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Multimodal Constructions of Self: Autobiographical Comics and the Case of Joe Matt’s Peepshow

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In the last thirty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of autobiographies published and read in North America. Autobiography and memoir now constitute a sizable portion of the publishing industry, a phenomenon that can be witnessed by venturing into any bookstore or picking up the book review section of any major newspaper. This is, of course, not news to anyone interested in autobiography and memoir, but what might be news is that this penchant for life writing extends beyond word-based texts and into the realm of comic books and graphic novels (in the most inclusive sense, any book-length works in the comics form, including works originally published serially and then collected). Although autobiography is certainly not the predominant type of comic published in North America, since the 1960s there has been a steady rise in the availability and sales of autobiographical comics as they have moved from the underground into the mainstream of comics shops, and finally into both independent and chain bookstores.

As we think about autobiography, then, it becomes necessary to broaden our ways of thinking about texts. In order to do so, we need to consider how comics creators use words and images to produce meanings at the intersection of multiple modal systems, meanings unavailable in either pictures or words alone. Working through the theoretical and practical connections between multimodality and theories of autobiography, this article considers the ways in which questions of autobiography are addressed in the comics form through an examination of Joe Matt’s Peepshow, an autobiographical comic that has been published at varying intervals since 1992.

Through this study, I hope not only to broaden the concept of autobiography, but also to expand further the ways we think about comics. In examining autobiographical graphic novels and comics, we can look at how the self is
represented and constructed through visual, textual, and multimodal rhetoric with reference to the following questions. How is identity created/negotiated through visual, textual, and multimodal rhetoric? How do authors create rhetorical meaning through the interaction of print and image from their own life experiences? What is the relationship in these texts between the “I” of the text, the author, and his or her social context, and how is that represented by the visual codes and multimodal rhetorics of these texts? How does multimodality intersect with participation in the genre of autobiography? In what ways does the multimodal form change the genre and vice versa? How does the production and consumption of these texts represent a distinct form of multimodal literacy? In thinking about these questions, I engage concepts of multimodality and theories of autobiography to examine how comics and autobiography function, and how meaning is created at the intersection of the two.

But what exactly do I mean when I talk about comics? We all think we know what comics are, or at least we think we know them when we see them—the comic books we remember from when we were children, the weekly strips in the newspaper, perhaps the manga that our children are reading. The ways in which we read and think about comics are thus affected by our history and past associations with comics, a history that for most people does not extend much beyond childhood or adolescence, except perhaps to a quick scan of the four-panel comic strips in the daily newspaper (a short form that is used less and less for narrative and more often for humor). Even this activity is seen as at best a diversion, a moment’s respite from the serious reading that encompasses the rest of the newspaper. Further, most adults are not exposed to comic books: serial publications that are published at regular intervals (usually monthly or bimonthly) and that usually present an ongoing, serialized story, but that may include self-contained stories with (usually) recurring characters. Despite the fact that characters from these serialized self-contained narratives are some of the most recognizable icons of North American popular culture—Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, Archie, Casper the Friendly Ghost—they are usually seen as belonging to the province of childhood, and are often held up as evidence that comics as a medium is only suited to the most juvenile forms of entertainment.

In this way comics are intimately connected with their status as social objects, a phenomenon first noted by Samuel R. Delany and later expanded by Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Hatfield writes, “the history of comic art has been bound up in the histories of certain packages or publishing formats,” and that as social objects, comics “come to us encrusted with connotations—or rather we come to them with associations and habits of thought inculcated through repeated use” (4). When I was growing up in the 1970s, for example, comics were seen by most people
as something children read, but that they would outgrow as they got older. As children, comics were definitely our turf, a place where we could linger for a few years but only if we didn’t plan on staying. The unspoken assumption was that children would then move from comics to more advanced or “real” kinds of reading such as books, newspapers, and more literate magazines. Comics were often seen as benign, but not challenging or instructive enough to merit further attention.¹ Even now, despite the movement of graphic novels into mainstream bookstores and onto the pages of book review sections, in North American culture comics are still seen primarily as juvenilia, something that we will outgrow as we age and mature.

While it is important to acknowledge the status of comics as social objects and the connotations that attend to those objects, it is also imperative to understand that comics are not just the sum total of these associations. In other words, we need to move beyond the association of comics with childhood, escapism, and “simpler” reading, and begin to look at the complexities of comics as a form. Such is Scott McCloud’s approach in his influential book, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. In a text that uses the comics form itself to make an argument about comics and the possibilities that exist in them, McCloud argues that comics should be viewed as a medium, “a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (6). In other words, McCloud argues that we should separate form from content so that we can consider the immense possibilities inherent in the form itself. According to McCloud, such a shift in our thinking would free comics of their associations with super-heroes and genre fiction, and allow for the same range of content as occurs in prose: fiction of all kinds, autobiography, history, instruction, and so on. Though I would argue that this separation of form and content is highly problematic, since form and content necessarily affect one another (as I will demonstrate in my discussion of underground and autobiographical comics), I agree with McCloud’s central point that there exists in the comics form the possibility of a far wider range of expression than has existed in the past and in most people’s conceptions of comics.

