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THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

SUMMARY

Scientific advisor:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Ștefan Borbély

Ph.D. Candidate:

Raluca-Ioana Mărginaș

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Summary

The challenge of my doctoral research paper started off by acknowledging the existing tension within the graphic narrative, and thus approaching the visual culture by the means of a new cognitive visuality, in the advent of new spatialities and potential interrogations of this popular culture product. One must admit that exploring this piece of land did not have a visible starting line or even some professional moderators in the earliest stage of my grip study. The chimerical nomenclature of this phenomenon refused to be domesticated. In any case, the properties of the disciplinary object are still quite vaguely defined which implies that a researcher must revisit, reorganize and discipline the graphic narrative’s umbrella term in order to properly investigate comics, strips and graphic novels. Through this reassuring system of dynamics, the simultaneous findings are slowly shaping, giving voice and reason in the midst of culture. This kind of dialogue on the emergence of the phenomenon in the academic field takes the clothing of progressive thinking, and if not so convincing, at least complementary to the Romanian introductory studies on comics, such as Ion Manolescu’s *Comics and the Postmodern Canon* (Cartea Românească, 2011) and Gelu Teampau’s commentaries on the relationship

between *Myth and Comics* (Institutul European, 2012). More to the point, the hybrid character opens up a venue that passes along the two sides of the medium, the verbal and the visual in an architectural configuration of time. The novelty of my research consents its vocabulary in an academic arena, and so, along with the disjunctive and global resignification that both reflects and assists cultural mutation, the pervasiveness requires a transmedial approach (control, impact, context). By extension, the mediations uphold a sustained exercise of discourse internalization. The procedural cognition of narrative symbiosis or, simply grasped, the balancing of qualitative discriminations given by other diachronic definitions and the reader's expectations. I am interested in the strategies by which they survive in popular culture, the means by which comics become literature and transgress fictional boundaries. The ordering is based on the specific formal methods, the industrial practices of popular culture, the message and the way the audience renders it.

The insistent terminology of my considerations comes from the studies of Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (1993), Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices From the Legendary Cartoonist* [1985] (2008) and Pascal Lefèvre with his essay "Narration in Comics" (2000).

The corpus of the study cases is discernible as we skim the structure that consists of nine chapters. The most logical step, "Cognitive Outcomes" starts by defining the third force of the brain and culture connection, cognition. We can observe the blending of narrative structures in a continuous cultural adaptation, narrative criteria and action patterns, reading techniques with intercessions made by Jerome Bruner, Robin Dunbar (the cognitive science perspective), Irit Rogoff, McLuhan (visual culture corner), Linda Hutcheon, Alexandru Ofrim, Clifford Geertz or Charles Taylor, etc., as it seems impossible to understand the public and cultural changes without taking a hold on the medium mechanism through which man carries out its influence. The specificity of the comics medium, the blending of words and pictures becomes animated through a reciprocal and well sustained process of action and reaction, in which words are rendered as images all across the page, and images are textualized. And if popular culture anoints the object with an economic aura we must take into consideration that traditional reading is alienated from the communicative structure. Thus, the relationship between word, image or signification and referent are restructuring towards desire. But what happens in the spurious case of abstract

comics? Situating ourselves on the middle ground of narrative criteria and the representational/nonrepresentational game we can attest that comics studies are an ongoing ride at the border of literature, arts, word and image. Choosing to follow Will Eisner's footsteps in conceptualizing the idea of sequential art, by describing the word-image montage, the reader finds itself in need of simultaneously expressing his visual as well as verbal interpretative abilities. In the vocabulary of art (eg: perspective, symmetry, brush strokes) and the categories of literature (ex: grammar, plot, syntax) we see that this mixing he proposes suggests something that Bart Beaty and Catherine Labio are observing in *Cinema Journal* (2011); something that does not privilege the contemporary graphic novel: visual formulas are modulating the predominant literary element, which leads towards a sad narrowing of the field.

The second chapter entitled "Culture and Transmedia" is entering the practical plane along with Neil Cohn's specialized sentence which claims that language is equivalent to human behavior. Immutably, comics are a social object, a result of two performed behaviors – the act of writing and the making of the drawing. Sequential images have a visual language of their own, where the aforementioned human behaviors are, either deprived of social categorization or invested, in our case, with negative poetics. I gradually tried to step out the formal exile towards the cultural arena. What Chomsky understands by External Language (E-Language), along with the notion of language as a collection of actions and behaviors, a construct independent of the brain's properties, uses a harmonizing grammar far away from Internalized Language (I-Language), constituting the science of the mentally represented language. We have here a mutation worth considering and finely tuned by Cohn in his article "Un-Defining Comics: Separating the cultural from the structural in comics" (2005) – the treating of comics as behavioristic products of visual language.

