



The "Graphic Novel": Discourses on the Archive

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Summary

In this study, I explore what the term “graphic novel” can reveal about the way in which we hierarchically categorize what we find important to study, how these objects and fields of study are inscribed and organized within our cultural memory institutions, and how these systems of classification form a cycle of importance that is laden with sociopolitical consequences. I assert that rather than indicating an artistic or cultural elevation of comics, that the term “graphic novel” allows for the political function of comics to emerge. By calling attention to the system of value upon which the archive is built and maintained, I argue that the “graphic novel” opens an avenue for comics to expose and critique the practices of the archive from archival inscription to interpretation to enacted power.

The point of overlap between Jacques Derrida's discourse on the archive and Michel Foucault's critique of institutions forms the frame for my discussion of the performative aspect of archival practice, that is, how the archive is used to mediate cultural memory across various sites. Thus, as I use it, the archive is the collection of all archives that make up our cultural memory, and more pointedly, the institutions that are ascribed hierarchical importance through discursive reiteration, namely “high art” discourse, historical writing, and evidential documentation. Through an investigation of how the archive privileges certain works and certain modes of articulation, I provide a new perspective on the root of the problem, that which helps create and maintain hierarchies within our cultural memory institutions and thus forms a cycle of importance, what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “cultural capital.”

In Chapter 1: The “Graphic Novel” and Archival Inscription, I argue that while many comics scholars on both sides of the debate over whether graphic novels are comics have noted that the term “graphic novel” delineates a separation from comics that points to the

division between high and low culture, much of the discourse has stopped there, merely grazing the surface of the capital attributed to cultural objects. I therefore investigate the claims of uniqueness and unattainability of cultural capital through careful consideration of the discursive terminology that endows objects with this capital. I explore how the binary of high and low culture developed from the hierarchical parameters ascribed to the term “medium,” both in art discourse and intermediality studies, and further, how rather than simply underlining the division between high and low culture, that the term “graphic novel” marks a separation from comics that necessarily hinges on medium classification.

By revealing how the debate over “medium” has a strong normative aspect that ultimately has led to an impasse about how to define “medium” formally rather than moralistically, I argue that the “graphic novel” can work to upset these discourses, and in so doing can ultimately work to simultaneously undermine its own value and elevate the value of comics. However, rather than being solely an attempt to culturally elevate comics or the graphic novel through asserting their medium status, in this chapter I demonstrate how medium classification obscures debates about comics’ abilities to function politically through dismissing it as low culture and therefore politically irrelevant. In this way, I assert that the “graphic novel” can provide insight on how such terminology, which upholds institutionalized cultural capital, can be exposed as faulty in its logic, which works to displace the entire question of the value of cultural objects.

In Chapter 2: Personal Narrative Comics and Archival Interpretation, I argue that, as in the dividing practices of archival inscription, the interpretation of archival material is also based on a system of attributable value. Because the hierarchical categorization of archival material is often scaled on an idea of truth, which is particularly evident in the privileging of document over testimony, I assert that personal narrative comics is an ideal object with which to explore and critique this practice of the archive. As an archive itself, personal narrative

works to comment on archival practices in its categorization of the various evidential and memorial material that make up the truth of a life. In a comparative analysis between textually based personal narrative and personal narrative comics, I argue that the aims of contemporary personal narrative to question the privileging of document over experience is advanced through the use of comics style, which obscures and thereby further questions hierarchical classifications within the archive.

I present examples of textually based contemporary personal narrative before moving forward, in a close reading of postmodern writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982), to discuss the manner in which the use of images can aid in the discourse on the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth of a life. I argue that what personal narrative comics adds to this contemporary movement of personal narrative is the use of comics form, which works to queer archival practices. Through a close reading of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), I assert that by presenting trauma, memory, and document congruently through comics form, personal narrative comics plays with and employs visibility to literally show the flaws inherent in archival systems. In so doing, I argue that comics not only reveals that the archive is always curated and never complete, in making the system visible, it reveals how the power of the archive lies in its interpretation.

In Chapter 3: The Contested Space of Comics and Archival Power, I argue that the relationship between power and visibility is further explored in comics through the use of its spatial structure, which works as a revelation of how archival power is enacted through the mediation of space by visibility. Already in its exposure and questioning of how archival material is hierarchically categorized, comics ties the personal to the political in terms of the creation of the subject. Through an analysis of the form of comics, I assert that comics further works to explore subjectivity through its revelation of the power inherent in spatial relations.

I argue that because comics can blur the perceived boundaries of both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it works to criticize the political ramifications of archival power and promote a new form of subjectivity. The spatializing of time in comics, I assert, not only works to comment on the formal possibilities of text and image, it further provides insight into how time is spatialized in terms of the real and the imaginary. Because comics style and structure can be used to confuse and conflate both time and space, and real and imaginary spaces, it is imbued with potential for institutional critique as it highlights that space is inherently multidimensional and power-laden.

Through a close reading of Paul Hornschemeier's false memoir *Mother, Come Home* (2003), I explore how in its toying with style and form through the use of color, various drawing styles, panels, and gutters, which can effectively move the space of the page and the space of the narrative in and out of various real and imagined spaces, comics makes visible the workings of spatial constructions. Further, through these same means, I assert that comics creates a possibility for conceptualizing other spaces beyond modernist binaries—spaces that necessarily blur the borders of both public and private and the real and the imaginary, what cultural geographer Edward Soja has termed “Thirdspace.” I posit that comics, through its collapsing of binaries and rethinking of subjectivity, offers a potentiality to unmask and effectively criticize the power inherent in spatial constructions and thereby the political ramifications of archival power.

In the Epilogue: Comics as “Minor Literature,” I offer that comics can be considered what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have termed “minor literature.” Eclipsing Soja's notion of “Thirdspace,” “minor literature” is not simply a recentering of the margin but is an avenue through which to contemplate the language and systems upholding binaries such as center and margin, and public and private. “Minor literature” does not speak to how to subvert or rethink current systems but to what Deleuze and Guattari term the “revolutionary

machine to come,” an entirely new system not yet fully conceived of. What “minor literature” enables, then, is a way to expose the workings of dominant systems to provide a veritable escape from the impasse created by such systems.

I illuminate how comics is “minor literature” using the arguments made in the individual chapters. I argue that because comics actively deterritorializes language through its combination of text and image, is inherently political in its commentary on power enacted through spatial relations, and thereby immediately disrupts the notion of the individual as separate from the collective, it works to expose the fault in binary oppositions that uphold processes of reterritorialization. I conclude by asserting that in its disruption of the value attributed to cultural objects and in its blurring the borders between document and experience, public and private, and the real and imaginary, comics not only exposes and critiques the archive’s processes of institutionalization, inscription, and interpretation, it offers a potentiality for thinking of an entirely new order.