

ang070 S/Ü "Key Concepts in Cultural Studies"

Assignment 2: Graphic Novel

Formal and media-specific analysis

1. Structure the following sequence by subdividing it into meaningful units, briefly summarise the content of these units and comment on relevant formal aspects (cf. HO "Narratology" and HO "Conceptual Tools for the Analysis of Comics and Graphic Novels").

One plausible subdivision could look like this:

- Unit One: Panel 2
Deconstructing the alleged correlation between sex, (homo-)sexuality and gender
- Unit Two: Panels 1; 3-7
From Alison the child to Alison the young adult: Juxtaposing Alison's and Bruce's gender identities
- Unit Three: Panels 8-10
Common ground: homosexuality and gender non-conformity as ties between father and daughter

In terms of *narration*,

- Alison, the narrator: extradiegetic, homodiegetic narrator, who narrates the diegetic level. There are no other narrators and thus, no other diegetic levels in this sequence. Her narration is an ulterior one.
- Alison is highly perceptive:
 - she identifies and defines other characters (younger versions of herself, her father and her mother)
 - she describes the setting (clothes, accessories, jewellery)
 - she provides temporal summaries ("five years later", "and seven years after that ...")
 - she offers commentaries ("Proust refers to his explicitly homosexual characters as 'inverts.' I've always been fond of this antiquated clinical term.")
 - she tells us what other characters think, even though they do not explicitly say so ("he was attempting to express something feminine through me"; "my father wanted the velvet and pearls – subjectively")
- Alison's reliability is influenced by the fact that
 - her former self is deeply involved in this ongoing conflict with her father
 - she writes this sequence in order to reconnect, emotionally, with her late father by citing, of all things, homosexuality and gender non-conformity as the tender and unexpected ties that cement this father-daughter relationship ("Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another").
 - she identifies strongly with a queer, feminist value scheme
 - the genre of the memoir/autobiography is by definition marked by a strong personal involvement of the homodiegetic narrator

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In terms of *focalisation*,

- In the narratory blocks/voice-overs, Alison, the narrator-focaliser, provides external focalisation, narrating the events in hindsight.
- In the panels, internal focalisation prevails as the perspective is clearly bound to the experiencing self/selves, e.g. through over-the-shoulder and point-of-view shots. The over-the-shoulder shots alternate between suggesting/approximating/appropriating Alison's perspective (panels 3; 4; 9; 10), Bruce's perspective (panels 4; 5; 6; 10), and a more neutral point of view (panels 1; 7; 8), so that, strictly speaking, young Alison serves as a character-focaliser only once in the whole sequence (panel 9).
- Both Alison and Bruce are the focalised throughout the entire sequence with the exception of panels 2 (narratory block), 3 (Alison only), and 9 (close-up of a page from a magazine). Technically, this is possible because of the over-the-shoulder shots and the (intradiegetic) mirrors that allow the reader to relate to/ approximate the characters' lines of vision but also to see their facial expressions, so that, virtually, they function as focalisers and focalised at the same time.
- Both Alison and Bruce are focalised from the outside as well as from within: from the outside, the characters are shown to express their respective gender performances, i.e. female masculinity and male femininity, through specific clothes, jewellery, hairdos, etc.; from within, their emotions, attitudes, and longings are shown in a way that delineates their conflict but more significantly, also points to its resolution ("our shared reverence"; "I wanted [...] my father wanted"; "our desire").

On the *visual level*,

- The first unit (panel 2) does not contain any visual representations at all, as it is a panel that serves solely as a text container (narratory block; voice-over).
- The second unit (panels 1; 3-7) covers three smaller episodes (1; 3-4; 5-7) that juxtapose Alison's and Bruce's gender identities over a period of twelve years.
 - In panel 1, virtually towering over his daughter, Bruce violently fastens a hairclip in young Alison's hair, while her facial expression clearly reveals her defiant and rebellious resistance. The panel includes three speech balloons that display their heated dispute.
 - Panels 3 and 4, taking place five years later, present even more of a contrasting juxtaposition. Panel three, a long shot, shows teenage Alison in her bedroom, facing her clothes hanger and wondering what to wear. The most prominent piece of clothing on the hanger is a middy blouse. The subsequent panel (four), is a splash panel showing Alison, Bruce and Helen in front of a mirror, with the mirror images of Bruce and Alison at the centre of the panel and their bodies to the right and to the left, respectively. Helen only appears in the margins of the panel and there is no reflection of her in the mirror. This design is produced by means of an over-the-shoulder shot that invites us to relate to both, Alison's

