

INTRODUCTION

On the back cover of R. Crumb's *Zap* #0 (1967) there appears an image of a large, angry mother berating her tearful son for "wasting" his time reading comic books (Figure 1). The accompanying commentary, intended as an advertisement for subsequent issues of *Zap*, asks the reader "Do you feel a spark of GUILT every time you pick up a comic book?". From Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) to lamentations about the decline of reading in the age of digital media, accusations of intellectual ruin are nothing new in the history of verbal-visual culture.¹ However, the view that the comic book is a shameful form of "trash" consumed by vulnerable young minds is a peculiarly mid-twentieth-century idea. In his defence of the medium, Crumb

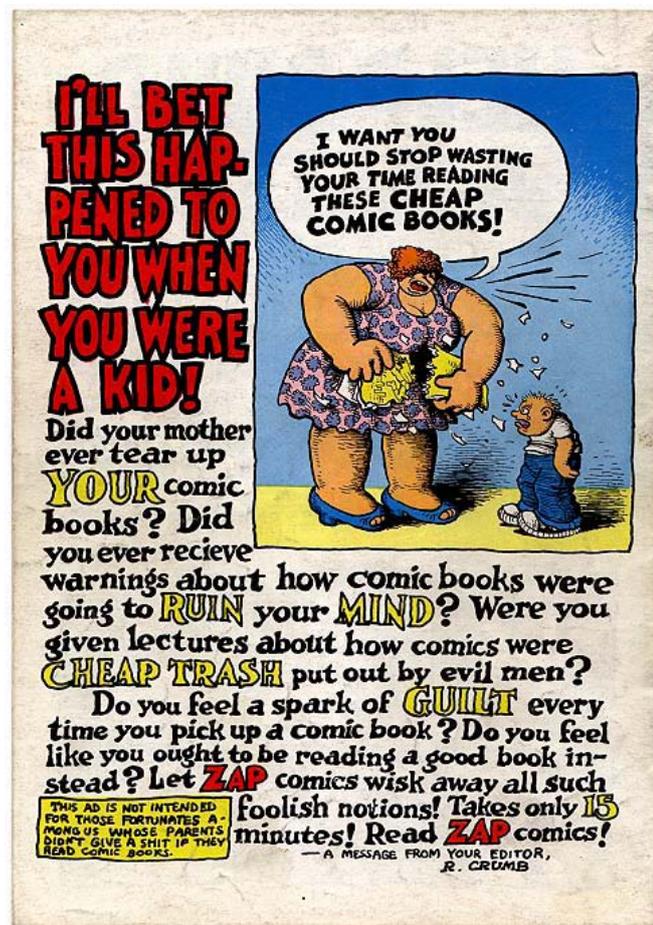


Figure 1.

1 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Edward Allen McCormick. (1766; Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984). For a modern critique see Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a balanced defence of word-image interaction, see Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick, *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT, 2003).

addresses himself to a group of adult readers whose childhoods, and subsequent adult tastes and perceptions, have been shaped by their experience of the comics form. He suggests that the child's emergent assertion of independent aesthetic choices in the form of the comic book purchase is typically attended by tensions in the parent-child relationship. Comics, in other words, mark a step towards adulthood that has to be fought for. Crumb was writing in 1967, but the popular stereotype of comics firstly as children's reading and secondly as a somewhat embarrassing, low grade, parentally discouraged form, has proved remarkably enduring.

In the four years in which I have been researching and writing this thesis, I have had occasion to mention it to a fair number of people. Of their various responses, two have come up again and again. The first is a broad smile followed by a barrage of questions, a warm handshake or even, on one occasion, a spontaneous hug. The second is simple puzzlement, a polite version of the response shown by Crumb's angry mother: "Comics? What, you mean like *Superman* or *The Beano*?". These two extremes say a great deal about the place of comics in contemporary culture, and I believe that they point towards a number of issues in comics research.

The first is the exceptional enthusiasm and loyalty that readers of both mainstream and alternative comics feel towards the medium. The decision to buy and read comic books was not only an important identity marker for mid-twentieth-century children, but has remained one for adults throughout the late twentieth century and to the present day. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, the comic has become a form that not only inspires devotion in its readers but seems to engender a feeling of comradeship amongst fellow fans. Throughout my research I have frequently experienced the sense that other readers consider comics consumption to be not just a pastime but a social grouping, and as a new researcher I have been welcomed as a cheerleader for the cause. As Matthew Pustz argues in *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, consumers of comics do not only buy and read the books, but participate in a complex culture of discussion and shared engagement with the narratives and characters.² This state of affairs has several consequences, not least the tendency of comics writers to address their community as Crumb does here, including in-jokes and self-reflexive remarks in the

2 Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

comics themselves. As an academic reader, and one relatively new to the form, I am necessarily on the edge of such a community, and this inevitably conditions my readings of comics. I will try to be sensitive to this problem, paying close attention to the reception of these comics and the reading practices they encourage.

