

Haunted: An Analysis of Traumatic Sequential Narrative. Why Graphic Novels are the perfect vehicle for such narratives.

In this presentation I will investigate interrelated themes of trauma and haunting through an analysis of visual sequential narratives. Recent research has led to analyses of the reverberation of trauma through both mind, body and even landscape. Through an exploration of graphic novel adaptations including Dave McKean's stunning *'Black Dog: The Dreams of Paul Nash'* a visual exploration of the impact of war trauma and PTSD, new knowledge has been acquired relating to the overarching theme.

I propose to explore the metaphor of haunting further to understand the physiological and psychological impact of trauma upon the body and mind. Through an analysis of Dominique Goblet's *'Pretending is Lying'* I intend to continue with an exploration of trauma related themes, including the disruption of a chronological narrative, isolation and loneliness.

The graphic novel format can play an important role in visually conveying traumatic narratives in which the chronology can be disrupted, mirroring the fractured memory experiences of the traumatised. Fragmentation of memory can also be alluded to through the shapes and placement of panels within double page spreads. Repetition of visual themes throughout a graphic novel can also allude to the repetition of traumatic themes and align with Freud's 'Repetition Compulsion' theory. With trauma, the body and mind can be haunted day and night, both through the central nervous system and the dream landscape.

Dominique Goblet's autobiographical narrative took 12 years to complete and within the pages we come to learn about her fractured relationship with her father and how past memory intrudes upon the present narrative. Sequential narratives require the reader to make connections between each separate image, in addition to a more holistic reading of the page. Through an analysis of strategies employed within the context of graphic novels, each panel can represent a moment in time, the gutter creating a visual pause. Gildersleeve and Batorowicz propose that "the very structure of these visual and written narratives-the gutter of comics and the immersive spaces of installations, or what Michael calls their "gappiness" ("Graphic Autofiction" 108)-not only permits but demands the reader or viewer to enter into the mutual and active construction of the narrative.'

The shape and size of a panel can aid with the speeding up or slowing down of time and shifts in colour, tone and the strategic use of media can suggest shifts in emotional tone and mood. Certain pages include combinations of text and image, whilst others are wordless, which could be a strategy employed to suggest that the lack of words alludes to the lack of a cohesive verbal dialogue within the traumatised.

Within the first few frames of the narrative whereby we are introduced to Goblet's emerging relationship with Marc Guy Hinant, and when on a date in a bar, she recounts a story about her father in which he alludes to a possible encounter with a ghost. There is the subtle addition of a white pastel form suggestive of a figure emerging from the dark graphite mark making. Eventually this spectral presence becomes somewhat more defined, and the outline of a female figure becomes more visible within the panels.



Fig 1: Dominique Goblet

After the couple's first sexual encounter, a ghostly figure appears within a series of full -page images. Is this a reference to her father's ghost or another? As the narrative progresses, we come to learn that Marc is still emotionally attached to a past lover, who appears as a spectre- like figure at certain points in the story. Goblet's treatment of media in these frames visually represents the former lover as a ghostly negative image, the pencil marks erased in places to create a paradoxical quality of both loss and presence.



Fig 2: Dominique Goblet

At another point, both the ex -lover and Dominique appear as visual memories together in the same frame with Marc situated in the centre of the panel and between the two women. Goblet uses shifts in the chronology of the narrative to mirror the ways in which sometimes unwanted memories disrupt current trains of thought.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth discusses the ways in which silence is imbued with a transmitting power within the context of traumatic events. I would suggest that in a similar way, a visual absence (such as the representation of the ex-lover using the technique of negative space) transmits both a powerful visual message of both loss and attachment that are still impacting upon the male character.



Fig 3: Dominique Goblet

Because of the ways in which mirror neurons behave, Roger Bechtel in his analysis of the dance performance 'Loopdiver' by Troika, suggests that the embodied experiences of trauma carried by the dancers is further transmitted to members of the audience, who empathically experience similar bodily sensations. The title of the performance alludes to the looping quality of trauma – that it is continual and non – resolving rather than linear and with a conclusion. Similar to the dancers' bodies transmitting their somatic experiences to their audiences, I propose that through her use of mark making, negative space, disrupted narratives, language, text, scale and image, Goblet skilfully transmits the lived experiences of her characters to her readers so that they might understand on a deep level, what these characters are experiencing through their emotions.

