Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels

This series concerns Comics Studies—with a capital "c" and a capital "s." It feels good to write it that way. From emerging as a fringe interest within Literature and Media/Cultural Studies departments, to becoming a minor field, to maturing into the fastest growing field in the Humanities, to becoming a nascent *discipline*, the journey has been a hard but spectacular one. Those capital letters have been earned.

Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels covers all aspects of the comic strip, comic book, and graphic novel, explored through clear and informative texts offering expansive coverage and theoretical sophistication. It is international in scope and provides a space in which scholars from all backgrounds can present new thinking about politics, history, aesthetics, production, distribution, and reception as well as the digital realm. Books appear in one of two forms: traditional monographs of 60,000 to 90,000 words and shorter works (Palgrave Pivots) of 20,000 to 50,000 words. All are rigorously peer-reviewed. Palgrave Pivots include new takes on theory, concise histories, and—not least—considered provocations. After all, Comics Studies may have come a long way, but it can't progress without a little prodding.

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by Nina Mickwitz

Documentary Comics

Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age

Nina Mickwitz

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Nonfiction Comics and Documentary

Comics have traditionally been associated with, and generally expected to present, imagined worlds and scenarios. This assumption underpins Martin Barker's (1989) argument against claims, from various ideological standpoints, of comics' harmful effects on readers. Barker's defense of comics is one particular instance of a far broader discussion relating to media effects, a debate returning with cyclical intervals, and one that in more recent incarnations has shifted its focus variously to console games and Internet content. The argument is that critics inscribe and "read into" texts ideology in ways that do not correspond to readers' experiences and pleasures. He argues that if something is a comic, a tacit understanding between creators and readers is built around the notion that these are imagined narratives, and that their purpose in turn is to allow readers to imagine. For Barker, the point is that the social context of comics instills a particular register that distances the worlds depicted from the one that readers inhabit. This is not simply a question of fiction versus ostensibly real content, but rather a suggestion that, even when the subject matter is based on actuality, its very treatment in comics form invites a particular response of "imaginative projection" (Barker, 1989, 273) rather than a witnessing function. This would suggest a fundamental incompatibility between the form of comics and a documentary mode of address.

But the theoretical core of Barker's argument is that the social context and location of any expression is a vital concern. And, since the publication of *Comics, Ideology and the Critics* in 1989, the profile of comics has undergone a certain amount of change. I would not wish to overstate this claim, as comics still remain relatively disparaged and marginalized by comparison to more established cultural forms. That cultural capital is asserted, not as previously by elitist exclusivity, but by omnivorous taste cultures (Peterson and Kern, 1996), has not altogether eradicated the hierarchies at

work in the cultural landscape. But comics certainly seem to be less rigidly excluded from the institutional contexts of more recognized cultural forms than has previously been the case.

The repositioning of comics involves multiple factors; improved production values (Round, 2010), the consolidation of certain comics and comics characters as nostalgic cultural icons through the successes of blockbuster movies and television series drawing on comic book culture, and the circulation of an increasing variety of comic books in mainstream book shops, engaging new readerships (ibid). Comics might also be "conceptualized as a sub-set of the art world" (Beaty, 2012, 13) in a way that once would have been unthinkable. These latter developments are not uncommonly reinforced by the handcrafted aesthetic of the comics in question, by underwriting authorial status and thus enhancing cultural cachet and authority. Such comics might of course be resolutely fictional, but it is noticeable that a substantial number present a more complex interaction between factual and fictitious. When, as they often are, printed in book rather than trade paperback form, their materiality adds a weight and permanence that further underlines an implicit claim to status. It would seem that a resistance to established genres, and subject matter that confounds expectation, often has worked to pique critical interest. Certainly, the emergence of comics addressing actual events seems to incorporate this combination of factors, and they can thus be seen as part of wider claims to legitimacy as a cultural expression capable of diverse approaches and topics staged by the form: its producers, industries, fans, critics, and scholars. It thus seems both logical and necessary to situate the emergence of comics maintaining a far more immediate relation with what we might call "the real world" than that for which Barker's evaluation seems to allow, in relation to this diversification of the "comics world" (Beaty, 2012, 37–38). As indicated in the introduction, comics representing actual events are not a recent phenomenon. However, the way in which they tend to tackle such topics shows certain changes. I want to illustrate this shift by way of a comparison.

