

Comics, Trauma and Cultural Memory(ies) of 9/11

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Historical (re)construction inevitably poses the problem of representation. In this essay, the authors inquire how, and to what extent, the comics medium represents the historical/cultural memory(ies) of the traumatic events of 9/11, asking how and why comics may be considered a source of memory.

In postmodern society, commemorative art, such as literature, poetry, cinema, sculpture and architecture, has made up for the gradual loss of historicity. The awareness of this loss has brought about a growing interest in historical memory, which has inevitably raised concerns about the appropriate language or medium to communicate memory. The accuracy and faithfulness of artistic representations of historical memory has been theorized by historians, sociologists and philosophers alike, within the dialectic “event/code” (Wagner Pacifici, 304). This dialectic, central to the memory debate, raises the issue of which cultural encodings (memorials, fictional narratives, movies, sculptures) best represent and commemorate traumatic cultural events, considering “the moral, political and aesthetic imperative[s]” entailed in the representation of trauma (*ibid.*).

From within this code/event framework, we would like to reflect on two questions concerning the appropriateness of the comics medium to convey the traumatic historical/cultural memory(ies) of 9/11. First, is comics an adequate medium for bearing witness to the past? In other words, in applying Pierre Nora’s idea of *lieu de mémoire* [site of memory] to selected comics texts, we ask whether or not comics are appropriate cultural encodings that may be

considered memorials or, to use Nora's concept, as "objects of memory"? The second question we want to raise is whether or not the comics medium, in terms of form and structure, can appropriately and adequately convey the memory of a traumatic experience. Or else, do the specific structural and aesthetic features of the medium give comics a privileged status when it comes to render the memory(ies) of 9/11?

Comics as "Objects of Memory"

According to Nora in his book *Realms of Memory*, a site of memory is anything that contains the memory of a community: an individual, an object, a place (15). Nora goes on to add that these sites of memory, or objects of memory, have no real referent. Rather, they are their own referent (Nora, 42–43). In that sense, Nora's definition suggests that, unlike the object of history that belongs to a particular historical moment, both in content and form, the object of memory escapes history itself and embodies the past. In other words, Nora argues that the form of the site of memory is "areferential": it cannot be reclaimed by history, whereas its contents refer to history. Within Nora's framework, we would like to argue that our corpus of research, namely a wide array of mainstream 9/11-related comics, makes up a site of memory and therefore merits close attention.

According to Nora's claim, comics belong in the category of objects of history because they are rooted in current events and thus pertain to history. Indeed, this major characteristic of comics enables them to provide an overview of the mentality of a society at a specific moment in history, and to be first-hand signs of the historical and cultural reality in which they were created. However, some comic books, like the ones under scrutiny in this essay, are also, and above all, objects or sites of memory. Nora explains that memory appears in more and more various institutional shapes, so that mainstream comic books, despite their populist nature, can rightly be considered to be memorials of a past event and to bear witness to a traumatic historical/cultural reality. They are created to incarnate history and shape a collective memory in the same way as any other film, museum, novel or monument does.

The comics under study, including Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and narratives from the comics compendia *Emergency Relief* and *9/11: Artists Respond*, can all be regarded as memorials to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Created shortly after 9/11, they all contain fictional and personal accounts, and interpretations of the events, and they all tell the

(hi)story of a past that now only exists in memory and in artistic or other mediated forms. In fact, because of their populist and commercial nature, comics act as objects of mass culture and play an important role in the production of collective memory due to their mass appeal.

Time, Space and Memory: The Comics Medium and Traumatic Memory

Comics are therefore capable of bearing witness to the past and of being “objects of memory.” But can a comic book be considered an appropriate form to convey the memory(ies) of a traumatic experience? Because of their mass appeal, common-sense logic would dictate that comics cannot, aesthetically speaking, represent the “unrepresentable.” However, we want to show that it is possible to draw interesting parallels between the breakdown and layout of comics and the structures of traumatic memory. Indeed, both comics and memory and, more specifically, traumatic memory, can be understood in terms of fragments and totality because they construct a whole (a narrative or story) by assembling multiple parts (such as panels, testimonies, or memories). Moreover, both the comics medium and traumatic events shatter notions of time and space as they are perceived under “normal” conditions.

