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## **Comics and Visual Biography: Sequential Art in Social Research**

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## **Comics and Visual Biography: Sequential Art in Social Research**

This article describes the use of comics in a mixed methods biographical research project aimed at understanding the experiences of vegans (i.e. people who eschew animal products such as meat, dairy and eggs). It begins with a discussion of Comics Studies as a growing interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry, and attempts to trace a connection between this and Visual Sociology more broadly. It then provides examples of the way in which comics were used in the project and the rationale underpinning this. Participants were asked to create comics about their lives, which aimed to supplement biographical interviews that had already taken place, eliciting rich ‘visual biographical’ data that an interview would not produce. Comics were also used as a mode of representation, whereby a ‘visual autoethnography’ was produced, outlining the author’s reflexive autobiographical relationship with veganism, and telling the story of the research. This project presented challenges, specifically around participation, ethics and anonymity, and data analysis. Despite this, the comics produced provided an unusual and valuable insight into the lives and experiences of vegans. To conclude, this article argues that the visual biographical data yielded through the use of the comics medium represents a valuable tool in visual sociology.

Keywords: comics; sequential art; visual sociology; biographical research; autoethnography; veganism

### ***Comics Today***

Comics are a huge global industry. In 2015, comic book and graphic novel sales topped \$1bn dollars in North America alone (MacDonald, 2016). Add to this ever expanding multi-million dollar, movie franchises based upon comic book characters and narratives, and it is clear that comics represent a significant part of the global culture industry. As of June, three of the top five highest grossing movies released in 2017 were based on comic books (Box Office Mojo, 2017). But comics have wide and varied applications, from all genres of fiction, to journalism, to history (Duncan and Smith, 2009). A rich tradition of biographical comics is evidenced in the critically acclaimed and commercially successful work of Art Spiegelman (1991), Alison Bechdel (2006) and Marjane Satrapi (2003). This

article analyses the way in which comics and visual biographies can be used effectively within social research both as a method, and mode of representation.

Though seemingly straightforward, comics are a deceptively complex medium to define. There are important questions as to where lines should be drawn between comics and other visual mediums. Eisner (1985: 127) defines comics in broad terms as ‘sequential art’, characterised by more specific factors such as imagery, temporality, and the use of ‘framing’. This is developed further by Hayman and Pratt (2005) who define comics as ‘pictorial narratives’. These definitions are useful at conveying two very important facets of the medium. The first being the visual component, and the second being the degree to which there is a passage of time, or sense of narrative to the work. The problem with such a broad definition is that it might include things that other, more rigidly delineated definitions would not, for example McCloud’s (1993) argument that cave paintings and hieroglyphics could be seen as progenitors of the medium. Indeed, such broad definitions have been criticised as failing to attend to the historical specificity of the medium (Meskin, 2007). Meskin (2007) argues that an awareness of their emergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth century should be central to our understanding of comics as a distinct medium, otherwise we risk presenting an anachronistic, ahistorical picture of reality. Perhaps important to this, is the historic legitimacy, or lack thereof, of comics. Comics have often been regarded as a lesser medium, especially in relation to comparable visual mediums such as fine art or even film, and have been ignored by art historians (Smith, 2017; Roeder, 2008). Duncan and Smith (2009) highlight the lingering reputation of comics as childish and vulgar, particularly due to the preponderance of pulp superhero comics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Groensteen (2008) argues that there has been academic prejudice against comics and argues that this is due to comics’ status as a ‘hybrid’ medium (combining images and words). This article seeks to challenge the notion that comics are inappropriate medium for scholarly enquiry.

In order to do this, the article discusses a mixed-methods research project<sup>1</sup> in which comics were used. Offering examples, it shows the way that comics were employed as a research method, through asking participants to create comics about their lives. It also shows the way comics were used as a mode of representation, through the creation

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the ESRC, awarded by Durham University.

of a ‘visual autoethnography’. Autoethnography entails the use of autobiographical and ethnographic techniques, placing the author of the work at the centre of the narrative (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography has faced criticism for the intellectual laziness and narcissism of first-person accounts (Delamont, 2009), and this article addresses some of these critiques in relation to the way it has been used in this project. The article then discusses some of the challenges faced when adopting a comics based methodology, namely, problems of participation, anonymity/confidentiality, and data analysis. To conclude, it is argued that the visual biographical data yielded through the use of the comics medium represents a valuable tool in visual sociology, both as a method and a mode of representation. In order to provide theoretical context, the next session discusses of the field of Comics Studies, tracing areas of overlap with the history and trajectory of Visual Sociology.

