

## **Beyond the Written Word: Graphic Novels in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

What is or is not a graphic novel has proven notoriously difficult to define. Against this background, the present article explores Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), Posy Simmonds' *Tamara Drewe* (2008), and Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2016) as three case studies of graphic novels that differ from each other in interesting ways, thus exemplifying the range of what a graphic novel can be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and further underscoring some of the most salient tensions between what the term 'graphic novel' seems to suggest and the corpus of comics works to which it is regularly applied.

### **Keywords**

Art Spiegelman, comics, graphic novel, Posy Simmonds, Sonny Liew

### **Contributors' Notes**

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### **1. Introduction**

From Angoulême to San Diego and from Tokyo to Buenos Aires, almost all major comics events—festivals, exhibits, and small press conventions—have dealt with the graphic novel in some way or another over the past few years. The same is true for many of the more conventional literary festivals and events worldwide. Particularly in the Anglophone world of book publication, the label ‘graphic novel’ is widely used and highly popular. It has made an entrance into areas of cultural production and reception where the comics medium had previously had difficulty making itself heard, including respected feuilletons, fine arts galleries, and institutions of higher education. So, what does the term ‘graphic novel’ refer to and how does it relate to and diverge from the literary novel in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Since Richard Kyle coined the term “to describe the artistically serious ‘comic book strip’” (1964: 4) and Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) popularized it, the graphic novel has enjoyed a remarkable streak of critical as well as commercial success. Perhaps not entirely dissimilar to the text-based literary novel, however, what is or is not a graphic novel—let alone one that is to be taken seriously in aesthetic/artistic terms—has proven notoriously difficult to define. Quite a few practitioners and scholars hence prefer different terms such as ‘comics,’ ‘sequential art,’ or ‘graphic narrative’ (see, e.g., Eisner 1985; McCloud 1993; as well as Chute/DeKoven 2006; Gardner/Herman 2011; Stein/Thon 2015). Paul Gravett, for example, notes in the opening chapter of his wide-ranging popular introduction *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* that “the term novel can make people expect the sort of format, serious intent, and weighty heft of traditional literature, as if a graphic novel must be the visual equivalent of ‘an extended, fictional work’” (Gravett 2005: 8). As Gravett goes on to remark, these as well as a few other ‘common sense’ expectations that the term may suggest regularly remain unmet by works that are widely advertised and distributed as graphic novels.

While it would go beyond the scope of the present article to give an extensive survey of the existing discourse(s) about graphic novels or provide any kind of definite answer to the question to what extent the term is a “misnomer” (Meyer 2015: 274; see also, e.g., Baetens/Frey 2014; Meskin 2007; Tabachnick 2010), it still seems helpful to underscore four of the most salient tensions between what the term ‘graphic novel’ suggests and the corpus of comics works to which it is regularly applied.

(1) Graphic novels need not adhere to conventional ‘literary’ models of authorship.<sup>1</sup> While various groundbreaking works such as Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), Charles Burns’ *Black Hole* (2005), Craig Thompson’s *Habibi* (2011), and Julie Maroh’s *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013) do indeed have a single writer-artist as their author, there are countless other graphic novels that do not (for more on comics authorship, see, e.g., Etter 2017; Gabilliet 2010; Gordon 2013; Stein 2018; Thon 2016: 125–138; Uidhir 2012; or the contributions in Williams and Lyons 2010). A particularly well-known example of the latter would be Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* series (1989–1996), which is defined by the individual styles of the various artists with whom Gaiman has collaborated over the course of the series as much as it is by his writing.