The second common response underlines the enduring popular association of the comics form with certain types of content, usually of a juvenile or adolescent nature. The reputation of comics has often suffered from the careless conflation of form and content. Even now, one occasionally finds the medium described as a genre, as though all comics had agreed to conform to a shared set of narrative conventions, like romance or crime fiction.³ In popular perception, comics are often associated with particular genres of narrative – children’s humour or superhero adventure, for example. Attempts to refute this assumption have not always been terribly helpful, often relying on a simplistically celebratory announcement that comics “aren’t just for kids any more”. However, it would be equally inaccurate to attempt a complete dissociation of form and content, because the development of adult comics over the past forty years has been strongly conditioned by both historical factors and the technical realities of the comic book. To some extent this is the case with all media: there are good reasons why one does not find many car chases in novels, or extended, introspective first person ramblings in film. It is my contention that personal identity has been a central preoccupation in alternative comics over the last forty years, and that the reasons for this are embedded in comics’ history and the specificities of the medium itself. In particular, issues surrounding the role of childhood and adolescent experience in the development of adult identity have been notably prevalent. The form of the comic book conditions the content, leading authors and artists to represent selfhood in ways that are unique to this medium. This will be the central argument of my thesis, and in order to develop it I need to do two things: firstly, to expand upon the terms “identity”, “form” and “alternative comics” as they will be understood here, and secondly to place my research in relation to current scholarship on the historical and technical aspects of the comics form.

3 See, for example, Alice Walton, “Graphic novelist defends value of comics genre”. *Yale Daily News*, February 5th 2007. <<http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/19741>>

Identity

The concept of identity covers a vast area of contemporary scholarship and is studied in a wide variety of fields from political science to anthropology.⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, three particular definitions concern me: philosophical, social and psychological.⁵ The first, and perhaps most familiar to recent literary theory, can be found in those nineteenth and twentieth-century theories which sought to destabilise the supposed Cartesian construct of a rational, coherent subject capable of fully understanding its own existence. From Foucault and Nietzsche to proponents of Marxist and feminist theory, a very broad range of writers have argued that the ground on which selfhood is constructed and understood is less solid than had previously been assumed.⁶ Directly or indirectly, these ideas have had an incalculable effect on the creation and interpretation of art and literature, and their influence permeates this thesis. Secondly, from a sociological perspective, individual identity is defined in relation to others, for example through the decision to place oneself with, or against, a particular social group. As I have suggested, readers and writers of comic books often consider themselves part of a comics community, or more specifically, a sub-group within the wider community of comics readers (Marvel fans or female zine producers, for example). Many have also defined themselves by negation of a perceived social orthodoxy (in the case of underground and punk-influenced artists, for example, it is often easier to say what they oppose than what they favour). Likewise within the comics themselves, writers and artists often describe their protagonists as seeking (often with difficulty) to place themselves in a social group, or conversely to define their identity by deliberate removal from a particular community. Thirdly, from a psychological point of view, identity is determined in large part by an individual's past experiences, particularly those of early childhood. In this understanding of identity, memory is of paramount

4 I will use the terms "identity" and "selfhood" interchangeably throughout this thesis, although I recognise that in some fields there are differences between the two (and, indeed, differences between the ways in which each term is used in different disciplines). On the variety of meanings of "self", for example, see Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, "The Self as an Organising Construct in the Behavioural and Social Sciences", in Leary and Tangney, eds. *Handbook of Self and Identity* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 2003) 3-14.

5 I recommend Jane Kroger, *Identity Development: Adolescence Through Adulthood* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007). Part I of this book offers an excellent, accessible summary of the variety of approaches to the study of identity.

6 A selection of these views can be found in any number of collections. I use Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

importance: what we recall, or have suppressed, determines our ability to function in the present. I will shortly discuss the importance of cognitive theories of memory to the reading of comics in particular.