In the United States, *True Comics* was launched in 1941 by The Parents' Institute. In addition to George C. Gallup, whose very first study ten years earlier had alerted advertisers and social scientists alike to the popular appeal of comics (Gordon, 1998, 81; Marchand, 1985, 112–115), it boasted professors of education and eminent historians on its advisory board. In the inaugural editorial, the publisher, George J. Hecht, promised a new kind of comic to challenge expectation that comics are vehicles for "exciting picture stories everyone recognizes as not only untrue but utterly impossible." The emphasis in *True Comics* on historical events, mostly in the form of military battles and heroic adventures from antiquity to the recent past, is comparable to the initial incarnation of EC Comics that also

published educational content—bible stories and stories of history and scientific discovery (Witek, 1989, 15).

The sober and edifying tone of these comics was not continued, however, in other publications also promising content based on actual events and persons that followed, such as *Crime Does Not Pay* (1942–1955), *Shock SuspenStories* (1952–1955), and *True Crime Comics* (1947–), with its subsidiary *Crimes by Women*. Here, a somewhat schematic, yet dramatically animated style of representation offers melodrama, lurid sensationalism, and graphic depictions of violence. It should be noted that particular visual stylistic choices do not in themselves have a bearing on whether the story told is based on actual events. Nor do they preclude the ability to confer ambivalent or even outright subversive reading positions (Barker, 1984, 146–158). However, in its representation of ostensibly actual events, the drawn image, here, conveniently bypasses codes of decorum that might otherwise apply. These comics take full advantage of the fact that "[v]iewers tend to accept more from a stylized medium than from a photographic medium" (Lefèvre, 2007, 9), and brutal, amoral, and heinous deeds are depicted with relish. Visually embodying a tabloid aesthetic, they offer schematic character depictions and sustain a tension between gratification of salacious, vicarious thrills and what seems to be a moralistic law-and-order message.

In a story titled "Gladys Behmer Plans Murder" (*Crimes by Women*, issue 3, 1948), the eponymous villainess, whose eventual demise in the electric chair is announced on the opening page, is portrayed as a lissome blonde lacking either morals or scruples. She repeatedly marries wealthy men whom she intends to kill off with the help of her boyfriend. As callous as she is seductive, Gladys's lithe limbs and flesh, exposed through repeatedly torn clothing, present the central visual motif. But beyond a combination of sexual allure, steely determination, and monetary greed, her persona, much as that of the lesser characters, remains at the level of a two-dimensional cipher.

The aesthetic and approach of the more recent example, *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf (2012), likewise depicting the story of a real-life murderer, vividly contrasts with the Gladys Behmer story as told in *Crimes by Women*. The depiction of notorious serial killer Jeff Dahmer, as portrayed by his erstwhile school friend, adheres to a comparatively low-key brand of realism. The narrative retrospectively traces Dahmer's high school years and trajectory from awkward and neglected young misfit to sadistic serial killer. There are multiple aesthetic and stylistic differences. But what is immediately noticeable is that, while the *Crimes by Women* story presents in color, *My Friend Dahmer*, which was published 64 years later, is in black and white.[1] Considering that the former came in a trade paperback

Figure 1.1 Anon. 1948. "Gladys Behmer Plans Murder." *Crimes by Women* #3, October issue, Fox Feature Syndicates.

sold at the price of ten cents, while the latter when initially published in hardback form was priced at just under $18, it is unlikely that economic necessity counts for this shift. Although a move away from color in some instances can be accounted for by the interference with authorial intent caused by insufficient technological capabilities (Baetens, 2011*b*, 113),

this is becoming less of an issue with increasing quality of reproduction. Instead, Backderf's choice to produce his comic in monochrome aligns with the tendency of setting apart "the more 'distinguished' form of comic art" (ibid, 112), authorial and not uncommonly foregrounding a hand-crafted aesthetic, from the traditionally color-printed comic books histori-cally produced according to a model of divided roles and that circulate as mass-culture products.[2]

Although the panel layout on both of these pages is regular, the place-ment of characters and the viewpoint and angles offers distinctly differing positions and affective prompts. "Gladys Behmer" makes use of dramatic shifts in point of view in the manner of cinematic shot and reverse shot conventions, in which the point of view and sight line mimics that of the respective characters in panels two and three. That the comic here defies another cinematic rule, the 180-degree rule that would demand the view-point to instill a sense of spatial logic by remaining on the same side of the characters, only adds to the heightened emotion and sense of being caught up in events, of being drawn beyond rational controls that normally govern. The melodramatic and subjective intensity of the scene is also enhanced by multiple diagonal relationships and the proximity between the characters as they overlap each other.

