

The Future of Text and Image

The Future of Text and Image:
Collected Essays on Literary
and Visual Conjectures

Edited by

Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh

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P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

In one of the pivotal moments of his book *The Future of the Image* (2007), Jacques Rancière writes:

The mixing of materialities is conceptual before it is real. Doubtless we had to wait until the Cubist and Dadaist age for the appearance of words from newspapers, poems or bus tickets on the canvases of painters [...]. But as early as 1830 Balzac could populate his novels with Dutch paintings.¹

In other words, before the crossing over between the visual and the textual became an established artistic practice, literature—and more specifically, the novel—was able to bring together the verbal and the visual in a way that challenged the traditional dichotomy between the two, and conceptually heralded, as Rancière notes, the “real” attempts at such crossover to follow.

This potential to “[redistribute] the relations between the visible and the sayable,”² and the cultural challenges it presents, are becoming more and more manifested in the literary realm today, as the visual, once primarily conceptual in scope, frequently occupies equally actualized (“real”) and essential roles alongside the textual, in the novel as in many other forms. As a result, the relation between the visual and the textual in literature is at the heart of an increasing number of scholarly projects and is becoming an independent discipline. Inspired by Rancière’s insightful survey, this volume is an attempt to explore these profound literary shifts through the work of twelve talented, and in some cases emerging, scholars who study text and image relations in diverse forms and contexts.

In a talk he gave at New York University (on April 22, 2008) after the publication of the English edition of his book, Rancière pointed out that the translation of the original title—*Le destin des images* (2003) as *The Future of the Image*—is somewhat lacking since it does not convey the manifold meanings that the term *destin* carries. Aware of such limitations, we nevertheless wanted to preserve the sense of homage to that book as it is known in English, hence our own title *The Future of Text and Image*.

¹ Rancière 2007, 42.

² Rancière 2007, 12.

Yet we hope that by exploring different examples of text and image encounters in the past and in the present, this volume will shed light not only on the *future* of text and image as an independent discipline. We hope that it will also elucidate this discipline's role and place—indeed, its *destiny*—among the many scholarly fields from which it draws, such as art history, literary criticism, culture studies, critical theory, and media studies, to mention just a few.

When discussing text and image relations, Rancière coins the term “sentence-image” (*phrase-image*), which represents not merely the merger of a verbal sequence and a visual form, but rather “the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image.”³ It is this complex understanding of text and image relations that our subtitle “Literary and Visual Conjunctures” aims to convey. The intermedial conjunctures investigated in this book play with and against the traditional roles of the visual and the verbal. In the spirit of such perception, *The Future of Text and Image* presents explorations of the incorporation of visual elements into different literary forms, of visual writing modes, and of textuality and literariness of images. Yet while Rancière's discussion expands into other media such as music and cinema, *The Future of Text and Image* focuses on the special potential literature offers for the combination of these two functions. Alongside examinations of major forms and genres such as memoirs, novels, and poetry, this volume expands the discussion of text and image relations into more marginal forms of literature, for instance, collage books, the PostSecret collections of anonymous postcards, and digital poetry. Considering the special role that cyberspace plays in the formation and expression of endeavors such as the PostSecret project or digital poetry, these last two examples also mark the particular effort to engage with the most recent text and image conjunctures becoming available in the digital age. In other words, while exploring the *destiny* of text and image as an independent discipline, this volume simultaneously looks at the very literal *future* of text and image forms in an ever-changing technological reality.

We would like to conclude by acknowledging the many people whose efforts helped this volume to take shape. First and foremost, we thank all those who contributed to this volume their original work, academic and artistic, thus making it the culturally and intellectually diverse mosaic we envisioned when we began this project. We would also like to thank every artist and institute that allowed us to reproduce the many visual elements

³ Rancière 2007, 46; cf. idem 2003, 56.

illustrating the discussions in the book, without which a volume on text and image relations would not have been complete. We are extremely grateful to both W. J. T. Mitchell and Marianne Hirsch for their willingness to contribute their insights and experience to this volume. As two of the major scholars to lay down the founding bricks for the text and image discipline, their presence was truly inspiring. A special thanks goes to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and particularly Carol Koulikourdi, for recognizing the potential of the project from its earliest stages and for patiently and meticulously escorting us through this journey. Last but certainly not least, our personal thanks to those dearest to us, Aryeh, Alex, and Isabelle, for being there beside us with good advice or a reassuring smile.

—Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh
New York, 2011

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INTRODUCTION

IMAGE X TEXT

W. J. T. MITCHELL

What is the “imagetext”? We might begin not by asking what it means, but how can it be written down. In a footnote to *Picture Theory* (1994) I took a stab at a notational answer:

I will employ the typographic convention of the slash to designate the “image/text” as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term “imagetext” designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. “Image-text,” with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal.¹

Rupture, synthesis, relationship. The essays in the present volume range over all three of these possibilities. On the one hand, there are what we might call “literal” manifestations of the imagetext: graphic narratives and comics, photo texts, poetic experiments with voice and picture, collage composition, and typography itself. On the other hand, there are the figurative, displaced versions of the image-text: the formal divisions of narrative and description, the relations of vision and language in memory, the nesting of images (metaphors, symbols, concrete objects) inside discourse, and the obverse, the murmur of discourse and language in graphic and visual media. And then there is a third thing, the traumatic gap of the unrepresentable space between words and images, what I tried to designate with the “/” or slash.

It is that third thing that I would like to re-open in this introduction. And I want to do it, again, “literally,” with an exploration of a typographic

¹ Mitchell 1994, 89. See also chapter three, “Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method” (ibid., 83-107), and the concluding chapter, “Some Pictures of Representation” (ibid., 417-25). My other key writings on the concept of the imagetext include *Iconology* (idem 1986) and “Word and Image,” in *Critical Terms for Art History* (idem 1996).

sign that might synthesize the three relationships of texts and images, and suggest further possibilities as well. My chosen sign is the “X,” and I wish to treat it as a Joycean verbo-voco-visual pun that condenses the following meanings and inscriptions: 1) X as the “unknown” or “variable” in algebra, or the “X factor” in vernacular usage; the signature of the illiterate; 2) X as the sign of multiplication, or (even more evocatively) as the “times sign”; also as a slightly tilted or torqued modification of the simplest operation in mathematics, the “plus” sign (+); 3) X as the sign of chiasmus in rhetoric, the trope of changing places and dialectical reversal, as in “the language of images” providing “images of language”; another way to see this is to grasp the ways in which image and text alternately evoke differentials and similarities, a paradox we could inscribe by fusing the relation of image *versus* text with image *as* text, a double cross that could be notated with an invented symbol, “VS” overlapped with “AS” to produce a double X in the intersection of A and V; 4) X as an image of crossing, intersection, and encounter, like the iconic sign at a railroad crossing; 5) X as a combination of the two kinds of slashes (/ and \), suggesting opposite directionalities in the portals to the unknown, different ways into the gap or rupture between signs and senses, indicating the difference between an approach to words and images from the side of the unspeakable or the unimaginable, the invisible or the inaudible; 6) X as the phoneme of eXcess, of the eXtra, the unpredictable surplus that will undoubtedly be generated by re-opening the variety of relationships subtended by this peculiar locution, the imagetext. This is the sign of everything that has been left out of my construal of the X.

Why is it possible, even necessary, to formulate such an abundance of meaning around a simple relation between two elementary, even primitive terms like “text” and “image”? One scarcely knows where to begin. A simple opening is provided by the innocent little phrase, “visual and verbal representation,” that is often uttered as a kind of alternative to “word and image” or “text and image.” But a moment’s thought reveals a strange discontinuity, a shift of levels of meaning. In order to make anything specific out of the visual-verbal, we must ask, “visual as distinct from what?” “Verbal as opposed to what?” And the obvious candidates are: images or pictures as opposed to verbal signs; visual sensations as opposed to auditory. The visual denotes a specific sensory channel, the verbal designates a specific semiotic register. The difference between the visual and verbal is actually *two* differences, one grounded in the senses (seeing versus hearing), the other in the nature of signs and meaning (words as arbitrary, conventional *symbols*, as distinct from images as representations by virtue of likeness or similitude). The phrase “visual-verbal,” then,

produces a productive confusion of signs and senses, ways of producing meaning and ways of inhabiting perceptual experience. The following diagram (Fig. [1]) provides a picture of this confusion:

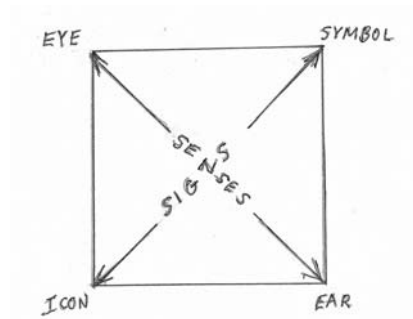


Fig. [1]: ImageText Square of Opposition

The “X” that links and differentiates images and texts is the intersection between signs and senses, semiotics and aesthetics. It becomes evident at a glance, then, that the apparently simple concept of the imagetext opens up a kind of fractal expansion of terms, as is captured in a more fully elaborated version of the diagram (Fig. [2]):