Each of these three versions of identity will become prominent in different areas of this thesis. The view that human perception and systems of interpretation are unreliable and arbitrary will be seen particularly in the work of Dave Sim; the artist's desire to define herself and her work through association with like-minded members of a creative community will dominate my reading of Julie Doucet; my chapters on Lynda Barry, and on Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman, will centre on the power and resilience of childhood memory. Needless to say, however, these three definitions of identity are not mutually exclusive, and all three will, to some extent, inform each chapter of this thesis.

The form of alternative comics

Turning to the term "alternative comic", one finds that this category is so broad and so widely contested that it makes more sense to suggest a set of commonly shared characteristics than to insist upon a rigid definition. As this thesis will demonstrate, alternative comics grew out of the underground scene of the 1960s and 70s, and the term itself appeared during the 80s as small press and other independent comics became increasingly diverse. The people who write these tend to define their work by its distinction from a perceived mainstream of superheroes, formulaic sci-fi or fantasy, and children's humour. The range of visual styles and narrative content found in alternative comics is infinitely broader and often more imaginative than in the comics produced by the mainstream publishers. These alternative comics are generally created and controlled by one or two people, they tend to be printed largely in black and white, they sell in relatively small numbers, and they are either self-published or produced by small independent publishers.⁷ However, the adoption of "alternative", adult themes by mainstream publishers, notably DC's Vertigo line, has begun to disrupt the distinction between alternative and mainstream.

⁷ I am indebted to Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs' *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to the Present Day* (Brighton: Slab-o-Concrete, 2000) for this definition of alternative comics. I also recommend Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon, 1996) and *Adult Comics* (London: Routledge, 1993) as general introductions to this field.

I use the term “form” to describe the specificities of the comic book medium as it is used by each artist and writer. The style of drawing, the use or rejection of traditional comics conventions, the choices of colour, panel layout, the format of the book itself, production values, and dozens of other aesthetic and publishing choices are all integral to the narrative of a comic and condition the way in which it is perceived by readers. Throughout this thesis I will argue that these choices condition comics creators’ representations of identity.

One particular aspect of comics form deserves further attention here because it has been instrumental in recent changes in the market for comic books. Many of those who wish to promote alternative comics and see them included in the category of respectable literature favour the term “graphic novel”. This magical phrase often seems to catalyse a mental shift in new readers and commentators: novels and graphic design are both familiar and respectable areas of research, a long way from flimsy, faded *Dandy* or garish *Spiderman* comics. The term is certainly a handy marketing tool, but its use is problematic because it almost always relies on the misconception that there is a qualitative difference between book-length and short-form comics narrative.⁸ The overwhelming success of the term betrays book-buyers’ deep-seated belief that size is important. Outside the community of comics fans, it is widely assumed that both adult fiction and full length “novels” in comic book form are relatively new developments. The reality, of course, is rather more complicated. Both a wide range of adult themes and a variety of narrative lengths and formats had been available to comics readers for much of the twentieth century. By the time Will Eisner used the term “graphic novel” to publish *A Contract with God* (1978), it had been in circulation amongst comics fans for years, and Sabin dates the origin of the graphic novel itself to children’s fiction of the 1940s.⁹ What is undoubtedly true is that comics hit the mainstream press in the late 80s, and were it not for the resultant expansion of comics’ readership it is highly unlikely that I would be writing this thesis. Whilst I will avoid the term “graphic novel”, I wish to draw attention to its prevalence because of its effect on comics research: it is impossible, in this field, to avoid constantly encountering the opinion that textual format matters, that it affects and even defines interpretation of a visual narrative.

8 Hatfield shares my reservations about the use of the term “graphic novel”. See Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) 5-6.

9 Sabin (1993) 94.

Comics scholars are always already students of book history, and in the chapters that follow I will necessarily pay attention to the size, shape and publication format of the comics I discuss.¹⁰

I will examine the works of eight authors or artists: Robert Crumb; Dave Sim; Lynda Barry; Julie Doucet; Alan Moore; the creative partnership of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; and Chris Ware. Unlike the creators of mainstream comics who typically work in large teams, most of these work alone, writing and drawing, inking, colouring and lettering the comics themselves. (The main exceptions are artist Dave McKean, writer Neil Gaiman, and writer Alan Moore.) I have chosen to centre my argument on these particular writers and artists for a number of reasons. Each of these creators has produced a substantial and influential body of work over a significant period. All have been influenced by the innovations of the underground, and in this close-knit field, many have also been influenced by each other. These creators exemplify a number of key trends in the representation of selfhood over the past forty years. However, it is worth saying that the range of alternative comics relating to identity is vast, and many major authors and artists working within the period have necessarily been excluded. Faced with such an open field my choices have inevitably been conditioned by personal taste, and there are many creators, such as Chester Brown, whose exclusion from this thesis is the unfortunate result of limited space. In particular I have overlooked the many creators who have produced only one substantial comic, and it is with great regret that I exclude such works as Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) and Debbie Dreschler's *Daddy's Girl* (1996), for example. Although my focus remains on works written in English, the close communication between British, US and Canadian authors and artists has led me to select creators from all three countries. (By way of example, one might note that of the creators discussed here, the only ones to have worked for mainstream US publisher DC Comics are Moore, Gaiman and McKean, all of whom are British.)

