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‘America through the looking-glass, lost’:
conflict and traumatic representation in
American comics since 1975

Harriet EH Earle

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in American Studies

March 2015

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Abstract

This thesis brings together two distinct areas of scholarship – trauma studies and comics. I focus on representations of trauma, specifically trauma arising from conflict and war, in post-Vietnam American comics. Trauma studies is an established area within literary research, both in terms of conflict trauma and also personal trauma. For the most part, comics have been ignored. It is my contention that, by the nature of its form, comics is able to mimic the symptoms and presentation of a traumatic rupture in order to represent a traumatic event as accurately and viscerally as possible.

My primary texts are taken from across the full spectrum of the comics form. I consider mainstream superhero comics alongside alternative and art comics; all primary texts were published after 1975 by American creators. The theoretical basis is drawn from Freudian, post-Freudian and contemporary clinical thought. The application of trauma theory to the comics form is a largely untraced path so in using this solid theoretical base I hope to reinvigorate these theories in light of a ‘new’ form.

I also draw on the small corpus of critical texts in the field of comics studies. This thesis is structured around 6 key issues in conflict and traumatic representation. I conduct close analyses of my primary sources to consider the effectiveness of comics, both formally and thematically, in the areas of mourning, dreams and personal identity. I further consider how the formal concern of temporality and problematizing issue of postmodernism affect, and are affected by, the dual focus of comics and trauma.

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Introduction

Comics and the New Art of War

Comics lull you into a false sense of security. You think, this will be funny or at least unserious. Then we hit you with the explosions and the dismemberment. That contrast lends a sharpening effect to the awfulness and violence.

David Axe, *War is Boring* (2010)

On Monday 26th April 1937, at the height of the Spanish Civil War, the German *Luftwaffe* ‘Condor Legion’ and Italian *Aviazione Legionaria* bombed the Basque town of Gernika in northern Spain. During the course of the three-hour raid, a total of thirty-one tonnes of munitions – explosives, fragmentation bombs and incendiary devices – were dropped. Pilots also used machine guns to fire at individuals on the ground. Alberto de Onaindía, a Basque priest, witnessed the bombing. He writes:

I left the car by the side of the road and took refuge with five milicianos in a sewer. The water came up to our ankles. From our hiding-place we could see everything that happened without being seen. The aeroplanes came low, flying at two hundred metres. As soon as we could leave our shelter[...]We heard the bullets ripping through branches, and the sinister sound of splintering wood. Women, children and old men were falling in heaps, like flies, and everywhere we saw lakes of blood [...] The aeroplanes were dropping incendiary bombs to try to convince the world that the Basques had fired their own city. (Onaindía, in Payne, 1962: 34)

George Speer wrote in *The Times* that ‘Guernica flamed from end to end’ (Speer, in Patterson, 2007: 54). The town was fire-bombed and left to burn. The number of victims of the bombing is disputed; in 1937, the Basque government reported that 1,654 people had been killed, although modern reports suggests between 150 to 400 civilians died (Maier, 1975: 13). However, these numbers may not include victims who later died of their injuries or whose bodies were discovered buried in the rubble.

The bombing has been considered one of the first raids in the history of modern military aviation on a defenceless civilian population – an air raid carried out with no regard for women, children or the elderly.¹ Jörg Diehl, writing in the German periodical *Der Spiegel*, reported:

Three years before the destruction of Coventry and eight years before the bombing of Dresden, the pilots of Germany’s Condor Legion broke with the basic military precept of doing no harm to civilians. Since then, it has been clear that the Germans saw the Spanish Civil War merely as a gigantic training camp. Some 19,000 soldiers – officially all were volunteers – were cycled through the war zone by the Nazis. ‘Two years of combat experience are more useful than ten years of peacetime training’, a German general summarized. (2007, online)

It was this horrific bombing of a civilian town that became the inspiration for Pablo Picasso’s most famous painting – *Guernica* (1937).

On commission from the Spanish Republican government Picasso created the enormous mural to hang in the Spanish pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris. Inspired by George Speer’s account and spurred on by sympathy for the Republican cause in Spain, he

¹ Though the first aerial bombing raid is considered to be the dropping of a single bomb from an unmanned balloon, launched by the Austrian Military in 1849, during the First Italian War of Independence, the first substantial aerial bombing campaigns were the Zeppelin raids on Liège, Antwerp and London during the First World War. However, there is no evidence to suggest that these bombings were intended to be attacks purely on defenceless civilians, as is the case in Gernika.

abandoned his original idea and began work on the mural, which was completed in early June. The painting itself is by no means easy to look at. The harsh monochromatic palette and angular forms are captivating and disturbing, both emotions being exacerbated by the huge physical size of the piece. A huge horse, its abdomen gaping from a large wound, fills the centre of the painting. A deformed yet stoic bull stands to the left of the horse, next to a woman cradling her dead child. The right of the painting depicts a burning woman and two witnesses, one bearing a lamp. The painting is chaotic, ably representing the pandemonium of the bombing. Though the mural hung in Paris for many months, it received little critical interest and that it did receive was negative. Le Corbusier wrote that ‘*Guernica* saw only the backs of visitors for they were repelled by it’ (Le Corbusier, in Martin, 2002: 121).

Guernica is one of the most important representations of warfare in twentieth-century art, not only because of its arresting size and appearance, but also because it captures the effects of military action on a civilian town in a way previously unseen. The extreme violence and chaos attest to the utter destruction of war, while removing any notion of glory or triumph. For Picasso, as illustrated in *Guernica*, war is death. As Chapter 2 discusses, many of the great texts of Western literature take a similar view of war, removing all glamorisation and concentrating instead on the grief and destruction it leaves in its wake. However, viewing *Guernica* in its artistic and historical context as a modernist work we can see there are many similarities, both formal and thematic, that can be drawn between modernism and comics.

Initially, it might appear that they have little in common. Comics is very much a part of mass culture, cheaply produced and disposable, very different to canonical modernism.²

In his 1988 book *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen discusses the relationship

²It is important to note here that the plural of comic is typically used as a singular (as ‘politics’ is) to refer to the entire form or industry. Hence one can talk about ‘the comics industry’ or ‘comics creators’. This is usually employed to avoid the unintentional consequences of using the adjective ‘comic’, which implies comedic content. By this definition, then, ‘comics is’ is a grammatically allowable construction and an acceptable way of discussing the form.

between high art and mass culture in the twentieth century. He notes the often-quoted fact that canonical modernism ‘constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture’ (1988: vii).³ However, modernity has, according to Huyssen, at least two experimental artistic threads – modernism and the avant-garde. He calls the avant-garde the ‘resistant thread’ (1988: xi).⁴ Modernism is not solely a high art form that resists change and experimentation. Indeed, it is a collection of forms, some imbued with a fear of the masses, some ushering in new styles and establishing new artistic freedoms. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, modernism was an era especially categorised by the breakdown of the barriers between high and low art: ‘For the aspiring and increasingly literate masses, the mere accessibility of high culture [...] was itself a triumph’ (1987: 225). The view of modernism as an artistic movement which resisted the banality of low forms and low art is, in actuality, a view that can be assigned to one small part of modernism, and not characteristic of the entire movement. Hobsbawm comments that, ‘in the sphere of “high culture” (which was already being made technologically obsolescent), neither the creators in the arts nor the public for what was classified as ‘good’ literature, music painting, etc., saw it in such terms’ (1987:225).

We can see the potential consonance or convergence of (one kind of) modernism and comics if we examine two recent discussions of modernism. Peter Childs states that modernism grew out of ‘devastation on such a scale that it became absurd to celebrate noble ideas like human dignity in art, or blithely assert a belief in human progress’ (2005: 20). For Susan Friedman,

³ For a thorough discussion of this ‘fear of contamination’ see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), pp. 3-19.

⁴ For Huyssen, the postmodern was a continuation and rearticulation of the resistant tradition that was articulated first in the avant-garde. Huyssen’s view of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism is discussed in Chapter 6.

The starting point of modernism is the crisis of belief that pervades twentieth-century culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and shattering of cultural symbols and norms. [...] Art produced after the First World War recorded the emotional aspect of this crisis: despair, hopelessness, paralysis, angst, and a sense of meaninglessness, chaos, and fragmentation of material reality. (1981: 97)

Both *Guernica* (and modernism more generally) and the comics form are preoccupied with devastation. Modernism is concerned with finding ways to give voice to this devastation, which involves developing new and innovative forms. So too is the comics form, which began to achieve cultural prominence between the publication of such canonical modernist texts as *The Waste Land* (1921) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) with the creation of series such as *Les Aventures de Tintin* (1929) and the birth of characters like Superman (1938) and Batman (1939). The forms employed are not only designed to depict devastation but to represent it as accurately and as viscerally as possible.

It is not just that Picasso, modernism and comics are fascinated with devastation. They are representing it in ways which are comparable. In terms of technical experimentation, comics has the freedom to develop new techniques by the very nature of its form. The myriad of artistic styles that are employed is constantly increasing.⁵ Indeed, the differences of form and technique are crucial to the comics narrative itself. This experimentation is not only employed on a widespread level across the entire comics form, but also within individual comics. A clear example of the extent of artistic experiment in comics is Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series (1989-2014), which uses a number of different styles within one text, with each separate style's inclusion playing a role within the construction of the narrative and the text as a whole. Charles Hatfield comments that:

⁵For an excellent demonstration see Madden, *99 Ways to Tell a Story* (2006), in which the artist tells the same one-page story in ninety-nine different ways.

The comics form is in flux, becoming more self-conscious in its explorations as creators increasingly recognise the knowledge and sophistication of readers [...] Comics has traced an arc of development similar to other cultural forms: away from presentational devices designed to ease audience adjustment and towards a more confident and thorough exploration of the form's peculiar tensions, potentialities and limits. (2006: 66)

In this respect the relationship between comics and modernism is complemented by their mutual interest in the exploration of limits and the desire to create works that probe these limits.

Childs writes that, 'typical aspects of Modernist writing are technical experimentation, spatial or rhythmic rather than chronological form and self-conscious reflexivity' (2005: 18). The representation of time is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 but at this juncture it is crucial to note that the primary concern of the comics form is the creation of spatio-temporal relationships. Without these relationships, comics would not work. Modernism is acutely aware of the importance of temporality: 'Because individuals order reality differently from external time, fiction for the Modernists had to represent the individual's actual experience' (Childs, 2005: 50). Earlier in his book on the subject, Childs claims that 'modernist prose is enormously compressed' (2005: 6). So, too, are comics. Art Spiegelman describes the act of creating comics as an act of 'intense condensation' (2011a: 175). The job of the comics creator is to compress a narrative into panelled images that both convey the storyline and allow enough space for readerly interpretation. Different wording aside, these two men are essentially saying the same thing: both modernism and comics are dependent on a level of compression that requires an active reader.

Formally too, comics and modernism share many aspects. In terms of visual art, modernism is often divided into several movements, including Post-Impressionism, *De*

Stijl, Constructivism and Cubism. *Guernica* balances on the edge of Cubism: ‘*Guernica* is not a Cubist painting, but equally obviously it could not have come into being without Cubism behind it’ (Golding, 1968: 186). Cubism was born between 1907 and 1911, though Picasso’s 1907 painting *Les Femmes d’Alger* is often considered the first example. The concept developed by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in *Du Cubisme* of observing a subject from different points in space and time simultaneously – the act of moving around an object to seize it from several successive angles fused into a single image – is the most recognisable aspect of the Cubist style. Malcolm Bull discusses multi-aspectival viewing, using the example of Joseph Jastrow’s duck/rabbit image. He quotes Stanley Cavell, who writes:

We may say that the rabbit-aspect is hidden from us when we fail to see it. But what hides it is obviously not the picture (that reveals it), but our (prior) way of taking it, namely its duck-aspect. What hides one aspect is another aspect, something at the same level. (Cavell, in Bull, 1999: 22)

The duck and rabbit are not hidden at different levels, but at the same level – you cannot see both at once and, according to Bull, seeing both at once is not to see either but to ‘recognise the drawing as a duck-rabbit drawing, although we are not then seeing a duck and a rabbit, only a drawing of the particular kind that disguises a duck and a rabbit’ (1999: 22). For Bull, multi-aspectival viewing is central to modernism. It is present in *Guernica* to some extent; the panelised images, planes and distortions of perspective are central to the structure of the painting. However, if we choose to concentrate solely on the panelisation of the image then the overall image is lost. As with comics, the individual panels must be considered within the wider frame and it is within this *quadrillage*, to use Thierry

Groensteen's term, that the panel is given meaning. The interest in panelisation represents the strongest formal tie between comics and modernism.⁶

The formal link established between comics and modernism can be clearly seen in *Guernica*— planes, panels, differing perspectives. I consider it a prototype for the silent comics that I discuss in Chapter 1. Though on initial viewing, we may see only a massive canvas of chaos, looking closer brings out many potential panels within the painting.

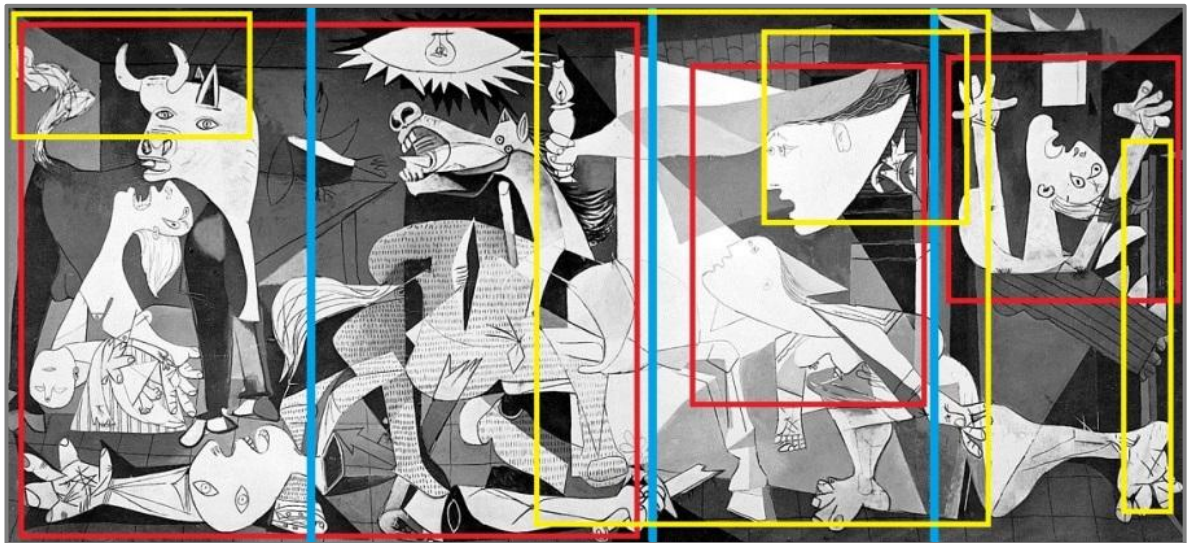


Fig.x.1— *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, 1937. Image used with permission of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.

We can see that the work can be divided into four vertical sections, marked in blue. The two left sections contain one panel, marked in red. The third and fourth sections contain one panel each. It would be most straightforward to read the painting from left to right, with the figures in the middle panel reacting to the left panel and the right panel occurring last. However, this logical left-to-right reading suggests movement of time as opposed to one frozen moment. Indeed, despite the lack of chronological movement, *Guernica* contains a complex series of panels. The yellow boxes highlight the most obvious frames within the painting. The action appears to be contained within a room, onto which several

⁶In terms of modernism, the clearest example of the importance of planes and panels can be seen in *De Stijl* (Dutch for 'The Style'). The most famous artist within this movement, Piet Mondrian, eliminated all aspects of representation and reduced his work to its bare elements.

windows and doors open. The floating head in the third section enters through a window; a door stands ajar at the far right side; a definite corner can be seen at the top right corner. However, the appearance of a tiled roof in the third section suggests that the action is both inside and outside, framed by walls and windows while not framed at all. The ambiguity created by this complex panelling mirrors the chaos of the painting's content.

Aside from the structural panels created by the walls and frames, the Cubist forms of the human and animal characters within the painting are divided into panels (or 'panelised') themselves. The sharp shapes of the figures are spliced by crosshatching lines, making them multi-panelled. Similarly, the bold colours create panels in their harsh contrast. The third section's white shape, juxtaposed to the black background of the horse, puts the two witness characters in a bright white panel, while the gored horse remains in black. However, unlike 'typical' cubism, where the panelisation is employed to show a shift in time and perspective on a single object, the panels in *Guernica* serve a different purpose. They create different perspectives within one object and create multiple focal points within the painting as a whole. Most paintings have a single focal point that draws the eye before allowing the viewer to take in the rest of the painting; in some cases there is a definite narrative thread through an image, as is the case in many religious tableaux. The lack of focal point and chaos of multiple panels creates an image that is both distressing to view and representative of the chaos of the event itself.

In January 1937, six months before the bombing of Gernika, Picasso created a series of fourteen etchings, entitled *The Dream and Lie of Franco*. It was his intention to sell them as postcards to raise money for the Spanish Republican aid campaign, though this idea was later abandoned. To the original fourteen he added four more etchings, which are recognisable as preliminary studies for *Guernica*. The original fourteen depict Francisco Franco in a rough narrative. The images display Franco in a series of different guises,

including a knight, a tight-rope walking ‘jackbooted phallus’ (O’Brian, 2012: 318), a courtesan and a soldier mounted on a pig to ride into battle, having stabbed Pegasus, who lies dead in the tenth scene. In one particularly odd scene, Franco is depicted as ‘a grotesque homunculus with a head like a gesticulating and tuberous sweet potato’ (van Hensbergen, 2013: 28), with a bull. The rough narrative is of Franco’s destruction of Spain, its culture and its people, before himself being destroyed by the bull, a symbol of the *Corrida*. John Golding writes that ‘more than any other work by Picasso *The Dream and Lie of Franco* breaks down, as the Surrealists so passionately longed to, distinctions between writing and visual imagery’ (1994: 244). *The Dream and Lie of Franco* can easily be considered sequential art – a series of images in specific sequence to create a narrative flow. We could, in short, see the sequence as a comic strip – and the form of the comic persists in *Guernica* itself. In line with Golding’s comment, the comics form also breaks down the distinction between writing and visual imagery, giving no preference to one over the other. Furthermore, comics is able to create coherent narratives without the inclusion of words at all. However, the central issue of *The Dream and Lie of Franco* is that it precedes *Guernica* and forms the basis of it. The first half is dated four months prior to the bombing of Gernika, showing that it was not initially influenced by the bombing. However, the final four panels are direct studies for *Guernica*, dated late April 1937. The fact that this piece, which influences the creation of *Guernica*, is a comic undoubtedly influenced the comics aspects of the final work.

Guernica is representative of a larger issue in conflict art. Trauma affects representational strategies and insists on new artistic and narrative forms. *Guernica* breaks with many traditional artistic techniques. Indeed, it is because Picasso rejected what was considered ‘good art’ (‘la belle peinture’) and instead turned to less accepted and less ‘comfortable’ techniques that the painting is effective as a representation of the trauma of

conflict. The distress that the viewer faces in this painting is created by the mimicking of the traumatic experience using carefully selected techniques and formal construction. Traumatic art of any medium is dependent on a recreation of the traumatic event itself. Because traumatic events are almost impossible to recreate with any degree of accuracy due to the individual's inability to remember the experience, traumatic representation must mimic the symptoms and feelings of the individual, as discussed in depth in Chapter 1. *Guernica* is carefully constructed to imitate the terror of the bombing of Gernika and allow those of us who were not present at the event itself to understand some of the trauma of that day. This is the aim of traumatic art.

In a 2005 article in *The New Yorker*, art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote,

Over-the-topness is endemic to comics, of course — an industry standard for popular action and horror titles, as well as for manga, and the default setting for [Robert] Crumb's work. But it is ill suited to serious subjects, especially those that incorporate authentic social history. (2005: 3)

He is right to suggest that comics is known for 'over-the-topness' – bold colouration, stereotyped characters and story arcs that require much suspension of disbelief. This, however, is only an accurate description of one genre within the comics form as a whole. A large number of comics do not fit into this genre and actively seek to be distanced from it. Comics is a complex artistic medium, which, as this thesis shows, is able to represent conflict trauma in new and innovative ways. It is my contention that comics deserves to be considered as viable a medium for traumatic art as any other. However, Schjeldahl's low opinion of comics as an art form (in fact, his opinion seems to be that comics is not an art

form at all) is endemic in scholarship and criticism.⁷ Being able to establish a relationship between modernism and comics, demonstrating this relationship in a comics reading of *Guernica*, suggests that Schjeldahl's criticism of comics as low culture is unfounded; the techniques and skills of high modernist art are closely related to those used in comics.

The 'authentic social history' with which this thesis is concerned is the history of conflict. But, like Picasso's mighty painting, rather than tackling this immense subject as a whole, this thesis considers the effects of conflict – and the traumatic after-effects – on individuals and groups. More specifically, the focus is on how this conflict trauma is represented in comics and, conversely, how the comics form is particularly suited to representing traumata of all kinds, but especially conflict trauma. This introduction is constructed around the key words of the thesis title. Each word is discussed in turn, explaining the definition of each term and giving a rationale for the parameters each creates. The quotation that forms the first part of this thesis' title is taken from *The Punisher: Born* (2011), a five-part comic which acts as an alternate origin story for Frank Castle, alias 'The Punisher', a vigilante anti-hero. The traditional origin story states that Frank Castle became The Punisher after his family were killed in a mob shoot-out in Central Park. *The Punisher: Born* places Castle in Vietnam in 1971, as a US Marines Captain. Following a Viet Cong attack on his forces, Castle undergoes a transformation into a crazed super-soldier and seemingly wins the battle single-handed (the story does not make it clear whether this is an extreme psychotic break or if there is a supernatural aspect at play). The narrator of the story, a conscript, states, 'I will not die here. I will escape these fields of slaughter. I will not re-up and serve a second tour, will not become a combat junkie like so many of the others' (2011: 5). The story concentrates on the idea that some

⁷ That said, Eric Hobsbawm comments generously on the advent of the comic in the press in his book *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, when he writes, 'Perhaps the only genuinely innovatory forms of communication the press revived were cartoons, and even the early versions of the modern strip-cartoons which they took over from popular pamphlets and broadsheets in forms simplified for technical reasons' (1987: 238).

do ‘fall in love with combat’, especially Frank Castle (2011: 6). Rather than being a straightforward war comic, then, *The Punisher: Born* is more concerned with the allure of war and treats it as addictive. This illustrates a shift in mainstream comics, from glorified depictions of warfare to more subtly-constructed narratives that engage with the psychological and ideological complexities of conflict; in newer mainstream comics a strong anti-war undertone is not uncommon. The quotation in the title is ‘America through the looking-glass, lost in Vietnam’ (2011: 29). Within the comic, this quotation is a reference to the lack of clearly-defined enemy or battle plans that characterised American involvement in Vietnam. For the title the quotation has been trimmed, as the focus is wider than just Vietnam comics.

Conflict

Conflict: c.1500. A war, battle or armed fight, from Latin *conflictus* ‘strike together’, *con* + *fligere*. Competitive or opposing action of incompatibles; antagonistic state or action, The opposition of persons or forces that gives rise to dramatic action. (OED, 2013)

The vast majority of contemporary news articles relate to conflict, be it military, political, interpersonal or ideological (or all four). However, the terminology used for each separate incident can differ between events and sources. As the definition above shows, conflict can be used as an umbrella term to encompass all facets of violent, militarised confrontations between opposing groups. This thesis deals with several conflicts, each of which comes with its own issues in nomenclature.

The Second World War, the subject of C. Tyler's trilogy *You'll Never Know* (2009-12), ran from 1st September 1939 to 2nd September 1945. Most records list this conflict, which many historians suggest includes the Second Sino-Japanese War, as simply 'the Second World War' (Taylor, 1979: 124). It has been suggested that the term 'World War II', was popularised by *Time* magazine in 1939 (*Time*, 1939: online). However, the term entered official usage in September 1945, when it was used in the US Federal Register (US Government: online); 'Second World War' tends to be British usage, 'World War II' American. Both terms are accepted. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) is centred on a specific aspect of the Second World War – the Holocaust. This is the accepted English term for the events, which occurred from the late 1930s to 1945, and is used in this thesis. Though the Holocaust is not necessarily a conflict in and of itself, it is linked to the events of the Second World War and so is discussed in this thesis.

Several texts in this thesis deal with the conflict in Vietnam. There has been considerable discussion as to the best way to label this particular event. Most typically, it is referred to as the Vietnam War. However, some historians prefer the term 'Second Indochina War', especially as this places it into the context of a long-running conflict in Southeast Asia which ended with the Communist victory of 1975. The term 'Vietnam Conflict' acknowledges that the USA at no point declared war on North Vietnam. Indeed, legally this would be labelled a 'police action'. Interestingly, the common term in Vietnam, 'Chiến tranh Mỹ', translates as 'the American War'.⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'Vietnam War' is used, as it is the most widely used and accepted term.

A large body of work discussed herein deals with the terrorist attacks in the USA on the 11th of September 2001. The most widely used term for the events of this day is '9/11' (Sometimes rendered as 'September 11'). However, this term is often used to relate

⁸ The colourful official term as used by the Vietnamese Government is the 'Resistance War against the American Empire to Save the Nation' (*Chiến tranh giữ nước chống Đế quốc Mỹ*); this is becoming less common.

only to the destruction of the World Trade Centre, forgetting that there were two other events – the attack on the Pentagon and an attempted attack on, it is assumed, the White House, which was diverted by passengers on the plane.⁹The term itself is loaded with political connotations, especially as it quickly became accepted by The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission). Leon Wieseltier writes that ‘[the media] set to work, and “September 11” was born. “September 11” was the deadening of September 11’ (Wieseltier, 2002: online). Though Wieseltier primarily suggests that ‘9/11’ is a concept created for emotional manipulation, the term has also been adopted for political purposes. This thesis uses the term ‘9/11’ fully aware of its connotations, as it is instantly recognisable. 9/11 is not necessarily a conflict in the way we may traditionally think it. However, it is considered a conflict because of the violent confrontation and provocative nature of the event itself and for what it spawned – the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror’ and the enduring conflicts (and military involvement) in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What we recognise here is that there is conflict within the nomenclature of conflicts. Each conflict discussed above is called by different names depending on who is talking. In some cases this is a matter of geography – it would be strange for the Vietnam War to be called this by the Vietnamese– but in other cases it is more clearly a matter of political affiliation or ideological stance. This is most obviously the case with the ‘War on Terror’, a term coined by George W. Bush in 2001, following a statement by television news anchor Tom Brokaw that ‘terrorists have declared war on America’ (Brokaw, 2001). According to the Bush administration, the term signifies the global military, political, lawful and conceptual struggle against terrorism. However, it has been shunned by many, including the British Government, who formally rejected the use of the phrase in

⁹ This is discussed further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

2007(Benn, in Reynolds, 2007: online). The names chosen above have been decided upon with this conflict of nomenclature in mind.

When we think of a text of conflict, of what do we think? We may think of films that deal with historical conflicts – for example, Michael Bay’s 2001 film *Pearl Harbor*, older classics such as *The Great Escape*(1963) and, more recently, the Oscar-winning *The Hurt Locker*(2008). For the most part, the West has turned towards cinema as the primary narrative form of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Although this is being challenged in recent films, there is a tendency in cinema to glorify conflict. Mark Kermode suggests that this is ‘Hollywood’s attempt to emphasise heroism rather than horror’, adding that ‘they fail in this, only succeeding in erasing all the gore and truth from the battle’ (2011: 4). An example of this is the dubious portrayal of battle as a time of ceaseless glory and clearly-defined moral code in Frank Miller’s comic *300*, and the subsequent film adaptation by the same name, which has been widely criticised for its black-and-white view of the Spartan-Persian conflict and glamorous battle scenes. The question posed here is from where does this artistic preoccupation with conflict and war stem?

Fredric Jameson writes, ‘history is what hurts’ – that which is painful and destructive is what creates human history (2002: 102). War and conflict are among the most prevalent of human experiences. If we consider the huge numbers of wars and conflicts that have raged throughout history, then it is no surprise that the corpus of conflict literature is extensive. Indeed, the sheer volume of work on the topic makes it virtually impossible to state which is the first text of conflict to have been written. This is compounded by the basic fact that the majority of classical and medieval texts began as orally-transmitted stories, epic poems and sung ballads. If we briefly consider three great narrative forms – Elegy (ἐλεγεία), Tragedy (τραγῳδία) and Epic (ἔπος) – we can see that these three terms find their etymological roots in ancient Greek. This is not to say that

these forms are found only in the literature of ancient Greece, simply that the Greek terms have become customary in describing these forms. Furthermore, the earliest surviving examples of these forms in the Western Canon are often to be found in the literature of Greece.¹⁰ These three forms find much of their subject matter in war and conflict.

In his 1945 work *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in Der Abendländischen Literatur*, Erich Auerbach discusses literary reality from Homer's *Odyssey* to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Though the study is not specific to the topic of war literature, Auerbach's list of primary texts does include a great number that deal with war, directly or indirectly. This is especially evident in the inclusion of the three earlier texts: Ammianus Marcellinus' descriptions of mob riot and conflict in Rome; a section of Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*; and *La Chanson de Roland*, a heroic poem of the late eleventh century. It is relevant here to note that the first two are listed as 'historical texts'. It is not clear how much of the texts are historical fact but their inclusion shows the importance of historical battle narrative in the development of literature at the time.

Towards the middle of his survey, Auerbach introduces Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante de Cavalcanti – two Florentine aristocrats who are burning together in the tombs of the heretics in Dante's *Inferno*. They are from opposite sides of the warring factions in Florence, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. This conflict tore Florence apart in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and is, in part, the cause of Dante's exile from the city in 1301. These two men, though confined to the same tomb for eternity, have no interaction with each other. Their inclusion in the text shows the violent severing of relationships that can – and does – arise in times of conflict. They become a microcosmic representation of the divisions of war. Much of *Inferno* is structured around discourses of

¹⁰ I emphasise 'western' here as there are other considerably older examples of epic that come from Mesopotamia (e.g. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) and the Indian Subcontinent.

political and civil unrest – it has, as Alison Milbank suggests, ‘war as its framework’ (1998: 43).

Auerbach’s later text choices do not centre on plots of war and conflict, but do discuss it. The final chapter concerns Woolf and Proust. Though neither *To the Lighthouse* nor *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* discuss conflict explicitly, both were written and published around the time of the First World War or shortly thereafter. It is difficult to imagine a text written at this time that was not in some way touched by the effects of the war. Indeed, there is a relationship between modernist narrative forms and conflict. We see the same fragmentation of narrative in many works of Modernist literature as is commonplace in the literature of trauma. The stream of consciousness narrative which features in so many modernist works (most notably the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce) references a similar fragmentation of experience. In this respect, the First World War and its traumatic legacy has affected narrative structure. Auerbach writes, ‘If an author wishes to write what is real, he will often have to write what is unpleasant’ (1988: 267). We have returned to our initial quotation from Jameson: ‘history is what hurts’. Literature that grows from this history must, then, also hurt.

Auerbach’s analyses end with the First World War. As I previously mentioned, the texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries do not hold conflict as their central concern. There are, of course, many novels of this time period that do discuss war explicitly– for example, Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869) and Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) – but it would not be an exaggeration to suggest, as Robert Uphaus does, that the novels of this period are concerned more with scenes of domesticity and the private sphere than with public concerns and war (1988: 17). Though we could suggest that this is not something we see in

the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the truth of the situation is more complicated than that.

There is a healthy corpus of conflict literature that has been steadily growing since the First World War, much of which has entered the canon. Texts such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) are explicit conflict texts in the tradition of Homer. If we look at O'Brien's collection of short stories *The Things They Carried*, it is not necessarily that we see a clear-cut narrative of conflict as much as an exploration of the complex negotiations between personal relationships and public conflict. O'Brien's stories are concerned with the smaller details of the war or, more accurately, the soldiers who fight it. In the eponymous story he writes at great length about each character's personal cargo – everything from photographs to cannabis – which reduces the war further into minutiae than we see in Heller's *Catch-22*. Heller structures his work around the increasingly bizarre personal relationships of the characters – both professional and romantic – and the now-famous paradoxical statement that forms the novel's title. Still, we do not see 'The War' discussed as much as the small details of those who are involved in it, regardless of the size of their input or the value of it. Hollywood representations may have lost this, wanting to make war appear a noble act with a victorious conclusion. War becomes a single, massive event and such representations do not give credence to the smaller, more human aspects of conflict. Tim O'Brien writes:

And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (O'Brien, 1991: 81)

Conflict literature, then, is by no means a straightforward genre to analyse; it is far more than battle narratives and military manoeuvres. It is also a literature of traumatic experiences, the difficulties faced in recovery and a multitude of small things that combine to create a conflict experienced by the individuals that recreate it in art. Conflict art does not concentrate so much on the overarching conflict as those that exist within it – conflicts within conflicts. This thesis takes these complexities into consideration as major factors that can affect the representation of the overarching conflict.

Traumatic Representation

The texts that are discussed in this thesis are not fictional – at least, not entirely. The majority are often categorised under ‘memoir’ and for the one text that cannot be considered non-fiction, *The ‘Nam*, the line between fiction and non-fiction is blurred. While the characters in *The ‘Nam* may be creations of the authors, the events are not. Furthermore, writer Doug Murray and series editor Larry Hama are veterans of the Vietnam War. The experiences contained within the series draw much inspiration from the real war experiences of the creators. In an interview with CBR, Doug Murray said, ‘I wanted to share things from the perspective of the grunts and also include some of my own experiences in Vietnam. My tours were the greatest inspiration for the series’ (Murray, 2008: online). For the rest of the texts in this thesis, there is very little argument that what is contained herein is historically true, albeit mediated by the comics form. Indeed, four of the texts (*American Widow*, *Maus*, *Vietnamerica* and the *You’ll Never Know Trilogy*) are explicitly autobiographical and describe the process of their creation within the narrative.

Thus we can say of these texts that they are representations of, for the most part, autobiographical truth.

And yet, the term ‘autobiographical truth’ is problematic. A useful case study is that of Benjamin Wilkomirski. In 1998, a controversial article was published in the Swiss periodical *Weltwoche*. Daniel Ganzfried, a Swiss journalist, questioned the veracity of Wilkomirski’s highly acclaimed Holocaust memoir *Bruchstück: Aus Einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, published in 1995.¹¹ Since its publication, *Bruchstück* had won several awards, including the National Jewish Book Award and *Le Prix Memoire de la Shoah*. The book was widely praised and Wilkomirski was enjoying a great deal of media attention. However, Ganzfried’s investigations proved that the vast majority of the memoir – including his reports of events that happened in both Auschwitz and Majdanek, his date and place of birth and also his name – was fabricated (Ganzfried in Hefti, 2002: 34). Latvian-born Benjamin Wilkomirski is really Bruno Grosjean, born in 1941 in Switzerland. The revelation that this celebrated memoir was completely false was shocking. However, what many critics and psychologists who were involved in the Wilkomirski affair noted was that Wilkomirski appeared genuinely to believe his fabricated past. When challenged by his agent, and confronted with a large amount of evidence of his real identity, Wilkomirski allegedly yelled ‘I AM BINJAMIN WILKOMIRSKI!’ The fact that he appears genuinely to believe his own lies and has placed himself in the company of survivors is of more interest to scholars of traumatic identity than the narrative itself. That this man had a troubled past is proven. In order to overcome his difficult childhood he takes on the mantle of Holocaust survivor and becomes a victim of the highest order, commanding the respect of millions: ‘as a child survivor he is

¹¹ The book was published in Anglophone countries with the title *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*.

the most innocent of all the innocents and the most deserving of pity' (Maechler, 2001: 70). Maechler further writes:

Once the professed interrelationship between the first-person narrator, the death-camp story he narrates, and historical reality are proved palpably false, what was a masterpiece becomes kitsch. (2001: 81)

Though Maechler makes a valid point, the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski brings into question the importance of unvarnished truth in memoir. Undoubtedly, for a memoir to be a retelling of the experiences of a person's life basic historical fact must be accurate –there are facts in every narrative that are indisputable. However, memoirs are representations of individual experience and how the individual represents that experience is unique to that individual and that experience.¹² Virginia Woolf likens the writing of biography (and autobiography) to a balancing act, between granite and rainbows. She writes:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other, there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (Woolf, 2008: 95)

If the 'standard' biographer struggles to balance the granite-truth and rainbow-personality, then the biographer of trauma faces an even bigger challenge. Applying the muddying filter of traumatic experience to the already-complex genre of memoir confuses matters further; Wilkomirski's book exemplifies to an extraordinary extent how using the rhetoric of trauma can produce a strong reaction of empathy on the part of the reader (Maechler,

¹² An excellent example of this sort of memoir is Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which, as Rocco Versaci writes, 'delivers five dreamlike stories that delve into her family and cultural history in order to reveal her own' (Versaci, 2008: 37). Her five vignettes are not necessarily factually true but nonetheless reveal to the reader the experiences of Kingston's life and personal history in a way that is arguably more evocative and effective than a 'straight memoir'.

2001: 66).For O'Brien, autobiography and memoir is less about 'actual truth' and more about finding ways to communicate the experience to those who were not there. He writes:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (O'Brien, 1991: 157)

The first chapter of this thesis is a study of the nature of traumatic ruptures and memory.

It is crucial to the discussion of the memoiristic nature of the texts in this thesis that their creation is considered as being a part of the process of recovery. In his short essay 'Sketches for the Preliminary Communication of 1893', Freud lays the groundwork for his work on cathartic therapy with Josef Breuer in *Studies in Hysteria*. He writes, 'If we can succeed in bringing [a traumatic experience] into normal consciousness, it ceases to be capable of producing attacks' (Freud, 2001c: 151). This is the basis of his theory of abreaction, the idea that 'pent-up emotions associated with a trauma can be discharged by talking or writing about it' (Akhtar, 2009: 1). Abreaction is the precursor to modern writing therapy, most famously (and vocally) advocated by Dr James Pennebaker in the 1980s, which has become a key aspect of psychological therapy for traumatised individuals. This is discussed further in the section 'Since 1975'.

American

Every text bar one in this thesis was written by a person who, while not necessarily American by background, is resident in America and has been for the majority of their life. The comics creators here discussed are American nationals. This distinction allows me to

consider the work of Art Spiegelman (born in Sweden to Polish parents) and GB Tran (born in the US but to Vietnamese refugee parents). While these two are not American by ethnicity (i.e. parents' nationality) or, for Spiegelman, by birth, they have adopted American citizenship and are resident in the US. The only exception to this is the inclusion of Dave Sim's *Judenhass* in Chapter 6. Sim is Canadian and his works are published by his own publishing house in Ontario. This is not a major deviation from my original parameters as he is still a North American writer.

Several factors influence my decision to concentrate my research on American comics. The focus is on conflict, a theme that is rampant in American comics, thanks to the influence of the mainstream publishing houses on the development of the form as a whole.¹³ Indeed, the nature of the mainstream comics houses and the 'set' story arcs thrive on conflict between warring factions. As the next section, 'Comics', demonstrates, several of the more enduring mainstream characters, especially Captain America, were originally conceived as propaganda figures during World War II, their origins inextricably bound up in international conflict. It is fair to say that America has been a major player in the majority of conflicts since World War II, due largely to their position as a superpower. For a nation that is so heavily involved in military matters it makes perfect sense for that nation's art (in the broadest sense of the word) to discuss these matters; if this were not the case it would be conspicuous by its absence.

The final justification for the sole use of American comics is the simple fact that the vast majority of comics publishers are American. While there are a number of noted and influential publishers based in Europe and Canada (Drawn and Quarterly in Canada; Casterman in Belgium; DC Thompson in the UK; Shueisha in Japan) by far the most productive and influential are based in the US – especially DC, Marvel, Fantagraphics and

¹³ For an explanation of 'mainstream' see next section on 'Comics'.

Dark Horse. This is especially relevant when discussing mainstream comics. In recent years, many publishing houses have begun publishing comics. For example, Villard, an imprint of Random House, has published many comics, including GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* and Alissa Torres' *American Widow*. The publishing of comics is no longer confined to specific comics publishers and has entered the realm of general publishing. That said, these are often American publishers and there is still a huge amount of comics that come from specific comics houses.

Comics

In order to undertake any serious scholarly analysis of comics, we must first be able to define what is meant by the term itself – what *is* comics? Scott McCloud constructs a somewhat convoluted definition which picks up on a key aspect of the form – that it involves images in sequence which aim to convey information to the reader. For the sake of clarity (and word count) McCloud accepts the term that is favoured by Will Eisner: sequential art (McCloud, 1994: 9; Eisner, 2008). Both definitions make it clear that the crux of the comics form is the use of artistic technique for narrative purpose. David Carrier is quick to ‘distinguish comics from traditional static images – paintings, engravings and other prints – and from movies, pictures that when projected move automatically’ (Carrier, 2000, 1). Comics is a separate form that, although indebted to other forms and media, should not be considered less worthy than its more ‘high culture’ siblings. Neither should comics be considered a precursor to film; the comic strip has much in common with film storyboards but with one substantial difference. The film storyboard is not the finished

product – it exists solely to act as a guide for the creation of a filmic narrative. Conversely, the comic is a narrative in and of itself.

The history of comics is a relatively short but tempestuous one. There is no definitive birthday for the form – nor is there a categorical ‘first text’. Certainly, the modern comics form is influenced by more than just its comic predecessors, political cartooning and newspaper daily ‘funny pages’. However, it was not until 1935 that comic strips were combined into what Danny Fingeroth calls ‘tabloid-sized anthologies, known as “comic books”’ (2008: 13).¹⁴ Such was the popularity of these new ‘comic books’ that the demand for them had to be met with original material not previously printed in the newspapers. One of the most productive publishers at this point was National Allied Publications, now known as DC Comics. It was at this point in time that superheroes first appeared, starting with Superman in *Action Comics #1* in 1938.

This is a particularly remarkable time for such a character to be created, being the year before the start of World War II. The early superheroes were all, to some extent, symbols of nationalist pride and Superman is no exception.¹⁵ However, it was the introduction of Captain America in 1941 that opened up the comics form as a medium for conveying nationalist pride and encouraging ‘homeland morale’. The co-creator, Joe Simon, said Captain America was a ‘consciously political creation as [Jack Kirby and I] felt war was inevitable: The opponents to the war were all quite well organized. We wanted to have our say too’ (Kirby, quoted in Wright, 2003: 26). Living up to his name, the character that was created was shown to be fiercely patriotic, as demonstrated by his

¹⁴ Many scholars of the Franco-Belgian tradition argue that many works, especially those of Hergé, were anthologised long before any American works. However, the first *Tintin* story was published in 1928 in serial form in *Le Petit Vingtième* and was not published as a complete book until 1931. This is only a difference of 4 years.

¹⁵ Superman is more than just a nationalist figure, though this is a major aspect of the character. He is also an immigrant (more bluntly an alien from the Planet Krypton), created by two young first generation Jewish immigrants, representative of the huge immigrant population of the United States.

costume. In the first issue Captain America deflects a Nazi bullet while punching Hitler (Kirby and Simon, reproduced in *Marvel Masterworks*, 2005).



Fig. x.2 – Excerpt from cover of 'Captain America #1', Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, 1941. Image used under fair dealings provisions for the purpose of scholarly discussion.