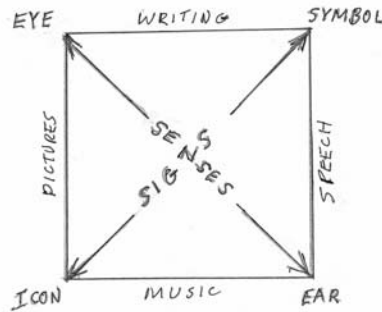


Fig. [2]: ImageText Square of Opposition Elaborated

As the sensory-semiotic dimensions of the word-image difference expand, they begin to demand some essential distinctions. When we talk about “words,” for instance, are we referring to speech or writing? (Let’s leave out, for the moment, gesture, which Rousseau saw as the original form of verbal expression, and which is fully elaborated today in the

languages of the Deaf).² Does the “imagetext” concept automatically rule out orality? On the side of the image, are we talking about visual images—e.g., drawings, photographs, paintings, sculpture? Or auditory images, as in poetry and music? And what happens when we include the notion of “verbal imagery” (metaphor, description, etc.), which has not yet found a place in my diagram? Is this the “X” factor as an excess that overflows the boundary of any conceivable graphic diagram?

Any systematic analysis of the relation of images and texts, then, leads inevitably into a wider field of reflection on aesthetics, semiotics, and the whole concept of representation itself as a heterogeneous fabric of sights and sounds, spectacle and speech, pictures and inscriptions.³ Is this not a multiply articulated fabric, in which the warp and woof are constantly shifting not only from sensory channels (the eye and the ear) to semiotic functions (iconic likenesses and arbitrary symbols), but also to modalities of cognition (space and time) to operational codes (the analog and the digital)? The fractal picture of the imagetext has scarcely begun with the “visual-verbal.” And will we not then have to add the “thirds” that inevitably spring up between our binary oppositions, sometimes as compromise formations (could the “ana-lytical” itself be a demand for fusion or interplay between analog and digital codes?) and sometimes as blank spaces in which something unpredictable and monstrous might emerge? The gap between the Lacanian registers of the Symbolic and Imaginary is the black hole of the Real, the site of trauma and the unrepresentable (but clearly *not* an unnameable place, since there it is, the name of “the Real”). Could it be the “beach” or margin between sea and land that Foucault names as the frontier between the words and images in Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*?⁴ Is it a contested zone in which, as Foucault puts it, “between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections—or rather attacks” are “launched by one against the other”?⁵ Could we then see our “X” as crossed lances (/ \) or “arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle”?⁶ Leonardo da Vinci called the encounter of painting and poetry a *paragone* or contest, and Lessing described their relation as

² See Mitchell 2006.

³ See “Some Pictures of Representation,” the conclusion to *Picture Theory* (Mitchell 1994, 417-25).

⁴ The official title of this work is *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*—see Magritte 1929).

⁵ Foucault 1983, 26. Foucault also refers to the blank space between the pipe and its caption as a “crevasse—an uncertain foggy region” (*ibid.*, 28).

⁶ Foucault 1983, 26.

the frontier between two countries, normally friendly and peaceful, but sometimes launching invasions into their neighbors' territory.

There are, then, normal and normative relations between texts and images. One illustrates or explains or names or describes or ornaments the other. They complement and supplement one another, simultaneously completing and extending. That is why Foucault focuses on the "common frontier" between Magritte's words and images, the "calm sand of the page," on which "are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification"—in short the whole order of the "seeable and sayable," the "visible and articulable," that lays down the archaeological layers of knowledge itself.⁷ Word and image are woven together to create a reality. The tear in that fabric is the Real. Foucault makes the space between images and texts even more radical when he denies it the status of a space at all: "it is too much to claim that there is a blank or lacuna: instead, it is an absence of space, an effacement of the 'common place' between the signs of writing and the lines of the image."⁸ X becomes, in this sense, the erasure or "effacement," not just of something inscribed, but of the very space in which the inscription might appear, as if the X signified a pair of *slashes*, like the tearing of a page, or cuts in a canvas left by a militant iconoclast—or an artist like Lucio Fontana.