(2) Graphic novels need not use words. While most comics and, indeed, most graphic novels are defined by their characteristic combination of words and pictures (for more on comics’ semiotic multimodality, see, e.g., Hoppeler/Etter/Rippl 2009; Rippl/Etter 2015; as well as Groensteen 2007; Miodrag 2013; Packard 2006; Peeters 1999; Postema 2013; Schüwer 2008), and some graphic novels such as Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987), *From Hell* (1999), and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2002/2004) include particularly long stretches of text, one can find several influential graphic novels such as Peter Kuper’s *The System* (1997), Nicolas de Crécy’s *Prosopopus* (2003), Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2006), and Marnie Galloway’s *In the Sounds and Seas* (2016) that do not use words at all (for more on these as well as other ‘wordless comics,’ see, e.g., Beronä 2011; Kunzle 2001; Postema 2016).

(3) Graphic novels need not limit themselves to a single publication format. While most (though certainly not all) graphic novels are printed on the standard comic book page size of 10 1/4 by 6 5/8 inches (if they are *printed* at all, that is), page counts vary widely. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, a majority of canonical graphic novels ranging from Moore’s *Watchmen* to Gabrielle Bell’s *The Voyeurs* (2012) are initially published in serialized comic book/magazine/comic strip form and only later collected into either a single paperback or a hardcover volume—or, as is the

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<sup>1</sup> It is for purely heuristic reasons that we here uphold a distinction between the prototype of the ‘literary’ work, i.e. an entirely text-based book, on the one hand, and that of the book with non-verbal information (e.g., the graphic novel) on the other. The contributions to the present volume are, of course, a testimony to the complexity and multi-shape appearances of the contemporary ‘literary’ novel—hence our reference to the heuristic nature of our distinction and to prototype theory.

case with Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and Gaiman's *The Sandman* series, published as a series of trade paperbacks or hardcovers (for more on publication formats and serialization, see, e.g., Couch 2000; Etter/Stein 2019; Stein/Etter 2018).

(4) Graphic novels need not be fictional. While it is certainly true that many graphic novels are works of fiction and that more specific labels such as 'autobiographical comics' (see, e.g., Chute 2010; El Refaie 2012; and the contributions in Chaney 2011), 'comics journalism' (see, e.g., Nyberg 2006; Woo 2010; and the contributions in Worden 2015a), or even 'documentary comics' (see, e.g., Adams 2008; Chute 2016; Mickwitz 2015) exist for nonfictional (or at least not-exclusively-fictional) works such as Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* (1986/1991), Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001), Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003/2004), David B.'s *Epileptic* (2005), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts* (2016), or Catherine Meurisse's *La Légèreté* (2016), these works are still commonly (and with some justification) discussed as graphic novels (see, once more, Gravett 2005; Meyer 2013; Tabachnick 2010). Many authors even specifically aim for a blurring of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

Despite the fact that the graphic novel's success is a recent phenomenon, at least when compared with the conventional literary novel, we do not aim to provide a comprehensive account of its early 21<sup>st</sup>-century manifestations (which, incidentally, we would not consider all that different from the graphic novel of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century). What we do offer are three brief case studies of graphic novels that differ from each other in what we think are interesting ways, thus exemplifying the range of what a graphic novel can be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2. Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers***

Despite it not being the only available authorship model, the rise of the graphic novel during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its continuing critical and commercial success during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are closely connected to the figure of the writer-artist exerting wide-ranging creative control over his or her work. Among the writer-artists that have created what we today consider canonical works, few have proven to be as influential as Art Spiegelman. Spiegelman is best known for the two-part

(auto)biographical graphic novel *MAUS*,<sup>2</sup> which tells the story of Spiegelman's father, Vladek, telling the story of his survival of the Holocaust to his son. Among his more recent works figures a graphic novel that focuses on what may well be considered the event that most significantly shaped US cultural and political life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—the events of September 11, 2001.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, at this point, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) pushes the borders of our understanding of what a graphic novel may be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let us start with the publication format. As Spiegelman notes in the introduction, *In the Shadow of No Towers* was certainly not conceived to be published in a conventional graphic novel form: "I'd spent much of the decade before the millennium trying to avoid making comix, but from some time in 2002 till September 2003 I devoted myself to what became a series of ten large-scale pages about September 11 and its aftermath" (Spiegelman 2004: n.pag.). Spiegelman originally accepted an offer from the German newspaper *Die Zeit* to publish translated versions of these ten large-scale pages while retaining complete creative control as well as the rights to publishing his work in other languages. In the US, he initially had a considerably harder time getting *In the Shadow of No Towers* published, which forged what he would later refer to as the "coalition of the willing" (Spiegelman 2004: n.pag.) that mostly consisted of newspapers and magazines from "the 'old Europe'—France, Italy, the Netherlands, England—where [Spiegelman's] political views hardly seemed extreme" (Spiegelman 2004: n.pag.).