Although autobiography is not the genre that most people associate with comics as social objects, autobiographical comics have been an important form of comics since the underground movement of the 1960s, when comics creators such as R. Crumb began to use the form as a means of personal and political expression. The choice of the standard-size comic book format, with its sediment of expectations and prior associations, provided a useful environment within which creators could work against the expectations of the form; sex and drugs were favorite topics, and the “comix” in which these subjects were treated were intended for an adult audience, the designation of which is in part behind the movement from “comics” to “comix.” In other words,
the comic book and all of its associations as social and material object intersected with adult content that seemed at odds with those expectations and associations, so that in the introduction and development of underground comics, form and content were inseparable. As Hatfield writes, “With Zap [usually seen as the first of the underground comix to use the standard-size comic book format] Crumb achieved something that had eluded Pop Art: he ironically usurped not only the content of comics (that is, the characters and situations he had imbibed from childhood onward) but also the format (the periodical comic book), achieving a union of form and content that Pop Art, ensconced within the fine art world, could not” (12). What’s more, creators in the underground movement were not constrained by the mainstream comics industry with its house styles, regimented division of labor (with writing, penciling, lettering, inking, and coloring all performed by different people), adherence to a restrictive Comics Code, and reliance on the bottom line, thus freeing them to explore a variety of topics and genres, including autobiography. Thus, the example of the underground movement at once bolsters McCloud’s point about the inherent possibilities in the comics form, while it also complicates his separation of form from content. Both of these points are necessary to keep in mind as we explore the relationship between comics and autobiography.

As Hatfield persuasively argues in Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature, the underground movement set the stage for and continues to be an influence on alternative comics as we now know them. Examples include recent and current autobiographical comics such as Joe Matt’s Peepshow, Ed Brubaker’s Lowlife, Chester Brown’s Yummy Fur, Julie Doucet’s Dirty Plotte, early issues of Seth’s Palookaville, Harvey Pekar’s long-running collaboration with various artists, American Splendor, and so on. Like many of its underground forebears, Peepshow deals with the private and painfully intimate, often focusing on sex and pornography as they relate to Joe Matt’s life. Published sporadically—sometimes several times a year, other times one every several years—Peepshow began in 1992 and as of this writing is at issue #14, published in October 2006. The individual issues are in standard-size comic book format, thus taking advantage of what is still for most people a jarring disjunction between adult content and child-associated format. These issues are still ephemeral objects, but unlike most comic books, do remain in print and available in their original format from the publisher, rather than simply as back issues from comics’ retailers. However, they have also been collected in three volumes. The Poor Bastard (issues 1–6 of Peepshow) and Fair Weather (issues 7–10 of Peepshow) represent two different, though both autobiographical, story arcs, the first focusing on Matt’s adult life, especially his obsessions with women and pornography, and the second focusing on Matt’s
childhood, especially his relationship with money. The later issues of *Peepshow* (11–14), collected as *Spent* in the fall of 2007, bring Matt back to his adult life, focusing even more directly on his relationship with pornography. Both the serial nature of publication and the material form of comics affect the way in which Matt produces the text and the ways in which we read it; events happen between issues that form the texts of subsequent issues, while our experiences and perceptions change between our readings of these issues. Reading the collections further alters the ways in which we consume these texts by providing us with complete story arcs with no break in reading as we wait for the publication of the next issue. As an example of how the comics can be used as a form of autobiography, *Peepshow* works both at the level of comics format as social and material object, and at the level of comics form as a specialized multimodal way of communicating.

Before proceeding to a discussion of *Peepshow*, let’s step back from a focus on comics as social and material objects and think further about how we might usefully define comics as a form, keeping in mind that there is no single definition upon which comics practitioners or theorists agree. Following Will Eisner’s use of the term “sequential art,” McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). As you can see from this definition, for McCloud, the pictorial or visual mode is the predominant one, with text simply subsumed under the phrase “other images.” Eisner, on the other hand, describes comics in this way:

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. (8)

Alternatively, as Robert C. Harvey simply argues, comics are “a blending of visual and verbal content” (76). Further, Art Spiegelman argues that comics should instead be referred to as “comix,” not only as a reference to the underpinnings of the 1960s, but because “comix” connotes “a co-mix of words and pictures” (Bongco 51). To these definitions I want to add Dylan Horrocks’s idea that comics are “a cultural idiom, a publishing genre, a set of narrative conventions, a kind of writing that uses words and pictures, a literary genre, and texts” (34). All of these definitions get at aspects of comics, and demonstrate how complex comics are when we move beyond thinking of them as strictly child-associated objects and pastimes. Comics are all of the above definitions, just as they are social objects, cultural artifacts, sites of literacy, and means
of communication. What lies at the heart of comics and what makes them distinct from other kinds of texts is their blending of images and words, a combination of sequential art and text to create meaning, including narrative meaning, for the audience.

As texts, then, comics provide a complex environment for the negotiation of meaning between the textual creators and textual receivers. Hatfield cogently describes the complexity of a comics page: “The fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixed” (xiii–xiv). The page is separated into multiple panels, divided from each other by the gutter, a physical or conceptual space that acts as a caesura through which connections are made and meanings are negotiated. Images of people, objects, animals, and settings, word balloons, lettering, sound effects, and gutters all come together to form page layouts that work to create meaning in distinctive ways and in multiple semiotic realms. In this combination of words, images, and gestural representations, comics partake of what the New London Group calls multimodality in order to create meaning in very particular and distinctive ways. A group of literacy scholars who first came together in New London, New Hampshire in 1994, the New London Group’s work seeks to push literacy educators, broadly defined and at all levels of teaching, to think about literacy in ways that move beyond a focus on strictly word-based literacy. In the introduction to the New London Group’s collection Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis write that their approach “relates to the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on. . . . Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (5). Multimodal texts include much of the content on the internet, interactive multimedia, newspapers, television, film, instructional textbooks, and many other texts in our contemporary society. Most importantly for the present discussion, a theory of multimodality helps to explain how meaning is created/negotiated in comics, and more to the point, how representations of self and issues of autobiographical meaning-making are constituted in autobiographical comics.