Let's say, then, that the normal relation of text and image is complementary or supplementary, and that together they make up a third thing, or open a space where that third thing appears. If we take comics as our example, the third thing that appears is just the composite art form known as comics, combining text and image in a highly specific medium. But there is also a third thing in the medium of graphic narration that is neither text nor image, but which simultaneously links and separates them, namely, the *gutter*. These unobtrusive framing lines, as is well known, are neither words nor images, but indicators of relationships, of temporal sequence or simultaneity, or of notional camera movements in space from panorama to close-up. Avant garde comics, from Smokey Stover to Art Spiegelman to Chris Ware, have often played with the gutter, cutting across it, treating it as a window that can be opened to hang out the laundry.

So the third thing, the X between text and image certainly does not have to be an absence. In fact, we might argue that there is always

⁷ For an account of the way Foucault's playful reflections on Magritte's imagetext composition serve as a basis for his whole archaeological method, see Deleuze 1988, 80.

⁸ Foucault 1983, 28-29.

something positive, even in the blank space of the Real, the slash of the canvas, or the non-space beyond blankness. Something rushes in to fill the emptiness, some “X” to suggest the presence of an absence, the appearance of something neither text nor image. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), I identified this third thing as my subtitle indicated, in the ideological framework that invariably suffuses the field of image-text relationships: the difference between the “natural” and “conventional” sign; the distinction between an illiterate viewer who can see what images represent, and a literate reader who can see through the image to something else (typically, a text). In the polemic of Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1766) the difference between image and text is not only figured in the relation of different nations, but rendered literal in his characterization of French culture as obsessed with effeminate “bright eyes” and spectacle, while German (and English) culture are described as manly cultures of the word.

And if we survey the history of semiotics and aesthetics, we find the positive presence of the third element everywhere. The *locus classicus* is, of course, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which divides the “means” or “medium” of tragedy into three parts: *opsis*, *melos*, *lexis* (spectacle, music, words). Or, as Roland Barthes would have it, *Image, Music, Text* (1977). The X-factor in the imagetext problematic is music, or more generally, sound, which may be why “imagetext” has always struck me as slightly impoverished in that it confines *words* to the realm of writing and printing, and neglects the sphere of orality and speech, not to mention gesture.⁹ Sometimes this silencing of the third dimension becomes explicit, most famously in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820), where the text not only conjures up the *sight* and image of its titular subject, but further attributes to it a silent music and speech—“a leafy tale” told “more sweetly than our rhyme,” accompanied by an “unheard” music. The radio comedians Bob and Ray used to pose the riddle, why is radio superior to television? The answer: because the images we see while listening to the radio are better, more vivid, dynamic, and vital.

The image/music/text triad must be the most durable and deeply grounded taxonomy of the arts and media that we possess, because it recurs constantly in the most disparate contexts, defining the elements of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the components of cinema, radio, and television, and even the order of technical media that constitute modernity. I am thinking here of Friedrich Kittler’s masterpiece, *Gramophone, Film*,

⁹ A version of the Aristotelian and Barthesian triad was institutionalized some years ago in the University of Chicago’s common core as a year long course sequence in “Media Aesthetics” entitled “Image/Sound/Text.”

Typewriter (1986), which is, on the one hand, an updating of the old Aristotelian categories, and on the other, a trio of inventions subject to a new technical synthesis in the master platform of the computer.

Finally, we must turn to the role of the imagetext in the constitutive elements of semiotics, the fundamental theory of signs and meaning. There we encounter Saussure's famous diagram (Fig. [3]) of the linguistic sign as a bifurcated oval with an image of a tree in the upper compartment and the word "arbor" in the lower.

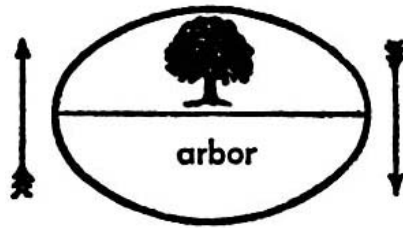


Fig. [3]: From Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915)

It is as if Saussure were forced to admit that even words, speech, and language itself cannot be adequately represented by a purely linguistic notation.¹⁰ The image, which stands here not just for a tree but for the *signified* or mental image conjured by the verbal signifier, actually stands *above* and prior to the word in the model of language itself. Saussure is building upon a picture of language that could be traced back into the psychology of empiricism, in which mental images are the content named by words, or all the way to Plato's discussion of natural and conventional signs in the *Cratylus*. But we also have to notice that the imagetext is not all there is to the sign, and there is a surplus of "third elements": the oval, which is presumably a graphic rendering of the wholeness of the sign, despite its binary structure; the arrows, which stand for the bi-directionality of meaning, a kind of circuit of alternating current between spoken words and ideas in the mind; and (most important) the *bar* between signifier and signified, the index of the fundamental duality of language and thought.

