line to see how a world is constructed, a story told, a character sketched. And behind or beyond each line emerges the source of any storytelling whatsoever: the narrator. The very singularities of

the line can teach us a lot about the actual presence of the storyteller, his or her involvement in the fictional world, and his or her moral stance towards it. By linking the materiality of the line to the hand and the mind producing it [...] we better understand which kind of narrator is doing the telling and how we are supposed to make meaning of the narrative act. (2014:165)

In one of the chapters in Cohn's book, Marilyn Lewis writes that reading it "will not provide the key to understanding graphics any more than reading a book *about* grammar or vocabulary would turn someone into a fluent reader" (Lewis 2015:634). However, a reader of autobiographical comics is not merely dispassionately reading *about* the author's life but is interpolated *into* a story that – in the case of serialized comics like Joe Matt's *Peepshow* – may still be playing out. The pact the reader of fiction makes usually involves a suspension of disbelief by which they recognize the emotional truth of a story. Lejeune argues that the truth of the autobiographical form exists in dialectical relationship to the truth of the fictional form, i.e., an author's autobiography will generally contain an insufficiency of artistic complexity and ambiguity in contrast with their fictional writing/s. However, this very insufficiency makes the autobiography appear even more *accurate* (cf. Lejeune 1989:27). This requires the presence of the contractual agreement (cf. Lejeune 1989:29) between the author and his/her reader, which – as per contract – requires the author's signature (cf. Lejeune 1989:14).

For the autobiographical comic book artist who draws as well as writes their comics, this authenticating signature is, as noted by Baetens and Frey above, embodied in the very line of the comic, metonymically linked to the hand of the comic book artist who exists within the same world as the reader.

Elisabeth El Refaie dedicates the whole fourth chapter of her *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures* (El Refaie 2012:1876-2499), to the issue of authenticity in autobiographical comics. El Refaie, however, makes it clear that the perceptual viewpoint need not be privileged when it comes to comic book artists making truth claims that we take to align with the reality outside of the comic book. She notes that "stylistic realism" does not always ensure authenticity; in fact, "comics creators sometimes try to enhance the perceived genuineness of their accounts by adopting an ostentatiously *naïve* cartoonish drawing style" (El Refaie 2012:1917, original emphasis). This is in accord with McCloud's assertion that a realistic drawing style can make a story told through the comics medium feel less real, less *lived-in* than a comic drawn in a more iconographic style (cf. McCloud 1993:35-37). McCloud frames his argument in terms of identification, writing: "[W]hen you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face [...] you see

it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon* [...] you see *yourself*" (McCloud 1993:36, original emphases).

So, if McCloud is correct that the iconographic style of most comics elicits reader identification, this acquires an especially potent ethical dimension when dealing with autobiographical comics. Indeed, El Refaie devotes the entirety of the last chapter of *Autobiographical Comics* to the question of 'Drawing in the Reader' (cf. El Refaie 2012:2505-3091). In line with reader-response theory, she points out that the reader of comics is an active participant who imaginatively engages with the text and its implied author (cf. El Refaie 2012:2520-2529), identifying two processes by which this occurs, 'involvement' and 'affiliation' (El Refaie 2012:2529). The primary example El Refaie gives to explain involvement is that of the 'ellipsis,' by which gaps in the information provided by the comic are imaginatively filled in by the reader, drawing them into the experience of reading (cf. El Refaie 2012:2555-2591). By contrast, she uses 'affiliation' to refer to "the act of connecting emotionally" to a character in a comic (cf. El Refaie 2012:2614). McCloud's valuation of the ellipsis leads him to emphasize involvement over affiliation. To achieve the latter, a comics author may not adopt a starkly iconographic style but rather a highly expressive one that bears body traces (cf. Chute 2010). This can be a form of presence that draws in and involves the reader. Eszter Szép puts this convincingly and straightforwardly when she states that "[c]omics are made by expressive lines that mark the union of movement and thinking, and they are interpreted not simply visually, but also by and via the reader's body" (Szép 2020:2).