According to the New London Group, in reading and writing multimodal texts we interact with up to six design elements, including linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial modes, as well as multimodal design, “of a different order to the others as it represents the patterns of interconnections among the other modes” (25). As you can see in this page from Peepshow #6 (Fig. 1), all of these design elements are present, including a textual and visual
Figure 1. Excerpted from Joe Matt’s Peepshow # 6 (p. 14) / The Poor Bastard (p. 156) by Joe Matt. Copyright by Joe Matt. Reprinted by courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.
representation of the audio element. The linguistic element is represented in the words included in the word balloons, representing dialogue from each of the characters; through what the characters say we are presented with one of the elements necessary for us to create meaning in the text. In word-based texts, our interaction with words would form the environment for the creation/negotiation of textual meaning through the interaction of our social situatedness, individual histories, and experience with generic conventions. As we all know, the reading and writing of word-based texts and the creation/negotiation of meaning in them is infinitely complex. Imagine if five other elements were added to the mix. If we think about comics in this way, we can see them not as simpler versions of print texts, but as the complex textual environments that they are.

In multimodal texts such as autobiographical comics, the other design elements are just as important as the linguistic. For example, voice inflections, tone, cadence, and emotional tenor—that is, the audio element—are indicated by way of lettering, punctuation, and the shape of the word balloons. As can be seen in Figure 1, the bold lettering in panels 1 and 5 indicates an increase in the volume of the speaker’s voice and an intonational emphasis on the bolded word. The decrease in size of letters in Joe Matt’s words in panel 4 indicates a reduction in volume and a mumbling tone, and is emphasized by the uneven outline of Joe Matt’s word balloons (compare these to the shape of Andy’s and Kim’s word balloons). Together with the use of both punctuation (dashes and ellipses, in particular) and word balloons, such lettering is meant to represent the audio element of Joe Matt’s speech and thus his response to the couple he has portrayed negatively in an earlier issue of Peepshow. The visual element includes such things as the use of line and white space, shading, perspective, distance, depth of field, and composition. Five of the six panels are medium shots, with the characters shown in unexaggerated proportion to each other and with the depth of field focused in the foreground and on the characters (the background is undifferentiated). These visual elements focus the reader’s attention on the characters, what they are saying, and how they are interacting. There is, however, one panel in which Andy is shown in close-up (panel 2); such a design decision (along with the jagged shape of his word balloon) is used to emphasize his anger and to indicate that he is a menacing presence to Joe Matt. Visual elements thus come together to reinforce Joe Matt’s state of mind in this sequence.

Joe Matt’s state of mind can also be seen in the gestural design of Joe Matt in these panels: in all five panels in which he appears, gestural indicators (motion lines, sweat beads, posture, etc.) are used to indicate what is happening both physically and emotionally to Joe Matt. In panel 1, the motion
lines indicate his head coming around quickly as he confronts Andy and Kim, while the lines emanating from his head indicate the onset of sudden emotion (embarrassment, surprise, trepidation, fear?). In panels 3–5, sweat beads indicate Joe Matt’s discomfort with the situation, while his facial expressions indicate his progression from embarrassed fast talking to nervous fear. Finally, in panel 6, Matt presents himself (that is, the cartoon persona Joe Matt) with his head covered and a spiral line above his head as he walks along the street with his friends Seth and Chester Brown. These gestural elements cannot be overestimated; as Eisner has written, “In comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words” (103). In this example, gestural design indicates Joe Matt’s discomfort (embarrassment, anguish, regret?) with the previous scene, while the presence of the gutter invites us to fill in the narrative gap between Kim’s angered words and Joe Matt’s reaction. Here, then, the gestural operates in concert with the spatial in the act of multimodal design.

The spatial in the parlance of the New London Group refers to the meanings of environmental and architectural spaces; in the case of comics the environment can be conceived of as the layout of panels on the page and the relation between these panels through use of gutter space. In Figure 1, as on almost all pages of *Peepshow*, we are presented with a regularized and repeating grid of six panels of equal size. This regularized page layout forms the textual environment for *Peepshow*, and influences the ways in which we receive it as readers. Since we do not have to negotiate ever-changing page layouts/textual environments, we are invited to focus on individual panels and the connections between them as represented by the gutter. The rhythm of such regularized page layout pulls us into a focus on the characters and their interactions with each other, and especially on the character of Joe Matt and Matt’s representation of self. In other words, the spatial design facilitates and heightens the work of the other design elements. As readers, we are confronted with what multimodal design might mean for autobiographical comics such as *Peepshow*.

All of these elements interact in our reading of the text, creating meanings that would not be possible if only one of the five design elements were used. For example, Joe Matt’s state of mind and reaction to this situation are conveyed by the linguistic (the words he says), the audio (the manner in which they are said as indicated by lettering and punctuation), the visual (the composition of panels 1 and 3 which sets him apart from Andy and Kim as he tries to explain, and the more crowded and less balanced composition of panels 4 and 5 as the situation begins to spiral out of control for Joe Matt), the gestural (the sweat beads, facial expressions, and raised hands), and the spatial (the
regularized panel grid that focuses the reader’s attention on the characters as seen through the other design elements and on the relation between the panels as represented by the gutters). These five design elements come together to produce the conditions for the production/negotiation of meaning in ways that would not be possible without the presence of all of the elements.