Fingerroth writes, 'by the early 1950s, the superhero comics fad was pretty much dead. DC Comics published Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, but that was all. The genre that sold in huge numbers was horror' (2008: 14). Unfortunately, at the same time, comics were gaining notoriety among those who feared their children were being corrupted. In 1940, a Chicago journalist, Sterling North, wrote:

Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed – a strain on the young eyes and young nervous systems – the effects of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil a child's natural sense of colour; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazine. (North, in Duncan and Smith, 2009: 274)

At the time, North's diatribe did very little. However, in 1954 Dr Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, the influence of which is still felt in the comics world today. Wertham stated that comics were a major cause of juvenile delinquency. Critics of Wertham's study pointed out that Wertham studied only 'juvenile delinquents', without comparing them to 'normal' children; Wertham responded that the kids who did not become delinquents may, bizarrely, be worse off (Duncan and Smith, 2009: 275). There is no evidence that children who read comics are at risk of delinquency (or, indeed, of mental instability, psychological distress or any other ill effect). Wertham does not state how the children who avoid delinquency are worse off, nor does he give examples of non-delinquent children suffering from the effects of comics reading. That said, he did argue that comics confused children's knowledge of physics (due to superpowers), implemented homosexual ideas (due to the prevalence of young male sidekicks) and that female superheroes gave children 'wrong ideas' about the place of women in society.

The objections of Wertham and his supporters led to a US Senate Investigation and then to the creation of the Comic Magazine Association of America (CMAA) and the Comics Code Authority (CCA). Only comics that bore the CCA stamp were allowed to be sold. It is thanks to the harsh regulations that killed off the horror genre that the Superhero genre was revitalised into its Silver Age (1956 – c. 1970). To a twenty-first century reader, the regulations of the CCA seem at best strict, at worst hilarious. Perhaps the most amusing to those familiar with the history of female superheroes is the following rule: 'Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities' (CCA:CBLDF online, 2012). Though the CCA has not been used since 2011 – and no longer has any power over which comics are published and distributed in the USA – at the time it brought the comics industry to its knees and was responsible for several companies going out of business.

In the 1920s, 30s and 40s ‘Tijuana Bibles’, cheaply printed pornographic comics, grew in popularity, mostly due to their ready availability compared to traditional pornography. They usually depicted well-known comics characters engaging in sexual acts. The availability of pornographic material in the 1950s meant that this sub-set died out but it did act as the predecessor to what became known as ‘Underground Comix’ – the ‘x’ bringing attention to the slightly deviant and ‘X-rated’ potential of their content. Fingerioth writes, ‘the underground comix were about as far from the mainstream as it was possible to be... that was the whole point’ (2008: 17). Underground ‘comix’ intentionally moved away from ‘house drawing styles’, as were common in mainstream comics, and catered to an older readership. Though the movement originally began as a rebellion against the mainstream, it was a huge part of the birth of what we may now call ‘graphic novels’. Perhaps one of the most famous ‘graphic novelists’, Art Spiegelman, began as the founder of *Raw Magazine*, a comix where many now well-known artists started out. Indeed, Spiegelman has said that ‘without *Binky Brown* [one of the first underground comix to deal with especially dark and psychologically rich material] there would be no *Maus*’ (Spiegelman, in Fingerioth, 2009: 18). The underground movement allowed many up-and-coming artists to hone their skills without being constrained by the requirements and rules of the mainstream comics world.

Since the late 1980s, when comics began telling more serious or realistic or complex stories, the form has exploded with a wealth of material, with texts ranging from Chris Ware’s heart-breaking *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) to Charles Burns’ adolescent narrative *Black Hole* (2005). Stephen Weiner considers the huge corpus of comics memoirs to be of special interest. He contends that the form is well-suited to ‘illustrating grand narratives and the grandest of all is love – familial, romantic, personal’ (2003: 5). Comics is taking on big topics and big stories and, for the most part, doing so

very well. Many mainstream artists turned from superheroes to writing and drawing their own work. Comics are available in most bookshops – albeit often on their own little shelf and the selection is often sparse. The form is also being taken on as a serious literary form for consideration in academic circles – as this thesis proves – but scholars must still fight for the legitimacy of the form.

As comics is a relatively new form in academia, the form-specific lexicon is limited at best and will require some explanation to those not familiar with the terms. This thesis draws on the work of Thierry Groensteen and Scott McCloud for their technical terminology, as both are widely respected comics scholars and the terminology they use is accepted in the field. Mort Walker's 2000 text *The Lexicon of Comicana* offers some quirky terms for the more specific elements of the form. My reasons for using Walker's terms are two-fold: his terms adequately explain a single and isolated comics technique in one succinct word and these words are (usually) amusing and pleasant. Furthermore, Walker's terms are becoming more widely used in comics scholarship. They will be explained when they are used.

The discussion within this thesis avoids using cinematic language, as is so often the case with comics criticism, or suggesting that the two forms are very closely connected. Comics are not films. Though there is a basic similarity between film storyboards and comics, the massive difference is that storyboards are not a completed narrative and serve only as guidelines for the production team. The finished film is a separate entity again. Though it is a completed narrative, film and comics differ most obviously in their amount of reader control over the construction of the narrative itself, as discussed throughout. Furthermore, avoiding filmic terminology avoids the suggestion that comics aspire to be films, a comment that occasionally appears in reviews (though this tendency is on the

wane). However, the use of some film terminology is unavoidable in places, especially when discussing angle and perspective.

It is my personal preference to abstain from referring to comics as ‘graphic novels’. This term is most often used to pertain to longer narratives that are contained within one book (the most typical use of the term) or a serialised narrative that is collected into one bound volume (although these may also be referred to as trade paperbacks or TPBs). Art Spiegelman claims that graphic novels are ‘long comic books that require a bookmark’ (Spiegelman, 2011b). My quibble with this term is related to both its history and the status that the term has achieved when discussing comics. The history of the term is disputed; it is typically attributed to Will Eisner and his 1978 book *A Contract with God*. This book was almost singlehandedly responsible for the adoption of the term. However, the willingness to credit Eisner with this is likely to be due to his popularity and seniority within the comics world.¹⁶ That said, in 1976, two years before Eisner’s book, three different texts used the term: Richard Corben *Bloodstar*, George Metzger’s *Beyond Time and Again* (previously serialised in an underground comics magazine) and Jim Steranko’s *Chandler: Red Tide*, the first self-proclaimed graphic novel to be sold on newsstands. Indeed, from 1976 onwards the term appeared on comics works of all genres and of varying lengths. There are many issues with the term. On the most basic level the two words themselves are problematic. ‘Graphic’ can suggest ‘violent and/or sexually explicit’ as much as ‘image-laden’; ‘novels’ are automatically assumed to be fictional but a huge number of comics (especially those that are considered canonical) are auto- or semi-autobiographical, reportage or non-fiction. Furthermore, it is often considered (especially by reviewers) as a compliment but ‘using it as praise implies that comics as a form aspire to being novels or movies’ (Wolk, 2007: 13). Douglas Wolk quotes the example of a reviewer for *The Nation*

¹⁶ In 2003, *Time* magazine published an article in which Eisner stated that he did not know that the term had been previously used and he did not take credit for the invention of the term (Arnold, 2003: online)

who, after stating ‘it has never been a habit of mine to read comics books’, notes that she was surprised she enjoyed Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* – and was further surprised to find it to be a beautifully crafted work. As such, this reviewer thought it wrong to call *Persepolis* a comic book, a term so loaded with snobbish stigma.

Wolk and many other comics creators and theorists are critical of the term ‘graphic novel’. Daniel Raeburn, founder and writer of *The Imp* writes, ‘I snicker at the neologism first for its insecure pretension – the literary equivalent of calling a garbage man a ‘sanitation engineer’ – and second because a ‘graphic novel’ is in fact the very thing it is ashamed to admit: a comic book’ (2004: 110). Neil Gaiman makes a similar comment when he claimed that being told he wrote graphic novels instead of comics he ‘felt like someone who’d been informed that she wasn’t actually a hooker; that in fact she was a lady of the evening’ (Gaiman, in Bender, 1999: 32). Indeed, the term has faced criticism and ridicule from all manner of voices within the comics world. As a response to this, many comics creators use their own terms to describe their works. Daniel Clowes refers to his 2001 work *Ice Haven* as a ‘comic strip novel’, whereas Craig Thompson prefers ‘illustrated novel’ for his 2003 auto-biography *Blankets*.

Several other terms do exist – *bandes-dessinées* for Franco-Belgian comics, *fumetti* for Italian comics and also photo-comics – but these typically refer to the aforementioned specific subsets within the umbrella of comics.¹⁷ To my mind, the term ‘graphic novels’ serves to give legitimacy to a form that has been unfairly tarnished by its past as a mass-produced medium, or more precisely by high cultural prejudices about the age of mass production. Comics have earned their stripes as a legitimate narrative form. As such, there is no reason why a long comic that deals with ‘serious’ issues and memoir should have any special term, hence my preference for the original term ‘comic’.

¹⁷ A photo-comic uses photographs or film stills instead of artwork, along with bubbles and captions, to create the narrative.

The rationale for concentrating on comics is twofold. First (and most crucially), the comics form is an excellent medium for the discussion and representation of traumatic experience. The form does not shy away from representing conflict. In fact, the visual nature of the form makes it ideal for representing trauma and conflict. Both trauma and conflict are intensely visual phenomena. In terms of conflict, this is reflected in the term ‘theatre of war’. This term was first used in about 1580 to describe a geographical area and was used specifically for the location of a conflict in 1914 (OED, 2012). The Greek root of the word comes from ‘θεάομαι’ (‘to see’ or ‘to view’); the concept of theatre is intrinsically bound up in the necessity of viewing. The visual nature of conflict trauma and the visual nature of comics bind together in the comics of this thesis in their representations of conflict trauma. As this thesis demonstrates, the comics form is not simply visual but aspects of the form can be used to reproduce and mimic the experience of a traumatic rupture.

The second reason relates to the age of comics scholarship. It is still a young area of scholarship and there is a dearth of academic publications, despite the healthy catalogue of comics in publication. Certainly it is the case that there is very little scholarly interest in the relationship between comics and trauma, though traumatic readings of literature and film are well-represented in the overarching field of trauma studies. However, the void in comics studies is beginning to be filled and this thesis will assist in joining the two fields of trauma studies and comics.

Since 1975

This thesis is specific in its publication dates. No primary text discussed in this thesis was written prior to 1975.¹⁸ 1975 was chosen because the Fall of Saigon, which signalled the end of the Vietnam War and American military involvement in Southeast Asia, occurred on 1st April 1975. This defeat for the American military shifted the popular opinion of conflict in the American consciousness, though this shift had been on-going throughout the American occupation of Vietnam, thanks to the growing anti-war movement. Formal demonstrations to the war began small. On 12th May 1964, twelve men in New York City publically burned their draft cards (Gottlieb, 1991: xix). By October 1965, thousands of people were congregating for anti-war protest marches across the world. Protests such as that at Kent State University in May 1970 (this protest was specifically against the invasion of Cambodia and the reigniting of fighting in Vietnam) in which the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four unarmed students in thirteen seconds, injuring a further nine, and the April 1971 march on the Capitol, in which veterans discarded over 700 medals and over 500,000 people marched, a public, potent manifestation of the depth of negative feeling towards the nation's involvement.

Coupled with the thousands of unposed, unedited photographs of the experiences of the front line and the daily televised reports, the Vietnam War was responsible for a shift in the perception of conflict within American society and, furthermore, a shift in the treatment of returning veterans. Vietnam veteran James 'Bud' O'Reilly states, 'Vietnam vets are among the most fucked up because we had so little training. Twelve weeks, here's your gun, off you go and shoot at the VC. That's no way to prepare a man to kill someone. I don't even think some of the guys realised they were going to get shot at. And we got back to nothing' (O'Reilly, 2012). General David Petraeus states, 'Vietnam cost the

¹⁸ Though the initial publication of *Maus* was in 1986, the 3-page comic that Spiegelman wrote prior to beginning the full-length work was published in *Funny Animals* in 1972. However, as this is not the specific text studied – and differs greatly in content and artistic style – then this to negate my publication date stipulations.

military dearly [...] it robbed them of good men and dignity' (Petraeus, in Miles, 2011). Thus, the Vietnam War caused the American military seriously to reconsider their courses of action, organisations and personnel strategy.

It can be noted that since the Vietnam War there has been a shift in conflict literature and, moreover, an increase in the number of combat veterans who have become successful writers, with an emphasis in their writing about their experiences. Many of these books (it would be inaccurate to describe them as fiction, though equally inaccurate to label them non-fiction; so often trauma literature blurs the boundaries between the two) have achieved critical acclaim and a wider readership. Others have been made into successful Hollywood films (Gustav Hasford's *The Short-timer* became *Full Metal Jacket*; Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* was filmed under the same title). For O'Brien 'telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat' (1991: 151). This inevitability and need to tell one's experience is repeated over and over again in representations of trauma. The issue that is then faced, as discussed in Chapter 1, is the seemingly impossible task of giving voice to the traumatic experience.

The founding of Fantagraphics Books in 1976 helped underground comix move into more visible publishing circles, as this was a publishing house willing to print works that were previously of little interest to the more established companies. As a publisher they were a key force in '[establishing]comics as a medium as eloquent and expressive as the more established popular arts of film, literature, poetry, et al' (Fantagraphics, 2013: online). Spurred on by the increasing popularity and market visibility of comics, Roger Sabin suggests, the biggest year in the forward momentum of this new breed of comics was 1986 (2001: 98). This was the year of publication of three major works of the form, all of which remain both popular and influential today: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, an intense retelling of his family's Holocaust experiences and the only comic (to date) to win a

Pulitzer Prize; Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, in which the familiar superhero contemplates the threat of a dystopian future; and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, a work of dense political criticism, set in an alternate America on the brink of nuclear war. Their publication not only opened the comics world to the prospect of complex plots and 'serious' themes, but also gave new possibilities for different and innovative artistic styles.

This thesis finds its theoretical grounding in the two diverse fields of comics and trauma theory. Contemporary trauma theory comprises a complex body of work, which draws on both clinical definitions and cultural understandings of the impact of trauma on both the individual and the wider society. Chapter 1 forms the literature review of this thesis. The chapter is divided into four parts. First, it clarifies the thesis' position within the wider field of trauma theory, rooting my argument in relation to clinical and psycho-social theories. Secondly, it gives an overview of Freudian trauma theory. The nature of trauma was of interest to Freud throughout his career, beginning with *Studies in Hysteria* (1896) and remaining a key theme in his work until his last monograph, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). This chapter uses Cathy Caruth's commentary on Freudian trauma studies, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), to complement Freud's works and understand their position in modern scholarship. Following this, a survey of three key post-Freudian trauma theorists – Jacques Lacan, Dominick LaCapra and Kalí Tal – is presented and critiqued. These three theorists take different directions within trauma studies. Lacan develops Freud's ideas of trauma by considering a traumatic experience to be an encounter with the 'Real'; he combines Freudian psychoanalysis with orders of meaning. LaCapra, a historian by training, moves away from a strictly psychoanalytical view and instead considers the act of writing historical trauma. His most famous book,

Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001), discusses two methodologies for writing traumatic accounts. It is LaCapra's insistence that both objective fact and personal impact are crucial to the creation of a well-rounded account. In contrast to both Lacan and LaCapra, Tal eschews any theory in favour of individual, personal experience. What is important to Tal is the lack of hierarchy between literature and personal narrative. Her work gives equal attention to all traumatic narratives, including the Holocaust, Vietnam and personal trauma. Despite her refusal to engage with other key writers in trauma studies, Tal's work is worthy of attention as it realises the importance of the individual in the recreation of traumatic experiences in literature and narrative art.

The final part of Chapter 1 is a detailed analysis of three formal aspects that are of utmost importance in the creation of comics in general and trauma comics in particular. Each separate aspect is considered as a typical comics technique and then critiqued in the light of traumatic representation to give a preliminary outline as to how these aspects are used within the comics discussed in this thesis. As comics theory is a new and largely-uncharted territory, this introductory analysis of the three most visible aspects of the form removes the need to repeat myself throughout the body of the thesis when considering each aspect. Furthermore, it allows the reader to become aware of and comfortable with some of the more basic comics terminology and analytical techniques.

Chapter 2 begins with a survey of three key conflict texts: *The Iliad*, *Beowulf* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*. These three important works of western literature have a single thematic thread in common – that conflict texts are all, to some extent, mourning texts. All of the comics discussed within this thesis are concerned with mourning or rituals of death, although some only to a small degree and others in a tangential manner. The most obvious text discussed in this chapter is Alissa Torres' *American Widow* (2008), which is first and foremost a depiction of the writer's work of mourning, much of it in line with the 'Five

Stages of Grief’ as explained by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Kübler-Ross’ framework is used, along with Freud’s work on mourning, for my analysis of this text. In a similar vein, there is much to be discussed on mourning and especially shrine-building in the anthologies of short comics published to raise money for September 11th Relief Charities.¹⁹ One of the short 9/11 comics, which uses the framework of the Jewish Yom Kippur celebration is compared with Art Spiegelman’s short ‘Prisoner from the Hell Planet’ (1973, reproduced in *Maus*), which takes its cue from his mother’s death and funeral. Both comics use religious death rituals to discuss their traumatic experiences – the differences are considered, with special emphasis on the use of religion as a comfort.

Chapter 3 tackles the issue of the representations of traumatic dream sequences in five different comics. To strengthen my analysis this chapter begins by outlining clinical studies on traumatic dreaming, the Freudian dream-work and explorations of Freud’s work by post-Freudian scholars Jacques Lacan and Cathy Caruth. The dream sequences discussed here are divided into two groups – dreams of traumatic experience and dreams of traumatic loss. The first section includes *The ‘Nam* and *Maus*. Ed Marks’ combat dream is the clearest rendering of a traumatic dream in any comic in this thesis. *Maus* has two instances of relevance here. The first is Vladek’s dream of his grandfather and the second is not a dream in itself, but a discussion between Art and Françoise regarding Vladek’s sleep disturbances. The second section also contains three sequences of interest. Both *American Widow* and ‘Untitled’ present similar dreams of traumatic loss, both presented as a search for the deceased lover. The last dream is that of a young boy, dreaming of his deceased mother, a distinctly different dream to any other in this chapter. This chapter discusses the dreams within each section individually and then compares them to each other, before then comparing the two separate groups. Though both types of traumatic dreams

¹⁹ These texts are henceforth referred to as ‘the 9/11 Charity Comics’ for ease of nomenclature. When a specific comic is mentioned, I will reference it separately.

have similarities, their content and manifestations in comics are markedly different. This chapter considers the reasons for these dreams' use within the wider narrative of each comic and the specific artistic techniques employed in their representation.

Three of the texts in this thesis (*Maus* [2003], *Vietnamerica* [2011] and *You'll Never Know* Trilogy [2009-2012]) are explicit retellings of family stories, in which the parents of the author were directly involved (and often imprisoned) in major conflicts. A major theme in each of these texts is the child-author working through and coming to terms with the events that their parents survived – events which have unquestionably had an effect on the way the children were raised and how they are as adults. The fourth chapter of this thesis seeks to answer the question of how the trauma of the parents influences the personal identity of their children. This chapter draws on Freud's last book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) as well as Abraham and Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), and Gabriele Schwab's 2010 book *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. In addition to this, there is a discussion of Theodore Lidz's theory of the 'schizophrenogenic mother' (see *Schizophrenia and the Family*, 1985) to consider how the mental health of traumatised parents creates a familial atmosphere that raises traumatised children. Finally, the wider social and cultural implications of these identity crises are considered. In the case of both Spiegelman and Tran, their first-generation immigrant status conflicts with the national identity of their parents. In Spiegelman's case, his personal religious identity is at odds with that of his parents; this is compounded when we consider that it is this religious identity that is at the root of his parents' trauma.

Chapters 5 and 6 move away from questions of content and theme within conflict comics and consider questions of form and genre. In Chapter 5, a dialogue between the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope and the creative process of comics is

opened; building on ideas of traumatic temporal fractures that is discussed in Chapter 1. Although comics certainly fit into the complex definition that Bakhtin offers for the chronotope, trauma comics break with the conventions of the form, as traumatic representation is wont to do. Much of this chapter deals with challenges to narrative linearity, looking at the use of fractured and framed narratives. *The 'Nam* (1986-1993) uses complex temporal structures and framing devices that are not typical in mainstream publications, helping to mimic the chronological ruptures that a traumatised individual may experience. Lastly, this chapter examines problems of temporal representation created when superheroes become involved, as shown in the 9/11 Charity Comics²⁰, using Umberto Eco's essay 'The Myth of Superman' (1997). Eco's critique can also be used in relation to *The 'Nam*, which does involve the characters interacting with actual historical events, though in a different way and to different ends than with superhero involvement.

Chapter 6 attempts to answer the questions of whether both comics and trauma can be seen as postmodernist and, by extension, whether trauma comics are a distinctly postmodern enterprise. In order to answer this, the argument begins by considering the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, especially in the work of Linda Hutcheon and Jean-François Lyotard. The linking factor between comics, trauma and postmodernism is time. This chapter is a prolonged discussion of the relationship between temporal ruptures, comics ruptures and postmodernism's preoccupation with brokenness. It concludes with a discussion of three Holocaust comics and how they sit in relation to the overarching issues created by looking at comics and trauma through a postmodernist lens.

Each chapter of this thesis concentrates on a separate issue. As such, they can be read as individual case studies within the fields of trauma and comics. However, collectively this thesis is a study of the formal and thematic aspects of comics that make it

²⁰ 9/11 Charity Comics is a term I apply to the corpus of comics released by Marvel, DC and Dark Horse to raise money for the American Red Cross and other charities that worked with survivors and families in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

ideal for the artistic representation and recreation of conflict trauma. This is the thread that runs through the thesis *in toto* – that comics can represent trauma in ways that are unavailable to other narrative and artistic forms.

Chapter One

Representing the Traumatic

In *Henry IV Part I*, William Shakespeare presents an accurate description of the effects of war-induced trauma on an individual. Lady Percy, wife of Henry Percy, questions her husband as to his behaviour following frequent military campaigns (Act II, scene iii). She speaks of him refusing his wife's company (line 39-40), losing his appetite (42) and turning very pale (45). She goes on to describe him talking in his sleep and having nightmares (50-56), crying 'Courage! To the field!' (51) and sweating profusely (60). Percy is an able soldier (nicknamed 'Hotspur') and so it seems unusual to her that such a man would be given to nightmares and distant behaviour.²¹ He does not give in to his wife's questions (though she threatens to break his finger) and so the trauma remains secret and untreated. Lady Percy's appraisal of her husband's condition can be seen as an early record of the symptoms of a traumatic rupture arising from violent military conflict.

²¹ Indeed, as I discuss later in this chapter, the notion of the brave soldier being immune to trauma and the traumatised soldier being weak and cowardly was common into the twentieth century.

In her 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes that ‘the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness [...] Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried’ (1992: 1). Herman’s comment stands as a fitting summary of a century of psychological scholarship concerned with the ‘unknowability’ of the traumatic. It is from this central issue – the persistence of atrocity within consciousness – that trauma theory takes its lead. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the development of theories of trauma and their relevance to discussions of the representation of conflict in comics; to discuss some of the more pertinent theories found in psychological thought, especially the work of Sigmund Freud; and to consider contemporary clinical studies of trauma so as to create an overall definition and theoretical basis for this thesis.

As is commonly observed, the word ‘trauma’ finds its root in the Greek word ‘τραῦμα’ (‘wound’). The term was initially a physical one (as one still finds in much medical literature); however, the term has become widely adopted in psychological and emotional discourse. The following quotation is taken from Cathy Caruth as my benchmark for a definition of trauma:

the wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (1996: 19)

Caruth’s definition raises many points that are important for discussions of trauma. We are aware of the wound-like nature of psychic trauma. However, Caruth makes the point that this wound is not ‘healable’. It is not possible fully to be healed of a psychic trauma, though the condition can be ameliorated to some degree. She writes that trauma is ‘experienced too soon’. This statement is curious in itself but speaks to the shattering of normal temporality that is common in traumatic experience. The event is not experienced

as it happens. Rather, the mind works to protect itself and it is only after the event that the individual begins to witness it; hence, 'it is not available to consciousness' and the individual may only begin to experience the event retroactively 'in nightmares and repetitive actions'.

Freud writes at length of the repetition compulsion found in individuals with psychic trauma.²² The individual is compelled to return to the traumatic event over and over in nightmares and flashbacks, with no control over the recurrence of these phenomena. We must remember, however, that these 'traumatic returns' are not complete: the individual will not experience the whole event, nor will any coherent narrative be presented. Flashbacks may be a series of images or feelings with very little context; nightmares will be experienced in a similar fashion. Speaking as a psychiatrist, Herman corroborates much of what Caruth says, writing that the symptoms of this traumatic rupture include repetition of the event, flashbacks, nightmares, hypersensitivity, hyperarousal, unprovoked violent outbursts, evasion of certain situations or sensations, irrational anger, emotional and psychological numbing and a disrupted sense of personal time (1992: 35).

Caruth uses the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim'. The concept of survival creates complex issues for discussions of trauma. The traumatic event has placed the survivor in a situation of serious risk to their life which, possibly by chance, they have overcome. They are then left with the shadow of this 'near-death experience' awakening the 'peculiar and perplexing experience of surviving' (Caruth, 1996: 61). Survival becomes a part of the trauma because one is left with the knowledge of impending mortality and an intensified apprehension of the fragility of existence. The survivor '[oscillates] between [...] the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival' (Caruth, 1996: 7). Robert Jay Lifton claims that 'any focus on survival puts the death back

²²Most notably in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

into the traumatic experience, because survival suggests that there has been death and the survivor therefore has had a death encounter, which is central to their psychological experience' (Lifton in Caruth, 2005: 128). This phenomenon goes some way to explaining the large numbers of soldiers who commit suicide after returning home.²³ The failure to reintegrate into 'normal' life suggests that the basic survival instinct of the individual is irreparably damaged. The heightened 'fight or flight' response that is noted in many traumatised individuals would attest to this. L.S. Brown writes that traumatic events exist 'outside the range of human experience' (Brown in Caruth, 2005: 35). This statement can be modified – traumatic events exist outside the range of *assimilable* human experience, which is to say that we do not have the mental capacity and in-built strategies to process and 'cope with' these events – to assimilate them into our understanding of a normal human experience – thus permanently keeping the traumatic experience apart from consciousness.

By this definition, a traumatic event is one for which the mind has no integrating coping mechanism and thus remains apart from the survivor's psychic functioning, recreating itself within the mind but independently of consciousness. The symptoms of this traumatic rupture relate directly to the individual's inability to understand and find ways mentally to process their experience: 'trauma [...] overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation' (Whitehead, 2004: 3). This is the challenge that is taken on by traumatic representation – how does the recreator of trauma, whether victim or witness, translate their experience into art when they themselves do not fully understand it?

At this juncture it is necessary to give some explanation as to my choice of sources on trauma theory. The psychological literature of trauma is extensive and has grown

²³ By way of example, it has been noted that over 150,000 veterans of the Vietnam War committed suicide within five years of returning home. This is nearly three times the number who died in theatre. These statistics are taken from Chuck Dean's book *Nam Vet: Making Peace With Your Past* (2012).

considerably within traditional psychological research over the past fifty years. As Freud has largely fallen out of favour within the academic psychological community, due to extensive criticism from feminist thinkers and in part to the rise of psychiatry and a psycho-pharmacological approach to the treatment of mental illness that began in the 1950s, much of this research has grown away from his initial findings. However, his work forms the basis of the theoretical framework. My reasons for this are simple: this thesis is not a psychological study, but rather a literary analysis. Freud himself draws examples and case studies for his research from literary sources, the most notable of these being the Greek myth of Oedipus and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Furthermore, he maintained an interest in the relationship between literary creation and psychological issues, as seen most explicitly in 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1907). Rather than taking his word as proven fact, Freud is presented as a literary theorist, the scientific 'truth' of his arguments being of secondary importance to the overall argument.

This thesis does, however, make reference to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5)* and *The International Classification of Diseases, 10th Edition (ICD-10)*, as well as a selection of clinical and theoretical texts on trauma and, more specifically, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in order to create a working definition of trauma that is in line with both clinical practice and Freudian psycho-literary theory. *DSM-5/ICD-10* definitions are not central to my theoretical approach and definition of trauma, but considering medical definitions assists in creating a theoretical framework that encompasses all areas of trauma studies, both clinical and socio-cultural. In his review of *DSM-5*, Ian Hacking questions the efficacy of a diagnostic guide such as *DSM-5*, which is based on rules of Linnaean taxonomy; he writes: 'Perhaps in the end the *DSM* will be regarded as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the botanical project in the field of insanity' (2013: 7). However, Freud's work opens up both diagnosis and treatment of

traumata to a wider arena than psychiatry alone. A further reason for acknowledging the definition given in the *DSM*, while also treating it with care, is that it is a medical diagnosis. In order for an individual to be diagnosed with PTSD a fair number of symptoms should be present, as discussed later in this chapter. In the representations of trauma that are discussed in this thesis not all symptoms are presented. Not all of the representations discussed could be labelled as displaying adequate diagnostic criteria for PTSD, though all offer representations of a traumatic rupture. Furthermore, psychiatry tends to take a more materialistic approach to the conditions it treats, in that it draws attention to the physical (for example, neurological) basis of mental disorders as well as to individual, familial and social conditioning; this thesis is interested in the response to emotional and traumatic events and the (often) culturally determined behaviour that goes with it and, while psychiatry does not entirely reject the emotional and socio-cultural dimensions, it favours psychological and neurological factors. Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that the works used here grew from psychological research and method and, moreover, that all subsequent psycho-literary theory and criticism is indebted to this lineage. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the wider development of these ideas before applying them in a strictly literary context. The work of Judith Herman, a clinical psychiatrist, is used for both her overview of the development of trauma studies and her catalogue of traumatic symptoms, as her work has a Freudian base. Prior to this is a discussion clinical and medical definitions of trauma.

In order to consider trauma as a medical condition we must consider Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which was officially entered into the *DSM*, and thus the diagnostic mind, in 1980; the *ICD* only acknowledged PTSD in 1992. According to the *DSM*, the symptoms of PTSD occur after ‘exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence’ as a direct victim, witness, friend or family of a victim or one

who experiences extreme exposure to ‘aversive details of traumatic events’ (*DSM*, 2013: 271). Psychiatrist Lisetta Lovett groups the symptoms of PTSD into four ‘phenomenological domains’, using the *ICD-10*. She defines them thus:

Reliving the traumatic experience [...] in flashbacks and nightmares or intrusive memories.

[psychoanalysis refers to this as the ‘repetition compulsion’]

Hyper arousal [which can manifest as] hyper vigilance [...] insomnia, irritability or anger.

Avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event.

Emotional detachment or numbing [which can be experienced as] a disconnection from oneself and others.(Lovett, 2013: 177)

The definitions from the *DSM-5* and *ICD-10* have many similarities to the definition and symptoms of a traumatic rupture that I have constructed from Freudian and post-Freudian theory; indeed, they are in many ways identical. However, as Christine Ross argues, ‘diagnostic criteria decontextualize the illness and its symptoms, separating them from the subject’s life history and his or her social and cultural background’ (2006: 147). In his 2007 study of shyness, *How Normal Behaviour Became a Sickness*, Christopher Lane suggests that the *DSM* (and indeed all diagnostic manuals) is a ‘field guide to mental disorders, giving a checklist rather like a birdwatcher uses for spotting birds’ (2007: 12). It is these issues – the potentially narrow view of trauma that medicalisation creates – that must be treated with care when considering trauma in art.

A Very Short History of Trauma Theory

Prior to the advent of trauma theory, the psychological community expended much time and energy on the study of hysteria. Henri Ellenberger writes that ‘for twenty-five

centuries, hysteria had been considered a strange disease with incoherent and incomprehensible symptoms. Most physicians believed it to be a disease proper to women and originating in the uterus, hence the name' (1970: 142). The study of hysteria, and the women it affected, was presided over by nineteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Herman writes:

Charcot's Tuesday Lectures were theatrical events, attended by a multi-coloured audience, drawn from all over Paris. In these lectures, Charcot illustrated his findings on hysteria by live demonstrations. The patients he put on display were young women who had found refuge in the Salpêtrière from lives of unrelenting violence, exploitation and rape. (1992: 10)

Spurred on by Charcot's example, many of his admirers, of which Freud was one, aimed to develop his ideas further, moving on from mere classification and observation by interviewing their female patients personally. It is through these long and intimate interviews that Freud and two of his contemporaries, Pierre Janet and Josef Breuer, made the discovery that 'unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events produced an altered state of consciousness, which in turn produced the hysterical symptoms' (Herman, 1992: 12). However, the discoveries that came about as a result of these interviews created a dilemma for the (male) doctors involved. If what their findings suggested was the truth, it meant that these women were the victims of what Freud called 'perverted acts against children' and, moreover, that this was endemic among all classes in society and not, as originally thought, the proletariat (Herman, 1992: 14). The publication of Freud and Breuer's essay on the subject, *Studies in Hysteria* (1896), was met with much negative feeling in the psychological community, as he feared; in Vienna in 1899 he recanted the essay and ignored the testimonies of his female patients – an act that marked the end of what Herman calls the 'Heroic Age of Hysteria' (1992: 10).

The beginning of the twentieth century offered very little in the way of major research in the field of hysteria. With the advent of the First World War the field became of interest once more. As with the study of hysteria, the debate centred on the moral character of the patient – soldiers should betray no emotion and remain steadfast and resolute at all times. The soldier who developed traumatic symptoms was a malingerer and coward. The British psychiatrist Lewis Yealland, famously recreated as Dr Holmes in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, suggested that victims of 'shell shock' be treated with shaming, threats and punishment, as well as electric shocks and restraining in chairs. Unsurprisingly, this treatment did not work, but by 1920 most believed that a cure to the problem had been found.²⁴ It is only when it became abundantly clear that this was not at all true in the 1920s that the field of traumatic research was jump-started for a third time, most notably with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. It is from this third reincarnation of the field that modern scholarship has grown. However, the field remained neither rigorously researched nor widely received until after the Vietnam War in the 1970s, when the widespread traumatic symptoms of returning troops forced the psychological community to reconsider their ideas. The effect of Vietnam veterans on trauma studies is echoed in literature, with a surge in personal accounts and a raw frankness of narrative that draws heavily on the experience of the traumatised soldier.

Freudian Trauma Theory

²⁴ Freud was not in favour of the use of electrotherapy on traumatised soldiers, as he wrote in 'Memorandum on the Electrical Treatment of War Neurotics' (1920). He soon realised that the treatment was only a temporary cure and the patients were quick to relapse. However, Freud did not understand the long-lasting effects of this so-called 'war neurosis' and wrote that 'with the end of the war the war neurotics, too, disappeared (2001d: 215).

In his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes and interprets a game played by his grandson at the age of eighteen months. Ernst was a ‘good little boy’, manifested no particular symptoms, was of calm disposition, and ‘never cried when his mother left him for a few hours’ (2003: 14). However,

he had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed... As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out “o-o-o”, accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and [Freud] were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word ‘*fort*’. (Freud, 2003: 14-15)

Freud interpreted this behavior as a way of obtaining satisfaction by causing things to be ‘gone’. A short time later he observed the child playing with a reel that had a piece of string tied around it: He would toss the reel away from him to where it could no longer be seen, before pulling it back into view and hailing its reappearance with a gleeful “*Da!*” (“There!”). Freud also noticed that the boy would utter his ‘o-o-o’ sound with reference to *himself* – notably when, by crouching down below a mirror, he made his image ‘gone’. Freud stresses the fact that the *fort* part of the game was much of the time sufficient unto itself, and was ‘repeated untiringly’ by the child.

Freud’s observation led to a number of fundamental questions: Is this a method of mastering a painful experience by reproducing it in an active and playful manner? Or is the child literally taking revenge for the treatment visited upon him (according to Freud, the departure of his mother) by redirecting it onto an object (the reel)? These questions aside, the main issue is the contradiction between the compulsion to repeat and the pleasure principle, the basic human drive to attain pleasure and avoid suffering. How is satisfaction to be derived from repeating actions that have been sources of unpleasant feelings? Freud writes that a child cannot understand death or disappearance but can form

an idea of these concepts through a visual relationship to objects, so the child transforms the traumatic departure into a satisfying return, mastering the traumatic experience and regaining pleasure: '*fort*' becomes '*da*'.

In a healthy and untraumatised mind, the repetition of loss and return is a positive experience, allowing the development of methods for processing unpleasant and potentially traumatising events. However, in a traumatised mind, the repetition compulsion behaves very differently. Unlike Ernst, who is delighted to see his wooden spool return to him, the constant return of the traumatic experience in 'the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' neither delights nor comforts (Caruth, 1996: 4). Freud is clear to state that this repetition is truly compulsive, writing that; 'no lesson has been learnt from the old experience of these activities [...] they are repeated, under pressure of a compulsion' (2003: 290). This 'driven, tenacious intrusion of traumatic experience' is one of the most visceral and explosive symptoms of trauma – and so often paired with the nightmares and flashbacks that become its medium; it seems unavoidable that the repetition compulsion will feature heavily in any text that deals with representations of trauma (Herman, 1992: 41). For Freud, this repetition sits at the heart of the experience he calls 'traumatic neurosis' (2003: 16). Furthermore, as 'traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context [...] they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images' (Brett and Ostroff, 1985: 417). Throughout this thesis, these images translate into the world of comics; indeed it is because of the intensely visual nature of the comics form that it can be used to such good effect in recreations of conflict trauma. In order to create the traumatic experience for the reader, each work usually employs the same frantic and disturbing repetition that plagues the traumatised subject.

Though in theory this sounds a relatively straightforward endeavour, it is most certainly not. According to a Caruthian reading, central to Freud's theories of traumatic

neurosis is the innate unknowability of the experience. In part, this stems from the underlying concept of the 'Pleasure Principle'. Freud states that 'the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle' but that this is 'the most obscure and inaccessible region of the mind' (2003: 7). If the psychological concept that underpins the entire basis of Freud's work on trauma is largely inaccessible, then all works arising from this principle must be similarly compromised. This leads us to a key issue in the creation of trauma texts: if the trauma that is central to the text is 'unknowable', then how can the artist recreate it in a way that will be intelligible to the reader?

For Freud, the symptomatic picture of a traumatic neurosis can be reduced to two key factors. First, he discusses 'fright, the factor of surprise' and makes it clear that this is to be kept separate from fear and anxiety:

'fright' [...] is the name we give to the states a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it. I do not believe that anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against frights and so against fright-neuroses. (2003: 7)

The unexpectedness of the traumatic event, then, is key to the creation of the traumatic neurosis. It is the fact that the individual is struck as if out of nowhere by the trauma that creates the initial traumatic rupture. Secondly, Freud suggests that the presence of a physical wound 'works as a rule *against* the development of a neurosis' (2003: 8). In *Moses and Monotheism*, he writes:

It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident – a railway collision, for instance – leaves the scene of the event apparently uninjured. In the course of the next few weeks, however, he develops a number of severe psychical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock. He now has a 'traumatic neurosis'. It is a quite unintelligible – that is to say, a new – fact. (Freud, 2001a: 80)

It is the apparent survival – and the accompanying incomprehensibility of that survival – that breeds the traumatic neurosis. Furthermore, it is this unquenchable need for psychic healing that leads to the symptoms of traumatic rupture that are noted by Herman and Caruth. Many years previous to this, in *Studies in Hysteria* (1896), Freud had written of *Nachträglichkeit*, ‘deferred action’:

There is in principle no difference between the symptom’s appearing in a temporary way after its first provoking cause and its being latent from the first. Indeed in the great majority of instances we find that a first trauma has left no symptom behind, while a later trauma of the same kind produces a symptom, and yet the latter could not have come into existence without the co-operation of the earlier provoking cause; nor can it be cleared up without taking all the provoking causes into account. (Freud and Breuer, 2000: 30)²⁵

By Freud’s suggestion it could be that a person is seemingly unaffected by, for example, a mugging but the traumatic response becomes apparent after the person experiences some other relatively insignificant event such as colliding with someone in the street. This deferred action is something that is commonly reported by combat veterans. It is similar to the more common response of psycho-physical numbing that many experience after a particularly distressing event. However, rather than seeming to be emotionally ‘dulled’ and devoid of desire or sensation, those whose response is delayed will not appear to be affected at all and will carry on as usual.

The Passage of Trauma within Families

²⁵*Nachträglichkeit* translates more literally to ‘afterwardsness’ but English editions of Freud translate it as ‘deferred action’.

The breadth of Freudian trauma theory – and responses to it – gives a wide and solid base for the discussion of trauma and traumatic representation in relation to comics. The works discussed were written at varying stages throughout Freud’s career, though mostly between 1896 and 1920, and there is much development and refining of ideas. However, the final issue of Freudian theory that must be addressed is raised most prominently in his last major text, *Moses and Monotheism* (1937) – the transmission of trauma between generations.²⁶ Though this aspect of traumatic theory does not relate as closely to the comics form as other theories, it is of much relevance to the texts that are discussed in this thesis, especially in Chapter 4, which discusses the influence of trauma on familial relationships and identity. That said, there are instances in which the comics form mimics the relationship – or, more specifically, relational difficulties – it is depicting, as Chapter 4 shows.

In *The Shell and the Kernel*, Abraham and Torok refer to the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma as the ‘transgenerational phantom’, postulating that ‘some people unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors’ lives’, leading to the development of ‘symptoms that do not spring from the individual’s life experiences but from someone else’s psychic conflicts and traumas’ (1994: 165-6). In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud posits that the Biblical account of the Exodus story obscures a core feature of the narrative: that Moses was murdered by the Israelites, who objected to the rules he was attempting to impose upon them. Freud explains that after the murder of Moses, the rebels regretted their action and as an act of contrition they formed the concept and need for a Messiah as a hope for the return of Moses. From this narrative, Freud claims that the guilt of the murder of Moses is inherited throughout generations of Jews and that this guilt is the driving force of the religion. He writes that the Jews have ‘taken a tragic

²⁶*Moses and Monotheism* was written during a particularly difficult time for Freud, as he prepared to escape the rise of Nazism in continental Europe. His books had already been burned in large numbers by the Nazi Party in the early 1930s.

load of guilt on themselves; they have been made to pay heavy penance for the actions of their forefathers' (Freud, 2001a: 132). This inherited trauma, first outlined in its most basic form in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), creates in the individual a very particular sort of traumatic rupture as it does not stem from a direct stimulus as with other traumata but from the experience of others. It can be seen, however, that this trauma forms a basis on which others will grow. For example, the child of Holocaust survivors may well have 'inherited' the trauma of their parents' experiences but may also be traumatised by the upbringing that their traumatised parents provide. In this respect, the child faces traumatic influence from two related but distinct sources.

Trauma after Freud

In general psychoanalytic theory, trauma is defined by 'an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization' (LaPlanche and Pontalis, 1973: 465). Jacques Lacan takes his primary lead from Freud's work on trauma in relation to the pleasure principle:

In effect, the trauma is conceived as having necessarily been marked by the subjectifying homeostasis that orientates the whole functioning defined by the pleasure principle. Our experience then presents us with a problem, which derives from the fact that, at the very heart of the primary processes, we see preserved the insistence of the trauma in making us aware of its existence. The trauma reappears, in effect, frequently unveiled [...] emerging repeatedly – if not its face, at least the screen that shows us that it is still there behind? (Lacan, 1977: 55)

However, there are some marked distinctions between notions of trauma for Freud and for Lacan. For Freud, a trauma is retroactively induced when excess psychic excitations penetrate the ego defences without warning and in a potentially life-threatening situation. For Lacan, a trauma occurs when there is an encounter with the 'Real', that which denies signification. Lacan writes:

there is an anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarises what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real, of the essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*. (1988: 164)

These encounters with the Real are traumatic experiences where the 'link between two thoughts have succumbed to repression and must be restored' (1988: 170).

