Comics an der Grenze

COMICS AN DER GRENZE

SUB/VERSIONEN VON FORM UND INHALT

9. Wissenschaftstagung der
Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (ComFor)

herausgegeben von
Matthias Harbeck,
Linda-Rabea Heyden
und Marie Schröer

Bibliographische Informationen der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.dnb.de abrufbar.

Soweit möglich wurden Abdruckrechte für alle Abbildungen eingeholt, die nicht vom Zitatrecht (§ 51 UrhG) abgedeckt sind. In Fällen, bei denen es nicht gelungen ist, die Rechteinhaber ausfindig zu machen, bitten wir um Nachricht an den Verlag.

Copyright 2017 Christian A. Bachmann Verlag, Berlin
www.christian-bachmann.de

Titelillustration Copyright 2014 Paul Paetzel, Berlin
Herstellung: docupoint GmbH, Barleben
Printed in Germany
Print-Ausgabe: ISBN 978-3-941030-68-8
E-Book-Ausgabe: ISBN 978-3-96234-012-4
1. Auflage 2017

Christina Maria Koch

Comic-Grotesque Metamorphoses

Boundaries between Illness and Health in Ken Dahl's *Monsters*

Abstract | Monsters are no rarity in the history of U.S.-American comics, but in Ken Dahl's eponymous small press comic they assume a particular function: His morphing monsters tell a story about how being a carrier of the herpes virus leads to incessant worry and social isolation. Dahl's narrative exposes the instability of the body's boundaries, and that of the distinction between illness and health. This chapter reads *Monsters* through traditions and theorizations of the Monstrous and Grotesque, as well as cultural histories of medicine that have shed light on discourses of contagion and (in-)visibility of illness. It is the idiosyncrasies of the comics medium and its history, and those of Dahl's stylistic choices, that enable a particularly tangible representation of social and personal illness experience.

Zusammenfassung | Monster sind keine Seltenheit in der Geschichte U.S.-amerikanischer Comics, doch in Ken Dahls gleichnamigem *small press*-Comic haben sie eine besondere Funktion: Dahls sich ständig wandelnde Monster erzählen eine Geschichte davon, wie ein (vermeintlicher) Träger des Herpesvirus an unaufhörlicher Sorge und sozialer Isolation leidet. Die Erzählung enthüllt die instabilen Grenzen des Körpers und die verschwommene Grenze zwischen Krankheit und Gesundheit. Dieses Kapitel liest *Monsters* im Lichte von Traditionen und Theorien des Monströsen und Grotesken sowie von kulturgeschichtlichen Studien zur Medizin, die Diskurse über Ansteckung und die (Un-)Sichtbarkeit von Krankheit genauer beleuchtet haben. Es sind die Eigenheiten des Mediums Comic und seiner Geschichte, und die von Dahls künstlerischem Stil, die hier zusammen eine besonders greifbare Darstellung von sozialer und persönlicher Krankheitserfahrung ermöglichen.

Where does health end and illness begin, and vice versa? The oft-cited definition from the constitution of the World Health Organization states that »[h]ealth is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity«.[1] Still, »health« seems to be a concept and a personal

1 | WHO: Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no.

experience that is much harder to grasp than »illness«.[2] And what if someone is feeling well, blissfully ignorant of the fact that he or she may be carrying dormant particles of a virus that could be transmitted to unsuspecting others? Surely a medical test would then reveal to a lay person that this well-being is but a temporary illusion or at least a dangerous aberration from a purportedly real state of health. This entrance into an unsettling state between illness and health is what happens to the protagonist of *Monsters*, a semi-autobiographical graphic narrative small-press published in book format in 2009 by Ken Dahl, the pen name of Gabby Schulz. After his girlfriend Rory is diagnosed with an outbreak of genital herpes, the protagonist Ken's relationship falls apart as both believe the infection to stem from open sores in his mouth which he had been ignoring carelessly. Unable to pay for medical care and too ashamed to reveal his sexually transmitted infection, Ken despairs over deteriorating friendships and an inhibited love life. His great fear of being contagious is manifested visually in his frequent imaginations of morphing into a monster, or in conversations with the anthropomorphized virus.

The narrative exhibits a considerable dose of gallows humor and self-irony both visually and verbally. Bodily functions and sexual acts are depicted quite frankly. In these features, *Monsters* recalls the style of underground comix, their bent towards the autobiographical, and their frequent candor in the depiction of bodies and of sexual drives – which has been chronicled perhaps most famously for the example of Justin Green's *Binky Brown*.[3] This is particularly apparent when Dahl exaggerates physiques or bodily features, for instance when he depicts a party including lots of drinking and dancing with laughing faces whose noses and open mouths are disproportionally enlarged.[4] Dahl's crisp black-and-white style varies from frequent cartoony and simplified imagery, especially in characters' faces, to sometimes quite realistic depictions. He includes, for instance, an intricately drawn web image search for herpes.[5] Moreover, in the middle section of the book, Dahl presents us with a sequence of infographics[6] on herpes, in which he uses serifs lettering and

---

2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948. http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html (publ. 2003, cit. 05.02.2015).