Next, the reticular structure of cultures and the different significations in popular culture are mounted and inspected in order to get an encompassing view. The ideological intersection which validates or invalidates the products of the popular culture makes itself visible in the 19th century controversial debates through the lenses of Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Walt Whitman, Ortega Y Gasset, Adorno, etc. A spirit which is frequently invoked in the polemics on the subject of comic strips, by claiming that they are part of the inferior strata of society, along with caricature and degrading humor. Then, in the underground culture of the

1960s, as well as the spatially dislocated anarchism of certain graphic novels fueled by the disruptive spirit of comics artists, just like in Arnold's discourse. Identified as intrinsic elements of the middle class individual, slowly becoming a risk and a threat through the all invading masses, the anarchic tentacles are feeding the anxiety of the power system, branding themselves as resistance and applying a constant reassuring of the self against dislocation. While testing a type of solidarity as treatment for the blind spots of the comics medium, found in essentialist definitions or the ideological exclusions of the taste makers, we can admit that studying comics as cultural artifacts shares elements with the revisionist history of a marginal community. The discourse of the comics culture advocates the specific poles through the flexibilization proposed by Charles Taylor in his essay, "The Politics of Recognition", Matthew J. Pustz and Henry Jenkins with *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), as well as the terminological aspects of "cultural convergence" and the "transmedia" concept of "inter-" and "extra-" binding, according to Vandermeersche și Soetaert. Here, Ariel Dorfman's phrase, "the pleasures of the empire" or "the empire's old clothes", used in his article "The Infantilizing of Culture", sets the comics medium on the new peaceful frontier of communication, free commerce and infantilization corrosively felt in the American collective desire (referring to the idea of territorial immensity and uncontained possession, perceived as aggressive but in the same time comfortable in colonizing other nations, as the perfect stimulant which anchors them in a perpetual option for fantasy). A thing which is recognizable in the third chapter of my project, in the case of wrestling and comics, with its sports (entertainment) dimension whose strings are well bent by the colonizing impact seen as an exercise of power. Foucault's identification is based on the inherence of the institution that rates violence and then substitutes this principle with the "weakness-production-profit" one, so familiar to the "imaginary medium of entertainment". This nevertheless extends the commercial horizon and creates a symptomatic state well noted by Daniel MacKay in *The Fantasy Role-playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) and asserted in the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (DC) comics by Dennis O'Neil and Neil Adams. The sliding phrase of Raymond F. Betts, "More of everything, faster and brighter" seems appropriate to the evolution of the global popular culture. Concepts such as "decentering", "fragmentariness", "heterarchy" or "polyculturism" are denying a fixed order of things and a unique way of seeing things, and so, in a capitalist society, people are learning to transpose themselves in different media. Both artifacts of popular culture, the graphic novel and the

Occupy Movement can be interpreted contextually, in the cult of entertainment era and of media biases, as a superhuman response – the profane and cinematic mask of the graphic novel carried out through the structural mediums (as seen in the “Subversive Effect...” chapter). Perhaps with a transgressive agenda to erase the border of fiction and reality, graphic novels, although a product of popular culture, acutely electrify a recovery from an addiction of the system, abandoning “the lowest common denominator” or the “cultural Chernobyl” and favoring certain indexations of freedom which escape institutional control following a postmodern literary criteria. As we deal with a hybrid medium, the visual aspect gives them the subversive tattoo allure, an oppositional sign that breaks any “nuclear family” norm, a way of middle-class protest, selectively accepted by bohemian circles. The countercultural children are adopting them as a marker for the generational gap, thus we must not lose sight of the fact that the narrative of the graphic novel and its visuality is a form of personal independence articulating both bodies and histories.

As they are filming and posting themselves on their personal channel on YouTube, or immortalizing the everyday grumpiness in a meme, various individuals are using digital masks or small gadgets, such as Google Glasses in a “pay-per-gaze” experience. Then, a comparative case of comics reading and Google Glasses (adaptive) experience comes to mind. The present moment takes into consideration alternative languages, new questions, where the old logical positivism is left behind for a more circumstantial type of knowledge, at the brink of the history of art, cinematic studies or mass media. The structures of the culture are consistently circumventing narrative and ideational unity. First of all, there are those images which are acknowledged by their disputed histories, then the critic’s instruments are conditioned by the cultural models, such as narrative and technology. It becomes important to consider the subjective identification criteria (desire, abjection) as a receptive filter and representation model.