Backderf's page (see Figure 1.2), on the other hand, is composed mainly by horizontal and vertical, rather than diagonal, lines. The tall and upright character of Dahmer in the first panel lines up with and continues the ver-tical division of the remainder of the page by the gutters, or spaces between panels. Dahmer is in fact placed outside rather than within this opening panel, with its teeming hall of high school youth, and so immediately echoes the suggestion of his outsider status in the verbal narration. The small group of friends around a table in panel two is paired with the image of Dahmer carrying his lunch tray toward some empty single booths in the top-right corner of panel three. The figure of him crossing the floor is given a small but discernible margin of space around it, while the shapes of students eating and chatting at tables overlap in places to subtly stress the social connectedness from which he is excluded. In the fourth panel, the reader shares the narrator's glance across the floor toward the solitary fig-ure of Jeff Dahmer hunched over his lunch, and in the fifth and final panel, a closer view of Dahmer shows him looking over his shoulder while suck-ing the straw of his little drink carton, as if surveying the hustle of the caf-eteria from afar. The orderly visual composition and the clear articulation of space between various elements is a crucial factor in communicating the sense of disconnection that is central to the narrative. Just as impor-tantly, as distances between compositional elements and panel edges echo the width and shapes of the gutters themselves, this tidy and systematic
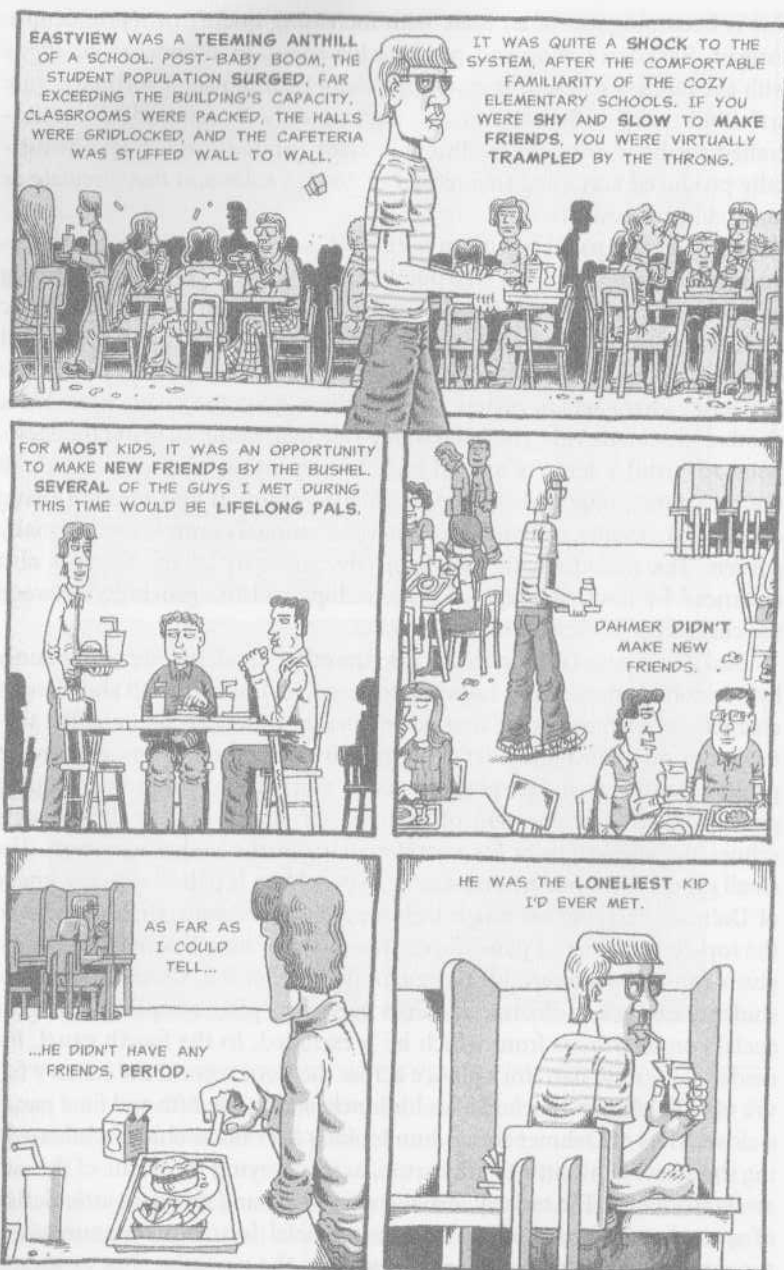
Figure 1.2   Derf Backderf. 2012. *My Friend Dahmer*, 33. New York: Abrams.

