

So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, The Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability

Susan M. Squier

© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

Abstract This essay draws on two emerging fields—the study of comics or graphic fiction, and disability studies—to demonstrate how graphic fictions articulate the embodied, ethical, and sociopolitical experiences of impairment and disability. Examining David B’s *Epileptic* and Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik’s *The Ride Together*, I argue that these graphic novels unsettle conventional notions of normalcy and disability. In so doing, they also challenge our assumed dimensions and possibilities of the comics genre and medium, demonstrating the great potential comics hold for disability studies.

Keywords Disability · Impairment · Graphic fiction · Comics · Norm · Normalcy · Abnormal · Ethics · Development · Moral model · Medical model · Social model · Epilepsy · Autism · Pathology · Anomaly · Universalism · Alterity · Canguilhem · Levinas

[T]he associations of childhood and puerility are still hard to shake; comics are the only art form that many “normal” people still arrive at expecting a specific emotional reaction (laughter) or a specific content (superheroes).¹

Comics writer Chris Ware uses a striking simile to explain his role as editor of the comics special issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*: “Throughout the process of assembling this anthology... I felt a bit like the director of a talent show at an institution for developmentally disabled students, standing at the front of the auditorium, trying to encourage the parents to clap louder.”² The connection between comics as an art form and the question of normal development also occurs to Scott McCloud, who in *Understanding Comics* explains, “It’s considered *normal* in this society for children to combine words and pictures, so long as they *grow out of it*.”³ (Fig. 1) These comments by two widely known

An earlier version of this essay was published, in a Norwegian translation, as “Bare de vokser fra det—Tegneserier, normalitetsdiskurs og funksjonshemming” in *Tegn på sykdom: Om litterær medisin og medisinsk litteratur* eds. Hilde Bondevik and Anne Kveim Lie (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2007): 87–111.

S. M. Squier (✉)

Departments of Women’s Studies, English, and STS, The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, 211 Miller Lane, P.O. Box 557, Boalsburg,
PA 16827, USA
e-mail: sxs62@psu.edu

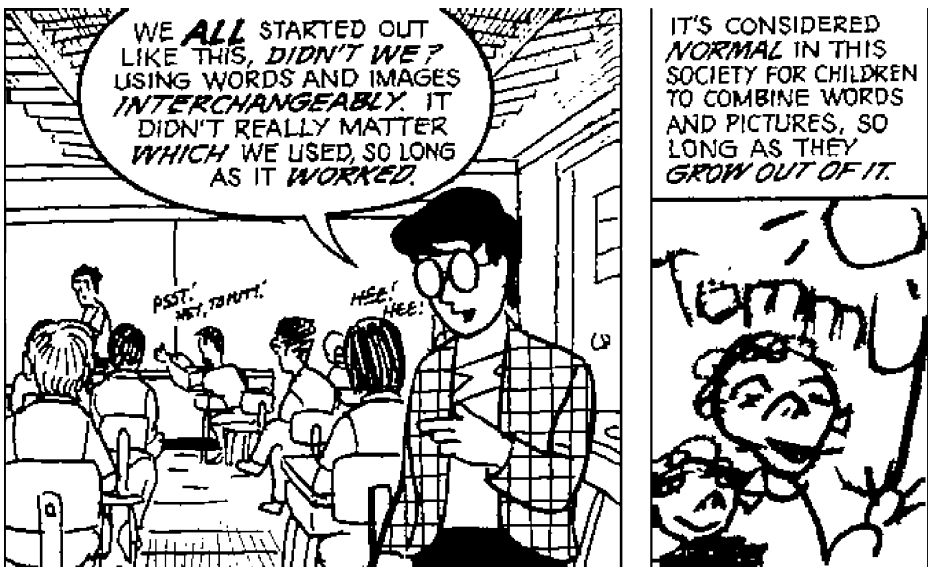


Fig. 1 “We all started out like this, didn’t we?” Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994): 139

practitioners and theorists of graphic fiction present a curious and thought-provoking vision of the writers and readers of comic books as childish, puerile, even (as Chris Ware puts it) “developmentally disabled.” Shadowed as they are by the label *abnormal*, comics can offer a rich area in which to explore some crucial issues in disability studies.

