Prosthetic Traveling Companions

Carrie Keasler
c.e.keasler@wustl.edu

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Above
Excerpt from Daniel Clowes’

Cover
Excerpt from Between Us
Carrie Keasler, 2023
Prosthetic Traveling Companions

by Carrie Keasler

This essay explores the potential for narrative art (film, literature, comics) to be a transformative experience in the life of the consumer (viewer, reader) through a sensuous, embodied interaction with that work of narrative art. Drawing from film, narrative and comics theory as well as primary sources, I show that there is potential for consumers to engage in reading and viewing in an embodied way that allows them to take on these experiences as new memories, highlighting the ability of art to engage our senses in a manner that is similar to everyday lived experiences. In contrast with some theories that challenge the “realness” of these mediated experiences, or relegate narratives to the sidelines of fiction and fantasy, I find that the immersive experiences of art are not only constructed from real, lived experiences, but indeed make up significant portions of those experiences. Furthermore, reading and viewing can potentially offer healing and transformation of the person in a way that remedies lived experience.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Reader

I have a particular memory of reading My Antonia (1918) by Willa Cather as a preteen and identifying strongly with the sense of loss and melancholy that I attributed to the character Jim. It is a yellow-orange memory, like the color of my bed posts and the cover of the book. I can see myself laying on the bed, looking out of the curtains and feeling that sensation of recognition: I feel this, this is what reading is. This was the first time that I remember seeing myself so clearly in a character. In Jim’s account of his memories of Antonia, I found an echo of the loss I felt as my dad and I grew apart. I was able to name something that hung over me that was previously undefined: reading brought it to the surface. Although these were characters in a work of fiction, I established a relationship with them as companions. This companionship broke up my loneliness and instilled in me a sense of pride of belonging: other people in books experience what I experience. When I think back to that period of my life, both the act of reading My Antonia and the sensations from the experience of reading the narrative are folded into the memory and are part of my personal narrative.

Introduction

This essay will demonstrate the workings of, through an analysis of film and comics, the particular mechanisms of these media that privilege viewers and readers with access to a prosthetic experience—a sensuous engagement.
with a work of art—and build empathy in the process. Empathy is here defined as a feeling of “as if” you are really there or feeling what the characters feel but can also refer to a broader sensuous engagement with materials.

I am particularly interested in the coming-of-age story from the viewpoint of both a consumer of these narratives and a creator. I consider the role of film and literature in the development of a young person’s sensibility, particularly that of a young woman. Sensibility here is defined as a particular person’s emotional and intellectual make-up (composed from authentic and prosthetic experience) that positions them to look at the world in a certain way and to seek a specific type of narrative.

I propose that the prosthetic experience, while offering an opportunity for empathetic development that fosters political and social change, most importantly offers a type of empathy that I call reflexive empathy. Through identifying with others that are similarly situated in some significant ways and different in others, we are able to see ourselves differently in the world. We develop empathy for self which in turn can help us relate to others in new ways: compassion for self leads to compassion for others. Ultimately, I will reflect on the path of the creative person who has consumed narratives that have informed their development and in turn becomes the creator of narratives.

Why Do We Need Narratives?

As a writer of personal narratives and an avid reader of memoirs, coming-of-age stories and non-fiction based on personal experiences, I am often thinking about how a person develops in a certain way. What circumstances formed them and what did they overcome? I read to understand the development of other people and also to find myself reflected in the lives of others. My experience reading My Antonia was the beginning of my identification as a certain type of reader. I read to learn about other’s experiences, out of curiosity and to understand my own experience.

It might be possible to create categories for the types of experiences that we crave and find in the consumption of narratives such as adventure seeking, historical knowledge, escapism, empathy-seeking, and so on. There is, however, something especially captivating about a narrative of human experience: they teach us how to live, how to pay attention and examine the connections and dissonance between others. As Lisa Zunshine, whose research includes the interface between narratives and cognition, has commented, narratives are everywhere: in songs, television, theatre, movies and even in football games when you follow one play to the next. There is an argument in cognitive science that the need for narrative is an adaptation that humans made in order to survive socially. We create stories about other people’s motives in order to predict their behavior and to be socially prepared. We also deeply enjoy stories and the act of predicting what characters will do. In daily life, we need to engage in mind reading, whether successful or not, to navigate social situations. In our past-times, we seek out opportunities to watch other people engage in this social navigation through film, theatre and novel reading. As we consume narratives, we identify with characters and acquire aspects of their stories through this identification. We take them on, prosthetically, as if these experiences were our own.