What I have just described is my own process of making meaning with the text of a particular page of Joe Matt’s Peepshow. Here I have engaged in what the New London Group calls Design, a theory of meaning-making for multimodal texts that acknowledges the social and semiotic structures that surround us and within which we exist, while at the same time recognizing individual agency and experience. Design involves three elements—Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned—that form “an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules” (New London Group 20). Available Designs can be thought of as resources for Design, including “the ‘grammars’ of various semiotic systems: the grammars of languages, and the grammars of other semiotic systems such as film, photography, or gesture” (New London Group 20). These “grammars,” including discourse and genre conventions, are available to both writers and readers of multimodal texts as they seek to create/negotiate meaning. Just as readers of fiction become attuned to conventions of novels, readers of comics learn its conventions. For example, it is a convention within comics that lines outside of a person or object are used to indicate speed and direction of motion, and that sweat beads are used to indicate emotional states of mind. Both of these resources would have been available to Matt as he wrote and drew issue #6 of Peepshow, and are also available to me and to all other readers of his text. These conventions form the structured part of the design equation, while familiarity with these conventions, practice in reading comics, interest, prior experience, and attention given to that reading all come into play in the exercise of agency on the part of the reader (and writer). Structure and agency interact so that we are influenced by Available Designs as we read, but are not determined by them; though we are subject to the same set of grammars, my reading of the text is not necessarily the same as that of someone else.

The manner in which each person (whether creator or reader of a multimodal text) uses the resources of Available Designs is what occurs in the Designing phase of the process. According to the New London Group, “The process of shaping emergent meaning involves re-presentation and recontextualization. This is never simply a repetition of Available Designs. Every moment of meaning involves the transformation of the available resources of meaning. . . . Transformation is always a new use of old materials, a rearticulation and recombination of the given resources of Available Designs”
Designing, then, is an active process, both for creators of multimodal texts, but also for readers, who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who all use the resources of Available Designs based on their own social situatedness, history, life experiences, and interests. Designing is not, however, the end of the process of Design, but rather a step that feeds into the ongoing loop of Design. The new meaning that is created in Designing becomes the Redesigned, “a new Available Design, a new meaning-making resource” (New London Group 23). The Redesigned may tend towards the reproductive or the creative in its relation to the original resources (Available Designs), but “it is neither a simple reproduction (as the myth of standards and transmission pedagogy would have us believe), nor is it simply creative (as the myths of individual originality and personal voice would have us believe)” (New London Group 23). In the same vein, Matt’s work in Peepshow is neither a simple reproduction of the conventions of the autobiographical genre, nor is it wholly creative in its execution. Instead, it falls somewhere between the poles of structure and agency, just as our readings of his text must. Every act of Designing, happening as it does at the intersection of structure and agency, contributes to the ongoing process of Design in which both creators and readers of multimodal texts necessarily engage. Keep in mind these ideas about the process of Design as I discuss some theories of autobiography in relation to Matt’s Peepshow.

While a full treatment of the central definitional questions that occupy much of the field of autobiography and autobiographical theory is beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to touch on some of these definitional issues in order to address my central concern, the connections between autobiography, autobiographical theory, and comics. By examining the ideas of Georges Gusdorf and the subsequent critiques of his work, I can also think through the ways in which these ideas can be applied to autobiographical comics and the specific example of Peepshow. To begin, in his seminal 1956 essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Gusdorf defines in detail what he understands autobiography to be. He is worth quoting at length, both because his definition is the one from which much subsequent discussion stems, and because thinking about autobiographical comics in general and Peepshow in particular complicates this definition in interesting and important ways. Gusdorf writes,
autobiography claims to retrace a period, a development in time, not by juxtaposing instantaneous images but by composing a kind of film according to a preestablished scenario. The author of a private journal, noting his impressions and mental notes from day to day, fixes the portrait of his daily reality without any concern for continuity. Autobiography, on the other hand, requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time. (35)

Beyond the blatant androcentrism displayed both here and in the rest of the article, we can see that Gusdorf’s definition of autobiography centers around an individual writer shaping the narrative of events “towards a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny.” In Gusdorf’s conception of the genre, autobiography involves almost entirely the public part of the lives of “great men,” those whose lives are worthy of our reading time. He acknowledges that the autobiographer “is situated in social space,” but claims that “at the heart of which he will become capable of reshaping his own reality” (32). An autobiography, then, is a consciously constructed narrative that presents the autobiographer “as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been” (45). Gusdorf summarizes his project of autobiographical definition in this way: “In the final analysis, then, the prerogative of autobiography consists in this: that it shows us not the objective stages of a career—to discern these is the task of the historian—but that it reveals instead the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale” (48). In critiquing, complicating, and extending Gusdorf’s ideas in relation to subsequent autobiographical theory and to autobiographical comics such as *Peepshow*, we can begin to think through the intersections of autobiography, multimodality, and genre.

In his emphasis on narrative in autobiography, Gusdorf prefigures the work of such scholars as Paul John Eakin, Paul Anthony Kerby, and Charlotte Linde. Directly and indirectly, these scholars address the question of whether this emphasis on narrative in autobiography is simply a convention of the genre or if the construction of narrative intersects with the construction of identity. Directly addressing this question, Eakin contends that “narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self—the self of autobiographical discourse—does not necessarily precede its constitution in discourse” (100). Eakin and the other scholars mentioned above argue that narrativization is the way that we as human beings make sense of our identities and the social spheres in which we exist; both consciously and unconsciously, we all continuously construct ourselves in story (to ourselves and to others) as a way to deal with the discontinuities of our lives. As Kerby writes, “the self is given content, is delineated, and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories”—narrative
provides a way for us to re-order our experiences and to make them coherent both for ourselves and for others (1). Or, as Eakin writes, “narrative here is not merely about the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part of self . . . the writing of autobiography is properly understood as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part” (101). As we continually construct our identities, we do so through narrative, whether in private thought or public autobiography.