The third chapter, “What is an industry? “The Face and the Heel” talks about the utopic and spectacular dimension of the entertainment industry (WWE), the wrestling match of Rey Mysterio and Chris Jericho along with the *Superman versus Muhammad Ali* (1978, DC) comics, through the run downs of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Fredric Jameson, etc. The rampant dynamics of the wrestling games and superhero comics makes the tragic seem overworked. Along this line, the anonymity represents a liberating assumption from the doer and also a

multitude of variables to be analyzed. The mask cuts conformity, implying transition, metamorphosis, irony or using nicknames. The game, the integral element of human nature, incorporates this merry-go-round move between image and reality, familiar to many antique rituals, as Bakhtin observes. The diegesis of a comics storyworld, the role playing and the complicated and serialized plot of a wrestling game are a perpetual negotiation ground. Huinziga's magical circle of the game holds the possibility to be translated according to the endogenous rules. The "Blaxploitation" term that denotes the 1970-1975 period of action low budget movies with a black hero, of course, also envelops a short run superhero comics series. Daniel Leab calls this type of hero "Superspade", naming it after an obscure hero from the ghetto that fights against the system and identified in *Superman versus Muhammad Ali* (1978) by Dennis O'Neil și Neal Adams. We come to find out that the comics series is a mixture of blaxploitation elements from popular movies of the time and mainstream superhero prototypes in an American integrationist political outcome. The subchapters „Spectacle and Carnival” and „Masquerade” are playing along with the idea of utopic entertainment, Peter Brook's „rough theatre”, the *kayfabe* pact of wrestling (an old carnivalesque term which means “keep secret”) and the sexualized dimension of mainstream comics. The parody dimension of wrestling and the correspondence of the *kayfabe* element with the tacit pact between the reader and the fictional world of comics can be situated in the contradictory nature of entertainment. Here, equality predominates, rampancy, the collaboration of ideas, primitivism, collective laughter, everything well orchestrated in an oscillation between what is verisimilar and what is unreal. Language abandons orthodoxy and become injurious, ironic just like the “street wise” ghetto lines of the character of Muhammad Ali are reruns of certain Blaxploitation movies. Our short diachronic travel demonstrates that the show transforms itself in a finely fashioned magic circle of play. We are witnessing the parkour of an industry where the comics artists/writers are working for a pretty transparent capitalist system and where the most available proofs are the stereotypical characters and the artificial aspect. Not more than an extension of this western assertion, the spectator or the reader consumes the needed experience by the system's terms. The tendency of exploiting the black man, the symbol of Muhammad Ali, denies any validity on other social levels, although the participation is massively encouraged – “we can all create a new consensus”. The fictional game entices us with abundance and freedom to walk around and so the reader steps in without constraints and delights himself with happy ending conventions. The social

gratification is cleverly transposed in personal terms, a pure space of escapism that becomes relevant according to its endogenous rules and formal aspects. The only one who refuses to make any compromises and to disconnect de undifferentiated magma of the fictional game is the one who exposes the puppeteer and refuses to remain inert in a sequential cliché – the nihilist. After a postmodern feminist approach on exposing the female wrestling masquerade and the hypersexualisation of female superheroes in comics, using concepts such as “epistemophilia”, borrowed from Peter Brooks and his *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (1993), Laura Mulvey and other considerations on „shero-es” with Trina Robbins, David Farber (ex: Barbarella, the pilot episode of *Star Trek*) we may say that the victimization syndrome coined by Anita McDaniel “women/girlfriends in refrigerators” is highly recognizable in *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland. Barbara Gordon, the character in question, doesn’t bring out of the fog the phenomenon of the graphic novel but places it on a „theme-park-ride-comics-adventure”, held by an industry which is desperate to create new genres such as *New Adult* or *Young Adult*. Also, this intermittent fluctuation demonstrates that there is still a dependency generated by the system through the validation and the categorization of taste in comics culture, seen up to a point as an alternative, and only countercultural when the graphic novel claims its (not just commercial) value.