I will bring together two emerging fields—the study of comic books or graphic fiction, and disability studies—to demonstrate how two contemporary graphic fictions rely on, and challenge, longstanding notions of normalcy, disability, and the comic book genre in order to articulate the embodied, ethical and sociopolitical experiences of impairment and disability. In doing so, I will argue, these graphic novels also challenge our assumed dimensions and possibilities of the comics genre and medium, demonstrating the great potential of comics for disability studies. My texts are David B.’s *Epileptic* [1996–2004] (2005) and Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik’s *The Ride Together* (2003). These two works occupy different positions in literary, cultural and social history. *Epileptic* was praised in the *Times Book Review* as “a graphic intellectual history,” while *The Ride Together* was noted in the *Times Health Column* as a memoir about growing up with an autistic brother and “illustrated with cartoons.” Despite their different levels of acclaim and the different audiences that each work invokes, these texts have several things in common: the comics medium; the concept of normal development; and its social and medical sibling, the category of disability.⁴

What *is* disability? Until the 1980s, that question was answered primarily in medical terms. Disability was conceptualized as a physical or mental condition (the result of an illness, injury, or accident of birth) that caused significant limitations to a person’s quality of life and was therefore understood as a misfortune deserving of medical and social care.⁵ This definition of disability, with its curative and therapeutic focus, led to the creation of institutions charged with providing that cure or care, while often isolating individuals with disabilities from mainstream society, constructing them not only as pathological but as inferior, abnormal, and incapable of participation. The medical model of disability thus relied on a discourse of normalcy (expressed in the understanding of day-to-day human

health and of human development more generally) that collapsed the developmentally or functionally anomalous into the unhealthy, or pathological. French physician and philosopher Georges Canguilhem troubled that distinction in *The Normal and the Pathological*.⁶ This crucial work revealed the normative (or norm-creating), evaluative force behind the word *normal*: “in taking the word “normal” in its authentic sense we must set up an equation between the concepts of sick, pathological and abnormal” (138). Whether we label a variation as abnormal or simply anomalous depends on whether it is seen through the lens of biological science (as a simple statistical variation) or through a medical lens (as a difference that *makes a difference in health*, we might say). Indeed, the habit of enforcing a medically driven normativity has provided an unacknowledged spur to research. Even when we think of ourselves as merely studying the nature and causes of a biological variation, our investigation is often driven by commitment to normalcy in its specifically medical sense—the absence of pathology: “It is because the anomaly has become pathological that it stimulates scientific study,” Canguilhem observes (136). Yet as Canguilhem also points out, “Diversity is not disease; the *anomalous* is not the pathological” (137). The anomalous becomes the abnormal when the difference in functioning it produces is “judged pejoratively [through the medical lens] in terms of the normal human ideal” (139).

In the past decade or so, the field of Disability Studies (DS) has challenged the medically enforced reign of the normal that Canguilhem identified.⁷ This new area of scholarly work, primarily attracting scholars of English, philosophy, history, and sociology in the United States, distinguishes between *impairment*—the individual limitation linked to a medically based problem that impairs one or more basic life functions—and *disability*—the individual limitation produced by society’s failure to accommodate to the impairment. DS scholarship has moved the analysis of disability from the medical model, which is concerned with the diagnosis, treatment, amelioration or cure of an impairment to the social model, which examines the social or institutional context that renders an impairment a disability. Productive lines of investigation have followed from the new scholarly emphasis: attention to the ways that legal, educational, social, medical, even physical environments are disabling as well as the renewed drive for disabled people’s political and social rights to access, mobility, and independence.

Yet in its move to theorize the social nature of disability, the movement has taken a wrong turn, sociologist Bill Hughes argued in 2002. In its attempt to remedy the shortcomings of the medical model, Hughes holds, Disability Studies scholarship has actually constructed a new dualism, “consigning impairment to a pre-social domain.”⁸ Because it has defined “impairment solely in biological terms and thus denied its social nature,” the social model has relegated the experience of impairment to the same pre-cultural zone as the body of biomedicine. The result has been an unfortunate syllogism: “If impairment was the opposite of disability, and disability was socially constituted, then impairment must be biologically constituted” (67). The effect has ironically been to *remedicalize* much of the experience of disability. Hughes explains:

Impairment must, therefore, be taken to refer to that palpable and pathological fleshly object that constitutes the subject matter of medical science. It follows that impairment must be devoid of social meaning and separate from the self... Thus the social model, conceived of as the intractable opponent of all things associated with the medical model of disability, came to share with it a common conception of the body as a domain of corporeality untouched by culture (67).

The resulting effect? Scholars in disability studies have increasingly turned away from exploring the *physical experiences of disabled people*, even while focusing on the profound

significance of the institutional and social response to impairment and asserting the central importance of the experience of disabled people. (“Nothing about us without us.”) Rather than continuing this embargo on exploration of the embodied meaning of disability, Hughes argues, we should acknowledge that we live in “the somatic society” where “major political and personal problems are both problematised within the body and expressed through it”(66). To that end, he offers a new formulation of disability that we might define as the socio-somatic model: “*impairment is social and disability embodied*” (66).⁹

This is where graphic fiction comes in. As comics artist and theorist Will Eisner has observed, embodiment plays a central role in the developing language that is comics. “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.”¹⁰ (Fig. 2) Physique, gesture, and facial expression are all central ways that the sequential artist conveys meaning. Moreover, the medium depends on our ability, as readers and viewers, to register these particular gestures and body postures as signifying a particular emotion. And these emotions are far from simple; just as with prose fiction and visual art, ambiguity and dissonance figure from time to time. In sum, as a medium combining verbal and gestural expression, comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints. Portraying embodiment through gesture, posture, and design choice; through choice of panel, frame and character; and through the conventions of character creation, the three comic texts I will discuss explore the socio-somatics of disability: how disability *feels* and what an impairment *means socially* for the disabled person and his family members.