In Matt’s *Peepshow*, then, the act of creating the character Joe Matt can also be seen as an act of continuous or serial identity formation. This is not to say that Joe Matt the cartoonist and Joe Matt the character are the same; Joe Matt the character is clearly an artistic and rhetorical construction of Joe Matt the creator. However, as Eakin argues, that construction is “in some profound way a constituent part of the self” (101). For example, in the first six issues of *Peepshow* that comprise *The Poor Bastard* narrative arc, Matt uses his autobiographical comic as a way to put coherent order to his experiences, including his obsessions with pornography and sex, his break-up with his girlfriend Trish, and his subsequent attempts at dating. *Peepshow* is a means for Matt to engage in self-representation, though in Matt’s *Peepshow* we are a far cry from Gusdorf’s idea that in autobiography the writer portrays himself “as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been” (45). Rather, *Peepshow* presents a narrative self-portrayal that is anything but flattering, as Joe Matt lurches from one embarrassing situation and demeaning piece of self-disclosure to another.

Moreover, as Hatfield points out, Matt “gleefully blur[s] the distinction between auteur and cartoon persona” so that “*Peepshow* often serves as a passive-aggressive intervention in his own real-life relationships” (126). For example, when Matt/Joe Matt is having problems in his relationship with Trish in issue #1 of *Peepshow*, he becomes obsessed with one of her co-workers, constantly fantasizing about her and hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Nothing happens between them, but his obsession is fully chronicled in *Peepshow* #1 (see Figure 4 and the discussion that follows). Since *Peepshow* is a serialized comic book, the real Trish is sure to eventually read that issue and react to the representations of her, Joe Matt, and his obsession with her co-worker. What’s more, Matt must have realized that Trish would read the comic as he was creating it. *Peepshow* can thus be seen as a kind of intervention by Matt in his real life, just as his life provides material for *Peepshow*. In issue #2, then, we are presented with Matt’s representation of Trish’s discovery of the comic and Joe Matt’s subsequent discussion of that event with his friend Seth (Fig. 2). In reply to Seth’s question, “What the hell were you thinking?” Joe Matt replies, “Oh, I dunno—I just thought it would make a good story. What’s the
big deal? I was just being honest!” Such a reply is, of course, problematic both in terms of his personal relationships and his representations of them in narrative. As in the case of Andy and Kim described earlier, Matt’s inclusion and portrayal of other people raises many ethical issues as the line between his actual life and his cartoon persona blurs. Experiences become narrative, which then has an impact on future experience and subsequent narrative—such is the nature of serial comics autobiography, especially in the case of Peepshow.

Despite the usefulness of Gusdorf as a precursor to these important ideas about narrative and identity, it is necessary to confront the limitations of his ideas. The most obvious critique of Gusdorf’s work is that he is androcentric.
and focused on the public sphere in his formulation of autobiography. As theorists of autobiography such as Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith, Shari Benstock, and Betty Bergland have pointed out, definitions such as Gusdorf’s limit the scope of autobiography and autobiographical studies to the perspective of white, upper class men to the exclusion of those of different races, classes, or genders. Such a stance, written as it was in 1956, neither admits the inclusion of previously marginalized voices, nor does it match the realities of current production, publishing, or consumption in the field of autobiography. In the introduction to *The Limits of Autobiography*, the title of which is itself a play on the title of Gusdorf’s essay, Gilmore lists four reasons for the current popularity of autobiography: the increase in the number of voices being published and the number of opportunities for publication in response to the social and political movements of the past thirty years; the pervasiveness of confession and confessional practices within mass culture and mass media in North America; the appearance of first person accounts or the “autobiographical ‘I’” in places it had not previously appeared such as journalism and academic articles; and changes in the literary marketplace (16–17). As she points out, it is difficult to disentangle the connections among these four factors, especially the relationship between opportunities for other voices and changes in the literary marketplace. In other words, did the market lead or follow the other trends (especially the increase in opportunities)? The answer to that question and an extended discussion of the reasons for the current popularity of autobiography are outside the scope of this paper; what is important is that other voices are being heard and need to be heard, in both popular reading and sales, and in academic discussions of autobiography. What’s more, by keying in on confessional and on the use of first person in unexpected genres and situations, Gilmore’s list also points to the fact that Gusdorf’s focus on the public at the expense of the private is no longer tenable or appropriate. Clearly the writers and readers and their relationship within the genre of autobiography are different now than when Gusdorf wrote in 1956.

In Joe Matt’s case, we are presented with an autobiographical comic created by a white, middle class man. These identity markers, as they have been socially constructed, certainly do not mark Matt as marginal, and I certainly do not want to claim that such voices have been silenced in North American culture. However, in terms of Gusdorf’s focus on the exceptional man and on the reminiscences about the public life of that exceptional man, Matt does not fit. The material from which Matt shapes *Peepshow* is not the stuff of great men doing great deeds. Rather, it is the stuff of his rather ordinary (though sex-obsessed) life. In this focus on the ordinary, Matt can be seen as following in the tradition of *American Splendor* and its creator, Harvey Pekar, who Hatfield credits with establishing “the quotidian autobiographical series,
focused on the events and textures of everyday existence” (109). In working
in this genre, Pekar and those who follow him introduce the autobiographical
“I” into a medium (comics) where it was previously unknown, at least prior
to the underground movement of the late 1960s. In Peepshow, Matt works in
the genre of “the quotidian autobiographical series”; he is concerned with the
private rather than the public, to the point that the reader at times becomes
uncomfortable with the perceived level of disclosure.

