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Doctoral Dissertation

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Bodily Vulnerability in Non-Fiction Comics:
Interactions among Artist, Object and Reader

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Summary of Theses

The goals of the dissertation

This dissertation has been motivated by a single sentence of Jared Gardner’s 2011 article, “Storylines.” Gardner claims that “the line [is] arguably the most undertheorized element in comics scholarship and one that has no neat equivalent in any other narrative form” (53). My research is aimed to be a contribution to an emerging new direction in comics scholarship devoted to the study of the line and of the drawn nature of comics (cf. Nick Sousanis, Unflattening, Harvard University Press, 2015; Hillary Chute, Disaster Drawn, Harvard University Press, 2016; Simon Grennan, A Theory of Narrative Drawing, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2017). I approach the act of drawing as an emphatically embodied process, and I examine the birth and the role of the line in creating narratives in contemporary American non-fiction comics. I insert the meaning making and ontological work (Rawson) that materializes in the drawer’s gestures and lines into a phenomenological and discursive model similar to Vivian Sobchack’s model in her discussion of film. I approach comics as a means of interaction between drawer and reader, which manifests via interaction with the comics as object. In this interaction, apart from relying on their visual capacities, drawer and reader also take part with their bodily gestures. My aim is to examine the line by positioning drawing as an embodied meaning making and interpretive process, which is part of a dynamic and embodied communicative process with the reader. I also claim that in non-fiction contexts the line is capable of expressing ethical encounters and can be expressive of the performance of vulnerability. By focusing on comics autobiography in Chapter One and Two, and on comics reportage in the second part of this dissertation, I examine aspects of the experience of vulnerability in the light of drawing. A novelty of this dissertation is its departure from well-studied aspects of comics non-fiction: instead of discussing authenticity in non-fiction narratives and allusions to photography in visuality, comics autobiography and reportage are approached as performances of the mechanical, embodied, creative and interpretive processes of drawing. A further contribution of this dissertation to
comics scholarship is its integration of questions, points of departure, and results from the study of art and visual culture (Norman Bryson, James Elkins, Paul Klee, Karen Kurczynski, W. J. T. Mitchell, Philip Rawson) into the study of comics.

**Methodology**

My argumentation relies on the concept of bodily vulnerability, and this dissertation is, to my knowledge, the first systematic study of comics and vulnerability. Following Judith Butler, I consider vulnerability a universal experience, which is a prerequisite of ethical encounters (Drichel), and which is dynamic and discursive in nature (Diprose). Vulnerability is always experienced in interaction, as a result of which it can be considered a question which always elicits an answer from one’s partner in a specific interaction. This answer can be either caring or wounding. By claiming that a parallel can be drawn between the embodied and discursive nature of vulnerability and the embodied and discursive nature of comics, I claim that creators of comics non-fiction, who include characters based on themselves in their comics, articulate their own experience of bodily vulnerability in their drawings.

**Structure**

The chapters are organized around issues and questions raised by drawing comics. In Chapter One I discuss the possibility of the drawn line to express, in the context of comics autobiography, a direct link to the person of the drawer. This potentiality of the line is explored with the help of Lynda Barry’s comics and her theories on creation. In contrast to many theoreticians, Barry’s answer is that it is possible to create not only an autobiographically motivated story, but also to draw such a line. By close reading pages by Barry I claim that this deeply autobiographical and self-expressive line is always born out of the drawer’s experience of vulnerability, and that the line created in this way is a separate entity and an equal partner to the artist.

Chapter Two connects elementary features of comics autobiography, namely repeatedly drawing oneself as a character in the panels of comics, to the concept of vulnerability. In Ken Dahl’s illness memoir called *Monsters*, the body of the
autobiographical avatar, that is, of the character based on the drawer, undergoes repeated transformations. As a result, at one point of the story the avatar defines himself as a monster. Based on Margrit Shildrick’s approach of monstrosity and vulnerability as twin concepts, I argue that the experience of vulnerability in illness is only a partial reason for the continuous transformation of the avatar’s body. In Dahl’s comics the creative and dynamic zeal of representation visualizes a further aspect of the experience of vulnerability, namely, being vulnerable to the performative power of the line.

In the second part of the dissertation I discuss Joe Sacco’s comics reportage on the war in Bosnia (1992-1995). Although these narratives center around the alternation between representations of witnesses in the moment of testimony and the representations of their often traumatic memories of war, these works can be related to autobiography, as Sacco draws himself as a character in the stories. In Chapter Four my aim is to approach Sacco’s style from a new perspective. Building on the findings of studies of Sacco’s style which elaborate his attention to detail and his realism, but also parting from them, I investigate the most noticeable non-realistic feature of Sacco’s style, his texture like backgrounds created out of thin parallel lines. I claim that this unique stylistic feature, the laboriously, slowly, sometimes mechanically created hand drawn tactile surface can be considered a symbolic ethical community and a means of dwelling (Diprose) with the subjects of drawing. This way crosshatching becomes a way to experience vulnerability and share it.

In Chapter Four, I approach the same corpus of Sacco’s comics from a different aspect: they are often described as “visceral,” and in this chapter I investigate the reasons contributing to this visceral effect. Sacco openly represents bodies broken by the war, corpses, suffering, and blood. I connect the experience of viscosity to three elements: to the realistic style in representing people and bodies, to disregarding the taboos about representing the inside of the body, and to his special ways to organize his pages. Sacco’s layout and his way to connect text and image build on the increased attention and involvement of the reader, this way bringing the reader closer to the represented narrative.
Results and Further Direction of Study

My dissertation focuses on one participant of the embodied interaction via comics, the drawer. By making inquiries about the reactions of the reader, the last chapter signals an openness in a new, but related direction of study: the ways in which vulnerability, which is articulated and visualized on the pages, creates an embodied and ethical relationship among artist and reader. The dissertation has showed that studying non-fiction comics along with the concept of vulnerability can contribute to our understanding of creating comics and drawing. Using these results as points of departure, I would like to map out two further directions of study. The first direction is to study the ways comics as a material object partakes in the discourse based on vulnerability. The second direction is to study the reader’s involvement in the discourse of vulnerability. This involvement manifests via the reader’s gestures and embodied performance, and only in cases when the reader decides to answer the drawer’s visualized experience of vulnerability. I presume the reader’s touch and posture of the body to be of primary importance in his or her embodied performance of vulnerability.
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A tézisekben hivatkozott irodalom