Another interesting thing that the cognitive wiring reveals is the fact that the narrative, meaning the way we read comics or watch a wrestling game, is altering the reader’s experience. Victor Nell and his essay “The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure: Needs and Gratifications” (1988) provides us the practical kit. The resulting satisfaction implies a ludic reading specific to commercial fictions. The entertainment industry is full of such nonhermeneutical narratives, and so the professor’s studies remind us about the viability of fiction, and also about the nonfictional narrative. The distillation of the fictional identity with the biographical aspect is a commonly used gimmick in wrestling. The reclassification of the wrestlers on highly polarized roles, following a social pattern is vibrating through the phantasmagoric travesty, the recycled scenarios and the caricature corporeality creates, along the very vivid atemporality, a confirmation of the superhero in the arena of the public, perceptible game.

The fourth chapter, “Contiguity: The Superhero Ideology” and “A Superhero’s Mission” can be traced also in the escapist register but it actually traces a dialogue with a different

mythopoetic run. I chose to work with Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (2004), Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal* (2011), Peter Coogan and its *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006), Jason BeDuhn in detecting the Manichean nuances of the hero's imaginary, also Bertrand Russell in facing the hero's "new responsibility" with examples from Spider-Man, Batman, Superman. The mask shows indetermination through isolation versus mediation, counting on the imperative of secrecy and the open invitation addressed to the reader/spectator to see who is under the mask. The costume is claiming a certain discipline, an appropriateness from the bearer in defining or corrupting his identity.

The fifth chapter discusses the first graphic novel, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller, attesting an historical and cultural post-nuclear sensibility. The voices of critics such as Lois Gresh and Robert Weinberg with *The Science of Superheroes* (2002) and Jean Baudrillard show us the role of the gadget, the corporeal avatars of the American culture in shaping a new type of superhero. The identification of the reader with the gadgeteer hero grants Russell's third condition on the functionality of a state, and that is the opportunity for initiative (the other two are utility and security). We encounter all those elements that stimulate the individual towards change in the dystopian vision of TDKR. When the gadget proves itself useful in handling a hopeless situation, it really can be called "true" as "warranted assertibility", and thus the hero's power becomes relevant by augmenting.

It must be stated that the methodology assumes an inductive examination of the comics frames. Each sequential layout of frames is about cross lines between the syntagmatic level, that is selecting the visible through cinematic techniques (Peer Peterson, Slavoj Žižek, Ranciere and Elliot with *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009)) and the paradigmatic one, with potential images. The intentional rhetoric and strategy are the ways in which a can deconstruct the monomyth already established by Robert Jewett and John Lawrence in *The American Monomyth* (1977). The schism-and-palingenesis cycle of Toynbee and Caplan can be traced in the Batman character (Miller version), as he is losing the creative possibilities of contributing to the organisation of the society, but he expresses some alternative behaviors, under pressure. After 1980, the mythical solution grows some intrusive antennas, detecting corruption and injustice in the immediate reality, making its public more sympathetic, generating commentaries that multiply in various

platforms through a process called “mythical massage”. The readers are encouraged to participate, becoming themselves “vigilantes”, just like a nihilist would do, proven by the “Reaganite” impetus or by viral discussions. Foucault’s docility project holds the responsibility of “cutting the damsel braids off” and enrolling in a responsibility upon the body process. The case of Wendi Richter, the most popular female wrestler versus “the rampage hero” (Phillipa Gates) helps us determine the masculinity concept of the American society. The chapter ends with a postmodern feminist analysis of Barbara Gordon from *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) by Alan Moore, with references to Phillipa Gates, Yvonne Tasker, Anne Balsamo, Rosi Braidotti, Kristeva.

The sixth chapter “Vulgarity and Innocence: strips and comics” identifies the concept of free time, freedom and the phenomenon of comic strips as yellow journalism. We take a look at R. F. Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid* (1895) published in the *New York World* newspaper, as well as Scott Bukatman’s concept of “vitalism” in the comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905) by Winsor McKay. Following this, the opposing view on comics through the voices of the New York intellectuals, Irving Howe with “Notes on Mass Culture” (1948) or Gershon Legman and the behavioristic sciences of the time. Then the path amounts to the hostile environment (Rosenberg, Melvin E. Matthews, etc.) just before the implementation of the Comics Code, insisting on the fractal details of Dr. Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of The Innocent* (1954). Thomas Hine’s concept of “populuxe” in determining the boundless affluence of the American society and the Kefauver hearings are relocating the comics medium onto the next chapter. The idealization of the bodies depicted in the Golden Age of superhero comics still holds true till this day pertaining to the “vitalism” tradition. By the medium’s effects, the frozen in time state and the “always ready to go” position no matter what we can identify something false which claims itself as an extension of the industrial machine. The sequential frames are hedging the massive movements of the body, and so, the comics can be traced in this cartography preference but are communicating something much more than the rationalist impulse of cronophotography duplication. The controversial comic strips and its immigrant audience are seen as the ominous savagery that threatens the science of books.