While Lacan makes reference to the encounter with the Real as traumatic, he further suggests that this encounter is a secondary experience and that the actual trauma occurs belatedly and through repetition. This repetition of the event can 'activate symbolic meaning where the scene was traumatized, elevated into a traumatic Real, only retroactively, in order to help [the individual] to cope with the impasse of his symbolic universe' (Žižek, 2006: 73-4). In Lacan's theory, trauma is at the origin of the subject. It is something that marks the subject irreparably, but also something that the subject doesn't experience. As such, the experiences are not mastered by the subject; instead, they produce the subject. In this regard, one's whole life can be considered as repetition compulsion. Here there is tension: trauma is the universal element of psychoanalytical theory of the subject. However, specific traumata that threaten normal functioning of the psyche, and which result in more drastic symptoms, often outshine their less dramatic counterparts and become the focus of psychoanalytical attention. This awkwardness of hierarchy is seen

repeatedly within theories of trauma. Like Freud, Lacan discusses trauma in relation to *Hamlet*, showing the suitability of psychoanalytical theories of trauma for literary analysis. It is noted, however, that Lacan's work on trauma has much interest in semiotics and orders of meaning, something that is lacking from Freud's more medical ideas. Lacan's discussion of trauma in relation to the dream state and Freud's 'Dream of the Burning Boy' is examined in Chapter 3.

Dominick LaCapra, as a historian rather than literary theorist, is concerned within his works with history and historiography; his main focus is on how traumatic experiences – he refers to these as 'limit experiences' – relate to historical writing (2001: 9). Unlike Lacan and Caruth, whose work is based on a Freudian framework and influenced by semiotic theory, LaCapra's works integrate concepts from psychoanalysis, literary and critical theory and philosophy, as well as basic ideas of historiography. He is acutely aware of the problem of representation that is unavoidable in writing about trauma and so insists on the difference between transhistorical and historical trauma (2001: 48). LaCapra argues for the distinction between loss and absence in historiography. Absence is transhistorical and signifies an existential lack, whereas loss is historical, specific and tangible – something is taken away or let go; loss always entails absence, but not always vice versa. He writes:

My contention is that the difference (or non-identity) between absence and loss is often elided, and the two are conflated with confusing and dubious results. This conflation tends to take place so rapidly that it escapes notice and seems natural or necessary. Yet among other questionable consequences, it threatens to convert subsequent accounts into displacements of the story of original sin wherein a prelapsarian state of unity or identity, whether real or fictive, is understood as giving way through a fall to difference and conflict'. (LaCapra, 2001: 47-48)

In short, ignoring or failing to recognise this difference can exacerbate an individual's pre-existing traumata. The clearest example is found in *Maus*, in which Spiegelman must cope with the trauma of his parents' survival of the Holocaust without having experienced it himself. His parents' trauma has had a massive impact on him but, while they experience traumatic loss, he experiences traumatic absence. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

LaCapra explains two historical methodologies: 'documentary or a self-sufficient research model' and 'radical constructivism' (2001: 1). In the former, 'priority is often given to research based on primary (preferably archival) documents that enable one to derive authenticated facts about the past which may be recounted in a narrative (the more 'artistic' approach) or employed in a mode of analysis which puts forth testable hypotheses (the more 'social-scientific' approach)' (2001: 2). This method aims to describe what happened and how, with an emphasis on facts, dates and places.²⁷ Radical constructivism, on the other hand, argues that history is one mode of writing among many, holding no superior position above other writing forms; we are mistaken in believing that historical writings are in any way more objective or 'real' than a literary or philosophical text. LaCapra calls for a 'middle voice', which acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of both methodologies and creates a dialogue between the two, allowing for objective facts, but also giving credence to 'the performative, figurative, aesthetic, rhetorical, political, and ideological factors that 'construct' structures' (2001: 1). As LaCapra writes,

The problem [of resolving these two approaches] is how an attentiveness to certain issues may lead to better self-understanding and to a sensitivity or openness to responses that generate necessary tensions in one's account. This attentiveness creates, in Nietzsche's term, a *Schweregewicht*, or stressful weight in inquiry, and it indicates how history in its own way poses

²⁷Its extreme form is 'positivism', which was developed (in the modern sense) by the philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte in his 1848 book *Discours sur L'ensemble du Positivisme*. Comte's positivism argued that society operates on absolute laws just as the physical world does.

problems of writing or signification which cannot be reduced to writing up the results of research. (2001: 105)

LaCapra's most compelling argument deals with 'acting out' and 'working through'. In 'acting out', 'tenses implode and it is as if one were back there in the past, reliving the traumatic scene. Any duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed or productive only of aporia and double binds' (2001: 21). This is a compulsive behaviour – similar to Freud's 'repetition compulsion' – which negates the individual's capacity for recovery. In contrast, 'working through' is 'an articulatory process [...] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realising that one is living here and now with openings to the future' (2001: 22). LaCapra is careful to suggest that 'those traumatised by extreme events, as well as those empathising with them, may resist working through because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it' (2001: 22). In the crudest terms, we may consider this 'fidelity' to be related to survivor guilt.

Though LaCapra is not explicitly Freudian, he does use a Freudian term – 'transferential implication' – to refer to historians' need to recognise that history is not separate from us. By writing history, we implicate ourselves in it, a fact that positivism and the 'self-sufficient research model' fail to realise. This ignorance, coupled with the lack of empathy for victims and awareness of the wide range of narrative forms, accounts for the failure of these methodologies individually. It is only in finding a middle ground between them that LaCapra claims these two methodologies can be utilised in discussions of trauma and historiography.

Kalí Tal's 1991 book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* moves away from theoretical considerations and instead places emphasis on personal experiences of traumatic events. She describes three strategies of 'cultural coping':

Mythologisation works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardised narratives [...] turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. Medicalisation focuses our gaze upon the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an 'illness' that can be 'cured' within existing or slightly modified structured of institutionalised medicine and psychiatry. Disappearance – a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma – is usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim. (1991: 6)

Tal uses examples of Holocaust, Vietnam War and incest-victim narratives throughout her analysis and critiques any attempt to conflate the unique literature of conflict and all other genre classifications. Instead, she calls for interrogative cultural, sociological and historical approaches to trauma literature that avoid postmodernist dangers of dismissing personal testimony and accept that 'the specific effects of trauma on the process of narration' (1991: 117) must be acknowledged.

What makes Tal's book unusual (and, for its time, ground-breaking) is the attention that the final chapter pays to the narratives of rape and incest survivors. Such narratives have received little consideration from the academic world but Tal argues for their inherent relevance in the realm of trauma studies. She argues that traditional conceptions of literature are extraneous when attempting to understand and analyse these narratives:

Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized writer. (1991: 137)

Tal's work is sceptical of the importance of theoretical understandings of trauma. She is quick to argue that theory can cloud that which is important when considering representations of a trauma – the experience of the individual and the way they interpret it. Her insistence on the importance of the individual is compelling; an over-emphasis on theory tends to ignore the massive personal impact of the traumatic. However, it is necessary to find a balance – using a solid theoretical basis and also giving due attention to the individual experience. These various approaches are returned to trauma through the course of this thesis but before progressing it is necessary to discuss three of the most obvious and important ways in which the comics form captures the nature of traumatic experience.

The Gutter, the Bleed and the Bubble

The purpose of the recreator of trauma in any form is to instil in the reader some suggestion of the traumatic experience, to bring them as close to the experience of the traumatised party as the form will allow. Michael Rothberg uses the term 'traumatic realism' to categorise the variety of formal techniques that the recreator of trauma uses to bring the reader into the experience of the text (Rothberg, 2000). In text-based literature, this effect is achieved at the most basic level by words, through the careful choice of word and phrase, as well as deliberate placement of the words in relation to the page. A notable example of this is found in Jonathan Safran Foer's 9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), in which the narrative of the protagonist's grandfather becomes increasingly crowded on the page until the text is cramped into a solid block of black ink.

The often clipped and linguistically economical description in such texts – especially in relation to a traumatic event – is a recurrent feature of conflict literature.

Moving away from the basic units of the text, trauma writers introduce atypical narrative techniques, especially in relation to time and disrupted narrative linearity, in order to make the reading of the text a traumatic experience within itself; not only is this distorted personal chronology an important symptom of a traumatic rupture but it is also something over which the author can exercise a great deal of control. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Vonnegut's hero Billy Pilgrim is a time-traveller. His experience of World War II, and specifically the firebombing of Dresden, traumatises him in such a way as to force a disconnection between Billy and the normal temporal workings of the universe. Though this is an extreme example, Vonnegut is not the only writer to play with time in dramatic ways for the purposes of creation of a conflict trauma narrative. When boiled down to the very basic level, this is the aim of a traumatic text: to bombard the reader with the traumatic experience, to mimetically evoke trauma, but also put the reader in a position to reflect on the text.

The aim of the conflict comics creator is the same as that of his text-based cousin, though there is a different tool kit required to create the effect. In comics of conflict and trauma, the symptoms of traumatic experience are mimicked in the formal techniques of the comic. However, the comics creator has a range of devices that the traditional writer does not. In order to demonstrate the interplay between the comics form and trauma theory, there is a need to analyse different formal aspects and consider how the transforming effects of a traumatic rupture affect the overall text. To this end, this discussion concentrates on three of the most striking elements of the form: transitions across the gutter, page bleeds and the bubble.

Comics theorist Scott McCloud discusses the importance of the ‘gutter’ – the space between each panel of a comic. He argues that what goes on between the individual panels – ‘closure’ – is essential to effective comics writing and reading: ‘comics panels fracture both time and space [...] but closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality’ (McCloud, 1994: 45). Closure, he claims, is the grammar of the form and the entirety of the form hinges on the arrangement of elements, a point that Thierry Groensteen readily agrees with in his concept of arthrology: ‘the true magic of comics operates between the images, the tension that binds them’ (2007: 23).

The process of closure is one that most readers adapt to without thinking – most readers have no issue constructing a coherent narrative from a comic and, furthermore, would do so without thinking about the reading process involved. The amount of mental movement required to jump across the gutter depends on which transition is employed. McCloud asserts that there are six types of transitions, each requiring a different level and type of reader engagement (1994: 72). Each type of transition will alter the way the text is read and the way the reader reacts to the text. This is a key technique by which comics creators work when piecing together the narrative elements of a story. Indeed, it is not going too far to say that the gutter is the most important aspect of the comics form. However, all this changes when we shift the variables slightly and introduce a dimension that by its very nature disrupts and resists representation – trauma. In order to discuss the use of transitions in trauma comics, this argument looks at two two-page comics excerpts, both of which use the physical nature of the book to assist in the act of closure, emphasising the effects of the transition, thus creating an ‘extreme transition’ of sorts.



Fig.2.1 – ‘Unreal’ in *9/11: The World’s Finest Comic Book Writers and Artists Tell Stories to Remember*, Steven Seagle, Duncan Rouleau and Aaron Sowd, 2002. pp. 15-16. Image used under fair dealings provisions for the purpose of scholarly discussion.

In February 2002, DC Comics published an anthology of short comics by a wide range of creators to raise money for 9/11 Charities. The first comic of the anthology, which set the tone for the entire book, is presented recto-verso, meaning that the page must be turned half way through reading in order to complete the narrative. In ‘Unreal’, the first page shows Superman using his powers to stop a space shuttle from crashing into a satellite (Seagle, Rouleau and Sowd, 2002: 15-16). However, on the second page, according to Smith and Goodrum, ‘we see that the first page is metadiagetic; it is a Superman comic held by a child being carried from the burning WTC by a fireman’ (Smith and Goodrum, 2011: 322). The comic is presented in a typical mainstream artistic style, using bold colours and clear lines, as one would expect from a Superman comic. Page one shows us only a superhero comic; this page on its own is unremarkable. Page two zooms out from the pages of the boy’s comic, making the panel transitions jarring and uncomfortable. The

final panel breaks down the barriers between comics universe and real universe as the page-bound Superman salutes the fireman as he runs back into the breach with an American flag. It is presented in such a way as to necessitate the reader to turn the page in order to complete the narrative. It is in this movement from page to page that the biggest and most difficult leap of closure occurs. Put crudely, in this context the page turn creates the 'punch line'. While transitions exist between all contiguous panels in comics, as well as between pages, the necessity of the page turn – and the fact that the next part of the narrative is hidden until this point – intensifies the transition between pages. The fact that the action has shifted so quickly from the fantastical world of Superman to the events at the WTC mimics the sudden and unannounced experience of a traumatic rupture, for which the reader, like the traumatised individual, is wholly unprepared. The punch line of the second page destabilises our reading and momentarily overwhelms us with information we struggle to process in line with what has come before, hence mimicking the traumatic rupture.

Page one of 'Unreal' uses what McCloud labels action-to-action transitions (the type which is most widely used in Western mainstream comics), following a single subject in distinct progression of action. However, the subsequent pages do not follow this, using moment-to-moment transitions which, while requiring less closure, are not typically used in Western comics and so will not be as easy to read as the reader must change their reading method. It zooms out slowly from the comic page to the crying little boy then to the fireman and finally to the image of the flag and the burning building. This takes six panels and moves with agonising slowness compared to the usually fast pace of superhero stories. Though this comic uses the artistic style and basic techniques of mainstream comics art, the difference in transitional elements serves to disquiet the reader and assist in the creation of a traumatic narrative.

Alissa Torres' 2009 comic *American Widow* opens with a two-page spread that, like 'Unreal', requires the reader to abandon their typical comics reading methods. However, unlike 'Unreal' there is no sense of false security, but a sudden and violent leap. The two full-page images are placed next to each other. There is a huge demand of closure needed for the reader to fill the gap between these two images. By McCloud's classification, this looks like a 'non sequitur' – two contiguous images that appear to have no relationship beyond the spatial one (1994: 72). However, the jump from clear, blue sky with birds to a screaming television with the now-famous image of the towers imitates the mental jump that many people around the world experienced on that day. This huge leap of closure has several uses. First, it mirrors the shock and suddenness of the event. Secondly, it unsettles the reader from the beginning, creating an air of insecurity and setting up the text as both unsettling and potentially shocking. Thirdly, Torres is using the reader: the reader is complicit in creating the text's disquieting tone by the huge amount of closure they are forced to do.

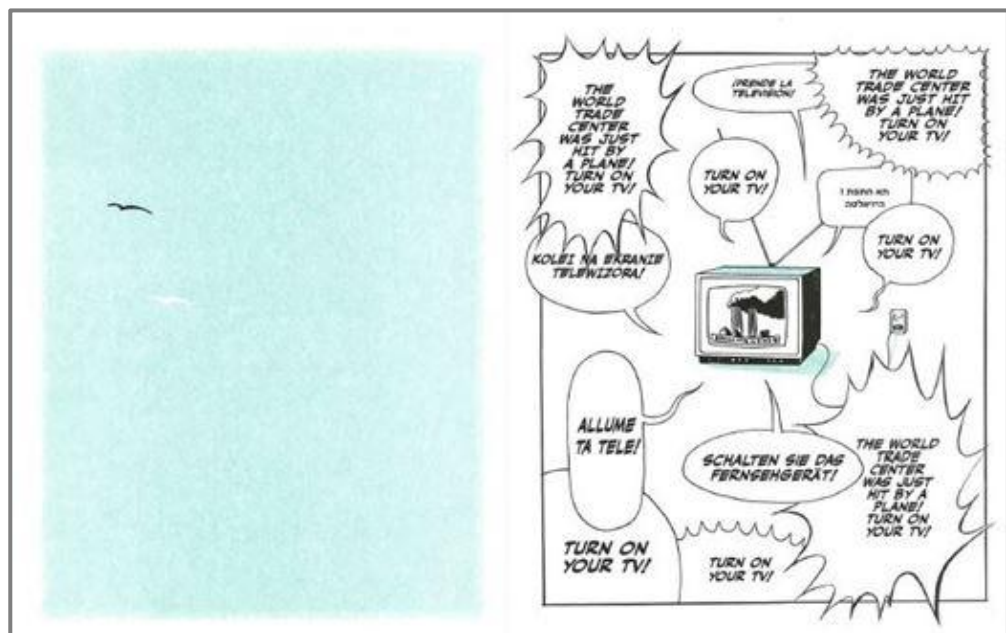


Fig. 1.2 – From *American Widow*, Alissa Torres, 2008, pp. 4-5. Image used with permission of the author.

These two short examples are indicative of two of the main ways in which comics transitions serve to recreate the traumatic rupture. In ‘Unreal’, the comic begins in an unremarkable fashion but makes a dramatic twist, which disrupts the narrative mid-flow, forcing the reader to change reading method very quickly, while also creating a traumatic rupture within the text’s diegetic flow. In *American Widow*, this does not happen and the reader faces the trauma, mimicked in the unusually vast transitional leap, from the first page. Thus, these two examples show that the rupture in panel transitions that is so commonly used to mimic a traumatic chronology can occur at many points throughout the narrative. Indeed, for most of the texts discussed in this thesis ruptures such as these occur so frequently that the narrative is held together, in places, by the reader’s self-created chronology alone.

Not all pages employ gutters or borders. When a single image fills an entire page to the edge, it is called a ‘bleed’. Bleeds have a relatively short history in western comics art, being far more common in Manga and Manhwa (Japanese and Korean comics respectively). The rarity of the bleed in American comics – especially mainstream publications, in which they are even rarer than usual – makes it something of a novelty and, moreover, very powerful when one is employed. McCloud writes of bleeds that ‘time is no longer contained by the familiar lines of the closed panel, but instead haemorrhages and escapes into timeless space’ (1994: 103). Bleeds are, by their nature, violent. The image’s domination of the page is striking and demands the reader’s complete attention. The removal of frames from the page edges removes any sense of constriction or confinement – the image has total control of the page. It is for this reason that Frank Miller drew *300* (1998), which depicts the violent battles at Thermopylae, entirely in two-page

bleeds. If the bleed page follows a series of ordered panels, its presence breaks the flow of visual uniformity and shakes the reader's sense of security.

Though influenced heavily by the Franco-Belgian tradition, GB Tran uses bleeds frequently in *Vietnamerica* (2011). In one section, Tran recounts the serious wounding of his uncle, Vinh, in a fire fight during his time in the army (2011: 178). The bleed is on the left-hand page and so accosts the reader as they turn the page. It is not only the violence of the subject matter that confronts the reader, but also the violent use of colour. Though Tran is not shy about using bold colour throughout the comic, he uses relatively subdued colouration for the background of this image to create a dramatic contrast with the red of the blood. The use of a bleed in this instance not only mirrors the violence of Vinh's situation with a violent confrontation of the reader, but also suggests a sense of continuing action. Were this page to be framed, as is typical, we would see this incident as 'closed'. However, the lack of a frame lends the image a sense of timelessness; the blood continues to flow. The fact that the blood flows off the page attests to this – the severity of the injury is shown in the careful use of the bleed.

At another point in the narrative, Tran uses a two-page bleed to depict Saigon Airport, just before the Fall of Saigon on the 30th April 1975. Thousands of people descended on the airport in the hope of escaping the country. As with the previous example, Tran uses a vivid and ominous shade of red for the sky but keeps the rest of the image muted in colour. This draws the eye, unnaturally, to the top of the page, then to the exclamation mark in a jagged bubble, before allowing the more natural movement of the eye across the page. In this example, the bleed gives the artist space to force this unnatural eye movement. Again, as with the previous example, the removal of frames adds to the chaos of the scene. It seems as if the confusion and pandemonium is bursting out of the

page, especially as the crowded nature of the page makes it uncomfortable to look at.²⁸ The bleed, then, is a violent device, removing constraints and encouraging chaos.



Fig. 1.3 – From *Vietnamera*, GB Tran, 2011. pp. 162-3. Image used with permission of the author.

In order to work as a narrative form, comics are required to make visible many intangible things, most notably speech and thought. This is where the use of bubbles enters the form. On the most basic level, bubbles are containers for speech or thoughts. They usually involve a directional pointer that links the bubble to the source of the information contained therein. Traditionally, speech bubbles have smooth lines, connected directional pointers and a roughly oval shape while thought bubbles have a cloud-shaped outline and the directional pointer is typically not connected to the bubble itself. Will Eisner calls the bubble a ‘desperation device [which] attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound’ (Eisner, 2008: 45).

Despite this criticism, the bubble is present in almost all comics, though it has been developed over time so that the shape of the bubble has become a narrative device in its

²⁸At first glance, this bleed is reminiscent of Martin Handford’s *Where’s Wally?* series, which featured densely-packed crowd scenes.

own right. To give two examples, jagged-edged bubbles can denote shouting or show the reader that the sound is emanating from an electronic device, as in the Torres panels mentioned previously, while wobbly-edged bubbles suggest a dream-like tone or possibly inebriation. The contents of the bubble, too, can be used to illustrate features of the speaker. In Goscinny and Uderzo's famous *Astérix* series (1959-2010), for example, fonts that can be recognised as stereotypes of certain tongues are used to show that characters are speaking in different languages, including Gothic and Norse. In some cases, images are used to represent words within bubbles. For example, a bubble may contain an image of a cup of coffee, rather than a character speaking the words 'a cup of coffee, please'. The use of an image in the bubble changes the relationship that the reader has to the comic but given them far more power in the creation of the narrative than they have when the bubble contains words. We do not know if the image represents a demand, a request, a question or any other type of statement; it is for the reader to decide. Similarly, we do not know if it is coffee, tea or soup – again, the reader decides. Furthermore, the use of an image removes any linguistic barrier that may exist. This example comes from a comic by a Norwegian artist but does not require translation. The image introduces a universality that is not available to comics that include words. By this reckoning the bubble is a wonderfully flexible device.

Why, then, does Eisner consider its use to be a sign of desperation? In many of Eisner's comics, the dialogue is an integral part of the image, artistically woven into the fabric of the panel. To encase dialogue within a bubble is to relegate it to encapsulation within blank space, segregating it from the rest of the panel. This changes the position of the dialogue; it can serve to create distance between the dialogue and the rest of the panel. Similarly, McCloud discusses the distancing implications of thought bubbles:

A thought caption – with or without borders – embodies each thought in a way that encourages us to assume ownership of it as we read. The thought balloon, just by virtue of its pointer,

brings a third party into the relationship: the author, gently putting his hand on our shoulder and pointing to the face of the thinker with the words 'he thought'. (2010: online)

By keeping thoughts constrained by thought clouds, rather than in, for example, a voiceover-style caption, the creator places another boundary between himself and the reader. His thoughts do not become ours, as McCloud suggests a caption would allow, but the cloud reminds us starkly of the distance between the creator's experience and our own. The implications for representations of trauma are crucial here. Not only is the bubble a central formal device, but it can be subtle, moving the reader in a way that is not obvious to them.

The written aspects of the comic, encased usually in bubbles but also sometimes in caption or voiceover boxes, are the part that most people read and, subsequently, what people think of when they think of reading comics. However, to read any comic relies on the reader adopting a new way of reading, which I propose we consider in terms of levels. The first level is the typical act of reading text – the basic comprehension of words. To this I would add the recognition of objects and people in drawn form. In comics, this level allows us the basic skill of reading dialogue and captions. The second level – that which is required for the reading of comics – is, for most people, an unconscious skill. This level involves an understanding of the demands of closure and the creation of a system of time. Though most seasoned comics readers will probably not be aware that they employ any special skills in reading, this does not mean they are absent. To this level I also add the recognition of comics-specific symbols, such as emanata and grawlixes to name two, as well as an awareness of conventions of the form.²⁹

²⁹ 'Emanata' refers to the lines around a character's head to indicate shock, drunkenness or any other number of emotions and states. 'Grawlixes' are typographical symbols used to replace words, usually expletives. Both terms were coined by Mort Walker in *The Lexicon of Comicana* (2000).

This way of reading is undermined entirely when we consider ‘silent’ comics – comics in which there are no bubbles at all, and often few captions. In silent comics, the first level is removed as there is little or no text to read. The reader, then, is reliant entirely on their second-level skills and in order to construct a coherent narrative must work especially hard. Silent comics disrupt the standard methods of reading comics. By this definition, silent comics are particularly relevant for traumatic representation. The removal of first level reading skills is disorienting and has a destabilising effect on the reader, as we are so used to the presence of words. This omission in itself can make the experience of reading the comic mimic the traumatic experience, the reader being to all intents and purposes diegetically stranded. Silent comics are relatively rare in Western mainstream publishing, which is still very much driven by the influence of the ‘house style’, standardising artistic technique. However, in trauma comics, silence is much more common, often for the simple reason that there is nothing to say or no way of saying it. Silent comics allow the events to be presented without comment. Not only does this increase reader engagement but it also allows a traumatic experience to exist without words. Returning to Herman’s suggestion of trauma as intensely visual we see that very often it is extremely difficult to give words to trauma, though images may provide an outlet. The removal of words, then, can assist the author in the creation of the text, while simultaneously creating a disturbing textual experience that unnerves the reader.

Keith Giffen and Bill Wray’s short comic ‘Dust’ is an excellent example of a silent comic that uses a linking motif to create narrative movement (Giffen and Wray, 2002: 111-113). It is not unusual for comics artists to use linking motifs – images or symbols that exist throughout a text to maintain continuity – but these are not usually present in all panels. Each panel of ‘Dust’ contains an image of discarded papers fluttering in the breeze. This persistence of images speaks more of a traumatic repetition than a stylistic linking

motif. Despite this, 'Dust' contains no discernible storyline. By the end of the comic, the reader has not completed a storyline as much as witnessed a small snapshot of a situation but with no commentary to explain the scenario or guide the reader in any way. The reader gains no information from the comic, remaining instead in a state of confusion and distress.

Though this discussion is by no means an exhaustive investigation of the comics form – or even of the three aspects examined – it gives an introduction to the form itself, as well as the massive impact that the demands of traumatic representation have on the development of such formal devices. The reason for a more sustained look at these three aspects in particular is because of their uniqueness and importance. The gutter is the most important part of the comics form; it provides the grammar of the form and does more than any other aspect in involving the reader in the flow of the narrative. The gutter and the six types of transitions form a very large part of my close readings of comics and, as such, it is essential that the reader of this thesis understands how they work. The bubble and the bleed are two aspects that are unique to the comics form and which are the most likely to be harnessed and manipulated by the artist of trauma. Though most are aware of how a bubble works, bleeds are more unusual and so both aspects are expounded upon here to ensure clarity. The discussion here allows for these aspects to be examined throughout the thesis with no detraction from the flow of the analysis.

Chapter Two

Rituals, Mourning and Grief

What separates us from the animals, what separates us from the chaos, is our ability to mourn people we've never met.
David Levithan, *Love is the Higher Law*(2009)

There is no satisfactory way to look at any text of conflict without also looking at the effect that such widespread violence and devastation has on the self. However, it would be unwise to suggest that the traumatic experience ends with the psychological and psycho-physiological effect on the individual. Rather, the experience of trauma has another layer: the culturally defined and performative expression of mourning. The comics discussed throughout this thesis are testament to the 'persistence of the trauma's desire to exist' and attempt to recreate it both visually and linguistically (Kopf, 2005: 10). The need to recreate trauma is inextricably bound up in the need to memorialise and to mourn. Freud writes that 'Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (2002: 248).

For many, the huge socio-political changes that arise from conflicts are seen as the death of an ideal and a way of life, a notion that speaks to Freud's definition of mourning.

Many people find it difficult to engage with those who are mourning, but for Freud the process of mourning is necessary and healthy. He writes that ‘we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful’ (2002: 244).

As introduction to this thesis contended, texts of conflict are rarely over-blown and glorious epics. Rather, as O’Brien declares, war stories are stories of ‘love and memory’ (1991: 81). In order to provide a basis for this chapter it begins with a discussion of three classic texts and the importance that each places on mourning and grief following conflicts.

Three Case Studies in Conflict and Mourning

Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*, generally accepted as being written around 1190 BC, is a landmark work in both Classical poetry and conflict literature. James Tatum argues that part of the enduring nature of *The Iliad* is its internal dichotomy: ‘read as history, *The Iliad* seems only a fragment of war; at the same time it says everything there is to say about war’ (2004: xii). He is right to note this odd split within the text but more unusual is the literal locational and thematic split that permeates the whole poem. Homer does not limit his text only to the theatre of war. Throughout the text there are frequent returns to domestic settings, usually as male characters return to their homes to visit family. The interweaving of familial and military duty, of ‘hearth and battlefield’, creates a space in which the poem’s most predominant theme can be cultivated. It is its focus on mourning and grief that lends the poem much of its power.³⁰ Homer builds his narrative, not around a glamorous image of handsome and aesthetically pleasing warriors, but of devastation and

³⁰ It is interesting to note at this time that the name of the great hero and central figure Achilles (Greek Ἀχιλλεύς) has its root in the Greek for ‘grief of the people’. In the etymology of his name, Achilles is a ‘Hero of Grief’.

extreme loss. Our preconceived ideas of heroism and valour are crushed. Homer writes of Hector:

[...] all around, the black hair [of Hector]
was spread, and the whole head lay in the dust,
just before so charming; now Zeus has granted
to his enemies to debase [the corpse] on native land. (2003: 401)

Formerly the Hope of Troy and a figure of great military prowess, Hector is reduced to a corpse, desecrated and lying in the dust. The poem closes with no great celebration, but a funeral and the elegies of three women. Tatum writes:

Our lasting memory of *The Iliad* is not only of the imminent fall of Troy, or of the victory of Agamemnon, or even of Achilles and his approaching death, but of the burial and tomb of Hector, and of the final speeches of his wife and mother... *The Iliad* stops when the devastations of war are plain... [but] the whys and wherefores of war itself are as unanswered at the end of the poem as they were at its beginning. (2004: xiv)

The lack of 'closure' and reluctance to offer opinion or solution are familiar issues in modern conflict literature. It is comforting to know that the inability to give reasons for war is nothing new, more comforting still to recognise Homer's honest admission of this. *The Iliad*, therefore, provides us with a mile-marker from which we can trace a history of conflict literature. The tropes that Homer employs – the epic form, the duality of the domestic and the military, the emphasis on relationships between individuals – are central to countless texts of conflict that have been written since.

What the Greeks enjoyed and perfected in the epic genre is something we see in literatures around the world. Of the Anglo-Saxon Sagas, the most famous is probably *Beowulf*. J.R.R. Tolkien writes of this:

Beowulf is not an ‘epic’, not even a magnified ‘lay’. No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather ‘elegy’. It is an heroic-elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3136 lines are the prelude to a dirge. (1937: 3)

Whatever its generic classification, this text is something of an enigma as there is no known (or supposed) author and its date of writing is vague indeed – between the eighth and early eleventh centuries. Despite this, the narrative is remarkably consistent in all of the early printed versions. Tolkien suggests that the text’s ‘weakness lies in placing the unimportant things at the centre and the important things on the outer edges’ (1937: 33). To an extent this repeats what we have seen in *The Iliad*. That which, in a conflict text, seems to be unimportant – the daily interactions of a family, the experience of the individual – is given heightened status. Furthermore, as we have seen in *The Iliad* and will see in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, *Beowulf* questions the ‘might is right’ ideal. Beowulf’s might is undeniable as he slays the monster, Grendel, and restores peace to Heorot. However, as with many of the Greek heroes and also many of Malory’s knights, Beowulf’s might is corrupted by other personality traits. In this case, it is Beowulf’s pride, over-confidence in his own abilities and desire for individual glory that cause his downfall.

As with Homer’s poem, *Beowulf* is shaped by mourning and loss. However, *Beowulf* is structured around death in a far more literal way than *The Iliad*. The poem is clearly arranged around three funerals, which are paired with three battles; each battle and each funeral have a different focus (Abrams and Greenblatt, 2000: 29). Regardless of the differences, it is the emphasis on death and mourning that resonates. Gale Owen-Crocker (2000) contends that the poem is structured around four funerals (rather than three, as previous scholarship has held). In her study of the poem she writes, ‘the placing of funerals at the beginning and end of the narrative is a deliberate act of structuring, which completes

a circle of grief' (2002: 2). Tolkien concurs that defeat is the theme of the poem. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death (1937: 32).

Sir Thomas Malory's compilation of Arthurian legends *Le Morte D'Arthur* includes bloody battle scenes, discussions of political and civil unrest and, most interestingly, the individual conflicts between characters. *Le Morte D'Arthur* was probably written during Malory's time in prison in the late 1400s, during the War of the Roses. Unlike Homer, Malory is generally nonchalant in his depictions of war's violence, offering the gruesome scene with little additional comment. However, there are many similarities within the three texts. All three show situations in which violence is not the only option but is considered with no suggestion of any other method of reconciliation. In *Le Morte* this leads to much of the tragedy – especially when characters engage in mortal combat with a supposedly unknown assailant, only to realise that they were fighting their close friend or relation. In these interchanges, the pointlessness of violence and its bitter after-taste become evident. Indeed, there are many instances within the text of two knights engaging in hand-to-hand combat without knowing each other's true identities and then regretting the action. Sir Tristan is horrified to find that he has fought for hours with Sir Launcelot. Sir Launcelot is distraught to find he has slain Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris – more so when this 'accident' is escalated to war by Sir Gawain's desire for revenge for the murder of his brothers. T.J. Lustig notes drily: 'Smite first and ask questions later: it is the standard operating procedure. But the potential for making mistakes in these circumstances is so great that one wonders why nobody modifies the rules of engagement' (2013: 12-13).

All three texts end with death and rituals of mortality. In *The Iliad* the deaths of Hector and Patroclus unite the warring two factions in mutual grief and mourning. In order to allow Priam to conduct Hector's funeral without disruption, Achilles declares a

ceasefire. The experience of grief for a loved one violently lost reminds the men of their common humanity and the text closes, leaving the reader in no doubt that Homer sees grief and loss as the outcome of conflict. Beowulf's funeral is dealt with differently. While it is evident that Beowulf's death is a great blow to the Geats, it is also a time of celebration for his life as the 'most gracious and fair-minded warrior king, kindest to his people and keenest to win fame' (Heaney, 1999: 121). However, despite the hint of a festival atmosphere around his funeral, there is still an overwhelming attitude of grief at the end of the poem. In *Le Morte* we again find ending in funereal grief. Arthur is slain in battle by his son Mordred, despite a Papal bull demanding a cessation of the conflict. Though there is no funeral in the traditional sense, Arthur is taken away on a barge – not unlike the sea funeral of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*:

And when they were at the water side, even fast by the bank hove a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur. Now put me into the barge, said the king. And so he did softly; and there received him three queens with great mourning; and so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head. (Malory, 1889: 480)

With Arthur's death and 'funeral' – as with Hector's, Patroclus' and Beowulf's – 'the ladies wept and shrieked that it was a pity to hear' (1889: 481). At the end of battle, there is no jubilation, nor glory. These three texts unite in their conclusion of violence and conflict as a destructive force that results in death and grief, often with very little achieved as a result.

We can begin to see how the work of mourning (to use Freud's phrase) forms a huge part of comics of conflict. This chapter takes the concept of 'conflict text as text of mourning' and applies it to representations of mourning and funeral rites in *American Widow* and *Maus*, as well as considering the inclusion of these themes to a lesser extent in

a selection of other texts. It shows how the 'work of mourning' acts in conjunction with traumatic representation within the text. Prior to this, however, this chapter discusses the relationship between mourning, shrines and the necessary physicality of the comic.

Mourning, Manipulation and Materiality

The creation of shrines is a normal and healthy part of mourning; a way to honour the deceased and to offer them a final token of love or respect. Of course, it is possible for shrine-building to become decidedly unhealthy, as John Hewitt contends: 'This drive towards creating a "museum to the deceased" is one way to ensure a lifetime of grief, our method of refusing to let go' (Hewitt, 1980: 44). For Freud, this unhealthy reaction speaks more of melancholia than mourning. In his book *On Mourning*, William Watkin agrees, stating that the attempt to keep someone alive by means of words 'suggests to us the beginning stages of a melancholia or a refusal to see mourning as a ritualised process of self-healing, but rather conceiving of mourning as a magical process of linguistic reanimation' (2004: 5).

Words are one aspect of memorialisation; when we think of memorialisation in a physical sense, we think of shrine-building and memorials. However, the creation of an artistic work is just as much an act of physical memorialisation and mourning as the building of a shrine. Indeed, in a medium such as comics, where the materiality of the work is of great importance to the narrative, this idea can be developed. Watkin writes, 'All memorialists strive to create a physical location for remembrance from the manipulation of the material world' (2004: 7). The first part of the statement is relatively straightforward – the creation

of a physical location for remembrance. However, it is not as simple as saying that this refers purely to memorial masonry and the like. As discussed in Chapter 5, the physical existence of the comic book is an important factor in the creation and development of both the plot development and, more specifically, the representation of traumatic experience contained therein. The creation of works of art as physical memorials to the dead is by no means a new phenomenon but comics take this further by adding an extra layer of meaning and necessity: in order to be comics, they must exist in a specific, physical sense. Unlike with many forms where representation does not affect the message of the work, comics must be presented in their originally-created format in order for the message to remain as is intended.³¹ In this respect, then, the comic item itself becomes a memorial. The 9/11 charity comics attest to this most readily in their being created for the dual purpose of praising emergency responders and raising money to support their families too.

Let us consider the second part of Watkin's quotation. The concept of manipulation and the material world raises a number of issues. The word 'manipulation' has an intriguing etymology:

Manipulation: c.1730, a method of digging ore, from Latin *Manipulus* 'handful', from *manus* 'hand' + root *plere* 'to fill'. Sense of 'skilful handling of objects' is first recorded 1826. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2012)

The earliest definition of 'digging' holds some relevance to the process of unearthing the core of a traumatic experience, in which one is often forced to find the root of their emotions and experience 'rock bottom' before beginning the work of mourning and recovery. The latter sense of the word refers us back to the concept of the careful presentation and handling of the physical object of the text. Though Watkin is not

³¹ Though webcomics are not presented in a strictly physical sense, they still exist in a specially-constructed physical space. The construction of webcomics works with the presentation space available, just as print comics do.

discussing comics in this quotation, his point is salient – the comics form relies on careful handling and manipulation of the physical object of the book to a far greater extent than other artistic forms. When the comic involves a discussion of mourning, and more specifically the rituals and tangible manifestations thereof, it is reasonable to consider that the relationship between the physical object and the content is intensified by the culturally-charged importance of material remembrance.

Structured Grief in *American Widow*

Alissa Torres, in collaboration with Sungyoon Choi, makes no attempt to understand the magnitude of the events of 11th September 2001, in which her husband, Luis Eduardo ‘Eddie’ Torres, died. In *American Widow*, Torres tells only her own story. Despite the intensely personal nature of the text, this does not alienate the reader. Unlike many of the primary texts of this thesis, *American Widow* is unusual because the conflict event has not begun at the start of the text. That is to say we experience the beginning of the conflict and ‘witness’ the very early stages of trauma and shock, rather than entering the narrative at a later date. Furthermore, Torres does not retell the story of what happened. Indeed, the wider socio-political aspects of the event are not covered in great detail at all – the only engagements with this within the text are the many instances of Torres’ visits to the Red Cross. Instead, the text is a carefully constructed comics representation of her work of mourning.

It becomes apparent throughout the text that Torres is acutely aware of her own mourning. What we see is a shifting, although clear, demarcation of different stages of the

mourning process.³²In Kübler-Ross' 'Five Stage Model', grief involves denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. In her book *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross writes that 'the stages are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives' (Kübler-Ross, 1997: 4). All of the five stages are represented in *American Widow*.

The first stage, denial, is evident in the chapter of the text set on September 11th – which I discuss presently. The four panels of Torres' face show a clear state of denial and shock. In this stage, Kübler-Ross writes, 'the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming... we refuse to believe in the loss' (1997: 24). Torres writes of her efforts to track down Eddie in New York hospitals. She writes:

You didn't come home so I searched for you in the hospitals... there was a Doris Torres. I knew she was a woman; I knew she wasn't you. I checked anyway... On day four, I accepted the truth. (2008: 47-50)

Though Torres has accepted that Eddie is dead, she has not reached the 'acceptance stage'. Rather, the next three stages (anger, bargaining and depression) appear all at once. The use of the black page bleeds features prominently, especially in depictions of a depressive mood. Similarly, the image of Torres surrounded by speech bubbles is repeated over and over (2008: 43, 106-109). Though there is no malice in the words, the effect of them is stifling. The pointers of the speech bubbles begin to encircle Torres and grab hold of her. The use of bleeds and stark contrast on the page, together with the ghostly and nightmarish images, illustrate Torres' mental state. The images seem as if Torres is suspended in air – or falling. Either way, she is not on solid ground. This lack of solidity is both disconcerting and effective in giving the reader a sense of her state. These images represent the constant

³² I take as my model for mourning the Five Stage Model, proposed by E. Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (1969). Though this model is no longer universally accepted and that other models now secure more widespread assent from specialists, it is both the most well-known model and one that Torres adheres to relatively closely.

barrage of well-meaning friends and relatives that wanted to help Alissa. This speaks to the concept of collective grief and the need of many to feel something in the aftermath of 9/11, as I discuss in due course with reference to the work of David Holloway.

In the middle of the text, Torres gives birth to her son. The birth itself is discussed in an indirect manner and is, unusually, not presented in a comics style. Rather, the episode is recounted as continuous prose, accompanied by small, childlike images, making this chapter less of a comic and more like a children's illustrated story. Torres' description does not read like a typical birth narrative. She likens the experience of the pain of contractions and trauma to the body to sex, describing each part of labour as though it was a part of a sexual encounter. The passage is written as though she is talking directly to Eddie, giving the text an overwhelmingly personal feel, as though the reader is intruding on their private correspondence. Torres links the experience of birth and sex with her grief as she writes, 'I welcomed the grief in the screams of my hard-earned labour. I invited you into each one, mourning you each time as I had not done previously' (2008: 83). In this respect, her grief has permeated every aspect of her life, including the beginning of the life of her son.

Torres' depiction of her post-natal depression is honest and harrowing (2008: 89). The view jumps uncomfortably around the room but without any movement. The reader is presented with four views of the same scene. Again, we see the constrained thought bubbles. The most unusual features of this page are the intense black gutters. They give the impression of a blink. We see the image of the light, and then blink. We see Torres and the nurse, and then blink again. In each black gutter, time is slowed down. This manipulation of time is central to the reconstruction of trauma and is discussed at length in Chapter 5. The blink-gutters in this section of *American Widow* allows us to be party to Torres' grief and depression, while still remaining separate from it. Kübler-Ross writes, 'in the depressive stage empty feelings present themselves and feel as though they will last

forever’ (1997: 67). The heavy black colouring on these pages emphasises this. The black page bleed is used to excellent effect there. This is an intense depiction of the seemingly never-ending depression of mourning.

The page bleed is used to excellent effect in the section of the text on Eddie’s funeral. The vast emptiness of the church mirrors the vast emptiness of Torres and the mourners. There is nothing cosy about this church – it seems more like a barn in this image. The immeasurable loneliness of Torres is made manifest in this image – a cave-like church that should be a place of great comfort but only represents sorrow. This sits in contrast to the image of the cemetery presented later in the text (2008: 173).

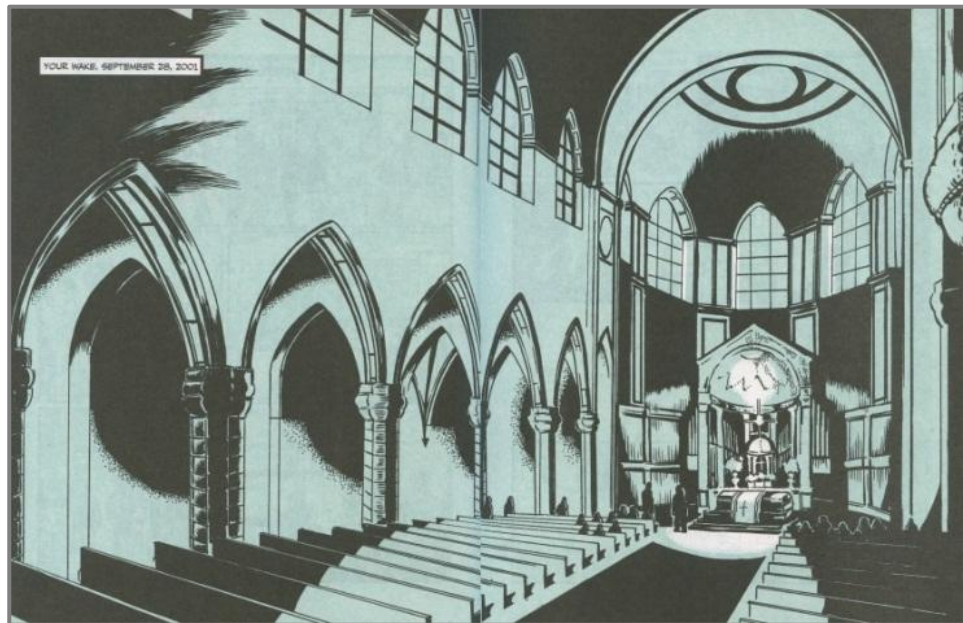


Fig. 2.1 – From *American Widow*, Alissa Torres, 2008, pp. 68-69. Image used with permission of the author.