Finally, in 2004, *In the Shadow of No Towers* was published with Pantheon as an oversized 29 ½ by 23 ½ inches hardcover, printed on unusually strong cardboard, and including not only the ten full-color sheets previously published by *Die Zeit* and Spiegelman's "coalition of the willing" but also an extensive "comics supplement" that included reproductions of ten of the "old comics strips" Spiegelman identifies as "the only cultural artifacts that could get past [his] defenses to flood [his] eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers" (2004: n.pag.), and whose graphical style he emulated in various parts of *In the Shadow of No Towers*' main

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of *MAUS* was published from 1980 to 1991 as a series of inserts in *RAW* magazine. These chapters, along with a previously unpublished one, were later collected in two volumes published in 1986 and 1991, as well as in a 'complete' volume that included additional background material in 1994. For further discussion of the complex production process of what still remains a defining graphic novel, see also the wealth of material collected in Spiegelman 2011.

pages. As Henry Jenkins notes in an exploration of “the cultural work performed by early comics in *No Towers*” (2015: 305) that goes significantly beyond the brief sketch that we can offer here, “the selected pages are not simply illustrative; they are also exemplary. The artists featured here (including Winsor McCay, Richard F. Outcault, Rudolph Dirks, Frederick Burr Opper, George McManus, Lyonel Feininger, Gustave Verbeck, and George Herriman) represent the canon Spiegelman had promoted over the previous decades” (Jenkins 2015: 309) as part of his extensive curatorial work.

Spiegelman’s evocation of the archive may also be read as contributing to an at least partial subversion of his ‘singular’ authorial position as a writer-artist. Yet, its main function seems to be a thorough fragmentation of *In the Shadow of No Towers*’ comics pages, as he “uses fragments, snippets, isolated images, removed from the original context and layered over very contemporary experiences, as the basic building blocks of *No Towers*’ own narrative” (Jenkins 2015: 310). In narratological terms, *In the Shadow of No Towers*’ ten large-scale comics pages mainly seem to be held together by Spiegelman’s extradiegetic, autodiegetic, and explicitly autobiographical ‘narrating I,’ which speaks to its ‘narratee’ (i.e., the reader) via fairly conventional ‘narration boxes,’ on the one hand, and the corresponding ‘experiencing I’ that is repeatedly represented within individual panels or sequences of panels, on the other (for more on the distinction between the ‘narrating I’ and the ‘experiencing I’ in autobiographical comics, see, e.g., Horstkotte/Pedri 2017).

Despite these well-worn narrative devices, however, there “is no one familiar narrative line or consistent meaning to be drawn from Spiegelman’s depictions of the attacks” (Smith 2015: 115; see also Jenkins 2015; as well as, e.g., Chute 2007; Kuhlman 2007; McGlothlin 2008). Not only do the ‘narration boxes’ use differently colored borders, backgrounds, and lettering (including some instances where the words are directly written into the panel). They also, and perhaps more importantly, create repeated switches in ‘narrative perspective.’ These become most visible via the changing pronouns that the ‘narrating I’ uses to refer to the ‘experiencing I.’ Indeed, the ‘experiencing I’ does not remain an ‘experiencing I,’ but rather repeatedly morphs into a first-person ‘we’ (when referring to Art Spiegelman, his wife Françoise Mouly, and their daughter Nadja Spiegelman) as well as a third-person ‘he’ (when referring to Spiegelman) and a third-person ‘they’ (when referring to Spiegelman and Mouly). Not least because there is no clear correspondence between the use of differently

colored ‘narration boxes’ and the use of different pronouns, *In the Shadow of No Towers*’ narratorial voice seems to intensify rather than weaken the overall sense of fragmentation.