But this mention of the index must bring to mind immediately the most comprehensive analysis of the sign to date, the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, who identified three elements or sign-functions that make

¹⁰ Since Saussure's text was a compilation of lecture notes by himself and his students, it is not possible to be certain that this diagram was actually drawn by the great linguist. Nevertheless, it has become a canonical picture of his understanding of the linguistic sign.

meaning possible. These are the elements he calls “icon/index/symbol,” a triad that describes (very roughly) the distinctions between images (pictures, but also any sign by resemblance, including metaphors), indexical signs (arrows and bars, for instance, but also pronouns and other deictic words that depend upon context), and symbols (signs by “law” or convention). The relation of image and symbol, we must note, is merely analogous to and at a quite different level from the image-text relation, because Peirce is not interested in classifying signs by their singular manifestations such as “words and images,” but by their *sign function*, which depends upon the way in which they make meaning. The category of the icon includes pictures and other visual, graphic images, but it is not exhausted by those things. Icons can appear in language as metaphor and in logic in the form of analogy. They are signs by resemblance or likeness. Similarly, indices may be exemplified by arrows and bars, but they also include elements of language such as deictic terms (this, that, there, then) and pronouns such as I, we, and you. Indices are “shifters” or existential signs that take their meaning from context. They are also signs by cause and effect (tracks in the snow indicating where someone has walked; smoke as an indicator of fire). And finally, symbols are signs that take their meaning from arbitrary conventions (we will let the word “arbor” stand for this vertical object sprouting with leaves).

From Peirce’s standpoint, then, the image/text is simply a figure for two-thirds of the semiotic field, awaiting only the recognition of its third element, the “/” as the index of a slash or relational sign in the concrete thing (a text, a work of art) that is being decoded. All these triads of aesthetics and semiotics can be seen at a glance in the following table (Table [1]), to which I want to add one final layer that will, as it were, bring us back to the surface of these reflections, and the original question of how to write these things down. I’m thinking here of Nelson Goodman’s theory of notation, which examines the way marks themselves can produce meaning, and which relies heavily on categories such as “density” and “repleteness” (where every difference in a mark is potentially significant), and “differentiated” and “articulate” (where marks belong to a finite set of characters that have definite meaning, as in an alphabet, in which the letter “a” still means “a,” regardless of whether it is written or typed or printed in Gothic or Times New Roman).¹¹ Goodman’s categories, in contrast to Peirce’s, take us back to the surface of inscription. His triad of sketch, score, and script reinscribes the image/ music/text triad, but this time at the level of notation.

¹¹ Goodman 1976.


Aristotle	Opsis	Melos	Lexis
Barthes	Image	Music	Text
Lacan	Imaginary	Real	Symbolic
Kittler	Film	Gramophone	Typewriter
Goodman	Sketch	Score	Script
Peirce	Icon	Index	Symbol
Foucault	Seeable	[X]	Sayable
Hume	Similarity	Cause and Effect	Convention
Saussure		Bar	Arbor

Table [1]

I hope it is clear that this table does not postulate some kind of uniformity or even translatability down the columns. The rows are the strong elements, teasing out concepts of semiotics and aesthetics that happen to fall into these precise terms. The columns are merely iconic: they suggest a structural analogy between the ideas of radically different kinds of thinkers. Why, for instance, should we want to link music with the Lacanian Real? Kittler provides a technical answer based in recording apparatuses and the physical structure of the ear. Nevertheless, the whole point of this table is to produce a set of diagonal, X-shaped reflections that would slash across the rigid order of the columns: the arrows in Saussure's picture of the sign are indices, for sure. But are they not also icons in that they resemble arrows, and symbols in that we have to know the convention of pointing? Point at an object to the average dog, and he will sniff your finger.