It is concerning such reciprocity that El Refaie critiques the notion that the visual presence of the authorial surrogate in a comic distances the reader, arguing, "readers of comics are always aware of the embodied presence of the autobiographer, but I believe that this does not necessarily discourage readers from identifying with him or her" (El Refaie 2012:2726). She reflects that it tends to be the character that the reader follows on their journeys through time and space that the reader will primarily identify with: "If a graphic narrative follows the autobiographical protagonist around, showing all the events, people, and places as she experiences them, the reader is probably more likely to align with her perspective than that of the other characters" (El Refaie 2012:2735). This is true for Chester Brown's, Joe Matt's, and David Heatley's work, but less so for Debbie Drechsler's or Alison Bechdel's, which sometimes contain digressive speculations related to family members. Phoebe Gloeckner and Ariel Schrag sometimes momentarily shift their focus to the interior lives of others. However, their authorial surrogates are rarely entirely absent from the frame, showing that there is not a clear gender divide in the narratological tendencies at play in autobiographical comics.

## Joe Matt's elision of Trish

In *The Poor Bastard*, there are no scenes that do not feature Joe Matt as either present in 'the real world' or dreaming. We move through time and space with him, through both inner and outer states, across periods of days, months, and years. In the scene in which Joe gives his girlfriend Trish a black eye, the assault exists as an ellipsis within the gutter between panels. The brute materiality of the violence is withheld from the viewer. Moreover, the next panel featuring Trish comes after a panel of Joe informing fellow cartoonist Seth about his actions (cf. Matt 1997:11). As such, Matt withholds an externalizing visual depiction of the assault while providing his authorial proxy a speech balloon with which to justify his internal motivation for the act. Despite the font used for Seth's exclamation of "THEN YOU WHAT?!" being larger, Joe's word balloon still fills more of the panel. The following panel shows Joe and Trish in bed with the back of Trish's head drawn facing the reader, preventing identification. It is only in the next panel again that the reader is finally shown Trish with a black eye. She is depicted smiling, in front of a white background, in visual symmetry with the also smiling Joe presented in front of a black background. This harmonious composition helps reassure the reader that Trish has not been traumatized by her experience, deflating their potential adverse emotional reaction and judgment of Matt.

Additionally, Trish is shown with her bicycle and proceeds to talk about her day at work, subtly inflating the reader's sense of her agency and freedom. Her body language looks relaxed, even casual. Indeed, it is Joe who is next shown looking stressed and contorted, his left hand splayed apart, surrounded by vibration lines, his cheeks bulging, with spittle flying from his mouth. This is how he reacts to Trish informing him that Frankie, the girl upon whom he is fixated, works at the same day center as herself. Joe's emotions are privileged, and the comically exaggerated way in which they are visually depicted is a mechanism of reader affiliation.

Matt's use of self-deprecating humor and self-caricature certainly problematizes Joe as a figure for reader identification, leading to moments in *Peepshow* in which the reader is complicit in the events of the comic, or a co-conspirator – partly since Matt's writing of *Peepshow* ends up not only depicted within the comic itself but is also impacting his relationship with Trish, eventually leading to their breakup. Trish is only present in a brief flashback in the latter two-thirds of *The Poor Bastard*. She continues to be talked about a great deal by Joe and other men (such as Seth) but is denied a voice herself, undepicted and unseen.

## Objectification and abstraction in *Paying for It*

The erasure of female suffering and subjectivity is even more pronounced in Chester Brown's *Paying for It*. In his review of the comic, Chris Mautner remarks that, while Brown may have intended to protect the identity of the sex workers he visited by obscuring their faces (with word balloons or hair, or cropping them out of the panel), this leads to "a palpable sense of something missing, an experience or emotional hole that needs to be filled" (Mautner 2011:2011). El Refaie makes a similar observation about Brown's earlier *I Never Liked You* (1994). She suggests that Brown's use of high angles and distant staging, as well as his tendency to draw his characters with blank, expressionless faces, "creates a sense of emotional disengagement" (El Refaie 2012:2768). This sense is intensified in *Paying for It* by the sheer length of the voluminous endnotes, which span almost fifty pages (Brown 2011:231-280). The impression of academic authority provided by these is at the expense of sustained emotional and empathetic engagement, perhaps due to the disembodied nature of the endnotes in contrast to the comics. In the case of *I Never Liked You*, the lack of emotional and empathetic engagement only concerns Chester and his immediate social and familial circles. However, *Paying for It* builds upon the sexual labor of young women (at least one of whom is implied to have been trafficked) who, for the most part, were unaware that these sexual encounters were going to be visually represented to a mass audience for Brown's profit (rather than themselves).