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and Bruce's perspectives. In terms of clothing, both Alison and Bruce show cross-dressing tendencies with Alison wearing her middy blouse ("least girly dress in the store") and Bruce an extravagant sack coat and a tie with flamboyant patterns ("Velvet!"; "You're going to upstage the bride in that suit."). Their conflict is expressed both in a non-verbal manner, namely through their body language (Alison: 'akimbo' posture) and their gazes, and in a verbal manner, as their conversation is represented in two speech balloons. In terms of text containers, then, the panel comprises the said speech balloons as well as two narratory blocks and two labels (plus an additional speech balloon belonging to Helen). What is striking about the arrangement of the text containers, is that they visually illustrate the notion of 'crossing' (cross-dressing; "cross-purposes") that informs the whole sequence, as the speech balloons overlap so that Bruce's balloon is positioned over Alison's mirror image and vice versa.

- The panels 5, 6 and 7 take place another seven years later and relate visually to the previous episodes. Panel five is again a splash panel. In terms of the arrangement of the panel, it is very similar to the previous one, in that the mirror images of Bruce and Alison, now a young adult, are in the centre of the panel and their respective bodies to the left and to the right, except that they have swapped positions. Helen, again, is shown as a marginalised character at the right side of the panel, this time facing away from both her family and the readers. In this panel, the hairdos rather than the clothes are juxtaposed, with Bruce shaving and Alison drying her hair, which is much shorter than before. The panel includes two speech balloons representing the characters' ongoing conflict. By contrast, the panels six and seven bare a strong similarity to the very first panel: they present two-shots of Bruce and Alison and show the former in a renewed attempt to force feminine accessories upon his daughter, this time a pearl necklace. However, Bruce is no longer towering over Alison and their power relations seem to have balanced out to a certain extent.
- The third unit (panels 8-10) consists of one splash panel (eight) and two regular panels (nine and ten).
 - Panel 8, a medium shot, shows Alison's and Bruce's affinity to masculine beauty, primarily by means of the setting that includes glimpses at the Bechdel library and two telling publications in particular, Kenneth Clark's *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* and an issue of the *Esquire*, featuring articles about William F. Buckley Jr, J. Edgar Hoover and Fashion. Alison, sitting in an armchair, advises Bruce, who is arranging his books, to buy a suit that is advertised in the magazine.
 - The following two panels 9 and 10 present the centrefold of the magazine showing the said suit as well as the model wearing it. In panel nine, Alison

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functions as the internal focaliser. The readers see through her eyes and what they see is the illustration and an extreme close-up of Alison's right hand holding the magazine. Panel ten, eventually, marks an interesting variation of a double-angled over-the-shoulder shot that allows the reader to look over Bruce's shoulder as he is looking over Alison's. Responding to his daughter's suggestion, he agrees to get a suit of the kind shown in the *Esquire*.

2. Identify various discourses in the given passages by considering terms / vocabulary; visual motifs; settings / institutions; subject positions / roles.

- Sexuality:
 - Terms: "inversion"
 - Subject positions/ roles: "homosexual"; "inverts"; "objects of desire"
 - Others (people): "WM. F. Buckley"; "J. Edgar Hoover"
- Gender:
 - Terms: "gender expression"; "unmanly"; "feminine"; "girly"; "muscles"; "beautiful"; "masculine"
 - Subject positions/ roles: *here*: "missionary"
 - Others (artefacts): hair clip; middy blouse; suit and tie; shaver; pearl necklace; hairdos
- Fashion:
 - Terms: "beautiful"; "fall fashion"; (beauty) magazine
 - Subject position/ role: (male) model
 - Setting: mirrors
 - Others (artefacts): "straw hat"; "sneakers"; "velvet"; "suit"; "girly dress"; "skirt"; "pearls"; "vest"; "tweed"; hair clip; middy blouse; suit and tie; velvet; pearl necklace; magazine
- Literature and Art:
 - Subject positions/ roles: readers
 - Setting: library
 - Others (artefacts): "The Nude"; "Esquire"; books
 - Others (people): "Proust"; "Kenneth Clark"
- Family:
 - Subject positions/ roles: "father"; "wedding"; "bride"; father-daughter relationship; (marginalised) representation of Helen
 - Setting: family home, various rooms
- Medicine/Biological Sex: "inverts"; "clinical"; "sex"
- Conflict: "war"; "cross-purposes"; "demilitarized zone"; body language; gazes
- Politics: "WM. F. Buckley"; "J. Edgar Hoover"
- Economy: "bought", advertisement

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Functional analysis: Toward a problem-oriented sample analysis

3. Based on the data generated through your formal and media-specific analysis, provide a **coherently written** analysis with a clear research problem that addresses the following points

(a) the discursive constructedness and representations of identity; in what ways do discourses produce and ascribe 'meaning' to the identities construed?