We still have not addressed the most fundamental question, which is why the image/text rupture, the image-text relation, and the imagetext synthesis should be so fundamental to aesthetics and semiotics. Why do disciplines like art, history, and literary criticism find themselves inexorably converging around encounters of visual and verbal media? Why does the theory of representation itself seem to converge on this primitive binary opposition? My claim is that the imagetext is the convergence point of semiotics, the theory of signs and aesthetics, the theory of the senses. It is the place where the eye and the ear encounter the logical, analogical, and cognitive relations that give rise to meaning in the first place. David Hume understood the laws of "association of ideas" as a triad very close to Peirce's analysis of the sign. Similarity, cause-effect, and convention are his three laws, corresponding quite precisely to

Peirce's icon, index, and symbol. The imagetext, then, is a principle of thought, feeling, and meaning as fundamental to human beings as distinctions (and the accompanying indistinctions) of gender and sexuality. Blake glimpsed this when he asserted that the great Kantian modes of intuition—space and time—are gendered as female and male respectively. And Lacan revised the Saussurean picture of the sign by portraying it as a pair of adjacent doors labeled “Men” and “Women,” as if the gendered binary (and urinary segregation) was the foundation of semiosis itself. Of course, some will say that we have transcended all these binary oppositions in the digital age, when images have all been absorbed into the flow of information. They forget that the dense, sensuous world of the analog doesn't disappear in the field of ones and zeros: it re-surfaces in the eye and ear ravished by new forms of music and spectacle, and in the hand itself, where digits are literalized in the keyboard interface and game controller. Hardly surprising then, that the imagetext can play such a productive role in the range of essays included in this volume, embracing poetry and photography, painting and typography, blogs and comics.

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PART I:

TEXT AND IMAGE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER ONE

PORTRAIT OF A SECRET: J. R. ACKERLEY AND ALISON BECHDEL

MOLLY PULDA

“Comics have finally joined the mainstream,” *The New York Times* announced in March 2009, heralding the addition of a “Graphic Books” category to its best seller lists.¹ The *Times* graphic list is divided into hardcover, softcover, and manga—fiction and nonfiction share these categories, unlike on the other best seller lists, which are separated by genre. However, leading comics scholar Hillary Chute contends that nonfiction remains the “strongest genre in the field.”² As critical attention to the medium of comics increases, Chute and other critics are mainly occupied with asking how the graphic narrative differs from the kinds of narratives with which we have more typically been engaged.³ I would like to argue that an equally important question should be: how is the graphic narrative the *same* as other narratives? In other words, what formal and thematic elements provide productive comparisons between graphic and nongraphic narratives?⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell memorably argues, “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts.”⁵ What can the medium of comics tell us about the verbal and visual possibilities of narratives in all media?

Graphic memoirs—autobiographies in the medium of comics—have led the wave of literary comics for the past twenty five years, since Art

¹ Gustines 2009.

² Chute 2008a, 452.

³ Chute and DeKoven 2006, 768.

⁴ See Chute 2008b for an exemplary analysis of how graphic narratives and contemporary fiction intersect, “investigating different ways to present and express history” (idem 268).

⁵ Mitchell 1994, 5.

Spiegelman published *Maus* to critical clamor in 1986.⁶ That clamor has nearly been matched by Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a literary graphic memoir that officially hit the mainstream as *Time* magazine's best book of 2006. Although graphic memoirs are certainly innovative in their hybrid, word-and-image depictions of the self, it is also important to consider what graphic memoirs have in common with text memoirs, in order to analyze what the graphic medium contributes to narrative studies. For one, the use of images in autobiography is not new; authors often publish photographs of their younger selves and their families, usually as photo inserts near the middle of the volume. In this paper I put two verbal/visual memoirs in dialogue: a graphic memoir and a text memoir with a photo insert. By doing so I wish to interrogate some of the possibilities and limitations of visual representation in literature that represents the self. What does an author attempt to reveal to the reader, through text, image, and their combination? Can the reader "see" a secret in a portrait? As Mitchell puts it, "[h]ow do we say what we see, and how can we make the reader see?"⁷ What are the uses of a family photograph within a memoir of any medium? Where does the reader fit into a "familial gaze" when a writer produces an image of a lost parent?⁸

In order to examine what the graphic and nongraphic *do similarly*, I will compare two memoirs about a father's sexual secrets: J. R. Ackerley's memoir *My Father and Myself* (1968) and Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006). Both authors, separated by gender, two generations, and the Atlantic Ocean, write about quests to claim secretive fathers through photographs. In these works, Ackerley and Bechdel put desire, death, and heredity into visual and sexual terms. Both texts are necessarily biography, autobiography, and family albums of secrets. In *My Father and Myself*, British author Ackerley strains to glimpse a core of homosexuality in his father's youthful photographs. Ackerley (1896-1967), the long-standing editor of the BBC magazine *The Listener* and close friend of E. M. Forster, lived in a period of British history that was bookended by Oscar Wilde's indecency conviction and the decriminalization of homosexual activity in the Sexual Offences Act of 1967.⁹ Reeling from the revelation of one secret—that his loving, wealthy

⁶ Although Whitlock (2006, 965) coined the term "autographics" for autobiographical works in the medium of comics (as many booksellers and critics are still misnaming the genre "graphic novel"), I employ the more popular term "graphic memoir."