appearance simultaneously suggests the intention to offer a detached rather than emotive account. The opposition between a tabloid aesthetic and tone of narration in "Gladys Behmer Plans Murder" and the atmosphere of angst-infused mundanity in *My Friend Dahmer* thus signals a difference in approach and motivation. *My Friend Dahmer* appears to want to go beyond the rhetoric of criminal justice and demonizing media discourses that came to describe Jeff Dahmer on his capture. Without arriving at a definitive conclusion, this comic ponders over contributory factors and systemic failures by describing its narrator's attempt to retrace a period some time before any of the crimes took place.

As much as considerations of register and aesthetics, it is the particularity that marks this account and that the earlier comics mentioned cannot be seen to share that aligns it with documentary. The pictorial depiction in the *True Crime* comics incorporates details of clothing and interiors to locate the stories convincingly in a recognizably contemporaneous milieu. It follows a visual aesthetic familiar from other comics and a particular style of illustration of their time that, like twentieth-century socialist realism, might be more appropriately understood as idealism (Nochlin, 1971, 226).

Curved lines and shorthand cartoon aesthetic notwithstanding, Backderf's work contemplates issues of social and moral significance through attention to the specific. This is how it calls forth associations with the politically motivated aspects of realism, the framework for thinking through the notion of documentary comics favored by Jeff Adams (2008). Like the story about Gladys Behmer, *My Friend Dahmer* incorporates speculatively reconstructed scenes, yet its overall claim to authenticity is buttressed by the creator/narrator's witnessing position and by him openly conceding the partial nature of his knowledge and understanding of his subject. This approach speaks to the position of the individual subject as the guarantor of knowledge. But, at the same time, it also qualifies and acknowledges the limits of its own certainty. Backderf tells us what he remembers but continually asserts how little he knows, to what extent what he offers partly involves speculation, and how limited his understanding is. Yet this is precisely what assumes a persuasive function. The shift from bluntly authoritative assertion to a display of knowingness and qualification plays a significant role in how documentary is understood and performed in a variety of iterations and formats. It is also crucial in terms of the emergent connection between comics and documentary that this book aims to make explicit.

As the social context of comics has taken on greater plurality, the form has come to encompass a range of genres, not all of which necessarily extend a position to their readers or an "evaluative accent" (Barker, 1989, 272) inviting

a response of suspended disbelief. Instead of proposing "what if . . .?" some of them assert "witness this."[3] Despite Gladys Behmer's story ostensibly originating in police files and court transcripts, its telling in comics form crucially lacks the element of witnessing that characterizes *My Friend Dahmer*. The implied address and register that representations of the real and factual (as in documentary) assume is different from that of fiction. It does not invite us to imagine, but rather to imagine that we "see" and "hear," and in so doing to understand a statement, proposal, or position in relation to its subject matter. This is predicated on the understanding that the world, the real to which any such text refers, is a shared and common real, despite its multiplicity, complexity, and multitude of disparate aspects. Of course, any such representations, or utterances, are open to challenges. Yet they are often, though not always, situated within discourses perceived to be both important and "serious." The ability to frame expectation and indicate this particular attitude in comics form connects to the changing and broadened contexts of comics—production, circulation, and consumption. Equally, however, when comics assert their capacity to go beyond genres of fiction, adapting a register of "see/witness this" as opposed to "imagine this," they can be seen as making certain claims for cultural validity.

Documentary Traditions and Theories

It seems fair to ask: Why does the Backderf comic somehow seem more of a documentary than the 1940s *True Crime* comic? After all, are contemporary television listings not liberally sprinkled with "true crime" reconstructions that give highly schematic accounts and often rather gratuitous reconstructions of serial killings and other grisly crimes and violations? These types of programs are habitually given the assignation of documentary. In order to justify the suggestion that *My Friend Dahmer* is representative of an emergent connection between nonfiction comics and documentary, it is necessary, to some extent at least, to unpack the latter.

The idea of capturing the fleeting and elusive real, and, in the case of film, the ability to reanimate an event, is the seductive promise offered by particular technologies. This is a stance increasingly seen as beset with problems. Narratives of objective knowledge, universal truths, and the possibility of neutral representational practices have become subject to critical scrutiny, theoretical skepticism, and political pressure. Nevertheless, issues of veracity, integrity, and the limits of truth claims in debates around documentary speak to an ideal founded on the purportedly neutral and evidential character of recorded material, and "document-ness" of such images—if not necessarily in documentary practice, then at least in the theorizing surrounding it.