David B’s *Epileptic* (2005) was originally published in a series of volumes between 1996 and 2004 under the title *L’Ascension du Haut-Mal* (The Ascension of Sacred Disease).¹¹ This stunning black-and-white graphic memoir recounts the author’s experience of having a brother with epilepsy. A brain disorder that can be attributed to a range of causes including congenital injury, trauma, and illness (as well as “no known cause”) and which results in disordered firing of brain cells in the cerebral cortex leading to loss of consciousness or convulsions, epilepsy has a long association with the sacred in both Western and Eastern culture.¹² The memoir, which is narrated as a long flashback, traces the impact of Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy on himself, a younger brother Pierre-Francois (the narrator, later called David), a sister Florence (who contributed the foreword to the book), and ultimately the entire family. The memoir opens with a present-day interaction between the adult Jean-Christophe and the narrator, then returns to 1964, shortly before the 7-year-old Jean-Christophe has his first seizure and is diagnosed with epilepsy.

Graphic fiction is essential to *Epileptic* both as a mode of narration and a record of shared experience. The brothers share an interest in writing and drawing from their very earliest childhood. “We draw a lot. Both of our parents teach art, and we’ve got as much paper and as many crayons as we want. With my brother, I put together my first book. It’s called ‘The Martyrdom of Florence.’ My sister is tortured on every page” (11). The combination of drawing and writing essential to the brothers’ childhood composition establishes the relational nature both of the epilepsy and its representation in this graphic fiction. *Epileptic* moves between realistic and iconic imagery, drawing on the words, lines, and graphic styles that constitute the *vocabulary* of comics to explore the personal, social and spiritual meaning of Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy.¹³

In a series of realistic drawings, the narrative provides depictions of the typical course of the seizures as well as emblematic expressions of their meaning for Jean-Christophe, his friends, his brother and sister, his parents, even for strangers. (Fig. 3) Approached in the terms advocated by Hughes, these frames tease out the difference between impairment and