⁷ Mitchell 1994, 114.

⁸ Hirsch 1997, 10.

⁹ McHugh 2000, 21.

father raised a second family with a mistress—Ackerley searches for another secret that will draw his father's life in closer parallel with his own. He begins that imaginative quest with his father's death, and tries to link his father's fatal case of syphilis to a secret history of homosexual encounters. Similarly, Bechdel tries to connect her father's violent death—he was hit by a truck, which she believes was a suicidal act—to two sexual revelations: her recent discovery of her own homosexuality, and her father's secret history of affairs with young men. Like Ackerley, Bechdel compares her father's era of secrets to her own era of "out" sexuality. As Bechdel states in an interview, "our two stories form a kind of longitudinal sociological study. He graduated from college a dozen years before Stonewall. I graduated a dozen years after."¹⁰ Bechdel's theory of her father's suicide bridges the generational gap; she inserts her own sexuality and coming-out into the causal narrative of her father's death, weaving what she calls "that last, tenuous bond" between father and daughter.¹¹

Guardians of their dead fathers' depictions, Bechdel and Ackerley attempt to build a visual archive that recasts an absent father in the author's own image. As Marianne Hirsch demonstrates in her influential *Family Frames* (1997), family photographs are uniquely "perched between life and death."¹² Inspired by Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus*, Hirsch introduced the concept of "postmemory," which she describes as:

the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.¹³

In other words, in instances of postmemory, the parent's past overshadows the progeny's present, and even unspoken trauma is passed on intergenerationally. In my reading of *My Father and Myself* and *Fun Home*'s visual secrets, I draw upon what Hirsch terms the "imaginative investment and creation" of postmemory. The writer recreates the parent's experience imaginatively, especially when studying old family photographs. Ackerley and Bechdel's memoirs demonstrate the *reverse* inheritance of the postmemorial imagination: its powers of creative generation flow from the present to the past, from the writer to the lost father. Although postmemory relies on patterns of generational inheritance,

¹⁰ Bechdel 2006a.

¹¹ Bechdel 2006c, 85.

¹² Hirsch 1997, 23.

¹³ Hirsch 1997, 22.

its workings of “imaginative investment and creation” resist what Michael Warner terms “repro-narrativity” or “the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession.”¹⁴ Through acts of looking and interpretation, the writer can reverse the “repro-narrative”: she can fill in the parent’s inaccessible story with a narrative from her own identity and life.

But what are the stakes of casting the lost parent in one’s own image? Ackerley declares that in researching his dead father’s past, he was “hoping still to drag him captive into the homosexual fold.”¹⁵ Similarly Bechdel writes that “perhaps my eagerness to claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself—a sort of inverted Oedipal complex.”¹⁶ By placing homosexuality within the chain of lineage, within two generations of the family story, these authors attempt to locate themselves within their fathers’ mortal secrets. I argue that the autobiographical act, in any work of text, comics, or other “mixed media,” builds a narrative bridge between generations separated by death and secrecy, serving as a gesture of familial reparation. For these authors, a sexual confession requires an investigation of heredity, an envisioning of hypothetical circumstances in which they would never have been born. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), “I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now*?”¹⁷ A father’s secret history of homosexuality, however, troubles the progression of lineage. As she looks up “father” and “beget” in Webster’s dictionary, Bechdel writes: “If my father had ‘come out’ in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother, where does that leave me?”¹⁸ Gazing at the father’s photograph, the author wavers between yearning to resurrect him through identification, and keeping a secret essential to the author’s own birth.

Memoirs of family secrets

“Private life is almost always a co-property,” writes the autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune.¹⁹ Who is more exposed in these works of family confession: the author or the father? Following Mary G. Mason’s

¹⁴ Warner 1991, 7.

¹⁵ Ackerley 1999, 259.

