

## Frames of Mind

### *Comics and Psychoanalysis in the Visual Field*

The visual form of comics has much to teach psychoanalysis about the psychic power of images. As French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu proclaimed in 1989, squinting over the horizon of the twentieth century, “psychoanalysis has a greater need of people who think in images than of learned scholars, scholiasts, and abstract or formalistic thinkers.”<sup>1</sup> We find this proclamation prefacing Anzieu’s classic book, *The Skin-Ego*, whose namesake concept – or thought-image – brings the body back to the center of psychoanalytic inquiry by suturing it to the Freudian ego, as a literal “skin for thought.” While Anzieu does not mention comics in *The Skin-Ego*, he also wrote the introduction to a literary critical book on one of the most popular European comics of the twentieth century, Belgian cartoonist Hergé’s *Adventures of Tintin*.<sup>2</sup> The distinguished psychoanalyst’s interest in this particular visual form of mass culture foretells the conjoined fates of psychoanalysis and comics the present chapter seeks to trace. Cartoonists meet Anzieu’s “need” in myriad and creative ways, developing the comics form as a medium of thinking in images – images that conjure regions of unconscious feeling inaccessible to language, and open hermetic internal worlds to creator and reader, patient and caretaker alike.

Comics and graphic narratives today are more popular than ever. Accounts of personal and historical traumas that would be difficult to imagine in words alone have been captured throughout the twentieth century in comics form, first and perhaps most notably in Art Spiegelman’s still-shocking Holocaust comic book, *Maus*, a combined autobiography and biography that presents the survivor testimony of Spiegelman’s father, Vladek, with Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. As a form that captures stories of lived experience for so many, comics is ideally suited to psychoanalytic literary study. This chapter traces the history of repeated encounters and interactions between the discourse of mental healthcare and comics. Now in our own day this form which was so denigrated is gracing the covers of elite journals; educators on both sides of academic campuses bring comics into classroom settings as informational and accessible resources. At the same

time, the comics field welcomes a growing number of autobiographical comics and graphic narratives that take up some of the most sobering subjects of mental health and personal as well as social trauma, channeling what cartoonist Justin Green calls the inbuilt “double vision” of the medium – its stereoscopy of pictured action and verbal overlay in thought bubbles, speech balloons, and narrative text boxes – to represent complex, fractured, chaotic, ambiguous, or otherwise hard-to-describe psychic realities.<sup>3</sup> This chapter thus further describes how the turn to visual media as a force for capturing contemporary culture may be understood from a psychoanalytic perspective.

All has not always been well between the psychoanalytic establishment and comics. After World War II, comics responded to the shocking horrors emerging out of Europe with new genres, many geared toward GIs and veterans. Lurid war, crime, and horror stories registered the unmastered anxieties repressed by conformist 1950s high culture. In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham unleashed his best-seller, *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comics Books on Today's Youth*, which claimed that comics were turning the nation's youth into illiterate delinquents. On April 21, 1954, a Senate Judiciary subcommittee tasked with investigating the causes of juvenile delinquency summoned Wertham as its star witness. Wertham's testimony was catastrophic for comics. In an effort to forestall government censorship, comics publishers adopted a strict, and sometimes preposterous “self-regulatory” code, including such stipulations as: “in every instance shall good triumph over evil.”<sup>4</sup> This Comics Code ended comics' “Golden Age” of unfettered expression and ushered in the “Silver Age” of the superhero.

One title that warrants special mention during this transition into a morally instructive mission for popular comics is *Psychoanalysis*, which restaged the traumas of world history as private psychodrama (1955). Scripted by Daniel Keyes and drawn by Jack Kamen – the same talented artist responsible for EC's bestselling horror, crime, and suspense titles – *Psychoanalysis* advertises stories of “People Searching for Peace of Mind through ... PSYCHOANALYSIS,” inspired by the personal analyses of Gaines and Feldstein.<sup>5</sup> Each issue documents another week of sessions, following three patients who come through the analyst's revolving door. As the editors themselves acknowledge at the outset of the series, in their editor's note, “Id Bits,” the portrait of psychoanalysis made by *Psychoanalysis* takes a number of liberties. Patients move agitatedly about the room; the couch is a prop. The anonymous psychoanalyst “actively guides” his patients to their breakthrough insights. Meanwhile, psychosomatic symptoms melt away at the touch of an explanation, so that the treatment arc is telescoped into just

four sessions. The handsome psychoanalyst, who bears a striking resemblance to Clark Kent, rewrites the analyst as superhero, or the superhero as analyst: resolving symptoms faster than a speeding bullet, leaping patients' defenses in a single bound. Yet despite its crude stereotypes of psychoanalytic theory and practice – the parents are always to blame – *Psychoanalysis* flirted suggestively with how the comic-book format could be used to portray, graphically and dramatically, the methods of psychoanalysis.