Due to this, Matt Seneca subtitles his review of the comic with the alternative title of *He Fucks Them Twice* (2011). Seneca resists the comic's academic abstractions by insisting upon the stubborn materiality of the comic book as a consumer object linked to Brown's solicitation of prostitutes in a chain of capitalist exchange and exploitation.

Interestingly, Seneca's review is the only review of his book that Brown singles out for disapprobation in a 2016 interview with Peter Bagge for *The Comics Journal*, with Brown dismissing Seneca's critique as "[o]ne of the silliest examples [of whorephobia]" (Brown and Bagge 2016:n.pag.) he had come across. The only other negative review Brown mentions explicitly is by sex worker and critic Charlotte Shane (2011). Both Shane and Seneca are particularly morally troubled by an episode in which Chester repeatedly pays for sex with a girl, "Anne", whom he suspects might be under eighteen (cf. Brown 2011:77-84) and a secondary episode in which he pays for sex with another girl, "Arlene", who cries out in pain during intercourse, further arousing Chester until orgasm (cf. Brown 2011:185-188). Therefore, it is worth analyzing the formal semiotics of these sequences to discern their patterns of objectification.

When Chester first walks through the door into the apartment where Anne lives, she is placed standing statically next to the door and her right arm extended at a right angle to visually mirror the door handle (cf. Brown 2011:78). This visual rhyme creates a metonymic association between Anne and the room which Chester has paid to enter and occupy. Indeed, in six out of the seven panels in which Anne is shown in this introductory sequence, she stands next to a door or doors. These borders demarcate space in much the same way as the comics panels. In *Frames and Framing in Documentary Comics*, Johannes Schmid reflects that the spatial language of comics allows the writer-artist to arrange “bodies, objects, and environments in relation to borders of an image [...] framing the respective conflicts through the rendering of the represented actors” (Schmid 2021:124). He reflects that, in the case of documentary comics, experimentation with the shape of the frame is rare, creators regularly relying upon rectangular patterns (cf. Schmid 2021:157).

Therefore, it perhaps speaks to Brown’s attempt to engage in (or even imitate) a more documentary mode of autobiographical storytelling. He adheres strictly to a two-by-four layout of rectangular panels on almost every page of *Paying for It*. Brown regularly places his authorial avatar two-thirds of the way along the horizontal of the rectangular frame, often against a blank wall with his shadow drawn cast against it in black ink (cf. Brown 2011:78, 99-101, 111, 116-117, etc.). This visually anchors Chester within the frame while also giving him the slightly detached position of an observer – a third-person narrator in his own autobiographical comic. By contrast, Anne’s head (and interiority) is often *outside* the space of the comic, severed by the panel border or literally obscured by Chester’s thoughts. For instance, in the third panel of the page in which Anne is introduced, Chester’s thought bubble occupies the entire top left third of the frame, completely obscuring Anne’s face with the thought, ‘She *could* be 18, but she could also be younger. It’s hard to tell’ (Brown 2011:78, original emphasis). Visually, the reader can only assess Anne’s age by reference to the lower half of her body. We are given no access to her facial response to the situation.