### *Comics Studies*

Comics Studies is a diverse, interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry which has expanded in scope and stature over the past twenty five years (Heer and Worcester, 2009). The growing significance of Comics Studies is evidenced in the emergence of academic journals such as ‘ImageText’; ‘The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship’; ‘Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics’; ‘International Journal of Comic Art’ and ‘Comicality: Studies of Graphic Culture’<sup>2</sup> (Comics Research, 2017). Recent years have also seen the emergence of specific comic related academic degree programmes in the UK such as the BA (Hons) in Comics, Graphic Novels and Sequential Art now offered at Teesside University; the BA (Hons) in Cartoon And Comic Arts BA (Hons) offered at Staffordshire University, and the MLitt/MDes in Comics & Graphic Novels offered by Dundee University. Globally, there has also been the emergence of academic departments and institutions devoted to the comics medium, such as The Centre for Cartoon Studies in Vermont, USA; and the School of Comics Studies at the University of Oregon, USA. It is self-evident that academic interest in comics is growing.

Indeed, comics have been a topic of academic interest for some time, with studies dating at least as far back as the 1940s (Sones, 1944). There has often been a degree of tension between comics as a topic of interest, comics as a communicative medium, and

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<sup>2</sup> This is a French language journal, called *Comicalités. Études de culture graphique*.

the extent to which the comics medium itself has been deployed as a means of studying the commenting upon the social world. Influential work by comic creators like Will Eisner (1985, 1996) and Scott McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006) have proven that the medium can be used to dissect itself creatively and rigorously, and works like these form a significant part of the canon of Comics Studies literature. However, it is one thing to study comics and write essays about them, it is another to use the comics medium itself to investigate society. A question logically posed is therefore, can comics provide a legitimate method and/or mode of representation in academic contexts? I would argue that there is a preponderance of evidence, including data from my own research discussed later, that they can and should.

Comics, in principle, already have a well-established methodological application in therapeutic and educational contexts. Art therapy is an established mode of psychotherapy that uses visual art media, as its primary mode of communication, to facilitate change and personal improvement, through the use of art materials (BAAT, 2014). Similar therapeutic uses of comics can also be seen in the ‘better, drawn’ project (Better, Drawn, 2011). Comics have also been used in academia in a more functional context. Comics also have a longstanding application in the classroom. Cary (2004) demonstrates the unique advantages of the comics medium in multi-lingual educational contexts, highlighting the value of visual means of communicating where languages differ. Berkowitz and Packer (2001: 17) argue that comics provide a “wealth of pedagogical opportunities” and provide guidance for how comics can be used in practice in various contexts. In 2010 the first issue of an interdisciplinary journal called ‘Sequential Art in Narrative Education’ was published, dedicated to covering intersections of comics and education.

### *Academic Comics*

Comics have been successfully applied in an academic context in various ways, as succinctly outlined by Carrigan (2017). Contrary to the assumption that the broad accessibility of comics involves a sacrifice of the complexity or nuance of traditional modes of representation (i.e. written prose), various scholars have demonstrated the power and complexity of the comics medium within academia. Far from ‘dumbing down’ scholarly enquiry, the examples given establish a clear case for the use and value of comics within research and critical academic thought.