But what is repressed will return; and the cultural unconscious that had gained expression in shocking horror comics took new shape on the coattails of the Code. The repressed unconscious anxieties that horror comics of the 1940s had symptomatically expressed found new expression in the comix underground that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. In this period comics stood divided between the mainstream, commercial comics and the self-published or “underground” comics, which were known as “comix” – the “x” indicating their adult, “x-rated” content. An outcropping of the underground left-wing press more generally, the underground comix movement reinvented comics as an “adult” medium. In 1968, Robert Crumb launched the underground movement by peddling his self-published comic book *ZAP #1* (labeled “Fair Warning: For Adult Intellectuals Only”) on Haight Street with his wife; the pair even sold copies to pedestrians out of a baby carriage. Rejecting mainstream commercial standards and strictures, underground comix also rejected “house drawing styles,” embracing instead an “auteurist” model of production that went hand-in-hand with the construction of idiosyncratic unconscious worlds. Known for his bulbous, grotesque female forms and a meticulous, tightly controlled line quality, Crumb visualized every sort of sexually perverse, racist, bigoted, materialist fantasy and exorcised his own fears, gripes, and sexual neuroses in stories that seemed to tap directly into the discontents of a generation.<sup>6</sup>

Crumb and his followers in the comix underground set the table for the rise of the “graphic novel,” a development relevant to psychoanalysis because the very form was born of a desire to document private, interior states – especially those produced by mental disease.<sup>7</sup> The founding comics narrative that can be considered a “graphic novel,” Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, communicates the author’s own experience of debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder; in this sense, it anticipates cartoonist Alison Bechdel’s visualization of her own childhood OCD in her bestselling *Fun Home* (2006), now a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical.<sup>8</sup> In 1972, Green – whose discovery of a little cartoon by Robert Crumb in a tattered European underground paper had inspired him to abandon a career in painting and join the vital underground comix movement – published the forty-four-page, stand-alone *Binky* on cheap newsprint, through Last Gasp

Eco-Funnies. As Green later recalled, he was driven by “an internal necessity to define the psychic components of a specific condition” for which he had no official diagnosis at the time.<sup>9</sup> (The title ironically stages a hero-meets-villain plot, although the fight is not with the Madonna herself, but rather with Binky’s own internal demons.) “With *Binky Brown*,” cartoonist Chris Ware observed of McSweeney’s deluxe 2009 edition of the book, “comics went practically overnight from being an art form that saw from the outside in to being one that sees from the inside out.”<sup>10</sup>

In terms especially pertinent to a discussion of comics form, Green describes his OCD as “a spatial and temporal relationship with Roman Catholic icons, architecture, and doctrine that has been resounding in my life for almost forty years.”<sup>11</sup> Comics is a form that produces meaning and causality through the careful arrangement of objects and figures in space, as Hillary Chute has argued in her keen analysis of Green. In this way, comics can map the anxious causal narratives that determine Green’s mental landscape, and which coalesce around the position of his own body in a space brimming with phantasmatic threats. Additionally, *Binky* shows how the work of comics itself gains energy from the compulsive spatial preoccupations its pages do not so much purge as refocus and redirect. Against the common notion that making art is “cathartic,” an easy purging of difficult emotions – perhaps the psychological counterpart to Catholic confession, as an unburdening of sin – Green suggests that the craft of cartooning offers rather a mode of assimilation, containment, and integration: it requires “the precision of a jeweler along with the fortitude of a cobbler,” he writes; it involves placing little pieces together into a multipartite material construction that rebuilds cognitive and emotional meaning.<sup>12</sup>

*Binky* chronicles Green’s childhood struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder and Catholic guilt in a surreal, allegorical style that allows him to externalize and animate the bizarre, compulsive commands he fights to suppress. In one scene, Binky botches his special way of going down his front stairs: we see his “routine” diagrammed on the steps; in the next panel, the staircase, now with eyes, a mouth, and clutching hands, grabs Binky from behind and yells, “Come back here!” And Binky, who attends a strict Catholic school, obsesses most intensely over the consequences of his “impure” thoughts directed at the Virgin Mary. In the comic, these sexual thoughts radiate as literal “pecker rays” or “penis rays” from his genitals, crisscrossing through space to pierce their sacred objects; the cat’s cradle of lines can be seen as a parody of the orderly orthogonals in a linear perspective scheme. The device also puts an ironic twist on the conventional depiction of the Annunciation in Christian art, whereby a single golden ray – usually a delicate line of gold paint – falls across the Virgin, impregnating her. Later,

as Binky's obsession morphs and intensifies, the rays begin to project from every appendage. His fingers and toes transform into surreal penises; eventually, even inanimate objects reassemble before his eyes as engorged genitals. The proliferating penis rays visualize preoccupying *thoughts* as *graphic marks*, while underscoring the connection between vision and the body by rendering visual rays as penis rays.<sup>13</sup>

On the introductory splash page, "A Confession to My Readers," Green himself appears with his feet and hands bound, dangling upside down over a scythe positioned right at his crotch, like a needle about to scratch a record.<sup>14</sup> Ave Maria warbles from an old phonograph. Gripping his pen between his teeth, he inscribes a page with the comics boxes we are about to read. The text of his confession is contained in a speech bubble that has been nailed to the wall; the bubble, which bulges with veins, like an engorged penis, states the book's twofold intention: to "purge" the author of his compulsive neurosis; and to use the "easy-to-understand comic book format" to liberate other "tormented souls" from their own neuroses, so as to tie together "all we neurotics" into "a vast chain of common suffering." The image expresses and makes melodramatically literal the double bind of confession – while binding him once more to the Catholic faith he claims to have renounced, Green's comics confession further seems to participate in the compulsive neurosis he would purge (thus the speech bubble becomes a penis). Through the metaphor of the "vast chain of suffering," however, Green suggests how the comics format, through its very power to visualize metaphors, can reach and unite a community of those suffering from "invisible" mental disorders. Green's statement serves as an early "graphic medicine" manifesto.<sup>15</sup>