A micro-DICTIONARY of GESTURES

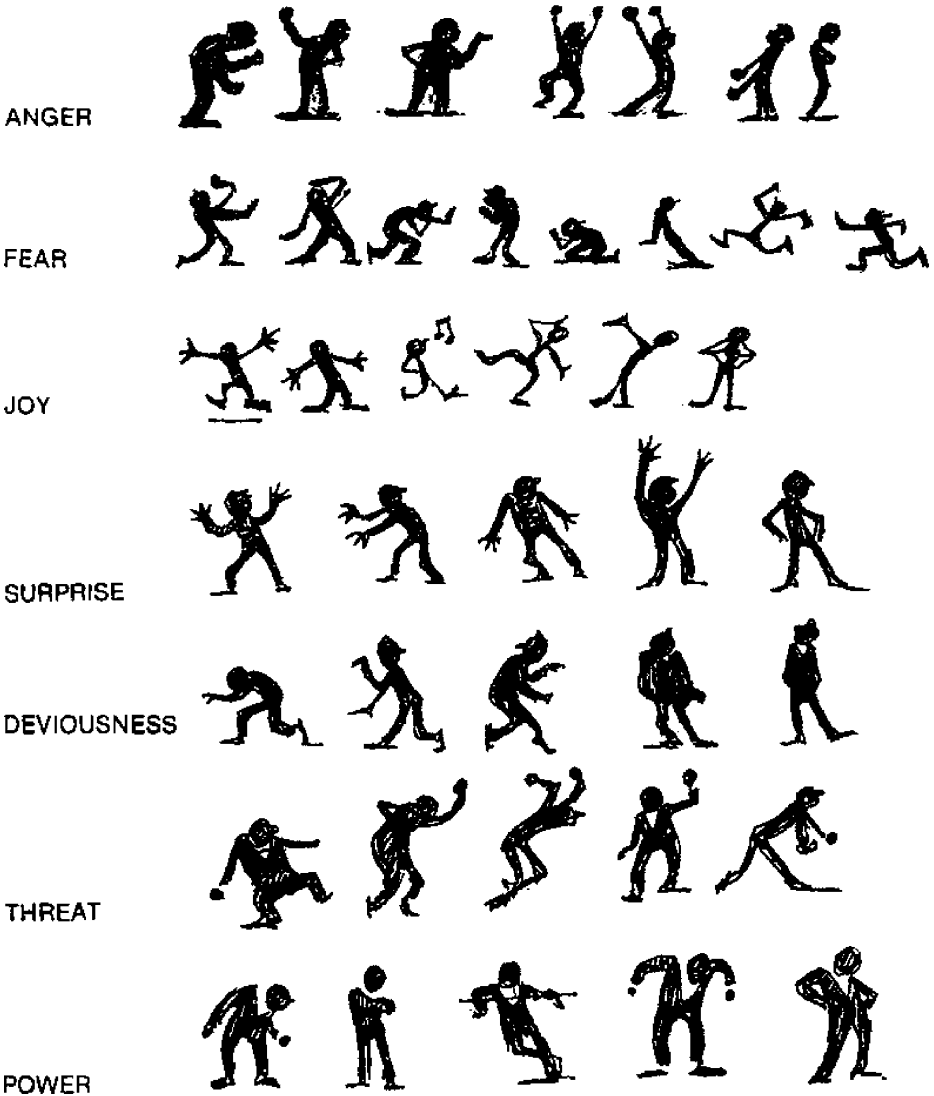


Fig. 2 “A Micro-Dictionary of Gestures” Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles & Practice of the World’s Most Popular Art Form* (Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 2004): 103

disability, for they show us not only the seizures that leave Jean-Christophe impaired by bruises and disorientation, but also the social response to those seizures that render his epilepsy a pervasive, intractable disability. So, one page uses contrasting black and white backgrounds and shifting perspectives and scales to reveal how Jean-Christophe’s friends respond to a seizure as if it were a fit of homicidal rage, denouncing him as a madman or murderer and isolating not only him, but his younger brother and sister as well (34). A later page draws on contrast, shadow, gesture, iconic representation, perspective and scale to dramatize how Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy shapes the way he is seen and dealt with by



Fig. 3 “For the time being, Jean-Christophe’s seizures have stopped.” David B., *Epileptic*, trans. Kim Thompson (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005): 32

neighbors and siblings, even when the illness is under control so he is having no seizures. In succeeding panels, he is shown dwarfed by “the ghost of his illness”; separate but roughly the same scale as the other children; and finally, as towering above both them and the city in which they live, brandishing his wooden sword in disappointment that they have reneged on their promise to let him lead: “they said I couldn’t be th’ leader!” (63). Not only do these illustrations reveal the social processes that disable him, but they also suggest the impairment produced by this epilepsy: multiple distortions in his *own* sense of himself (63).

The choice of different styles of illustration can also express the specific interpersonal dynamics of the disability experience. In *Epileptic*, cartooning dramatizes Pierre-Francois’s escape from the burden of his non-disabled and intact individuality, while it draws on realistic portrayal to express Jean-Christophe’s longing for the consolation of a stable and empowered identity: “His fantasy is Hitler. Seized by this sudden weakness, he develops a huge craving for power and domination. While I’m an anonymous crowd of Mongols, he’s a supreme leader” (20). (Fig. 4) Jean-Christophe’s choice of Hitler as his particular icon of power, though he has a whole gallery of such figures to choose from, is ironic. “[T]his Nazi fantasy is in no way anti-Semitic. Neither one of us even has any idea what a Jew is.” Indeed, there is a double irony. Jews were not the only targets for Nazi oppression: although the narrative doesn’t explicitly mention it, epileptics and other people with disabilities were also among those targeted for extermination in Hitler’s 1939 Aktion T-4.¹⁴

Epileptic not only draws ironically on the recent history of Nazi atrocities, but it references the broader history of comics as it recounts the family’s response to Jean-Christophe’s illness. Contemporary comics can be traced back to pre-Columbian artifacts, the Bayeux Tapestry, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Japanese scrolls, as well as saints tales and the work of Hogarth, Topfer, and the Surrealists. As the family struggles to find a style of treatment that will manage, if not cure, Jean-Christophe’s violent seizures, the memoir’s graphic style mirrors their desperate search, adopting the style of those various precursors to comic books, as well as Buddhist, Christian, Rosicrucian, and Mayan iconographies. Moreover, the course of the epilepsy is juxtaposed to the course of the author’s growth as a comic book writer, especially his increased use of the medium to come to terms with what the epilepsy has meant to his brother and to himself. We see Pierre-Francois trying one form of illustration after another in his attempt to subdue, and make sense of, his brother’s epilepsy. From Jean-Christophe’s first seizure and the moment of diagnosis onwards, Pierre-Francois enacts the violence of his brother’s physical and emotional experience of epilepsy in the violence of his drawings. He covers pages with the Algerian War and the battles of Genghis Khan and finally produces a 37 page graphic novel on the Mongol invasion of Japan under the leadership of Kublai Khan. “Once the book is finished, I keep going, covering entire pages with epic battles. *It’s my own form of epilepsy*. I expend the rage that boils in me. Jean-Christophe suffers from the same rage, but we express it differently” (19–20; my italics).