2 | See Simon Johnson Williams: *Medicine and the Body.* London 2003, p. 29. See also Elisabeth El Refaie on Leder's concept of dys-appearance: Elisabeth El Refaie: *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures.* Jackson 2012, pp. 60–61.

3 | Ian Williams: »Graphic Medicine: Comics as Medical Narrative«, in: *Medical Humanities* (2012: 38.1), pp. 21–27, p. 23. See also Jared Gardner: »Autography's Biography, 1972–2007«, in: *Biography* (2008: 31.1): 1–26.

4 | Ken Dahl: *Monsters.* Jackson Heights 2009, p. 75.

5 | Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 51–52.

6 | On infographics in graphic illness narratives, see See Williams: »Medical Narrative«, p. 23.

drawings reminiscent of the accuracy of medical textbook illustrations.[7] This combination of visual styles and references may have earned the book the description that can be found on the back of the 2009 Secret Acres edition, namely »probably the most entertaining educational comic ever«.

The stylistic legacy of underground comix that I mentioned above resurfaces time and again in many graphic illness narratives or contemporary alternative comics in general. Through their intermedial nature, Susan Squier argues, graphic narratives have »the capacity to articulate aspects of social experience that escape both the normal realms of medicine and the comforts of canonical literature«.[8] Many graphic illness memoirs do not shy away from visualizing and voicing the lows of illness experience – disgust, self-loathing, social exclusion, and so on.[9] But as in *Monsters*, they often do so in a tragicomic manner. Grotesque imagery may not only shock and repel. It may also, especially in the case of Dahl's cartoony visual simplifications and exaggerations, produce a comic effect.

Monsters and grotesque beings are, of course, quite evidently numerous in the history of Anglophone graphic narratives, and metamorphoses have functioned as one of comics' central narrative elements.[10] Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* encounters fantasy creatures in dream lands, Steve Ditko's monsters in 1960s mainstream comics are a classic, Robert Crumb's and Aline Kominsky-Crumb's underground comix aesthetics have featured monstrous bodies, Mike Mignola's website biography statement reads »[a]ll I really want to do is draw monsters«,[11] and the website *comicmonsters.com* catalogues countless historical and contemporary examples of these figures. Their ambivalence lies in their more or less strong ties to the history of putting abnormal bodies on display. In this context, Rosi Braidotti refers to Leslie Fiedlers seminal 1978 study *Freaks* on the »exploitation of monsters for purposes of entertainment«.[12] Quite fittingly for the history of comics she reminds us that »[s]ince the sixties a whole youth culture has developed around freaks,

---

7 | Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 112–113.

8 | Susan M. Squier: »Literature and Medicine, Future Tense: Making It Graphic«, in: *Literature and Medicine* (2008: 27.2), pp. 124–152, p. 130.

9 | Examples include Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow*, Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, & Me*, John Porcellino's *The Hospital Suite*, or Jeffrey Brown's *Funny Misshapen Body*.

10 | Thierry Groensteen qtd. in Bart Beaty: *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*. Toronto 2007, p. 249.

11 | Mike Mignola: »Bio«, in: *The Art of Mike Mignola*. http://www.artofmikemignola.com/Bio (publ. 2010, cit. 05.09.2014).

12 | Rosi Braidotti: »Mothers, Monsters, and Machines«, in: Katie Conboy/Nadia Medina/Sarah Stanbury (Eds.): *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York 1997, pp. 59–79, p. 74.

with special emphasis on genetic mutation as a sign of nonconformism and social rebellion.«[13] Braidotti concludes somewhat optimistically, however, that the »commodification of freaks« also coincided with a nascent disability rights movement.[14] Thus, in order to understand how and to what effect Ken Dahl deploys and reclaims visual tropes of the monstrous and grotesque in his semi-autobiographical comic, it is instructive to take a closer look into the ways in which they have been theorized in context with the body and the self.