Comics' visual grammar itself tracks with the visual, fragmentary, and repetitive experience of trauma. It is no accident that such a broad swath of autobiographical graphic novels recount and attempt to account with traumatic experiences and historical traumas. In a crisp definition that has become canonical, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "precisely to be possessed by an *image* or event" (*italics mine*).<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Hartman writes that trauma "seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche," where "its exceptional presence" relates to its having been "registered rather than experienced."<sup>17</sup> In comics, too, images seem to sear themselves directly onto the mental retina. Responding to Wertham's attack on comics, Spiegelman notes how the infamous "injury-to-the-eye" motif penetrates to the core of what comics does. "I concede that this isn't Mother Goose," he writes of Plastic Man creator Jack Cole's panel showing a hypodermic needle piercing the protagonist's eye: "but I find the panel (part of a dream sequence, incidentally) emblematic of the comic book's visceral power to pass the reader's analytical defenses and pierce the

brain.”<sup>18</sup> In a public conversation, Spiegelman further described how the visual domain in comics “has to do with the body – with the things that can’t be articulated in other ways.”<sup>19</sup>

As a form where the illusion of time is created, or broken, through the juxtaposition of images in space, comics articulates what influential French second generation Freudian André Green calls “eclaté” (“shattered”) time – the exploded time of psychic life.<sup>20</sup> Comics frames remain materially and conceptually accessible on the page, in contrast to film, which snatches its frames away at a fixed rate of millimeters per second; for this reason, comics can make profoundly legible the Freudian “hypothesis of the timelessness of the unconscious, which is nothing more than the timelessness or its traces and cathexes, endowed with mobility.”<sup>21</sup> In comics, then, as in the psychoanalytic session itself – steered by the analysand’s dream-like, freely associative speech – the tripartition of past/present/future may be represented as a purely present manifestation at any given moment. In comics, as in psychoanalysis, the past is not hidden behind the present; it infiltrates it, giving it modes of organization and its own special character.

The cartoonist who perhaps has revealed this most convincingly is Spiegelman. His memoiristic work consistently explores intergenerational trauma – the impact of his parents’ trauma on his own life – and exemplifies how the work of comics relates to psychoanalytic categories of memory and repetition. In the *annus mirabilis* of 1972, Spiegelman produced the first pieces toward his Pulitzer Prize-winning Holocaust comics narrative, *Maus*.<sup>22</sup> *Maus* brought comix out of the underground and into the mainstream as a respectable form. Spiegelman claims that without the personal, confessional mode *Binky* innovated, “there could have been no *Maus*.”<sup>23</sup> And at the heart of *Maus*, about his parents’ trauma, is Spiegelman’s own. Spiegelman’s mother, Anja Spiegelman, took her own life in 1968, months after Art himself had been hospitalized for a psychotic breakdown. Spiegelman chronicles his mother’s suicide and its immediate aftermath in his 1972 underground comic, “Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History,” drawn on scratchboard in a German Expressionist style that seems etched with anger. “Prisoner,” originally published in a small underground publication, is reprinted in its entirety at the heart of *Maus I*, where it breaks with the rest of the narrative temporally and stylistically.

The mother’s loss is the unfinished business of *Maus*. At the outset of his 2008 experimental comics *kunstlerroman* “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@%\*!” – inspired by his underground-era work, a collection of which Pantheon re-edited in 2008 – Spiegelman returns to the subject of his mother. “Portrait” opens by conjuring an intriguing sequence of childhood memories that situate maternal loss at the origin of his becoming the

cartoonist he became. On the first page of “Portrait,” little Art and his mother are playing a popular drawing game: Art makes a scribble – the same spiral that forms the third character in the last “word” of the book title – and hands it to Anja to turn into a representational picture. She compulsively draws another iteration of the “same old face” she always draws: the profile of a thin-lipped woman with closed eyes. She draws an unconscious avatar, who does not (cannot?) return her son’s look. Then Anja makes a scribble for Art (random, jaggy – very unlike the smooth and composed spiral of her son). He draws an adorable cartoon duck in a sailor’s cap. But Anja is too worried to play further: her husband isn’t home yet.<sup>24</sup> The mother-child idyll breaks down: “Breakdowns” is the title of Spiegelman’s 1978 underground collection, the cover of which is reproduced alongside the scribble game sequence on the first page. The absorptive moment is ruptured by the mother’s creative inhibitions, by the symbolic intrusion of the father, by Anja’s own war-haunted past. Here the emotional subtexts shaping the mother-child encounter gain graphic form through their shared production of lines on paper.