Prosthetic traveling, a term coined by Mihaela Mihai, is a way to describe the process of acquiring new experiences, or memories, through the consumption of media. We participate in prosthetic traveling through all types of activities, including, but not limited to reading, watching films, and listening to music. To the degree that we are able to live in the experience of characters, although new to us, we are creating a prosthetic expericence is seductive enough to cause a hesitation and thereby disturb dominant political narratives. Seductive, in this case, is however, something especially captivating about a narrative of human experience: they teach us how to live, how to pay attention and examine the connections and dissonance between others. As Lisa Zunshine, whose research includes the interface between narratives and cognition, has commented, narratives are everywhere: in songs, television, theatre, movies and even in football games when you follow one play to the next. There is an argument in cognitive science that the need for narrative is an adaptation that humans made in order to survive socially. We create stories about other people’s motives in order to predict their behavior and to be socially prepared. We also deeply enjoy stories and the act of predicting what characters will do. In daily life, we need to engage in mind reading, whether successful or not, to navigate social situations. In our past-times, we seek out opportunities to watch other people engage in this social navigation through film, theatre and novel reading. As we consume narratives, we identify with characters and acquire aspects of their stories through this identification. We take them on, prosthetically, as if these experiences were our own.

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2 Ibid, 21.
4 Ibid, 114. The author describes the need to mind read as one of the main reasons that we read fiction. Our belief in mind reading, known to cognitive scientists as theory of mind, compels us to attribute meaning to the facial expressions and bodily gestures of others.
5 Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022). 52. For Mihai, memories are acquired prosthetically, taken on to the body, when a mediated experience is seductive enough to cause a hesitation and thereby disturb dominant political narratives. Seductive, in this case, means pleasurable, but not necessarily pleasant. We might, for example, be drawn to stories that are disturbing or traumatic, but emotionally compelling.
Prosthetic Traveling Companions

Above Antoine Doinel, the protagonist in François Truffaut’s 400 Blows, reading Balzac. The character’s profound identification with the book is a pivotal plot point in the 1959 film.
memory, as defined by Allison Landsberg. The taking on of new experiences through the consumption of media is an embodied act — through the body (watching and listening, for example), we are actively engaged in an experience. The consumption of media is one facet of experience that is formative to the person. Memory and imagination work together through these embodied experiences to create new narratives.

How Do Narratives Work on Us?

Narratives help us to experience ourselves in new situations that offer an access, an in-road, to an understanding of the world that heightens the sense of who we are. These experiences may not be authentic in the way we normally think of the word: an experience happening in real time. Successful narratives are able to portray an authentic experience or activate our imaginations in a seamless way, so that we experience the narrative as if it were happening. We really do live in narratives. The study of narratives, or narratology, is in “essence, the science of making visible that which the majority of narratives works to make us forget.” This field studies the features of narratives and how these features individually and in concert create the text and the reading experience. Professor Jared Gardner provides an overview on the intersection of traditional narrative studies with film studies and the more recent field of comics studies. While some of the features can be usefully isolated in all three disciplines (plot, narrator, sequence) there are distinct features in film and in the comic sequence that don’t have an equivalent in the short story or the novel. Film and comics would seem to be on opposite ends of the seamless spectrum, with film unfolding before the eyes of the viewer, while the comic requires “work” from the viewer to make meaning. Both mediums, however, command an embodied interaction with the mediums that encourages the reader to be deeply engaged.

Transmission of Prosthetic Memory through Film

Mediated memories—those memories that are supplied to us through the consumption of art— are not a new phenomenon. Group and individual identity have often been formed by the passing on of narratives — a type of “memory process” as described by Landsberg. The access to the narratives of other people’s lives greatly shifted in the early twentieth century as technologies developed to circulate images and texts beyond immediate communities and challenged the established understanding of authentic memory.