For example, in issue #6 of Peepshow, we are presented with Matt’s sexual
encounter with his ex-girlfriend Laura and her roommate Carol (Fig. 3), an
encounter that contradicts his much more successful fantasy of a threesome
on the first page of issue #1. In the course of two facing pages of six panels
per page (the same regularized rhythm and page layout described previous-
ly), Matt constructs the story of the encounter from the introduction of the
roommate into the bedroom in the first panel to the less-than-successful out-
come of the episode (at least from Joe Matt’s perspective) in the last panel. In
the first panel, Joe Matt is in close-up, motion lines indicating the quick turn
of his head while exclamation and question marks fill word balloons to in-
dicate his surprise and confusion. As the episode proceeds, we see Joe Matt’s
growing embarrassment at his inability to perform, as shown through the var-
ious multimodal devices described earlier. In the last panel, we see the three
of them in bed in a medium-shot, the two women wrapped in each other’s
arms on the right side of the frame while Joe Matt is placed in the left side of
the frame, physically separate from them, a visual detail that uses composi-
tion to emphasize his position in the relationship between the three charac-
ters (further emphasized by his facial expression).

Clearly a threesome is not within the realm of his everyday existence, a
point that Matt emphasizes in panel 5 when Joe Matt thinks “T-this c-can’t
be h-happening! It’s too unbelievable!” When he fails to perform during this
event for which he’s been waiting his whole life, he becomes embarrassed and
retreats to the bathroom to masturbate while the two women carry on with
little regard for him. Joe Matt’s fantasy of the conquest of two women simulta-
neously is deflated by his inability to perform when the real situation presents
itself. In this two-page sequence, Matt constructs the multimodal narrative of
an event that makes the reader uncomfortable, both because of its intensely
private subject matter and its revelation of the disjunction between Joe Matt’s
pornographic fantasies and his actual ability to perform. Matt’s use of the au-
tobiographical “I” within the medium of comics, and his intense focus on the
private rather than the public, belie Gusdorf’s formulation, and place Matt’s
text squarely within current theoretical discussions of autobiography.

I choose to focus on the above sequence because of what it reveals about
Matt’s focus on the private and intimate to the point of reader discomfort, but
Figure 3. Excerpted from *Joe Matt’s Peepshow* # 6 (pp. 22–23) / *The Poor Bastard* (p. 164–65) by Joe Matt. Copyright by Joe Matt. Reprinted by courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.
also because of how it demonstrates what Gilmore calls the “the autobiographical paradox of the unusual or unrepresentative life becoming representative” (Limits 19). In Gusdorf’s formulation, autobiography entails a recounting of exceptional deeds by exceptional men; these men and their lives are somehow seen to be more representative (at least in an instructional way) than the lives of “ordinary” people. However, as Gilmore argues, the autobiographical paradox also pertains to more recent autobiographies that focus on trauma (Lucy Greely’s Autobiography of a Face or Dorothy Allison’s Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, for example), since trauma is by definition not an ordinary experience (Limits 19–20). In such narrative, issues of self-representation and representativeness intersect and exist in tension that can, if dealt with in ways that question this relationship, lead to an interrogation of representation itself. However, such tension between representation and representativeness also exists in autobiographies that focus not on trauma but on the everyday. Such is the case in American Splendor and other such autobiographies of the everyday, in which we are presented with depictions of day to day life in sometimes minute detail (especially in American Splendor), and we are privy to what are presented as the innermost thoughts of these cartoonists.

In Peepshow, we see Matt’s multimodal constructions of his everyday life, and are thus paradoxically presented with Joe Matt as a representative white, middle class man. However, most of us are not as obsessed with sex, pornography, or money to the extent with which we are presented in the character of Joe Matt. And yet, the autobiographical paradox holds because of the relationship between writer and reader that is established within the genre of autobiography. As readers, we come to expect that we will see some of ourselves (or a representative of people vastly different from ourselves) when we read an autobiography. Many readers of Peepshow do, in fact, seem to see themselves or aspects of themselves in Joe Matt, while others read the title to see a representative of someone wholly different from themselves (so, that’s what a porn/sex addict looks like); both of these reactions can be seen in the letters printed inside the back cover in the serialized issues of Peepshow.

In the threesome sequence described above, the illusion of representativeness is called into question by the improbability of the situation within a series that chronicles day to day events that had involved some perfunctory sex and many pornographic fantasies; the unbelievability of the event is highlighted in Joe Matt’s thought balloons. This fantasy-come-to-life begins to show the cracks in this idea of representativeness by playing with the disjunction between pornographic fantasy, as seen in his imagined threesome that opens issue #1, and the “actual” threesome as constructed in issue #6. In Peepshow, then, Joe Matt can be seen both as a representative of the kind of male who indulges in pornographic fantasy and who treats women as sexual objects, and as a
particularized but carefully constructed individual whose actual experience can never coincide with his fantasy life. When, on the final page of issue #6, Joe Matt reminds his friend Seth to tell his ex-girlfriend Trish about the threesome, we are reminded of the constructed nature of both fantasy and narrative; in both, Joe Matt can become the sexual hero, but in Peepshow, Matt also presents us with a version of events that deviates substantially from this scenario. As well, the constructed nature of autobiographical narrative in Peepshow is constantly reinforced through the use of conversations between Joe Matt, Seth, and Chester Brown (both of whom are cartoonists who sometimes work in the genre of autobiography) about the making of comics (see Figure 2, for example). In Matt’s self-representation and the continual reminders of the form itself, the impression of representativeness fades. This illusion of representativeness in the act of self-representation is one that writers, including Matt, often shatter by self-reflexively calling attention to the fragmentation and discontinuity of self, a conception of subjectivity at odds with that presented by Gusdorf.