Our seventh chapter concerning the *Occupy* Movement and the *V for Vendetta* graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd is actually a transmedial approach, by examining the Guy

Fawkes mask and its rotation. The manifestations, along with the resistance and the *Occupy* Movement which targets the world's governments and powerful corporations of the world assumes the revolutionary mission of bringing some sort of change on a cultural level, by confronting the establishment's mentality by occupying public space. The critical lenses come from Judith Butler, Roland Barthes, Chris Hedges, Debord, Jenkins, Samuel Weber, Henri Lefebvre, Elisabeth Burns as they are also sustaining the analysis of the graphic novel as a cultural pastiche. This abrupt repositioning alerts the reader/participant as he is beginning to inquire into different reactionary ideas which rewrite our whole being. The convergence gathers a mentality which elaborates and distributes, authorizing "super-" narratives and resonating with David Lewis's "genuine possible-worlds realism". Defining the "x" in underground comix and tracing the masculinity crisis comes next with an illustrative example of S Clay Wilson from *Zap* Magazine.

Further, chapter number eight accounts for an analysis of the following graphic novels: *Watchmen* (1986-1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) and *Safe Area Goradže* (2000) by Joe Sacco and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) by Alison Bechdel as socially re/productive phenomena. Unlike the conventional superheroes, *Watchmen* heroes are suffering from what Thomason calls "a hypertrophic deconstruction". Their heroism is being analyzed through forms of political, historical and psychological discourse. The graphic novel leaves behind its entertainment function and instant gratification, now ticking subversively. The structural continuity, an essential core of comics, does not separate history from the characters involved, but proposes an alternative way of thinking, deeply anchored in historicity. The ubiquitous, available, "bodybuilder" hero in a series of increasing entropy vanishes as the reader now situates time in a structure of possibilities, thinking of the way we progress, as Eco tells us. This project involves the freedom overloaded by facticity, where the incentive of continuation is in the feasibility of a possibility of change. Demonstrated by the Bergsonian analysis in the novel and Dr. Manhattan's perspective manifested through the manipulation of the medium itself, perplexing and collaborating with the reader. Other intertextual elements are claiming this point.

Footnotes in Gaza and *Safe Area Goradže*, both by Joe Sacco are examples of comics journalism that deal with the communicational aspect of the imperial popular culture's object.

They are dense works which imply a double decoding rhythm set by the recorded facticity, with a very tense flux. The reader feels the spatialization of the verbal narrative with its drama and hold back the look while the notion of collective rights and the denial of them during political oppressions draws its survival in the comics medium, now a co-original creation (Western-Oriental creation, journalist-survivor). We are thus acknowledging in the evolved graphic narrative, that the commercial criteria that once worked against the medium, are now conveying the experimental dimension as a form of interventionist politics, a version of civic journalism or a whole rethinking of the narrative and genre.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic's (2006) premise tool by Alison Bechdel deals with the process of truth fragmentation, once formal through intentional framing and rhythmic tuning, then, on the semantic side, by destroying appearances, beginning with the father's stabilizing role and his renovation process and continuing with the spatial deconstruction situating the medium far away of any escapist adventure but in a direct line to autobiographical experiment of the underground press or similar to Art Spiegelman of Marjane Satrapi's creations. Bechdel's cartoonization ingrains a fragmentary signification which destabilizes the entire authorship representation. It tries to retrieve the inferior condition the slave of the system (the work-for-hire industry workings) for a more sophisticated version of the technician/director/artist and a recalibration of identity using postmodern artifices which fully engage the reader's participation. The reader, who is now a gender producer, in Butler's terms, with its visual cues and intellectual arguments rendered through the medium of comics proves to behave subversively and taking down the normative heterosexual perspective but also any utopic kernel of the "hypermuscular" feminine body.

Our last chapter, "Romanian Comics", suggest that signification is indeed affected through witnessing the experimental and perhaps, one that works as an impulse timer of streaming summarizations of the American popular scene of the 80s. Of course, the new blending of interpretations crushes the conventional iconography lobbying for an abstractization of comics, as well as a personal expression, a side which the specific magazines and workshops held during popular conventions are proving right. Nevertheless, the popular culture's industry is being fostered by the so specific rules of entertainment and this new spatialization or action for

taking down the walls of the museums coincides with a current praxis of a postmodern cultural theory while curiously testing the blockbuster economic formula.