(b) the relevant contexts (historical, cultural, literary, generic, etc.)

The sequence above extensively discusses and deconstructs the alleged correlation between *biological sex* ("sex"), *gender* (visual representations of female masculinity/ male femininity) and *(homo-)sexuality* ("inversion") on a social and cultural level, even as it reintroduces both homosexuality and gender non-conformity as the reparative ties that cement the relationship between Alison and her father on a personal level.

Regarding the relation between sex and gender, the sequence highlights Alison's and Bruce's attitudes to fashion and their respective tendencies toward non-conformist gender expressions, thereby displaying an understanding of gender as performative and dismissing any claims to the alleged 'naturalness' of normative gender roles as simplistic, erroneous and, ultimately, a heteronormative construction. In line with Judith Butler who claims that "[t]here is no 'proper' gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another" (21) and that thus, gender non-conformity and its various manifestations, among them cross-dressing and drag, principally serve to illustrate "the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalised, worn, and done" (ibid.), the sequence has Alison and Bruce insisting on their respective gender identities, even as they police the performative choices of the other, if only to compensate for their own perceived shortcomings ("While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him ... he was attempting to express something feminine through me.")

In addition, the sequence goes on to discuss the alleged correlation between gender and sexuality or, more specifically, that between cross-dressing and homosexuality. With regard to social and cultural identity constructions, therefore, Alison, the narrator, who strongly identifies with queer and feminist sexual politics, continues to dismiss and ridicule outdated ("antiquated") and de-facto pathologizing ("clinical") definitions of homosexuality ("inversion") that she finds in Modernist literature ("Proust") and that, according to the spirit of the age, i.e. the turn of the century, tend to relate gender non-conformity to same-sex desire (panel 2). However, while Alison, the narrator, deconstructs obsolete identity constructions on a social and cultural level, she simultaneously admits that, on a(n) (inter-) personal level ("the admittedly limited example of my father and me"), the assumed link between homosexuality and gender non-conformity may have fundamentally informed the ongoing conflict between her younger self and her father that has shaped both their personal

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identities over the space of many years. The second unit thus illustrates this conflict, with Alison vehemently rejecting her father's continuing efforts to turn her into a more "girly" and, by implication, more feminine child, teenager, or young adult – with the help of all sorts of accessories, including hair clips and pearls.

And yet, the sequence ends on a somewhat more reparative and conciliatory note, as Alison, the narrator, ultimately reclaims the initially pathologising term "inversion" and uses it to describe her personal connection with her father, in this manner turning the "clinical" term "inversion" into a term of endearment ("We were inversions of one another"). Consequently, the term "inversion" undergoes a resignification and, now, comes to denote the connectedness of father and daughter as well as a queer sense of belonging. In the last unit, then, Alison and Bruce can be seen to move on common ground, as they indulge in their mutual soft spot – masculine beauty – even though this ground is fragile as Alison seeks to embody a specific manifestation of masculinity, while her father desires it (in others). With the last panel, therefore, the sequence completes a reassessment and a revaluation of this complex father-daughter relationship – a relationship that starts, quite literally, with the pain that underlies this relationship ("ow!") and that nonetheless ends with the pleasure – literary, aesthetic, and homo-erotic – expressed in the final over-the-shoulder shot, which, ultimately, brings their different perspectives together. According to this reading, the sequence as a whole thus indicates "an instant of queer world-making that draws on an understanding of the past as saturated with both pleasure and pain" (McCullough 403).

Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*.

Ed. Diana Fuss. New York and London: Routledge, 1991. 13-31. Print.

McCullough, Kate. "'The Complexity of Loss Itself': The Comic's Form and *Fun Home's* Queer Reparative Temporality." *American Literature* 90.2 (2018): 377-405. Print.