One would typically expect the church to be the place of comfort and the cemetery to be the place of sorrow but Torres inverts this. The cemetery, though bleak, is more reminiscent of the book’s first image of a calm blue sky. The three panels are uniform in size and shape but show very different images. The top panel shows rose petals in the air. These petals then float into the middle panel – a winter view of the cemetery. The bottom panel shows the same scene again, but this time in summer. Again, we have a huge jump to

make between the images – this time spanning seasons to achieve closure. And again we have the image of the rose, this time as petal confetti. As with the analysis of ‘Dust’ in Chapter 1, we see the use of a linking image to connect panels that may otherwise seem too disconnected to contain a discernible narrative. Not only does the petal motif link three panels across a large timespan, it also connects these images of death and the passage of time to the repeated images of roses that are seen throughout the text.

Kübler-Ross’ second stage is anger. Of this she writes:

At first grief feels like being lost at sea: no connection to anything. Then you get angry at someone.... Suddenly you have a structure – your anger toward them. The anger becomes a connection from you to them. It is something to hold onto; and a connection made from the strength of anger feels better than nothing. (1997: 40)

There are many instances in the text of Torres’ anger and they are presented to us in such a way as to make us both complicit in and accepting of her rage. As we have seen, at the start of the text Alissa and Eddie have had an argument. Alissa is still angry at Eddie near the end of the text, almost a year later, as she writes ‘You told me, “I want to turn 90 beside you”, but you didn’t. So that’s how I got here. I am still so mad at you’ (2008: 200). Kübler-Ross suggests that bargaining is the most irrational stage of grief: we become lost in a maze of ‘If only...’ or ‘What if...’ statements. We want life returned to what is was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time... if only, if only, if only (1997: 51). Torres spends three pages on a wide range of ‘what ifs’ but receives no answers and does not attempt to answer them herself. Prior to this we are confronted by this intensely disturbing Genie and lamp image. The lamp is emitting a multi-faced ghoul that taunts with guilt and jibes to remind Torres – and the reader – that, no matter how hard she wishes, hopes and bargains, Eddie will not come back. This is the opposite side to

Torres' 'What ifs' and pleas. Rather than show the asking of the questions and the begging itself, she has chosen to show the frightening replies instead. However, in order to move on she must address these questions and accept that there are no answers, only more questions.

We can see in the text that Torres moves through the three middle stages of grief in mixed order – she does not finish one and neatly move onto the next. Her work of mourning is both a disorderly journey through the five stages and also, more basically, the unknotting of the traumatic aporia. Torres must learn to confront her trauma before she can move on from it. Acceptance – the fifth stage – is dependent on the mourner's ability to face the truth of the situation. As Kübler-Ross writes, 'learning to live with it – it is the new norm with which we must learn to live, though we wish it were otherwise (1997: 66). The issues of her grief are entangled with the national and international nature of the events and her own entry into motherhood. She poses the unanswerable question: 'what would motherhood be like without widowhood?

As I mentioned previously, *American Widow* begins prior to the event itself. Not only does this mean that we witness the collapse of the WTC 'as it happens' within the text but the reader is also party to Torres' moments of realisation. Torres is in the aftermath of a marital dispute and it is into this mood of antagonism that the news of the first plane hitting the WTC reaches her by telephone. In four panels, she shows her reaction (2008: 35). Here the reader is presented with a reading challenge. The panels are of uniform size. There is no indication of the amount of time that passes. We as readers are left to insert the timespan of these panels with no assistance from Torres. We can allow this train of thought to occur for 10 seconds or 10 minutes. The heavy white-on-black contrast makes these images stark and uncomfortable to view.



Fig. 2.2 – From *American Widow*, Alissa Torres, 2008, p. 35. Image used with permission of the author.

Within these four panels is more information than could be covered in a text novel in as much space, though there is little information to suggest how much time passes. However, as we know the times at which the two towers were initially hit and then collapsed – and as we will see the second collapse in the text – we can extrapolate a sense of timing from that. It is at this point in the text that the work of mourning begins, so to speak, and Torres' four-panel reaction captures the mental development of shock.

Later in the same chapter comes a second moment of realisation. The final page spread is a rare depiction of the towers that are not on a television screen (2008: 41). The overwhelming image on this page is the smoke billowing from the WTC as a tower collapses. Torres' stricken and tear-stained face hovers above this image as she asks after her husband. The most striking feature of this page is the shiver lines that surround the image of the collapsed (or collapsing) tower. It is as if the page itself is shaking with the impact of the collapse as well as representing the trembling reaction to shock. The representation itself is traumatic. The top-right panel shows a silhouetted image of people

on shaking stairs. The implication in the text is that these two events are occurring at the same time: the tower collapses as people rush to escape. This is the last page that records the event ‘live’. We follow Torres’ mourning from the moment of initial realisation. The reader’s implicit involvement with the construction of the narrative places us in a privileged position, as close as is possible, although not able to breach the void of knowledge that exists between Torres and the reader. The narrative’s close adherence to Kübler-Ross’ model of grief allows the experience of mourning to unfold in front of the reader.

The public nature of 9/11 leads *American Widow* to bring up the troublesome issue of ‘trauma and grief by proxy’. David Holloway writes,

Media coverage of 9/11[...] helped construct the attacks as trauma by collapsing the distinctions between those who experienced the attacks at first hand and those traumatised by images of them, and between those traumatised in real time and those traumatised after the fact in media replay time. (2008: 64-65)

The intensity of the image – and the repetition of it – created a traumatic response in huge numbers of people who were not party to the initial traumatic event – a trauma by proxy, if you will. Leon Wieseltier writes that this was ‘an event that we never saw, which is precisely the character of collective memory: knowledge made so immediate that it feels like experience’ (2002: 38). In line with what Holloway says, the barriers between victims of ‘actual trauma’ and ‘trauma by proxy’ became blurred to the point that very little distinction could be made.³³

This is evident in many of the 9/11 Charity Comics. These stories are not written by those who were involved in the event itself. Instead, they are the recollections of artists and

³³ I do not wish to belittle the experiences of those we would class as ‘trauma by proxy’, but I do wish to make the distinction clear.

writers who felt compelled to ‘write out’ their own experiences as an American and a human being on that day. It would be incorrect to suggest that these artists are latching onto the grief of others. Rather, these artists are telling their own story of what, as we have seen, became a hugely traumatic event worldwide. They refer us back to Holloway’s words regarding the collective memory of grief: without our own personal grief, but feeling the need to feel something after such a tragedy, we attach ourselves to the grief of others.

In an article for *Salon Magazine*, Torres writes: ‘As a widow of 9/11 with a new baby, I am on America’s patriotic payroll’ (2002: online). Her experience is not hers alone. Her situation makes her a unique but ‘reluctant’ media figure. She is not alone in this. Two episodes in the text discuss this issue. In the first, a woman tells Torres that she televised her child’s birth (the woman was presumably, like Torres, pregnant and lost her husband in 9/11). In the second, Torres talks on the phone to a man who insists that, since she did one interview, she is needed for more.

In both conversations it is evident to the reader that Torres is reluctant to be involved in the media. This leads us, logically, to ask why she decided to write (and publish) a book on the topic that would surely push her further into the spotlight. However, one gets the sense throughout the text that Torres is not ‘against the media’ at all – rather she is against the media’s way of doing media. On her own terms, she is happier and more able to face the camera. Writing *American Widow* gave her the opportunity to speak out on her own terms. There is a second layer to this. The drawings throughout the text are very plain – the faces could be the faces of any number of people, allowing us to impose ourselves on the narrative much more easily. We find this often in comics – that the more simple the faces, the easier it is for the reader to implant themselves into the story. We will see this feature repeated throughout this thesis. In *American Widow*, the simplicity of

drawing is asking us how we would feel about giving birth on television: ‘Would I want to be interviewed as a “9/11 Widow”?’ This question remains throughout the entire text.

The events within the text are things that are unexceptional – buying a dress, answering the phone on the bus, sitting in bed – but they are all tainted by the event that we know came before (2008: 66). Torres is placing us into ordinary situations with extraordinary knowledge and asking us: How would you deal with this situation? What would you do or say differently? The text is full of these unspoken questions but does contain one extremely striking direct question – one that, for Torres, is impossible to answer: ‘What would motherhood be like without widowhood’ (2011: 149). However, in her use of the comics form to ask these questions, Torres is able to illustrate the context in which she exists. This does not necessarily make it any easier for us to empathise with her position; it serves to help and to hinder our understanding: to help, by showing us her experiences of grief in stark visual manner but to hinder, by the unavoidable distance between reader and text that does not let us fully enter into the experience of the author.

Psychological therapy programmes around the world use writing as a means of expressing one’s emotions, especially when one is grieving. *American Widow*, then, is Torres’ mourning and healing in one. This is most clearly illustrated by two parts of the book. First, the book’s cover shows a picture of Eddie and Alissa that occurs in the body of the text in a flashback to their first date. The fact that the picture shows them looking away suggests that they are looking into the text; Eddie’s arm supporting Alissa in it and through it. When we read the text itself, the image becomes all the more poignant and the film noir effect created by the limited use of colour makes the image of Eddie appear both ghost-like and enduring. The second illustration comes at the book’s very end. At the end of the narrative – 10th September 2002 – Torres and her son travel to Hawaii. The final few pages show a boat in the ocean and the view zooms out over a number of panels to reveal the

islands and the sea in a similar way to that which one might see in a film. On the last two-page spread we see two separate images. On one side, a photograph of Torres and her son snorkelling; on the other a plain blue sky – a repetition of the book’s first page (2008: 210).

The inclusion of the photograph needs little explanation – an image to measure ‘how far we have come’ and to remind the reader of the autobiographical nature of what has gone before. That the photograph is not drawn in the same style as the rest of the images but is reproduced ‘as a photograph’ creates what Groensteen calls ‘a semiotic break’ (2013: 100). It causes the reader to pause and to be reminded of the graphic nature of what they have been reading; We can see this technique used to similar effect in Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Tran’s *Vietnamerica*. The inclusion of a photograph, then, is not particularly unusual. However, what are we to make of the blue page that mirrors the plain blue page at the beginning of the text? We can see this as a return to a pure and natural state. Its inclusion at the end of this text is not suggesting that Torres or the world have returned to this state but, rather, that it is the ultimate aim. Freud writes that ‘when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ (2002: 289). The return to the clear blue sky is a representation of this freeing.

In *American Widow*, Torres depicts the cyclical nature of human history and experience. The end of the text, with the return to the pale blue sky, shows this and, coupled with the suddenness of the TV screens at the beginning, we are asked to be aware that tragedy does not give a warning. This suggestion of cyclicity makes the ending ambiguous. However, when paired with the text’s epigraph, a different interpretation arises. The epigraph is taken from a report in the *New York Times*:

Everything the people of Beslan thought they knew about living, his aunt said, had changed. She rubbed bits of the filament of eggshell onto the boy’s blisters and burns, and said the lesson was indelible: “We never knew how happy we were”. (Chivers, 2004, Torres, 2008)

This quotation is attested to repeatedly in the text. Alissa is angry at Eddie and so they parted on poor terms. It is only after he is lost that she realises just how much she has lost. This quotation contains an invisible ‘if only’ that receives no answer. It speaks of the regret and lonely bargaining we see in Kübler-Ross’ third stage. But more than that, placing this quotation in relation to the cycle of history and the traumatic text creates a call to live in the moment. Torres writes throughout the text that she was living ‘one day at a time’; this quotation asks us why we only live like this after a tragedy. It is only at the end of the text – and Torres’ closing words – that we see some sort of resolution of this issue. Torres writes, ‘Although I was so confused by who I was and how I was supposed to be, I knew so fiercely that I was alive, together with my son, and that it was a beautiful day’ (2008: 210). In this single sentence there is an acceptance of Torres’ situation and an acceptance of her own state of grief. Many of the conflicts within the text are unresolved – and will always remain so; there is still much healing to do. This is as much ‘closure’ as one will receive in a textual narrative but for Torres it is enough.

Collective Mourning and Communal Grief

In *American Widow* we saw that the end of the text returns the ego to freedom on completion of the work of mourning. However, a strong difference between Torres’ text and the 9/11 Charity Comics exists: *American Widow* was published in 2008, when Torres had had the time and space to complete her work of mourning, whereas the Charity Comics were published in early 2002, before the work of mourning was completed.³⁴ It is no

³⁴ I do not wish to put a time scale on how long people should have to mourn, as such things are dependent on the individual. However, in the case of Torres she was in the process of mourning in 2008, whereas this was not the case for the artists of the Charity Comics in 2002.

surprise, then, to see that many of the 9/11 comics contain depictions of the rituals of mourning, shrines and grief – the work of mourning begun but not completed.

The depiction of mourning ritual and shrines has much precedent in the literature of conflict, as we have already seen in *The Iliad*, *Le Morte D'Arthur* and *Beowulf*. In these texts the result of conflict is death and destruction and as such the depictions of mourning are outpourings of grief and anguish, rather than an attempt to reconcile the ego and restore psychic balance – the harrowing conclusion to a destructive text. The 9/11 Charity Comics, however, do not handle mourning in this fashion. For them, it is not the end of the story, but rather another period within it. The images of shrines suggest that there is somewhere to move onto – an acceptance that the work of mourning is neither irrelevant nor complete. Thus, these texts are consistent with Freud's definition of mourning. This gives the texts an aura of hope that is missing in many other conflict comics, in which the overwhelming horror of the traumatic experience removes all chance of healthy mental reconciliation, instead keeping the text and its characters locked in traumatic limbo.

The presence of shrines and mourning rituals is not only indicative of communal grief and healthy emotional regeneration; it also serves as a way to 'bear witness' to the event. Cooper and Atkinson write that 9/11 was 'distinguished [from] other human atrocities [...] by the lack of actual images of human carnage' (Cooper and Atkinson, 2008: 69). Rather than producing (as has been the case in many previous situations) large numbers of photographs of the human casualties of the event, photographic representation of 9/11 concentrated more on the heroism of emergency responders, 'people grieving at the site of the attack without depiction of the site itself [or] people viewing depictions of the site of the attack' (Zelizer, 2003: 51). In the Charity Comics it is superheroes who are seen bearing witness and presiding over shrines:

The act of witnessing is the only form of action because the superheroes could not intervene in an event that has already occurred. Mourning and witnessing become heroic acts where the

anguished expressions and muscular stances of the exceptional figures serve as indexical signs marking out the event in history. (Cooper and Atkinson, 2008: 70)

Joe Kubert's splash page in *Heroes* shows a shrine constructed amongst rubble and posters of missing people (2001: 4). Captain America's shield forms part of the shrine; it appears to have been placed as an offering. Its presence here can be read in two different ways. First, the shield is an image of strength and power to defend the nation – an image compounded by its physical qualities and indestructibility. Its presence at the shrine is a desire to imbue those represented here with these same qualities. Cap is unable to help, but wishes to share his superhuman ability with those who can. An alternative reading of this image sees Cap's shield not as being offered but being discarded. Just as superheroes are rendered powerless, so their brand of macho vigilantism has no place in the shrines and rituals of the 9/11 aftermath. Kubert's image makes no comment on how the placement of the shield is supposed to be read. However, the central part of the image shows a fireman's helmet and jacket, both more visibly presented and physically larger than the shield, lessening its status as a tool of heroism. The courage and strength that has defined Cap as a superhero pales in comparison to the qualities of the first responders in the aftermath of 9/11. In Kubert's splash page their heroism far outshines that of the superheroes because they have no magical abilities to help them. They are ordinary people, working in extraordinary ways.

Religion and Rite

In 'Ayekah', the ritual and liturgy of *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year) is combined with a narrative of post-9/11 mourning (Boyd, 2002: 168-169). Though the comic mostly uses

captioning, the first page's captions are split into two categories: a retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac, part of the traditional *Rosh Hashanah* liturgy, and a series of short quotations which the reader is led to assume are from the depicted fireman's wife, stating their intent to travel from Boston – presumably on one of the planes that crashed into the WTC. The second page uses captions of the biblical passage only, ending with a single tier-length panel in which the fireman is calling 'Here I am!' This is the same line that Abraham calls out when God is testing him. The biblical narrative of Abraham is generally read as being a test of faith – will Abraham's love and devotion to God be strong enough that he will follow all commands, even when they involve the death of his son? His cry of 'Hineini!' ('Here I am!') is his ascent to duty. Thus, the fireman is a modern-day Abraham, facing his test of faith with courage and conviction. The juxtaposition of the biblical story of Abraham's test and the fireman's call to duty allows the fireman to be seen as one who is doing work that is in accordance with a call from God.

'Ayekah' is presented in high-contrast format, a style made famous by Frank Miller in *Sin City*. This style uses only black and white, playing with the effects of light and shadow to create highly effective images. However, the starkness of these images – and the discomfort one experiences while viewing them – mirror the bleakness and lack of comfort within the narrative. The two pages are presented verso-recto, requiring no page turn. The first page is presented with consistently sized and evenly spaced panels. This becomes disjointed on the second page, where, although the tiers remain evenly sized, the panels are not uniform. The panel transitions employed are atypical. The vast majority of transitions in American (and, more generally, western) comics fit McCloud's second category definition of action-to-action transitions: 'a single subject in distinct progression' (1994: 70-74). While there are some action-to-action transitions here, the majority are aspect-to-aspect transitions, as we have seen in the analysis of 'Dust' in Chapter 1. This particular

type of transition is not often used in western comics, meaning that a western comics reader will not be familiar with it. This unfamiliarity alone will create an air of unease in the text.

The depiction of religious ritual in 'Ayekah' introduces a major theme in the depictions of mourning and ritual in the Charity Comics. In 'Ayekah', the fireman lights the tradition pair of candles and recites the *Shehecheyanu* blessing. The candles are present throughout the comic. Candles occur frequently throughout the Charity Comics as a symbol of mourning and the lighting of them becomes a key part of the ritual. The use of candles in mourning rituals has roots that can be traced back for thousands of years and is prevalent in the vast majority of religions and secular belief systems. Indeed, candles are presented as symbols of mourning and memorialisation without comment in most of the comics. In 'Untitled', a mother Dalmatian tucks her children into bed, while her son asks her about the whereabouts of his father (Fields, 2002: 59). The dialogue begins mid-sentence, with the mother explaining the job of firemen. The dialogue would suggest that their father is working a night shift. However, in the background there is a large framed picture of him, surrounded by lit candles and next to his fireman's helmet. While the children are placated by the mother's answers, the reader is aware, simply by the presence of the shrine, that the father is dead. In this comic, the candles are part of a shrine, a trope that is repeated throughout the Charity Comics. However, in 'Ayekah' we see one further aspect of ritual and mourning. By going through the ritual of the *Rosh Hashanah* prayers and rites, the fireman gains strength. It is the words of the Torah that give him the strength to answer his call to duty (Boyd, 2002: 169).

Boyd structures his comic around the framework of Jewish funeral rites. In a similar style, Spiegelman's short comic, 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', reproduced within the body of the text of *Maus*, is built around the suicide and funeral of Spiegelman's

mother, Anja. Unlike 'Ayekah', in which the protagonist draws strength from ritual and faith, Spiegelman suggests that rite and ritual have provided no comfort at all. He describes the rituals of *Shiva*, the period of mourning traditional in Judaism, as being a dreadful and discomforting experience: 'That first night was bad... my father insisted we sleep on the floor – an old Jewish custom. He held me and moaned to himself all night. I was uncomfortable. We were scared!' (Spiegelman, 2003: 104). Spiegelman wishes to make it very clear that his experience of mourning rituals have done little to alleviate his disquietude. A bandeau panel of his mother's funeral makes this abundantly clear, as his father throws himself, screaming, onto the coffin and Art looks on in startled shock.

In contrast to the clean lines and the high ratio of white to black in the artwork in 'Ayekah', 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' is visually distressing, the artistic style being representative of the extreme mental anguish Art is experiencing. The images themselves are reminiscent of German Expressionist woodcuts of the early twentieth century. Not only is the artistic style very different to that of 'Ayekah', there is also little stylistic commonality between this comic and the wider text in which it sits, that of *Maus*, in which the facial expressions of his characters are minimal and very little facial detail is given at all. Instead, Spiegelman produces figures with grotesquely distorted faces and misshapen bodies.

'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' gives us a very different picture of mourning to that which has been presented in other conflict comics. There is no comfort, nor resolution. The text ends with a three-panel tier as the viewer moves away from Spiegelman locked in a stereotypical prison cell, berating his mother for her suicide and its effect on him (2003: 105). Rather than a vigorous call to action, here we are left with a prisoner of grief. Spiegelman's imprisonment within his own emotions becomes more evident when we consider the fact he draws himself in the uniform of an Auschwitz prisoner. The inclusion

of 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' is the only discussion of mourning that arises in *Maus*. At no point in the rest of the text is this issue discussed; it is conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, this embargo on the subject makes the inclusion of this short comic all the more powerful. Its strong contrast to the rest of the text is instantly unnerving, as is the shift in perspective from Art's father, Vladek's, fairly unemotional testimony of the Holocaust to Art's intensely personal rendering. In both *American Widow* and the 9/11 Comics, the work of mourning is healthy and constructive, aiming to allow the participants to heal themselves, while still accepting and recognising the magnitude of what has occurred. This is mourning that broadly adheres to the Freudian model. For Spiegelman, the silent trauma of the effect of his parents' experiences on him, which is discussed in Chapter 4, and the guilt that has arisen from this creates a complex traumatic wound that reaches bursting point when his mother commits suicide. The complexity of the experience – the amount of personal guilt and instability that is bound up in it – means that Art's grief becomes melancholia. Freud defines melancholia as being the result of an unhealthy work of mourning: 'the patient allows the loss to absorb him entirely [...] He vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished' (2002: 245). This is most clearly demonstrated in the final tier, depicted previously, in which Art declares 'you murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!' Such a bold display of melancholia is absent from the 9/11 texts.

'Ayekah' is explicit in its declaration of strength through faith but that is not to say that strength and comfort is to be found solely in religious rite. The use of candles in mourning is used as much in secular memorialisation as religious. Ritual can be intensely comforting, even when not imbued with religious significance. Indeed, it is a common idea that funerals are held for the benefit of the living and not the deceased, to bring succour and closure. For Torres, the funeral of Eddie does not offer closure as she must continue

her battle with various organisations for aid and also the return of his personal effects. However, the inclusion of rituals of mourning in both *American Widow* and the Charity Comics emphasises their importance in the completion of a healthy work of mourning and healing of the psychic rift caused by the traumatic event itself. While none of these comics comment on the hope of a positive future, they are not devoid of hope entirely. The emphasis on both individual heroism and the communal courage of New York's first responders works to counteract some of the intense trauma that is felt in these comics. However, it does not eradicate all trauma – it cannot. *American Widow* ends with an overall feeling of hope for Alissa and her son, while 'Ayekah' is a demonstration of strength and hope through faith. However, though these texts have a generally positive ending, both deny the reader total closure.

Chapter Three

Trauma Invading Sleep

Long have they pass'd, faces and trenches and fields,
Where through the carnage I moved with a callous composure, or away from
the fallen,
Onward I sped at the time — but now of their forms at night,
I dream, I dream, I dream.
Walt Whitman, 'Old War Dreams' (1855)

On returning from his second tour with the US Army in Vietnam, Adam Blaine began a long cycle of psychotherapy, medication and intermittent hospitalisation that continues to this day.³⁵ He describes in detail the nightmares that became the defining feature of his trauma. The nightmares that Blaine described were vivid re-enactments of the events at My Lai; they recount with horrible accuracy his movements on that day. Such nightmares have been an enduring part of Blaine's life since the early 1970s, beginning shortly after the My Lai tribunal. The disruptions they have caused to his daily life have meant that he has never held down a job and has been divorced three times. Blaine blames the repetitive nightmares for his broken life. He is not unusual in the symptoms of his traumatic

³⁵ Blaine was under the command of William Calley, who was convicted of war crimes for his role in the My Lai Massacre on 16th March 1968. Calley was convicted of the premeditated murder of 104 Vietnamese civilians. Blaine was present at My Lai, though he was exonerated of any responsibility for the events at a military tribunal in 1970.

rupture. An estimated 78% of Vietnam veterans reported nightmares following their return to the USA (Davis et al, 2007: 190).³⁶ The aim of this chapter is to discuss the nature of traumatic dreaming and its relationship to trauma comics. This chapter begins with an outline of the psychological and psychoanalytical theories of dreams, using both clinical research and Freud's *Die Traumdeutung*, specifically his four-part description of the dream-work. Following this, the argument centres on the relationship between the comics form and the creation of the dream in accordance with Freud's theory. The final part of this chapter is a close analysis of dream sequences in comics, discussing their formal construction and their purpose within both the narrative and the overall representation of trauma within each comic.

Neuropsychology, Psychoanalysis and Traumatic Dreaming

Dreams are a recurring issue throughout psychological and clinical studies in trauma.³⁷ Harry Wilmer states that 'war nightmares are a unique form of dreams – there are no other dreams like them' (1996: 85). Caruth makes the point that it is in the nightmares of the sufferer that the traumatic neurosis makes itself known. Similarly, for Herman, disturbance of dreams and a tendency towards nightmares are two of the most common – and often most terrifying – symptoms of a traumatic rupture. The relationship of the dream-state to consciousness becomes a factor here. Traumatic neuroses exist outside of consciousness and it is because of this location within the psychic self that they are

³⁶ This figure increases to 96% in individuals with a diagnosis of PTSD and another condition, such as Panic Disorder, Generalised Anxiety Disorder or Episodic Paroxysmal Anxiety (Davis et al., 2007: 201).

³⁷ It is commonly noticed that the German word *Traum* ('dream') is very similar to 'trauma', though in *Traum* the 'au' is generally pronounced /aʊ/, while 'trauma' is pronounced with an /ɔ:/ sound. However, the two words do not share a common root. Rather, *Traum* is derived from the Old West Germanic '*draugmas*', meaning a deception or illusion (*OED*, 2013: online). The German etymology of *Traum* references the phantasmagorical and illusionary aspect that is central to dreaming.

incomprehensible. Dreams, too, occupy a space that exists in an awkward relationship to consciousness because they occur during sleep.

There is another factor pertaining to trauma and traumatic dreams that is of special relevance to the study of comics. If we consider the contention of Herman that ‘trauma is encoded in vivid sensations and images’, we can see an immediate relationship between the comics form and the nature of trauma (1992: 38). Comics is a visual medium and trauma is typically encoded in image and sensation more than in word. Therefore, comics tend to hold a privileged relationship to the representation of traumatic experience because form and content can be paired so effectively; in relation to traumatic dreams, this relationship is particularly clear, as I show in this chapter.

At this juncture it is useful to offer a brief explanation of neuropsychological studies into traumatic dreaming that have assisted in shaping both definitions of nightmares and wider definitions of trauma and PTSD. It should be noted that nightmares in the form of bad dreams are not as uncommon as one may expect in the adult civilian population: 5% report having nightmares regularly (Hamblen, 2011: online). As Ernest Hartmann explains, the content of nightmares can be anything but ‘almost always involves the dreamer being chased, threatened, or wounded by some sort of attacker [...] there is almost always danger of some kind to the dreamer’ (1996: 102). These types of nightmares typically do not recreate a specific event and are not usually treatable with medication. In contrast, ‘the characteristic terrifying nightmare of the actual [traumatic] event is as if it were recorded by *cinema vérité*. The dream portrays a single event in recurrent replays’ (Wilmer, 1996: 88). For the purposes of this thesis, the terms ‘nightmare’ and ‘traumatic dream’ refer to the dreams that arise from a traumatic rupture, but with the awareness that this differs from the clinical understanding of these terms; this distinction is made where necessary.

Given that nightmares are such a common symptom of a traumatic rupture, it naturally follows that they would be the subject of considerable academic research and clinical interest.³⁸ One of the key proponents of traumatic dream research is Bessel van der Kolk, who co-ordinated the first (and, to date, largest) study of nightmares in veterans at a Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic, in which 410 individuals completed detailed questionnaires. Of this initial group, thirty were selected for further interviews (van der Kolk et al., 1984: 187). The study showed that ‘the chronic traumatic nightmares of men who had been in combat (PTSD) were found to differ from the lifelong nightmares of veterans with no combat experience (LL)’ (1984: 187). In his paper on the same study, Hartmann discusses the two main groups: the study contained a further ‘control’ group of men who had ‘severe combat experience but had no history of nightmares’ (1984: 187). The study sought to investigate whether there are any differences between ‘regular’ nightmares and traumatic nightmares. The features of nightmares that were identified went beyond the narrative content of the dream itself and also considered treatment options, sleep movement and the time of the nightmare within the sleep cycle. The findings from the two groups are shown in the following table:

		Group 1 PTSD (N=15)	Group 2 LL (N=10)
When nightmare occurs in sleep cycle			
Beginning (2300 to 0200)		4	1
Middle (0200 to 0430)		11	3
End (0430 to 0800)		0	4
Nightmare replicates an actual event	Yes	11	0
	No	4	10
Nightmare is repetitive, almost exactly the same content	Yes	15	3
	No	0	6
Body movements concurrent with nightmare	Yes	15	0
	No	0	8
Positive effect of medication on nightmares	Yes	8	2
	No	4	7
Positive effect of psychotherapy on nightmares	Yes	6	2
	No	2	5

Fig. 3.1 – Table from ‘Who Develops PTSD Nightmares and Who Doesn’t’, Ernest Hartmann, 1996.p 107.

³⁸ See Varvin et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2013.

The differences shown in this table are clear. Hartmann states that ‘repetitive post-traumatic nightmares are not nightmares’ in the traditional sense and ‘could be induced by a slight “nudge” or mini-arousal’ (1996: 105-106). Traumatic nightmares have a closer relationship to waking flashbacks than to non-traumatic nightmares: ‘the same post-traumatic nightmare sequence involving the same content can occur not only during various stages of sleep but during waking’ (Hartmann, 1996: 108).

Clinical literature has been considered in order to confirm that traumatized patients suffer from nightmares that are of a different nature to non-traumatized patients. To complement the representations of traumatic dreams in comics this thesis makes use of Freud’s *Die Traumdeutung* (1899), especially to consider the nature and structure of the dream. Freud’s dream-work provides a useful account of the formal features of dreaming.

For Freud, the nightmare of the survivor of trauma is connected to a conscious mental block:

I am not aware [...] that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking about it. (2003: 13)

By this reckoning we may think it is logical that that which is consciously avoided during waking hours is unable to be contained during sleep. However, Freud challenges this idea:

Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams. It would be more in harmony with their nature if they showed the patient pictures from his healthy past or of the cure for which he hopes [...] We may argue that the function of dreaming, like so much else, is upset in this condition and diverted from its purposes. (2003: 13)

Rather than dreams being the place in which the traumatic neurosis is presented to the individual, it is another case of the trauma's intrusion into the mind: 'Freud stated that dreams in war neuroses were better viewed as fear enactments' (Barrett, 1991: 412). The traumatic rupture is one that affects all aspects of the individual's mind. However, the basic nature of the dream – the method of construction and stages of representation that latent content goes through to become manifest – sets it apart from waking recollections; the fact that dreams exist in tenuous relationship to consciousness and are created through the dream-work makes them different to flashbacks and other waking recollections.

In order to discuss Freud's theories of dreaming more fully, it is necessary to the self-proclaimed Freudian Jacques Lacan, who claims that the dream holds a different meaning when we think of it in relation to trauma. He writes that 'awakening [from dreams] is itself the site of a trauma' (1977: 25). This comment is made in relation to one of the shortest and most famous of Freud's dream analyses, commonly known as 'the dream of the burning boy':

A father had been watching day and night beside the sick-bed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child's body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: "Father, don't you see that I am burning?" The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved boy were burnt by a fallen candle. (Freud, 1991: 652)

For Lacan and Caruth, it is the act of waking that is the key to this dream. While in the dream, the father remains with the child in an ideal state – he sees his child as alive. The act of awakening represents

the inevitability of responding [...] awakening to the survival of the child that is now only a corpse [...] the father, who would have stayed inside the dream to see his child alive once more, is commanded by the same child to leave the dream and awaken [...] To awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive. (Caruth, 1996: 105)

Awakening, then, repeats the trauma. The father sees his son alive in a dream but must awaken to the traumatic realisation that his son is dead. The action of waking – of opening one's eyes – is a reopening of the traumatic wound. Furthermore, it reemphasises for the traumatised individual the absurdity of one's own survival, thus returning us to this key facet of trauma once more.

In order to understand the relationship between dreams and trauma, one must discuss the theories of dreams that Freud discusses in his seminal text *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). He divides the 'dream-work' – that is, the processes behind the creation of dreams – into four stages: condensation, distortion, representation and secondary revision. Each manifest image within a dream does not necessarily equal one item of latent content; one manifest image may represent a multitude of latent images. Freud gives the example of a dream regarding one of his patients, Irma, in which the figure of Irma stood for many of the women in his life; one image is a condensation of many. Freud states that although this can be seen as a form of translation, there are many substantial differences:

a translation usually strives to respect the discriminations expressed in the text, and to differentiate similar things. The dream-work, on the contrary, tries to fuse two different thoughts by looking [...] for an ambiguous word which shall act as a connecting link between the two thoughts. (Freud, 2001b: 171)

Though two or more items of latent content may condense into one manifest image, the relationship between them may be convoluted.

The convolution of the dream image is echoed in the second part of the dream-work, distortion, a term which draws our attention to the fact that the latent content of the dream is distorted by a variety of techniques. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud uses the term ‘*überdeterminierung*’ (‘over-determination’) to describe that multiple causation for a single symptom or manifest image (Freud and Breuer, 2001: 43). That is to say, a single image or event within the dream may have roots traceable to several different causes and it is likely that there is no ‘right answer’ as to which, if any, is the singular cause. Thus, the repetition of images in the dream may be the same item of latent content repeated in varying forms – *over-determined*. This links the process of the dream with the process of the traumatic neurosis – the unconscious repetition of images and sensation.

The next stage of the dream-work – the stage that is most pertinent when considering traumatic representation in comics – is the ‘consideration of representability [consisting] of transforming thoughts into visual images’ (Freud, 2001b: 207). This stage questions why each item of latent content is included in a dream and why the latent content is translated into each item of manifest content. However, Freud is quick to point out that these questions are unanswerable due to the very nature of the dream-work. The selection of images that combine to create a dream is an unconscious process and thus resists analysis. The mission of dream analysis is to trace the manifest content of the dream to its latent roots. The images that persist in the dreams, flashbacks and repetitions of a traumatic neurosis are similarly constructed, being separated from consciousness and often being a smaller part of the overarching traumatic event. One literary example of this can be seen in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1991), when he describes the death of Curt Lemon in a land mine explosion. O’Brien and Dave Jensen have been told to retrieve Lemon’s body from a tree – an undoubtedly traumatic experience – but ‘what wakes [him] up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing “Lemon Tree” as [they] threw down the parts’

(O'Brien, 1991: 79). It is not the traumatic event itself that has remained for O'Brien, but a small part of the aftermath. On waking from his nightmare, a re-enactment of the traumatic moment, what is manifestly present is the song. The song brings back all the latent and distressing original affective reaction to the experience even though the song was not, in itself, the central distressing part of it.

If we liken the visual and sensational output of the traumatic neurosis to the manifest content of the dream, then the latent content can be likened to the original traumatic event. Just as the analyst of dreams must work through the manifest content to understand the reasons for the dream's creation and the meaning, if any, contained within, so too must the analyst of trauma be able to work through the symptoms of a traumatic neurosis to uncover the (latent) event that sits at its root. What the trauma artist must then do is to take the latent content and translate it, along with the manifest content, into a piece of art – be it literature, comics, film or another form – that can help the reader to understand some aspect of the traumatic experience. It is here that the recreator of trauma faces the enormous task of representing their trauma in a way that will show others its full horror, especially when the artist may not consciously understand the full horror or import of the traumatic event.

The final stage of the dream-work concerns what Freud terms 'secondary revision'. The first two stages of the dream-work are a disguise – they hide the latent content of the dream in convoluted images and distortions. Secondary revision is a second-order disguise – it hides the disguise. It is this stage that conceals the contradictory and improbable material of the manifest content within a seemingly normal narrative. If, for example, we find a dream to have a particularly filmic nature, this is attributed to the influence of secondary revision on the other parts of the dream work. The seeming normality of the situation within the dream will conceal all trace of abnormality of image or subject matter.

The Freudian dream-work and the construction of traumatic dreams are very different. While Freud's dream-work is concerned with the construction of the dream narrative itself – and specifically the interplay of latent and manifest content – traumatic dreams and nightmares do not undergo the same process because they are direct renderings of a specific event. There is no relationship between the latent and the manifest because the latent level does not exist as it does in the dreams of a healthy mind; though there is a latent level in traumatic dreams, the manifestation of the dream does not necessarily conceal deeper meanings. Despite these differences, both theories are relevant to the representation of traumatic dreaming in comics. Neuropsychological studies of real traumatic experience are used to frame my account; the Freudian model gives a richer account of formal strategies in dreams and is used to look at the comics form. Comics creators use their own experiences of dreaming, as well as expectations of what a traumatic dream should be like, in conjunction with comics-specific techniques in the construction of the representative dream sequences. For the purposes of this chapter, the dreams are divided into two sections: dreams of traumatic experience and dreams of traumatic loss, while recognising that there will inevitably be overlaps.

Dreams exist on a separate level of consciousness to waking life, as does trauma; the individual does not experience the dream in the same way as their waking existence. Within the text, the dream occupies a separate narrative level to the overarching narrative. Here it is necessary briefly to discuss the work of Gérard Genette, and the terms he defines in his work *Narrative Discourse* (1972).³⁹ Genette proposes that narrative occurs in levels. The main plot of the story occurs at the extradiegetic level; the events within the story are intradiegetic. An embedded narrative, for example a character telling a story within the

³⁹For the purposes of this thesis I do not enter into a discussion of the validity of Genette's terms. Rather, I accept them as clearly defined terms in their own right.

body of the main narrative, sits at the metadiegetic level. Dreams exist in the text at the metadiegetic level. The inclusion of a dream sequence, while not necessarily crucial to the narrative flow, assists in the development of the character and the mood of the scene; while a dream may not add anything to the movement of the storyline, it will heighten the sense of the traumatic within the text, as well as provide a visual outlet for one of the key symptoms of a traumatic rupture.

The inclusion of a dream introduces another dimension to the text. According to Genette, metalepsis is a method of playing with variations in narrative level in order to create an effect of illusion or disquietude. A metaleptical move within a text can occur between any narrative levels, but in the case of dream sequences the shift is from metadiegetic to intradiegetic. The narrative has moved from an embedded narrative (the dream) to the events within the story itself. As Genette suggests, this can create unease within the narrative, not simply because the reader must reposition themselves within the text and re-assimilate the events of the dream into the text at the correct narrative level, but also because the shift in itself is unsettling. To make sense of our own dreams can be difficult enough, but the added traumatic dimension – the fact the dream may make little coherent sense or includes manifest content that is distressing to consider – often makes this impossible; this inability to codify one's dreams is key to the understanding of traumatic dreaming as a whole. The intensely visual nature of the dream lends itself well to representation in comics form; the near-impossibility of mentally collating traumatic dreams when awake – as well as the trauma of waking– is made manifest in the metaleptical leaps that can be seen in these comics renderings. Comics, then, can represent traumatic dreams effectively, not only because it is a visual medium, but because the physical space of the comic itself is suitable for creating visually intense metaleptical shifts.

Dreams of Traumatic Experience

Dreams that recreate a specific event are a common symptom of a traumatic rupture. Many comics of conflict use dreams to assist in their representations of trauma but they are not necessarily constructed in line with how clinical research claims that traumatic dreams work. These dreams are narrative devices within the wider comics story arc and as such are not meant to be clinically accurate representations of traumatic dreams. Moreover, the need for comics (or any medium) to be artistically striking requires the artist to look beyond the literal representation and create something that is both representative of the traumatic event at hand and visually arresting.

The majority of traumatic nightmares begin after the individual is in a safe environment. For example, most Vietnam veterans did not begin to experience nightmares until at least three months after returning home (van der Kolk et al., 1984: 188). Some do not experience nightmares until several years later. It is rare for the nightmares to begin while the individual is still in the midst of the traumatic event. Despite this, one of the most vivid and dramatic renderings of a traumatic dream is found in *The 'Nam* comic 'Three Day Pass'. The story follows Ed, Mike and Lonnie on a three-day 'R&R' pass in Saigon. In the early hours of their second day, a group of Vietcong soldiers blow up the hotel in which they are staying and Lonnie is injured. The hotel explosion rouses Ed in the middle of a graphic and terrifying nightmare. The nightmare image acts as an encapsulation of the events that Ed has experienced during his time in Vietnam. The wedge-shaped panel shows Ed's sleeping face at the very bottom, cast in a blue light to suggest darkness in his bedroom. His face is slightly contorted in a worried expression, with a knitted brow and

open lips. In terms of Genette's narrative levels, Ed sits at the intradiegetic level. Behind him, as if radiating out from him, is the action of the dream, the intrusion of the metadiegetic on the intradiegetic – metalepsis. As suggested by Genette, the effect of metalepsis on this panel is to create a sense of illusion and disquiet. The reader's eye is immediately drawn to the repeated image of a Vietnamese woman in *ao dai* who appears to walk from the top of the image to the bottom, getting bigger as she approaches the bottom of the image. In the smaller, full-length images she appears to be holding out her hand but by the time we reach the final image – a close-up of her face – she is holding a gun. This is a reference to an incident earlier in the same issue where the naïve Ed leaves a Saigon nightclub with a young woman (it is implied that she is a prostitute) and is then nearly robbed and shot in an alley.



Fig. 3.2 – From 'Three Day Pass', *The 'Nam*, Doug Murray and Mike Golden, 1987. p 12. Image used with permission of Marvel Entertainment LLC.

Around the girl are realistic images of Ed's colleagues in the heat of battle; cartridge cases pepper the panel. No figure is shown completely; they are shown only by close-ups of their faces (and several pairs of legs). In the background at the top of the image is a Vietnamese village, with a host of traditionally dressed civilians in shadow.

At no point in the series is *The 'Nam* shy about using bold, high-contrast colours; violent scenes are often rendered in bright greens, purples and pinks to create a vivid visual effect. However, the coloration is *either* vibrant and clashing *or* 'typical' (*id est* items are depicted in the colours they naturally are). In the nightmare panel, these two colour styles combine; the bold atypical colouring of Ed and the girl clashes with the typical colouring of the rest of the panel. This contrast confirms for the reader that this is a dream sequence and adds to the visual chaos within the frame. This dream shows aspects of both Freudian dream-work and clinical definitions of traumatic dreams. In line with van der Kolk's study (1984), Ed's nightmare retells actual events. However, this dream has more in common with the dream-work. In this dream sequence we can see most of the stages of the dream-work represented. The condensation stage is clearly represented in the repeated figure of the woman; her presence and the addition of the gun is the attempted mugging incident neatly condensed into one image. Similarly, distortion is present in the recurrent images of Ed's colleagues' faces and discharging weapons. The event that is being represented here is not evident – it could be many events in one image, making this an excellent example of over-determination. The same could be suggested of the repeated image of the woman. The third stage, consideration of representability, is more difficult to recognise in comics because it is an unanswerable question to begin with. In relation to comics, we must consider why the artist chose each item within the dream sequence. This dream is relatively straightforward. Ed's colleagues are important to him and so images of them in peril are likely to traumatise him. Their presence in the dream – most of them screaming

and shooting – is a substitute for his own image in the dream. The inclusion of the woman has two potential reasons, both of which may be relevant. First, the events in the alley had only just happened and were still fresh in Ed's mind. More serious, however, is the implication of a prostitute with a gun. To Ed, who has little experience of women in general, the human act of sex (and the notion of physical closeness) has become bound up with violence and death in his mind, heightening the traumatic experience of an attempted mugging. The only stage that is not identifiable in this dream is the final stage – secondary revision. This dream has no discernible coherent narrative strand. The second order disguise has not been employed here. This is a purposeful omission to heighten the traumatic chaos of the dream itself and a technique that is noted in many comics dream sequences. The abundance of visual material – manifest content – heightens the visual chaos.