Not only does Gusdorf focus on the public aspect of the lives of “exceptional men” as narrative constructions of the autobiographer “as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been,” but in doing so, he argues that the autobiographer focuses on “his special unity and identity across time” (45, 35). This concept of unified identity has been strenuously critiqued, as we have instead come to think of subjectivity as discontinuous and fragmented, socially constructed rather than an essential creation. According to Betty Bergland, in autobiography “the speaking subject, historically situated and positioned in multiple and contradictory discourses, places the ‘I’ in the world in positions conceptually possible in language” so that “the autobiographical subject must be understood as socially and historically constructed and multiply positioned in complex worlds and discourses” (131). In autobiographical comics, the autobiographical subject is not only multiply positioned in complex worlds and discourses as constituted by language, but is also multiply positioned through graphic representation so that the multiple and fragmented nature of identity is foregrounded even more. Hatfield offers a cogent explanation for the ability of comics to represent this fragmentation and discontinuity of identity and is worth quoting at length:

If this constitutive absence [of core identity] underlies autobiography in general, it becomes especially clear in the form of comics, where a series of discrete images, each one substituting for the one before it, represents sequence and continuity. The syntax of comics—specifically, its reliance on visual substitution to suggest continuity—puts the lie to the notion of an unchanging, undivided self, for in the breakdowns of comics we see the self (in action over a span of time) represented by multiple selves. . . . The representation of time through space, and the fragmentation of space into contiguous images, argue for the changeability of the individual self—the possibility that our identities may be more changeable, or less stable, than we care to imagine. (126)
In graphic self-representation or self-caricature, we are presented with the cartoonist’s visual construction of self, but because of the exaggeration of caricature and the sequential nature of the art in comics, the effect is much different than the snapshot of the present that Gusdorf argues is created by self-portraiture.

A good example of what Hatfield is describing can be seen in the following section from Peepshow #1 (Fig. 4), in which we see eleven different versions of Joe Matt over the course of an eleven panel sequence. In this sequence we can see all of the elements of multimodal Design that come into play in the creation of Joe Matt’s successive presentations of self over time, where the first ten panels represent a relatively short period of time (probably only a few minutes), while the gap between panels ten and eleven is several hours (as evidenced by him being in bed and the “That night . . .” intertitle). Visually, we see several drawing styles for graphic self-representation, from the minimal caricature in panel 3 to the drawing in the final panel that, while still caricature, tends towards a more realistic representation of the self. In panel 3, where a double image of Joe Matt’s head is used to indicate him seeing a cute girl (who he later will find out is his girlfriend’s co-worker), we are presented with a kind of shorthand for behavior that we have seen before from Matt. In the second face that represents his reaction to the girl, not only do we not see his eyes (as is also the case with the first caricature in the panel and in several of the other panels in this sequence), but the glasses become rounded and the face less detailed, recalling Matt’s graphic representations of self in his earlier one-page strips (originally published in the magazines Snarf and Drawn and Quarterly and later collected under the title Peepshow: The Cartoon Diary of Joe Matt). In the next panel, we see Joe Matt in close-up, a much more detailed caricature that uses visual detail, graphic representation of audio (the action of whistling is indicated through the use of musical notes), gestural cues, and words (as seen in his thought balloons) to present a different picture of Joe Matt than in any of the preceding panels. Finally, panels 10 and 11 present two very different representations of self over time. In panel 10, we see a less detailed self-caricature than in panels 4 and 6 (in which close-up is used and the depth of field is shortened to focus the reader’s attention on Joe Matt and his reaction). If panels 4 and 6 pull us in to Joe Matt as he reacts to the situation, panel 10 pulls us back out, presenting us with a comic book character whose feelings of love are represented in the most familiar of ways—the iconographic presence of hearts floating around his head. By contrast, in panel 11, Matt chooses a more realistic self-caricature with perhaps the least exaggerated expression in the entire narrative arc of The Poor Bastard—his thoughts represented not by linguistic elements, but by the visual of the woman’s face, a presence that dominates the panel along with the figure of Joe Matt, while the figure of his girlfriend Trish is crowded off to the right of the panel. As this sequence of panels demonstrates, the comics form
not only invites the consideration of the fragmented and discontinuous nature of self, but demands we take note of it.

What’s more, as Hatfield points out, cartoonists often invoke a strategy of self-referentiality, or what he calls “ironic authentication,” as a means to call attention to the constructed nature of the text, and thus, the self (126). In Peepshow, the comic becomes self-referential through the continual references to the creation of comics, usually seen through the conversations between Joe Matt, Seth, and/or Chester Brown, as in Figure 2, but also in paratextual elements such as the strip printed above the letters column on the inside cover of Peepshow #13 (Fig. 5). In this short strip, Joe Matt the character becomes excited about receiving fan mail sent to Joe Matt the creator, thus collapsing or blurring the distinction between cartoon self and actual self. However, in framing this blurring within the context of a self-referential strip about the infrequent publication of the book (two years passed between #12 and #13, and five years have passed between #13 and #14), Matt is able to draw our attention to the constructed nature of the comic, the constructed nature of the autobiographical self, and the ways in which we, as readers, tend to collapse the actual self of the creator and the autobiographical self as constructed in the comic. As Hatfield aptly writes, such self-referentiality “continually renegotiates the compact between the author and audience, certifying the genre’s truth claims through unabashed falseness” (126). As such, autobiographical comics provide another space through which we can think about the knotty problem of “truth” in autobiography.