As Chapter 2 specifically addresses the perceived realism and evidential force of the photographic image, it will suffice here to acknowledge that the mechanically, or instrumentally, recorded image occupies a central position in common-sense definitions of documentary and remains a tacit assumption of much academic discourse on the subject. Yet documentary has proven too complex to derive its truth-claim from a purist sense of recorded evidence (Beattie, 2004, 13), even in those particular forms that uphold an idea of dispassionate and mechanical acts of witnessing (Peters, 2001) as enabling privileged access to the real. The reason for the debates generated by the relationship between the real and its representation can, at least in part, be understood as the contradiction, or "logical impossibility" (Ellis, 2005, 342) of the genre.

It is well rehearsed that, for the man who coined the term "documentary," John Grierson, this did not present a problem.[4] But subsequent attempts by documentary makers and theorists alike to negotiate the gap between event and representation, and thus between reality and the truth-claims presented by the documentary image, have been considerably more painstaking. Documentaries are commonly, if not always, constructions claiming authenticity while rendering their mediation and constructed character as invisible and imperceptible as possible. Such notions of guileless immediacy quickly disintegrate at closer scrutiny. Film, as record of any given event, is "a construction which intervenes in that reality separating out the to-be-recorded/reviewed from the seen and thus structuring an included scene and an excluded reality" (Cowie, 2009, 55). Moreover, the upshot of both pre- and post-production stages involved in the making of documentaries is that the reality supposedly "captured" is to a significant degree constructed.

The assembly, arrangement, and rearrangement of material in order to construct a narrative further complicate the notion of transparency. The crucial importance of the editing process is of course that "the individual image, the fragment seized from reality [. . .] is given its meaning only through combination with other such fragments, through montage" (Chanan, 2007, 47). Such acts of "exclusion, inclusion, framing and linking" (Silverstone, 1985, 202) are, moreover, circumscribed by, or at least subject to, competing discourses connected to both subject/subjects and broadcasting contexts (ibid, 103). Another issue concerns the extent to which the behavior of subjects is likely to be affected by the presence of cameras and crew. In order to uphold the illusion of direct access, the subjects filmed should ideally not turn toward the camera, acknowledging its presence and breaking "the fourth wall" (Branigan, 1992, 206, quoted by Beattie, 2004, 16–17). This might require either surreptitious filming or negotiations at the outset of a shoot.

Refusing the tendency to frame such issues as shortcomings, Stella Bruzzi (2006) has suggested that documentary needs to be considered as a relationship between representation and the real, rather than a project to erase such a distinction. This works to reintroduce connections between certain approaches in documentary that other categorizations and subdivisions have worked to conceal. Importantly, Bruzzi's emphasis on a process of negotiation also reinstates the notion of performance at the center of documentary. By considering performativity as central, historical, and recurrent features of reenactment (Corner, 1996, 30–31; Nichols, 2008) and staging (Staiger, 1996, 42) emerge, not merely as conditional and marginal instances, but as variations of a constitutive aspect. This is significant when considering the persistence of such practices; from the "apparent naturalness" and scant attention to Louis Lumière's camera shown by passengers alighting from the train (Loiperdinger and Elzer, 2004, 109), the re-creation of obsolete hunting practices in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) to the multiple reenactments in Errol Morris' *Thin Blue Line* (1988) and the prominence of staging and performance in a whole host of factual and reality television formats. It should be noted that the sense in which Bruzzi uses the concept of performativity clearly relates to relations between subjects, filmmakers and their recording equipment, and the implied audiences.

At this point, it seems apt to consider Judd Winick's (2000) *Pedro and Me,*[5] as this is a comic about a relationship developing in the context of a reality television show. The comic that carries the added legend "Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned" tells of Winick's time as a cast member on season 3 of the MTV reality show *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994). The soap-opera format of this show placed the seven participants in a shared house for a period of six months. They continue to engage in work and life beyond the house-share, but the house is rigged with 24-hour camera surveillance. Winick formed close friendships with two people in particular: Pam, who later became his fiancée, and Pedro of the story's title, an HIV-positive AIDS educator. The comic is a tribute to Pedro Zamora, whose health began to deteriorate during filming and who died at age 22 on November 11, 1994, but not before making significant contributions to raising public awareness about HIV and safe sex. Modes of representation is clearly not the focus of comic, and it is not always made explicitly clear to what extent the scenes shown in the comic overlap with the edits constituting the television show's 20 episodes, each lasting 22 and a half minutes. However, Winick (2000, 4) acknowledges the question of performance and authenticity already on the opening pages: "can people truly be themselves when they are aware that all their actions are being filmed?" This is a question he answers in the positive, with very little hesitation. This assertion