11 Ibid, 54.
12 Allison Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 5-6. Landsberg describes memory process from both Renaissance and medieval eras, which include the recitation of poetry and biblical passages and the enacting of rituals that link believers with the life of Christ. Landsberg describes these practices as flattening, or collapsing the present and the past, compared with the distance that is possible when acquiring memories prosthetically.
13 Ibid, 6.

6 Allison Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2. Both Mihai and Landsberg are chiefly concerned with the potential of art to change the dominant narratives that contribute to structural racial injustices. An individual’s subjectivity has the potential to shift, as Landsberg explains, as “...the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which she or he did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics.”


8 Gardner, Jared. "Storylines." SubStance 40, no. 1 (2011): 53-69. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4300188. In comparison to other types of narratives, film is the most seamless of media as “it works hard to efface the hand of the artist.” The illusion of reality in film is held intact because the way it is made.

9 Gardner, 66
10 Ibid, 54.
communities through proximity—to an expanding acceptance of “imagined communities”\(^a\). Access to the stories of the lives of other people in other parts of the world opened up the possibility of connecting to people that weren’t part of the immediate community and family group. It became possible to identify with people that were different and thus to develop empathy: seeing oneself in the other and the other in the self.

Landsberg identifies film as a radically new type of memory technology that exposes the viewer to stories of people that are different and most importantly provides an opportunity to build empathy while maintaining an understanding of alteriority.\(^a\) As an immersive experience, film is experienced sensuously and is folded into the experiences of the viewer who has not lived the experience authentically. The experience of watching a film engages the senses in a similar way that a body engages in the world. This embodied experience engages the imagination along with the senses to feel the surface of the film as the “eyes function as organs of touch”\(^b\). The film narrative does not merely represent reality but is an event that is experienced viscerally. As film theorist Steven Shaviro states, “the dematerialized images of film are the raw content of sensation without the forms, horizons and contexts that usually orient them. And this is how film crosses the threshold of a new kind of perception, one that is below or above the human.”\(^b\) This pre-cognitive perception that Shaviro refers to operates on a primitive and pre-lingual level simultaneously with sophisticated thinking that decodes and organizes information.\(^b\) As the memories of a person are constructed by embodied experience, so immersive experiences such as watching films become part of a person’s archive of stored memories.

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\(^a\) Ibid, 8.

\(^b\) Ibid, 9.


\(^b\) Steven Shaviro. The Cinematic Body. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 31. The author discusses the changes in film theory over time, including the tension between thinking of film as artifice and illusion to a more contemporary view point of film as an experience of immanent materiality.

Above
Jump Shot by Lynda Barry, 1988
character’s fleeting perceptions. Our perceptions vacillate along with those of the protagonist, helping us to feel and see the world as she does.

**Empathy in Comics**

The experience of reading comics, according to Jared Gardner, can’t be separated from the way the media is created. Gardner contrasts the hidden methods of the writer, and even more so the filmmaker, with that of the comics artist. The hand of the artist, or style, as well as the tool, are always visible. Comics are the only narrative art where the line has not been effaced. Reading the comic, then, requires another level of engagement with the material and with the line especially. Line work in comics “compels a physical, bodily encounter with an imagined scene of embodied enunciation.” Through the line work, we can imagine that act of drawing.

Lynda Barry is a comic artist who is recognized for the use of an expressive, even erratic, line to describe her characters and scenery. Ivan Brunetti eloquently describes Barry’s use of line in an analysis of the short comic *Jump*:

“In this self-contained short comic, the girl is under Richard’s spell, and we are under Lynda Barry’s spell. We need not have lived this exact moment; we have likely had similar moments of immersive intensity burned into our memory. The artist conjures, with humor and without fuss, a heightened awareness, an internal response to the external world, and a shared experience. Moreover, the drawing hand is always visible, in its movement, so the line work is never neutral, not even in the panel borders, reinforcing a sense of intimacy and vulnerability.”

Brunetti gets at the multilayered experience of reading comics which include an interaction with line work, sequence, scale and the artist’s deft control of narrative. We react to a comic like *Jump* because we bring our own memories to our reading and, as Gardner has said, the encounter with the artist’s hand is embodied: we feel it. Brunetti emphasizes that it is Barry’s line that is instrumental in arousing empathy in the reader. Empathy, according to Brunetti, is the acknowledgment of shared experience, and it is the quality of the marks that provides the access to empathy- and thus the prosthetic experience. Mark-making, a very physical act, is in stark contrast to the making and viewing of a film, which Steven Shapiro has called the most prosthetic of media.