Similarly, the graphic representation of Spiegelman’s ‘experiencing I’ ranges from various comparatively ‘realistic’ styles that employ different degrees of abstraction, via the metaphoric self-representation as an anthropomorphic mouse that is well-established since *MAUS* (and which, likewise, employs a range of different styles, including homages to Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*), to full-fledged metamorphoses into other classical comics characters such as “a hapless hooligan” (Spiegelman 2004: 10), a thinly-veiled reference to Frederick Burr Opper’s *Happy Hooligan*, or Jiggs from George McManus’ *Bringing Up Father*. While these metamorphoses of the ‘experiencing I’ may be particularly striking, the resulting visual fragmentation of course extends to the graphic novel as a whole, as the ten comics pages encompass not only various other sequences drawn in the style of “old comics strips” such as Richard F. Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid* and Rudolph Dirks’ *The Katzenjammer Kids*, as well as “editorial cartoons” (Smith 2015: 116), but also reproductions of photographs and a reoccurring, highly pixelated digital “image of the looming north tower’s glowing bones just before it vaporized” (Spiegelman 2004: n.pag.). The result may appear to be a “god-awful mess” (Wolk 2007: 346) to some, but Spiegelman arguably succeeds in representing “an artist who finds himself navigating multiple systems of representation in order to find one that appropriately captures his lived experience of September 11, 2001” (Smith 2015: 103).

### **3. Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye***

Diversity is about acknowledging various forms, and it comes in various forms. The diversity displayed in *In the Shadow of No Towers* is, among other things, that of the rich stylistic tradition of North American cartoons. Diversity in the present field of graphic novels or long-form comics can, of course, also mean to go beyond the rather Eurocentric and North-America-oriented market, and to focus on graphic novels produced and published in socially/politically unstable regions; in a variety of

languages; on unconventional topics; and so on.<sup>3</sup> One recent example that speaks about—and illustrates—various forms of diversity is Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*.

The book, published in 2016 with Pantheon, is a peculiar work for various reasons. A stylistic potpourri, it retraces the biography of one Charlie Chan Hock Chye, a fictitious comics artist who lives to see Singapore grow from a group of fishermen’s hamlets into a major international business hub. To account for all levels of narration—and hence, all styles—is no easy task. The book starts on the level of an interview in which a 72-year-old Chan talks about his career as a cartoonist in retrospect. As though facing a camera, Chan puts on display comics he used to read as a child, while reflecting on how the artistic and institutional challenges present in the comics landscape have changed between the 1940s and the present time, 2010. The interviewer is never seen, nor properly ‘heard’ for that matter. Remaining within the metaphor of the panel as *framing*, this means that the focus is persistently on Chan, while a speech bubble from the ‘off’—i.e., a bubble whose thorn ‘originates’ outside of the field of vision—offers nothing but a few unintelligible strokes. It is only upon Chan’s (intelligible) answer in the ensuing panel that we learn what the interviewer’s question has been.

This level of Chan as a talking head in his early (and later mid-)seventies is complemented by materials that are presented as though Liew’s graphic novel were an exhibition catalogue: covers of Chan’s earliest comics, excerpts from these works, sketches and sample materials from the same era, most of which specified in meticulous legends to be taken from the artist’s personal collections. Here, the dust cover blurb’s description of *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* as “[blurring] the