is qualified further along, with the acknowledgement of the "unspoken pressure to be interesting" (ibid, 110) and strain of weekly reflections to camera to analyze and comment on events in the house. Ultimately, and seemingly supporting the argument that performance does not so much undermine as engender its own authenticity, Winick explains: "We lived in this pressure-cooker existence where reality became that much *more* real by the fact that it was being documented" (ibid, original emphasis). Yet the comic clearly sets out to retrospectively offer aspects of the events taking place while this documentation took place, which eluded its efforts. This is not so much a question of a competing account, but a significantly different and complementary one, in which encounter between subject and camera gives way to an encounter of a different order. Here, the narrative construction, the suturing together of explanatory back stories and remembered encounters are in the hands of Winick rather than a production team. The reader's encounter with the persons and events are filtered through Winick's subjectivity as he narrates, constructs, and performs, and the account's innate retrospective perspective adds a reflective dimension.

Thinking about representation as performativity and transaction evokes a real that remains resistant to attempts to preserve or replicate it. It forces acknowledgment that veracity will inevitably be conditional and that any given perspective and any given representation will be inescapably partial. Importantly, however, this does not equate to making documentary either a failed, pointless, or unimportant undertaking.

A Documentary Mode of Address

To describe the boundary between the factual and fictional as definite or stable would be an overstatement, yet in broadcasting it provides a vital distinction that "defines two distinct regimes of response" (Ellis, 2005, 351). Indicated here is a distinct position offered by a text to the viewer/reader through cues offered to audiences (Kuhn, 1978). These conventions determine, or at least guide, the attitude with which to approach and respond to the text in question: "the different relationship of the 'reader' constituted by the text to the knowledge of its discourse" (Cowie, 2009, 61). This emphasis on mode of reception, attention, and response is likewise proposed by Dirk Eitzen (1995), Vivian Sobchack (2004, 261), and, specifically in relation to comics that present their material as distinct from imagined persons and events, Elisabeth El Refaie (2010).

To some extent, then, to acknowledge that documentary's truth-value and authenticity is determined at the point of reception works to undo such qualities from specific and technologically determined processes of

production. However, constructing documentary as a mode of reception means that the way in which an audience/readers accept a text, and make sense of it, is informed by extant conventions, genre-boundaries, and categorization. If the commonplace assumption and overriding convention guiding audience perception of documentary is tied to the recorded and moving image, this does little by way of offering a convincing link between documentary and the static and printed nonfiction narratives in comics.

In order to account for the difference between an audience and reception-orientated study, one that would work only in relation to "historical genres" (Todorov, 1973, 13), and the undertaking of this project, I have chosen to exchange the notion of a mode of reception for a *mode of address*. This modification acknowledges that I have no way of accounting for the ways in which the texts I am discussing are actually received, made meaningful or interacted with by their readers. Meanwhile, the term still incorporates recognition of the conditional quality of documentary. It recognizes that the way we approach and understand something as fiction or not, is directed by the text and its ancillary prompts.

So the term "mode of address" indicates that a text might offer its viewers/readers a particular position and that, in the case of documentary, this position invites them to "look to its images as records of the specific, not as envisioning of the possible" (Vaughan, 1999, 154). That downplaying aesthetic and affective aspects has worked to strengthen the evidential claims and persuasive force of certain kinds of documentary only underlines the importance of aesthetic cues. John Corner (2005, 52) has called this "[a]n apparent absence of style," while John Hartley has described such conventions as the means by which a text "effaces its own textuality, its own status as discourse" (1996, 204). In the case of documentary the evidential force and apparent transparency of the recorded image is underscored by the implied lack of manipulation or intentionality within the text's overall presentation. This might indeed be understood in terms of performed neutrality.

Although we might conclude that certain codes and conventions are routinely made use of in order to present documentary claims, this is not to say that they have not been appropriated, parodied, and also vehemently critiqued (see Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997; Trinh, 1990). Attention has been drawn to ways in which the emergence of mock-documentary (Bayer, 2006, 184–178; Hight, 2008a, 204–216; Juhasz and Lerner, 2006; Roscoe and Hight, 2001) and the adoption of a documentary aesthetic in fictive texts (Caldwell, 2002; Landesman, 2008; Renov, 1993, 23) speaks to a reflexive engagement with the codes of representation and the values of truth and authenticity beyond the academe.