The vignette is introduced by two more panel images featuring the spiral scribble: an image of Spiegelman as a vaudeville clown slipping on a banana peel (the spiral figures the motion line of his tumble), and a surreal portrait panel of Spiegelman with the spiral scribble for a face. Each “Portrait” strip begins a portrait cameo of one “face” of the artist, rendered in a different graphic style, which together produce a constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic psychological portrait of the artist in the self-interpretative act – attempting (according to the noir-style voiceover of his midget detective character, Ace Hole) “to locate the traumas that shaped and misshaped him.”<sup>25</sup> Here, we see how the scribble Spiegelman’s child self makes for the mother to complete gives him his identity as a cartoonist – the cartoonist who is constantly slipping over his own history – even as it destroys his recognizable features. While the looped spiral line is the icon for drunkenness and confusion in the lexicon of comics, as W. J. T. Mitchell tells us, the spiral line or vortex itself has been “the signature of the artist since Apelles and Hogarth, the sign of transformation and empathetic doodling.”<sup>26</sup>

This encounter between the young artist and his mother also stages a (suggestively missed) encounter between psychoanalytic theory and comics. British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott adapted the same popular drawing game into a psychotherapeutic technique for use in initial consultations with his child patients. This game would later be regarded as Winnicott’s “most famous technical invention,” although the analyst referred to it much more simply – as a game he “liked to play with no rules,” or “the squiggle game.”<sup>27</sup> “Portrait” becomes a kind of squiggle

game the adult artist plays with and by himself, yet which casts the reader in the maternal – and by extension, psychotherapeutic – position. The “active” reader recruited by the participatory comics form turns rough marks into story, dream-residue into meaningful presence. The space of the drawing pad, and the realm of the visual more broadly, is proposed as a powerful, even compulsory site of memory and history-construction – memory and history-construction as moreover collaborative, interlocutory activities – where the past is preserved but also transformed. The artist’s drawing pad offers up a leaden signifier of the past, the unexpurgated spiral – a remnant of former marks and spaces, a lingering gesture (like a motion line etched in the air) – for transformation: “Ha! Turn *THIS* one into something!” says the young “%@&\*!” to his mother, and to his adult self.<sup>28</sup>

As the repeating spiral mark itself announces, repetition is central to comics. Repetition carves comics’ formal contours and creative procedures. (Spiegelman further highlights this by repeating panels and even whole sequences across the pages of “Portrait,” adding different captions or, in the self-reflexive finale, mixing up the colored overlays used to print the panels to turn the images into defamiliarized abstractions.) At the most basic level, to move the story forward, another panel must be drawn and filled. Such a painstaking process of drawing and redrawing can seem almost mad – a form of repetition-compulsion, similar to the urge to repeat in OCD. And yet, comics also repeat to remember and transform; they side with Freudian remembrance, with “working through,” over amnesiac “acting out.”<sup>29</sup> Quoting Jacqueline Rose, Hillary Chute writes that “the encounter between psychoanalysis and artistic practice draws its strength from ‘repetition as insistence, that is, as the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten – something that can only come into focus now by blurring the fields of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition take place’”<sup>30</sup> Chute argues that comics – especially by women – make this mode of repetition evident, as the “work of (self)-interpretation is literally visualized; the authors show us interpretation as a process of visualization (93).”

The very *panelization* of the comics page implies interpretation, a *nachtraglich* (belated) resignification of past events. Specifically, as the careful selection and curation of moments in frames titrates what can or should be seen, comics requires immense condensations and compressions that cannot happen without some degree of assimilation, of processing. By situating images within a meaningful order, through words and pictures, the comics panel or box (a word evocative of a literal container) itself becomes a therapeutic container for the symbolic repetition of trauma, rather than a vector or agent of traumatization. What Wilfred Bion (1970) calls



“containment,” similar to what Donald Winnicott calls “holding,” refers to the containing environment (originally just the mother) into which elements of the self can be projected and then transformed, given back in a way that solidifies the contours of self and precipitates self-actualization and self-understanding.<sup>31</sup> Containment/holding further provides an apt metaphor for the psychological work performed by the framed, spatial envelope of the comics form, offering perhaps a second psychic skin: a prosthetic extension of Anzieu’s skin-ego – a psychic envelope that interfaces with the world. Even so, it is important to recognize that comics is not simply a form of therapy, as cartoonist Lynda Barry is fond of reminding the students who come to her creative workshops. “Therapy is like *this*, and this is very old,” she says about the process of drawing.<sup>32</sup>

Another cartoonist who reveals the aptness of comics for psychoanalytic work is Alison Bechdel, the acclaimed author of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), the latter of which reflects on Bechdel’s relationship with her mother, using Winnicottian theory as an organizational matrix. Both Bechdel and Spiegelman situate filial play, or its traumatic interruption, at the origins of their professional careers. Spiegelman once compared obsessively rewriting the same phrases over and over again – trying to get his father’s testimony to fit into the tiny boxes of the comics page – to the hypergraphia of a mental ward inmate (as Spiegelman himself was in 1968). Joking about her own labor-intensive book projects, Bechdel claims that one must be “clinically insane” to be a graphic novelist.<sup>33</sup> In interviews and lectures, the queer cartoonist – who won a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” grant in 2014 for redefining the form of contemporary memoir and expanding the expressive possibilities of the graphic form – characterizes her autobiographical cartooning as a less virulent expression of the OCD that overtook her childhood diary at age eleven, when, petrified of bearing false witness to the people and things she wrote about, she began obliterating her own autobiographical texts, and most vigorously the pronoun “I,” with ritualistic symbolic markings. “I do like to describe my drawing process as a barely harnessed obsessive-compulsive disorder,” she said in one interview.<sup>34</sup>