Tying Dahl's *Monsters* to a History of the Grotesque

In the history of Western visual art, the grotesque has reemerged forcefully in the Romantic period and has figured in many diverse stylistic traditions since. Frances Connelly has described the concept as images that »combine unlike things […]; deform or decompose things; and [images] that are metamorphic«.[15] The grotesque deviates from ideal forms or stylistic conventions to »create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless«.[16] Hence, it goes against Platonic ideals. As Mark Dorrian outlines, the grotesque violates classical norms of proportion and geometry – and, thus, beauty – in the depiction of bodies. The grotesque body also represents an aberration from the ideal paradigm – most famously, Aristotle argues that female offspring is actually a deformed male.[17] Dorrian, like many others, reads these figures phenomenologically and argues that they »undo […] [the body's] coherence and thereby its separation from other bodies and from the world«.[18] Monstrous or grotesque figures can, however, never stray too far from the human image to become completely formless: if these figures evoke horror, it is caused by them being too close to the classically ideal human form rather than too far from it.[19] Margrit Shildrick has aimed at breaking up the binary dynamics of the monstrous versus the normal in arguing in a similar vein that the monstrous is not an exterior other: »In seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the

---

13 | Braidotti: »Mothers«, p. 75.

14 | Braidotti: »Mothers«, p. 76.

15 | Frances S. Connelly: »Introduction«, in: Frances S. Connelly (Ed.): *Modern Art and the Grotesque.* Cambridge 2003, pp. 1–19, p. 2.

16 | Ibid.

17 | See Braidotti: »Mothers«, p. 64; and Mark Dorrian: »On the Monstrous and the Grotesque«, in: *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* (2000: 16.3), pp. 310–317.

18 | Dorrian: »On the Monstrous«, p. 313.

19 | Dorrian: »On the Monstrous«, p. 314.

vulnerabilities in our own embodied being.«[20] Just as we project vulnerability onto others rather than admitting our own, we keep the monstrous at a distance to avoid acknowledging the »permeability of the boundaries that guarantee the normatively embodied self«.[21]

In Dahl's graphic narrative, the collapsing boundaries between health and disease are paralleled in a disturbed unity of the subject. The virus images that Dahl conjures up sometimes transform the protagonist Ken into a virus monster from the inside out.[22] At other times virus particles latch on to the protagonist and work their way to the inside to transform Ken, or the origin of the transforming particles remains unclear.[23] In some cases faintly anthropomorphic virus particles remain separate as a sort of invisible friend (or rather, foe),[24] and in other instances Ken is sucked into a towering virus monster to merge with it.[25] In several of these situations, there is a telling ambiguity of the first-person plural pronoun: the monster's »we« might be understood as a quirky ›royal we‹ reflecting its mass of particles or rather as a signal of Ken's feeling of being the unwilling host to an alien lifeform that has become part of himself.

In the scene shown in Figure 1, Ken is tormented by his desire to reach out to his current love interest and his guilt and fear of being contagious. The monster's first-person plural could at times refer to the virus particles (»If we do infect her it'll be her fault«), at other times they point more clearly to a unity with the character Ken (»We're getting so old… How many more chances like this do you think we'll get?«). Yet the monster also addresses Ken individually as the one who needs to act in the situation (»Kiss her«, »You don't have to say anything«), becoming a kind of invisible wingman reiterating familiar tropes of victim blaming, typical in sexual assault cases (»We can blame it on the alcohol… And isn't she coming on to us?«).[26]

As Mary Russo states with reference to Bakhtin, »[t]he grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and

20 | Margrit Shildrick: *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self.* London 2002, p. 4.

21 | Shildrick: *Embodying*, p. 1.

22 | For instance, see Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 122–124.

23 | For instance, see Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 184–185.

24 | For instance, see Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 125.

25 | For instance, see Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 84.

26 | See also Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 83, 125.

Fig. 1 Ken Dahl, *Monsters*, p. 84

change.«[27] In Dahl's graphic narrative, for instance, we see the protagonist imagining himself as a virus monster with grotesquely enlarged bodily orifices and a huge penis preying on a female human body and becoming so large that it towers over skyscrapers.[28] The iconography evoked is not only that of boundless, oozing monsters and predators like King Kong, but also that of malicious virus particles reproducing by penetrating healthy cells and multiplying endlessly. Therefore, it is at the extreme of the grotesque or Kristeva's abject in that its bodily boundaries are completely fluid and ever changing.[29] Again, we judge the representation of the

27 | Mary Russo: »Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory«, in: Katie Conboy/Nadia Medina/Sarah Stanbury (Eds.): *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory.* New York 1997, pp. 318–336, p. 325.

28 | Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 124.

29 | See Shildrick: *Embodying*, p. 81.

virus monster's body as deformed and disproportionate precisely because we are still able to make out the remainder of the human form.