As the chapters continue, Anne is provided with more speech and agency, though her face continues to be obscured by the black ink of her hair. More straightforwardly problematic is the chapter concerning Chester’s encounter with Arlene, who is configured as private property temporarily loaned to Chester by an unseen pimp. After being introduced, Arlene is shown not to be a native English Canadian speaker. This is indicated by her speech bubble being filled with vertical dashes all the same size and thickness, with an asterisk connected to a footnote that reads “A foreign language” (Brown 2011:187). While “foreign” might simply mean “foreign to Chester” or “foreign to the reader,” the visual monotony of the dashes provides no symbolic attempt to replicate cadence or intonation. The otherness of Arlene’s native language

is thus reinforced. In five of the six panels in which Arlene is shown, she takes up a tiny amount of the frame and is mostly obscured by Chester's heaving body. Indeed, in some frames, her speech bubbles of "ow!" "ow!" "ow!" take up more space than she does, but the use of lowercase renders them non-authoritative in contrast to her uppercase reply of "No." (Brown 2011:187) when Chester asks if he is hurting her and "Yes." (Brown 2011:187) when he asks whether she is really eighteen. The fact that Arlene's body is drawn as completely untextured compared to Chester's emphasizes her youth, but it also renders her statuesque and doll-like. Removing the texture of skin and flesh reduces the corporeality of the act and thus the felt sensation of Arlene's physical pain. Likewise, providing only medium-close ups of Chester's face and not hers means that Chester remains our point of identification throughout. Two-thirds of the last panel is taken up with his thought "That she seems to be in pain is kind of a turn-on for me, but I also feel bad for her. I'm going to cut this short and come quickly" (Brown 2011:188) rather than a depiction of Arlene's experience.

The obfuscation of material violence (and the materialist flows of power and capital that enable this violence) is reflected clearly in Chester's exchange in the previous chapter with a female friend. Defending johns – men who pay for sex – Chester argues that "Just 'cause a guy pays for sex, that doesn't make him a pedophile or a rapist. I'll bet I'm close to what the typical john is like. I'll bet a lot of johns are mild-mannered introverts [...] guys who would never even consider assaulting anyone" (Brown 2011:179). Here, Chester/Brown makes recourse to what criminologist Tony G. Poveda referred to as the "myth of the law-abiding citizen" (Poveda 1970:63), which divides the world into delinquent criminals and ordinary citizens who follow the laws, sharply demarcated by class. This is in spite of the fact that the middle-aged Chester has pursued sex with girls he believes might be children and at least one who was likely a victim of sex trafficking. However, Brown's libertarian framework reduces all interactions to those between free consumer agents who can state "Yes" and "No" clearly in business-like negotiations. Brown's footnote references to libertarian political commentary support this reductive philosophy of economic abstraction just as his sparse, starkly iconographic drawings simplify and quantify human emotions. Brown's art thus functions in the opposite way to the more excessive, embodied art of the female comics creators praised by Hillary Chute. Finally, Chute argues that "[a]gainst a valorization of absence and aporia," these women's stories assert "the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (Chute 2010:2). This presence – in the form of embodied drawings – allows the survivor-creator to "literally reappear – in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page – at the site of her inscriptional effacement" (Chute 2010:3). By contrast, Brown disappears the women in *Paying for It*, absenting them from the site of what often appear to have been traumatic or painful encounters.

In *Serial Selves*, Frederik Byrn Køhlert praises the comics of Julie Doucet for challenging an objectifying gaze through a busy (and sometimes grotesque) attentiveness to the materiality of both the external world and the drawn line (which not only demarcates and shapes the world but is *of* it too). In terms of the external world, Køhlert claims that the unevenness of Doucet's lines "drawn with an attention to the creases, folds, and dents of the used and the everyday, give each object a materiality that further democratizes the visual field" (Køhlert 2019:47) – a comment that could equally be made about Kominsky-Crumb's work and that of many underground female artists. He reflects that "the materiality of Doucet's unsteady line resists the smooth surfaces associated with traditional representations of women in comics art" (Køhlert 2019:47). These smooth surfaces are present in Brown's *Paying for It*, but a materialist line does not ensure a lack of objectification as in Doucet's comics.