Comics ask something from the reader, a back and forth, that is distinct from reading a traditional narrative, and hardly ever required in film. Susan E. Kirtley, the author of *Lynda Barry: Through The Looking Glass* (2012), examines the methods that Barry uses in the

20 Gardner, 66.
22 Ibid. (web article)
23 Shaviro, 29-31. Steven Shapiro explains that the film camera acts like the human eye and is thus the most prosthetic of mediums. We assume the eye of the camera as we watch a film and do not feel the decisions of the maker that are made through editing. Instead, the narrative film unfolds before us, seamlessly, moment to moment.
Carrie Keasler

Comics build empathy in the reader through a back and forth process of looking, reading, and interpreting its various parts. As Jared Gardner has written, comics don’t let you forget the medium as a film does. When reading a comic, you are keenly aware of cells, text size and presentation. “Comics is a medium that calls attention with every line to its own boundaries, frames and limitations, and to the labor involved in both accommodating and challenging the limitations.”

As we feel the story being built as we read, we are participating in the act of creating the comic. This is itself an act of empathy with the artist, seeing the world through the eyes of the artist as they lead us through the process of reading their narratives.

**Portrait of the Artist as A Young Adult Reader**

Most of the books I read as teenager came to me through fortuitously assigned readings. Such was the case when I was assigned to read *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Bronte during my senior year of high school. All of my years in this school were difficult socially, but this year in particular was daunting as most of my close friends had graduated the previous year. But I didn’t expect *Jane Eyre* to be a touch stone for me, judging by the cover. Strangely enough, my mom, who doesn’t like to keep books, had her old copy. It was a dark green cloth-bound book with the book-board poking through the frayed corners. Having long lost its dust jacket, the cover indicated the title and author with embossed, italic letters. A faint hint of gold leaf remained in the grooves of the letters. But inside that book was a character whose plainess masked an indomitable spirit and a clever mind. I immediately felt that Jane was my other self: people could not see beyond her ordinary exterior. However, like the best of

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25 Ibid,122. Kirtley refers to Joris Driest’s “Subjective Narration in Comics,” in which he writes, “Focalization has commonly been defined as ‘who sees,’ opposed to the ‘who speaks’ of narration...the reader accompanies ‘the focalizer, in the story, so to speak.”
26 Ibid, 131-2.

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28 Ibid, 66.

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Right
I traveled up the mountain as Heidi. I slept on a straw bed in the hayloft and heard the high wind in the trees. I despaired for my future there, not knowing what was to come.

But paper and ink have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangement of lines and shape of letters and words on a series of pages make a world we can dwell and travel in.

I remember it like it happened to me. I suppose you could say that it did.
fairy tales, the ordinary eventually reveals the extraordinary. Rochester, who is somewhat like the wise characters in a fairytale, (although complicated) can see her qualities, and in keeping with the revelations engineered into fairy tales, the beauty Rochester sees was always there. The spirit of Jane Eyre carried me through that year and further into the early years of college.

II The Expanded Self

Reading books and watching films about other people in different times and places exposes the consumer of the media to people with vastly different experiences. For Landsberg, “the sensuous engagement of the past is the foundation for more than individual subjectivity” but more importantly has the ability to create empathy in individuals and can create possibilities of changing entrenched political beliefs. I argue that such a shift in subjectivity creates empathy for the self as well as others: prosthetic traveling is also a way to cultivate experiences that change the subjectivity of the consumer or the one who experiences the narrative, and is self-beneficial. Beyond merely consuming media (books, film, music) that reinforce individual or societal concepts, the consumer develops a reflexive empathy: identifying with the suffering or experiences of another creates an extension of the self that relates differently to the environment. Identity is shaped as much by these prosthetic experiences as it is by authentic experiences or events that we suffer or experiences of another creates an extension of the self that relates differently to the environment. Beyond merely consuming media (books, film, music) that reinforce individual or societal concepts, the consumer develops a reflexive empathy: identifying with the suffering or experiences of another creates an extension of the self that relates differently to the environment. Identity is shaped as much by these prosthetic experiences as it is by authentic experiences or events that we experience in real time through relationship with other people and institutions. Comics author and teacher Lynda Barry explains the process of acquiring experiences through prosthetic traveling in the autobiographical how-to-manual What it is: the Formless Thing which Gives Things Form (2008). A page from this illustrated manual on creativity details:

“…Paper and ink have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangements of lines and shapes, of letters and words on a series of pages make a world we can dwell and travel in. I traveled up the mountain as Heidi. I slept on a straw bed in the hayloft and heard the high wind in the trees. I despaired for my future there, not knowing what was to come. I remember it like it happened to me. I suppose you could say that it did.”

Barry’s memory of reading Heidi (1881) by Johanna Spyri, one of four books that miraculously made it into her chaotic childhood home, is an example of the type of prosthetic memory that I have described. The reading of the narrative created an empathetic pathway for Barry to assume the identity of the titular character, feeling and doing as the character feels and does. The narrative allows Barry to escape the circumstances of her life, transports her and she is able to carry the memory with her. The portability of prosthetic memory is one of its essential qualities: these acquired experiences become intertwined into the subjectivity of the consumer. In Lynda Barry’s example, she is able to “dwell and travel” in the environment created by Spyri, and although she doesn’t state this explicitly, the experiences of Heidi have supplied the young Barry with resilience. Looking back as an adult, this memory of reading Heidi and living in her world has become interwoven in the author’s embodied experience.

Barry’s narrative provides an example of repair through engaging with materials such as books (she credits the radio as well as books for supplying much needed guidance). I argue that these experiences can both replace and repair harmful self-concepts that

29 Angela Carter, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and Other Classic Fairytales of Charles Perrault,(New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 39-45. In Angela Carter’s version of Ricky with the Tuft on Top, the princess eventually realizes her foolishness and devotes herself to the disfigured man who loves her and wishes him the gift of handsomeness. “But some people say there was no magic involved in the transformation and love alone performed the miracle.” In the Disney version of Cinderella, the protagonist has great physical beauty that is hidden by her clothing and the dirt on her visage. In original tellings, Cinderella-like characters are beautiful in ways ordinary people can’t see. It is actually others that change, the scales fall away from their eyes, and they are able to recognize beauty (which is often more about character than physical appearance).


32 Ibid, 27.

Prosthetic Traveling Companions

Above

Above
Two portraits from Raina Matars’s project A Girl and Her Room. Christilla, from Rabieh, Lebanon (right) and Kate from Boston, USA.
develop during and through authentic experiences and provide alternative scripts for engaging with others. As the young Barry continued to develop and suffer from parental neglect, she could draw strength from her reading experience of resilient characters such as Heidi.

**Side Bar: Teenage Girl’s Bedrooms as Curation**

Adolescents engage in a prosthetic traveling of sorts as they explore mass culture, including music, movies, books and video games. As young people consume, they also curate by choosing what is of interest to them and to an extent, define themselves by the media that is around them. This curation can be viewed as liberating, especially if it is a means of creatively responding to adverse circumstances. The Lebanese-born photographer Rania Matar, through portraits of teenage girls in the backdrop of their bedrooms, has documented the universal trend, from Lebanon to the US, of decorating the walls with aspirational images of music and film stars. Matar was especially drawn to this project as she recalled her own teenage bedroom, similarly decked out, although she was living in Lebanon during the civil war. The outside world was not reflected in her choice of decorations. The bedroom, especially for teen-age girls, is a type of sanctuary, self-curated and reflective of the subjectivity that is forming through an interaction with the environment and mediated through engagement with mass culture.

The graphic novelist Daniel Clowes hones into the defining characteristic of the teenage girl’s bedroom in *Ghost World*, wherein Enid, a recent high school graduate, rails against the pressures of adulthood. The characters are haunted by, amongst a host of things, the ghosts of childhood ephemera and the ever-present forces of mass culture. In this case, Enid is defining herself against both the people and the media that surround her, as she rejects her self-reflection. Rather than cocooning herself in a protective layer like the girls in Matar’s photos, she is excavating.