As Bakhtin's link of the grotesque to the carnivalesque and its ties to the practice of caricature show, visualizations of grotesque forms can evoke horror, laughter, or both at once. While the abstract concept of the grotesque has been praised as a productive way of rethinking the subject as unfixed and embodied and for overcoming Cartesian dualism,[30] the grotesque has also been used to mark illness and disability as something that deviates from the norm – so, in fact, preserving the illusion of the ideal non-grotesque body.[31] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us that the monstrous and grotesque have long been labels for so-called freaks and their visibly impaired or abnormally formed bodies. It is in a process she calls the »politics of staring« that stigmatization happens, »a social process that hurdles a body from the safe shadows of ordinariness into the bull's-eye of judgment«.[32] Interestingly, as Connelly mentions, the rising interest in Western visual art in the depiction of »monstrosities«, such as the herpes simplex virus that is at the center of my example, coincided with the rise of a newly developed scientific imaging technique, the microscope.[33] The aberrant, deformed, abnormal had sparked the interest of medical thinkers and scientists for a long time, not only constituting advancements in scientific developments but also satisfying a voyeuristic desire and the urge to stabilize norms of behavior and physical morphology. The Foucauldian »clinical gaze« is what turns »the unusual into the monstrous,« in Garland-Thomson's words.[34] Referring to Georges Canguilhem, Rosi Braidotti elucidates her project to find »new ways of thinking about difference« by his analysis of the scientific status of the monster as a necessary foil for defining the norm.[35]

---

30 | In that vein, Sara Cohen Shabot claims that the grotesque represents a viable alternative to the cyborg, which she pronounces »disembodied,« in that it prevents a return to Cartesian dualism. Sara Cohen Shabot: »Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs«, in: *Journal of Gender Studies* (2006: 15.3), pp. 223–235.

31 | Goffman's prototypical »normal« figure – white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, healthy etc. – is a »phantom«, states Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. She takes up this concept to point out the irony that lies in our surprise at what might seem monstrous to us, when the great majority of people in fact fails to conform to this imagined ideal. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: *Staring: How We Look.* Oxford 2009, p. 45.

32 | ibd.

33 | Connelly lists several cultural views on the grotesque from the end of the 19th century onwards. The connection of monsters to the microscope is made in J.K. Huysmans' 1889 book *Le monstre*. Connelly: »Introduction«, p. 1.

34 | Garland-Thomson: *Staring*, p. 49.

35 | Braidotti: »Mothers«, pp. 62, 67–68.

In Dahl's graphic narrative, it is striking that the visible surface condition of his herpes outbreaks, the cold sores in and around his mouth, are seldom visually foregrounded or represented at all.[36] His is not, in Garland-Thomson's words, a »stareable« condition. He rather represents the monstrosity that lies on the inside of the body and that threatens to transgress the body's limits in search of new hosts: the cells of the virus, invisible to the unaided human eye. It begins when his then girlfriend Rory calls him from the clinic while he is working at a café and tells him about her infection; news that are followed by a stunning realization. In a sequence of quite static panels, this is visualized by lumps of dough morphing into virus cells that finally enfold Ken in an otherwise very clean and uncluttered environment.[37]

The Fear of Carriers: A Cultural Phenomenon

Infectious diseases, especially epidemics, are of course a profoundly social phenomenon not only in their proliferation and impact but in understanding the disease, its causes, and the ill subjects themselves. »We understand that a contaminated object is one to be avoided or kept at a safe distance, lest we too become affected, our bodies opened up to the forces of disintegration«, Shildrick says.[38] From the medieval terrors of the plague until today, the dangers of contagion are discursively produced, as Marc Rölli argues with Foucault.[39] The Western modern era saw a shift from the understanding of illness as brought about by divine wrath towards »the germ theory of disease«, in which ailments are attributed to »microscopic invaders, intent on entering the body and causing trouble«.[40] With reference to Helman, Deborah Lupton explains the significance of this shift in that the reasoning entered not only medical but also lay discourses on illness and endowed cell particles with a malicious intentionality and agency which encouraged social

---

36 | James Elkins, in his history of picturing the body, deals with skin diseases as an example of what used to be »unrepresentable« in the history of medical illustration. While the traditional color lithographies and engravings »glossed over« the textures of skin conditions, he argues that it was the advent of photography that gave »doctors a sense of what could be made into a picture«. James Elkins: *Pictures of the Body: Logic and Affect.* 2nd ed. *academia.edu.* James Elkins, 2012, p. 317.

37 | Dahl: *Monsters*, pp. 22–23.

38 | Shildrick: *Embodying*, p. 69.

39 | Marc Rölli: »Ansteckungsgefahr! Disziplinierung im Zeichen des schwarzen Todes. Über Michel Foucaults *Surveiller et punir*«, in: Mirjam Schaub/Nicola Suthor/Erika Fischer-Lichte (Eds.): *Ansteckung: Zur Körperlichkeit eines ästhetischen Prinzips*. München 2005, pp. 353–366, p. 357.