## Ossifying seriality in David Heatley's comics

Uneven and unsteady could effectively describe David Heatley's linework in *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* (2008), an autobiographical collection that divides Heatley's life into different categories. The book's opening chapter, "Sex" (Heatley 2008:12-27), is an exhaustive chronicle of Heatley's entire sexual history. In contrast to the (sometimes over-insistent) heterosexuality of Joe Matt and Chester Brown, Heatley depicts his/David's encounters with boys and girls through his childhood and adolescence with no obvious visual differentiation. Heatley's pacing is highly staccato, with panels sometimes matching on actions but often jumping forward through time and space dramatically. This, in effect, ossifies moments of time, which is an effect that is reinforced by the thematic structure of the comic. Outside of Heatley's family, all the characters present in the "Sex" chapter only exist in relation to David's sexual interaction with them. This mirrors the solipsistic logic of a collector who, Jean Baudrillard reflects, morbidly stages – while disavowing – his/her death through obsessive, endlessly deferred serialization (cf. Baudrillard 1996:97). Baudrillard himself draws an explicit comparison between the collection of objects and the collection of sexual partners. Concerning the former, he states: "[I]n the passionate abstractness of possession all objects are equivalent. And just one object no longer suffices: the fulfillment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects" (Baudrillard 1996:86). Similarly, he writes: "[T]he need to possess the love object can be satisfied only by a succession of objects, by repetition, or, alternatively, by making the assumption that all possible objects are somehow present" (Baudrillard 1996:86). As such, the unique

qualities of the love object are collapsed into sameness, the subject's sexual relations defined quantitatively rather than qualitatively (cf. Baudrillard 1996:88).

This ossification is reflected in teenage David's repeated decision to molest sleeping girls and ignore spoken boundaries of consent. At summer camp as a teenager, the girlfriend of David's brother, Michele, sits down upon his lap, and David thinks, "I guess I'll feel her up... Tomorrow I'll pretend I was too fucked up to know what I was doing!" (Heatley 2008:16). Michele, with upward slanted eyebrows indicating anxiety, tells David, "I want to, just not here... Let's go someplace." (Heatley 2008:16). The background lines are harshly cross-hatched and streaky. The next panel shows David and Michele illuminated in the spotlight of a torch beam while a speech bubble belonging to someone off-page reads "What's going on over there??", with David replying, "Cut it out!" (Heatley 2008:16). The next panel has a caption in the top-left of the frame, which reads "Minutes later" with a drawing of David fingering Michele from an aerial perspective (cf. Heatley 2008:16). The cut forward in time elides any navigation of consent. We know that David did not respect Michele's wish to move someplace else and not be touched in the tent in front of the other teenagers. While David's demand of "Cut it out!" denies these children a voyeuristic perspective, it is provided to the reader in a God's eye view, providing an omniscient mastery decidedly more empowered than Michele's experience. Likewise, the reader is given an x-ray perspective of David's hand groping Michele's breast. These visual strategies ensure the objectification of Michele, with David's mastery shared with the voyeuristic reader of the comic (but not the contemporaneous teenagers in the tent). Unless we have shoplifted the book or borrowed it from a public library, we have paid for access like Chester Brown.

It is not clear in *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* whether Heatley asked any of the other people featured in his comic if he was allowed to record their shared experiences. Heatley may be inscribing moments of violation or trauma experienced by others at his hands on the page, freezing them within his invariably rectilinear panels. The only exception to this rule is David's wife, Rebecca. Compared to the other girls, women, and boys with whom David interacts sexually in the chapter, David's sexual history with Rebecca is kept from the page. The narration reads: "I don't want to embarrass her or cheapen the potent sexual memories I have of all our years together" (Heatley 2008:17). In keeping with this, a censorship bar obscures Rebecca's breasts in a full-page portrait of her.