Scholars do not agree on a definition of the term “comics,” which we use as a generic term. However, they generally agree on Will Eisner’s famous term, “sequential art.” This particular appellation suggests that one of the intrinsic characteristics of the medium is its multi-episodic format, which uses static panels arranged in a specific order to convey a narrative. This method is tremendously interesting in the sense that it allows the reader to experience time spatially and, therefore, to consider movement and duration visually, while in “reality” time is more illusory because perceived through “the memory of experience” as Will Eisner has argued (Eisner, 38).

Along with the fragmentation of time and space, the comics medium can also associate parts or fragments (panels) in order to construct a whole narrative or page. French theoretician, analyst, and comics writer Benoit Peeters insists on the fragmentary nature of the panel as it inscribes itself within a whole, i.e. the plate, or even the book (Peeters 1998, 29–31).¹ The different narrative units of the comic book can actually be considered to be both independent as well as parts of a larger unit. Scott McCloud puts it simply as follows:

All of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our sense. Yet, our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete. Even the

most wildly travelled mind can only see so much of the world in the course of a life. Our perception of “reality” is an act of *faith*, based on mere fragments. [...] This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It’s called closure [McCloud 1994, 62–63].

This logic of seeing the part(s) as standing for the whole applies as much to the breakdown/layout of comics as to the structures of traumatic memory. Both are indeed built up from fragments, and both shatter the notions of time and space. In discussing the traumatic events of 9/11, many commentators claimed that “time was broken” and that *nothing would ever be the same again*, which resulted in the now widely-spread notions surrounding pre- and post-9/11 eras (Campbell, 1–9). According to Campbell, the struggle for the ordering of things “into a sequence that allows understanding [...] is emblematic of trauma” (1). In addition, space(s) previously void of any particular significance become “sites of memory,” to use Nora’s terms, which can constantly engender new meanings. This is the case with the location where the WTC formerly stood, now known as Ground Zero — a site of pilgrimage for New Yorkers and tourists alike (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 359). Within this collapse of the notions of time and space, the memory of the traumatic event can only be fragmentary, given that the act of remembering itself implies fragmentation. As Lock contends, “to *re-member* something is to perform the act of re-assembling its members, thus stressing the importance to the memory process of creative reconstruction” (Lock, 112). In other words: the process of remembrance is partial and incomplete as well as creative because it consists in the juxtaposition of parts in order to (re)construct a coherent whole.

Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers and Traumatic Memory(ies)

In this brief theoretical overview, we have shown that the relationship between fragmentation in comics and memory lends the comics medium an advantage over other media in the representation of the unrepresentable. This is because the structural features of comics, such as sequentiality and fragmentation, lend themselves particularly well to the fragmented structures of memory and, more specifically, to the structures of traumatic memory.

In order to illustrate this claim, let us introduce Art Spiegelman and his book *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) as our first example of how comics narrate memory. Spiegelman is a Jewish-American cartoonist and comic book author, best known for his graphic novels *Maus I* (1984) and *Maus II* (1991). In both volumes, Spiegelman tackles the difficult and traumatic subject

matter of the Holocaust in the form of graphic memoirs that tell the history of his parents during World War II, especially during their internment at Auschwitz. In typically postmodern fashion, Spiegelman uses the meta-fictional device of self-reflexively appearing in his own narrative. This technique highlights the fictionality or artificiality of the work, as a means of undermining any illusion of authenticity which he, as someone who did not experience these events, may not claim. Hence, Spiegelman himself is presented as a character who expresses his struggle while writing and drawing his father's memories of the Holocaust. And in both volumes, sections about his complex relationship with his father, set in the present day, regularly interrupt the telling of his father's memories, thus demonstrating the tension between history and memory as well as the tension between personal and official historical accounts.