40 | Deborah Lupton: *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles 2012, p. 62.

responses to infectious diseases that continue to wield their influence today. The germ theory was focused on »anxieties over pollution, purity and boundary maintenance« that soon took on the larger dimensions of the body politic oftentimes in nationalist agitations against »degenerations« of a »race«.[41]

The fear of contagion has led to more or less drastic measures and moralizations. The emergence of syphilis in the 16th century, for instance, also coincided or even influenced a change in the quite liberal medieval sexual morals: since sexual transmission was discovered, promiscuity was condemned.[42] We find some similarities in the modern phenomenon of AIDS, its public framing as a punishment for non-conformist (sexual) practices, and the risen fears about the body's threatened boundaries.[43] The metaphorical treatment of AIDS has perhaps most famously been described by Susan Sontag, who also explains that »[d]isease is seen as an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations«.[44] The syndrome is feared not least because of the nature of HIV: it can lie dormant, making someone a carrier without signs of an outbreak.[45] It is unsettling because it blurs the boundaries between illness and health. In the case of »Typhoid Mary« at the beginning of the 20th century, an unfortunate Irish cook was confined to drastic isolation by U.S. health officials after they discovered in her the first healthy carrier of Typhoid.[46]

In *Monsters*, of course, the disease in question is of a non-life-threatening variant, but still associated with shame for reckless behavior. Ken profoundly identifies with the self-image of a carrier and his intense feeling of guilt alternates with self-pity. These self-images are embodied, both as Ken communicates them and as they are visually represented. This is significant, because he is not visible as a carrier – his stigmatization is, for the most part, internalized. In a depiction of guilt and remorse after a drunken one-night stand, Ken's face is an increasingly exaggerated expression of shame and distress, while a hole is piercing the core of his body. Well-differentiated from this is the innocent depiction of his unsuspecting lover

---

41 | Lupton: *Medicine*, p. 62.

42 | Rolf Wienau: »Ansteckung – medizinhistorisch«, in: Mirjam Schaub / Nicola Suthor / Erika Fischer-Lichte (Eds.): *Ansteckung: Zur Körperlichkeit eines ästhetischen Prinzips*. München 2005, pp. 61–72, p. 65.

43 | Lupton: *Medicine*, p. 36.

44 | Susan Sontag: *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York 1989, p. 9.

45 | Sontag: *AIDS*, p. 20.

46 | See Priscilla Wald: »Cultures and Carriers: ›Typhoid Mary‹ and the Science of Social Control«, in: *Social Text* (1997: 52/53), pp. 181–214. Incidentally, »Typhoid Mary« later became a character in the Marvel comics universe. Her alias is »Mutant Zero« – perhaps pointing to »patient zero«, allegedly the first person to suffer from AIDS.

with realistic body proportions.[47] In comparison, Ken's desperate outcry for affection and for feeling »normal« and »clean« instead of verging on the non-human is envisioned as the pathetic cry of a shedding serpent-like creature, thereby ironically playing on cultural aversions towards snakes.[48] Through their metamorphoses or graphic exaggerations of proportion, these instances are once more profoundly self-ironic and comical rather than presented as tragic events. The metamorphoses of Ken's body often reference the cultural fear of contagion that he has internalized as something that is happening in allegedly corrupting sexual unions: »Let's face it: Nobody wants to fuck a monster… …and become a monster themselves«, the narrative voice tells us while the images enact a monster-human intercourse during which the hapless woman morphs into a monster herself.[49]

Visibility/Invisibility and Inside/Outside Dynamics in Illness Representations

These visualizations of self-images point towards a concern that generally looms large in graphic narratives on illness. Representations of illness in graphic narratives negotiate how in some cases diseases and disorders are perceptible from the outside, while in others a sick person in the story may go unnoticed as seemingly healthy.[50] This is in itself nothing specific to the medium. It becomes all the more interesting, however, when the process of going unnoticed or noticed (as healthy, able-bodied and so on) is visually showcased in a graphic externalization[51] of an

47 | Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 87.

48 | Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 104.

49 | Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 55. As panelists and discussants at the 2014 ComFor conference pointed out, here lies the closest connection of *Monsters* to Charles Burns' *Black Hole*. The latter also has quite similar scenes of self-scrutiny in front of a mirror at the beginning of the chapter »Seeing Double«. See Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 54 and Charles Burns: *Black Hole.* New York 2005.

50 | These are significant issues in disability studies and activism as well, perhaps most concretely in understanding different forms of discrimination from inquisitive stares at (hyper) visible impairments to reprimanding glances at people with an invisible impairment seemingly taking advantage of, e.g., disability parking spots or restrooms.