Baudrillard explains that the endpoint of the collecting impulse is "pure jealousy," in which the subject gains pleasure in "the value that objects can have for others and from the fact of depriving them thereof" (Baudrillard 1996:98). The narrator's assertion that intimate representations of Rebecca are withheld due to

respect for the real Rebecca's privacy is undermined by the fact that the heliographic-style portrait of her is implied by shading lines to be completely naked (cf. Heatley 2008:17). Baudrillard calls pleasure taken in withholding the desired object to be "anal-sadistic" (Baudrillard 1996:98), so it is interesting to note that the numerous panels of David pleasuring himself anally (cf. Heatley 2008:15, 22, 23, etc.) tend to radiate streaky angry lines and have David's exclamations of orgasmic release rendered in jagged, scribbled, angry capital letters.

In his review of Heatley's 2019 graphic memoir *Qualification*, Austin Price (2020) convincingly argues that the lack of self-aware interiority in Heatley's work is evident not only in his reductive (and often caricatured) art but also in the very narrative structure of *Qualification*. He suggests that it is "not that [Heatley] is bad about identifying the emotions he was feeling at the time or explaining them; the book is all explanation, box after box after box after box cataloguing his every shame, disappointment, frustration or fear" (Price 2020:n.pag.). Price's criticism repeatedly refers to the sheer scale of Heatley's book and the number of panels – "page after page"; "two -hundred pages"; "the thousand episodes he chose to fill the book," etc. (Price 2020:n.pag.). This reflects the lack of qualitative reflection in favor of quantitative description that characterizes Heatley's work. It is not only that such an approach ossifies the past and objectifies seemingly real people (and their experiences) but that the reader is also in danger of being objectified in the experience of reading due to the lack of a transformative dialogue that such a numbing litany produces. Rather than another 'notch on the bedpost,' the reader becomes another sales figure. Finally, it is apposite that the only art of Heatley's that impresses, both formally and emotionally, are his heliographic-style portraits and tableaux. Here, the ossification of life is complete, with family members and loved ones transformed, ultimately, into collectibles.

## Ariel Schrag's queer transformations

The early comics of Ariel Schrag, *Awkward and Definition* (2008a), *Potential* (2008b), and *Likewise* (2009) are not entirely free from objectification. Schrag's cartooning as an adolescent was loose and sometimes improvisatory in appearance. As such, figures (including her own) could be characterized by unflattering visual distortions, even caricature. Moreover, in the comics, Ariel's then-girlfriend Sally is often shown to object to Ariel's obsessive recording (and, later, publication) of the intimate aspects of their relationship – objections which, in turn, are enfolded into the diegesis. However, these arguably problematic aspects of Schrag's early comics gesture towards later strengths. A loose, improvisatory style evolves into more considered respect for change and transformation, internal growth in both Ariel and others external-

ized through shifting stylistic techniques. Meanwhile, the self-reflexivity becomes increasingly sophisticated, allowing for Schrag to foreground the materiality of her work and emphasizing comics creation as a process of artistic becoming rather than an always already completed commercial product.

In a short comic anthologized in *Part of It. Comics and Confessions* (2018), written when she was seventeen, “The Truth,” Ariel argues with a male friend about depicting their sexual relationship in her comic. Defending her decision to represent the encounter, Ariel proclaims: “[Y]ou know how important the comic book is to me, I mean it’s my *life* [...] *that’s why we* [...] excessively talked about it before it happened and you knew I was going to write about you” (Schrag 2018:53, original emphases), indicating that Ariel had explicitly sought and gained her friend’s consent. Ariel is shown in close-up, meeting the gaze of the reader. Her assertion of selfhood implicates the reader in a mutual recognition that – in reading the comic – they/we are engaging with the everyday material of her life. Ariel and her friend decide upon a compromise by which his name will be disguised, but then, in the next panel, Ariel is shown looking up towards the top right, where the panel meets the gutter, next to which we see the following panel. The reader’s gaze is moved further outwards, revealing more of the preceding and subsequent panels. Ariel, now meta-diegetically placed within the comic, sighs “fine” and reaches outside the panel to grasp the border itself (Schrag 2018:55). What should be the next panel in sequence does not have a border at all but is instead a borderless drawing of the comic crumpled up into a ball of paper. Ariel thus disavows the comic’s existence, even while the ‘real’ Schrag preserves it some two decades later in an anthology. This dramatization of the author’s process of mediating her own life – its dramatic reconstruction and then (fictive?) destruction – helps the reader recognize the constructedness of the truth on display, providing a sense of authenticity while also puncturing the omnipotence of the author-subject. This puncturing is reinforced by how Schrag draws herself with large manga-style eyes often caught in an expression of confusion or dismay. Her linework is craggy; bodies often obscured beneath baggy, shapeless clothing. A sketchbook quality to her art makes each of her comics look like a work in progress rather than a finished product.