The dream is presented in one panel that takes up roughly half the page. That it is confined within a frame immediately contains the event in time, removing the timelessness that would occur if it was presented as a bleed. However, the gutters that separate this panel from the adjacent two are not uniform. Rather, the panels appear to overlap at the bottom corners and then are separated by a gradually widening gutter that divides them lengthways. This atypical guttering has two effects on the page and the narrative. First, it is unusual enough to create a destabilising effect on the reading of the page; the page lacks a comfortable, uniform layout and instead mimics the chaos of the dream. Secondly, the fact that the panels gradually separate suggests a distancing from reality, while the overlapping suggests that the two events of the panels (Ed sleeping and dreaming and the explosion in the hotel) influence each other. The layout of the two panels, then, suggests both a cognitive separation of dream and reality and also an implication that the violence that surrounds him in sleep is, in part, responsible for the content of Ed's dream. Here we can

see echoes of Freud's 'dream of the burning boy' in that it is the action directly outside of the sleeper while they sleep which influences the construction for the dream.

Despite being contained in one panel, this dream's inclusion in the narrative assists in the development of the wider story arc. This dream makes the reader aware of the impact of combat on Ed's emotional and mental health. The fact that this traumatic sequence occurs so early in the overall comics series emphasises the seriousness of combat trauma, as well as the high probability that Ed (and, by extension, most conscripted soldiers) will suffer from symptoms of a traumatic rupture and that these symptoms will have a profound effect on their daily living for a long period of time. This dream also underscores the relative *naiveté* and immaturity of Ed and many other conscripted soldiers.⁴⁰ Such an extreme traumatic dream after a relatively short exposure to combat would be unlikely in soldiers with previous combat experience. Therefore, this dream foreshadows the traumatic aftermath that Ed and his colleagues are likely to experience on return from the theatre of war, as well as introducing the concept of combat trauma to the reader.

As with *The 'Nam*, *Maus* also contains discussion of traumatic dreams. However, there are different motives for the inclusion of these dreams in the narrative. Whereas in *The 'Nam* Ed's dream serves to summarise the trauma of his situation and represent the prevalence of traumatic ruptures among soldiers, dreams in *Maus* are used to discuss the potentially supernatural aspect of dreaming and also the ways in which one person's traumatic dreams can affect those around them. There are two mentions of traumatic dreams in *Maus*: a dream itself and a discussion of dreams in a more abstract manner. In the first sequence, Vladek recounts an episode that occurred while he was a prisoner of war in a work camp

⁴⁰ The average age of a Vietnam soldier was 23 (Karnow, 2008). However, this number includes all soldiers and not just conscripts; it is likely that most conscripts were younger.

near Nürnberg in 1939. He says that he dreamed of his grandfather, a rabbi, speaking to him and telling him he would be saved from the camp on ‘the day of *Parshas Truma*’ (Spiegelman, 2003: 57), the week in which that specific *parsha* would be read and some three months from the night of Vladek’s dream. The dream comes true, so to speak, as it is in the week of *Parshas Truma* that Vladek and his fellow prisoners are taken from the work camp back into (now-occupied) Poland. Vladek adds that this same *parsha* has become very special to him – as it was in the week of this *parsha* that he married Anja, that Art was born and that Art had his *bar mitzvah*. That this dream happened is not necessarily unusual – dreams in which people receive ‘premonitions’ are not unheard of – but that it came true is definitely not common. Vladek includes this dream in his narrative because, as he explains, the *parsha* has become so important to his life and the life of his family. Moreover, the dream gave him hope. It was something for him to focus on during his time in the work camp and became a target to work towards.

Formally, this dream has many aspects in common with other comics renderings of dream sequences and is presented in the same artistic style as the rest of *Maus*. As with Ed’s dream in *The ‘Nam*, the sleeper at the intradiegetic and the dream at the metadiegetic; there is a metaleptical shift within one panel. In the main panel of the dream, Vladek is presented as a basic line drawing with no cross-hatching, making him appear brighter on the page. His grandfather, depicted with traditional Jewish *tallit* and *tefillah*, is drawn realistically and with much cross-hatching to make him appear very mouse-like (and hairy) and also physically substantial.⁴¹ As with the rest of the text, the dream sequence combines Vladek’s retrospective narrative, presented in caption boxes or outside of the frame itself. The words of the dream are presented within the frame, which keeps the words of the dream and the image of the grandfather closely linked. The fact that the dream is not

⁴¹ The *Tallit* is the tasselled shawl that is worn by Jewish men during prayer and the *Tefillah* (also called ‘phylacteries’) is the small black box containing scriptural texts, worn on the forehead during weekday prayer.

presented in a different style to the rest of Vladek's narrative suggests that it has been assimilated into his memory in the same way as the rest of his life.

When analysed in isolation from the rest of the text, this dream sequence appears to be a straightforward declaration of the basic human need for hope. However, placing it within the overall narrative gives this section renewed importance. The significance of this section is wider than the dream itself. This passage can be seen as 'the key to the deep religious significance of *Maus*, as well as to Vladek's character' (Tabachnick, 2004: 2). *Parshas Truma* (the 'offering passage') is Exodus 25-27, which begins 'The LORD said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering from me'. Tabachnick states that this passage holds special relevance in *Maus*, not only because it is repeated throughout Vladek's life, but by donating a portion of his wealth to others [Anja, Mandelbaum and Felix] of his own free will and at considerable risk, Vladek is fulfilling the injunction in the first two verses of *Parshas Truma* to make offerings to God (2004: 5).

Spiegelman has stated that his Jewish heritage is not something he actively engages with; his Jewishness is a secular part of himself.⁴² However, the passage of *Parshas Truma* and its subsequent application by Vladek suggests that Spiegelman is very aware of his Jewish identity and the importance of remembering the Jewish identity that framed his parents' existence. Alan Berger writes:

That Vladek feels compelled to tell [the story of the Parshas Truma dream and its outcome] to his son indicates some belief that divine providence played a role in his rescue and survival [...] This would tend to undermine Vladek's assertion that God was not in Auschwitz. (1998: 202)⁴³

⁴² See Spiegelman in Schneider, 2010: 23.

⁴³ Berger references the comment that Vladek makes to Artie during an interview in the Catskills that '[In Auschwitz] God did not come. We were all on her own' (189).

This dream sequence, then, is less a representation of traumatic dreaming and more a statement on the importance of religion for the survival of Vladek during the Holocaust and also for the text as a whole.

The second instance of dreams in *Maus* is not a direct rendering of a dream sequence, but a conversation that occurs between Art and Françoise. After a tense day at Vladek's holiday home in the Catskills, Art and Françoise sit on the porch. In the background, Vladek is wailing in his sleep. Art is unsurprised by the noises and explains that they were a common occurrence throughout his childhood, though it is not mentioned whether or not his mother had similar sleep issues.

The conversation, presented in uniform panels, gives a very brief snapshot into Vladek's thirty-year sleep issues. Though Art describes the noise as 'moaning', the size of the 'moan', which is not contained within a bubble, seems too large to represent a mere moan. Rather, it seems that Vladek is wailing loudly and dramatically. The disjunction between Art's comment and the apparent reality makes it clear that Art has become used to Vladek's sleep disturbances; he himself states that he assumed it was normal adult sleep behaviour. That this behaviour has been a part of Vladek's daily life for so long – even affecting the way his son sees the world around him – shows that the disturbances of sleep that traumatic ruptures can cause have an effect not only on the traumatised individual, but also on those around them. The inclusion of this vignette shows the depth of Vladek's trauma and also shows the wider issue of sleep disturbance in Holocaust survivors.⁴⁴ Unlike with *The 'Nam*, the inclusion of dreams in *Maus* serves a varied purpose and does not use the concept of traumatic dreaming as a straightforward depiction of a symptom of the traumatic rupture. Rather, Spiegelman uses the dreams to raise wider issues – in this

⁴⁴ Sleep disturbances in Holocaust survivors has been the subject of many studies. See: Rosen et al, 'Sleep Disturbances in Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust' (1991); Kuch et al., 'Symptoms of PTSD in 124 survivors of the Holocaust' (1992) and Barel et al., 'Surviving the Holocaust: A Meta-analysis of the Long-term Sequelae of a Genocide' (2010).

case, of the necessity of hope and the prevalence of sleep disturbance for Holocaust survivors.

However, the inclusion of Vladek's dream is also a clear illustration of a specific issue of representation that is unique to comics. As with Ed's dream in *The Nam*, Vladek's dream is a clear, visual, single-panel representation of metalepsis. This is something that comics can do particularly well and in ways that are unavailable to other media. Vladek sits at the intradiegetic level, with his grandfather at the metadiegetic. The two are seamlessly connected in the single panel and it is only on reading the caption that the fact that this panel contains a metaleptical shift is made clear to us. This would not be achievable in text-based literature, nor would it be achievable in the same way in film, due to the spatial differences. As discussed in Chapter 2, comics differ from film in their use of physical space and this again is noted here. When the narrative moves out of Vladek's dreamscape, we are still able to view the metaleptical dream panel alongside the intradiegetic narration. This is not possible in film, as all images inhabit the same space.

Dreams of Traumatic Loss

Trauma is not just that which happens directly to an individual but also that which is witnessed by others, especially the relatives of those directly involved. These individuals who are traumatised by proxy are as susceptible to traumatic dreams as those directly affected.⁴⁵ Because there is so little clinical research in this area it is difficult to determine

⁴⁵ No substantial research has been conducted in the area of nightmares in witnesses of conflict trauma. However, other types of trauma have been considered. For more information see: Fernandez et al. 'Cognitive-Behavioural Treatment of Trauma-Related Nightmare Experienced by Children' (2012); Kilpatrick, 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence (1998) and Boulanger, 'From Voyeur to Witness: Recapturing Symbolic Function After Massive Psychic Trauma (2012).

what form the traumatic dreams of the by proxy traumatised may take. In comics, the dreams of those traumatised by proxy are most often represented as what are categorised as ‘dreams of traumatic loss’. Instead of concentrating on the event itself, these dreams consider the trauma of loss for those who remain.

In *American Widow*, Alissa Torres dedicates a chapter of the text to a dream in which she is reunited with her late husband. Torres writes that ‘high-voltage traces of our lust and love flowed through our mattress nightly [...] until one night when the power surged and overflowed’ (2008: 121-122). She describes an intense dream in which she and Eddie ‘tumbled slowly around the universe’ (2008: 123). There is little narrative content to the dream and it is described more as a collection of sensations and vague images. Though there is little dream narrative, this is not to say there is little material to analyse. The atypical colour scheme of the entire text – using pale green-blue as a highlight colour alongside stark black and white images – is used to emphasise specific images within each frame and to accentuate the supernatural aura of the chapter. Torres’ dream begins when she wakes to the aforementioned ‘overflowing of power’ and her bed is caught in a whirlwind.

Later in the dream, Torres describes the initial sensation as ‘[perching] on [her] lips like a determined sparrow’ (2008: 124). The page presents three equally-sized bandeau panels, each containing a single image (a sparrow, Torres’ upturned face, her wrist). There are no bubbles, only words in caption boxes, separated from the images. The images have no relationship to each other – in McCloud’s terms the transitions would be classed as ‘non sequiturs’ – and without the captions would be impossible to understand. That these images are presented so simply is emphasised by the pale blue highlighting on each image.

Furthermore, the simplicity of the image works in a similar way to masking,⁴⁶ allowing the reader to place the image into whatever narrative of the dream sequence they have constructed from the limited information available.

Torres' dream, though unusual, is not particularly traumatic. The trauma in dreams of loss is to be found in the waking, in line with Lacan and Caruth's readings of the 'dream of the burning boy'. As with the bereaved father, it is on waking that Torres most acutely experiences the trauma of the dream; asleep, she is with Eddie but on waking, she is alone again.

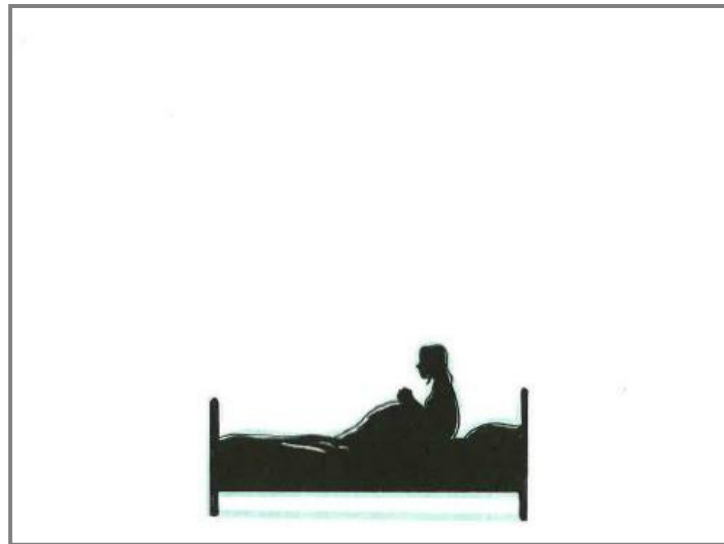


Fig. 3.3 – From *American Widow*, Alissa Torres, 2008.p 125. Image used with permission of the author.

Torres presents the moment of waking in a single image presented on a white page. The starkness of the image – high contrast white on black in a silhouette with blue highlights – mimics the shock of the awakening and the lonely return to her traumatic existence. In a previous panel, Torres states that, when she tries to reach out to Eddie, she '[makes] contact only with [her] own skin' (2008: 125). It is this touch that wakes her. Again, we

⁴⁶ Masking is described by McCloud as the use of simplistic characters, often juxtaposed with detailed verisimilar backgrounds. This is most commonly used to allow readers to place themselves in the narrative – a type of projective identification. One of the most famous uses of this technique is Hergé's Tintin series.

see the similarity with ‘the burning boy’ – the activity within the dream waking the dreamer. Torres’ waking is a bleed and, as with most bleeds, appears timeless because of its uncontained nature. The large expanse of white page is a striking sight and the eye is immediately drawn to the image of Torres sitting in her bed at the bottom of the page. The loneliness of the image is seen in her blacked-out face, staring forward, while her hands rest, clasped, on her knees. The bed appears to be enclosed within a bright white empty space, heightening the effect of loneliness and loss. Compared to the unusual and visually busy dream sequence, the bold emptiness of this final page gives traumatic emphasis to the act of waking.

The trauma of waking is a common theme in post 9/11 trauma comics. *American Widow* presents one example but two more are found in the 9/11 charity comics ‘Untitled’ and ‘Wake Up’. In ‘Untitled’ an anonymous dreamer floats ethereally around the shell of a half-built skyscraper and then sees her deceased lover moving towards her across the sea, before disappearing, ending the dream. The comic has no bubbles or caption boxes but the few words that are used are written in the gutters; they are short statements, presented without punctuation or capitalisation. As the gutter is the place where the shift between panels occurs, the fact that this shift is interrupted by words disrupts the flow of panels. The disruption of the visual and linguistic relationship in this comic attests to the changing operations of language in traumatic situations. The words are not complete sentences, but fragments that do not appear to have a connection to the images, further intensifying an atmosphere of disconnection and disorder. The dreamer within the images is searching for a connection but is unable to find one and, on finding what she believes to be her deceased partner, realises that there is still no connection and the attempt to find one is futile. The artwork in ‘Untitled’ is heavily shaded and cross-hatched, accentuated by the borderless panels and the broad white gutters. The final panel is plain white, bordered with a broken

black line and accompanied by the words ‘only in dreams’ (2002: 143). ‘Untitled’ shares many formal features with the dream in *American Widow*. The most obvious similarity on first glance is the bold colour palette (exclusively monochrome in this case). The starkness of the final panel is very similar to the starkness of the final bleed in *American Widow*. Furthermore, the panel transitions are similar to those used by Torres, creating a sense of confusion and mimicking the fantastical aspects of the dream itself.

The dreams in both *American Widow* and ‘Untitled’ recreate the trauma of waking to one’s own solitude and loss. Unlike Ed’s dream in *The ‘Nam*, comics representations of dreams of traumatic loss do not place the emphasis on the content and presentation of the dream itself but on the act of waking and the dreamer’s return to their traumatic situation. In dreams of traumatic loss, the content of the dream itself is not a replay of an event that happened but an eerie return of the lost one who remains out of reach; the inability to reach their lover causes the dreamer to awake. In contrast, the dream sequence in ‘Wake Up’ shows a positive dream that does not end in a return to traumatic loss. Part of a 9/11 anthology, ‘Wake Up’ begins with a young boy, Jimmy, sitting up in bed in the early hours of the morning. His mother comes in and comforts him, mollifying his fears of ‘bad guys’ who commit crimes and act to hurt others. The mother is revealed to be an NYPD officer and then we see that Jimmy’s interaction with her was a dream and she was, in fact, killed in the 9/11 attacks. The comic ends with son and father remembering the mother and Jimmy ‘standing tall [because his] heart is unbreakable’ (Kelly et al., 2002: 23). ‘Wake Up’ has less in common with the other two dreams of traumatic loss and more in common with Vladek’s dream of his grandfather in *Maus*. Though the dream is born out of a traumatic situation, the underlying message of the dream is one of hope. The dream of *Parshas Truma* gives Vladek a goal toward which he could aim during his time in a Nazi labour camp; Jimmy’s dream reminds him of his mother’s unconditional love for him and

the strength that he can derive from this. The innocence of a child attempting to come to terms with a terrible traumatic event – and one that they cannot possibly understand – is encapsulated in the simple message of the comic.

Artistically, ‘Wake Up’ is drawn in a typically mainstream style, realistically coloured and with action-to-action transitions. However, towards the end of the comic there are aspects of the artistic style that are not typical in mainstream comics and, in this instance, assist in the development of the narrative. As Jimmy decides to get some sleep his mother stands at his bedroom door. In the previous panel, she was wearing a dressing gown and t-shirt but now she is dressed in full police uniform. Her legs appear to be fading away, making her appear ghostly and creating the final ‘punch line’ – Jimmy’s mum has only appeared in a dream and she has passed away; he is asleep and wakes to the realisation that she is still not with him. A single bandeau panel marks the brief period between dreaming and waking. This is the most atypical panel in the comic; it is also the simplest. Gradational colour on either side of the words ‘I love you, sweetheart’ makes the words appear as if a bright white light is radiating out around them. These are the last words Jimmy’s mother speaks within the dream but the white light makes them appear supernatural. This is not a typical mainstream technique; it clashes with the rest of the comic and reminds the reader of the fact that what they just read was only a dream. ‘Wake Up’ ends with Jimmy celebrating his mother’s life rather than mourning her death. It is strongly implied that he is able to take the dream to effect positive forward movement in his work of mourning and in his relationship with his father. This dream sequence is very different to the two other examples of dreams of loss, both in terms of artistic style and treatment of the subject matter. ‘Wake Up’, like the dream in *Maus*, shows that trauma-induced dreams are not necessarily nightmares.

The divide that is created between two sets of traumatic dreams hinges on the way in which the individual experiences the trauma. In terms of the dreams discussed here the first collection of dream sequences are prompted by a direct traumatic experience and the second collection are the result of trauma by proxy. It is unfair to suggest that trauma by proxy is less serious than a direct traumatic experience. The dreams of traumatic loss presented here, though very different in content and context to the dreams of traumatic experience, are born out of a trauma that is in no way inferior to direct experience. Despite the differences between these dreams, there is one key similarity across the two collections: in all the dreams presented here the dreamer is a visible character, either within the dream or sleeping outside the dream action. Thus there is still some attempt on the part of the artist to make sure that the distinction between dreaming and waking is maintained. However, within the dream itself, this distinction becomes blurred. In comics of traumatic representation, dreams are a useful narrative device for conveying large amounts of visual information in a single panel, as with *The 'Nam*, or for emphasising the importance of a certain theme within the narrative as a whole, as with the dream of *Parshas Truma* in *Maus*. The inclusion of Art and Françoise's discussion of Vladek's sleep disturbances shows that one's nightmares are not necessarily a personal problem and can affect those around them to a great degree. For individuals who are traumatised by proxy, their dreams are no less relevant as representations of that trauma, though they operate in a different way and, in this case, the trauma of the dream is to be found in the act of waking, rather than the dream itself.

Chapter Four

The Search for Identity

It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.
Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (1994)

In the late eighteenth Century, Rip Van Winkle falls asleep on a grassy knoll and wakes to a world completely altered by conflict, seemingly in the blinking of an eye. When he falls asleep, the village pub sign depicts King George III; on waking he finds it changed to a portrait of George Washington. Once a citizen under the king, Rip is now a citizen of a new republic, without even knowing it. His identity has been changed by the conflict that has caused major shifts in the overarching structures by which he previously aligned himself. Washington Irving's short story attests to the suddenness with which conflict can transform one's identity and understanding of the world, as the waking Rip exclaims, "I'm not myself – I'm somebody else – [...] I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!" (Irving, 1998: 43). However, the irony of Irving's story is that the day-to-day existence of Rip and his neighbours has not changed dramatically. In many ways, life goes on as it always did in Rip's village. Nevertheless, the constancy of everyday life that Rip experiences jars with the differences brought about by the shift from Crown colony to

republic. Similarly, although there are many massive changes in the life of an individual by conflict, there is much constancy too. After the traumatic event, the individual returns to a world that has not intrinsically changed, though their experience of it has. Furthermore, their identity has shifted; they have become a victim or survivor, or both.

Though many factors affect our identity, in this chapter I consider the environment in which an individual exists because this is the factor that is most relevant to my study of trauma and its representations. When this environment is shaken by conflict and traumatic experiences, our sense of self is likely to be shaken, too. Herman writes:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships [...] They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others [...] Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community. (51)

Thus we can see that the relationship between a traumatised individual and those around him will be changed – if not damaged – by the traumatic event. This chapter discusses the effects of a traumatic rupture on the construction of identity, not just for the individual, but the whole family. Indeed, for many comics artists, the experience of being raised by parents who have witnessed conflicts – and have been to some extent traumatised by them – forms the basis of their work. This chapter concentrates on comics artists who use the form to discuss not only their family histories, but also how the experiences of their families affect them and their own identities and histories. The three artists considered in this chapter are writing from different backgrounds, spanning two conflicts – the Second World War (including the Holocaust) and the Vietnam War. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* centres on the experiences of the artist's parents during the Holocaust. *Vietnamerica* follows both parents but there is an emphasis on the experience of Tri, Tran's father; C.

Tyler's *You'll Never Know* excludes her mother to give the narrative limelight wholly to her father. The shift in focus affects both the narrative and the artist.

There are three main thematic strands running through these texts. The most obvious aspect is the relationship between parent and child. The father is usually the narrator and the focus of the text but this chapter also considers the mother-child relationship and its seemingly diminished importance to both text and artist. In these texts, though the father is the central figure, he is no more traumatised or traumatising than the mother; equal consideration is given to the influence of both parents. The next issue is that of nationality and cultural identity. The fact that the artist-children were, with the exception of Tyler, born and raised in a different country to their parents affects the children's personal identity. Furthermore, the parents' first language is not always the same as the child's and this has an effect on communication between child and parent, as well as on the narrative itself. Finally, this chapter examines the 'why and how' of the texts' creation. The texts are not merely family chronicles but also ways for the artist-child to, as LaCapra puts it, 'work through' their trauma and its effects on the construction of their identity (LaCapra, 2001: 141). As the artist appears as a character in the narration, the first name is used to refer to the character and the surname to refer to the artist so as to avoid confusion.

Trauma affects the individual's conception of identity. When the traumatised individual is a parent, the issue becomes far more complex. Not only does the individual face difficulty in the construction of basic relationships, but they face further difficulty in adapting to the role of parent. For a child, their parents form the first and arguably most important relationship they will establish; if those parents struggle to form relationships of any kind, the child will invariably suffer. As discussed in Chapter 1, traumatic ruptures are intrinsically bound up with the incomprehensibility of one's survival. The individual's

‘fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world’ are destroyed (Herman, 1992: 51). If an individual is unable to feel safe and protect themselves, then it logically follows that they will be ill-equipped to protect and care for a child. The child is the embodiment of the incomprehensible survival and is therefore itself incomprehensible.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s concept of the ‘transgenerational phantom’ takes its lead from Freud’s psychoanalytical works. They argue that the phantom is not ‘the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others’ (1994: 171). The phantom exists in the same psychological dimension as a first-hand traumatic rupture; it ‘is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious [...] It passes from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s’ (1994: 173). It is difficult enough for the directly traumatised individual to make sense of their experience, but when the trauma is second-hand, then the chances of it being understood and assimilated into the individual’s consciousness are further reduced. Though the child may know what the parent experienced, this can only be a superficial knowledge (something as basic as ‘my father survived a terrible incident’), removing the capacity for a deeper understanding of the experience which may have assisted the child in their comprehension of the traumatic rupture within themselves.

There is a wealth of research on the transmission of trauma across generations, the majority of which concentrates on Holocaust survivors and their descendants.⁴⁷ This is understandable, given the magnitude of what happened (as well as its international repercussions). These research findings are invaluable for my analysis of *Maus*. However, this raises concerns when looking at the transmission of non-Holocaust traumata. Is it appropriate to use this research in the context of a different traumatic conflict situation

⁴⁷ The most comprehensive text on transgenerational trauma is *The International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (ed. Y. Danieli, 1998), which addresses a wide range of traumatic events, including the Cambodian genocide, the Holocaust, the Japanese atomic bombs, children of Nazi commanders, the war in the Balkans and the legacy of slavery in America. As well as this there are many more narrow psychological and psychiatric studies that concentrate on specific events or groups, including Coffey, *Unspeakable Truths and Happy Endings* (1998); Degruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005) and Fossion et al., ‘Family Approach to Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors’ (2003).

and to use this as a case study that is indicative of other situations? Given what is known about trauma and transgenerational trauma on a basic level, the findings of Holocaust research appear to be applicable to other situations. That said, we must be careful to bear in mind the (often huge) social and cultural differences between each event and not take Holocaust research findings as absolute truth for every traumatic event.

Dan Bar-On and Ğŭlyā Ćayŭn's 2001 book *Parenthood and the Holocaust* analyses survivor testimonies alongside testimonies from their descendants, while keeping them within their socio-historical context. Their research is not strictly a psychological exercise but aims to create a 'historically contextualised psychodynamic approach' to the subject (Bar-On and Ćayŭn, 2001: 4). As this thesis intentionally avoids using sources that seek to emphasise neurological or chemical determinants of trauma, this text works well; it sees the traumatic experience in a social, cultural and historical light. Bar-On and Ćayŭn note several key themes that arise in research into transgenerational traumata. First, that survivors 'remained married even though they lacked the emotional resources necessary for the development of intimacy' (2001: 5); secondly, that many survivor parents 'were found to be emotionally unavailable to their children's needs' and finally that 'survivor parents either excessively exposed their children to their horror stories, or alternatively, were uncannily silent [...] creating a 'conspiracy of silence' (2001: 5, 7). Though this research concentrates on a specific event – and a specific cultural group – these three phenomena are noted in parent-child relationships of many different traumatic experiences.⁴⁸

There is a squeamishness inherent in discussions of the Holocaust, especially when placed in dialogue with other traumatic experiences. The Holocaust has become a benchmark for indescribable trauma. W. Schueffel suggests that the 'Holocaust is the

⁴⁸ Though I focus on conflict trauma, these phenomena are also seen in the parenting experiences of survivors of personal trauma, including rape, and violent non-conflict traumata.

ultimate measure of traumatic stress, surpassing every catastrophe' (Schueffel et al., in Dasberg, 2003: 315). To discuss any other incident in the same breath seems disrespectful, as if it belittles the experience of the millions who were affected. It is not the purpose or place of this thesis to disparage the experiences of Holocaust survivors at all, but it can be contended that it is neither fair nor accurate to create an *absolute* scale of 'traumatic severity'. Though some events, by their magnitude, are considered 'worse', there is no way we can suggest that the experience of a Holocaust survivor is necessarily more traumatic than that of, say, a Vietnam veteran. They are very different and cannot be compared. Though the basic symptoms of a traumatic rupture are comparable across a wide range of individuals, the exact presentation of the rupture is unique to the individual. There is no way to suggest that a specific person's representations of traumata are more (or less) accurate, and the trauma itself more severe, than another's. By this reckoning, then, the work of Bar-On and Čaytîn can be used to understand parenthood in traumatic situations in general, with the Holocaust as a key case study.

Our environment has a major influence on our personal identity. When an individual grows up surrounded by adults who have lived through traumatic experiences, the psychological effects of parental trauma on the child can be compounded. The 'clubbing together' of survivors of traumatic situations differs greatly. It has been noted that Holocaust survivors tend to form communities that isolate them from non-survivors (Bar-On and Čaytîn, 2001: 42). However, veterans of the Vietnam War do not appear to engage in the same social behaviour. Though there are several Vietnam Veterans organisations, such as Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), these do not operate in the same way as Holocaust survivor communities; they are organisations that may have regular meetings for discussion and socialising but they do not usually move beyond this. If

anything, Vietnam veterans are more likely to be isolated within a community, probably due to the nature of the home situation.

Whereas Holocaust survivors are able to maintain these tight-knit communities due to family ties and the Displaced Persons camps that were set up internationally after 1945, Vietnam veterans usually returned to their original homes, scattered across America. Though several veterans may live close to each other, they may not have served together and may not have had the same combat experiences. Furthermore, as Wayne Scott writes in his book on PTSD and Vietnam, ‘isolation may be either physical, psychological or both. Many veterans elect to live in isolation, feeling secure on their own piece of land often in geographically isolated regions’ (2001: 23). However, in his comprehensive history of the Vietnam War, Stanley Karnow notes that the lack of communal experience among Vietnam veterans began as soon as the soldier was in theatre (2008: 122). Because most of the low-ranking soldiers were draftees and volunteers (many men volunteered to avoid the infantry) it was not feasible to send soldiers into Vietnam in regiments. Rather, soldiers were placed individually in combat units with spaces left by men returning home at the end of the 366-day draft. This meant that combat units were in constant flux as men left and joined; this was not a solid group that remained stable and, thus, was able to build strong bonds. That these soldiers did not have a community with which to share their experiences is in itself isolating. To return to the original issue, the psychological effects of being raised in either situation – a survivor community or social isolation – assist in the transgenerational transmission of traumata.

The Sins of the Parent

The relationship between parent and child sits at the centre of the texts discussed in this chapter. Though each relationship is different and rendered in a different style and format, there are marked parallels between them. Moreover, although the parent-child relationship in general poses questions about the transgenerational nature of traumatic experience, it is in the specific father-child and mother-child relationships that this traumatic transmission is encapsulated. Thus, the parents' impact on the child is analysed individually. In *Maus*, *You'll Never Know* and *Vietnamerica* the father-child relationships show similar marks of the influence of trauma on the parent and, by proxy, the child. In all three of these texts, this is the relationship that drives the narrative; although *Vietnamerica* does not concentrate solely on the father, it is the narrative of his early life that is awarded the most space within the book. This is not to say that the mother's story does not feature at all in these texts. Indeed, it is Tran's mother who acts as a type of narrator in *Vietnamerica*. That said, the role of the mother within these texts differs in many ways to that of the father. The reasons for this are not the same in all texts. In *You'll Never Know* the lack of maternal input largely occurs because Tyler is concerned with her father's war memories – something that her mother, Hannah, was not part of. Similarly, though *Vietnamerica* does give space to Dzung's story, it is Tri, the father, who is the focus. He is the one who worked to support the family during the invasion and escape from Saigon, as well as the one who was imprisoned by the Army. Though Dzung went through traumatic events, too, the burden on her is different simply because of her role as wife and mother.

Maus opens with a vignette of Spiegelman's childhood; he is skating with some friends and, after his skate breaks, his friends disappear without him. It is a silly and childish game, the sort that most children experience at some point, and Art cries to his father. Rather than a consoling hug and some kind words, Vladek replies with, 'Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... THEN you see

what it is, friends!’ (Spiegelman, 2003: 6). Art is unable to reply to this – the experiences of a ten-year-old boy in 1950s New York are very far removed from those of a Holocaust survivor. Hamida Bosmajian writes that ‘survivor parents often cannot connect with their children because of unresolved mourning, survivor guilt, or psychic numbing’ (1998: 3). Though these symptoms are seen in *Vladek*, the most striking feature of his survivor trauma is his complete inability to bond with his son because he is unable to see outside of his own experience; the short and succinct introductory vignette is a microcosm of the father-son relationship that is written out more fully in the body of the text. For Art, his father’s inability to recognise his son’s personal experiences and understand their differences belittles his own life experiences because there is no way they can ever be equal to what his father went through. Art must construct his self-image in the light of memories that are not his own (Hirsch, 12: 1993). Freud writes that civilised society ‘[makes] every effort to limit man’s aggressive drives’ (44: 2002) but, being unable to do so, must instead contend with the destruction of the civilised ideals that violence and conflict bring to humanity. To *Vladek*, the notion of civilisation crumbles in the light of his Holocaust memories and all human experience is viewed through the lens of his survivor identity, regardless of whether or not that experience is analogous to his own.

Similarly, the first page of *Vietnamerica* sets up a distinction between the experiences of father and son. The first page shows a blood red sky above Saigon, with a small plane ascending. The caption, part of Dzung’s narration, reads ‘You know what your father was doing at your age... He... WE left Vietnam’ (2011: 2). Though she corrects herself, Dzung’s initial comment sets up an immediate distinction between Tri and GB. As with Art and *Vladek*, the division between the two created in this comment negates the son’s experiences in the light of the father’s. Dzung’s correction to her statement (‘he’ to ‘we’) does not fully remove this barrier between the two, but broadens the scope of it. GB

is disconnected not only from his father's experiences but the experiences of his whole family. In both Tran and Spiegelman's case this initial statement of opposition is reiterated in several forms throughout the duration of the text and poses several questions: can the child live up to the parent's experiences and, furthermore, should he have to? These questions are compounded further by the fact that the parent disrupts civilisational ideals; they are unable to fulfil the basic role of parent adequately and as such cannot assist the child in healthy development.

For Spiegelman, the character of his father poses a problem of representation. Vladek is a difficult man, miserly and permanently anxious. Spiegelman grapples with this image of his father, saying that 'it's something that worries [him] about the book... in some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew' (2003: 133). It is understandable that Spiegelman would want to avoid his father being seen as a stereotypically negative portrayal of a Jew. However, the testimonies of Vladek's wife, Mala, and neighbours – as well as Spiegelman's wife, Françoise – suggest that Vladek does display many facets of the stereotype. Regardless of this, Art seeks to justify his father's character by suggesting that 'Auschwitz made him like that' (2003: 182) but Mala refutes this – she survived the camps and is not like him at all. It is through his discussions of the neuroses of his father that Art becomes aware that 'lots of people are survivors [and] if they're whacked up it's in a different way from Vladek' (2003: 182). In this statement, Spiegelman makes reference to the individualism of a traumatic rupture. The traumatic experiences of Vladek emphasise his survival instincts to an extreme extent. His 'can-do' attitude and skill with materials and communication – the qualities that enabled him to survive the Holocaust and relocate to the USA – become extreme. Vladek is still able to fix things, to manipulate those around him and to maintain a good quality of life for his family but he does so with a mind-set of preservation and preparation. His actions suggest a fear

‘that Hitler might come back’ (2003: 238) and, while we know this fear is unfounded, it is difficult to criticise a man who survived such horrors for wanting to protect himself and his family from a recurrence.

Though Vladek’s behaviour is not entirely condemnable, it is shown to be damaging to all his relationships and especially the relationship with his son. Vladek’s self-image is entirely bound up in his identity as a Holocaust survivor; he is unable to view himself as anything else. As everything in his life is mediated by this view of himself, Vladek imposes this view on his son. Art has nightmares of the camps and ‘Zyklon B coming out of the shower’ (2003: 176). As Victoria Elmwood writes:

despite Art’s denial of any obsession with Holocaust culture, it seems that he has been profoundly affected by his parents’ past. His nightmares and morbid fantasies, while not necessarily symptoms of trauma *per se*, certainly reveal a child whose everyday imagination is haunted by events to which he has no direct connection. This lack of connection is compounded by Vladek’s fragmentary processing of his own traumatic experiences. (2004: 697)

Thus, Spiegelman faces the double-layered issue of trying to comprehend not only a traumatic experience (which is in itself almost impossible to understand) but a traumatic experience that is not his own. This is only exacerbated by the ‘conspiracy of silence’ that existed within the survivor community, preventing parents from speaking about their experiences in any coherent way while simultaneously expecting their children constantly to remember the past (Bar-On and Čaytın, 2001: 6). Elmwood describes this as the ‘gaps and absences created by extreme events [bleeding] into the next generation’ (2004: 692). Not only is a gap formed by the parents’ inability to speak but also by the children’s inability to understand.

This same parental silence is discussed at length in *You'll Never Know*. Carol Tyler describes her father Chuck's memories as being 'buried under tons of mental concrete' (Tyler, 2009: Vol 1, n.p.). Though she knows her father served in the European theatre in the Second World War, he has never discussed this with her or, it seems, anyone else. This silence, as with the Holocaust 'conspiracy of silence', pervades the whole of Chuck's generation. Tyler writes that 'Six million men [...] are tight-lipped about the biggest, baddest thing in their lives. Did they make a pact of secrecy? Guess I'll never know' (2009: Vol 1, n.p.). However, Chuck differs from Vladek in the extent of his silence. Art knew that his parents had been in the camps and knew some of what had happened from overhearing conversations and his parents' off-hand comments. Carol has no knowledge of her father's wartime experiences at all; Chuck has never said a word. Thus, unlike with Art and Vladek, there is no basic information on which Carol can build a version of events and, as such, no frame of reference to explain her father's mood swings and unusual behaviour.

Tyler only becomes aware of her father's wartime experiences many decades later when he unleashes the story in a rambling telephone call. The first words of his revelation are 'RIVERS OF BLOOD!' (2009: Vol 1, n.p.). Later in the text, Tyler writes:

Those rivers of blood still course through his veins. And through my veins too it seems. So the war was never really buried under tons of mental concrete. Rather, it was an active shaper of life, affecting moods and outcomes... more than anyone ever knew. (2009: Vol 1, n.p.)

She appears to recognise the impact of her father's experiences on his life, as well as her own. Her reference to him as a 'caustic agent' shows Tyler's awareness of the dissolving, destructive nature of trauma. In referring to her father, rather than the experience itself, however, she binds him inextricably with his experience; he becomes the experience. However, within the text itself, Tyler is unable to create a link between her father's experiences and her life. The overarching narrative of the trilogy follows Tyler as she

creates a scrapbook of her father's war photographs. But, unlike the other texts in this chapter – which are more seamless in their movement between narrative strands – *You'll Never Know* sets up a stark split between the war narrative and the contemporary narrative. Though the text as a whole is arranged like a scrapbook, in landscape format and printed on heavy paper, the war narrative is uniform in presentation on the page: three blocks of text and three images are arranged like photographs with captions. However, there is no strong relationship between text and image; though the image would be meaningless without the text, the text does not rely on the image. The war sections of the narrative are separated by introductory splash pages, stating the dates and location of each section. The split between narrative strands is marked, not only by these splash pages, but also by the difference in presentation style. The fact that Tyler keeps this narrative physically separate from the rest of the text shows that she is unable to link this history to her own and also to her father's post-war life.

What is striking about *You'll Never Know* are not Chuck's war memories themselves, but the way they sit in relation to the wider narrative of his marriage and later life, as well as his relationship with his daughter and her troubled family life. It is evident that Tyler sees a link between her failed marriage, depression and general dissatisfaction and the character of her father. That said, it is less clear whether she links her father's many negative qualities (and occasional abuse) to his wartime experiences. The separate presentation of the war narrative suggests that while Tyler is aware that his experiences were traumatic, she has not fully grasped the importance of these events on his overall character, as well as hers. By the end of the text, Tyler has not reached any sort of resolution with her father. The text ends with Tyler's trip to Arlington National Cemetery and an overwhelming sense of the pointlessness of war, represented by the emptiness and stillness of the Second World War memorial.

Though the father is the most visible parent in *Maus* and *Vietnamerica*, the mother is not entirely absent. However, there is a difference between the type of involvement the father has in the narrative and the involvement of the mother. This thesis suggests that this difference is, on a basic level, due to the amount of input the mothers in these texts have in the public sphere. The social situations in which these texts are set make it clear that the role for the mother is to make them home and raise children, whereas the father is the breadwinner and family protector. Thus, the father is not only more exposed to the events of the conflict, but also far more publicly visible. The mother's role of homemaker does not make her experience of the traumatic conflict easier – rather, it puts different stresses on her. That the creators of these comics are mostly men does not necessarily suggest that they are unable to relate to their mothers' experiences, but it is an important fact to consider when analysing these texts.

In *Vietnamerica*, Dzung's narration frames each section, guiding the reader through the text's many chronological leaps. The narrative panel is a single square panel on a black bleed page, in which Dzung is preparing dinner while telling the family story; many of the narrative captions throughout each section contain Dzung's first-narrative, presented in a distinctive cursive font that is used solely for her words to distinguish them from the other dialogue. In her story, she is left behind to take care of the family while the men (first, her brother Vinh and then her husband, Tri) are conscripted or imprisoned. Dzung's responsibility as the daughter of the family is to care for her mother and younger siblings. It is she who must support the family when her brother is shot. Dzung is the one who mediates Tri's behaviour towards his children and their new life in the USA. Not only does she have the responsibility of raising the family, but she also provides a buffer between her husband and children. As is explained more fully in Chapter 5, Tri Tran was traumatised by his upbringing and experiences in an ARVN prison during his first marriage; he brings

this trauma into his life as a father. The traumatised and traumatising parent, in this text, is Tri while Dzung is the buffer to intercede between husband and children. She has the qualities to make her a perfect foil to Tri's somewhat abrasive personality.

In stark contrast to Dzung, Spiegelman's mother Anja is mostly absent from the text of *Maus* yet, despite this, has a massive traumatising influence on her son. It is crucial to remember in analysing the character of Anja that the accounts of her are mediated through the memories of Art and Vladek; Anja herself has no voice in the text. 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', which is discussed in Chapter 2, is a frank description of her death and funeral, written relatively soon after the event. This is the closest that the text gets to resolving any of Spiegelman's issues regarding his mother. Vladek's narrative discusses his courtship and marriage to Anja. She is presented as intelligent and gentle, but also very frail and unstable. She takes large amounts of medication and, just after the birth of her son, Richieu, suffers from severe Post-Partum Depression. The narrative implicitly suggests that by 1939 Anja was extremely unwell, both mentally and physically.