51 | Hillary Chute uses the verb »externalize« in her introduction to *Graphic Women*, meaning to »give visual body to« an illness. Hillary L. Chute: *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics.* New York 2010, p. 18. It also appears briefly in Rocco Versaci: *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*. New York 2007, p. 43. Similar processes are hinted at in other literature on graphic illness narratives, and Ian Williams has recently suggested a categorization of showing illness that relates to the abovementioned phenomenon: He divides illness representations into »The Manifest« (visually obvi-

illness that is otherwise not readily visible.[52] The aforementioned endowment of microscopically small cells or virus particles with intentionality is an invitation for these visualizations. From the fact that in public and professional medical discourse these particles are often »anthropomorphized into wily aggressors«[53] it is a small step towards a visual image of a humanized virus monster. This goes to show just how quickly doctors and patients reach an impasse when trying to not only rationalize but grasp the experiential meaning of the body's inner workings. The experiences of (in)visibility or (un)noticeability often alternate depending on the stage of an illness. Jackie Stacey muses on this in her study on cancer when she juxtaposes two photographs of herself, one in which she appears to be healthy but is only pre-diagnosis, and the other in which she looks ill but is in fact cancer-free and simply still affected by recent chemotherapy. The »disorientating effect« of not being able to »equate seeing and knowing« lies in the link one erroneously makes between the bald chemotherapy patient and the presence of cancer, and in realizing this jumped conclusion. This lets Stacey conclude: »The body has tricked us all, it seems. We labour under the illusion that we can read its surface signs.«[54] Through a study of images of cancer as »cellular dysfunction and immune system breakdown«, she tackles »the question of how the changing conceptualisations of the body's *visualisable* interior indicate new beliefs about health and illness in contemporary culture«.[55]

---

ous external signs), »The Concealed« (not very obvious visual signs, or mental issues more grave than physical symptoms), and »The Invisible« (conditions not visible externally, but causing internal mental and/or physical suffering) – Dahl's work being sorted into the second group. Although the distinctions between psychological/physical and visible/invisible might be difficult to maintain in practice, Williams' categories nevertheless provide a valuable and adaptable analytic tool. See Ian Williams: »Comics and the Iconography of Illness«, in: MK Czerwiec et al. (Eds.): *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. University Park 2015, pp. 115–142, p. 119.

52 | There might be an interesting link to the etymology of »monster« as showing/warning. Some Renaissance theories suggest a link to the Latin *monstrare*, i.e. to »the idea of showing« and more precisely as a sign of God. More current etymologies cite the Latin *monere* (to warn) and thus evoke »impending disaster«, as argued in Marie-Hélène Huet: *Monstrous Imagination*. Harvard 1993, p. 6.

53 | Lupton: *Medicine*, p. 63. See also Jackie Stacey: *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*. London 1997, p. 6, and Susan M. Squier: *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*. Durham 2004, p. 268, on Ruben Bolling's comic strip episode »Bad Blastocyst«.

54 | Stacey: *Teratologies*, p. 139.

55 | ibd., p. 141.

Learning to Read Illness Experiences in Comics Form

Comics such as Dahl's might set some new, experience-centered images or rather imaginations against traditional medical visualizations. At a later time in the story, when Ken has already done some research on herpes and the common misconceptions thereof, he embarks on a comically angry crusade of medical enlightenment education and a plea for accepting the monstrous: those who shun the obvious monster are »hypocrites«[56] because almost everybody already is a carrier of the herpes simplex virus, knowingly or not. The narrative voice of Ken introduces an empirical set-up of a random group in which we are to count the number of people that have herpes type 1 or 2. Following this, in two wide panels juxtaposed on the top and bottom half of a page the narrator instructs us: »Then substract all those people from the total… And see who's left.«[57] In these panels, Dahl first portrays a diverse group of people facing the reader as if for a staged photograph and then repeats the same group in the bottom panel as a congregation of virus monsters except for two people who remain unaffected. Thus, the narrative effectively exposes the »hypocri[sy]« and ultimate failure of drawing a clear line between healthy and ill in the case of a widespread condition in which the numbers of contagion and outbreaks seem so disjointed.

That we as readers or viewers recognize something as a visual externalization, in my case a grotesque imagery, depends on our intuitive understanding of the artist's style[58] and his or her work-specific convention of depicting bodies or minds.[59] That a certain convention tends to emerge is necessitated by the continuity of the graphic narrative, and it is this that enables a distinction between seemingly sick bodies and those regarded as well or »normal«. This means that grotesque and/or metamorphic visualizations or externalizations can play an important role in the

---

56 | Dahl: *Monsters,* p. 57.

57 | Dahl: *Monsters*, p. 192.