The chronological arrangement of chapters in this thesis is important because, as will become apparent, I intend to chart a development in the field of alternative comics, in which Robert Crumb's innovations in the 1960s have been of incalculable importance. All of the writers following Crumb have, to some extent,

¹⁰ On the subject of terminology, I will generally avoid the term "text" when referring to a comic, unless I specifically mean the words rather than the images. Although the term is in common usage amongst literary critics, many scholars consider it inappropriate for comics because it appears to privilege the verbal over the visual.

been influenced not only by his work but by the social and political events of the 1960s and 70s which surrounded the development and subsequent decline of the underground press. Because the chapters that follow are arranged chronologically, I will present historical sources as I go along. However, it is necessary at this stage to sketch out the current state of criticism with regard to the technical aspects of comics, and to locate my own argument in relation to contemporary scholarship. In particular I wish to point up some challenges posed by the study of comics, and to explain my appropriation of a wide range of critical discourses, most notably aspects of film theory and cognitive psychology.

Comics research

Comics scholars come from a variety of academic disciplines, and bring a broad range of methodological approaches to the form. The comic book is a narrative medium typically combining word and image to create an integrated visual language. By my reckoning, the perfect comics academic would need at least five areas of expertise: art history, film, literature (preferably in several languages including French and Japanese), semiotics and cultural studies. My background is a literary one, a fact that will inevitably colour my approach to the form, but I will draw on a range of critical discourses including art history and film theory as well as the growing body of critical writing devoted to comics. I have been influenced by neoformalist film theory, especially the “pro-filmic” approach suggested by Martin Barker in his *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis* (2000). Barker’s approach is a deliberate rejection of the heavy-handed theory dominant in the 1980s and 90s, particularly psychoanalytic theory as applied to films. Barker emphasises the importance of active audience engagement with films, and strongly opposes any notion of passive audiences being influenced *by* films. Focusing primarily on popular cinema, Barker stresses the impossibility of separating emotive responses from aesthetic evaluation of films. If an analysis of audience participation and response is important in film criticism, it is doubly so for the interpretation of comics, because as I suggested above, comics readers form an unusually close bond with their chosen medium and tend to have a strong awareness of cultural meanings of their readership.

Notwithstanding Barker’s aversion to psychoanalytic criticism in film

studies, psychoanalysis will still be of considerable value to the argument that follows. However, classic psychoanalysis deals primarily with the unconscious, with repressed memories, dreams, fantasies and unacknowledged desires and drives. What psychoanalysis generally does not do is engage with consciously recalled mental images; for this it is necessary to turn to cognitive psychology, a field that so far has had very little to do with literary theory. Catherine Keenan's doctoral thesis, *Memory, History and the Contemporary Novel* (1999) and Nicola King's *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) both offer helpful signposts in this approach, particularly in relation to narratives of personal history and traumatic experience. It is probable that cognitive theory may be of use to literary criticism in ways that have yet to be explored fully. However, the use of cognitive theory in relation to comics is particularly relevant because of the similarities between the fractured and hybrid nature of the comics page and the mind itself.

It is my view that the characteristically hybrid quality of the comic book and the non-realist form of the cartoon drawing make comics an ideal medium for the exploration of subjective states of consciousness. Various comics creators and critics have said things to this effect, often with tantalising brevity.¹¹ Most notably, Art Spiegelman claims in his lecture, "Comix 101":

...comics echo the way the brain works. People think in iconographic images, not in holograms, and people think in bursts of language, not in paragraphs.¹²

Spiegelman is a writer and artist, not an academic: he has had neither the need nor the opportunity to substantiate his hypothesis through research. There is still no book-length work which engages fully with this view, but several critics have made helpful steps in that direction. The first, and most well known (although by no means the most accurate) is Scott McCloud. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud argues:

11 Lisa Coppin, for example, asserts that "it is... all but a coincidence that Freud used to define the unconscious as a picture story. Maybe in the beginning of the twenty first century, he would have compared it to a comic, maybe even after reading *From Hell*". Lisa Coppin, "Looking Inside Out: The Vision as Particular Gaze in *From Hell*", *Image and Narrative* 5 (January 2003). <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/uncanny/lisacoppin.htm>>

12 Art Spiegelman, quoted in *CAL Performances Presents*. University of California, Berkeley. 24th February 2004. <http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu/presents/season/2003/program_notes/pdf_files/pn_spiegelman.pdf> Spiegelman has never published this statement in print, and says that his talks on the subject are "extemporised variations on a theme". Personal email, 10th July 2008.