Anja's fragile mental state seriously affects her ability to parent her children. While it is wrong to suggest that parenting is ever easy, parenting during an event such as the Holocaust offers challenges that no one can anticipate. However, many of the basic instincts of parenting appear to be deficient in Anja. In 1941, Anja and Vladek have the opportunity to send their son away to a safe house with the son of a friend but Anja violently refuses (2003: 83). Despite overwhelming evidence that their situation is dire, Anja refuses to let go. Though it is not her fault that her son dies, her desperation to cling on to her child has negative consequences. Anja's behaviour is not rational and does not seek to do the best for her child, but it is an act in line with basic maternal instinct. However, the portrayal of a desperately clinging and mentally fragile woman who is unable effectively to care for her child is the overarching view of Anja in the text. For this

reason it is more likely that her desperate behaviour is linked to her poor mental health, rather than the reversion to basic instinct in the face of tragedy. Throughout Vladek's narrative, Anja appears rarely but each appearance portrays her as childlike, weak, frail and in need of constant need of care and protection. She repeatedly discusses suicide, foreshadowing her successful suicide in 1968. However, she does not exist outside of Vladek's narrative of her. With the exception of 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', Art does not talk about her. Elmwood suggests that this is because 'his memory of her is disabled by the trauma of her suicide' (2004: 708). Such is the depth of his grief that Art is unable to remember his mother in any way other than as the woman whose suicide dramatically affected him. Elmwood writes: 'Anja's appearances in *Maus* strongly suggest that her suicide is Art's central trauma, in that he reaches considerably less resolution with regard to her suicide than he does with Vladek's alienating wartime experiences' (2004: 705).

Anja and Vladek's traumatising leads to them creating a traumatic environment for their child. A parentally-created traumatic environment – one that leads to similar symptoms in the child – is reminiscent of the 'schizophrenogenic parent' in the work of psychiatrist Theodore Lidz (1985). Lidz examined how the socialisation of the parents affected the development of schizophrenia in their children.⁴⁹ He deduced that a schizophrenic child's inability to act independently, develop a stable self-identity and engage in normal intimate activities was due to the defective interaction between the parents (Lidz, 1985: 119). Lidz writes of the schizophrenogenic mother: 'her psychotic and strange concepts remain unchallenged by the husband [and] they create reality within the

⁴⁹ It must be noted that Lidz's study was conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s. His case studies were mostly traditional nuclear families in which the father was responsible for financially supporting the family, while the mother was a homemaker. Because of this, his work can seem essentialising to contemporary readers, especially as the traditional nuclear family is becoming less common and more women are rejecting the homemaker role. Theodore Lidz's work on familial causes for schizophrenia nevertheless laid the groundwork for contemporary studies into the family situation for the incubation, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. For information on current clinical thought, see: Gottesman et al. 'Severe Mental Disorders in Offspring with 2 Psychiatrically Ill Parents' (2010) and Göpfert et al. *Parental Psychiatric Disorders: Distressed Parents and Their Families* (2004).

family'. Though Lidz is discussing a specific psychiatric disorder in parents, the phenomenon he identifies is very similar to the situation that appears in families affected by traumata. The 'strange' concepts of the parents, caused by their traumatic past, are unchallenged by those around them and, as such, these concepts become 'reality' for the family; Lidz refers to this as a *folie en famille* (1985: 43). The incubation of such 'strangeness' might well be compounded in many cases where the parents' social circle is comprised of others who have survived similar traumatic experiences, as is the case with Spiegelman's parents. For the child, the home situation clashes with the 'outside world', creating both confusion and alienation. The child may be aware that their home life is not normal or healthy, because of their experience of the rest of the world, but they are unable to change their situation, alienating them from both their parents and the rest of the world. Thus, these parents might be described as 'traumatogenic' – their relationship with each other, the child and their surroundings creates an environment that is a petri dish for traumatic symptoms in the child.

'Prisoner on the Hell Planet' can be seen as a case study for the 'traumatogenic parent'; it vividly depicts the amount of pressure that is put on Art, the 'replacement child' (Gordon, 2004: 14). Anja's tight hold on her son (he refers to it as her 'tightening the umbilical cord') shows that she is unable to form a typical mother-son relationship with him. Not only is she extremely possessive, she also expects him to be her confidante and supporter. Art represents a post-Holocaust generation that Anja believes provides a level of support that Vladek, himself traumatised, cannot provide. Art is a troubled young man who admits to having spent time in a psychiatric hospital. He would be unable to provide succour to his mother, even if she had not been through the trauma of the Holocaust; he is a young man in need of his parents. The fact that his parents are emotionally (and often physically) unavailable to him, with Anja being paradoxically *too* available, is traumatising

in itself. Therefore, the parents are traumatised by their experiences in the Holocaust and their son is traumatised by his parents' inability to be parents *because* of their Holocaust experiences. The trauma of one generation is transferred to the next. In Spiegelman's case, he places a huge weight of blame for his mental distress on his parents.

In contrast, Tyler places the blame for her traumatising, not on her parents, but on Hitler. In an abstract sequence of images at the end of volume one of *You'll Never Know*, Chuck chases after his hat, which has been blown away by wind. He comes across a large sign, flanked by crows, before seeing Hitler holding his hat.

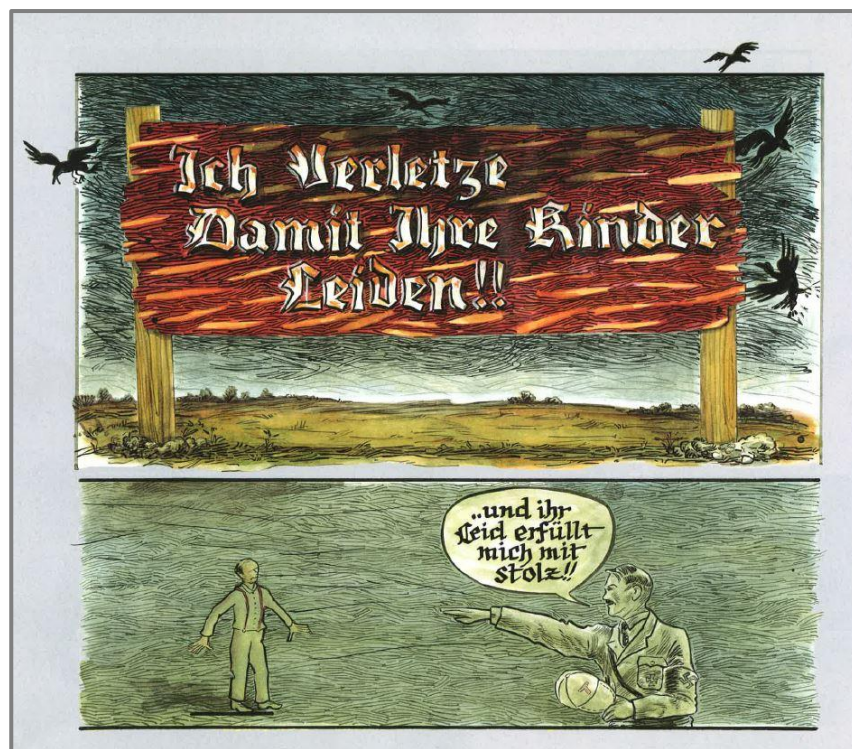


Fig. 4.1 – From *You'll Never Know*, C. Tyler, 2009. N.p. Image used with permission of Fantagraphics Books Inc.

The German translates as 'I abuse them so that their children suffer ... and their suffering fills me with pride'. That Tyler is willing to remove the burden of blame from her father shows that she does not believe he acts as he does on purpose but that his behaviour is a result of his wartime experiences. The phrase on the sign is multi-levelled. On a basic level

it states that the aggressors in the war aimed seriously to affect their enemies. Writing this text in German (and in a Teutonic font) makes it clear that Tyler sees Germany as the aggressor, keeping her father's experience of war firmly in the European theatre. The addition of Hitler stating that he takes pride in the children's suffering suggests that, though the suffering of future generations was not a motive, it was an 'added bonus' as far as the aggressors could see. The inclusion of the figure of Hitler as speaker of the second phrase, rather than a second sign or an unattached speech bubble, gives the blame a human face, one that is already widely associated with evil and suffering. This page gives Tyler a person to blame for her suffering and that of her father, exonerating him. Chuck doubts this, claiming, 'war's got nothing to do with it. I'm just an ornery bastard, that's all'.

At the end of the second volume, Tyler suggests that the transgenerational transmission of trauma has not spanned one generation but two. Her daughter, Julia, nearly jumps from a second-story window as a result of psychosis and delusional thinking. Rather than suggesting there is a genetic component to this (Julia's father and Tyler's estranged husband is Justin Green, creator of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, which details his struggles with OCD and Scrupulosity), Tyler again places the blame with Hitler.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a psychiatric condition characterised by 'recurrent obsessions or compulsions [...] that are severe enough to be time-consuming or cause marked distress or significant impairment' (DSM-V: 456). Often, compulsions are repetitive behaviours (such as hand-washing, touching certain items or repeating certain words) that must be completed to reduce anxiety. Scrupulosity is recognised as a form of OCD, in which the individual experiences pathological guilt regarding moral and religious issues, leading them to commit certain repetitive acts in order to assuage this guilt (Santa, 1999).



Fig. 4.2 – From *You'll Never Know*, C. Tyler, 2010.N.p. Image used with permission of Fantagraphics Books Inc.

Hitler, here portrayed with the wings of the Nazi *Parteiadler*, states that Julia is ‘Meine Bleibendes Vermächtnis’ (‘my lasting legacy’). Not only is Hitler delighted that Chuck’s trauma became Carol’s but he is ‘ecstatic’ that it is Julia’s too. Tyler attributes responsibility neither to Chuck, nor Julia, nor Justin, but places blame firmly at the feet of the cause of the initial trauma. Despite his cantankerous and often hurtful behaviour, Tyler does love her father and feels no resentment to him for his actions towards her. However, in placing the blame for her father’s traumatising and subsequent problems at the feet of Hitler, she is deflecting attention away from those who can act on it and work to ameliorate the situation. Hitler is a symbolic figurehead for Chuck’s trauma and that of all those who suffered as a result of their involvement in World War Two. Though her blaming Hitler allows Carol to forgive her father and reconcile their relationship, it also suggests that both she and Chuck are unable to truly begin to work through their traumata and reach a more satisfactory, healthy resolution. Because of this inability to fully reconcile, Tyler reaches

no conclusion with her father. She sees herself as a bent sapling, unable to straighten out, and asks why he didn't spend more time with her. This matter is not resolved in the text.

“Not my Parents’ Life”

Tran and Spiegelman were both born in different countries to their parents: Tran in the USA and Spiegelman in Sweden. Not only does this give them access to a different nationality (though Spiegelman does not claim Swedish citizenship), it also removes them completely from their parents' home country and places them in a very different culture. The parents then raise the child in an alien culture. The child does not share the same culture as the parents, alienating them from their parents and their familial past. For Tran, the cultural gap between him and his parents is enormous. His portrayal of his teenage self is very much as an American, often playing computer games, with little interest in visiting Vietnam and learning about his family. Though his parents want him to know about his past, they also place blocks in his way, by refusing to talk to him. Dzung says 'I tell you these things, but you'll never understand' – how can GB understand when he has neither frame of reference nor basic information to build on? His parents' inability to explain their experiences, due to both the mental blocks caused by trauma and a desire to protect their son, causes their son to lose interest in his past, choosing instead to assimilate himself fully into American culture.

On a more basic level, there is a language barrier between Tran and his parents. By his own admission, Tran speaks 'enough Vietnamese to read a menu and no French' (2014: personal communication), while his parents speak Vietnamese first, French second and

English third.⁵¹ Their English is not as good as Tran's; indeed, they were learning to speak English while he was learning to speak. Though the text does not explicitly state it, there is a suggestion that Tran finds this linguistic barrier both frustrating and amusing. As anyone who has learned a second language will know, it is usually the idioms and nuances of the language that are most difficult to learn. As Tran does not understand his parents' language and they do not fully understand his, the result is linguistic distance between them.

The most striking rejection of Tran's family history is shown in his decision to change his name. As a young child, he decides to change his name from Gia-Bao to GB, as 'nobody at school, even teachers, ever say "Gia-Bao" right' (2011: 99). The rejection of one's name, especially when the name is deeply significant to the parents, is a rejection of one's cultural history. Tran is moving away from the history of his parents in the Anglicisation of his name. This is not a straightforward issue. The image on the inside cover of the book itself suggests that Tran struggles with his desire to be American and his desire to remember his cultural heritage.



Fig. 4.3 – From *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran, 2011. Cover image. Image used with permission of the author.

⁵¹ The reader assumes that conversations in the family narrative part of the book are in Vietnamese. Whenever French is being spoken, the dialogue is encased in guillemets, the standard French punctuation mark used to indicate speech.

The struggle that Tran faces is the seeming incompatibility of Vietnamese and American cultures. Throughout *Vietnamerica*, it appears that Tran rejects his Vietnamese heritage completely, even during the passages describing his 2006 visit for his grandmother's funeral, where he appears reluctant to engage with the culture. However, the very end of the text negates this idea, showing that Tran does want to find out about his heritage. The book on the Vietnam War that his father gives him for graduation in an awkward attempt to connect with his son ends up buried in a box. It is his discovery of the book – and the epigraph that he had not previously seen – that prompts Tran to make the journey to Vietnam and to discover the history of his family. In this respect, then, Tri's attempt to connect with GB, that fails when he is eighteen, is successful when he is thirty and leads to the creation of the text. However, as with Tyler, Tran does not reach any resolution of the issues of alienation and tension between him and his father; the scars of his father's traumatic experiences are not relieved in the text; nor are father and son able to discuss the barriers between them.



Fig. 4.4 – From *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran, 2011.p 268. Image used with permission of the author.

The tier of Tran and the telephone uses gutters to split the panel rather than keeping the image as a bandeau panel. The black gutters form a barrier between Tran and the phone, representing the difficulty that Tran has in communicating with his family. The next page shows a bandeau panel of Tran reaching for the phone, showing that he has overcome this first barrier and intends to attempt to overcome others.

Spiegelman faces a similar issue of linguistic difference between him and his parents. He was raised in America, speaking English. His parents are both shown to speak Polish, German, Yiddish, Hebrew and English, the implication being that both of them speak English very well. As with *Vietnamerica*, Spiegelman writes the entire text in English. However, he uses different linguistic patterns for the past narrative and the present narrative. All dialogue within the past narrative is written in grammatically correct English, which we assume replaces Polish, while indicating when other languages are being spoken. Few phrases are included in the original language, usually ones that are easily understandable by an Anglophone reader (the most common of these is 'Heil Hitler!'). However, for all of the dialogue between Art and Vladek, as well as the narrative captions that accompany the Holocaust narrative, Spiegelman writes in a strange, transliterated half-English, suggesting that Vladek's English is good, but not perfect; many grammatical constructions and idioms are confused or incorrect. Spiegelman speaks some Polish – he refers to this as 'passive Polish' rather than a serious grasp of the language – but gives no indication that he can speak any of the other languages. This limits his linguistic ability to English, a language which his parents speak well but not fluently. Spiegelman must wade through his father's cracked English in order to communicate with him; he gives no indication as to how much he feels is lost in translation.

The language that evades Spiegelman the most is the cultural language of Judaism, which he rejects in his twenties. Though he had his *Bar Mitzvah* and was raised in a Jewish

household, Spiegelman moved away from the religion, maintaining a secular Jewish identity as ‘an atheist Jew’ (Spiegelman in Schneider, 2010: 23).⁵² This is another example of a language barrier, a language of culture rather than words. Spiegelman is unable to understand his parents’ experiences because he has little experience of the cultural background, an issue that is exacerbated by Art being brought up in the USA. He cannot understand the cultural framework on which his parents’ experience hangs. Andrew Gordon suggests that Spiegelman and other children of Holocaust survivors who were raised in the USA ‘became educated beyond their fathers, rebelled against paternal restrictions and, in assimilating to America, became only vestigially Jewish’ (2004: 15). His parents’ decision to emigrate to America and raise their son in what they consider a safe and comfortable environment also distances him from his family history, as is the case with Tran, and creates distance and barriers between parent and child.

The most famous aspect of *Maus* is the animal metaphor that forms the basis of the narrative. The use of different animals to represent different groups remains unspoken within the narrative (that is to say at no point does a character say ‘Oh crikey, I’m a mouse!’). Spiegelman references the long tradition of ‘funny animal’ comics, while also playing with the cat-mouse trope. Spiegelman’s use of such a striking metaphor raises many issues of identity and self-identification. However, before discussing this it is important to note that this metaphor has faced much reproach; Spiegelman has been widely criticised for depicting Poles as pigs. Robert Harvey argues that the animal metaphor ‘plays directly into [Nazism’s] racist vision [...] threatening to erode the text’s moral underpinnings’ (2008: 244). However, his reasoning is that pigs exist outside of the ‘cat

⁵²In 1987, the US Supreme Court ruled that Jews can be classed as a race for the purposes of certain anti-discrimination laws. However, the term ‘race’ refers to people of shared ancestry and genetic traits. These are not required for one to convert to Judaism. Many (mostly American) secular Jews consider their ‘Jewishness’ a matter of culture and ethnicity. For them, Judaism is a matter of food, language and cultural values. Much of this is derived from Ashkenazic Jewish culture – Ashkenazi Jews originate in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, Judaism cannot be considered a race but can be considered a cultural or ethnic group.

and mouse' food chain and that the depiction of pigs is not necessarily a negative one: 'Look at Porky and Petunia Pig [...] I'm unhappy that so many readers thought it was OK to use vermin for Jews but not pigs for Poles' (Spiegelman in Bolhafner, 1991: 97). The nationalist animal metaphor crumbles when we consider cats and mice. The cats are supposed to represent Germans but Spiegelman does not make a distinction between Germans and Nazis. Rather than making distinctions between Nazis, Germans and German Jews, the first two are classed as one group; any Jewish character, regardless of their nationality, is portrayed as a mouse. Spiegelman is aware of this problem, discussing it most explicitly in relation to a German Jew in Auschwitz:



Fig. 4.5 – From *Maus*, Art Spiegelman, 2003.p 210. Image used under fair dealings provisions for the purpose of scholarly discussion.

In making all Jewish characters mice, Spiegelman suggests that Jewish identity cancels out national allegiances. Vladek repeatedly refers to 'the Poles' without acknowledging that he is also a Polish citizen by birth and family heritage. Rather, he draws a strong demarcation between Poles and Jews. At one point Vladek and Anja wear pig masks to pass as Poles – even though they are already Polish. The fact that Spiegelman chooses pigs is of especial interest here, as pigs are not kosher animals and are therefore considered unclean. Hillel Halkin writes, 'The Holocaust was a crime committed by humans against humans, not – as

Nazi theory held – by one biological species against another. To draw people as animals is doubly dehumanising’ (2005: 140).

At the beginning of the second volume, Art is trying to decide how to draw Françoise, his French wife, who has converted to Judaism. Art’s objection to making Françoise a mouse is that she is French, yet he makes other Jewish characters into mice without question. Furthermore, he draws himself as a mouse but there are several other animals that could be used: he was born in Sweden (represented as a reindeer), to Polish parents (pig) but is now American (dog). The discrepancies here are never resolved within the text. Spiegelman’s animals are uncannily humanoid. Baker writes:

The smallest expanse of naked flesh other than head and hands may invite the reader to focus directly on the awkward conjunction of body parts. *Maus* is full of such instances: Vladek as a prisoner bathing naked in a river [and] Art sitting on his bed dressed only in his Y-fronts. (1993: 142)

Each animal is drawn with human hands and bodies; the reader must reconcile the humanoid qualities of the characters, remembering that each character is an animal, while also understanding that Spiegelman’s metaphor is imperfect by design. In an interview with *The Comics Journal*, Spiegelman says:

Ultimately, what the book is about is the commonality of human beings. It’s crazy to divide things down the nationalistic or racial or religious lines. And that’s the whole point, isn’t it? These metaphors, which are meant to self-destruct in my book – and I think they do self-destruct – still have a residual force that allows them to work as metaphors, and still get people worked up over them. (Spiegelman in Bolhafner, 1991: 98)

The self-destruction of the metaphor on which the narrative hangs assists in the creation of the text and the representation of trauma. The awkwardness of humanoid animals

representing ethnic and national groups that negate the collective identity of human beings – in a comic that discusses an event in which ethnic and national segregation became, quite literally, a matter of life and death – both jars with and complements the disjointed memories of Vladek, the conspicuous absence of Anja and the dysfunctional relationship they both have with Art. Thus, though this metaphor has many flaws and does not hold up perfectly under the pressure of the narrative, its weaknesses become strengths as they highlight the many blatant shortcomings of such segregational methods. The lack of resolution maintains the confusion and discomfort of the text. Amid this confusion, the original problem remains: How is the son, who is removed by nationality and culture from the experience of his parents, meant to be able to come to terms with his parents' experience and the effect it has had on him, while struggling at the same time with issues of national and religious identity and an event that is incomprehensible? The conflicts of identity that Spiegelman faces are unresolved. Spiegelman is haunted by the shadow of his parents' experiences and their identity as survivors. In his 2011 commentary on *Maus*, Spiegelman is honest about the fact that his identity has become so bound up in his parents' lives that he is unable to separate it from himself (2011: 9).

The identity that Spiegelman has constructed for himself is based on experiences that are not his own. His trauma has been spawned from events for which he was not present. Traumatic experience exists outside of consciousness, as the mind cannot process such events and thus is unable to assimilate it into normal memory. Vladek and Anja are traumatised by events that they experienced but were unable to process. Dora Apel writes, 'experience that has not been processed cannot be narrated, constituting trauma, not memory' (2002: 56). By this reckoning, then, Spiegelman is as traumatised as his parents, though he has no frame of reference for this trauma. For both Spiegelman and Tran, the crisis of identity they experience is caused by traumata that they do not undergo first

hand and do not understand. In these texts, both creators show that the traumata of their parents has been transmitted to the children; it is for the child to reconcile the experience of the parents with their own experiences in such a way as to make sense of it and to use this knowledge to find their place within their own family and heritage.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Rip van Winkle wakes up from his long slumber to find that he is himself and yet not himself; his fundamental identity has been changed by an event he had no control over or involvement in – the American Revolutionary War. Though the day-to-day existence of Rip and his neighbours has changed very little, their basic identity has transformed from subject of a Monarchy to citizen of a Republic. Just as the Revolutionary War changed the identity of Rip, the experience and survival of a traumatic conflict can radically change the personal identity of those it affects. The trauma does not affect only the direct victims, but is also transmitted across generations; traumatised individuals can become traumatising parents, leading to traumatised children and grandchildren. The three texts discussed in this chapter are all written by artists whose parents survived traumatic conflicts and were affected by these experiences in ways that affected them into later life and, more importantly, affected the way they parent their children. The texts themselves are not only chronicles of family history and family trauma, but also the artist-child's representations of them working through their trauma and that of their parents. Furthermore, by using the comics form to create their representations these artists are able to harness specific aspects of the form to assist both the creation of the text and also the comprehension of the reader.

Chapter Five

Moving in Four Dimensions

Perhaps it is our perennial fate to be surprised by the simultaneity of events, by the sheer extension of the world in time and space.
Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004)

One basic fact about the nature of comics gives it something that cannot be found in any other narrative medium. In comics, each narrative event occupies its own space on the page and within the book; the specific spatial relationships between panels correspond to (or contrast with) the temporal relationships between narrative events.⁵³ Thus, more so than with a traditional literary text, the physicality of the comic is a major factor in its reading, as discussed in Chapter 2. The movement of time mimics the reader's movement through the pages and often the turning of the pages mimics the events within the text, as is discussed in Chapter 1. Adding to this the physicality of comics reading – at the most basic level the turning of the page – comics emerges as a unique form. If we then consider that comics is able to manipulate temporal awareness in many ways that are not available to any other narrative medium, then our contention that comics is a form well-suited to

⁵³ I would argue that this is the most important distinction between comics and film. In a film, all information is presented in the same space – we watch the entire sequence of events unfolding on one screen. The physical spatial relationship is lacking.

traumatic representation is further supported. This manipulation of temporal awareness is not solely in the hand of the comics artist, but also the reader. As readers, we decide how long to take over each panel, each page and even how quickly to turn the pages. Putting this much power over the time-scale of the narrative in the hands of the reader means that not only does the reader have to work much harder than, for example, a film-goer, but that each reader will read the story differently, giving temporal emphasis to some panels over others and changing reading speeds at different times.

To suffer a traumatic rupture is often to have one's sense of time abused, to suffer a serious temporal rupture. Indeed for many it is one of the most noticeable symptoms of a traumatic rupture that the individual loses their grip on time; their sense of personal chronology is severely disrupted. For Freud, writing in *Moses and Monotheism*, this disjunction in personal timekeeping can occur at the very first instance of the traumatic rupture (2001a: 67). It is at this moment that the difficult relationship between time and trauma begins for, as Freud writes, the complete psychical effects of the traumatic rupture do not necessarily happen immediately – there is a delay; Freud refers to this as deferred action (2001a: 68). Thus the amount of time that may pass before the trauma's full effect is felt can vary greatly between individuals.⁵⁴ However, it remains the case that trauma is, as Caruth contends, a 'break in the mind's experience of time' (1996: 61). Freud suggests that this break is not caused by the quantity of traumatic stimuli, but by the mind's lack of preparedness:

We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli. This would seem to

⁵⁴ Perhaps the most extreme disruption of personal time that can occur in the wake of a traumatic event is catatonia, in which the individual experiences an extreme loss of motor skills, among other things. Some catatonic patients hold rigid poses for hours at a time, as if they are paused. However this does not occur in all traumatised individuals. Some studies suggest that it affects less than 2% of traumatised individuals but these statistics are debated (FDA, 2010).

reinstate the old, naïve theory of shock [...] and we still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety. (2003: 31)

The protective shield is not engaged in time; the threat to the self is recognised one moment too late. Furthermore, returning to Caruth's original definition of trauma as an event 'experienced too soon [...] and therefore unavailable to consciousness' (1996: 4), if trauma exists separately from human consciousness and comprehension, then it has never been known fully or, indeed, understood and has therefore not existed *in time*. It is this lack of temporal understanding and direct experience that causes the traumatic rupture and leads to the development of traumatic symptoms. The initial point is reiterated: time – and the fracturing thereof – has an effect on all other symptoms of the traumatic rupture.

This chapter discusses time in relation to both trauma and comics, bringing these two areas together in analysis of representations of traumatic time in comics. It works specifically with GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2011) and the Marvel series *The 'Nam* (1986-1993). These two comics, though centred on the same conflict, are very different in both style and focus. *Vietnamerica* is a family narrative that spans several generations. Tran's artistic style owes much to his father's past as a watercolourist, making it markedly different from the mainstream 'house style' that is used in *The 'Nam*. The final major difference is that Tran's story concentrates on the Vietnamese, the occupied, rather than *The 'Nam*, which looks solely at the American forces, the occupiers. Moreover, *The 'Nam* was created specifically with the Comics Code Authority in mind, narrowing the options of the creators to a large degree, as I have already discussed in the introduction to this thesis. The constraints of both CCA and Marvel's 'house style' combined create a text that ignores many aspects of the soldiers' experience of Vietnam (notably swearing and drug usage) but does not stifle representations of the intense trauma that many endured. In my analysis of these works, particular attention is paid to the use of analepsis and multiple

analepsis, framed narratives and metalepsis.⁵⁵ Though these tropes are employed across many different literary and comics genres, their usage here contributes to the representations of trauma within the text; each trope is used in a very specific way, with the overarching purpose of chronological destabilisation, mimicking a traumatic rupture.

Further to this, this chapter looks at two specific instances of representations of photographs in two comics. These photographs are famous and, as such, their inclusion in the comic can be seen as a far more obvious collision of the ‘real world’ and ‘comics world’ than simply including the events in a storyline. It also looks at the inclusion of superheroes, paying particular interest to what Umberto Eco discusses in his essay ‘The Myth of Superman’ (1997) – that superheroes cannot intervene in actual events because they would change the course of history. The (similar but independent) work of two theorists complements these analyses: Thierry Groensteen’s ‘spatio-topical system’ and Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘chronotope’.

Theories of Time in Groensteen and Bakhtin

In *The System of Comics* (2007), Groensteen argues that the basic unit of the comic is the panel. Though it is possible to break down each panel into smaller units, ‘for the particular subject that is comics, the operativity of the micro-semiotic is revealed to be, in practice, extremely weak’ (2007: 5). Rather, the analysis of comics begins to become possible at the ‘level of relations between the units [...] the level not of the ropes, but of the knots’ (2007: 5). With this in mind, Groensteen posits the ‘spatio-topical system’ of the comic, which

⁵⁵ Analepsis is defined as ‘evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier in the point of the story’ (flashback) (Genette, 1972: 40). Similarly prolepsis is defined as ‘any narrative manoeuvre that consists in narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place’ (flashforward) (Genette, 1972: 40). See Chapter 3 for the definition of metalepsis.

gives much emphasis to the placement of panels in relation to each other. Removing all words and images so the page is pared down to the 'grid' of the frames (a stage of the creation process referred to as *quadrillage*) leaves a framework on which the 'language of the comic is written' (2007: 28). In short, before the addition of image or word to the hyperpanel, we can see already that the positioning of frames is of extreme importance to the creation of the comic.

For Groensteen, there are four main parameters that govern the 'general architecture' of the hyperpanel. First, the height of each tier of panels should be taken into consideration as 'a tier stands out better if [...] its height differs from that of the others on the page' (Groensteen, 2007: 63). Similarly, the width of the gutter (Groensteen uses the term 'interstices') – both horizontal and vertical – has an effect on the visual scaffolding. The location of bubbles (speech or thought) can drastically alter the whole page. The convention is that bubbles are placed in the upper part of the panel and 'a different position, if it is anarchic, will scramble the apparatus of the layout' (2007: 63). Such breaking of convention, given the 'anarchic' effect it can have on the layout, is common and, indeed, to be expected in trauma comics. Finally, Groensteen discusses 'the number of panels that make up the tier, in the absolute terms and relative to the quantity of panels that are included in neighbouring tiers'. He argues that tiers containing a lot of panels – or panels of unusual shape – are more likely to be eye-catching and to demand 'narrative interest' than tiers containing two panels of equal size and shape. It is at the level of the tier, rather than just the panel, that true interpretation can begin (2007: 63).

Earlier in his text, Groensteen writes, 'the position of a panel on the page corresponds to a particular moment in the unfolding of the story, and also in the process of reading' (2007: 35). This is echoed over and over in comics theory (as well as in this thesis). McCloud writes:

Time can be controlled through the content of panels and the transitions between panels. As unlikely as it seems, the panel shape can make a difference in our perception of time... Ever noticed how the words 'short' or 'long' can refer either to the first dimension or to the fourth? In a medium where time and space merge so completely, the distinction often vanishes. (1994: 101-2)

The relationship to which McCloud alludes is examined at great length in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope' (1978: 493-528). Bakhtin writes that 'the essential conjunction of temporal and spatial relationships artistically assimilated into literature shall be called the *chronotopos*', in literal translation 'timespace'. For Bakhtin, as for McCloud, there is an 'indissoluble connection between space and time' (1978: 493). The chronotope works on three levels:

First, as the means by which a text represents history; second, as the relation between images of time and space in the novel, out of which any representation of history must be constructed; and third, as a way of discussing the formal properties of the text itself. (Vice, 1997: 201-2)

On the most basic level, it would be entirely feasible to look at comics through the lens of the third chronotopic level only – the work as being bound up in space-time connections by the very virtue of its form. However, the first chronotopic level is of equal importance, as the comics within this thesis find their inspiration in actual events. Thus, the historical time of the event and the physical space of the page become inextricably linked. Furthermore, such events become chronotopic in their own right. For example, '9/11' has taken on a chronotopic meaning as it refers to both the time in which the event happened but also the place where it occurred. In this sense, prepositions of time and place often become equivalent – Kurt Vonnegut writes that he was 'at Dresden', instead of the more typical 'in Dresden' (1991: 19). This construction only makes sense if we acknowledge that the event is chronotopic – Dresden as a location in both space (city in Eastern Germany) and time

(13th to 15th February 1945). In terms of historical events, the chronotope ‘provides substantial basis for the showing and depiction of events [...] thanks to its particular solidification and concretization of the distinguishing marks of time in defined areas of space’ (Bakhtin, 1978: 521).

Bakhtin’s chronotope, then, gives us a framework by which ‘time [can] thicken [and become] artistically visible [and] space [can become] charged and responsive to the movements of time’ (1978: 493). Using this framework gives both comics creators and readers a structure on which to hang both their timescale and their representations of historical events. Traumatic representation, which thrives on atypical temporality and chronological inexactitude, still adheres to Bakhtin’s concepts, as there remains a strong link between time and space. For *American Widow* and the 9/11 Charity Comics, the chronotopic meaning of ‘9/11’ becomes artistically observable. The spatial movement within the comics is limited, keeping all action firmly rooted in the geographical centre of ‘9/11’. Similarly, the vast majority of the comics are set on the exact day. Bakhtin uses the example of a road narrative as having a clear chronotopic outline. However, unlike in a road narrative, there is little movement within these comics, making the chronotope of each individual comic narrow. In a road narrative, distance travelled and time passed are inseparable.⁵⁶ Sue Vice uses the example of *Thelma and Louise* and the line ‘I’m trying to put some distance between us and the scene of our last goddamn crime!’ (1997: 214). In the Charity Comics’ depictions of 9/11 there is very little movement and time appears to stagnate. Bakhtin, referencing a similar chronotope in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, calls this ‘thick, sticky time, which oozes in space’ (1978: 520). It is this oozing time that the reader encounters throughout much traumatic representation within comics. The traumatic

⁵⁶ Bakhtin uses the example of the Greek ‘novel of ordeal’ (including *Aethiopica*, *Clitophon* and *Leucippe* and *Ephesiaca*) to show how the road forms the basic structure of the novel (1978: 495). He writes that as ‘the action of the plot unfolds against a broad geographical background’, movement of time and space becomes inextricably linked and, thus, the novel’s structure is formed entirely around this spatial movement (1978: 500).

rupture of representation – the creator’s inability accurately or adequately to reproduce the traumatic event – gives rise to clotted or fractured temporality. Traumatic chronology is often presented as fractured. One of the more explicit examples of this is Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, in which the protagonist is a time-traveller. In other texts, chronology can be seen as clotted: the movement of time ceases and seems unable to progress at all. Brian Michael Bendis and Scott Morse’s silent comic ‘Moment of Silence: A True Story’ demonstrates this (Bendis and Morse, 2002: 8-12). The eight-page comic shows seven views of the same man, holding his arm in the same position, with no movement of time whatsoever. Rather than an elongated chronotope that spans much time-space, the traumatic creates a chronotope that mimics the trauma that it displays.

Stories within Stories – Analepsis and Framed Narratives

GB Tran’s 2011 family narrative *Vietnamerica* recounts the multi-generational story of his family history, starting with his grandparents’ (specifically grandmothers’) experience of the French colonial presence and First Indochina War. The text follows three levels of narration: the historical background of his family, the post-war experience of the two younger generations and Tran’s 2006 visit to Vietnam for the funeral of Thi Mot, his maternal grandmother. The first narrative layer – the historical background – does not work chronologically and relies heavily on analepsis. Tran’s mother, Dzung, acts as the narrator for a single scene-setting panel before the narrative shifts back. Though this framing happens throughout the text there is one section which utilises a specific (and iconic) comics style that does not feature in any other part of the text. Tran uses *ligne*

claire to illustrate the flashback-within-a-flashback narrative of his father's imprisonment by the ARVN (2011: 68-91).⁵⁷

In this section, the first flashback (to Tri's imprisonment) uses dark coloration and black gutters, combined with crosshatching, crowded bubbles and onomatopoeia, to create an atmosphere of uncertainty. However, the darkness and confusion of the images contrast sharply with the uniformity of the panelling, beginning with equally sized and spaced bandeau panels (2011: 69). Uniformity of panels generally suggests a steady and mechanical passage of time. This may be the case – Tri cannot know how much time has passed – but this stability of timeframe serves to destabilise the narrative as a whole; it is disconcerting because it jars uncomfortably with the content of the images. The relative size of each instance of onomatopoeia to the rest of the image within each panel suggests two things. First, that the sound represented is extremely loud and second, that the room in which the activity is taking place is small and cramped. As is common in the comics form, the writing style corresponds to the noise itself; the artist writes the sounds as he wants them to be read in order to evoke certain emotions and sensations within the reader. This brings the textual style into direct involvement with the meaning of the words, furthering the onomatopoeic effect.

The second flashback occurs while Tri is in his cell and takes him back into his early life, hence 'flashback within a flashback' (the 'flash-flashback'). This occurs three times and it is here that the *ligne claire* comes into play. A trigger in the flashback takes Tri into the flash-flashback. The ARVN guards refer to him by his full name, Tran Huu

⁵⁷ The term *ligne claire* comes from Dutch cartoonist Joost Swarte (originally rendered *klare lijn*) and his 1977 exhibition in Rotterdam (Miller, 2007: 18). However, the style is synonymous with the Franco-Belgian *bandes-dessinées* tradition and more specifically Belgian comics artist Hergé. This style 'privileges smooth, continuous linework, simplified contours and bright, solid colours, while avoiding frayed lines, exploded forms and expressionistic rendering' (Hatfield, 2005: 60). *Ligne claire* has not been widely used in American comics, although some artists do employ it and to good effect. Recent examples include Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* (1997) and Jason Lutes' series *Berlin* (2008).

Tri, which moves the narration back to Tri's first day at school and the occasion of his meeting his best friend, Do (2011: 71).

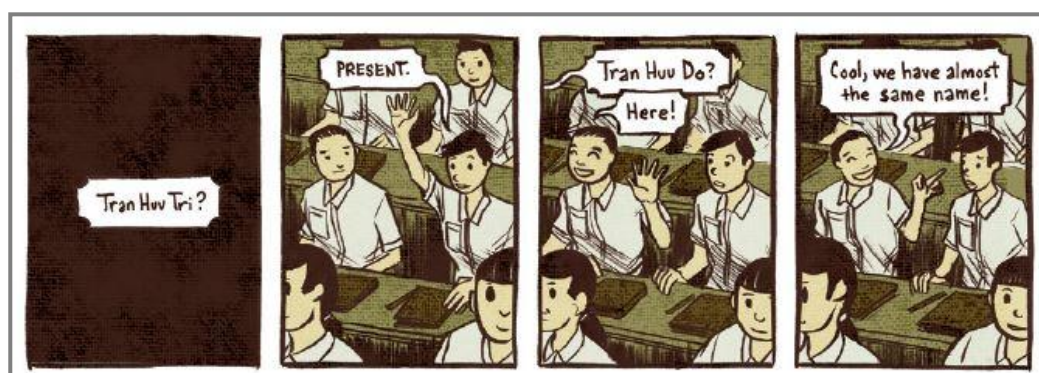


Fig. 5.1 – From *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran, 2011, p 71. Image used with permission of the author.

Each flash-flashback starts on the right-hand side of the page, creating a stark contrast between the two pages. The cleanness and rich, bold colour of *ligne claire* seems childlike compared to the roughness of the preceding images. By starting the flash-flashback on the right-hand side, rather than the left, which would require a page-turn, the shift in time is very fast. It happens in the time it takes the reader's eye to move up the page. Were it presented on the left-hand page, the shift in time would take longer – the time it took to turn the page. Not only would this remove the bold contrast between pages, it would also give the reader more time to pause before moving further back, removing the shock of the sudden time shift and allowing for anticipation of what was about to happen, replacing shock with anticipatory fear, as Freud and Breuer describe in *Studies in Hysteria* (2000: 57). Further to this, *ligne claire* uses emanata, especially in the case of someone being punched, to demonstrate the individual's physical state. This, coupled with a heavy use of onomatopoeia, is typical of the form.

Ligne claire is more than just an artistic style. It carries with it tremendous iconic weight, thanks to its associations with Hergé and *Les Aventures de Tintin*. In choosing to use this style, Tran will be aware of these associations. Earlier in the text, while discussing

his father's childhood in a small Vietnamese town, a panel shows him being presented with a copy of *Le Lotus Bleu*, the fifth book of the Tintin series (2011: 38). This panel acts as a brief hint of what is to come, as well as testifying to the influence of Hergé on both Tran's development as a comics artist and Tri's life as an artist. In a later panel, Tran's mother fumes over his father's inability to throw anything out and, holding two Tintin books, she says 'He's a grown man! When does he ever read comics?' (2011: 142). The inclusion of Hergé and the watercolourist style of Tran's artwork both refer to the impact of the French colonial presence on the development of Vietnamese artistic identity, as represented in Tran and his father.

Bruno Lecigne argues that 'the ideological efficacy of the *ligne claire* lies not in what is chosen for depiction, but in the idea that the world is legible' (Lecigne, 1983 in Miller, 2007: 19). *Ligne claire* is a lens through which the world attains some level of clarity and comprehensibility. Laurence Grove writes that many artists 'reject *ligne claire* precisely to suggest that life is not always clear cut, and that the violent ambiguities of society can indeed be worthy of artistic portrayal' (2010: 183). However, it is precisely *for* this reason that Tran uses it here. The story contained within the *ligne claire* flash-flashback is not a pleasant, happy childhood memory – in many ways it suggests that Tri had a horrible childhood, fraught with disappointment and negative experiences – but it is important to remember that this is what Tri remembers while locked in a small, dark prison cell. Though his memories are not entirely happy, the lens of *ligne claire* makes them appear clean and puts this narrative in stark contrast to the cold and dark reality of his situation.

Tran's use of triggers for each of the three flash-flashbacks is not only an innovative method of moving the narrative back in time, but also a technique which mimics the triggering of memory and subsequent regression to memory that occurs in a

traumatic rupture. It is, of course, common to everyone to find that certain stimuli will trigger a memory but this is often more pronounced in an individual who is undergoing – or has undergone – great stress. In this respect, the suddenness of the narrative time shift mimics the shifting of personal chronology that can occur in a traumatic rupture. At the other end, when the flash-flashback moves forward to Tri in his cell, the *ligne claire* panels become increasingly thin, with a bandeau panel being sliced into sections, creating the effect of a stuttering filmstrip on a projector. This gives the impression that Tri's memory is faltering. Tran plays with this idea most explicitly in the last tier of *ligne claire* panels, in which Tri's thoughts are shown as a stream of slides in a thought bubble. The structuring of this section with multiple analepsis allows Tran to explore key events of his father's past – as well as the effect of these events on his older self – while also illustrating the nature of memory and traumatic regression.

The 'Nam is not a typical mainstream comics series. Though published by Marvel and created in line with the house style and the CCA, the series does not follow the formats laid down by the majority of Marvel series. It is a misconception that all mainstream comics involve superheroes, but the vast majority do. There are no regular superhero characters in *The 'Nam*. Moreover, mainstream comics may deal with convoluted story arcs but they do not typically handle political issues on the same level as *The 'Nam*. This particular series is noted for its use of a variety of narrative devices. The most striking of these is the use of letters as a means of creating a distinctive narrative voice. *The 'Nam* includes two issues in which the letter device is used as the framework for the entire issue: 'From Cedar Falls, with Love' (November 1987) and 'Notes from the World' (February 1988). Both stories are centred on Ed Marks, who acts as the 'author' of the letters.

In 'From Cedar Falls, with Love', Marks writes to his parents from a small village in Vietnam (2010: 28). The opening page of the issue sees Marks and fellow soldier Rob Little receiving post in the aftermath of Operation Cedar Falls and then beginning to write replies.⁵⁸ The majority of the issue uses Marks' reply as captions for the images, which are presented without any bubbles or internal dialogue; the captions remain outside of the frame of the image at all times, creating an immediate distance between the words and images in the mind of the reader. The artwork for these panels lacks the sharp lines that are present in the rest of the issue. This lack of clarity is most evident in the rendering of faces, which appear to become more generic and anonymous than in the rest of the series on the whole. The transitions between these panels follow the lead of the captions and as such are not fluid at all. However, the fact that they follow the letter's narration means that the transitions do not jar for the reader as much as they would if the images did not follow the letter device.

The style of writing that comprises the captions reads exactly as a letter from a young son to his parents would. It is colloquial and fluid, makes occasional off-hand comments ('You sure do get hungry in the bush!') and, most importantly, is peppered with parenthetical explanations of army slang, directed at Marks' mother: 'Over here we move around in slicks (that's slang for helicopters, Mom) all the time' (2010: 30). The fact that Marks so often makes corrections to the letter suggests that it is hand-written, and composed quickly. For example, at one point Marks writes 'this is army talk for whatever the Brass, sorry, the officers, have in mind'. Were this not a handwritten letter, the corrections would likely have been removed. Their inclusion substantiates the story's contention that Marks is writing this in the 'bush'.