58 | I am referring primarily to the visual component of artistic style and particularly to drawing style, i.e. the idiosyncratic and unaided way of producing pen(cil) marks on a surface with distinctive deviations from photorealism. This follows the definition given in Etter's dissertation (Lukas Etter: *Auteurgraphy: Distinctiveness of Styles in Alternative Graphic Narratives.* Bern 2014. Unpublished dissertation.) For a discussion of style and subjectivity, see also Pascal Lefèvre: »Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences«, in: Jared Gardner/David Herman (Eds.): *Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory*. Spec. issue of *SubStance* (2011: 40.1), pp. 14–33; and Kai Mikkonen: »Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives«, in: Daniel Stein/Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.): *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin 2013, pp. 101–123.

59 | On the »conventionally stabilized legibilities of comics« that »make the use of disproportional bodies and anthropomorphized animals acceptable« see Stephan Packard: *Anatomie des Comics: Psychosemiotische Medienanalyse*. Göttingen 2006, p. 99 [my translation].

construction of subjectivity in the narrative. As Elisabeth El Refaie instructively explains, comics artists producing autobiographical work are »in the unusual position of having to visually portray themselves over and over again [and are, thus,] constantly compelled to engage with their physical identities«.[60] In Charles Hatfield's words, in autobiographical comics the self appears as »successive selves«, and when the avatar appears on the page, the autobiographical cartoonist performs the »split between observer and observed«.[61] In first-person accounts of illness narratives, this characteristic trait is specified by our attempts to determine whether we are participants in the process of looking at a sick body from the outside or whether we are invited to share a perception or imagination of the sick person him- or herself. *Monsters* often alternates between more or less grotesquely exaggerated depictions of Ken's avatar (see Fig. 2). In this excerpt, Ken's discomfort is rendered in familiar comic visual tropes. The knot in his throat or the protruding eyes point to Witek's »cartoon mode«, in which »characters and even objects can move and be transformed according to an associative or emotive logic rather than the laws of physics«. It is crucial that unlike in, e.g., superhero comics, which offer quasi-physical explanations for their transformations, these instances »exist at a symbolic level, legible to the reader but invisible to characters within the world of the story«.[62] Cultural conventions tell us to read them as symbolic representations of Ken's changing self-images and perceptions.

In *Monsters* and other graphic illness memoirs, the images frequently shift between the perceptual point of view of the protagonist, visualized self-images, and other-perceptions. Even though Dahl's protagonist Ken is a very highly present and reliable narrator, and thanks to visual-verbal cues he remains a visually recognizable character throughout the narrative, it is striking just how diverse the depictions of Ken's »embodied selves« are. There is simply no single visual blueprint for Ken in a physical state unaffected by illness juxtaposed with one single

---

60 | El Refaie: *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 62. For the issue of embodiment in comics, see also Squier, »Future Tense«; José Alaniz: *Death, Disability and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson 2014; Courtney Donovan: »Representations of Health, Embodiment, and Experience in Graphic Memoir«, in: *Configurations* (2014: 22.2), pp. 237–253; Elisabeth Klar: »Wir sind alle Superhelden! Über die Eigenart des Körpers im Comic – und über die Lust an ihm«, in: Barbara Eder / Elisabeth Klar / Ramón Reichert (Eds.): *Theorien des Comics: Ein Reader.* Bielefeld 2011, pp. 219–36; Karin Kukkonen: »Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: An Embodied Approach«, in: Daniel Stein / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.): *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin 2013, pp. 49–66.

61 | Charles Hatfield: *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson 2005, p. 117.

62 | Joseph Witek: »Comics Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's *Dirty Laundry*«, in: Matthew J. Smith / Randy Duncan (Eds.): *Critical Approaches to Comics.* New York 2012, pp. 27–42, pp. 30 ff.

Fig. 2 Ken Dahl, *Monsters*, p. 130

metamorphic monstrous identity. Depending on the mood of the narrative and the emotional state of the protagonist, Ken is sometimes drawn in simplified contours with black dots for eyes and at others with much more detail, sometimes with cartoonish exaggerations of proportions and other times in much more realistic balance of size and shape. Contrary to other imaginations of infectious diseases, the virus is not simply an alien invader to a body and a self fighting to preserve a stable and closed-off unity. Instead, Dahl unsettles inside/outside dichotomies as well as those between illness and health, self and other by incorporating cultural fears of contagion through monstrous visuals and by exposing the vulnerability and mutability of all bodies.

Works Cited

Alaniz, José: *Death, Disability and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson 2014.

Bakhtin, Mikhail: *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington 1968.

Beaty, Bart: *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*. Toronto 2007.

Braidotti, Rosi: »Mothers, Monsters, and Machines«, in: Katie Conboy/Nadia Medina/ Sarah Stanbury (Eds.): *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory.* New York 1997, pp. 59–79.

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole.* New York 2005.

Chute, Hillary L.: *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics.* New York 2010.

Connelly, Frances S.: »Introduction«, in: Frances S. Connelly (Ed.): *Modern Art and the Grotesque.* Cambridge 2003, pp. 1–19.