When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail. // Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement... a sense of shape... a sense of general placement. // Something as simple and basic – as a cartoon. // Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. // But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself. // I believe this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part.¹³

Leaving aside the unacknowledged centrality of childhood perceptions here, which I will come to shortly, I suggest that McCloud starts on the right track, talking about the mental processes through which readers interpret comics. However, as his argument develops he places too much emphasis on the questionable assertion that the comics reader *identifies* more closely with the protagonist of a comic than readers or viewers of other media.¹⁴ Nevertheless, he is right to suggest that there is something about the comics form that makes it uniquely well-suited to the mimicry of mental processes. More recently, and much more helpfully, Richard Walsh has used cognitive theory to talk about the role of medium in narrative, with particular reference to comics. Walsh denies that the process of reading sequential images as narrative is necessarily obvious, and suggests that the human brain performs the task of transforming the “undifferentiated flux of sense impressions” into a narrative. He writes:

Flux is what we encounter in the world... Representation is one of the ways in which we busy ourselves, an encoding process of cognitive mapping that, as such, is semiotic: its power is that of assimilation, primarily by reducing the chaos of sense data to comprehensible terms. Representation always functions within some system of signs, the interpretants of which are not the real, but other signs. This pursuit of signs is a function of cognitive processing...¹⁵

Walsh is taking issue here with one of McCloud's other well-known theories, the

13 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993) 35-6. Throughout this thesis I will use / to indicate a new speech balloon within a panel, and // to indicate a new panel.

14 Martin Barker takes issue with the idea of identification in *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

15 Richard Walsh, “The Narrative Imagination Across Media” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006) 858.

concept of “closure”:¹⁶ McCloud had argued that the mind closes the gaps between panels, creating a “continuous unified reality”¹⁷; Walsh agrees with him up to a point, but rightly stops short of saying that this narrative processing results in a smooth and seamless reading experience. I want to expand on Walsh’s argument because his point that the mind, like the comic, is in the business of “reducing the chaos of sense data to comprehensible terms” is central to my thesis.

Comics and memory

Most modern psychologists adhere to a multi-store model of memory which distinguishes between short term and long term memory, although many critics adapt this model with various theories about the unity or otherwise of each type of memory and the modes of communication between the two.¹⁸ Within the category of long term memory, neuropsychologist Larry Squire distinguishes between declarative and procedural memory, the former indicating knowledge *about* something, the latter referring to knowledge of *how to do* something.¹⁹ Within the declarative memory, Endel Tulving identifies episodic memory, which comprises the recollection of specific synchronic events such as autobiographical incidents, and semantic memory, which comprises general knowledge not attached to a specific experience.²⁰ Semantic knowledge includes both the use of language and the understanding of other codes and systems such as mathematics. The point of all this is that in memory, as in comics, word and image cooperate, storing and conveying different types of information as part of an integral network of signs.

Various critics have theorised the way in which this amalgam of forms becomes an integral visual language in comics, and I would like briefly to outline the models proposed by Mario Saraceni and Scott McCloud. In his thesis, *Language*

16 See also Ole Frahm, “Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody” in Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000) 177-91, and *The Comics Journal* 211 (April 1999), subtitled “The Scott McCloud Issue”, in which numerous critics address this and other aspects of McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*.

17 McCloud (1993) 67.

18 Alan Baddeley, *Human Memory: Theory and Practice* (Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990) is a useful general introduction to the field. See also Elizabeth Ligon Bjork and Robert A. Bjork, eds. *Memory* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996).

19 Larry R. Squire, *Memory and Brain* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

20 E. Tulving, “Episodic and Semantic Memory” in E. Tulving and W. Donaldson, eds. *Organization of Memory* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1972).