⁵⁸ Here we see the inclusion of another 'actual' event into the story arc of *The 'Nam*. Operation Cedar Falls was a search and destroy mission that ran from 8th to 28th January 1967. The objective was to eradicate the 'Iron Triangle', an area of south Vietnam, close to Saigon, that was a Viet Cong stronghold. Many thousands of Vietnamese saw their homes destroyed and the US used Agent Orange to destroy crops.

The most arresting feature of this issue of *The 'Nam* is the degree of disconnection between the words and images. Marks describes the events of Operation Cedar Falls to his parents in plain language that is ambiguous in its meaning. His descriptions are not inaccurate but they do not come close to fully describing the horror and violence that he witnesses. The vast majority of the panels and their associated captions include this disconnection. At one point Marks describes his job as 'helping to cordon the perimeter', which sounds innocuous but is accompanied by an image of a Vietnamese man on a bike being shot in the back with an M14 rifle. In the next panel, he writes that 'it wasn't an easy job but on the whole we managed to do it'. Again, the choice of words is calm and measured but the accompanying image is of Marine aircraft dropping bombs and the subsequent explosion. If one chose to read only the captions, one would receive a calm and carefully sanitised account of what happened, not incorrect but by no means the truth. Reading the images alone, one receives a disorganised visual report of the same event with no censoring, but also no explanation of the images.

Though it would be correct to suggest that Marks' not-wholly-accurate letter is his attempt to protect his parents (especially his mother, who evidently has little knowledge of military life) from the reality of his tour of Vietnam, this is only part of the matter. It is also a way of protecting himself. If he memorialises this event in a letter to his parents in these carefully chosen words, then that is how it will remain in his memory. Thus, Marks is creating this softened rendering of events for himself as much as for anyone else. Moreover, at this point in the story arc, Marks is 'short', having less than one month left in Vietnam before his tour is over. It is highly likely that the reason Marks writes with such blandness and lack of emotion is because this is how he sees it. Throughout the series, the character develops from a naïve and easily startled young man into a 'combat veteran' (2010: 28). For Marks, as with so many soldiers, his key concern is his own survival and

the survival of his fellow soldiers. The disjunction between images, then, is not only a break in the relationship between image and word in Marks' letter but also in his perception of events. The amount of traumatic stimuli that Marks has encountered during his 11-month tour has caused a traumatic rupture to occur but he is not currently experiencing explicit symptoms of this. Rather, he is still in what Freud terms the 'incubation period' (2001a: 67), the period of delay between the traumatic event and the onset of explicit traumatic symptoms. The narrative gives no indication as to whether Marks goes on to develop serious traumatic symptoms.

There is an awareness of the limitations of this narrative device within the comic itself. After witnessing the death of another soldier from gunshot Marks says, 'I keep forgetting... My brain keeps blocking it out...' In the next panel, he stares at a blank piece of paper thinking, 'How do I tell my folks about that?' (2010: 45). It is with this thought that Marks concludes his letter with well wishes and love. There are no words to explain the death in any way that will be accessible to either Marks' parents or his own comprehension and so the event is passed over. The fact that the event is present in the comic outside of the letter narrative attests to the inadequacy of this narrative device – or, indeed, any – to make full sense of such events.

'Notes from the World' uses Marks as a letter-writing narrator in a different way. Rather than writing from Vietnam to his parents in America, he is writing from America (specifically South Carolina) to Rob Little in Vietnam. The panel used to introduce the letter device is drawn as an airmail envelope (2010: 100). Unlike 'From Cedar Falls, with Love' there are no breaks in the letter narrative; it runs without interruption to its end and then the narration moves back to Rob reading the letter in Vietnam. Marks explains his experience of leaving Vietnam and flying back to the US, spending time with his parents and then returning to duty at Fort Jackson. As with 'From Cedar Falls, with Love', the

artistic style of the letter panels lacks clarity of line and colour, but not to the same extent. Additionally, unlike the previous issue, 'Notes from the World' uses captions that are integral to the frame of the image. There is no physical disconnection between words and images in this comic. Indeed, there is little detachment between the captions and the images throughout the whole of Marks' letter. There is one section which has very few captions, in which Marks visits his old girlfriend to find that she has a baby (it does not say whether the child is Marks') but all he writes on this is 'I decided to go and see my old girlfriend... the less said about that fiasco, the better' (2010: 106).

There is a disparity in levels of separation between word and image in these two comics. For the most part, the image and words match perfectly. This comic makes no great demand of closure on the reader. Rather, it is a description of the difficulties faced by returning soldiers. Marks can speak more openly because he is writing to a fellow veteran who will understand his situation better than most. He ends the letter with a claim that he is going to write about his experience in Vietnam as this can only be done 'by someone who understood what it's really like' (2010: 114). Though this is a noble endeavour, the reader is left questioning whether this will ever be possible, given the innate unknowability of traumatic experience and the difficulty in transcribing it into a coherent narrative, as made plain by Marks' earlier attempt at an explanation in 'From Cedar Falls, with Love'.

Long Distance Chronology

The most temporally sophisticated issue of *The 'Nam* is 'Auld Acquaintance' (2011: 120-141). The story is set in late February 1968, just before the end of the Battle for Hue, the longest battle of the Vietnam War. However, though the amount of time covered is no

longer than an hour, the location covers thousands of miles, from Vietnam to the USA and back again several times. The issue opens with three soldiers – Clark, Ice and Aeder – discussing the lack of honest reporting on the events in Hue. Clark mentions his experience of finding a Viet Cong mass grave. Though this recollection takes only two panels, it is accompanied by inset captions and the frame has a wavy outline to suggest a dream-like state of memory. Ice is disturbed by the fact that this detail is not mentioned in any press release. With his loud declaration of ‘If they lie to us about what’s goin’ on, what do they do back in the world?’ (2011: 122) the narrative shifts to Columbia University in New York City where Ed Marks (now free of the Army and a student) is watching television news, which states the same information that Ice and Clark were debating in the previous panels. The panel’s main caption states ‘at that same time’ to make the reader aware that these events are happening concurrently, albeit 8500 miles apart.

Marks discusses the televised coverage of the news, which he believes to be unequivocal truth, with a university professor. Marks’ anger at the professor’s extreme anti-war stance causes him to snap a pencil in half (2011: 127). The narrative moves again, to the Philippines, where ‘Top’ Tarver (First Sergeant Tarver) breaks his ‘substandard military crap pencil’ (2011: 128). Tarver discusses the events in Hue and his time in Vietnam with Corporal Lewin, flashing back to his time with Rob Little. After this, the narration moves again – this time to Rob Little on a rifle range in Fort Bliss, Texas. Here the linking image is less explicit. It is a close up of Tarver’s face followed by a close-up of Little’s. Both are African-American and are drawn similarly, save for Tarver’s characteristic gold teeth. On the rifle range the topic of discussion is the ongoing Battle in Hue. Rob drinks a bottle of coke and the action moves once more, this time to a meeting ‘somewhere in America’ of various employees of comics companies discussing the possibility of holding a convention for comics fans. This is a reference to the first San

Diego Comic-Con (now the largest and most famous comics convention in the world) in 1970. This mini-story seems to jar with the others in this issue. The only link to *The 'Nam* at all is the presence of the character Thomas, who was a private in Vietnam for several issues and is identifiable by his extreme clumsiness.⁵⁹ Thomas spills his coke (this is the link to Rob Little) and ruins a stack of comics, holding them up by their soggy corners. Again, the narrative shifts, this time to an unidentified location and a group of soldiers discussing the progress of the American troops in Hue. Sergeant Crews concludes that the American forces 'will lose this war... and in the press too' (2011: 137). The final shift of narrative is, again, to an unidentified location (though we know it is a hospital) and a character called Frank T. Verzyl, who is catatonic from his experiences in Vietnam.⁶⁰ The last tier of the issue contains two panels: the first shows Verzyl's doctor saying 'I don't think the war will ever end for this one', the second gives a close-up of Verzyl's frozen and terrified face and the nurse's reply of 'and for a lot of others, doctor, too many others' (2011: 141). This exchange stands as a comment on the prevalence of severe trauma in veterans of the Vietnam War.

Aside from the linking images that move from one mini-narrative to the next, the entire issue is tied together with a single narrative concern – the media coverage of the ongoing Battle of Hue. The differing opinions of each set of characters, as well as the different types of media reporting that are mentioned, are the catalyst for this discussion. The artistic style is consistent throughout each mini-narrative. Furthermore, of the seven mini-narratives, five contain analeptic panels as the characters relate past experiences. This use of a specific narrative technique creates continuity between each individual narrative.

⁵⁹ Thomas' character provides much comic relief and most of the characters lament him ever being drafted into the army. He left Vietnam by helicopter, after falling into said helicopter face first.

⁶⁰ Verzyl is the subject of a short comic entitled 'Tunnel Rat' that appears alongside other issues of *The 'Nam*. After being attacked by a nest of rats in a Viet Cong tunnel, Verzyl is traumatised. When his commanding officer tries to force him back into the tunnel to continue looking for VC soldiers, Verzyl shoots him and then enters a stage of extreme catatonia. This return to him in hospital, bound and silent, is the only other mention of this character in the series.

The chronotope of this story is geographically wide and temporally narrow. There is no indication of how much time passes but each shift in narrative is accompanied by a caption that suggests the events either occur simultaneously or occur one immediately after the other. Thus, the amount of time it takes the reader to construct the narrative is roughly the amount of time that the events of the narrative take. The temporal structure allows the reader to interact with the narrative on a temporal level – the reader moves through the narrative at the same speed as the action is happening. Conversely, the atypicality of this chronotope is disorienting. The reader is expected to jump from place to place, across a wide geographical distance, in the turn of a page, with no indication as to when this jump will occur. The thread of discussion that runs through each section is the only thing the reader has to tie the narrative together. This puts a strain on the reader, who has to construct a coherent narrative. Though this is the case in all comics, it is more pronounced in ‘Auld Acquaintance’, as the reader is forced to move through each section quickly and make the jump between sections as smoothly as possible in order to maintain the narrative, with very little assistance from the narrative itself.

The Intrusion of History

The first level of the chronotope relates to the text’s representation of history and how the chronotope ‘serves to assimilate real temporal (in the extreme, historical) reality’ into literary texts (Bakhtin, 1978: 493). This use of the chronotope makes it possible ‘to reflect and introduce into the artistic plane [...] substantial elements of historical reality’ (1978: 523). When an actual (historical) event is incorporated into a text it is chronotopic. As with the creation of the chronotope of Dresden mentioned previously, the inclusion of an event

marks it as a particular place in both space and time. However, even in texts which find their basis in historical events there is still an overarching fictionality to them. Though the supra-event is real, the minor events and activities of the text may not be.

There is a trend gathering momentum in artistic representations of conflict for including ‘actual’ information. That is to say that photographs or video footage of the event are spliced into the piece in an attempt to lend it an air of accuracy and historical credibility. A good example would be the recreation of Robert Capa’s photographs of the D-Day Landings in 1944 in the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*. There is an assumption that what the camera tells us is unvarnished truth. For the most part, when speaking of conflict photography, this is true, though it is important to add that very few photographs of conflict were completely un-posed prior to the Vietnam War, which marked the beginning of the war photographer as a ‘hands-off’ observer. That said, it is important to note here that claiming a photograph is a true and accurate record of an event is problematic. Roland Barthes discusses the relationship between connotation and denotation, arguing that in photography the two are distinct from each other (Barthes, 1977: 15-51); John Fiske claims succinctly, ‘denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed’ (1982: 91). Barthes writes:

Denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature (1974: 9).

Hence, the photograph that we take at face value as being an honest representation of a moment in time should, instead, be viewed as a representation of the event. However, the inclusion of photographs in comics does not necessarily consider this and instead uses the photographs to cement the comic’s narrative arc into a wider historical event.

Simone Weil (2003) attests that violence turns anyone subjected to it into a ‘thing’ – photography does the same (2003: 7); they capture an event, a person, a place and crystallise it into a single, consumable image. It is in part due to photography’s ability to encapsulate and crystallise that certain images of conflicts become ‘the image’ of that particular event. However, this is not a simple case of picking the ‘best’ or ‘favourite’ photograph. Sontag writes:

Photographs that everyone recognises are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas ‘memories’ [...]
What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.
(2004a: 76-77)

The locked-in picture becomes an icon: the uncaptioned image, endlessly repeated – a stand-alone representation of the event. Furthermore, it becomes a chronotope. The still image of a split-second of an event becomes, in that singular time and place, the event itself. Taking this into consideration, this chapter looks at two famous photographs and their subsequent comics representations: Richard Drew’s ‘The Falling Man’ (2001) and Eddie Adams’ ‘Saigon Execution’ (1968). It considers how each sits in relation to the chronotope and, furthermore, how each works as a chronotope in the wider narrative of the comic.

As a chronotope, ‘9/11’ is very narrow. Not only is the temporal aspect confined, even by its name, to one day (although the aftermath was not over so quickly) but the spatial aspect has also been narrowed, with many people forgetting that the events of 9/11 were not just those that occurred in downtown New York City, but also in Pennsylvania and Washington DC. Regardless, the chronotope of 9/11 does not take this into account and so it has become crystallised as the events of mid-morning in New York City on

September 11th 2001. Because of this, many of the most famous photographs of 9/11 are of events that happened during this narrow time-window.

There are twelve photographs in the series taken by Richard Drew that have been labelled ‘The Falling Man’ (2001). They were taken as the man fell from the upper floors of the North Tower. Though there is much speculation, he has never been officially identified. This photograph is one of the most hotly debated of all those taken on that day. *The New York Times* only printed the photograph once due to the barrage of complaints.⁶¹ The photographer himself noted that many people were commenting to him personally that they found the image ‘too disturbing’ (Drew, 2010).

The objections of the public on this image’s publication stem not only from concern for the victim’s family but also a concern for themselves. Several thousand people were in the towers at the time of the impact; several million people were in New York City. For the residents of New York and the US, this photograph is a threat of what could happen, what might happen. The objections, then, were an objection to a glimpse at a possible, devastating future through an image of a definite and traumatising present. There are many references to the ‘Falling Man’ throughout *American Widow*. Torres includes a full-page representation of the photograph (2008: 197). However, she picks one of the less well-known photographs of the series, where the man is not falling against a backdrop of the building.

⁶¹According to *The New York Times* archives in 2003.

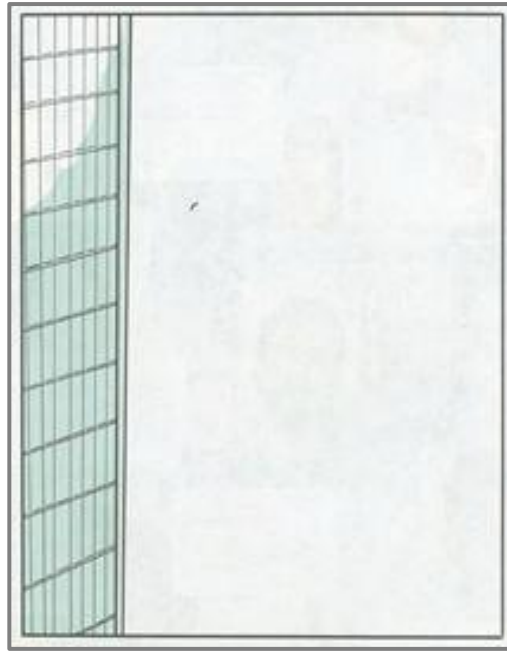


Fig.5.2 – From *American Widow*, Alissa Torres, 2008.p 197. Image used with permission of the author.

That she chooses to show the figure as a tiny and barely perceptible mark on an otherwise mostly empty page is visually startling. The expanse of white space is vast and void-like, the tiny figure falling parallel to a very basic drawing of a building. The lack of visual information on the page draws the eye to the figure, despite the size, as it appears at first to be a smudge on the page. It is only upon realisation of what the mark represents that we understand that this is a rendering of Drew's photograph. This page is not presented as a bleed. Instead, it is kept constrained within a frame to emphasise the photographic nature of the moment paused in time (and, as a chronotope, time-space).

Soon after the event, Torres believed her husband to have jumped. She writes 'you said, "Fuck it, I'm out of here". And that was that' (2008: 46). However, at no point does the text substantiate this claim. That said, it is a recurring motif throughout, coming to represent the tragedy of the event and the desperate decisions that had to be made: to jump or not to jump. On the page before the 'Falling Man' image, Torres writes, 'The Medical Examiner said it took you eighteen seconds to fall. What were you thinking?'(2008: 196).

This is a complex comment. Is the Medical Examiner definitely talking about Eddie or is he speaking in general? When Torres asks ‘what were you thinking’, is she meaning it in the sense of ‘what on earth was going through your head to make you do that?’ Or, more literally, ‘what was going through your mind as you fell?’ The meaning remains ambiguous. Torres’ use of ‘The Falling Man’ in the text resonates with what Jonathan Safran Foer says when he talks of the photograph as representing ‘a twenty-first century Tomb of the Unknown Soldier’ (2007: 153). The photograph has become an icon for grieving families. Regardless of whether Eddie is the Falling Man or not, the inclusion of the image in *American Widow* is further testimony to the permeation of this image in the visual memory of 9/11. Furthermore, it keeps the chronotope of 9/11 firmly centred on this one place and this one time.

Unlike the chronotope of 9/11, which is concentrated on the tight and narrow area of sixteen acres and several hours, the chronotope of the Vietnam War is wider, although temporally difficult to define, due to the transition period in the mid-1950s, during which the French forces left (signalling the end of the First Indochina War) and American forces moved in. That said, the official dates of the Vietnam War are accepted as 1st November 1955 to 30th April 1975. The spatial boundaries of the conflict do not entirely correspond to the name, as the conflict spread into Laos and Cambodia. This aside, the spatial and temporal parameters of the Vietnam chronotope are considerably wider than that of 9/11.

The lack of posed Vietnam War photographs has been discussed previously. It is entirely true that very few were posed by the photographer but there are other people capable of setting up a shot, aside from the person behind the camera. Eddie Adams’ world famous (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) photograph ‘Saigon Execution’, taken in February 1968, shows the chief of the South Vietnamese national police, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, shooting a Vietcong suspect in a street in Saigon. We do not doubt the un-

staged nature of this image. However, ‘it was staged – by General Loan, who had led the prisoner out to the street where journalists had gathered; he would not have carried out the summary execution there had they not been available to witness it’ (Sontag, 2004a: 53).

Adams’ photograph captures the moment of the impact of the bullet at point blank range. The prisoner’s face is turned to the side in a grimace but he has not yet begun to fall. The General’s arm is still outstretched. Of this, his most famous photograph, Adams is recorded as saying:

They walked down to the street corner. We were taking pictures. He turned out to be a Viet Cong lieutenant. And out of nowhere came this guy [General Loan] who we didn’t know. I was about five feet away and he pulled out his pistol, shot him [the VC prisoner] in the head and walked by us and said, “They killed many of my men and many of our people.” I kept making pictures. (Adams, 1969)

This photograph became one of the most important images of the Anti-War Movement, adopted as a representation of the excesses and injustices of war, although Adams disagrees with this, stating that it is more accurately a representation of the unfathomable decisions one is required to make during wartime.

The 'Nam is careful to follow a rigid temporal structure which mimics the standard US Army tour of duty. This allows the writers of the series to place the characters into actual historical events without causing disruption to the comic’s timescale (provided the characters do not try to intervene). This gives the creative team more flexibility as to what they can include in terms of actual landmark events throughout the conflict. Hence, in issue 24, the story arc involves the Tet Offensive and the moment of Adams’ photograph. The issue ends with a full-page image (Murray and Golden, 2011: 93).

The image fills an entire page but is not presented as a bleed, as we also saw with Torres’ representation of ‘Falling Man’. This is a double-frame image – two images

presented one inside the other. The camera lens serves as an inner frame for the restaging of Adams' photograph, reflected in vivid colour. This is a major change from the original, which is presented in black and white. The bold colours here are typical of the mainstream style to which *The 'Nam* vigorously subscribes. The outer frame shows the camera itself being held by, we assume, Adams, though we see little of his face. The image appears cramped, as both hands are visible, holding the camera tightly. Adams' mouth is open as he speaks, suggesting an expression of shock. The name of the camera brand is clearly displayed, not only for realism's sake (the brand would be visible on the camera, of course) but also to remind us that without technology pioneered by Leica this type of photo-journalism would not be possible.



Fig. 5.3 – From 'Beginning of the End', *The 'Nam*, Doug Murray and Mike Golden, 2011. p 93. Image used with permission of Marvel Entertainment LLC.

The speech bubble in this frame gives rise to questions of terminology. Adams shouts, ‘Holy..! Suu, keep shooting! Just keep shooting!’⁶² But is it to Suu that Adams aims the command to ‘keep shooting’? ‘Shoot’ as a photographic term is first noted in the 1890s (OED, 2012). This is the same time that another firearms term, ‘snap shot’, also entered photographic discourse. The movement of these two terms from one distinct discourse to another may be coincidental but it does show an awareness of the camera’s ability to take something of its target, as a weapon might. If we read this the other way and suggest that Adams is not talking to Suu but to General Loan, then the words have a decidedly different meaning. Shooting a prisoner makes for good photographs – award-winning ones in Adams’ case. To quote a popular maxim of the American press: ‘if it bleeds, it leads’. The image and the speech give no indication as to which reading is intended. It is for the reader to decide for themselves.

The use of the double-frame is not common in comics. This format shifts the reader’s focus. We are not only watching the events take place but we are also watching the watchers; not only are we given the action, but also the reaction. For a readership which was not present at this event, the shifting focus allows us to understand the position of the observers: Adams is evidently shocked and fascinated by this event – the reader is prompted to feel likewise. However, there is also an aspect of meta-narrative here. The reader is reminded, through the frame of the camera’s lens, that what we are seeing is mediated by someone: in the case of this image, by Adams; in the case of the wider text, by Murray and Golden. Not only are we given unique insight that draws us towards the traumatic experience captured here on film and paper but we are also pushed away with a coarse shove as we are reminded of the mediated nature of everything we see. The issue of

⁶² ‘Suu’ is in reference to Vo Suu, a fellow photographer.

mediation and relationships between representational levels is taken up in the final chapter of this thesis as part of a wider discussion of postmodernism.

This image is metaleptical. Metalepsis involves the interplay of many narrative levels and the double-frame allows for this to occur. If Adams is the creator of the image-event then he sits at the extradiegetic level, in the position of the image's narrator. This is attested to by the fact that Adams' hands and camera frame the image as a whole and thus create the double-frame within the hyperframe. The image-event itself – the action within the narrative – exists at the metadiegetic level. Adams, as photographer, is creating the story, choosing how to frame it and take it at the precise moment of his choice. The photograph itself, as encapsulated in the camera's lens, is the story being told. The collision of extradiegetic and metadiegetic narratives creates metalepsis.

The temporal aspect of this photograph's chronotope is narrow – only the split second of the camera shutter's movement to capture the image – and this in turn narrows the spatial aspect. However, the overarching chronotope of Vietnam encompasses a broad spatio-temporal area and this photograph does not condense it. What it does do, however, is to allow an actual and intensely iconic event to act as a foothold for readers, rooting the text in its historical context and giving validation to the historical accuracy of the rest of the text. Thus, the inclusion of this photograph has a different function within the whole text to Torres' representation of 'Falling Man'. Whereas Torres' personal history – and the unknown final acts of her husband – are inextricably tied to the photograph, 'Saigon Execution' ties a whole cast of characters to a conflict, though not necessarily to the event photographed.

A photograph relies on an audience – one does not typically take a photograph of something and then hide it away. The displaying of a photograph in a public place (be it a

physical display in an exhibition or a reproduction in the media) moves the image into the public sphere. An event that had previously been viewed by a limited number of people can be (almost instantly) viewed by millions of people internationally, despite their having little or no direct link to the photographed event or person whatsoever. In this respect, a photograph can act as a bridge between the public and private spheres. What is, at its basic level, a photograph of a man being shot becomes representative, in the act of viewing, of a much wider conflict. In these representations of conflict, traumatic temporality, which can be both fractured and frozen, unites all viewers in the frozen moment of the photograph; time becomes collective and connects.

This creation of a collective traumatic time is not strictly metaleptical. Though the image-narrative begins to exist on a separate narrative level to the event itself by the fact it becomes a representative image of a much wider event, the collective trauma that arises from it pauses time. Temporality becomes both cohesive and coagulated. The image is a freeze-frame of the event. In this respect, photographic representations of conflict span the public and private spheres to create a traumatic chronotope that is, paradoxically, both sticky and fractured, disconnecting and reconnecting.

Invasion of the Superheroes

Moving away from the textual temporal relationships that are contained within tiers and hyperpanels, there is a wider issue at hand that comes into question when reading mainstream comics, especially superhero narratives. How can superheroes be involved in historical events, especially war and conflict, when their super powers would surely guarantee that their 'side' achieves an unequivocal victory? It is a recurring theme

throughout the mainstream comics universes that superheroes are unable to intervene in actual historical events: ‘generally serialised comic books (and superhero comics especially) are predicated upon the exclusion of history in the sense that characters cannot directly intervene in history’ (Cooper and Atkinson, 2008: 60).

Though the superhero genre has experienced a healthy and stable popularity since the resurgence of the genre in the 1970s, since 2001 this popularity has increased greatly. DC and Marvel combined are worth an estimated \$400 million (Hughes, 2013: online). For many, this rise in popularity since 2001 (or, more specifically, since 9/11) signals a desire for escapism and safety, epitomising the ‘need of the “average” American to escape from the very real horrors of international unrest and terrorism whose epic moment was 9/11’ (Roberts, 2004: 211). For others, the repetition of widespread urban destruction in post-9/11 mainstream comics and filmic adaptations suggests a desire to recreate the events in a medium that gives us control: ‘this time, the terrorists don’t win’ (Smith and Goodrum, 2011: 488). In Freudian terms, what happens here is that shock – that which is uncontrollable and uncontrolled – is replaced with anticipatory fear – that which is controllable (Freud and Breuer, 2000: 57). The ability to be in command of the events of the narrative, despite what we know to be the ‘true’ ending, gives back the control that is lost in the shock of a traumatic rupture.

There is an issue of cultural saturation at hand here. American popular culture is so deeply imbued with superheroes that they have become a cultural staple. It goes without saying that the superheroes will save the day at the end of mainstream comics, though there will undoubtedly be perilous obstacles to overcome first. It is expected that there will be a superhero come to the rescue. As such, this desire for a hero has (understandably) filtered into the cultural imagination. The fact that this is wholly unlikely is an unpleasant shock. This is not to suggest that Western society (and America in particular) is naïve enough to

think that Superman is a real person, who will save the day. Rather, the lack of this level of altruistic heroism in typical everyday life is a rude awakening to a society which has constructed great narratives around these very qualities. Thus, the desire to replace shock with anticipatory fear cannot occur in reality because the situations that would allow this to happen (the arrival of a superhero) do not exist.

In 1990, in an attempt to boost dwindling sales, *The 'Nam* introduced the Marvel superhero The Punisher for two issues in a story arc entitled 'The Punisher invades The 'Nam', which was reborn for a three-issue arc in 1992. These three issues follow a flashback of Frank Castle (alias Castiglione) and his tour of Vietnam. The Punisher was enjoying a brief burst of popularity and it was thought that this cross-over would draw current Punisher fans to the series. The choice of this particular character was based on more than just current sales figures. Castle's character is a classic anti-hero. Following the mob-ordered murder of his wife and children, Castle, a Marine and Vietnam veteran, becomes a vigilante, employing both war weaponry and martial arts training to apprehend his targets (Dougall, 2009). It is Castle's military background that seems the most obvious reason for his selection for *The 'Nam*. However, a character who remorselessly punishes the 'enemy' and acts only 'for the good' (in this case, the American military) adds a dimension of revenge upon the VC and NVA that would be absent in interactions with other characters.

When it was first conceived, *The 'Nam* was carefully constructed to work alongside actual historical events and typical army tour chronology. The addition of the Punisher skews this attempt at a realistic chronology. Even though Castle is not a 'super' hero, as he has no superpowers, his extremely high pain tolerance and skill in armed and unarmed combat removes him from the ranks of the ordinary soldier. In the first story arc, Castle is sent on a one-man mission to kill a VC sniper called 'The Monkey', a feat he manages to

accomplish with very little problem. This is in direct contrast to the rest of the arcs in *The 'Nam*, which, if not representing actual military manoeuvres, depict plausible scenarios. Thus, not only does the inclusion of the Punisher affect the temporal structure of *The 'Nam* by the fact that he is a (semi) superhero, but it also affects the realistic nature of the narrative and the continuity therein.

'The Punisher invades The 'Nam' is not the only interaction of mainstream Marvel characters with the series. While the Punisher's story arcs detract from the series' continuity, the involvement of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor in Issue 41 ('Back in the Real World') does not. Rather, these characters exist on a different narrative level, being part of a 'what if' daydream by a character who has been reading comic books. Iceman, a well-respected Sergeant, is packing to leave Vietnam at the end of his fourth tour and finds a stack of comics belonging to Private Aeder.⁶³ Iceman imagines that Thor disrupts a VC ambush by altering the weather, Captain America uses his shield to destroy a bomb at the American Embassy and Iron Man blows up two missiles before they hit two American planes. Following this, the three capture Ho Chi Minh from a rally in Hanoi and take him to Paris to negotiate. Iceman and a fellow soldier, Martini, laugh about this, saying 'That's the way wars should be fought!' (Murray et al, 1990: 19). However, the men make it clear that they are aware of the fictional nature of these daydreams and the complete inability of superheroes to exist, let alone intervene. They are considered as amusing 'what if' scenarios, suitable for escapism and entertainment alone.

In the case of 'Back in the Real World' the inclusion of superhero intervention is not simply for the purposes of entertainment. The responses of the soldiers – that war is not how popular media displays it and superheroes could not exist in war because then there would not be war – stands as testament to what Eco discusses in his essay when he writes

⁶³ Aeder was an eighteen-year-old Private who was most often shown reading comics. He died in Issue 31.

that superheroes would win the war outright and so cannot be put into war situations in any realistic sense. Keeping the superheroes within the realm of the fantastical maintains the realism of *The 'Nam*. It also allows the series to work in the opposite way to superhero narratives. By removing the events which allow shock to become anticipatory fear, it allows the narrative to remain as realistic as possible. By removing any chance of a typical mainstream conclusion, the reader must move through the text with the same level of unknowing and uncertainty as the characters.

Keeping superheroes from intervening allows the badge of heroism to fall on the characters that we as readers recognise as real and deserving of it. The final panel of the issue shows Iceman's helicopter leaving Vietnam, while his two colleagues wave him off and the heads of the three superheroes are in the background. The message of this panel is unambiguous – real heroes do not wear capes and are imbued with a modesty that removes the self-importance that is often characteristic of many superheroes. The several hundred short comics collected into anthologies to raise money for 9/11 charities take this issue of heroism and 'superheroism' in a similar direction. 'Unreal' (Seagle, Rouleau and Sowd, 2002: 15-16) uses Superman to illustrate the fact that 'the apparent failure on the part of superheroes is diverted [...] by endowing non-superheroes with superhero-like qualities' (Smith and Goodrum, 2011: 495). It is the rebranding of heroes that we see in 'Unreal' that becomes the overarching aim of these four publications. The ultimate heroes – the men of tomorrow with superhuman ability and incredible gadgetry – are rendered powerless. Their place is taken by what Joe Kubert describes as 'ordinary men and women engaging in extra-ordinary acts of heroism' (2002: 214). In a text that aims to make heroes of 'mere mortals' the powers of superheroes *must* be removed. There is no way that ordinary people can compete with superhuman abilities. However, '[superheroes]' status is diminished by the heroism of people who do not possess superhuman powers and whose efforts therefore

have to be ranked more highly' (Heinze, 2007). Tim Sale's one-page comic reworks the 'superhero in a telephone booth' cliché to place the power in the hands of the New York Fire Department (Sale, 2002: 70). A young boy changes from a Superman t-shirt to one bearing the acronym 'FDNY'. Of this, Cooper and Atkinson write: 'The transformation is complete with the readers accepting the movement from the mythic figure of the superhero to the localized fire fighter' (2008: 71).

In these comics we see that superheroes cannot save the day even if they wished to as the flexible temporal scheme of the mainstream comics universes does not comfortably allow for the inclusion of historical accuracy. However, superheroes are not completely defunct by this rendering. In *New Avengers*, Cap is scathingly referred to as 'the soldier – the man out of time' (Bendis and Djurdjevic, 2010). This is a reference to the fact that he had spent the previous 60 years frozen in the depths of the ocean. However, it also makes a wider comment on the position of both soldiers and superheroes. Speaking of Cap as a soldier and, to use Kurt Vonnegut's term, a man 'unstuck in time' with no temporal home, he is a man whose importance is not bound to any one period in history. If the need for soldiers is not time-bound then we will always need them. This statement becomes a comment on the perpetual nature of man's involvement in conflict.

The 9/11 Charity Comics make clear the point that the input of superheroes is limited to witnessing the events. In one comic, Superman's dog, Krypto, shares his water bowl with some police rescue dogs (Loeb, Pacheco and Meriño, 2002). As Umberto Eco suggests, to incorporate historical events into the narrative universe of superheroes imposes great limitations; so much of the superhero universe is written and rewritten in different ways but it is not possible to do this with actual events (Eco, 1997:123). Thus, the superhero can only be a witness; he cannot participate because that would potentially change the course of events. We have seen many times that Superman is able to redirect

massive objects using only his superhuman strength so why not a plane en route to New York? Instead, 'the act of witnessing is the only form of action' open to these characters (Cooper and Atkinson, 2008: 69). This inability of superheroes to act in times of conflict is to be expected, given the temporal guidelines that govern their intervention. If they were able to intervene then this would remove any sense of realism. For *The 'Nam*, this would affect the entire creative ethos of the series. For the post-9/11 comics, it would mean that the 'real heroes' lost their position as superheroes took over. In both cases, it would mean that the events of the comic would be altered in such a way as to allow anticipatory fear to create a safe, controllable narrative. This would neither be accurate, nor a viable representation of a traumatic experience.

For Art Spiegelman, one of the key aspects of comics is

the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed. In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present – one does not displace the other the way it happens in film. (Spiegelman, 2011a: 165)

Comics, then, is a form in which time cannot move in typical chronological patterns by the very nature of its form. Whereas in film the viewer sees one period of time at once, in comics the reader can see all panels on the page (or double page spread) at a glance. This fact alone alters the way in which comics as a form works on a temporal level. Spiegelman goes on to define comics as 'an essentialised form of diagramming a narrative movement through time' (2011a: 168). This definition speaks to the reduction that goes into the creation of each narrative arc and each panel, the selection and construction of each moment and its relationship to those around it. Applying the filter of traumatic representation to a form with an already atypical relationship to time exacerbates the

existing temporal issues. As this chapter discusses, issues of temporality and personal chronology are crucial factors in the development of a traumatic neurosis. For many sufferers of a traumatic rupture the chronological disruption is the most debilitating and obvious of the symptoms that are experienced. This disruption is also one of the easiest to represent in the comics form, due to the comics form's grammatical thread – the transitions and movement of time across the gutters. The recreation of the trauma is heavily reliant on the fact that so much of the construction of the narrative's chronology is dependent on the reader.

Chapter Six

Postmodernism vs. Comics and Trauma

Moe: It's po-mo! Post-modern! Yeah, all right, weird for the sake of weird.
Groening et al., *The Simpsons* (2001)

The previous chapter discussed the issue of time in relation to both comics and trauma; the relationship between the three is complex. Symptoms involving temporal disruption and distortion are central to the presentation of trauma in an individual. The inability to assimilate a traumatic event into normal memory affects the way the individual processes that period of *time* and it is this break with normal functioning that creates the symptoms of trauma that relate to their understanding of time and temporality. Often it is these symptoms that are the most obvious and destabilising. The ability to manipulate time is unique to the comics form. This chapter reconsiders time, trauma and comics in the light of postmodernism. This discussion calls on the work of several key postmodern theorists, especially Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. It considers the issue of history and its relationship to trauma in general, as well as traumatic representation in comics. Prior to this, however, it is necessary to give some consideration to the question of whether comics can be seen as a postmodernist form.

The introduction to this thesis argued that comics can usefully be seen as a modernist art form. The importance of panelisation and aspectival viewing, which is central to modernist art, especially Cubism, is equally important for comics. That a comics reading of *Guernica* is possible gives weight to my suggestion. However, many of the features of comics time discussed in Chapter 5 appear to have more in common with the temporal issues typically found in postmodernist art, especially in relation to non-linear postmodern chronology and complex hermeneutic codes. The question, then, is whether we can claim comics as modernist rather than postmodernist. The problem is further compounded when we consider that many of the traits fundamental to the comics form are also found in postmodernist literature. For example, Chapters 2 and 5 discussed the importance of the material comic book in narrative development. This is not unique to comics; a body of literature known as ergodic literature shares this relationship between material form and narrative. Espen Aarseth writes:

In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be non-ergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.
(1997: 1-2)

B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) are two of the most well-known texts of this type. *The Unfortunates* is presented as twenty-seven unbound sections in a laminated box; only the first and last chapters are so labelled. The reader may read the remaining twenty-five sections in any order. Similarly, *House of Leaves* is a sprawling work of ergodic literature, containing a huge amount of footnotes (many of which contain further footnotes) that force the reader to decide how they move, quite literally, through the pages. This text also uses different colours for certain words

(blue for 'house', for example) and references to certain characters; different fonts are used to differentiate between characters. It is for the reader to decide how to interpret these aspects of the text and how much importance to place on them in relation to the creation of narrative movement. Considering the demands ergodic literature places on the reader and the range of devices used in its creation, it is easy to categorise this as a subset of postmodernism. However, these devices and the participation of the reader are not unusual for comics. Therefore, is comics a postmodernist form because it works in a similar way to postmodern literature? An affirmative answer could be found in the fact that comics reject the distinction of high and low culture. Fredric Jameson writes that a key feature of postmodernism is 'the effacement of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture' (1998: 2). However, before answering this question, let us to consider the relationship between modernism and postmodernism.

In terms of the words themselves, the prefix 'post' is confusing. It is evident that postmodernism identifies itself as something that is "not modernism" but the actual meaning of the prefix is ambiguous.⁶⁴ This ambiguity immediately signals the complexity of the relationship between the two. In his 1971 work *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Ihab Hassan presents the differences between modernism and postmodernism in a table. The opposites presented appear to present a clearly defined line between the two but underneath the table Hassan writes, 'the dichotomies this table represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer. Even collapse; concepts in one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions, in both modernism and postmodernism, abound' (1971: 269). Hassan is aware of the difficulty – indeed, impossibility – of creating

⁶⁴ Various interpretations include postmodernism as the result, aftermath, development, denial or rejection of modernism (Appignanesi and Garratt, 2006: 4).

a list of binary opposites between modernism and postmodernism because they are not clear opposites but share many bonds. It is précised the table to include four pairs.

Modernism	Postmodernism
Purpose	Play
Distance	Participation
Creation	Deconstruction
Paranoia	Schizophrenia

Fig. 6.1 – Précised from *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Ihab Hassan, 1971.p 269.

These four aspects of the table show the extent to which the modernism/postmodernism divide is by no means as clean as one may first think. The comics form is invested in both play and participation – the participation of readers is of utmost importance to the form and there is a distinct playfulness inherent in many of the tricks of narrative construction; reader and writer are involved in a game of sorts. Furthermore, if we consider high modernism’s rejection of popular art forms (playful art, if you will) then comics are clearly excluded. However, this depends on a particular (narrow) reading of modernism to which this thesis does not subscribe. The binary opposition that Hassan sets up between paranoia and schizophrenia is the most difficult to consider in the table because, especially in the light of trauma, they are not opposites but two facets of one phenomena. The notion that the relationship between modernism and postmodernism involves continuities –in particular the idea that postmodernism belongs to the history of modernism – is very familiar from earlier theoretical discussions of the subject, especially those put forward by Linda Hutcheon and Jean-François Lyotard.

For Hutcheon, ‘postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism’ (1989: 88). Here we have both ends of the spectrum represented. In describing

the opposition of postmodernism to modernism as ‘oedipal’ Hutcheon references Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus myth (and subsequent development of the Oedipus complex) and the apparent desire of the son to usurp the father’s position, while understanding that this is not possible, instead viewing the father as a rival and object of jealousy. The modernist father, then, is placed as the binary opposite to the jealous postmodernist son who develops ways of distancing itself from the father; at the same time the postmodernist son remains faithful to the father and maintains the relationship between them. Thus in this one relationship we can see continuation – as in the preoccupation with aspectival viewing – and opposition – as in high modernism’s rejection of popular art and postmodernism’s embracing of it.

Hutcheon’s concept of the dual nature of the modernism/postmodernism relationship echoes Lyotard’s essay ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’ where he writes, ‘[postmodernism] is undoubtedly a part of the modern’ (1991: 79). Lyotard does not see postmodernism as a separate entity at all but as something that can emerge within the modern at any time, as a natural reaction to modernism. He writes:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (1991: 81)

What is central to Lyotard’s understanding of the postmodern is that it has not broken away from the modern (and does not necessarily desire to) but moves beyond what is ‘good’ and known solely for the purposes of creating new methods of representation in order to demonstrate, paradoxically, the unrepresentable. Hutcheon and Lyotard’s works create a description of postmodernism that allows comics to remain closely affiliated to

modernism while still acknowledging the relationship between aspects of the form and aspects of postmodernism. However, though it is my contention that comics has a stronger relationship to modernism, there are texts within the arena of comics that break with the basic practices of the form in a way that could allow them to be called ‘postmodern comics’. In the introduction to a collective comic *Le Coup de Grâce* the authors write: ‘We long for startling transitions, improbable links, new kinds of narrative associations. We find conventional narrative functions boring and stifling [...] Meaning does not lie in clarification’ (2006: ii). These comics seek to push boundaries in a similar way to postmodern literature; though this would be cause to call these ‘postmodern comics’, the issue of linkage and deconstruction prevents this categorisation from being clear cut – a comic that does not subscribe to the basic rules of transitions will be difficult, if not impossible, to read. However, ‘this new kind of comic art disrupts the expectations and habits of readers of traditional comics’ (Groensteen, 2013: 31).⁶⁵ The clearest example of this new and experimental comic art is best seen in Chris Ware’s 2012 *Building Stories*, a comic presented as fourteen individual pieces in a box that the reader quite literally constructs for themselves. Groensteen suggests that new ways of thinking about comics has produced heightened awareness that ‘[it] is not ontologically destined only to perpetuate a canonical model dominated by the categories of narration and legibility, but that its constituent features – the association of text and image, the spatio-topical apparatus for the display of images – lend themselves to the exploration of new forms, new configurations, new ambitions’ (2013: 31).

Though it is often the case that that which is new and innovative is automatically labelled as ‘postmodern’, this can be a misnomer. That said, we could easily see the break with CCA guidelines (c.1970s) and the move beyond ‘house styles’ as similar to Lyotard’s

⁶⁵ The word that is translated as ‘traditional’ is ‘BD’ – a term used as equivalent to ‘mainstream’ in the Franco-Belgian tradition.

denial of the ‘solace of good forms’. Comics can be most clearly seen as postmodern through the lens of Lyotardian postmodernism, which does not deny the relationship with modernism, while also moving beyond the more constricting aspects of it.