In the Shadow of No Towers, a *comix* testimony of Spiegelman's own experience of 9/11 in Lower Manhattan, incorporates meta-fictional devices to mirror his hesitations and difficulties in representing his traumatic experience of 9/11². In addition, he renders the plurality of feelings and perspectives he went through by means of his original use of the inherently fragmentary comics medium. In this work, Spiegelman parts company with the traditional pattern of comic books, which involves a conventional reading from left to right and from top to bottom. Instead he uses the technique of *collage*, juxtaposing fragmentary thoughts and memories in different styles. As Benjamin Noys puts it, "one formal strategy that Spiegelman uses is a radical break with the traditional comic book arrangement of its images into a series of 'boxes' in a grid" (Noys, 367). While the grid format is still omnipresent in *Maus*, *In The Shadow of No Towers*, puts it "into play with other arrangements of images that cut across and disrupt this structure" (*ibid.*). While this technique communicates the chaos that followed the events of 9/11, it also demonstrates Spiegelman's ability to reflect on mnemonic structures and to adequately adapt them into comics.

Each plate in the text is made up of various strips and panels, resulting in the coexistence of several narrative/memories/fragments on the same page, all of which vary in size and style. The eclectic style and layout of the book makes any reading difficult, any general understanding of a page at first glance seemingly impossible without affecting its meaning. Likewise, it is virtually impossible to develop full understanding of a traumatic experience — which by definition exceeds experience — within a single memory, thought or testimony.

An excerpt from the middle of page two of *In the Shadow of No Towers* exemplifies this stylistic heterogeneity, which gives rise to the difficulty in

finding a direction for reading, as well as the fragmentary structure of pages throughout the book. In this excerpt, one can distinguish three overlapping narratives or fragments, each in a different style. On the left, Spiegelman illustrates his anxiety about the political conflict between the U.S. and Al Qaeda as symptomatic for individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder. In the center panel, Spiegelman addresses the issue of self-representation and his difficulty in defining his identity in the aftermath of 9/11. In both these narratives, Spiegelman's self-representation is an intertextual reference to his character in *Maus*. This metafictional device establishes continuity between the traumatic events of 9/11 and the Holocaust and problematizes the issue of representability. On the right, Spiegelman depicts his personal experience of 9/11 in Lower Manhattan, by showing himself and his wife on the street when the planes hit the Twin Towers. As he and his wife realize that their daughter Nadja "had just started high school at the foot of the towers three days before," Spiegelman and his wife are transformed into the twins from Rudolph Dirck's *Katzenjammer Kids*.

In combining various strips that account for differing thoughts, fragments of memory, mixed feelings, and interrogations of his personal traumatic experience of 9/11, Spiegelman uses the sequential and fragmented format of the comics medium in a challenging fashion so as to reflect the chaotic and partial process of remembering that is characteristic of traumatic memory. In fact, the chaotic structures of the page, and that of the whole book, shatter conventional conceptions of time and space, and are themselves representative of "the moment of collapse and disintegration" of the Twin Towers (Noys, 369). In his closing essay of *In The shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman contends that "comics pages are architectural structures — the narrative row panels are like the stories of a building" (Spiegelman, 11). Therefore, as Noys argues, the "attack on the physical structure of these symbolic buildings ... is mirrored in [Spiegelman's] attack on the architecture of the traditional comic book page" (Noys, 367).

Pushing the Envelope: Other 9/11-Related Comics Narratives Sequencing Trauma

Other comics narratives commemorating the events of 9/11 use the fragmentary format of the medium particularly well in order to convey the author's fragmentary, partial, and incomplete recollection of the traumatic events, mixed feelings, and the plurality of perspectives that may be encountered after a traumatic psychological shock. In his narrative *Four Memories of Two*

Towers, Alex Robinson shatters the conventional grid format of the comics medium, dividing the page into four symmetrical stories, fragments, memories, perspectives, or feelings (Mason, 137). Because of the stories' symmetrical format (in terms of size and shape), readers do not know where to begin reading, or what part to interpret as the opening of the narrative. The panels containing different memories, fragments, or feelings seem to be of equal importance, and do not correlate in any sense, except perhaps in subject matter, given that they all reveal a particular story or memory of the Twin Towers.