Through their historical sweep and range of genres, these highly detailed and realistic panels link the individual violence of this illness to the collective violence of warfare, from Mongol hordes to French soldiers in the first and second World Wars to samurai warriors. As the family turns to dreams, family history, and finally to a sequence of different spiritual traditions from the old world and the new in search of a solution, the representations echo their process, leaving the plane of realism to explore dream images and iconic representations. Finally, when even those attempts have failed, Pierre-Francois begins to feel that he will also succumb to the epilepsy that grips his brother. Drawing becomes his refuge, and his armor, and speech deserts him: “It’s as if I’d offered my tongue, the better to combat epilepsy” (166). (Fig. 5) He takes a new name, David, as a way of marking his



Fig. 4 “His fantasy is Hitler.” *Ibid.* p. 20

identification with the victims in the eternal battles that rage in his drawings, and he announces himself as a “professional” comic book artist. The drawing style changes: the comics take their subject matter from dreams and from the rich vein of esoteric literature. “Suddenly it seems obvious to me. Only fantasy books can make sense of the skewed reality in which I live (184–186).



Fig. 5 "I feel like I'm alone." *Ibid.* p. 166

David's rebirth as a comic book artist is framed in relation to his brother's epilepsy, in panels that switch between David's view of his brother and a whirl of graphic images rendering David's inner world. Scott McCloud argues that "the panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided."¹⁵ Here, these divided panels suggest

the divided time and space of the brothers. Yet rather than the typical black outline, these darkly shaded panels are separated by a white band. Their openness permits a bleeding from one to the next. Thus, while they represent the brothers' division, they also suggest the possibility that it can be transcended.¹⁶

If we turn our attention from the style of drawing to the ways that the story employs panel-to-panel transitions, we can see how the estrangement between the brothers has been remedied by the end of *Epileptic*, while giving rich attention to the social and embodied meaning of each brother's world. Long panels picture David and Jean-Christophe riding through space and time on twin horses, encountering violence and peace, until they sit together under the sun on one horse, icon of the very rage that fuels their different journeys (356–361). (Fig. 6) Moreover, despite *Times* reviewer Rick Moody's backhanded praise of the work as "less a graphic novel... than a bildungsroman about the artist as reader of continental philosophy," the medium of graphic fiction is essential to an appreciation of the resolution accomplished by *Epileptic*. As McCloud argues, "If *visual iconography* is the *vocabulary* of comics, *closure* is its *grammar*.... In a very real sense, **comics IS closure!**"¹⁷ *Epileptic* accomplishes a closure that is not only verbal and visual but social as well. Just as the concluding panel dramatizes (verbally and visually) the convergence of the full range of the brothers' experiences, so the entire memoir performs and enables both the social accommodation to impairment and the cultural assessment of its embodied meaning that Hughes argued was imperative for DS. Rather than accepting as normative the developmental trajectory that moves away from combining words and pictures, this graphic memoir suggests the rich possibilities of a world that accommodates both.

Childhood, superheroes, and even the "puerility" that Chris Ware mentions in the comment serving as the epigraph to this essay, converge in *The Ride Together*, Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik's memoir of growing up with a brother with autism.¹⁸ Narrative chapters by Judy alternate with graphic chapters by Paul to convey the physical, cognitive, and social impact of autism on one individual and his family. Published as a therapeutic read for families dealing with autism, *The Ride Together* uses the medium of comics to transcend that useful beginning. Opening with words, "Family," followed by pictures, "Diagnosis," the memoir traces the experiences of David's experience as a child and an adult with autism, as he shuttles back and forth from the family home to institutions. Not only does *The Ride Together* explore the impact of David's disability on his family, as its members struggle to live with him or to find alternative settings for his care, but by its conclusion, the memoir has also explored the personal and social costs of a discourse of developmental normalcy that defines David as an abnormal Other and his cognitive impairment as a disability.

Chapter Six, "Bizarro World," draws on two different genres of comics (superhero fantasy and realistic information), set in different parts of the house that is their shared world, to convey the very different social and physical meanings of autism for David Karasik and his brother, Paul. In a series of panels dramatizing their parallel interests in superheroes, Paul arrives home from school, anticipating the new issue of *Superman*, only to find David in the living room, *acting out* the Superman television show that seems always to be playing in his head. As an earlier chapter explains in language resonant of the pre-history of graphic fiction:

David performs television shows... Throughout our childhoods, David would walk from room to room in our house, being different people, talking in different voices, a squeaky one for... Jimmy Olsen of *The Adventures of Superman*, holding his body in different ways to represent the different characters... These are not word-



Fig. 6 "My face would be yours." *Ibid.* p 361

for-word re-creations, but condensed versions, featuring the pivotal moments of each scene, drawing on the language that drives the plot, like a storyboard of a show, or a series of friezes telling the familiar story of a holy figure moving through his destiny (32–33).