When it comes to creating her graphic memoirs, Bechdel follows a very elaborate procedure, one thoroughly textured by repetition. This process includes not only redrawing, by hand, all the archival images exhibited within her pages, but also using her digital camera to set up photographs of herself posing (sometimes in costume!) as all the characters in her narrative, including her past self, and her parents. Though Bechdel blames this technique on “an utter failure of imagination,” her fastidiousness is more than a cartoonist’s basic fieldwork, gathering reference materials for the accurate

rendering of figures in space.<sup>35</sup> She enters the subjectivity, the psyche of her characters by “inhabiting” their gesture and feeling the weight of each pose in her own body. “As I am doing these poses which are really just quick drawing aids, there is a kind of interesting emotional thing that happens as I have to impersonate these characters,” she muses. “I would like to think it gives me an emotional intimacy that filters into my drawing. I don’t know if that happens, but it is just like I *have* to do it.”<sup>36</sup> Putting a name to the “weird acting ability” her writing requires, Bechdel calls herself a “Method cartoonist.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, Bechdel’s “method cartooning” pushes the medium of comics toward theater; it steers narrative toward mimetic imitation. We can see this consilience of comics and theater in the ad hoc genres of the “tragicomic” and the “comic drama,” which Bechdel uses to subtitle *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* respectively. The processual basis of Bechdel’s comics as a kind of auteurist psychodrama may also shed some light on the success of *Fun Home*’s stage adaptation, which sold-out on Broadway and won multiple Tony Awards. Bechdel’s process makes palpable the link between the body and the psyche, indeed the body in the grip of its compulsive repetitions, which Spiegelman had also adumbrated with reference to *Maus*: “it’s necessary for me to reenact every single gesture, as well as every single location present in these flashbacks,” Spiegelman said.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, Bechdel’s emphasis on the gestural body revives the archaic, physiological or somatic idea of “mimesis” evoked by Walter Benjamin. This is the meaning of mimesis defined – put in *play* – by Walter Benjamin in his 1933 essay on the mimetic faculty, which argues that man’s ability to perceive likeness is nothing more than the rudiment of a powerful compulsion to imitate and become other.<sup>39</sup> Benjamin’s foremost example is that of a child’s powerful compulsion to perform similitude to objects: to play at becoming a train, for example. By her own avowal, Bechdel’s mimetic comics are skeins of competing instincts. Her role reversals can seem aggressive: efforts to co-opt and seize back agency and control. In this strange, auteurist psychodrama, Bechdel functions as patient-protagonist, doctor-director, and the audience, dramatizing events from her past so as to integrate and control the unmastered feelings contained within them. “I am literally in my basement recreating my childhood,” Bechdel said, somewhat sheepish. “But I feel like this is my way to the outside world. And that when I’m writing about my family, my family is like a little country. It is like a little state and I’m trying to . . . overthrow it. So it is a kind of political act even as it is very intimate.”<sup>40</sup>

The imbrication of the visual image with the very body of the perceiver in Bechdel is key to the jointly political and psychoanalytic labor her work performs. Bechdel renders all the materials she reproduces from her family

archives – photographs, newspaper clippings, childhood drawings, a gorgeous, illustrated page from Dr. Seuss – with painstaking realism, contrasting with the simplified contours she deploys elsewhere in her books. This “mimetic” style of rendering is itself crucially related to touch. Beyond the fact that Bechdel often figures her own hands holding the documents she copies, fine linear hatching is schooled by touch; it models the topography of a sensory surface, the ridges, wrinkles, and folds. “I often feel, when I’m drawing,” Bechdel said, in terms resonant with Anzieu’s “skin-ego,”

that the line I’m making on the paper is a way of touching the people and things I’m drawing . . . The paper is like skin. And when you’re drawing comics, you have to physically touch every square inch of every page you’re working on. That feels really different from writing. It’s possible for a novelist to write a whole book and never really touch the paper.<sup>41</sup>

Whether “behind the scenes,” in the basement studio of her Vermont home, “recreating her childhood,” as she puts it, or rather through the optical tactility of drawing, in her staging of the space of the printed page, Bechdel’s mimetic performances are ways of contacting – of being in touch with – the things she copies.

Early in *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel reproduces a fascinating sequence of snapshots of herself as a three-month-old infant being held by her mother (Figure 10.1). This photographic sequence, a series of five or six snapshots all seemingly taken in a single sitting – but then scattered across various boxes and albums – seems to capture the genesis of Alison’s mimetic practices: her mother is cooing at her, and she is precisely mirroring the shape of her mother’s mouth. Later in her book, in the chapter entitled “Mirror,” which deals with the psychoanalytic figure of the mirror from Lacan to Winnicott, Bechdel delves into a theory that helps us grasp what is happening in this filial mirroring play. Winnicott’s late paper on the “mirror-role” of the mother in early child development evolves his earlier, instinct-based model of holding (the infant at breast) into one rooted in the visual field: Winnicott writes that the mother’s ability to reflect back what she sees in her child’s face – her ability to give the child the sense that she or he is seen (and therefore exists) – is essential for the development of the child’s self. From this perspective, Bechdel’s mirroring play with her mother illustrates the relational context within which the self is formed.