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<sup>3</sup> Publications such as John A. Lent’s *International Journal of Comic Art* (since 1999) have long testified to the richness of graphic novel and comics production outside the economically dominant hubs of North America, Japan, and Western Europe. To name but one example, international and local publishers in India have pushed aesthetically innovative projects for some time. This not only includes the comics represented in the anthology *Longform: An Anthology of Graphic Narratives* (see Sarbabjit et al. 2018) but also innovative projects produced with smaller presses like Navayana or Yoda Press. A particularly noteworthy work came out with Navayana in 2011: *Bhimayana* is a collectively produced graphic biography which—in close relation to its subject matter—builds its entire aesthetics on the Gond art tradition from central India (see Vyam et al. 2018). In other South Asian countries such as Pakistan, there are prolific online comics communities, a fact that is at least partially related to the issue of censorship. We are grateful to Amrita Singh for contributing this observation.



line between truth and construct” is revealed as well-wrought in every aspect of the final product. The comics and sketches in this catalogue are not reproduced in a cleaned up way but appear to bear the traces of years of storing and displacing: yellowed paper, withered margins, and stains of grease. Clippings and cut-up pages are presented as having been used by Chan and his later collaborator Bert in their attempts to sell ideas for new periodicals (including their own new comic strips) to printers in Singapore over the years—with rather modest success, as we successively learn. Other such materials include the reproduction of oil-on-canvas portraits, mixed media works, faux advertisements and invented pop music album covers, as well as the photograph of a hand-made doll that had been offered to Chan by an acquaintance—or so the catalogue legend tells us (see Liew 2016: 259).

Which of these objects are real, then? As pertinent a question as this may seem, it cannot be answered satisfactorily. The almost haptic atmosphere of the unfinished, stained, withered material, of structures, textures, and frames, makes the seeming paradox apparent to all readers familiar with the peritextual hints (dust jacket) and with the fictitiousness of Chan’s existence: these objects do somehow exist, if only because Liew created them to faux-document his main protagonist’s life. What techniques were used in which case—and whether or not digital enhancement was at work, for instance, to create the withering effect—is ultimately of secondary importance. The final document, this catalogue of mock-historical material, does exist. Liew further complicates the matter by adding, in some of the legends, credit lines that contend that some real-life institution (e.g., the “National Archives of Singapore”; Liew 2016: 254) is the current owner of the piece in question. Add to this the list of small-font notes at the very end of the book, no less than eight pages in length. The tone of these notes gives no indication of a lack of sincerity, on the contrary: They read trustworthy insofar as they indicate proper, existing secondary literature. It is only consistent that they make no mention of Chan and his biography whatsoever; rather, they serve as background information on particular historical incidents. (That a red herring or some subtle joke is also present is not altogether impossible; yet it would require a substantial study in its own right to test these eight pages for potential postmodern badinage.)

Chan’s biography is intricately linked to the history of modern Singapore, and along these lines his artifacts and the personal biographical anecdotes (in the form of black-and-white flashbacks) are recounted. This starts with his parents’ relocation

from Penang to the center of Singapore in order to open a provision shop there in the 1920s (see Liew 2016: 12). A 1940s personal anecdote—young Chan attending a sports event—is then meshed with one of Chan’s early comic strips, drawn in simple style. It is a comic strip about a fictitious boy (Ah Huat) and his robot, who get involved in student protests against the British rulers’ treatments of the ethnic Chinese population of Singapore. Fact and fiction merge insofar as the multiple-page excerpt we as readers are provided with involves us further in the history of political turmoil that follows. Here, two activists, the Chinese-schooled Lim Chin Siong and the British-schooled Lee Kuan Yew, go from joint efforts for a better representation of workers’ rights toward a schism with two resulting fates that could not be further from one another—Yew serving as Prime Minister for 31 years, Siong imprisoned under highly McCarthyan circumstances, and eventually *de facto* banned and exiled from Singapore (he spends the rest of his life as a fruit vendor in London). This duel is flanked by the involvement of the British in Singapore’s temporary merger with Malaya (now Malaysia), and further complications and subplots ensue. The catalogue later includes a comic strip which fast-forwards into an alternate history version of 2014—Chan’s fantasy of an alternate fate for Siong—just as much as it includes flashbacks, e.g., to the time of the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) and the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Singaporean history and politics of some seven decades are meshed up in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* with the history of comics during roughly the same time. This is perhaps best exemplified with the *Siege 136* plotline (see Liew 2016: 75–93). As part of another flashback, Bert and Chan explain to a third person the concept of their new comic strip about WWII scenes in 1943. In this strip, Malaysians (‘Malayans’ for the contemporary term) are drawn as cats, the Japanese as dogs, and the British as monkeys. As Bert has it, these attributions come “from a song the Chinese students sing” (Liew 2016: 78)—a song titled “I love Malaya” and reprinted as a page of sheet music with a non-Western musical notation soon after the flashback scene. To name but one connection, linking ethnicities or nationalities with particular animals has a history at least in North American and European comics, of course. When Art Spiegelman published *MAUS* with a similar premise,<sup>4</sup> he had already