Beyond Language: Comics as Verbo-Visual Texts, Saraceni proposes a scale with iconic signs (such as photographs) at one end and symbolic signs (such as the Latin alphabet) at the other. Somewhere in the middle come Chinese ideograms, Egyptian hieroglyphs, stick figures and cartoon characters. He introduces the concept of a *semiotic blend* in the relationship between word and image, which he explains as

...where the verbal and the pictorial elements acquire some of the characteristics of each other: the words are “seen” as pictures and the pictures are “read” as words.²¹

(I would add in passing that this need not discount wordless comics. They have fewer signs at the pure “symbolic” end of the scale, but rely heavily on other repeated images and motifs.) Saraceni’s argument has the advantages of clarity and scholarly rigour that Scott McCloud lacks, although his interest is in semiotics, and he does not extend his observations into the realms of psychology or literary theory. In *Understanding Comics* McCloud begins with a scale similar to Saraceni’s (although, confusingly, he uses the term “iconic” to refer to the kind of less-than-realistic image that Saraceni denotes as “symbolic”, setting it against “realistic” images at the other end of the scale). However, he then introduces a third dimension, that of “non-iconic abstraction”, in which the image makes no attempt at mimesis and the physical marks on the picture surface are seen *as marks*. I will discuss the role of abstraction in my chapters on Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; for the moment I will say only that at this point McCloud’s argument becomes confused and, having pinpointed the theoretical importance of abstract form, he never fully engages with its role in comics narrative.

A further analogy between comics and memory has to do with the simplification and encoding of information. No experience enters even short term memory in its entirety; the necessary information is filed and the rest is discarded. Memories can be organised in an endless variety of ways, and as F. C. Bartlett first proposed in the 1930s they are encoded by the intermediary device of the schema.²² A schema is a pattern that helps the mind to codify and explain experiences,

21 Mario Saraceni, *Language Beyond Language: Comics as Verbo-Visual Texts*. Dissertation, University of Nottingham (2000) 43. I recommend Saraceni’s doctoral thesis, rather than the oversimplified book that followed (*The Language of Comics* (2003)), on the semiotics of the comics form.

22 F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

mediating perception in order to make sense of the world. Their organisational function is crucial but they can also be responsible for the distortion and misinterpretation of events. (My ability to conceive of the abstract concept “coat” is based on an ability to conflate the characteristics of numerous different coats, but it also accounts for my inaccurate memory of which coat I was wearing on a particular occasion).²³ Comics images are likewise characteristically stylised and simplified: it is a commonplace amongst “how to” manuals on the subject that excessively cluttered or complex images make for a confusing comic.²⁴ Furthermore, comics rely heavily on accepted conventions of representation such as speech balloons, which govern the relationships between different kinds of information. In other words, the interpretative conventions adopted in the reading of a comic are very similar to the schemas with which we make sense of perceptual information in the first place.

Crucially, schemata are instrumental in the formation of memories into self-narratives. Bartlett’s most well-known study involved a Native American folk tale, “The War of the Ghosts”, which participants were asked to remember and re-tell at intervals.²⁵ The respondents tended to rationalise the events of this strange, fractured story, making its details more familiar and its logic more coherent than in the original. Likewise, autobiographical memories are encoded into stories which form a clear and comprehensible self-narrative: material which does not fit is adapted, misremembered or edited out. The importance of such edited narratives in a therapeutic context has been current since Freud, but narrative has been particularly prevalent in psychology since the 1980s, partly thanks to Theodore Sarbin’s essay “The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology”.²⁶ We tell ourselves stories about our experiences, and through these stories we define a sense of personal and social identity.

It is also worth noting that with the concept of the schema, cognitive psychology starts to move towards psychoanalysis, because the connections

23 For a useful illustration of the working of schemata, particularly in recall distortion, see William F. Brewer and James C. Treyns, “Role of Schemata in Memory for Places” *Cognitive Psychology* 13 (1981) 207-30.

24 See, for example, Alan McKenzie, *How to Draw and Sell Comic Strips* (3rd edition) (London: Titan, 2005) 80.

25 Bartlett (1932) 63-94.

26 Theodore Sarbin, “The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology”, in Sarbin (ed.), *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986). See also Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), and Paulo P. P. Machado and Óscar F. Gonçalves, eds., *Narrative in Psychotherapy: The Emerging Metaphor*, spec. issue of *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 55.10. (October 1999).