But it also illustrates something else being formed: a graphic narrative. In her voiceover, Bechdel observes that there is no way of knowing the photographs’ order without the sheet negatives, which she does not have. So she constructs her own order. This is itself deeply psychoanalytic work:

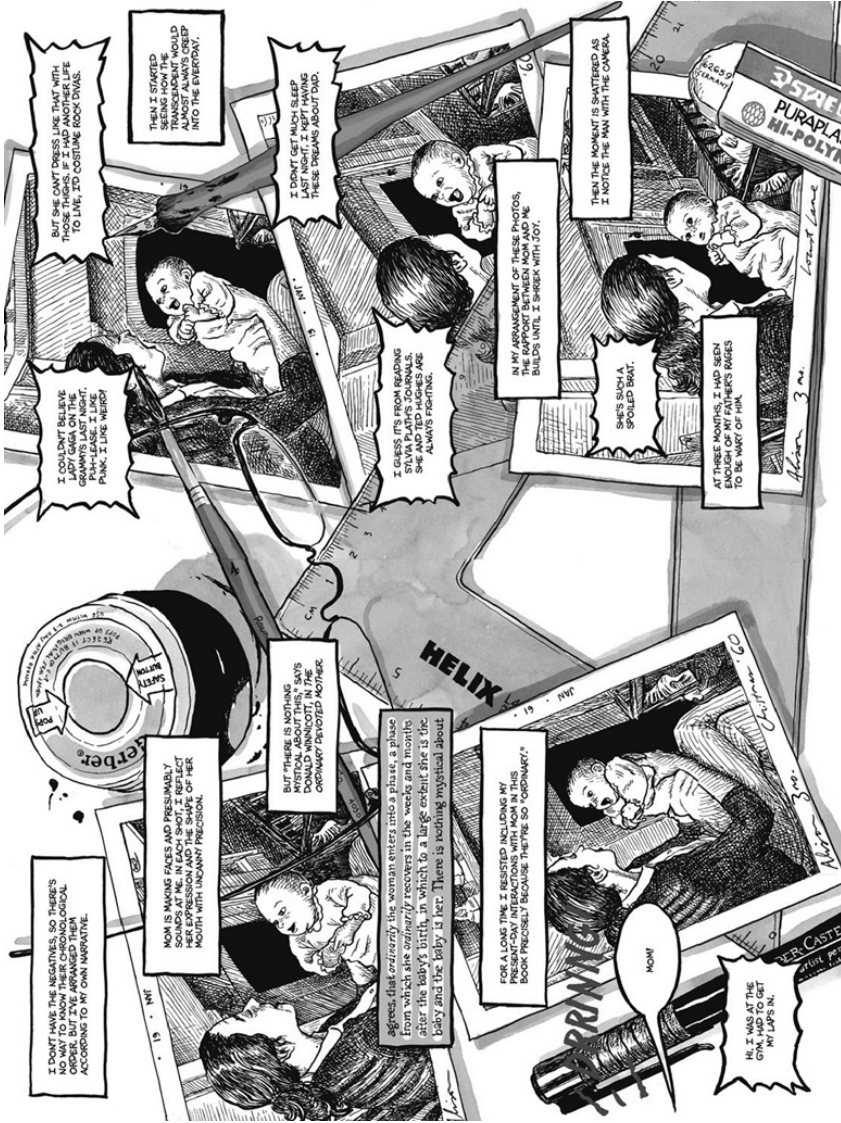


Figure 10.1 Double Spread from *Are You My Mother?* A Comic Drama by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

“by transforming the past into a history,” writes Christopher Bollas, “the psychoanalyst creates a series of densely symbolic stories . . . generating constant and continuous associations.”<sup>42</sup> Here, Bechdel gathers the scattered, disconnected fragments of the sequence together and arranges them – top-down, left-right, according to the conventions of western reading – across one arresting, full-bleed, double-page spread. Instead of a page of comics panels, we see the photographs, grouped in pristine disarray, covering a meticulously drawn, trompe l’oeil (“fool the eye”) tableau of Bechdel’s working space, nested with the assembled tools and props of the cartoonist’s trade: a helix triangle, ink – in a Gerber baby food jar! – a brush and fountain pen, a pair of glasses, and a rubber eraser. Rather than fetishize these photos by placing them together in some gilt-covered photo album, Bechdel shows us the creative, haptic memory-work she performs with and around them as the work of comics. In fact, Bechdel turns these photos into a species of comic, or proto-comic – the very seed of the text we are reading: on this unconventional page, the photographs serve as panels, with the white borders around the images as gutters.