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the general premise, the prisoner of war scene in Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and Spiegelman’s *MAUS* are strikingly similar. For specifically Singaporean comics and cartoon precursors, see Lent 2015: 207–222.

experimented, for years, with the idea of attributing animals or characteristics of animals to particular ethnic, national, or religious groups. Indeed, the tradition of the Funnies in North America is quite prominently tied up with the depiction of anthropomorphic animals—even before such examples as *Krazy Kat* and *Felix the Cat*, and long before the rise of Walt Disney’s commercial imperium (see Kaufmann 2013).

No brief survey can do justice to *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, a graphic novel 320 pages in length. Suffice it to highlight one more aspect that is conspicuous about the work, namely, the scarcity of female characters. Apart from a few characters with crucial functions but very little depth and still less dialogue (the artist’s mother, an early love interest, a TV anchorwoman), there is only one recurring female character: Bert’s cousin Lily. Lily is reasonable and responsible, she provides the hard working young men with coffee, and she is stunningly beautiful, just like a famous actress of which she reminds Chan (see Liew 2016: 77). The relative absence of female characters in Liew’s work may well be a plot device chosen to heighten the same absence in much of Singaporean history, at least in what mainstream historiography accounts for. As a side effect, however, it indirectly connects Singapore’s history with the marginalized position of female artists in the global comics markets well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Current views on female artists and female fictional protagonists in comics history are still often connected to the much older cliché of female artists as epigones of their male counterparts, a topic equally and much more explicitly addressed in a British contemporary graphic novel, Posy Simmonds’ *Tamara Drewe*.

#### **4. Posy Simmonds: *Tamara Drewe***

Attributing to women both physical beauty and the ‘willingness’ to support the male artists in their surroundings—these tropes are at the heart of Posy Simmonds’ *Tamara Drewe*. The work was serialized between 2005 and 2007 in *The Guardian* before being released as a full-length and full-color graphic novel in 2008. With a plot very loosely reminiscent of Thomas Hardy’s 1874 novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Tamara Drewe* establishes a setting where a young and beautiful woman returns to her provincial hometown and turns the heads of several men.

Tamara returns to her village in South East England, where she inherits a family estate and—particularly thanks to having undergone rhinoplasty to improve

her physical appearance—starts living the beautiful people’s life. As of this point, she makes a lasting impression anywhere she goes. Whereas she still waits for the moment of being fully independent so as to dedicate her time completely to novel writing, her weekly magazine columns afford her a decent amount of publicity and a steady income, and she soon starts an affair with pop musician Ben, going back and forth between her estate in the countryside and Ben’s apartment in nearby London.