that the memory makes between units of information are not always conscious. Experimental studies demonstrate that people tend to “cluster” similar experiences, and the notorious unreliability of eyewitness testimony provides ample evidence of the danger of distortion, particularly of traumatic memories.²⁷ Information stored is not necessarily information available for recall: studies of both semantic and episodic memory demonstrate the existence of suppressed, half-remembered information, emotional memories and implicit knowledge. Experimental studies may note the distortion of memories, but to speculate about why an individual misremembers in a particular way is to move into psychoanalytic territory. Of the comics discussed here, several contain long sequences which explicitly narrate the protagonists’ consciously recalled memories, and many feature sequences of unconscious mental imagery: dreams, hallucinations, fantasies or visionary states. All drift from real to unreal, conscious to unconscious recollection or thought, with little or no demarcation of a boundary between the two. Therefore in my critical approach to these comics I find it necessary to adapt both cognitive theory and psychoanalysis, addressing each text on its own terms.

Gender and sexuality

I wish to outline two significant threads in my reading of identity in alternative comics: gender and sexuality on the one hand and childhood and memory on the other. Until the mid twentieth century the reading and writing of comics was not a specifically gendered activity, but in the latter part of the twentieth century a number of historical factors conspired to render comic book production and consumption stereotypically white male pursuits. I will discuss the predominance of male authors, readers and protagonists more fully when I address the works of Lynda Barry and Julie Doucet, and I will also discuss these women’s very different attitudes to feminism. However, the problem is not simply one of exclusion of women; as my opening chapters will demonstrate, many creators of alternative comics have sought to valorise white heterosexual masculinity and have tended to claim for white males the status of a socially marginal group. Some have placed

²⁷ See Phil Mollon, *Remembering Trauma: A Psychotherapist’s Guide to Memory and Illusion* (London and Philadelphia: Whurr, 2002), David C. Rubin, ed. *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979).

themselves in direct opposition to feminism, appropriating the figure of the heroic artist to strengthen the position of the lonely, white, comic book reading male. Others, whilst not opposing feminism or directly addressing gender issues, nevertheless produce narratives that feature isolated male protagonists faced with a threatening or alienating world.

As my first chapter will demonstrate, a key part of Robert Crumb's rebellion against the enforced childishness of comics under the Comics Code was the expression of his sexuality in all its grotesque extremity. In choosing the comics form to talk about his sexual fantasies, frustrations and failures, Crumb started a trend that has continued to the present day, and significantly, it has continued through a period in which sexuality has become an increasingly important identity marker. Many of the comics I will discuss here are sexually explicit, and the impulse to rebel against restrictions on what may be represented has always been important in alternative comics. Partly owing to their historical links with self-publishing, alternative comics have a tradition of representing ideas and images that would be considered unprintable by many trade publishers. Masturbation anecdotes, for example, have become a traditional staple of alternative comics, and as my reading of Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's *Lost Girls* (2006) will show, the desire to use the comic book medium to push the limits of permissible representation of sexuality has continued to the present day.

Preoccupation with gender identity and sexuality are hallmarks of adolescence, and it will become apparent that the writers and artists addressed in this thesis are primarily – although not exclusively – concerned with young adult subjectivity. This observation leads back to the second major thread that I will follow throughout this thesis: the relationship between comics, childhood and memory.

Childhood and comics

As I noted above, the association of comics and childhood has long been a tiresome stereotype from which comics scholars and fans have been trying to escape. However, to deny that comics are fundamentally a juvenile form is not to ignore the prevalence of childhood, and particularly adult memories and revised narratives of childhood, in alternative comics from the 1960s to the present day. The comics form has had a long and complex history of association with childhood, particularly in the

mainstream US comics industry of the twentieth century as described by cultural historians such as Bradford Wright.²⁸ Significantly, many writers of alternative comics have engaged with this history when addressing the role of childhood experience in shaping and defining adult lives. It is perhaps surprising that so little substantial work has been done in this field. Charles Hatfield marks out a gap in current research and suggests one explanation for this problem:

Unfortunately, the recent reevaluation of comics in the United States has, to some extent, been based on a denial of childhood and childishness. Popular journalism, review criticism, and academic study have all partaken of the idea that “comics aren’t just for kids anymore” – a cliché that has circulated with teeth-grinding regularity since the 1980s.²⁹

None of the authors whose work I will discuss here are writing for children, but all of them, without exception, touch upon childhood or adolescence as a key element of their expression of adult subjectivity. Most represent childhood not as an idyllic, romanticised state, but as a period in which adult selfhood is in the process of being formed and defined. For many of these writers, as for cognitive theorists, the real reason for remembering and narrating the past is a desire to deal with the present. We define ourselves by what we can remember, however distorted and schematised that remembered past might be. Freud generally believed that childhood memories are fixed, albeit locked away in the unconscious, and often used archaeological metaphors to describe their recovery through psychoanalysis. In 1909, for example, he reported a conversation with a patient:

I made some short observations upon *the psychological differences between the conscious and the unconscious*, and upon the fact that everything conscious was subject to a process of wearing-away, while what was unconscious was relatively unchangeable; and I illustrated my remarks by pointing to the antiques standing about in my room. They were, in fact, I said, only objects found in a tomb, and their burial had been their preservation: the destruction of Pompeii was only beginning now that it had been dug up.³⁰

28 Wright discusses the commercial US comic book industry from 1933 to 1992. See Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

29 Charles Hatfield, “Comic Art, Children’s Literature, and the New Comics Studies” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30.3 (September 2006) 360-82. See also “Comics and Childhood”, a special issue of *ImageText* 3.3 (Summer 2007), introduced by Cathlena Martin and Charles Hatfield.

30 Sigmund Freud, “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1909), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. 10, 176. See also the case history of Elisabeth von R. in “Studies on Hysteria” (1895) *Standard Edition* Vol. 2, 139.

In direct opposition to this view, Bartlett's idea of the schema led to a reconceptualisation of the relationship between childhood memories and later, adult perceptions. Ulric Neisser and others argued that the schemas into which perceptions and memories are organised are not only constantly conditioning our interpretations of the present, but are themselves always being adapted in the light of subsequent experiences.³¹ The traffic between adult subjectivity and childhood memory is a two-way stream, with the present and past not only interdependent but constantly rewriting one another.

The recollection of childhood in the definition of adult selfhood is particularly pertinent in narratives of selfhood in comics form because many, if not all, of the authors whose work I will discuss here report having read comics as children, sometimes with obsessive enthusiasm. Robert Crumb produced his first comic in primary school; Alan Moore's career plan, aged seven, was to "put on a costume and fight crime".³² From *Archie* to *Spiderman*, from *Whizzer and Chips* to *Nikki*, comics and kids have a history.³³ The result is an alternative comics tradition that forever has one eye on the past. Creators of alternative comics often subvert or satirise the comics they read in childhood: funny animal comics are central to the grotesque carnival of Crumb's work, while Chris Ware's comics are haunted by a sinister superhero father figure. The values and conventions of these childhood comics merge with other early memories, conditioning the development of the reader's adult identity.

More generally, picture books are a part of childhood experience, part of how we learn to schematise experience and think about narrative. In a discussion of the near-impossibility of replacing books with electronic reading devices, Geoffrey Nunberg stresses the importance of the physicality of books in the reading process, and particularly in the early stages of learning to read. He points out, "It is unlikely

31 Ulric Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Freeman, 1976) 55-7. See also Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International University Press, 1952) and *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

32 R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics*, ed. Gary Groth et al. (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1987-2005). Vol. 1, vii; Stewart Lee, "Chain Reaction". Interview with Alan Moore. 27th January 2005. <<http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=4533>>

33 Surprisingly, there are no thorough histories of children's comics per se. Sections on children's comics in Sabin (1996) are helpful. See also Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 2001) and Paul Gravett, *Great British Comics: Celebrating a Century of Ripping Yarns and Wizard Wheezes* (London: Aurum, 1996).

that virtual reality will soon be developed to the point of being able to render *Pat the Bunny* in all its sensory complexity."³⁴ It should already be clear that the physicality of the comic book form will play a key part in my argument. With specific reference to childhood, however, it is worth noting that it is almost impossible to read a comic to someone else. As Crumb demonstrated in his advertisement for *Zap*, comics represent a later point in childhood, the stage at which individuals growing up in the mid to late twentieth century were capable of choosing, buying and asserting their right to possess their own reading matter. Childhood comics existed at a crucial stage in these creators' development, and they participated in the formation of adult identity not just through their content but by the very fact of their physical existence.

Identity is a complex and multifarious construction, and as I have outlined, there will be a number of threads to the argument that follows. Ultimately, my contention is this: there are ways in which writers and artists represent selfhood in alternative comics that one does not, and indeed *could* not encounter in any other narrative medium. By tracing the idiosyncrasies of such representation, and the reasons behind them in some detail, and particularly by identifying resemblances between the works of key creators, it may be possible to arrive at new insights into this diverse and vibrant form.

34 Geoffrey Nunberg. "The Places of Books in the Age of Electronic Reproduction." *Representations* 42 (1993) 17.