“The Truth” is set (and was initially written) in a period in which Schrag was only tentatively embracing her queer identity, which becomes more pronounced as her comics evolve. Køhlert supports this view, reflecting:

As Schrag’s narrative becomes increasingly sophisticated in both storytelling and imagery with each new instalment, it is evident that the multiple narrative and visual possibilities of the comics form are essential to her personal and artistic development and their implications for her depiction of a constantly

changing, growing, and maturing self. For a young, queer, and female artist, this radical [...] act of depicting both her exterior and interior realities constitutes a counterdiscourse [to mainstream heteronormativity]. (Køhlert 2019:87-88)

In “*Dyke March*” (Schrag 2018:135-138), for instance, a dancing topless woman is not frozen in a state of voyeuristic objectification but is rendered fluid, even amorphous between panels (Schrag 2018:137-138), emphasizing her sense of freedom and movement rather than – for instance – her physical dimensions (as would be emphasized in *Joe Matt*). When, by contrast, a gay man with “the world’s smallest penis” (Schrag 2018:138) is shown, though his physiognomy is objectified, he is drawn in a loose, naturalistic style, with his easy body language showing how unconcerned he is by Ariel’s spectatorship. Indeed, Ariel’s cartoon staring eyes render her (rather than him) visually ridiculous.

This generosity of representation is especially apparent in “*Plan on the Number 7 Bus*” (Schrag 2018:23-42), where a young Ariel and her friend Ronica chat disparagingly about two girls, called Hope and Rosie, who they refer to as “*The Seaweeds*” (Schrag 2018:27) on account of their undeveloped chests. While the comparison made by the diegetic thirteen-year-old Ariel is objectifying and caricatured, Schrag then provides a cut-away panel depicting Hope and Rosie standing next to two realistically drawn strands of seaweed. The drawing’s neutrality undercuts the comparison, not least between the two girls, which are drawn naturalistically in comparison to the more vividly exaggerated Ariel and Ronica, who are giggling manically. Later, when a scared and upset Ariel thinks that she wishes she was at Hope’s house rather than with Ronica because “*Hope is good*” (Schrag 2018:39), this impression has already been reinforced by the pleasant drawing of Hope which makes her appear nice and friendly in comparison to Ronica.

However, instead of transferring the reader’s sympathies away from Ronica, making her appear as the uncomplicated villain, unproblematically categorizing her as a ‘bully’ and thus undeserving of further humanization, Schrag shows that she is just as upset and scared as Ariel. Lost in an unknown part of town at the end of the bus line, Ariel is shown on the left, bottom-most panel, sitting alone on a bench. Also, in the right-most panel at the bottom of the page, Ronica is shown standing alone, isolated within the frame, equally lonely and afraid. A middle panel featuring a phone box and a couple of strangers separates the two panels and thus the two girls, switching from the temporal separation that tends to characterise comics to a purely spatial one. This frozen moment of time thus exists separately for the two girls. However, the balanced composition, which does not privilege one girl over the other, shows a commonality of experience between them.. Such formal strategies are common to Schrag’s comics, and they are often in the service of mutual subjectivization, which expands the scope of the reader’s empathetic engagement.

## A Crumb-y conclusion

In “Volume 10: June 1975 – February 1977” of Robert Crumb’s *Sketchbook* (2005), Crumb depicts an interaction between a bohemian artist called “Mr. Snoid” and his girlfriend Beverly. Repeatedly verbally assaulting Beverly as a “bitch” (Crumb 2005:80), Snoid instructs her to stick his head between her legs, with her buttocks in the air. He then sits on her while painting until she collapses, his artistry enabled by her objectification. With Beverly collapsed on the floor, Snoid squirts white seminal paint into her face obscured over the comic’s last six panels (cf. Crumb 2005:80-81).