Tamara’s middle-aged neighbors, Nicholas and Beth, run the Stonefield Farm, which serves as the permanent home of many farm animals and a more temporary one for humans—authors, to be precise. It offers reconverted farm buildings as writers’ retreats, “far from the madding crowd” (Simmonds 2008: n.pag.) of the city, as Beth likes to advertise it. Tamara and Stonefield, this is the connection that catalyzes the main plot strand, all of which takes place within one year: Nicholas starts an affair with Tamara, and just when a divorce is looming over his marriage with Beth, he gets into a fight with a temporary Stonefield resident (Glen), is numbed, and then trampled to death by a herd of cows under circumstances nobody will ever entirely know. The cows, described explicitly as “mad” (Simmonds 2008: n.pag.), evoke near-homophony with the “crowd” from Stonefield’s motto, which ultimately highlights the irony of its use as such: it is not in the “madding crowd” of London but rather in the countryside that this story of crime and seduction, with its suspense, multiple twists, and multiple narrating angles, is set.

Multiple angles means multiple voices—and multiple narrating styles. What is “mad” for some (like Glen) is “mental” for the local village teenagers such as Casey. Hers is a type of slang prevalent among peers and starkly contrasting with all other narrating voices’ tones and registers. (Simmonds awards each voice enough space to develop its niche, as the graphic novel depends for the most part on reflections and flashbacks provided in longer text passages without speech and thought bubbles; on most pages, only a few images are clearly black-rimmed as panels and, hence, offer a sense of present tense for the dialogues and action they present.) And it is a manner of speech also set apart visually from the otherwise hand-lettered text by the Comic Sans type of font chosen for Casey’s—and exclusively Casey’s—perspective.

The plot’s madness has a crowd of narrators, so to speak, and Simmonds has an array of strategies to distinguish them verbally and visually. All the teenagers come from low-income families and feel stuck and left behind in the countryside, so when they involve themselves in the multiple love affairs between the rich writers and

Londoners (sneaking into houses, sending anonymous messages, etc.), they seem to do so out of boredom and to express their situation in drastic terms—which Simmonds takes from a symbolic to a literal level: their lives feel scripted in unbearably automated, generic, and cheap fonts.

To highlight a graphic novel's self-reflexivity may have become clichéd by now, but it cannot be left unmentioned here, as it is so obvious. The local teens' youth slang points toward a reflection on the medium and its reception. Simmonds' democratic stance of not making narration exclusively the task of the—indeed many—writer protagonists reflects the constant intradiegetic negotiation (among those writers) of what proper literature might be. In this discourse, the popular press is contrasted with more 'literary' and 'intellectual' texts. A subtle pun may serve to summarize this negotiation. It is placed in the beginning of *Tamara Drewe's* quadripartite plot, but only revealed as such in the last part: the graphic novel has sections called "Autumn," "Winter," and "Spring," but it starts with "August" rather than "Summer," reflecting the protagonists' ever-present aspiration to become 'august literati,' and to deflect the danger of mingling with the popular and non-intellectual opposites that flock literary festivals these days, according to Beth. In her precise words: the danger of mingling with "telly chefs, [...] gardeners," and, indeed, those who author "comics" (Simmonds 2008: n.pag.).

Apart from offering a meta-comment on decades-old yet ongoing discussions about the 'literariness' of present-day comics and the usefulness of 'graphic novel' as a term (see Chute 2008), Beth's and Tamara's roles taken together have another function as well. They offer a pair of stock characters: the loyal and self-effacing house-wife and the young and energetic temptress. To remain in the setting of stereotypes, they are both 'necessary' for the male 'genius' to remain energized, yet only for some time, and in diverging ways. Beth's constant reflection on Nicholas' radical lack of *care* for and about anything household-related (apart from financial contributions) is cumulated in her brief yet explicit reflection on what a radical feminist standpoint might be in such a situation. Without spelling it out, she evokes, it seems, the 1990s paradigm of "feeding egos" and "tending wounds" (as per Sandra Lee Bartky [2000]), perhaps more so than ideas of an unfulfilled "promise of happiness" (as in Sara Ahmed's [2000] terms). In any case, the self-reassuring discourse that South England society and the mainstream press indulge in after the deaths of Nicholas and (in a different subplot) one of the local teenagers, is

