

Studies in Comics

Volume 2 Number 1

© 2011 Intellect Ltd Reviews. English language. doi: 10.1386/stic.2.1.223\_4

---

## REVIEWS

*Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*,  
Michael A. Chaney (ed.) (2011)

Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 336 pages,

50 b/w illustrations pp. Paper, ISBN: 978-0-299-25104-8, \$26.95

*Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman, CUNY Graduate Center*

In his introduction to *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, Michael A. Chaney writes that 'autobiography has not been immune from the narrative ambitions of the image' (p. 4). The essays collected in this anthology are all interested in how images, specifically those found in contemporary comics, narrate the story of the self in new and dynamic ways. As Chaney and the other contributors make clear, a critical discussion of autobiographical graphic narratives requires an understanding of the full spectrum of visual self-disclosure, including especially the relationship between comics and photography. In her short essay included in this anthology, 'Picturing Oneself as Another', Linda Haverty Rugg, author of one of the pioneering texts on photography and autobiography, *Picturing Ourselves* (1997), argues that '[t]he turn toward graphic representation may in part reflect disillusionment with photography's lie' (p. 75). Indeed, like autobiographical works that are composed of a mix of photographs and text, autobiographical comics, by emphasizing the tension between different modes of self-representation, continually highlight the constructedness of all representations of the self. What especially separates comics from other modes of visual autobiography, like photography, is the unmistakably particular style of each cartoonist as she draws her own image, again and again, directly onto the page.

newest autobiographical work, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&\*!*. The section also includes Marianne Hirsch's foundational chapter from *Family Frames*, entitled 'Mourning and Postmemory', which focuses on Holocaust photographs, and specifically the photographs included alongside the hand-drawn images in *Maus II*. The inclusion of this previously published essay makes *Graphic Subjects* an especially helpful text for those wanting a comprehensive introduction to the world of visual autobiography, with a focus on comics.

The second part concentrates on autobiographical comics created and published outside of the United States. It includes two essays on the influence of the French *bande dessinée*: one on David B.'s *Epileptic* and the other on Dominique Goblet's *Portraits Crachés*. Stephen E. Tabachnick names a new subgenre of autobiographical narratives, 'the autobiography of discovery', in order to talk about the experimental structure of *Epileptic*, which does not give the reader an 'inkling of how it all might end, until it truly does' (p. 115). Jan Baetens is similarly interested in the innovative structure of Goblet's work, which she describes as 'closer to the nonnarrative genre of the *portrait* rather than to the genre of the autobiographical *story*' (p. 80). In both cases, the critics focus on formal structures that are unique to autobiographical comics, in which the attempt to visualize the self sequentially on the page reveals that 'time and space is not without consequences for the issue of identity' (p. 81).

The third part gives some much-needed attention to the highly influential works of women cartoonists and their autobiographical explorations of gender, sexuality and the body. Some of the texts studied include well-known graphic memoirs, such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis I and II*. The essays studying these texts argue for – and develop – 'new interpretive practices' (Gilmore 158) meant to address stories of trauma told through visual memoir forms. This section also includes an essay by Theresa Tensuan on women's illness memoirs, a subgenre that has experienced a recent boom as the 'visual fetish' (p. 186) of women's bodies is manipulated by artists interested in addressing the untold and invisible 'causes and casualties' of diseases like breast cancer.

Finally, the last part, which is probably the least clearly categorized section, addresses in depth the works of various highly influential autobiographical cartoonists, including James Kochalka, Justin Green, Mary Fleener, Jeffrey Brown, Joe Matt and Lynda Barry. This section also applies autobiographical criticism to fictional comics narratives, such as *Watchmen* and *American Born Chinese*, to establish a deeper understanding of how identity is constructed through the intersection of image and text.

*Graphic Subjects* is a collection that includes traditional, chapter-length essays alongside what Chaney calls 'brief philosophical musings' (p. 7) of just several pages. These shorter essays, which

include, for example, a brief meditation on the term 'autobiography' by Phoebe Gloeckner, work surprisingly well to highlight the pervasive themes of the very diverse, lengthier essays. The book also reads as a veritable who's-who in the world of visual autobiographical criticism, with new (and several republished) essays by Paul John Eakin, Marianne Hirsch, Bella Brodzki, Sidonie Smith, Linda Haverty Rugg, Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, Isaac Cates, Bart Beaty and Hillary Chute, among others. For those interested in teaching autobiographical comics theory alongside interdisciplinary approaches to other modes of visual autobiography, *Graphic Subjects* is an invaluable and overdue collection.

***The Art of Jaime Hernandez: The Secrets of Life and Death*, Todd Hignite; introduction by Alison Bechdel (2010)**

New York: Abrams ComicArts, 224 pp., ISBN 978 0 8109 9570 3, Hardback, £25.00

*Reviewed by Tony Venezia, Birkbeck, University of London*

Anyone familiar with post-punk comic *Love and Rockets* and Jaime Hernandez's instantly identifiable comics style, will be aware of the extraordinarily textured world he has created. Maggie Chascarillo and Hopey Glass (with an increasing focus on prosolar mechanic Maggie) and their peers were, and remain, fully rounded characters inhabiting a rich, continually developing and highly nuanced Southern Californian setting. The warmth and reverence that the characters inspire in readers should come as no surprise, as older readers have aged in parallel with the *locas* while newer readers will have stumbled on a vividly realized universe that matches that of any superhero continuity.

It is only fitting given Jaime Hernandez's major contribution to comics art that a first encounter with Todd Hignite's impressive monograph is a weighty one: this is a big book, one that attempts, and largely succeeds in presenting the full range of Hernandez's achievements in the field in a format that does them justice. This is a typically elegant and sumptuous and glossy tome from Abrams ComicArts imprint. The book, or more accurately the book's subject comes garlanded with rhapsodical praise from such diverse fan luminaries as film-maker Darren Aronofosky; Northampton comics mage Alan Moore; and Latino writer Junot Diaz.

Comics scholar Todd Hignite has constructed an ambitious weaving of the biographical with commentary around Hernandez idiosyncratic art and life, including photographs, sketches, promotional and cover art, newspaper and magazine clippings, flyers and fanzines, juvenilia, interviews and even some complete strips – notably an expanded version of 'Maggie La Loea' that was originally serialized in the *New York Times* magazine, then reprinted in *Love and Rockets Volume*