Yet the absorption of one brother is the distraction of another. David is absorbed by “The Human Bomb” episode of *The Adventures of Superman*, while Paul experiences David as a “Human Bomb” that disrupts *his* enjoyment of the *Superman* comics. In a series of panels, the chapter portrays David’s perceptions, as he takes on the voices and personas of Superman, Jimmy Olsen, and Lois Lane, and then becomes the spokesman for Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia (64). (Fig. 7) Successive panels dramatize the conflict between Paul’s territory, whose psychic and physical boundaries are disrupted by David’s autism, and David’s territory, circumscribed by the television set playing in his mind (65–67).

We can see how comics function so well to convey the experience of impairment and disability if we stop for a moment to consider the use of panels in the “Bizarro World” chapter. The choice of panel border conveys the range of meanings that David’s disability takes on in the brothers’ shared childhood. As Eisner has observed, the frame of a panel can convey powerful emotion by the style of its line, functioning “as part of the non-verbal ‘language’ of sequential art.”¹⁹ The border can either contain the action, keeping the reader out of the picture, or it can “invit[e] the reader into the action or [allow] the action to ‘explode’ toward the reader.”²⁰ Moreover, Eisner explains, “The jagged outline implies an emotionally explosive action. It conveys a state of tension and is related to crisp crackle associated with radio or telephonic transmission of sound.”²¹ McCloud agrees: in his tentative lexicon of line styles, the emotion of anxiety is expressed through a thick jagged line.

Drawing on all of these strategies, the graphic design in this chapter gives us a “thick” representation of David’s autism, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s sense of the term.²² The graphic format enables us to see how the cognitive disruption of autism foils David’s attempts to connect with his little brother, leading him to mechanical media as he tries for mediated self-expression. And in the jagged line, we find compactly melded and articulated all of the issues this sequence explores: his anxiety, his frustration, and his recourse to a mechanical medium—not the radio or telephone that Eisner references but a television—to express himself. With these visual cues, the chapter conveys what is beyond words: the emotional charge of the head-butt that ends the brothers’ confrontation and the intense anxiety with which Paul goes to his room (67).

Once in his bedroom, free to immerse himself in his favorite comic, “Bizarro Superman,” David enters another world where all norms are inverted. “Everything on the planet is a wacky version of earthly civilization... for the strange Bizarro creatures *hate perfection!*” (69). Both physical disability (historically monitored by the “Ugly laws” that made it a crime for visibly disabled people to appear in public) and cognitive disability (monitored by IQ tests and intellectual tracking in schools) are reversed in “Bizarro World.”²³ Just as David thinks, “This is one of the greatest comics, ever!” he notices a public service ad he has never seen before, about “The Invisible Handicap.” In drawings redolent of 1960s realism, the ad introduces Tod, the new boy, who “happens to have a handicap that’s invisible—damage to part of the brain...” (72). In a realistically drawn panel in which her head-on perspective and locked gaze confront the reader directly, a teacher explains: “There are more like him than most people realize... because of faulty perception, he doesn’t see or do things quite as you do, and we’re trying to help him adjust.” (Fig. 8)

The juxtaposition of another comics genre, that of realistic representation, to Paul’s obsession with superhero fantasy introduces an ethical dimension to his experience of his brother’s disability. McCloud’s observation, “when you look at a... realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of **another**” recalls Emanuel Levinas’ argument that the ethical demands posed by the face of the Other provide the foundation for all human relations.²⁴



Fig. 7 "... Yes, it's Superman, who can bend steel in his bare hands..." Judy Karasik and Paul Karasik, *The Ride Together: A Brother and Sister's Memoir of Autism in the Family*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003): 63

The implications of this theory for medicine are beginning to be explored. For example, medical humanities scholar Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom has drawn on Levinas's work to argue that there is an ethical grounding to all medical practice.²⁵ She argues that "the moral obligation of the physician is imposed by the patient as Other, an obligation that is prior to the interpretive framework of medical knowledge.... Facing and speaking are the everyday



Fig. 8 “Bizarro Superman and Bizarro Lois Lane are waiting.” Ibid. p. 70

events through which ethics, and subsequent knowing such as that in medicine, are based” (451–2). She cites Arthur Frank’s observation that since contemporary scientific medicine distances and universalizes the patient, it has become imperative to develop a way of telling the story of the patient’s otherness if the patient is to be truly healed. Clifton-Soderstrom references the story of a very intelligent man with neurological impairments whose physician has held himself separate from the suffering of his patient, giving him technically skillful but impersonal care. As a result, “the man, as the doctor, dissociates himself from

his disability, creates no meaningful narrative from which to experience his illness and suffering, and in the end does not know who he is" (13).