¹⁶ Bechdel 2006c, 230.

¹⁷ Barthes 1982, 84 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Bechdel 2006c, 197.

¹⁹ Quoted in Eakin 2008, 40.

groundbreaking observation about the inherent relationality of autobiography, which teases out the author's "delineation of identity by way of alterity,"²⁰ it can be said that every autobiography is, in a sense, also a biography. That is, a life story unfolds in relation to the significant others who help shape it. In the subgenre of the memoir of family secrets, the story centers not on the author's indiscretions, but on the parent's sins of omission, the secrets that marred and protected the intimacy between parent and writer. And indeed, both Ackerley and Bechdel have complicated histories of autobiographical revelation. Ackerley's other works of fiction and drama all draw upon personal experience. In a review of *My Father and Myself*, W. H. Auden writes of Ackerley's autobiographical impulse:

He says that he went to work for the BBC because he felt he had failed in his ambition to become a writer himself. [...] He discovered that he could not create imaginary characters and situations: all his books were based on journals, whether written down or kept in his head.²¹

Nevertheless, Ackerley insists that *My Father and Myself* "is not an autobiography, its intention is narrower and is stated in the title and the text, it is no more than an investigation of the relationship between my father and myself."²² Similarly, Bechdel's long-running comic strip, *Dykes To Watch Out For*, features a community of lesbians with Mo, Bechdel's cartoon avatar, as a central character. Yet Bechdel is more forthright than Ackerley regarding what she defines as "my own compulsive propensity to autobiography."²³ In *Fun Home*, a ten-year-old Bechdel begins her first diary and has an "epistemological crisis" that perhaps leads her toward the graphic medium.²⁴ She worries about "the troubling gap between word and meaning," signifier and signified—and possibly, by extension, photograph and subject.²⁵ As Bechdel states in an interview about a trove of family photographs she found: "those photos were really my primary source for the book. Poring over them, recreating them painstakingly in pen and ink, trying to discern their hidden messages."²⁶ *Fun Home* is all about the family archive; each chapter opens with a recreated photograph that appears pasted into a family photo album. By drawing family photographs,

²⁰ Mason 1980, 231.

²¹ Auden 1969.

²² Ackerley 1999, 271 (emphasis in original).

²³ Bechdel 2006c, 140.

²⁴ Bechdel 2006c, 141.

²⁵ Bechdel 2006c, 143.

²⁶ Bechdel 2006a.

Bechdel asserts the artist's hand in her father's representation, making the autobiographical act all the more visible. Between each of these two authors' fathers and the depiction of his sexuality lies an intervening "I," a writing daughter or son whose queer identity and mourning process color every line of the father's portrait.

Digging for truth

The themes of death, secrecy, and heredity adopt a similar structure in both memoirs. Bechdel and Ackerley begin their investigations with their fathers' causes of death, inquiring how they as progeny are scripted into these deaths. Bechdel spirals back repeatedly to a cluster of related scenes, mainly the moment, which occurs in her college bookstore, when she discovers she is a lesbian, and the moment her mother tells her on the phone, in response to her announcement of sexual identity in a typewritten letter sent home, "Your father has had affairs. With other men"²⁷ (and underage boys, as Bechdel soon discovers). "And with my father's death following hard on the heels of this doleful coming-out party," Bechdel ruminates, "I could not help but assume a cause-and-effect relationship."²⁸ All of *Fun Home* is awash with death. The title itself is a nickname for the funeral home her father owned and ran part-time (when he was not teaching English to local high school students, including his daughter and the teen-aged boys he propositioned). Furthermore, conjoined scenes of coming out and suicide lie at the heart of the narrative. Bechdel prefigures this circling structure, the continual revelation of sexual identities, in a series of frames about lawn-mowing. She depicts her younger self learning how to ride a lawn mower with her father. First the father and daughter ride the mower together; then her father shows her how to operate the equipment herself. The last frame shows young Bechdel circling the lawn alone, as though spiraling through a narrative that centers on her father, but necessarily excludes him. The text above the last frame reads: "but I ached as if he were already gone."²⁹ Bruce Bechdel has set the circling narrative in motion, but at its core lies his absence, the empty lawn that signals the continuous loss and regrowth of the mourning cycle, as well as the continuous effort he put into maintaining the appearances of normalcy in his lifetime.

²⁷ Bechdel 2006c, 58.

²⁸ Bechdel 2006c, 59.

²⁹ Bechdel 2006c, 23.