Figure 5. Excerpted from Joe Matt’s Peepshow # 13 (inside cover) by Joe Matt. Copyright by Joe Matt. Reprinted by courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.
Wrapped up with the question of “truth” is the relationship between reader and writer in autobiographical comics in general and *Peepshow* in particular. In calling his comic *Peepshow*, Matt alludes to the pornographic and sexual connotations of the word, but also to the related voyeuristic implications. Who is peeping on whom? Clearly we see Joe Matt the character peeping at pornography throughout the series, but more importantly we, the readers, are peeping voyeuristically on Joe Matt, and through the blurring of persona and creator, seemingly on Matt himself. This relationship is common in autobiographical comics, and I would say, in autobiography in general. But not only are we keeping Joe Matt under surveillance, so is Matt the creator. As Gilmore writes, “autobiography can be viewed as a discipline, a self-study in surveillance. The prevalence of surveillance not only characterizes a relation between the self and others but becomes, as it is internalized, a property of the self as self reflexivity or conscience” (*Limits* 20). Throughout *Peepshow*, we see Joe Matt struggling with the consequences of his actions, putting himself under intense scrutiny through the way Matt constructs the text and what he chooses to include. For example, in the scene of the threesome (Fig. 3), we can see the self-surveillance and scrutiny as Matt depicts/constructs Joe Matt as unable to perform the very act about which he has been fantasizing his entire life, and about which he showed Joe Matt fantasizing on the first page of the first issue of *Peepshow*. As readers, we are not given critical commentary from a narrative voice, but instead we are privy to a level of self-scrutiny and surveillance simply by reading Matt’s multimodal presentation of the scene. The title *Peepshow* thus nods not only to the pornography that lies at the center of the series, but also to the relationships of surveillance that are established by autobiography and autobiographical comics.

Since it is an autobiographical comic, the autobiographical subject is what is under surveillance, and this subject is expected to bear at least some verisimilitude to Matt himself. In other words, since it is autobiography, we expect that Matt is telling the “truth” to us about his life (that the threesome actually happened, for example, and that it happened in this way), but we also realize, especially as we read autobiographies and autobiographical theory, that this concept of “truth” is shifting and unstable. Still, for writers and readers of autobiography, the idea of truth telling as a central feature of the genre remains, and in this way shares a central feature of the genres of both legal and spiritual confession. In fact, as Gilmore writes, “Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses” (“Policing” 55). In effect, Gilmore argues that autobiography historically arises from confession. While a study of the history of autobiography is
well outside of the scope of this essay, it is useful to note that such a claim is in accord with rhetorical notions of genre in which writers and readers adapt known genres for new functions (Miller; Bawarshi). In other words, autobiography as a genre adapts known generic relationships and ways of functioning, from the confession to new social exigencies that give rise to the need to narrate one’s story and one’s subjectivity. In such a relationship of confession, the writer becomes both penitent and lawbreaker, while the reader becomes both confessor and judge. As readers of Peepshow, we are put in the position of witnessing Joe Matt’s life and of judging both the veracity of the depiction and his actions themselves, while at the same time acting in the position of confessor in receiving his disclosures (or at least his constructions of those disclosures). However, as Gilmore rightly argues, “The confession must be regarded, then, as relational: neither the penitent nor confessor is the source of truth-production. Instead their relationship forms the locus from which confession is generated” (“Policing” 60). Through the interaction of Matt’s and the reader’s processes of Design, meaning or “truth” is created, so that the “truth” is not hard and fast but multiple and shifting. As discussed earlier, Peepshow recognizes its constructed nature as text, and its recognition as such points towards this multiplicity of “truths” and the discontinuous and fragmented nature of subjectivity. Functionally, “truth” as a concept stands at the center of autobiography, but the stance towards “truth” in the genre of autobiography and in the comic book Peepshow is ever evolving and must be constantly problematized.

Throughout this paper, I have endeavored to show that in thinking about issues and theories of autobiography, we need to broaden our scope of inquiry to include not only purely linguistic texts, but also multimodal texts such as comics. Texts such as Peepshow are complex in the way they deal with the construction of identity and issues of truth, ethics, and representation; that complexity is heightened by the process of Design in the multimodal presentation of these issues. Comics scholarship has dealt with these issues in studies such as Joseph Witek’s Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar and Charles Hatfield’s recent Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature. However, attention to autobiographical comics needs to happen not only in comics scholarship, but in the scholarly conversation on autobiography itself. In writing about Peepshow as an example of an autobiographical comic, I have attempted to demonstrate the complexities inherent in using the comics form for the genre of autobiography. Through examining Peepshow and other autobiographical comics, we can begin to get at issues of autobiography from a new angle and with the added elements of multimodality.
NOTES

1. Comics have always presented a diverse range of material, from talking animals to superheroes to horror to war and beyond, and at times this material has been controversial. In fact, comics were viewed as threatening and perhaps subversive in the late 1940s and early 1950s (as seen in the horror and war comics published by EC); attacks on comics in the 1950s by crusaders such as Frederic Wertham led to changes in the industry that stripped comics of much of their subversive power (Nyberg). By the late 1950s and through the next two decades, mainstream comics were seen simply as entertainment, a bit of escapism that was harmless as long as it didn’t take time away from other learning and other reading. The exception is the underground “comix” of the late 1960s and 1970s, a movement that laid the groundwork for today’s alternative and autobiographical comics (Hatfield). However, these publications were certainly not part of the mainstream, and were largely unavailable to most readers.

2. After Senator Estes Kefauver and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency investigated the comics industry in the spring of 1954, most publishers agreed to submit voluntarily to the Comics Code Authority, a code of standards that curbed depictions of violence, crime, and sexuality. The Code is generally seen as a stifling force on the development of comics. For more on the institution of the Comics Code and its effect on the industry, see Amy Kiste Nyberg’s Seal of Approval and Bradford K. Wright’s Comic Book Nation.

3. Throughout the text, I will refer to the textual character in Peepshow as “Joe Matt” and to the creator of Peepshow as “Matt.”

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