In the panel on the previous page from *Ghost World*, Enid and Becky pass time by watching tv and reading magazines in Becky’s room. Like the bedrooms of Matar’s photographs, this is a confined space where identity is shaped through the mediation of mass culture. The space and relationships within it can be profoundly liberating in terms of the formation of identity, especially if there is shared enjoyment. In this excerpt, both the television show and the content of the magazine cause friction. Enid and Becky are turned away from each other, towards the tv or a magazine or a window, all types of escape from the pressures of intimacy and growing up.

The formation of Enid’s identity is interwoven with interpersonal relationship, the experiential learning that happens through prosthetic traveling, and within the particular places that these events transpire. Individuals can cultivate, collect and curate parts of their identity through prosthetic means but this is always done within the bounds of a particular place that shape the contour of these memories. Gaston Bachelard coined the term Topoanalysis and defined it as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.” According to Bachelard, memory is always situated in a specific place and is a point in time-rather than a span of time. The particularities of the place, the people (the set and actors) are remembered as images and felt in other sensory capacities. Where important invents happened, which rooms, with specific windows and bookcases, is attached to memories of activities.

Enid’s rejection of her acquisitions, both authentic and prosthetic, indicates that she wants to be unencumbered from her past. The narrative ends obliquely as she disappears on a city bus, carrying the smallest of suitcases, on an unknown route with only a prediction from a stranger that she will be an artist of some sort. The reader predicts that Enid then, in some future, will process memories in order to fulfill this artistic process and prophecy. We wonder what kind of person she will become and how she will be shaped by her past. How will memory and imagination fuse and transform to create a new narrative? We carry her with us into the future as a possible self, both free to start again, and bound by our memories.

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III

The Artist Draws from Memory

Lynda Barry has spoken about reading as a transformative practice when she was a child. There were few books in her house, and a well-known anecdote from her childhood relays her fondness for Bil Keane’s singular circular panel Family Circus. She recalls its significance in a blog post:

“I was a kid growing up in a troubled household. We didn’t have books in the house but we did have the daily paper and I remember picking out Family Circus before I could really read. There was something about the life on the other side of that circle that looked pretty good. For kids like me there was a map and a compass hidden in Family Circus. The parents in that comic strip really loved their children. Their home was stable. It put that image in my head and I kept it.”

Barry attributes her decision to make comics to the experience of reading Family Circle, which Bil Keane’s son, Jeff, honored by adding her to the cast of characters in a strip from May, 2017. Barry responded to this gesture in a statement that communicates her unshakeable belief in the role of comics as a life-saving resource. She wrote in the same post:

“I’d always heard that great art will cause people to burst into tears but the only time it ever happened to me was when I was introduced to Bil Keane’s son, Jeff. As soon as I shook his hand I just started bawling my face off because I realized I had climbed through the circle.

And how I did it was by making pictures and writing stories. To me the Family Circus has always been my wished for family. My soul family in the image world.

You have heard me talk about the importance of comics for kids, and the kind of unexpected and sometimes lifesaving difference they can make—for me it was the comic “Family Circus”.

I’ve seen that world through my side of the circle for over 50 years. This weekend at the 71st annual National Cartoonist’s Society Conference, I found out that Jeff Keane inked me into life INSIDE that circle. SEE ABOVE!!! COMICS ARE MIRACULOUS!!! They are IMMUNE SYSTEMS!!! They are TRANSPORT SYSTEMS!!! They are TIME TRAVELING DEVICES!!”

Portrait of the Artist-Under-Construction

I have been doing “memory work” for a long time: narrative writing in prose, poetry and images that tell stories somewhat obliquely. This work continues to be under-construction. I am determined to construct parts of my past that have formed my sensibilities— I see these as separate parts that I carry around. Many of the stories that I tell refer to some sort of significant prosthetic experience: for better or for worse, I have absorbed images and stories, taken on the attributes of characters. As a child under ten I absorbed the emotions and perspectives of characters that I watched on tv with my dad. The duplicious and evil natures of some of these characters disturbed me, but I also felt them. I often heard people say that young children shouldn’t watch horror films, but I didn’t understand that it was possible to ever feel distance from characters. Because my dad overlooked the developmental appropriateness of the shows and movies we watched, I assumed there was no such distinction and that there was something wrong with me. As I grew older and could make my own choices, I found prosthetic traveling companions that reflected wounded parts of myself. They helped me recreate myself. I found myself in fiction. Rebuilding these pasts parts has been an exercise in sorting through memories, authentic and prosthetic, and noticing how one influenced the other. The prosthetic became more prominent because it functioned as an antidote to painful experiences. Now I am arranging them in a time capsule. Ultimately, I can keep the prominent prosthetic memories and bury the rest.