This embodied metaphor could also symbolize how male Drawn & Quarterly autobiographical comics artists – Joe Matt, Chester Brown, and David Heatley – have used women to create their work. Brown, like Snoid, literally obscures the faces of the women he paid for sex in *Paying for It*. Matt multiplies the bodies of the women in his comics – the collecting impulse seemingly playing out in both his life and art – rendering those he finds attractive static, ossified. Heatley hides violence in the gutter between panels, restricting the agency of the women and young girls depicted in his comics through a devitalizing conversion of time into space. Therefore, it is unsurprising that all three creators have explicitly been linked to, or inspired by, Crumb. In Matt’s strip “Hollywood, California. March 2013,” anthologized in the Drawn & Quarterly twenty-five-year retrospective, Matt refers to Crumb as his “single greatest role model” whom he has idolized for thirty years (Matt 2015:647). *Paying for It* opens with an introduction from Crumb (Brown 2011:v-vi), whose work Scott Grammel situates in relation to Brown’s in the opening paragraph of an interview anthologized in *Chester Brown: Conversations* (2013:24). *David Heatley’s Qualification* (2020) has a blurb on its back cover from Crumb, while Heatley himself namechecks Crumb as an influence in a 2008 interview with Simon Willis.

In Price’s 2020 review of Heatley’s *Qualification*, he charts the history of autobiographical comics as one of aesthetic, formal, and moral decline. For Price, while Crumb’s view of the world was “offensive and repulsive,” the “charm,” “wit,” and “care” (Price 2020:n.pag.) put into the art at least enabled his comics to “to play as earned observation and not as loathsome self-pity” (Price 2020:n.pag.). By contrast, his successors – Joe Matt and Chester Brown among them – “were so monomaniacally fixated on their sexual and romantic frustrations that it was as if they had little effort left to spare for their art. Their work was every bit as grotesque as the comics of their predecessors [...] but lacked for spark or originality” (Price 2020:n.pag.). Their tendency towards self-caricature could be indulgent. However, it evidenced an attempt to transform their subjectivity on the page, using stylization to “make sense out of” (Price 2020:n.pag.) their identity as white, male comics creators. Finally, Heatley “roundly rejects engaging with interior in any meaningful way” (Price 2020:n.pag.). Not only is the visual presentation of his authorial avatar bland, even “blank” (Price 2020:n.pag.),

he describes the world through caricaturing others rather than himself, reducing the other participants in his life to mere objects cataloged and serialized as part of his journey to self-discovery which Price critiques as fundamentally shallow.

Price does not mention Ariel Schrag. However, her work circumvents the failures and limitations of Heatley's, Matt's, and Brown's – even Crumb's – output due to her general refusal to ossify or objectify her identity or others', showing them in states of becoming and transformation as well as her insistence upon the materiality inherent in the act of making comics.

There are, of course, exceptions in all these comics artists' work. Joe Matt's Instagram account showcases his art that has been commissioned by fans, which often forces him to focus upon subjects outside himself to which he brings a seemingly earnest care and attentiveness sometimes lacking in his comics. Brown's more surrealist, fictional comics, such as *Underwater* (1994-1997), have a fluidity of style and a willingness to engage with ambiguities and liminality, mostly absent in his autobiographical works. While more stylistically limited, Heatley has produced collaborative comics with his wife Rebecca in the form of illustrated *Medium* articles that recall some of Crumb's work with his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Schrag, meanwhile, can indulge her narcissism and prejudices in comics in *Comics and Confessions* such as "The Experiment" (2018:145-157), which cruelly caricatures a woman Ariel refers to as "Acid Casualty" (Schrag 2018:147). However, all autobiographical comics creators have the ability and means to resist objectification of others by expanding their approach to representation, ensuring that they recognize that every person in addition to themselves is a subject in a process of becoming.

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