Perhaps partly in response to the increasing skepticism directed at documentary's status, authority, and ostensible transparency, new sets of

conventions that acknowledge (at least parts of) the process of production have become more prominent. This, too, has drawn criticism for conforming to protocols modeled on scientific inquiry and thus, rather than doing reflexive work, merely performing as standardized gestures to further textual authority.

> . . . as long as the maker abides by a series of "reflexive" techniques in filmmaking that are devised for the purpose of exposing the "context" of production and as long as the required techniques are method(olog)ically carried out, the maker can be assured that "reflexivity" is elevated to the status of scientific rigor. (Trinh 1993, 103)

This critique is upheld, at least in terms of cautioning against reading overt inclusion of parts of the production process as indicators of a self-reflexive approach, by John Ellis (2005). He claims that indications of construction as markers of transparency were brought in as standard features of the new factual formats in response to the public outcry in 1999 about fakery and misleading viewers in docu-soaps and other reality-based genres and the subsequent threat to the public trust in broadcasters (ibid). The institutional policing of documentary's integrity, by codes of ethics and production, points toward the fragile and contingent character of this producer/viewer contract. The ways in which the declarative stance of documentary is received and accepted appear to fundamentally hinge on an unquantifiable notion of trust. The imperative to maintain the "soft boundary" (ibid, 351) between the factual and fictional on television, an issue with important implications for protecting the reputations of networks, has led to the reclassification of some reality-based programs under "entertainment" (Staiger, 1996, 44). This, in turn, indicates the role played by cues situated beyond the actual text itself, in guiding audience expectations and framing the meaning-making processes of their engagement. The extent to which external, paratextual (Genette and Maclean, 1991) guides such as listings, introductory commentaries, and promotional introductions inform and stabilize terms of reception cannot be overestimated.

Subjectivity and Documentary

The foregrounding of subjectivity and the disruption of certainty it introduces have increasingly become a point of interest, rather than figured as a problem to overcome, in thinking around documentary (Bruzzi, 2006, 85; Lebow, 2012; Nichols, 1994, 1; Rascaroli, 2009; Renov, 2004). This does not necessarily mean that all documentary has abandoned authoritative

stances underwritten by their ostensible neutrality. Nor has it seemingly undermined the position of recorded images as the privileged means of documentary. In fact, recently announced 360-degree immersive documentaries, in conjunction with virtual-reality technologies such as Oculus Rift, suggest that their promise involves a reassertion of documentary objectivity. Initial reports certainly focus on a reinstatement of documentary credibility as a result of editing losing its instrumental role while signaling undeterred faith in the intrinsic capacity for objective truth assigned to particular imaging technologies.

Yet subjectivity, its expression and articulation, has been identified as a growing consideration for documentary studies (Ellis, 2012; Lebow, 2012; Renov, 2004), in line with the notion of situated knowledges. These wider cultural shifts and issues around representation are clearly of significant importance in terms of the encounters between reality and its representation in documentary—or, rather, the terms on which documentary texts are understood. As the documentary mode of address spans texts that are wildly diverse, making delineations according to themes, approaches, or, indeed, aesthetics is a thorny task. To anchor such aspects to particular time periods is particularly problematic. Rather than trying to identify changes in documentary itself, shifts can be more usefully traced in the attitudes toward and expectations of this category. More recent contributions have signaled an increasing readiness to value subjectivity rather than address it as a problem, to recognize its historical presence (Ellis, 2012; Renov, 2004, xviii–xxi), and to question whether the ideal of transparency that has been attached to documentary has been an actual concern of documentary itself (Bruzzi, 2006, 13–14). What once was perceived to be problematic is now more likely to be conceived of as a condition of credibility. So, instead of trying to identify changes in documentary itself, a greater emphasis on partial perspectives, encounter, and performance can be more usefully traced in the attitudes toward and expectations of this category.

Documentary Continuations and Disruptions in Comics

In broadcast documentary, in particular, the issue of trust, and attempts to safeguard such a producer–viewer relation is formalized in legal terms (Paget, 2011, 62–93; Winston, 2000, 88–112), as institutional codes of production attest. In comics on the other hand, the subjective qualities of drawing, and the overt display of their principle of construction, work as a rebuttal and caveat that to some degree preempt essentialist notions of both truth and transparency. Moreover, their historical distance from the institutional discourses of authority that imbricate recorded imagery makes the very idea of policing the truth-claims of comics seem incongruous.