The implications of Levinas's attention to an ethics grounded in facing and speaking, and his rejection of universalism in preference for the acknowledgement of alterity, can enable us to expand on the potential that comics and graphic fiction have for the full



Fig. 9 "The Invisible Handicap!" *Ibid.* 72

encounter with the experience of disability. Rather than leaving the disabled person unable to narrate or represent his full experience, like the man whose doctor denied him any personal encounter, comics make that narrative most fully possible because they include its pre-verbal components: the gestural, embodied physicality of disabled alterity in its precise and valuable specificity.

The decision to represent conflicting images of personhood by drawing both on the superhero fantasy of a wish fulfillment self and the realistic representation of a disabled other not only illuminates the brothers' experience of disability, but it also calls us to explore our own ethical responsibility as readers. Karasik brings the worlds of David and Paul into confrontation, dramatizing the shock with which Paul realizes the force of normativity in "Bizarro World" by juxtaposing it to its mirror image: *Superman's* encounter with the "Bizarro Code." Now Paul is the one who is Othered by the environment of "Bizarro World."²⁶ In a series of panels whose frame explodes outside of its borders, Paul breaks into angry tears, and shreds his beloved comic book, exclaiming: "Me do everything wrong!!" (73). (Fig. 9) In this comic book world of opposites, where the ugly is loved, beauty is hated, and perfection is a crime, Paul sees *himself* through a new lens, as the one whose perception is faulty (72). And as readers we are offered a similar opportunity for self-reassessment.

The Ride Together shows how the anomalous is transformed into the abnormal, the impaired, and ultimately the disabled, through the enforcement of social norms that fail to accommodate difference. That it does so by way of the Bizarro Superman comics is significant, for in general the super-hero genre relies on the discourse of developmental normalcy for its role in the construction both of comic books and of disability. (Admittedly, in issue # 43 of *Green Arrow*, DC Comics' Green Lantern revival comic drawn by Judd Winick, the Green Lantern's sidekick Mia tests HIV positive, but there too the force of the disability lies in its inversion of the genre's expectations.)²⁷ Here again, we are returned to the relationship between comics, the discourse of developmental normalcy, and disability:

Super-hero comics... [hold] a low status in the society that gave rise to them. They are the thrice damned of Anglo-American culture: damned as *culture*, being popular not "high"; damned as a *medium*, being neither art nor literature but some perverse hybrid, at best suitable only for children (and retarded adults), at worst positively harmful... And they are damned as a *genre*, being the most outlandish fantasy involving absurd characters acting in the most bizarre fashion.²⁸

Epileptic and *The Ride Together* focus initially on the way an impairment—epilepsy and autism—interrupts a sibling's normal development. Then, they both document, in words and pictures, how the social context renders that developmental interruption not only anomalous, but also abnormal, and ultimately disabling. Finally, each of them returns to the category of disability to deconstruct it, demonstrating the pathology and psychic impairment *within* the seemingly productive art of comic book writing in the case of *Epileptic* and demonstrating the health and able-mindedness of David's love for the Three Stooges in *The Ride Together*. Rethinking the category of the superhero, refusing the rejection of certain types of humor as childish, even puerile, these works of graphic fiction and narrative demonstrate the power comics have to move us beyond the damaging discourse of developmental normalcy into a genuine encounter with the experience of disability.