The very act of drawing and mark making, can visually transmit emotion to readers. The mark itself has the power to communicate feeling and even though a reader may not understand this on a conscious level, this will be received and felt on a deep level. The drawing transmits the gesture and emotions of the artist through the mark the pencil makes, the pressure exerted and the speed in which it is laid down. Goblet's use of raw mark making, at times, allows her to expressively communicate her feelings which are transmitted through the medium. The ghost like figures emerging from the darkness, over several pages creates a different pace in the narrative – these moments command our attention, they embody a sense of gravitas and slow down the time frame.

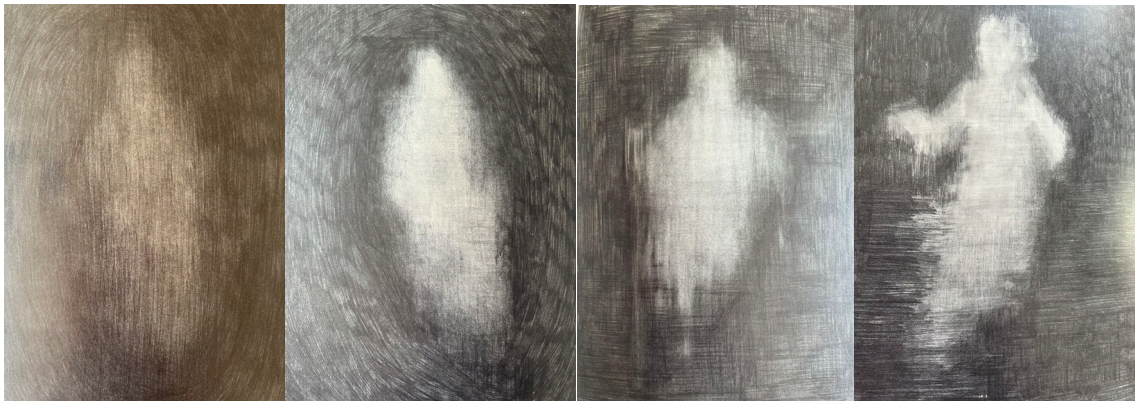


Fig 4: Dominique Goblet

In the image below there appear to be two spectral figures that have become merged. Within the chronology of the narrative, shortly afterwards, Marc meets in secret with his former lover, so this could be read as a precursor to their physical reunion.

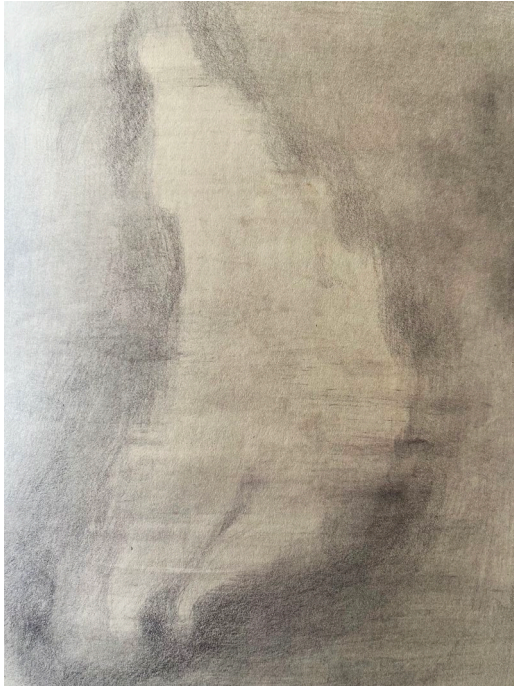


Fig 5: Dominique Goblet

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has analysed the paradoxical nature of traumatic memory and intuitive knowing which can impact upon body and mind through a combination of knowing and not knowing something simultaneously (or holding two opposing pieces of knowledge at the same time) an experience termed as cognitive dissonance. I suggest that the timing of Goblet's ocular migraine's (which occur simultaneously when her boyfriend is meeting with his former lover), allude to her unconscious intuition that all is not well and that his denial of her suspicions and 'jealousy' is impacting upon her physiology.

In the book 'Chaos, Order and Teaching' Philip Cabau proposes :

'The fact is, that in traditional drawing, which involves body gestures...is a process capable of incorporating the mistake, the slip, the accident.....Drawing always forms an experience of the fragment...the making of the drawing, consequently, can only exist as an experience (and consciousness) of the fragment... the drawing is , above all, a fragmentary experience.' (Drawing, Order , Chaos and Teaching.')

Bessel Van der Kolk has written extensively upon themes around the traumatic effects of events on the physiology of the traumatised.