Lynda Barry’s body of work, from early comics


37 Ibid
to novels, autobiography and instructional manuals, demonstrates the life-long process of unpacking and organizing experience, both authentic and prosthetic, into a shape that captures her life. She has said that her character’s aren’t quite autobiographical—she has coined a term to describe a genre that fits her: *autobifictionalography*. This approach to telling the truth of life explains how Barry creates parallel characters, such as Maybonne, who is roughly modeled on Barry’s teenage self, and the Lynda of 100 Demons (2002), who is “depicted as a series of selves in conversation with one another”.

The process of writing and drawing from life experience has given the artist great insight on both the benefits of this practice and how it actually happens. As Kirtley summarizes, “Barry frames and constructs her own life, and in particular her own girlhood from which the narrator ultimately survives, utilizing her own creative impulses to emerge victorious over the demons.”

Illustrated instructional manuals such as *What it Is* (2008) and *Making Comics* (2020)—the latter a compilation of creative exercises she uses in workshops—helps would-be writers/artists tap into the creative potential of their own experience. Barry has first and foremost isolated the seed of creativity and imagination in the image—which is rooted in memory. “What is an image?” Barry asks in *What It Is*. This is her answer:

> At the center of everything we call ‘The Arts,’ and children call ‘Play,’ is something which seems somehow alive. It’s not alive in the way you and I are alive, but it’s

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38 Kirtley, 148-149.
Certainly not dead. It’s alive in the way our memory is alive. Alive in the way the ocean is alive and able to transport us and contain us. Alive in the way thinking is not, but experiencing is, made of both memory and imagination. This is the thing we mean by the image.”

The work of Barry’s What It Is is to isolate the creative process and as Susan Kirtley observes, to provide access to the secret source of inspiration that children have but forget in the process of entering the adult world. Barry hopes to help the reader bypass that stage of forgetting by grabbing onto the source of creativity—which she has isolated as the image in the mind’s eye. The hybrid book enters the realm of the Kunstlerroman—the development of the young person into an artist—and an instructional manual for people on a similar path. Barry has come full circle: from her beginnings as a lonely child, finding comfort in the stories of other people, to writing stories of adolescence and finally adapting her personal story into a how-to for other artists-in-the-making. She explicitly demonstrates the route an artist takes from the one who perceives, overcomes adversity with the company of prosthetic traveling companions and then produces a body of work that narrates and illustrates that journey.

**Conclusion**

I have demonstrated through an examination of the prosthetic potential of art, especially narratives, that watching, reading, and listening are embodied activities that connect us to our own experiences, and attach themselves to us via a sensuous engagement with the medium. These prosthetic memories become important parts of our person, embedded in our subjectivity. What’s more, these newly added experiences are potentially healing and transformative. In the artists’ hand, the total of experiences can be reshaped into a cohesive form, providing a new medium for those who might really need it.

The research I have undertaken in prosthetic memory and narrative art has provided a useful vocabulary to understand my creative process and suggests a focus for future creative projects. In particular, this focus on memory that is situated on objects, including “narrative objects” such as film and comics, opens up possibilities for fuller exploration through Ekphrastic writing and illustrating. A close focus on the things of this world—and the images that these things conjure—is a way into the stories we tell about ourselves—the stories we can eventually tell to others.

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40 Barry, What It Is, 14.  
41 Kirtley, 184-5  
42 Kirtley, 180.  
43 Landsberg, 19-21. Personhood for Landsberg might be described as a particular point of reference, similar to subjectivity, a feeling of one’s identity as separate. From this position one can engage in consumption of mass media—experience privately felt public memory.
Bibliography


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