Dahl, Ken: *Monsters.* Jackson Heights 2009.

Donovan, Courtney: »Representations of Health, Embodiment, and Experience in Graphic Memoir«, in: *Configurations* (2014: 22.2), pp. 237–253.

Dorrian, Mark: »On the Monstrous and the Grotesque«, in: *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* (2000: 16.3), pp. 310–317.

El Refaie, Elisabeth: *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures.* Jackson 2012.

Elkins, James: *Pictures of the Body: Logic and Affect.* 2nd ed. *academia.edu.* James Elkins, 2012.

Etter, Lukas: *Auteurgraphy: Distinctiveness of Styles in Alternative Graphic Narratives.* Bern 2014. Unpublished dissertation.

Gardner, Jared: »Autography's Biography, 1972–2007«, in: *Biography* (2008: 31.1), pp. 1–26.

Gardner, Jared: »Storylines«, in: Jared Gardner/David Herman (Eds.): *Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory*. Spec. issue of *SubStance* (2011: 40.1), pp. 53–69.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie: *Staring: How We Look.* Oxford 2009.

Hatfield, Charles: *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson 2005.

Huet, Marie-Hélène: *Monstrous Imagination*. Harvard 1993.

Klar, Elisabeth: »Wir sind alle Superhelden! Über die Eigenart des Körpers im Comic – und über die Lust an ihm«, in: Barbara Eder/Elisabeth Klar/Ramón Reichert (Eds.): *Theorien des Comics: Ein Reader.* Bielefeld 2011, pp. 219–36.

Kristeva, Julia: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* New York 1982.

Kukkonen, Karin: »Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: An Embodied Approach«, in: Daniel Stein/Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.): *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin 2013, pp. 49–66.

Lefèvre, Pascal: »Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences«, in: Jared Gardner/David Herman (Eds.): *Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory*. Spec. issue of *SubStance* (2011: 40.1), pp. 14–33.

Lupton, Deborah: *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles 2012.

Mignola, Mike: »Bio.« In: *The Art of Mike Mignola.* http://www.artofmikemignola.com/Bio (publ. 2010, cit. 05.09.2014).

Mikkonen, Kai: »Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives«, in: Daniel Stein / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.): *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin 2013, pp. 101–123.

Packard, Stephan: *Anatomie des Comics: Psychosemiotische Medienanalyse*. Göttingen 2006.

Rölli, Marc: »Ansteckungsgefahr! Disziplinierung im Zeichen des schwarzen Todes. Über Michel Foucaults *Surveiller et punir*«, in: Mirjam Schaub / Nicola Suthor / Erika Fischer-Lichte (Eds.): *Ansteckung: Zur Körperlichkeit eines ästhetischen Prinzips*. München 2005, pp. 353–366.

Russo, Mary: »Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory«, in: Katie Conboy / Nadia Medina / Sarah Stanbury (Eds.): *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory.* New York 1997, pp. 318–336.

Shabot, Sara Cohen: »Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs.« *Journal of Gender Studies* (2006: 15.3), pp. 223–235.

Shildrick, Margrit: *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self.* London 2002.

Sontag, Susan: *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York 1989.

Squier, Susan M.: »Literature and Medicine, Future Tense: Making It Graphic«, in: *Literature and Medicine* (2008: 27.2), pp. 124–152.

Squier, Susan M.: *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine.* Durham 2004.

Stacey, Jackie: *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer.* London 1997.

Versaci, Rocco: *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*. New York 2007.

Wald, Priscilla: »Cultures and Carriers: ›Typhoid Mary‹ and the Science of Social Control«, in: *Social Text* (1997: 52/53), pp. 181–214.

WHO: Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948. http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html (publ. 2003, cit. 05.02.2015).

Wienau, Rolf: »Ansteckung – medizinhistorisch«, in: Mirjam Schaub / Nicola Suthor / Erika Fischer-Lichte (Eds.): *Ansteckung: Zur Körperlichkeit eines ästhetischen Prinzips*. München 2005, pp. 61–72.

Williams, Ian: »Graphic Medicine: Comics as Medical Narrative«, in: *Medical Humanities* (2012: 38.1), pp. 21–27.

Williams, Ian: »Graphic Medicine: The Portrayal of Illness in Underground and Autobiographical Comics: Case Study«, in: Victoria Bates / Alan Bleakley / Sam Goodman (Eds.): *Medicine, Health and the Arts: Approaches to the Medical Humanities.* London 2014, pp. 64–84.

Williams, Simon Johnson: *Medicine and the Body.* London 2003.

Witek, Joseph: »Comics Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's *Dirty Laundry*«, in: Matthew J. Smith / Randy Duncan (Eds.): *Critical Approaches to Comics.* New York 2012, pp. 27–42.