The chronology of Goblet's graphic novel is patchy and disrupted by another storyline alluding to her childhood, which explores themes of trauma and abuse experienced within her family – her relationship with her neglectful, alcoholic father, her abusive mother and Blandine, her father's second partner. In the case of Blandine, we see the pattern of abuse being revisited upon Goblet's daughter. At times the narrative becomes confusing as past and present seemingly merge.

Following the prologue of the narrative, Goblet segues to a meeting with her estranged father - an alcoholic, and his partner, visually represented as a Munch - like character. In the first reunion between them after a separation spanning several years, Goblet waits with her daughter Nikita, and we see her father and Blandine arriving in a car drawn as if by a young child, perhaps a memory from Goblet's childhood past, as she realises that they are both 'dead drunk'.



Fig 6: Dominique Goblet

As Goblet and her daughter enter the couple's house we start to see events from Nikita's perspective – Blandine is visually depicted as a child's drawing and dominates the panel, bearing down upon Nikkita. Within the context of a singular panel there is a depiction of Blandine being abusive to a child – but it's hard to tell if it's a memory from Goblet's own past (perhaps a regression) or if this actually happened to her daughter, Nikkita.



Fig 7: Dominique Goblet

The term ' Narrative Fragmentation 'can be understood as a reference to a phenomenon (Michele Bedard-Gilligan, Lori A.Zoellner, Norah C. Feeny) that describes the ways in which within the context of untraumatized minds, sequential narratives are represented in chronological order, whereas in the traumatized, the chronology is disrupted with memories suddenly intruding upon the narrative. The effect of these disruptions upon the reader understood as a sense of confusion, much in the same way that traumatised minds can experience confusion. It would appear that, as such, graphic novels as a form have much to offer in terms of visual representations of disrupted, traumatic memories. The sequencing of panels can be created in a non – chronological fashion, in essence mirroring traumatic memory. Old memories can intrude upon current events unfolding. The child- like drawings combined with more adult representations might allude to regression as Goblet's memories collide with the present.

As the narrative develops and the conversation with her father about her childhood abuse progresses, Goblet's representation of her father shapeshifts from a macho bull to a religious devil or saint as he recalls the past and his perception of his role in the family as a saint-like figure, in which he claims to have provided very well for she and her mother. The progressing conversation turns to the shaky ground of memory, the spectre of the past and of what is true or false. At one point Goblet's father claims that the family abandoned him, but Dominique protests that it was he who abandoned the family.

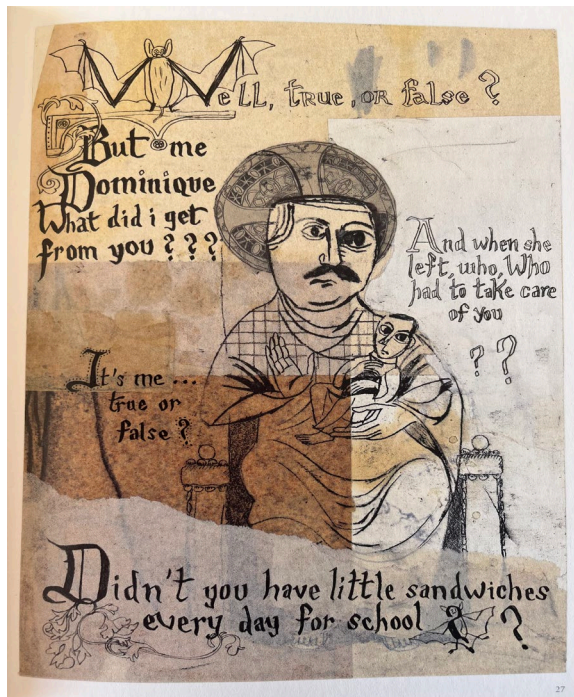


Fig 8: Dominique Goblet

In another section of the book, Goblet revisits memories of the dysfunctional relationship between her parents, as her mother undertakes household tasks and her father watches motor car racing on TV, always with beer in hand. Goblet as a young child is represented drawing and getting bored whilst the tension grows in the family home, the frustration of her mother erupting unexpectedly as we are confronted with a shocking image of a young Goblet tied up in the attic disrupts the visual narrative, whilst her drunken father watches car racing on the TV downstairs. Her Mother, at her wits end, punishes her by taking her to the attic. The scenes provide us with some idea of the shocking events unfolding at the hands of her frustrated, abusive mother. Back in the present at her father's house she recounts the story, and it transpires that she received the same punishment a number of times, her father denying knowledge of the events..