Before moving onto discussions of time, it is essential to draw attention to a short comment in Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that raises a number of questions, especially in relation to the theme and scope of this thesis. He writes that Vietnam was the ‘first terrible postmodernist war’ (1991: 44). Though this statement receives no explanation from Jameson, many critics have speculated on what he may have meant. Michael Bibby writes:

to modify the war as “postmodernist” implies that the war is yet another phenomenon of postmodernity. The war, in this sense, is read as exhibiting the traits of a general historical, cultural condition already identifiable. If we can attach a qualification to the name of the war, it must be because that which qualifies it supersedes it, gives it shape, definition, morphological precision. (1999: 148)

It is necessary for me, at this point, to briefly mention the difference between postmodernity and postmodernism. The former refers to the social condition that became prevalent in the 1950s and in which we have been, according to some thinkers, ever seen. Antony Giddens suggests that postmodernity is the social and historical period out of which grows the second term, postmodernism (1990: 4). Postmodernism is the cultural phenomenon – the artistic, literary and political movement – that results from postmodernity. It is the cultural output of the late twentieth century. As Lucas Carpenter observes, the postmodernist lens is applied to the war, and specifically the literature it spawned (2003: 31). He writes, ‘some writers [...] tried to accommodate Vietnam within the realistic-naturalistic, “war is hell” model of the American war novel [...] while others

realised that Vietnam demanded a very different kind of narrative paradigm' (2003: 31-2). As mentioned the introduction to this thesis, Vietnam marked a profound shift in the literature, film and (perhaps most importantly) journalism of war.⁶⁶ While many of the narratives of Vietnam exhibit traits that would lead to their categorisation as postmodernist, these traits are also found in narratives of trauma. The coming together of postmodernism and the shift in war experience after Vietnam was fortuitous; the similarities between traumatic representative techniques and postmodernist techniques make the two forms difficult to distinguish. Some critics suggest that trauma literature is a decidedly post-Vietnam form, especially Ruth Leys in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2010). If we consider that Jameson's statement refers not to the presentation but the experience of the Vietnam War, then this opens up the war beyond the art it produced. Taking a Lyotardian position, Carpenter states that Vietnam 'squashes whatever remains of the Western metanarrative of history that accommodates war as a possible inevitable form of primal human collective behaviour' (2003:32). Indeed, for Carpenter, Vietnam was instrumental in giving rise to postmodernism as it was a 'chaotic quagmire with no clear boundaries and no easily identified enemy' (2003: 35). By this reckoning, 'postmodern' is a label that can be given to certain kinds of experience that exist outside of a comfortable Manichean paradigm and rework the metanarratives through which we view the world and categorise our experiences; this is a category which includes trauma. Moreover, this is a way of considering postmodernist experience that is not dependent on any one historical time. Typically we claim that postmodernism 'began' sometime after the Second World War and is still in operation in the twenty-first century. Thinking of postmodernism as

⁶⁶ In his 1982 article on the Vietnam War, Michael Mandelbaum boldly states that 'The Vietnam War was the first to be televised' (1982: 157). *Dispatches*, Michael Herr's 1977 memoir of his time as a war correspondent in Vietnam, gives detailed descriptions of soldiers playing up to television crews, suggesting that the Vietnam War was not only televised but also manipulated by its televised status. Some critics think that 9/11 marks another shift in representation, especially due to the development of the internet and its shift in methods of news transmission and consumption.

something that is not time-bound, suggests that any experience that fits the criteria given above can be considered a postmodernist experience. We could include in this any number of wars, genocides and revolutions, going back, perhaps, to Malory, Beowulf or even Homer. The postmodernist experience, one that has moved beyond the constraints of modernism while not fully severing the relationship, is very close to the experience of a traumatic rupture and it is in this close relationship that we see the links between trauma and postmodernism most clearly. Thus, the three concepts of this chapter – comics, postmodernism, and trauma – are certainly linked but the triangular relationship is a complex one. The key to their linkage is time.

The previous chapter was an extended discussion of the importance of time to the basic mechanism of comics and the disrupted temporality usually occurring in traumatic ruptures. Postmodernism has a tempestuous relationship with time for many reasons, one of which I mentioned previously in its ability to be a (roughly) time-bound concept and also one that is not governed by its historical position at all. Jameson uses the case study of E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime* to consider the particular way in which postmodernism attempts to represent both time and history. He describes the specific declarative sentence structure that Doctorow favours but states that the effect is not really one of the condescending simplification of children's literature, but rather something more disturbing, 'the sense of some profound subterranean violence done to American English, which cannot, however, be detected empirically in any of the perfectly grammatical sentences with which this work is formed' (1991: 24).

Doctorow, according to Jameson, attempts to construct a tense that does not exist in English – a specifically verbal past tense – 'whose perfective movement [...] serves to separate events from the present of enunciation and to transform the stream of time and action into so many finished, complete, and isolated punctual event objects which find

themselves sundered from any present situation' (1991: 24). This tense causes time to clot in a similar way to the clotted temporality seen in traumatic ruptures.⁶⁷ More crucially, though, Jameson claims that *Ragtime* is a clear example of how 'the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past [...] We are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach' (1991: 25).

The stagnation of time and therefore history that we see in *Ragtime* becomes an excellent example of Jameson's central postmodernist concern of 'historical deafness' – the inability (or unwillingness) to think historically. Postmodernism's denial of metanarrative and the theories of 'wholeness' that were important to modernism leaves theorists to make sense of the present age but without the tools and structures that once governed critical thought. Jameson suggests that this 'depthlessness [leads to] a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality' (1991: 6). He considers the breakdown of temporal consciousness and the signifying chain in relation to Lacanian understandings of Schizophrenia, writing, 'Lacan describes Schizophrenia as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or meaning [...] Schizophrenia is a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers' (Jameson, 1991: 26).

The Schizophrenic, rather like the postmodernist, 'is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers [...] a series of pure and unrelated presents in time' (1991: 27). The postmodernist loss of historicity and historical consciousness resembles schizophrenic detachment. What remains is a complete disconnection from our history; to attempt to root ourselves leads to the realisation that images and icons are endlessly referential: 'Absolute

⁶⁷And also Bakhtin's chronotope of *Madame Bovary* – time that oozes and clots in space. See Chapter 5.

and absolutely random pluralism [...] a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems' (Jameson, 1991: 372). Each element is a free-floating image, with no meaning beyond itself.

The key to the signifying chain is not the links themselves but the linkage – that which binds each link to the overall chain. The content of the chain may not have been changed significantly (or at all) by the condition of postmodernism; it is a change in the glue that binds them. Jameson's postmodernism would see the chain dissolved completely into individual signifying units and trauma works the same way, especially if we consider Herman's contention that trauma is the 'intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context' (1992: 38). We can suggest that each image that forms part of the traumatic memory correlates to a single link within the signifying chain and, in a traumatised mind, each link is to a great extent left single and floating without reference. If the aim of healing a traumatic rupture is to reconnect the floating signifiers of the traumatic event and thus provide understanding and assimilation into the conscious mind, then the aim of the trauma artist – to create a piece of art that represents and to some extent reproduces the traumatic event – is congruent. However, in reconnecting divided signifiers, we are doing something to postmodernism. Attempting to reassemble fragmented experience and reverse temporal dislocation might be said to resist the postmodernism which typically accepts that this recreation is not possible. The aim of both healing and trauma art is to rebuild fragmented experience; in relation to postmodernism this is closer to the return of a modernist search for the ultimate reference point. Timothy Lustig and James Peacock summarise the apparent relationship between postmodernism and trauma:

the influence of postmodernism might also do something to explain a feeling that 'trauma' has recently become a less compelling topic for writers and critics alike because it carries certain implications about human subjectivity and wholeness which are incompatible with a postmodern take on selves variously described as fractured, plural, elusive, performative or

provisional. Recovered memories, traumas overcome or ‘cured’ by catharsis and therapy connote a view of individual sovereignty increasingly open to question. (2013: 9)

Though a traumatic rupture may be a postmodernist experience, the healing and artistic process is not. In line with a modernist attempt to reconnect brokenness – an endeavour that is usually futile – the artistic process depends on at the very least an attempt to reconcile schizophrenic signifiers.

Groensteen’s arthrology is an essential concept for consideration in the light of the breakdown and recreation of the chains of signification that occurs in the creation of traumatic art. Groensteen states: ‘demonstrating that meaning is inherent to the image is not something that directly speaks to comics, since it is between the panels that the pertinent contextual rapports establish themselves’ (2007: 107). The signifying chain is thus of utmost importance. The point can be seen further in the claim from Aron Varga Kibedi that comics is a form whose narrative creation is dependent on ‘the juxtaposition of images to generate narrative’ (1989: 96). Postmodernist breakdown of signification would undermine the basic functioning of the comics form.⁶⁸

It is possible to view the comics form from a reverse angle – to say that it is not primarily a connected form, but primarily a broken one. Pierre Mason calls comics ‘the stuttering art’ in reference to the brokenness of the form and the repetition of images that makes narrative construction possible (1985: 72). Mason’s comment implies that comics can be seen as broken first and connected second, rather than, as is more common, the other way round. In this respect, then, the postmodernist insistence on the death of unity and wholeness is the starting point of the comics form, which then moves beyond this to synthesise unity within the form through the reader and the use of transitional movement.

⁶⁸However, this is not to say that postmodernist techniques are not seen in comics at all, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Whether or not the objective is achieved is dependent in large part on the reader. Reading becomes 'more like a deliberate act than a reflex activity' (Peeters and Samson, 2010: 125). As the comics reader has, by the very nature of the form, a considerable input in the creation of the narrative flow, the narrative and meaning construed therein may differ from person to person. We see in this the creation of a readership that is akin to the reader Barthes desires in 'The Death of the Author' (1967). Barthes states that a text 'is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (1977: 146). The removal of the author opens the text to freedom of interpretation for the reader. Comics reading, by this definition, is a poststructuralist (if not also postmodernist) enterprise.

Comics, postmodernism and trauma are all concerned with time and temporal ruptures; in trauma, these are ruptures of the mind, for comics the rupture of the gutter, splitting images apart for the reader to suture together. Jameson is acutely aware of postmodernism's interest in rupture. It 'looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the tell-tale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the 'When-it-all-changed,' as [William] Gibson puts it, or better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and of the way they change' (Jameson, 1991, ix). Postmodernism, however, does not seek to heal the ruptures. Rather, it is aware of the difficulty in healing rifts and does not strive for unity and wholeness, preferring to acknowledge brokenness. That traumatic art and comics do strive for some modicum of wholeness makes a strong relationship between these three concepts difficult, though a preoccupation with temporal ruptures does forge a basic relationship between the three.

The texts of this thesis are all invested in historical time and ‘actual’ events. Both trauma and postmodernism cast doubt on the accuracy of historical remembrance and the ability of art to represent it. Timothy Melley writes: ‘Trauma has seemed a valuable model of history not because it represents postmodern indeterminacy, but because it seems to promise unparalleled contact with the past in all its original immediacy and fullness’ (2003: 108). He refers to Caruth’s point that, for Freud, the neurotic repetition is nothing but the ‘*unmediated* occurrence of violent events’ and ‘the *literal* return of the event’ (2003: 108 – Melley’s italics). However, Melley makes it clear that there are major flaws with this view of traumatic memory. A truly unmediated return to the event is impossible, due to the nature of memory, which is likely to be imperfect regardless of its traumatic nature. A traumatic model of history is ‘a model in which physical or emotional wounds distort or destroy memories’ (Melley, 2003: 121). To see trauma as a model for history is to accept that history is a flawed and imperfect concept that in no way promises truth, nor delivers closure. According to postmodernist thought history is a deeply problematic concept; the view of history as being a study of objective fact and truths collapses when we consider history as a narrative that is dependent on the experience of the writer. History should not be given a privileged position of authority over literature. In her 1988 book *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon coins the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to refer to texts that ‘attempt [...] to demarginalise the literary through confrontation with the historical’ (1988: 108); these texts seek to break down the borders between history and fiction – which Hutcheon calls ‘notoriously porous genres’ (1988: 106) – and combine aspects of the fictional alongside historical figures and documentation to problematize history’s position of authority. The presence of history in a postmodern text ‘is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic “return”’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 4). The majority of the texts already discussed in this thesis are not strictly examples of historiographic

metafiction, though they do contain information regarding historical events. However, we can see historiographic metafiction in *The 'Nam* and in *X-men: Magneto Testament* (henceforth referred to as *Testament*), a 2009 'origin story'. It is these two texts that are considered here.

Testament is a five-part story that outlines the history of Max Eisenhardt, who becomes Magneto, a central villain of the Marvel universe. This comic follows his experiences growing up as the youngest child of a middle-class Jewish family in 1930s Nürnberg, amid the infamous rallies. Max faces institutionalised bullying at school before leaving Germany with his parents several days after *Kristallnacht*, heading for the Warsaw Ghetto. Max's family are shot trying to escape and only he survives, before being taken to Auschwitz, where he works on the *Sonderkommando*. He escapes the camp during the revolt of October 7th 1944. The comic has been painstakingly researched to make it as accurate as possible, using sources from a number of Holocaust organisations. What is most striking about this comic in relation to Hutcheon's work on historiography is the contrast of fiction and fact as displayed within a single panel. The events of the text follow a series of key milestones of the Holocaust and for each event show Max interacting with the events (though never influencing or affecting them). The end of each event sequence shows a series of aspect-to-aspect panels, with white-on-grey caption boxes explaining the historical event behind each sequence. Though the rest of the comic uses caption boxes, they are black with white text; the grey of the history captions removes them from the narrative thread of the overall comic, creating a distinction between the fictional narrative and the historical facts that underwrite it.

The fact that the caption boxes establish a distinction between 'actual history' and 'fictional history' suggests both Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction and Jameson's

concern with the pastiche and simulacra that becomes postmodernist history. In a Jamesonian sense, *Testament* is a pastiche of superhero mythology, mainstream comics art and history textbook. The fierce insistence of writer Greg Pak to create a text that is as accurate as possible, while also being sensitive to those involved, is emphasised by the inclusion of a series of very detailed endnotes, which repeatedly declare the writer's desire for historical precision or delicacy. Their inclusion suggests that this text is setting itself up as a document of history. The evident desire to break down the boundary between, in this case, fictional comic and historical document is very much in line with Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction.

The superhero is, to put it crudely, as fictional as it is possible to get. To read a narrative that centres on fantastical events occurring in a world not unlike our own requires considerable suspension of disbelief. For a superhero comic to purport to be a historical document is a bizarre assertion. However, looking through a postmodern lens, the fact that *Testament* attempts to span diverse genres indicates the postmodernist breakdown of genre boundaries. Here we see another continuation from modernism to postmodernism. Modernism is wary of genre boundaries. Arden Reed, among others, claims that modernism is interested in 'genre blending' and hybridisation.⁶⁹ In this respect, the designation of *Testament* as 'superhero comic' is problematic. Though the artwork is in line with the Marvel style, the narrative itself contains barely any 'superheroism'. Furthermore, the inclusion of painstakingly researched historical events is not typical of the superhero genre. Thus, we see a blending of superheroes and non-fiction that, in turn, distances the text from both genres. Magneto is, in effect, alienated from his own genre by the historical interjections; he is a superhero stranded in a world in which he has no power.

⁶⁹ See: Reed. *Manet, Flaubert, and the Emergence of Modernism: Blurring Genre Boundaries*, 2003.

The Holocaust has become a common plot event in literature and film alike. Art Spiegelman claims that the Holocaust ‘is the perfect hero/villain paradigm for movies. It’s replaced cowboys and Indians’ (Spiegelman, 2011: 70) and uses the coinage ‘Holokitsch’. Kitsch (or the ‘kitschification of culture’) is seen as one symptom of postmodernism. Jean Baudrillard offers a definition of the term “kitsch”:

The kitsch object is commonly understood as one of that great army of 'trashy' objects, made of Plaster of Paris or some such imitation material: that gallery of cheap junk—accessories, folksy knickknacks, 'souvenirs', lampshades or fake African masks—which proliferate everywhere, with a preference for holiday resorts and places of leisure. (2004: 109-10)

Kitsch simplifies and trivialises complex ideas by breaking them into clear-cut stereotypes. Furthermore, it tends to be oriented to the masses and thus mass consumption; the aim is generally seen to be profit-making. Baudrillard states:

To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its aesthetics of simulation: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic, etc.); it apes forms or combines them discordantly; it repeats fashion without having been part of the experience of fashion. (2004: 111)

Kitsch has ‘its basis in consumer society’ (Baudrillard, 2004: 110). Holokitsch is that which takes the events of the Holocaust and reduces it to something consumable, though often in different ways. Spiegelman states:

The Holocaust has become a trope, sometimes used admirably, as in Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*, or sometimes meretriciously, like in Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*. Almost every year there’s another documentary or fiction film up for some Academy Award in this category. Then there are lots of sentimentalised documentaries about life in the shtetl or World War II. (2011: 70-73)⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Furthermore, enough time has seemingly passed for Nazism to become a source of parody and (black) humour. Consider Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 black comedy film *Inglourious Basterds*.

Holokitsch, then, is not necessarily a purely negative designation but can also be applied to works that have some value beyond their consumer nature. As the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski shows, the legacy of the Holocaust is one that some individuals have attempted to appropriate for themselves.⁷¹ The two cases are undoubtedly different, but the reasons for Pak and Di Giandomenico's appropriation of a survivor identity for Magneto are not too far removed from the reasons that Wilkomirski lied about his identity. Magneto, in being a survivor, is afforded a courage and traumatic history that few other life events could give.

In his 2003 comic, Joe Kubert appropriates a Holocaust survivor's past but in a different way. Kubert, born in 1926, left a small town in Poland with his family at the age of two months, moving to New York City. Had they stayed, he and the rest of the family would have been moved to the Warsaw Ghetto; Kubert would have been sixteen at the time of the ghetto uprising. In *Yossel*, he narrates the story of the eponymous character who lives the life Kubert may have lived if the family had not moved. Yossel is a talented young artist, who takes part in the planning and implementation of the uprising. The two characters – Yossel and the (not present) figure of the young Kubert – are as similar as it is possible for them to be. Kubert recreates his past as if his parents had not moved. After growing up in the small Polish town of Yzeran, Yossel's family are taken to the Warsaw Ghetto. His skill as an artist is noticed by the Nazi guards, who have him draw for them every day. In exchange, he receives small gifts from the guards. He gets involved with a group of young men, assisting in the planning of the uprising in 1943. Following the narrated flashback of

⁷¹ See the section on 'traumatic representation' in the introduction to this thesis.

a Rabbi who has escaped from Auschwitz, the young men plan the uprising and, subsequently, are killed.

The narrative of *Yossel* is told in layered analepses. The initial layer of narrative is of Yossel in the Warsaw sewers, drawing on scraps of paper with a stub of pencil.⁷² Brad Prager claims that the movement of time is carefully constructed to assist in avoiding conflict between narrative levels:

Kubert's comics jumps in time [but] *Yossel* steers clear of the present. In this way, his work avoids staging a confrontation between the past as a point represented, and the present as the point at which the author affirms that his work is only a representation. (2010: 117)

The material presentation of the text, raw sketched drawings printed on rough grey paper, mimics the drawings that Yossel makes. Prager writes:

The regularity and precision of his text stands in stark contrast with the rough, imperfect images, and the juxtaposition of the two recalls an issue specific to the representation of such atrocities: Kubert's decision to represent the horrors of the Holocaust imperfectly constantly reminds readers that the images should not be taken to stand for authentic Holocaust experience. This is not a story as depicted by a witness – and, even if it were, looking at them is a far cry from being there. (2010: 118-119)

The roughness of the artwork, juxtaposed with the seriousness of the subject matter, corresponds to a breakdown in the boundaries of high and low art. Though comic art is generally considered low art, the reason for classifying thus here is different. In contrast to other works of Holocaust art and their seeming hagiographic status, *Yossel* is a piece of 'low art', seeking neither to beatify nor to 'kitschify'; this creates a potential boundary that the narrative – and interplay of artwork and content – dissolves.

⁷² In his essay on this text, 'The Holocaust Without Ink', Brad Prager suggests another reason for the lack of ink in this comic. He reminds us that, typically, comics are drawn in pencil and then 'inked', with the pencil traces being completely erased. The absence of ink echoes the absence of a camp tattoo, 'the mark of victimhood', that Kubert does not bear (Prager, 2010: 118).



Fig. 6.2 – From *Yossel*, Joe Kubert, 2003. p 43. Image used under fair dealings provisions for the purpose of scholarly discussion.

While in the sewer, he draws the story of his childhood – one analeptical level. Within this flashback is the story the Rabbi tells of Auschwitz – a second analeptical level. Layered narratives and multiple analepses are two ways of manipulating chronology that can be seen as typically postmodern. However, there is a larger temporal issue at play in *Yossel*. The fact that this work consciously replays a history that ‘did not occur but could have’ makes it a work of ‘allohistory’.⁷³ Survivors are wont to think ‘what if?’ – this is the core of ‘survivor guilt’ – and ‘for this reason it is unsurprising that comics that deal with the Holocaust are particularly likely to cross into the allohistorical space between what was and what might have been’ (Prager, 2010: 117).

The creation of an allohistorical narrative of Kubert’s past creates an alternative personal history that alienates both the writer and reader from the ‘actual’ history. Kubert’s depiction of his younger, alternative self creates a distinction that leads to *Verfremdungseffekt* – a sense of alienation between factual and fictional. This type of allohistorical text, in which an individual places themselves in an alternative, nightmarish situation, becomes an outlet for the guilt that may be felt by those who did not witness the

⁷³ The Greek root ‘allo’ translates as ‘other’ or ‘different’.

events.⁷⁴ The alienation that this guilt engenders mimics the postmodern breakdown of historicity but, rather than being a cultural phenomenon, in this respect it is concentrated in the example of one individual's allohistorical pseudo-self.

So far this chapter has shown the extent to which comics, trauma and postmodernism are linked in a curious and complex relationship by the mutually occurring factors of temporality and temporal disruption. The timescale of comics is central to the creation of the narrative and the temporal symptoms are often the most obvious and debilitating aspects of a traumatic rupture. These two points are straightforward and largely self-evident. However, the addition of postmodernism is the complicating factor. Comics has much in common with postmodernist art but is not easily categorised as a postmodernist form. It is through the relationship between modernism and postmodernism that the argument for comics as postmodernist is best viewed. If we agree with Hutcheon and Lyotard that postmodernism is a continuation of modernism then comics can be seen through a postmodern lens. Both *Testament* and *Yossel* clearly demonstrate how issues of complex temporality in texts can be read in a postmodern sense.

The introduction to this thesis discussed Malcolm Bull's contention that modernism is concerned with aspectualism and the preoccupation with multi-faceted viewing that forms the artistic basis of much modernist art (especially Cubism). Looking at a subject from multiple angles adds another facet to ideas of time in modernist art. A cubist image of one subject from multiple angles suggests one of two things. Either, in the case of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No 2* (1912), that the subject is in motion and the artist attempts to capture the movement in the piece or, in the case of Braque's *The Guitar* (1909), that the subject is being viewed from a multitude of angles all at once. Typically,

⁷⁴ Another type of allohistory, and one that is much more common, shows a wider-ranging situation. For example, 'What if the Nazis won the Second World War?' or 'What if Nixon had served a third term as President?' This second question forms the basis of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986 comic *Watchmen*.

these varying perspectives are layered on top of one another. However, in his 2008 comic *Judenhass*, Dave Sim combines comics panelisation, photorealistic art and multiple perspectives. *Judenhass* is a non-fiction comic in which Sim presents a selection of anti-Semitic quotations from prominent figures, superimposed over images of Holocaust victims. The quotations move chronologically from the first century CE to the early twenty-first century; this rough timeline forms the narrative thread of the comic. Sim's contention is that the Holocaust was 'inevitable' and he attempts to show the prevalence and depth of anti-Semitism over the past two thousand years.

With the exception of the opening pages' sketches of Auschwitz and the concluding image of Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, each page of *Judenhass* shows an image of the Holocaust, rendered as line drawings, from multiple perspectives but, unlike the previous examples from Cubism, each different view is contained within separate panels. Each image is therefore repeated across the page instead of being repeated on top of itself. There are no alterations made to the image in each panel; they are exact copies of each other. The image below, which spans three pages in the comic, shows the increase in panel size that occurs across the pages until the ending image of the sequence, which shows the full photograph. The final page is presented on the left-hand side of the page, meaning the horrific extent of the complete image arrests the reader directly after a page turn. The increase in the panel sizes allows Sim to reveal the final image incrementally as the reader moves across the page.



Fig. 6.3 – From *Judenhass*, Dave Sim, 2008. pp. 18-20. Image used under fair dealings provisions for the purpose of scholarly discussion.

The repetition of the image across these three pages suggests a visual representation of the Freudian repetition compulsion. Previously this chapter discussed Melley's consideration of Freud and his criticism of Freud's suggestion that the return to the traumatic event is 'unmediated' and is a 'literal return of the event' (2003: 108). Melley is right to argue against the literal return of the traumatic event. His contention is that traumatic memory is 'as open as ordinary memory to influence, suggestion and contamination' (2003: 111). The return is thus not unmediated and not literal. The images above are a clear example of the mediation that is at play in the creation of – and return to – traumatic memory. A single image is repeated; we can see that this image represents the traumatic event. The repetition of the image represents the compulsion to return. However, the fact that the image is altered in each panel – whether by perspective, artistic differences or position on the page – suggests the mediation of the memory by external and psychological factors, the same factors that affect ordinary memory. In this three-page section, we can see a comics rendering of the psychological mediation that is at play in the repetition compulsion.

Judenhass best exemplifies the issues faced when attempting to categorise comics as modernist or postmodernist. It is a clear example of the coming together of modernist multiple viewing and comics presentation techniques. The bland pencilled artwork is far removed from the high-contrast mainstream style that typifies comics art. Both modernist and postmodernist concerns are represented. Furthermore, *Judenhass* is a strictly non-fiction comic and demands to be seen as one, with its long explanatory introduction and use of quotations, with no dialogue or narrative direction. For a form in which even non-fictional texts are considered fictional purely because they are comics, the structure of *Judenhass* helps to break down the preconceived ideas of what a comic should be and allow for comics to be considered fictional or non-fictional where appropriate. A clear example of the implied fictionality of comics can be seen in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), which was ranked at number five on *Newsweek's* 'Top Ten Best Fiction Books of the Decade' even though *Persepolis* is not fiction, but autobiography. Comics is bedevilled by its past as a disposable form that dealt with sensationalism and escapism; comics are still thought of as being superhero floppies. Though critical and academic interest in the wider comics world is growing, this low opinion remains. Regardless, a large percentage of the best-selling and highly acclaimed comics are most accurately categorised as memoir or reportage. The postmodern lens which advocates a breakdown of high and low art is an excellent way of looking at comics as a whole, as it allows for all genres of comic to be considered on an equal level.

In *Worlds of Hurt*, Kalí Tal claims that trauma literature cannot be viewed through a postmodernist lens. She writes:

The approach of most postmodern critics is inappropriate when applied to reading the literature of trauma. Postmodern critics have been concerned with the problematics of *reading*. As professional readers, it is in their interest to put forward the argument that any text, properly

read, can be “understood”. Those among them who do not claim to be able to divine the author’s intent simply claim that an author’s intent is irrelevant. It’s obvious that this approach won’t work for the literatures of trauma. The act of *writing*, though perhaps less accessible to the critic, is as important as the act of reading. (1991: 17-18)

Tal claims that postmodernists do not have an interest in the writer. Though this may be corroborated by Barthes in ‘The Death of the Author’, Tal creates a schism between reading and writing that does not exist. Though postmodernism does not give much credence to authorial input, it does not exclude it completely. Tal is explicit in her belief that ‘literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author’ (1991: 17). She writes, ‘survivors have the metaphorical tools to interpret representations of traumas similar to their own [whereas a non-traumatised person] does not have access to the meanings of the sign that invoke traumatic memory’ (1991: 16). By Tal’s reckoning, trauma literature should only be written – and can only be truly understood – by survivors. This is a bold statement and one that is severely flawed. Though individuals who have experienced a traumatic event may wish to write about their experience (and may be encouraged to do so), this is not to say that they would be more able to create a piece of art that represents and mimics the symptoms of a traumatic rupture than a non-traumatised individual. To claim special preference for traumatised ‘trauma artists’ undermines the scope of human imagination. Tal writes:

Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event, since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ conception. Textual representation – literary, visual, oral – are mediated by language and do not have the impact of the traumatic experience. (1991: 15)

She is correct that representation is mediated by language. To some extent she is also correct that accurate representation cannot be achieved without recreating the event.

However, we know that this is impossible. The event *cannot* be recreated and so other representational strategies must be employed. These strategies are often congruent with postmodernist artistic techniques. Thus, contrary to Tal's beliefs, trauma can be viewed through a postmodernist lens. Furthermore, if we can see trauma as a postmodernist experience – one in which we are forced to rework the paradigms and metanarratives that govern our world view – then the postmodernist lens becomes even more pertinent. Lyotard ends his essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' by stating: 'The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable' (1991: 82). Lyotard's postmodernism is aware of the need to witness to the unrepresentable; the most unrepresentable subject matter is the traumatic. The fracturing of traumatic experience is congruent to the fractured postmodernist world view, the 'war on totality'. Compounded with the fractured nature of the basic comics form, postmodernist strategies are highly appropriate for the creation of traumatic narratives.

Conclusion

Considering *Guernica* in the Wake of *Cerebus*

Hobbes: How come we play war and not peace?

Calvin: Too few role models.

Bill Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes* (1987)

In May 2010, *Comic Book Resources*, a comics website, launched a weekly activity on their blog, *Comics Should Be Good*. The aim was to give space for new and aspiring artists to develop their work. Every week a new topic was posted and artists would submit single-page works on that topic. In response to the topic ‘What if?’ deviantART⁷⁵ user Cynthia Sousa created *X-Men Guernica* – ‘What if Picasso drew X-Men comics?’ This piece mimics the shape and structure of *Guernica*, as well as the colour scheme. Sousa reworks the bombing into an attack on the Xavier Institute. The artist posted the piece on her online gallery and received a large amount of feedback, some positive and some suggesting that the appropriation of Picasso’s painting was inappropriate and disrespectful. It was not clear what exactly was considered disrespectful – the artist chosen or the subject of the original art being altered. However, both the process that underlies this work and the final piece tell

⁷⁵deviantART is an online art community. Users can create profiles and post their artwork – traditional and digital media, photography and creative writing – to the site for others to view and comment on. The site also has links to other websites that allow users to buy prints of the artwork.

us much about the nature of comics, as well as the relationship between comics, conflict, Modernism and Postmodernism.



Fig. xx.3 – *X-Men Guernica*, Cynthia Sousa, 2012. Image used with permission of the artist.

The introduction to this thesis discussed the complex relationship between Picasso's *Guernica* and the comics form. It suggested that the panelisation and multi-aspectival viewing link the two and make it possible to perform a comics reading of *Guernica*. The rough narrative that we can see in *Guernica* is also present here, albeit using comics characters. The use of these characters encourages the viewer to reinterpret the painting through X-Men mythology. *X-Men Guernica* uses eight characters in place of the original figures of the painting. To the far left, Rogue cradles her dead brother, Nightcrawler; the siblings are watched over by Beast, who replaces Picasso's deformed bull. Across the centre of the image, replacing the prostrate man, is Cyclops, a beam from his eye forming panels within the image. The events are watched by the two witness characters, here reimagined as Storm and Emma Frost; Wolverine replaces the man in the far corner, with his arms stretched to the sky. The most problematic character in this reworking is Magneto,

who replaces the gored horse, the large central figure of the original painting. Magneto is usually considered to be a villain and enemy of the X-Men, although he has also been an ally at times during the development of the series. Not only does Magneto's presence here cause disorientation for the viewer, it highlights one of the central features of the X-Men franchise. When first creating the X-Men in the 1960s, Stan Lee was heavily influenced by the Civil Rights movement; he 'used science fiction in time-honoured fashion as a potent means of holding a mirror up to society' (Kaplan, 2006: 59). The X-Men characters are all mutants (having the X-gene). The basic narrative that runs through all X-Men comics is of the mutants working to coexist peacefully with humans. Magneto is the adversary because, despite his wanting to protect mutants, he uses violent and extreme methods to do so. Professor Xavier and the X-Men are committed to more diplomatic methods. Their symbolic purpose in the 1960s is not subtle. Just as Picasso's original painting depicts an attack on a specific ethnic group, the Basques, Sousa's work depicts an attack on a subgroup, albeit a fictional one, the Mutants of Professor Xavier's school.

In Picasso's original painting, the victims were anonymous, their deformed faces representing the dehumanisation of violence and conflict. In assigning recognisable characters to previously anonymous figures, Sousa eliminates this powerful element of the original work. However, this is also the feature that sets *X-Men Guernica* apart from the original. Chapters 2 and 5 discussed the recognition on the part of comics creators that the superhero was unable to intervene in violence and conflict in post-9/11 America. The four comics collections published to raise money for 9/11 relief charities use superhero characters but make it clear that their powers are useless and they are limited to the role of witness; the most they are able to do is assist the emergency services in the aftermath. The instances concentrated on in these chapters involved individual superheroes who were depicted as acting alone. The fact that this image shows the impotence and helplessness of

a superhero team magnifies their inability to effect change and protection, especially in post-9/11 America. The impotence of superheroes has become a common theme in mainstream comics since 2001. The destruction and chaos in the image suggests, not only that superheroes are not the invincible *übermenschen* we assume, but that we do not want them to be.

The desire for a new type of hero is shown by Cyclops' position in Sousa's work – his dead body takes the place of Picasso's dismembered soldier, though Cyclops does not bear the stigmata as the soldier does. Cyclops is unusual for a superhero of his generation. Though created in the 1960s, at the same time as anti-heroes Wolverine and The Punisher, he is an archetype of the selfless, ethically-driven hero, who possesses excellent tactical and strategic skills. In this respect, Cyclops has much in common with Captain America. Despite his mutation, which allows him to deliver 'optic blasts' on any given target, Cyclops has remained a steady influence for 'good' in the X-Men universe. The fact that he is one of two dead characters in *X-Men Guernica* (the other is Nightcrawler) suggests that this type of hero has no place in contemporary narratives of heroism. A further point can be made regarding the inclusion of Cyclops in this context. Though Cyclops was the clearest embodiment of the desire for peaceful coexistence, he has developed as a character. He has taken more militaristic action and, in the 2012 story arc 'Avengers Vs. X-Men', moves into criminal activity to protect mutants. His development from perfect soldier to renegade follows a clear narrative arc, in which his basic survival is threatened to such a degree that he is forced into extreme action. Cyclops' change in both personality and moral compass is clearly linked to his experience of traumatic events.

X-Men Guernica shifts Picasso's work from being an indictment of the violence of the Spanish Civil War and the events of 9/11, both of which targeted civilians who were

unable to defend themselves, to a statement about conflict in comics, both thematically and formally; not only is conflict a prevalent theme in all genres of comics but there is conflict inherent in the formal construction. There is conflict in the relationship between panels as the act of closure is dependent on reader input and thus the panels exist in a fluid relationship that changes with each reading. This focus on conflict opens up a wider discussion of claims that comics and popular culture in general promotes violence. Prior to the 1954 Comics Code, critics such as Fredric Wertham and Sterling North argued that the depiction of violence in comics was excessive and unnecessary. Though this is a consensus that has endured, the criticism remains vague and disorganised. To state that comics are ‘too violent’ suggests that there is a level of violence that is acceptable but does not suggest how this would be measured or by whom. As with the employment 1954 comics code, which has not been in use since 2011, comics publishers have created their own rating systems to inform readers about the nature of the material, especially in terms of violence, sexual scenes and profanity. Despite the implementation of comics grading systems, artists continue to depict violence; though methods are, in general, becoming more subtle, recent series such as Frank Miller’s *Sin City* (1991-2000) and Brian Azzarello’s *100 Bullets* (1999-2009) have disregarded old concerns. Both of these series – and a large number of other comics that depict graphic violence – are published by mainstream publishers and have received wide-ranging acclaim.

However, the issue of violence in comics was reawakened in a new guise in 2008 when the Apple AppStore refused to sell a webcomic, *Murderdrome*, which had been written specially to showcase a digital comics reading application. Apple claimed that the comic was rejected on the grounds of ‘objectionable content’ (McNevitt, 2009: online). However, the AppStore also sells a large corpus of equally violent films and texts – including films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, as well as texts by authors such as the Marquis de

Sade – without censorship or warning information. Following the ban, though many people sent messages of support to the creators and their publisher, Infurious Comics, Apple have made it clear that the application and book will not be made available via the AppStore. Aside from the wider matter of corporate censorship, the ban on *Murderdrome* suggests two things specific to comics: that the negative reaction to comics has largely died down in relation to print media – print comics are to all intents and purposes ‘accepted’ – but also that the negative reaction has shifted to webcomics. Print comics are afforded legitimacy by the fact they have a recognised publisher and material form; webcomics do not have this protection. However, they are the new frontier, in terms of comics development, and it is from this new era of digital comics production that *X-Men Guernica* comes.

In the late 1930s, *Guernica* represented a larger issue in conflict art – that conflict (and conflict trauma) required new representational strategies and insisted on new artistic and narrative forms. In the modernist period, *Guernica* was new and bold. Now that nearly eighty years have passed since its painting, its position as a masterpiece of anti-war and trauma art is secure. *X-Men Guernica* might be called a postmodernist piece because it is a parody of the original. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*(1989), Hutcheon states that parody ‘signals how present representations come from past ones’ (2002: 93). In contrast, Jameson sees parody in postmodernism as being ‘blank parody’ (1991: 17). Parody has been replaced by pastiche:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.

(1991: 17)

Pastiche is ‘the cannibalisation of the past’ and represents a loss of connection to a historical referent. Instead of history, we encounter a series of simulacra: the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with

nothing but texts (1991: 18). *X-Men Guernica* does not merely mimic without comment, however: the choice of characters not only carefully considers the shape and narrative of the original but creates a new narrative of its own. Sousa's work is not *Guernica*, nor does it try to be. It uses the original to make a bold statement on the ubiquity of violence in comics and contemporary society.

If we take the objections to *X-Men Guernica* as an objection to the use of Picasso for comics parody then the issue raised is similar to those discussed in Chapter 6 – the dissolution of barriers between high and low culture. Postmodernism is acutely aware of 'the effacement of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very culture' (Jameson, 1991: 2). As mentioned in Chapter 6, the breakdown of what Huyssen called 'the inherent hostility between high and low [culture]' (1986: viii) works in comics' favour when considering conflict and traumatic representation within the comics form as it opens up discussion on accessibility. The fact that 'the categorical demand for the uncompromising segregation of high and low has lost much of its persuasive power' (Huyssen, 1986: 197) means that popular and seemingly marginalised forms are given an equal footing in both the critical and academic arena. That this populist form is able to tackle 'serious' subjects means that the themes contained therein will be communicated to a wider audience in a form that is both highly accessible and highly effective.

Within American comics, the move towards serious subject matter has been a slow process, partly due to the mainstream monopoly on comics publishing until the mid-1970s. However, we can also see a phenomenon informally called the 'Cerebus Syndrome' at work here. The name is taken from Dave Sim's multi-award winning comic series *Cerebus the Aardvark*, which ran from 1977 to 2004. The series is a sixteen-volume story that

follows *Cerebus*, a misanthropic aardvark; the series began as a parody of heroic fantasy comics but gradually became a platform for any topic Sim wished to discuss; he is especially known for his controversial views on politics and the sexes; these views were voiced loudest in Issue 186 of *Cerebus*, under the pseudonym 'Viktor Davies'. The Cerebus Syndrome refers to this gradual change from parodic and light subject matter to more serious concerns. It can be traced in other popular series, such as *The Simpsons* and the *Batman* comics franchise. The readers of the particular comic may be unaware of the shift and only notice it in retrospect. Regardless, the Cerebus Syndrome can be very effective in introducing serious subject matters to an audience that may not otherwise show interest. It is possible to trace a noticeable Cerebus shift in American comics as a whole, from newspaper funnies, to superheroes, to underground comix to the contemporary American comic as discussed in this thesis. As this thesis has shown, comics have faced a considerable amount of negative reception in both academic critical literature and popular criticism in the media; the history of their reception as cheap entertainment has proved difficult to shift. However, it is precisely because comics are not expected to deal with weighty subject matter that they are effective at doing so. The cultural perception of comics as a form that 'doesn't do serious' allows the form to reach a wider and more diverse audience than may be typically possible with text literature or film.⁷⁶

The most unexpected endorsement of comics as a legitimate source of information and inspiration in matters of conflict and the trauma that grows from it comes from the American military, specifically the United States Military Academy at West Point. The

⁷⁶ The Cerebus Syndrome can be seen in tandem with another similar cultural phenomenon. Comics (and also other popular forms such as animation and film) is a highly self-aware form and uses audience perceptions to its advantage: if comics isn't expected to be anything other than cheap entertainment then it can do anything it chooses because there are no preconceived ideas. This phenomenon is most clearly demonstrated by a quotation from long-running animated series *The Simpsons*, which is a good example of a self-aware series that uses its 'low' form to make bold statements: 'Cartoons don't have messages, Lisa. They're just a bunch of hilarious stuff, like people getting hurt and stuff' (Groening et al., 1995). Unfortunately, neither of these phenomena has received any substantial critical interest and, as such, there are no academic studies available.

required reading list for new recruits currently includes Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), which discusses her upbringing in Iran during the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s. Though this thesis has not been able to discuss this text more fully due to my geographic parameters, Satrapi's text is widely praised as an excellent analysis of the impact of conflict on a young person and their subsequent development into adulthood. West Point's reading list previously included a comic by mainstream artist George Pratt, a reworking of the 1960s DC anti-hero 'Enemy Ace', a German flying ace in the first and second world wars. Pratt rewrites the character as a frail and terminally ill old man, who is visited by a traumatised Vietnam veteran journalist; the comic deals with the interaction between the two men and the traumatic experiences that bind them. It might be suggested that this recognition of comics by the military can be seen as an indication, not of these comics' acclaim and acceptance, but that they are now facing the deliquescence of their oppositional tendencies. However, that military training institutions are choosing to use comics for the purposes of training combat personnel is testament to the skill of comics to represent trauma but also opens up the form to a far more diverse readership, with wider reaching publishing opportunities. Giving these texts a different level of legitimacy – as a military training tool – will open the way for comics to be used in all manner of situations beyond simply educational ones, though their position within education should not be underestimated. To allow these works the legitimacy they rightly deserve – and for this to be recognised in fora like West Point – will allow more and more artists to develop narratives of trauma and for these to be considered within the wider comics canon.

In her 1940 essay on Homer's *Iliad*, entitled 'The Poem of Force', Simone Weil writes, 'Though all are destined from birth to endure violence, the realm of circumstance closes their minds to this truth' (Weil, 2008: 53). War and conflict – and the violence they

perpetuate – are among the oldest and most widespread of human experiences. James Tatum concurs with this when he writes that ‘the one impulse that has proved as enduring as human beings’ urge to make wars is their need to make sense of them’ (Tatum, 2004: xi). For this reason among others, conflicts, wars and their consequences have been a key theme in art for thousands of years. However, above all else, conflict art has showed that it is not the event itself that remains with us, but the traumatic imprint that stains us indelibly and affects every subsequent experience. Rather than making sense of wars, the desire of conflict arts is to make sense of the trauma they leave in their wake. This thesis has argued that the comics form is ideally suited to representing conflict and, moreover, the trauma that is inherent in conflict. The representation of a traumatic event in any artistic medium relies on the artist’s ability, not to recreate the event itself, but to recreate the experience of the event – the trauma that the individual experienced and continues to experience. The specific structural and artistic techniques of comics are able to mimic the symptoms of a traumatic rupture in the formal presentation of the narrative, which in turn is able to mimic the experience of a traumatic rupture in the reader.

It is easy to diagnose the comics form as an instance of the Cerebus Syndrome. The form has undergone massive changes in both artwork and thematic concerns since the earliest publications, moving from cheaply printed fantastical storylines to sophisticated works of art in their own right. Comics is able to do things that other forms cannot because it is intrinsically bound up in a culture of imagination, fantasy and limitlessness. It is a form that encourages difference and experimentation. It is open to all themes. Indeed, the one thing that comics is definitely not is a laughing matter.

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