The arrangement further functions as a psychoanalytic allegory, casting Alison and her mother in the universal roles of mother and infant. It is a parable of the child’s premature transition from pre-oedipal unity to triangular oedipal conflict. Through her comics, as in the après-coup of an analysis – the deferred action of attributing meaning, often traumatic meaning, to the past – Bechdel reconstructs and gives meaning to this archaic moment of rupture. As she tells it, the baby’s delight builds and builds, until suddenly she becomes aware of the presence of her father, offstage, with the camera, and the moment is ruined. Bechdel concludes the sequence with a shot of baby Alison staring warily out over her mother’s shoulder at cameraman and reader alike, mouth pursed up into a worried little “o.” Here, the unpredictable figure of the father disrupts (“shatters,” like a mirror?) the visual encounter which is formative of the self.

As in the opening episode of Spiegelman’s “Portrait,” the father’s entrance puts an end to the filial play and interferes with the basic experience of parental holding. “The picture of me looking at the camera feels like a picture of the end of my childhood,” Bechdel laments.<sup>43</sup> All the self-censorship and doubt (her analyst calls it “undoing”) that plagues Bechdel as an adult cartoonist seems to enter the picture in the little rubber eraser at the bottom right of the page. But at the same time and on another level, the trauma of this interference assumes the quality of a “primary scene” in Bechdel’s professional development. Like the memoir of which it is the germ, the narrative of the photos is a “comic drama,” in the sense that it has, as *Maus* has, a qualified happy ending, a “happy, happy ever after.”

Similar to Spiegelman's *Maus*, *AYMM* is a story of survival, which performs the life instinct as the quest not so much for the mother, but for the self. It is no accident that the ink pot is a Gerber baby food jar. Bechdel feeds herself as well as her pen with her ink. Recreating what Winnicott would call the "environment-mother,"<sup>44</sup> the physical and psychic care, originally condensed on the mother, that envelops the infant, Bechdel wrests care and cure from the comics' material form. Making comics becomes a form of visual incorporation, a drinking-in with the eyes, related to the gustatory feed. "If I'd had different parents," Bechdel mused,

I would probably not have needed to write these books about my parents. But I'm glad I had the parents I did, I'm grateful for all the ways that they both oppressed and nurtured me as an artist, and I'm glad I've been able to climb out from underneath their thumbs.<sup>45</sup>

Commenting on the comic strip that made her name as a cartoonist, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, about the daily lives of a group of lesbian friends, Bechdel claimed that her motivation to make work comes from her sense of lacking "an accurate reflection" in the "cultural mirror."<sup>46</sup> She did not see popular images of lesbians like her; so, in *Dykes*, she created her own. In *AYMM*, Bechdel reflects on the psychology of the act of reflection itself, exploring how not seeing a reflection of herself in her childhood home led her to become the particular autobiographical cartoonist she became. Originally, Bechdel had thought to write about the relationship of the self to the other in the abstract, using her love life; then, helped along by her discovery of object-relations theory, and Winnicott especially, she saw how her relationship with her mother was the paradigm for her relationship with her analysts, as well as for her romantic attachments. In the text that overlaps this double page, Bechdel reflects on her decision to include her daily phone conversations with her mother within the book. Like the psychoanalyst, who finds tendentious meaning in the psychopathologies of everyday life, she observes the "transcendent" within the everyday. This is to see, finally, how the personal can transcend itself to become universal: how Bechdel's story can hold a mirror to her readers.

The past two decades have seen a dramatic uptick in comics that address topics of mental illness. These titles – by and for those suffering from mental disabilities, as well as those who treat them – continue to expand the horizons of literature and of psychoanalysis in productive ways. *New Yorker* cartoonist Jason Katzenstein's graphic memoir, *Everything is An Emergency* confronts Katzenstein's OCD.<sup>47</sup> This honest, often hilarious book once more reveals the fraught and multidimensional connection between comics and forms of compulsive behavior: Katzenstein's book

grew out of his Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) therapy. Its pages were drawn in the interval between an anxiety-producing exposure – such as touching his shoe and then his face – and the performance of a compulsive ritual – washing up. This charged space between exposure and response can be thought of as a metaphorical gutter, a space of constitutive absence that interrupts the narrative of emergency “written” by Katzenstein’s disorder. Katzenstein’s comics-making, which began as a stop-gap measure to hold off a compulsion, opens a space where his disorder’s inexorable causal narrative of emergency can be deconstructed, unwoven, figured otherwise – and where the compulsion to make meaning can be rerouted. Crucially, Katzenstein describes his book as an outgrowth of the group therapy that held him accountable throughout his treatment. In fact, he narrates his story *to* but also *for* – on behalf of – a community of fellow sufferers, making their invisible suffering visible and legible. At the height of an international pandemic, as the health of the world depends on our empathetic imagination, the so-called “art of the empathetic doodle,”<sup>48</sup> as Chris Ware put it, may be more important now than ever.