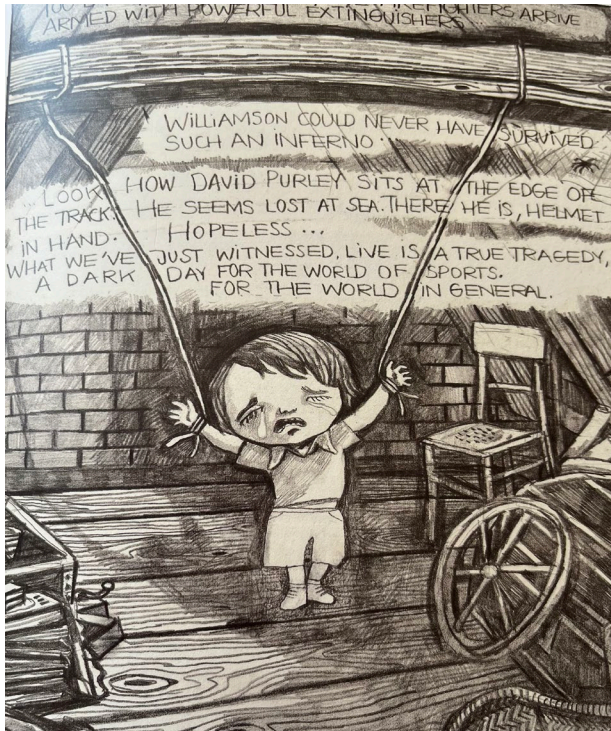


Fig 9: Dominique Goblet

CONCLUSION

Sidonie Smith proposes that *'The syncopation of personal storytelling across media (language and image) space / time (boxes and gutters) in graphic narration activates, as Jared Gardner argues of comics generally, readerly co- interpretation: "All comics are necessarily collaborative texts between the imagination of the author/artist and the imagination of the reader who must complete the narrative."*

On the subject of the problematic theme of Autobiographical works, Goblet's lover and collaborator Guy Marc Hinant, summarises the work in his afterword published in *Pretending is Lying* proposing that: *'We arrive here at the heart of the problem: how have we created, in ourselves, that which we consider to be our own reality? The past is fiction, re-memorization, re-interpretation, fleeting obsession (based on an accepted reality), projection, hypothesis, and opacity.....GM isn't Guy Marc and the Dom of the story isn't Dominique Goblet -these are, in reality, avatars being controlled by living people bearing similar names.'* A similar perspective is supported by Jessica Gildersleeve and Beata Batorowicz, who question the nature of subjectivity within the context of Feminine autobiography and who describe the *'slippery nature of memory 'and its representation within a new context, such as the graphic novel.'*

In Cathy Caruth's collection of essays in her book *'Trauma'* Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart proposed that *'Memories easily become inaccurate when new ideas and pieces of information are constantly combined with old knowledge to form flexible mental schemas. As Janet pointed out a century ago, once a particular event or bit of information becomes integrated in a larger scheme it will no longer be accessible to an individual entity and hence, the memory will be distorted. Edward O Wilson put it most poetically when he said that 'the brain is an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern. Since the mind recreates reality from the abstractions of sense impressions, it can equally well simulate reality by recall and fantasy. The brain invents stories and runs imagined and remembered events back and forth through time.'*

So, to conclude it would seem that Goblet's attempt to visualise and pin down her past and personal truth within this autobiographical work is fraught with an attempt to represent truth which is impacted upon to some extent by problematic distortions in memory, fantasy and artistic licence. As Bessel Van Der Kolk and others have proposed, traumatic memories are different than others, in that they reappear as repetitive content in nightmares, through somatic sensations and repetitive behaviours.

As Kosta Bovan suggested, trauma has a fragmentary nature and in response to this, Goblet has created a Graphic Novel that visually communicates such a concept in a number of ways, including unexpected images that intrude upon existing narratives, fragments of memories that don't always make sense so that the reader is placed in a position of co creating the narrative and revisiting various parts of the story in an attempt to build a cohesive chronology. In conclusion, it may be deduced that Goblet's powerful graphic novel is not necessarily a complete and accurate representation of past events, however, in accordance with trauma theory, the recurring themes of neglect and abuse powerfully break through the narrative and allude to traumatic experiences experienced by Goblet.

As Abraham and Torok propose:

'That which is silenced, unintegrated and unassimilated, haunts the individual like a ghost from the psychic crypt'.

'Perhaps of all art forms, comics is the "most proper field for the development of trauma narratives" (Romero-Jodar, 2017, p. 22). In order to understand why there are such high regards for comics and its possibilities for trauma representation, we have to delve deeper into the specificities of the art form itself.'

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