Both of these points suggest that documentary comics occupy a space perhaps especially well-suited for exploring and extending ways in which the experiential real and representation might be constructed and performed. Certainly, from an academic point of view, once questions of veracity and transparency have been dispensed with "it is more interesting to ask what aspects of reality are being represented, and how that is being done" (Honess Roe, 2013, 22). On the other hand, for a practitioner who wants to assert the authenticity and credibility of their account, adopting rather than subverting conventions and codes from established documentary forms might be of paramount importance.

Nevertheless, controversy in relation to truth-claims has not been wholly absent despite the form's associations with the imagined and fantastic, or its limited authority as a source of factuality. For example, debates were ignited as it transpired that the subject/author of an autobiographical comic turned out to be a fictional construct (El Refaie, 2012, 156–157). This suggests that, although the differing cultural expectations with regards to recorded and hand-rendered images that may ostensibly make comics immune to the kind of accusations of fraudulence and thus gives a certain degree of flexibility in terms of the documentary image (as is also the case with animated documentary), this does not exempt comics from expectations in terms of the mode of a particular system of communication, indicated by paratextual markers (Genette and Maclean, 1991). In the case of documentary and autobiography both, trust is a crucial part of what is generated by such expectations. In other words, if regulation of documentary is necessary in order to protect producer-viewer trust, because documentary is capable of lying (Eitzen 1995, 89), then comics, too, can lie when they are understood as extending a truth-claim.

Beyond the question of truth-claims, documentary as performative interaction and interplay between the reality and representation (Bruzzi 2006, 252) plays out in somewhat different ways in comics to what we might conventionally think of as documentary media. The difference is not that the narrative is constructed retrospectively, as this tends to also be the case with documentaries utilizing recording technologies. However, in her account of the relationship between performance and documentary, Bruzzi (2006) positions the encounter between subject and recording equipment as a central dynamic and consideration. This is something that quite clearly differentiates recorded documentary from documentary comics. But the construction of the documentary text, both by producers and in their reception, can also be considered as performative. In the case of documentary comics the performative aspects of production assume a more visible and central role, thus drawing attention to the subjective aspects of both experience and communication.

Broader cultural shifts have undoubtedly impacted on the continued interaction between reality and its representation, and as assertions of universal truth, neutrality, and objectivity have become replaced by terminology marked by qualifications—negotiation, partial perspectives, and subjectivity (no longer conceived as a merit, particularly in the context of artistic expression, but as validating the plurality of experience). On such terms, the performative inscription and engagement with reality in comics form significantly intersects with documentary. But accepting the notion of documentary comics necessitates seeing technological specificities as variations within the category of documentary, rather than as boundaries that circumscribe it.

2

The Truth-Claims of Images

The comics in this book extend an invitation to trust their representations as truthful depictions of real events and experiences while using means of representation that deviate from documentary's conventional methods and the images they produce. That documentary is dependent on, and indeed constituted by, its use of recording technologies unites otherwise plural, and at times competing, positions in documentary studies. But as is the case with animated documentary, the idea of documentary comics undercuts such an assumption.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the dominant measure for judging an image truthful in contemporary Western culture is its proximity to a particular type of photographic image. "We judge an image real when, for instance, its colors are approximately as saturated as those in the standard, the most widely used photographic technology" (ibid, 159). This describes a kind of feedback loop through which recorded images not only bear a particular likeness to the real, but simultaneously inscribe, constitute, and configure particular conceptions of reality (Black, 2002; Sobchack, 1994, 84; Virilio, 1994). Photographic realism might be understood as a set of pictorial conventions that, in terms of contemporary visual representations of reality, constitutes a culturally dominant paradigm. However, rather than accredited to a particular capacity for likeness, or resemblance to visual experiences of the world around us, the significance of recorded images is their function as a "certificate of presence" (Barthes, 2000, 87). This is what underscores documentary's evidential capacity at the level of the image and ultimately rebuts the uncertainties raised by processes of selection, construction, and the imposition of narrative described in Chapter 1.

The concept of a "paradigm of recording" (Lelong, 1988, quoted by Ricoeur, 2004, 162) offers a useful description. It gives due acknowledgment to the role, and potential affect, of technological means of production, but does not overstate medium-specific considerations. In other