### Notes

1. Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, trans. Naomi Segal [Originally published as *Le Moi-peau*, Paris, 1995] (London: Karnac, 2016), 6. On the “skin-ego” in comics, see Vera J. Camden, “‘Cartoonish Lumps’: The Surface Appeal of Alison Bechdel’s ‘Are You My Mother?’” *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9, no. 1 (January 2018): 93–111.
2. Didier Anzieu, “Essai sur la création graphique et la mis en scène de ses enjeux dans l’œuvre d’Hergé” in *Tintin Chez le Psychanalyste* (Paris: Aubier, 1985).
3. Justin Green, “Afterword,” in *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2009), 51–63.
4. For a comprehensive discussion of the history of the code and its disastrous consequences for comics, see Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 166.
5. For a discussion of the history of the *Psychoanalysis* comics, see Valentino L. Zullo, “Keeping Horror in Mind: Psychoanalysis and the ‘New Direction’ of EC Comics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 54, no. 4 (2021): 868–90. As EC editor Al Feldstein told interviewer Steve Ringgenberg, “*Psychoanalysis*, which Bill [Gaines] and I had come up with as part of our ‘New Direction’ after we were censored out of the horror because we had both been going. I was in analysis and he was in analysis. It was the ’50s thing to do when you had a little money and you had problems.” Steve Ringgenberg “An Interview with Al Feldstein,” *The Comics Journal* 177 (May 1995): 90.
6. See Chute, *Why Comics*, 95–108.
7. “Graphic novel” was born of publishing and marketing copy; but the term has become the most widely recognized name for any expressive, long-form graphic narrative that exists between book-covers.

8. The first book to proclaim itself a “graphic novel” was Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, which bore the words “a graphic novel” on the cover. Published by Baronet Press in 1978, *A Contract with God* tells of poor Jewish immigrants in a series of four interlocking vignettes.
9. Justin Green, “Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin,” *Justin Green’s Binky Brown Sampler* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1995), 8.
10. Cited in Chute, *Why Comics*, 211.
11. Green quoted in Chute, *Why Comics*, 253.
12. Green quoted in Chute, *ibid.*, 254.
13. Justin Green, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s 2009).
14. Green, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, 1.
15. The recent international “graphic medicine” movement, founded by an interdisciplinary community of academics, healthcare providers, authors, artists, and fans of comics and medicine, explores the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare, broadly conceived. In 2015’s *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, the inaugural volume in the Graphic Medicine series published through Penn State University Press, six doctors, nurses, and professors map the growing field of graphic medicine in scholarly essays and visual narratives. Comics that fall under the “graphic medicine” umbrella include narratives by patients that depict the complex, subjective experience of illness, as well as comics by and for doctors and nurses about patient care and medical education.
16. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4–5.
17. Geoffrey H. Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *New Literary History* 26 no. 3 (Summer 1995): 537.
18. Art Spiegelman, “Forms Stretched to Their Limits,” *The New Yorker* (April 19, 1999).
19. W. J. T. Mitchell and Art Spiegelman, “Public Conversation: What the %\$&# Happened to Comics?” in Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, eds., *Comics and Media* (a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Spring 2014), 20–35.
20. André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects*, trans. by Andrew Weller [Orig. pub. as *Le Temps éclaté* [Cairn International, 2000] (London: Free Association Books, 2002).
21. Green, 11.
22. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Spiegelman, *Maus II A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).
23. Art Spiegelman, “Introduction,” in *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, by Justin Green (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2009), n.p.
24. Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&\*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), n.p.
25. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, n.p.
26. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Comics as Media: An Afterword,” *Comics & Media*, 270.
27. Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); D. W. Winnicott, “The Squiggle Game” (1968), in Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic*



- Explorations*, eds. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (London: Karnac Books, 1989), 301–02 (Phillips, 15; Winnicott, 301–02).
28. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, n.p.
  29. See Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914), *SE* 12: 145–56.
  30. Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 20–21 (228).
  31. See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971); W. R. Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London: Karnac Books, 1984).
  32. Dan Kois, “Lynda Barry Will Make You Believe in Yourself,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 2011.
  33. Margot Harrison, “Life Drawing,” *Seven Days*, June 1, 2006.
  34. “Video of Alison Bechdel,” HoughtonMifflinBooks.com. [www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press\\_release/bechdel/#video](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press_release/bechdel/#video)
  35. Harrison, “Life Drawing.”
  36. “Public Conversation, May 19, 2012: Alison Bechdel and Hillary Chute,” *Comics & Media*, 203–19, 218.
  37. Harrison, “Life Drawing”; Bechdel again describes her “method cartooning” in Lydia Polgreen. “Alison Bechdel Misses Feeling Special,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2015.
  38. *Art Spiegelman: Conversations*, ed. Joseph Witek (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), xiv.
  39. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Selected Writings, 1926–1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).
  40. Alison Bechdel and Hillary Chute, “Public Conversation,” *Comics & Media*, 218.
  41. Hillary Chute, *Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 179.
  42. Christopher Bollas, “The Functions of History,” in *The Christopher Bollas Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011), 134.
  43. Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 45. For further discussions of these images and the concept of the psychoanalytic allegory, see Vera J. Camden, “Alison Bechdel’s Mystic Muse: A Psychoanalytic Allegory,” in *The Muse: Psychoanalytic Explorations of Creative Inspiration* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 229–74.
  44. D. W. Winnicott, “The Development of the Capacity for Concern” in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis), 75–78.
  45. Alison Bechdel, *Outside the Box* 185.
  46. See Alison Bechdel, *The Indelible Alison Bechdel: Confessions, Comix, and Miscellaneous Dykes to Watch Out For* (Firebrand Books, 1998), 209.
  47. Jason Adam Katzenstein, *Everything Is An Emergency* (New York: Harper, 2020).
  48. Chris Ware, *Comics: Philosophy and Practice Poster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Conference, 2012).