Endnotes

1 C. Ware, "Introduction," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), 11.

2 Ibid.

- 3 S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994), 139.
- 4 Graphic fiction is not the most appropriate term here, but I am using it as an umbrella concept to discuss two works that might more accurately be described as graphic autobiographies, or graphic disability narratives. As they consider these themes, these three works explore the specificity—in material and social terms—of disability.
- 5 Until the rise of modern medicine, disability had been conceptualized in moral terms, as the result of a moral or spiritual failing of the individual or of his/her ancestors. A. Silvers, D. Wasserman, M.B. Mahowald, eds., *Disability, Difference, Discrimination: Perspectives on Justice in Bioethics and Public Policy* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 56–69.
- 6 G. Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966). Introduction by M Foucault (New York: Zone Books, 1991). All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.
- 7 As Lennard Davis points out, this new concept of the norm as ideal is a result of the rise of statistics, with its central notions of the normal curve of distribution, and rankings within that curve. “The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be.” *Enforcing Normalcy* (New York: Verso, 1995), 35.
- 8 B. Hughes, “Disability and the Body,” in *Disability Studies Today*, eds. C. Barnes, M. Oliver, and L. Barton (London: Polity, 2002), 38–77, 63. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.
- 9 This is not to say that impairment is *caused* by social interaction, but rather that all impairments, including congenital ones, have social meaning. Drawing on Turner, then, we can understand even congenital impairments as being available to articulate and/or to problematize personal and social issues. B.S. Turner, *The Body and Society*, 2nd Edition (London: Sage Press, 1996), cited in Hughes, 66.
- 10 W. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World’s Most Popular Art Form* (Tamarac FL: Poorhouse Press, 2004), 103.
- 11 David B., *Epileptic*, trans. K Thompson (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005). David B. [Pierre-Francois Beauchard] is a co-founder of *L’Association*, the French experimental comics collection. The translator, Kim Thompson, is co-owner of Fantagraphics. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.
- 12 E. H. Reynolds, “Todd, Hughlings Jackson, and the electrical basis of epilepsy,” *Lancet 2001: 358 (9281): 575–577*; Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). A correlation exists between epilepsy and autism, the disability central to the next memoir I will discuss. As Tuchman and Rapin report, “Approximately one-third of children on the autistic spectrum develop epilepsy.” Roberto F. Tuchman, MD and Isabelle Rapid, MD, “Regression in Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Seizures and Epileptiform Electroencephalogram Correlates,” *Pediatrics* (April 1997) 99: 560–566.
- 13 McCloud, 24–59. As McCloud details, this vocabulary includes: the reliance on the *icon*, the use of the *face as a mask*, the distinction between the realm of *concepts* and the realm of the *senses*, the ability to portray the world without through *realism* and the world within through *cartooning*; and the *masking effect*, which allows readers to mask themselves in a character and imaginatively enter a sensually rich narrative world.
- 14 R. Young, “The Euthanasia of People with Disabilities in Nazi Germany: Harbinger of the ‘Final Solution’” (<http://www.wce.weu.edu/Resources/NCWCHE/reviews/disabled.shtml>).
- 15 McCloud, 99.
- 16 My thanks to Ralph Rodriguez for this observation.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 18 P. Karasik and J. Karasik, *The Ride Together* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003). All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.
- 19 Eisner, 44.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.http://www.iwup.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sektktf/gg/GeertzTexts/Thick_Description.htm (accessed 21 February 2007).
- 23 Ugly laws, which made it against the law for people with disabilities to appear on public streets because their appearance was likely to offend the public, have recently become the focus of disability scholars. Tobin Siebers points out that such laws continued to be “on the books” in the 1960s in parts of the American Midwest, and he cites as typical a passage from one statute: “No person who is diseased,

- mained, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other public places in this city, shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view." Burgdorf and Burgdorf, 1976, cited in Tobin Siebers, "What Can Disability Studies Learn from the Culture Wars?" *Cultural Critique* 55 (Fall 2003): 182–216, 199.
- 24 McCloud, 36.
- 25 M. Clifton-Soderstrom, "Levinas and the Patient as Other: The Ethical Foundation of Medicine" *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 28:4, 447–460.
- 26 Eisner, 46. Eisner observes that "[t]he frame's shape (or absence of one)...can be used to convey something of the dimension of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs."
- 27 S. Locke, "Fantastically Reasonable: Ambivalence in the Representation of Science and Technology in Super-Hero Comics," *Public Understanding of Science* 14 (2005): 25–46, 29–30 [my italics].
- 28 Ibid.

References

- B. David. *Epileptic*. Trans. K Thompson. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.
- Canguilhem, G. *The Normal and the Pathological*. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- Clifton-Soderstrom, M. "Levinas and the Patient as Other: The Ethical Foundation of Medicine" *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 28:4, 447–460.
- D'Angelo, J. "Comic-Book Hero to Battle Real World-Villain: HIV." *MTV News*. <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1492237/20041013/index.jhtml?headlines=true>.
- Davis, L. *Enforcing Normalcy*. New York: Verso, 1995.
- Eisner, W. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form*. Tamarac FL: Poorhouse Press, 2004.
- Fadiman, A. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Hughes, B. "Disability and the Body." In *Disability Studies Today*, eds. C Barnes, M Oliver and L Barton. London: Polity, 2002.
- Karasik, P. and J. Karasik. *The Ride Together*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2003.
- Locke, S. "Fantastically Reasonable: Ambivalence in the Representation of Science and Technology in Super-Hero Comics." *Public Understanding of Science* 14 (2005): 25–26.
- McCloud, S. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994.
- Reynolds, E.H. "Todd, Hughlings Jackson, and the Electrical Basis of Epilepsy." *Lancet*: 358, no. 9281 (2001): 575–577.
- Siebers, T. "What Can Disability Studies Learn from the Culture Wars?" *Cultural Critique* 55 (Fall 2003): 182–199.
- Silvers, A., D. Wasserman, and M.B. Mahowald, eds. *Disability, Difference, Discrimination: Perspectives on Justice in Bioethics and Public Policy*. Lanhan MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 1998.
- Tuchman, R.F. and I. Rapin. "Regression in Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Seizures and Epileptiform Electroencephalogram Correlates." *Pediatrics* 99 (April 1997): 560–566.
- Turner, B.S. *The Body and Society*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage Press, 1996.
- Ware, C. "Introduction." *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004.
- Young, R. "The Euthanasia of People with Disabilities in Nazi Germany: Harbinger of the 'Final Solution.'" <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/NWCHE/reviews/disabled.shtml>.