highlighted as missing a crucial point. Around the time when she also seeks reconciliation with Beth, Tamara gets to the heart of this point in her column “Cherchez les femmes,” where she shows how the activity of cementing inherently sexist structures may intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as classism—as, for instance, when the death of the local teenager who overdosed with self-made drugs is simply blamed on her bereaved single and low-income working mother. In other words, though the graphic novel’s plot is highly action-driven and composed to maintain a certain tension throughout, Simmonds does not fail to address political issues. On the most fundamental level and beyond the details mentioned above, she does so when delineating the tremendous gap of pecuniary and overall recognition that is in stock for the working-class locals vis-à-vis the lives led by the affluent protagonists, who choose the countryside to relax from their time in the metropolis.

## 5. Conclusion

As already stated above, graphic novels such as Spiegelman’s, Liew’s, and Simmonds’ are often taken to reflect on the medium and its various local and global markets. Gender and feminist issues, and particularly the relatively reduced degree of attention many of the hundreds, indeed thousands, of female cartoonists and critics are met with in North America and Europe (apart from ‘flagships’ such as Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel), are an issue that has been addressed by recent scholarship repeatedly (see Chase 2009; Chute 2010; Robbins 2013). One might think that ‘old’ forms of chauvinism among those cartoonists whose depiction of women either took the form of the caricatured housewife or the stunningly beautiful temptress, yet never anything between or beyond the two (as Hergé stated it for himself, *mutatis mutandis*, in a late interview, see Peeters 2015: 272), had died out by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, both the presence of female artists and the depiction of female characters continue to stir heated debates, as the famous Angoulême 2016 controversy exemplifies (see Chrisafis 2016). In other words, a sociological mapping of the graphic novels markets would probably not be very different in this respect from that of the classical literary markets.

Race and ethnicity is another factor that is discussed in similar contexts, and the presence and depiction of non-whiteness is a particularly salient issue, given the visual bent of the comics medium. There are other such issues—queerness, for instance—that are, slowly but steadily, gaining niche audiences and also broader ones

(see Worden 2015b) and which mainstream serialized comics are certainly not impervious to (see Nehrllich/Nowotny 2017). Thus, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Anglophone graphic novels—apart from the simple and perhaps no longer particularly radical stance of taking the comics medium ‘seriously’—are increasingly offering complexity precisely by addressing a multitude of present-day issues, including highly politicized ones, and allowing for stylistic playfulness, as discussed in all three case studies above.

We have started by hinting at the growing presence of graphic novels in contexts traditionally reserved for the literary novel. The methodological tools that 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary studies have at their disposal are expanding, and graphic novels are certainly a factor in this expansion. 21<sup>st</sup>-century graphic novels further encourage contemporary literary scholars who see the necessity for interdisciplinary work and who escape the dangers of a certain media blindness (see Hausken 2004; as well as, e.g., Ryan/Thon 2014). The aforementioned complications associated with defining the term ‘graphic novel’ are then also an exercise in reflection on the methodologies required for the study of comics.

Trivial as it may seem, we would like to conclude by stressing that the variety we have repeatedly insisted on as defining the current landscape of graphic novels is unprecedented in the medium; it has become affordable only within a particular present-day market, with the help of new material possibilities (sizes of books, special features, and printing techniques), and thanks to a certain adventurous attitude toward words-and-image connections that cartoonists, publishers, and readers seem to share. That such products are not rigidly limited by the connotations that the term ‘graphic novel’ itself seems to bear may well be one reason for its continuing proliferation. Yet independently of whether we call them comics, sequential art, graphic narratives, or graphic novels, it seems clear that multimodal works such as Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, Simmonds’ *Tamara Drewe*, and countless other examples that we could only hint at here, are (and will likely continue to be) not only a core element of our contemporary visual culture but also a core object of our critical landscape after the ‘pictorial turn’ (see Mitchell 1994; as well as, e.g., the contributions in Curtis 2010).

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