Interestingly enough, though, these narratives seem to be articulated within a dichotomy of being versus destruction. The top and bottom panels present memories concerning the iconic shape of the Twin Towers. The top panel features one of the first appearances of the Twin Towers in film, from the movie *King Kong* (1974). The bottom panel mirrors the importance the towers had to the New York skyline, while both panels emphasize the destruction of the towers. In contrast, the left and right panels present more trivial and anecdotal memories about the Twin Towers. For example, the panel on the left depicts the memory of a joke about the WTC shared by the author and one of his ex-roommates who were incited to quip "I betcha someone's having sex in the World Trade Center right now" whenever they saw the towers (Mason, 137). The panel on the right is the memory of the author's only visit to the World Trade Center on the occasion of a dinner with his girlfriend and her father in the "fancy restaurant at the top of tower one" (ibid.). In both these panels, the Towers' existence is emphasized.

Despite this articulation of memories of the Twin Towers within the binary opposition of existence and destruction, the narrative nevertheless lacks both continuity and closure. In a traditional narrative, continuity and closure are two features that allow the reader to make sense of the story events. In this comic, however, this strategy of placing similar panels of equal importance in an unconventional order challenges the conventional grid format of the comics medium, as well as the medium's traditional notions concerning the representation of time and space. Indeed, this narrative does not convey time spatially, and in that sense, Alex Robinson uses the fragmentary format of the comics medium in a challenging fashion, so as to convey his fragmentary memories of the events of 9/11, as well as his plurality of perspectives and mixed feelings that resulted from the severe psychological shock he experienced. In addition, this comic lacks continuity and closure, and reveals the artist's incapacity to develop a coherent story out of the events of 9/11, and mirrors how the concepts of time and space collapsed after 9/11, as well as the fragmentary nature of the process of memory following a traumatic experience.

Jessica Abel's 9/11-related narrative (Mason, 13–14) also illustrates how the comics medium transmits the fragmentary process of memory of a traumatic event. While this narrative adheres to the traditional grid format of the comics medium, Jessica Abel manages to blur the distinction between the parts (the panels) and the whole (the narrative) to reflect the fragmentary memory of her traumatic experience of 9/11. The first page of the narrative portrays friends speaking with each other as they gradually disappear from the narrative in the dust that gathered after the collapsing of the Twin Towers. On the second page, dust penetrates entire panels, making the surrounding frames disappear. This effectively blurs the distinction between the parts (panels) and the whole (story) and challenges the ways in which duration and temporality are traditionally rendered in comics, i.e. through the use of panels and gutter spaces. As a result of the disappearance of the frames that typically shape and enclose panels, this comic conveys an impression of timelessness. In addition, the disintegration of the sequential structure in this comic creates a void of meaning similar to the memory of the traumatic event, which cannot be understood in any straightforward chronological fashion because of its overwhelming intensity. In essence, Abel's deliberate use of comics' structures problematizes the issues of representability that surround traumatic events.

Spiegelman's work and these other two narratives reveal that the comics medium can make use of its specific sequential format in challenging new ways, thereby mirroring the fragmentary remembering process of a traumatic event, or representing the diversity of feelings and perspectives that those who experience troubling psychological shocks often report. One last example of this kind of innovation is Frank Miller's response to 9/11 in *9/11: Artists Respond* (Levitz, 64–65). Although Miller does not use the fragmented format of the medium to reflect the fragmentary structure of traumatic memory or the multiple perspectives and feelings one can experience after trauma, he nevertheless uses panels and colors in subtle and innovative ways to suggest how trauma affects individuals repetitively, and how those who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder constantly relive their experiences of the horror as they attempt to make sense of it.

Miller's short narrative features a clear visual and rhythmic pattern. The first two panels of the first page depict a black symbol on a white background. They also each contain a sentence containing four syllables; hence, a strong sense of repetition is induced through the visual and musical similarities on the first page of the narrative. The full-page splash panel of the second page, in contrast, clashes with this sense of repetition, given that the size of the panel is doubled and there is a striking inversion of colours, which contrasts sharply with the pattern established on the first page, namely a white symbol

over a black background. In addition, the sentence on the second page contains eight syllables, doubling the rhythmic pattern of the text in the two previous panels.

These sharp visual and rhythmic contrasts between the first and second pages reveal both an echo and a crescendo effect that culminates in the last panel. The sentence "I've seen the power of faith" resonates visually through the emptiness suggested in the black background. In addition, because the rhythmic pattern is broken, this last sentence operates as the closure of the rhythmic pattern. The narrative's musicality, therefore, gains importance in volume through the growing size of the panel and the prevalence of blackness. In the last panel, the echo effect is also enhanced by the shift from a two-dimensional perspective on the first page to a three-dimensional perspective on the second page. In the two first panels, the artist has drawn flat symbols on a background, so no visual perspective is indicated. On the second page, however, the appearance of the shattered structures of the Towers seems to fall away in the black background, suggesting a three-dimensional perspective.

As a result of these visual and musical echo and crescendo effects, the reader is plunged into a nihilistic "repetitive emptiness," or a response that might encourage the reader to question patriotism ("I'm sick of flags") and religion ("I'm sick of God"). The shattered structure of the towers falling forward in the background seems to attract the reader, plunging her into the black empty space of the panel, while the last sentence, because of its musicality and rhythm, seems to echo and grow in volume in the reader's head. These visual and musical techniques reproduce the re-experiencing and reliving of the events in ways that suggest the PTSD and post-traumatic compulsion that victims experience through nightmares and flashbacks. Frank Miller's short work, although it does not rely on fragmentation to convey trauma in the comic form, is nevertheless rich and complex in terms of the structural and formal aesthetics that traditionally inform it, illustrating how the comics medium can represent an ongoing dialogue between words and images. As such, it suggests that the comics medium can mobilize its formal characteristics to adequately or appropriately relate the trauma of 9/11.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have argued that these comics confirm the notion that the medium is perhaps the most appropriate form for capturing the essence of traumatic experiences. Though trauma, by definition, imposes a barrier

between the imaginable and the expressible, comics can overcome and emphasize the “unrepresentability” of the traumatic events via its fractured sequential format. However, few comics artists commemorating the events of 9/11 have used the medium’s fragmentary format to convey their difficulties in remembering the traumatic events of 9/11. In fact, many artists have used plain images, single panel images, or “splash pages” to represent the events of that day.

We have shown that the examples discussed here represent trauma in new ways that carry on a tradition of remembering traumatic events through single images. The collective memory of American national traumas such as the Civil War, the Maine, or the Alamo has often been expressed in single images in a range of various media, such as popular prints, newspapers, illustrations and paintings. These images, printed in 19th-century magazines like *Harper’s Weekly*, *London Illustrated News*, or Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspapers*, often used conventional modes representations of traumatic events that emphasized notions of heroism or relied on allegories and icons in order to support meta-narratives of American unity. We have argued that the medium has since developed the ability to represent traumatic memory in new and compelling ways that comics research is only now beginning to grasp.

Notes

1. Peeters, 29–31. Benoit Peeters has written a number of books on the comics medium. His historical work *Tintin and the World of Hergé* (1988), his extensive analysis on Hergé’s album *Les Bijoux de la Castaflore*, and his theoretical work on the medium *Lire la Bande Dessinée* (1998), rank among his most famous works.

2. Spiegelman prefers the term *comix* to *comics* to describe his mixing of images and words. However, neither Spiegelman’s neologism, nor the term “graphic novel” can clearly define *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The book, with its outsized format and its eclectic style and structure, challenges the boundaries of the comics genre so that no single term can adequately describe it.

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