More and more frequently the comics medium is being deployed effectively to interrogate a wide variety of fields of study, further strengthening the interdisciplinary credentials of comics studies. Sousanis' (2015) multi-award winning book 'Unflattening' uses the narrative capacity of comics to present a visual critique of the traditionally 'flat' modes of thinking and communicating within western scholarly discourse. Sousanis presents an epistemological challenge to the primacy of words over images, and the notion of a fixed, objectivist viewpoint in critical thought. Sossi (2017: 194) called the book "*an important contribution to the wider argument for the place of visual art in traditional academic research and discourse*". I have discussed the value of comics in the contexts of biographical sociology (Stephens Griffin, 2014a) and as a reflexive approach to critical animal studies research (Stephens Griffin, 2014b). Comics have also been employed by Louise Ahrens (2008) in 'The Real Cost of Prisons' offers a radical, visual critique of the prison system in the USA, incorporating statistics and empirical fieldwork to examine the causes and consequences of mass incarceration through the comics medium. The rationale was to "combine drawings and plain language to present complex ideas and concepts" (Ahrens, 2008: 9). Another example is the work of Edward Ross (2015) whose highly praised book 'Filmish' presents a rigorously argued and academically referenced history of cinema and film studies in comic form. Respected Psychologist Andy Field has sought to meet the problems he has faced in teaching statistics to undergraduates head-on by producing a comics-based textbook on the topic. Field's (2016) book entitled 'An Adventure in Statistics: The Reality Enigma' combines hard statistics with visual storytelling to address the conceptual difficulties students face when learning statistics for the first time. Han (2008) produced a comic called 'Missionary', as an attempt to experiment with new forms of academic presentation. Comics, Han argues, are an '*accessible media for readers inside and outside of academia*' and can produce a "*provocative blend of intimate self-reflexivity and incisive social criticism*" (Han, 2008: 58). In the author's field of Geography, charts, maps and even illustrations are important and accepted aspects of academic representation. However, Han wanted her comic not to simply '*illustrate the writing*' but to "*play with successive images and their productive coexistence with words*" (Han, 2008: 58). Comics have also been employed in more functional ways- for example Plowman and Stephen (2008) used comics to represent video data in a static print journal. Giddens (2015) skilfully uses comics as a critical resource to study criminal justice, law and legal theory, uniquely

showcasing the potential of the comics medium. Works such as these demonstrate that comics can have broad and varied academic applications.

### *Visual Sociology*

Harper (2012: 4) describes Visual Sociology in terms of a desire to properly engage with the visual dimension of culture, society and life, starting from the assumption that “*the world that is seen, photographed, drawn or otherwise represented visually is different than the world that is represented through words and numbers*”. Becker’s (1974) influential writing on photography and sociology posed important epistemological questions as to the way in which core research principles like ‘validity’ should be understood in the context of visual data. In challenging the extent to which a photograph can ‘measure’ that which we think it is measuring, Becker’s questions coincided with his own arguments around the standpoint of researcher, and the unfeasibility of total neutrality in research (Becker, 1967). Ultimately he argues that sociology should embrace these challenges and should commit to exploring the potential of visual approaches to research, and in making the argument helped contribute to the emergence of Visual Sociology as a distinct sub-discipline. Visual Sociology has traditionally sought to answer Becker’s call to side with the oppressed, and contribute to social change by documenting social problems, and presenting them to the wider public (Martiniello, 2017). Comics, as a medium that incorporates words and images, I would argue fit comfortably within a Visual Sociological paradigm as a primarily visual medium.

There are significant points of overlap between Visual Sociology and Comics Studies, for example, O’Neill (2008; 2009; 2010) has consistently demonstrated the value and potential of combining biographical/narrative techniques with visual art through a practice-based methodology known as ‘ethno-mimesis’. These visual arts based, biographical approaches are valuable in creating a reflective space for ideas to emerge, especially when doing research with refugees and otherwise vulnerable or marginalised groups (O’Neill, 2010). Cross, Kabel and Lysack (2006) used drawings in a research project aimed at understanding the personal experience of spinal cord injury, asking participants who had experienced spinal cord injury to draw themselves, and draw how they see their spinal cord injury in their mind. The authors argued that the illustrations produced provided a useful and worthwhile adjunct to data gleaned through traditional methods. Prosser’s (2007: 27) draws upon “‘researcher found data’, ‘researcher generated data’, ‘respondent created data’ and ‘visualization and representation of data’” in the form

of illustrations, diagrams and photographs to examine the visual culture of schools, some of which are comic like in form (including speech bubbles and illustrations). Godden (2016) used visual methods to examine the topic of love. Eliciting diagrams and illustrations from participants, both individually and in groups, the data produced shares commonalities with the comics medium. These visual accounts help to push forward understandings of various aspects of the social world.

Comics and sequential visual accounts of life and experience are already being used, albeit defined in different terms. Comics deserve a place at the Visual Sociology table. A clear argument can be made that exploring the practical application of comics in academic contexts can serve to push forward thought, debate and discussion in both the disciplines of Comics Studies and Visual Sociology. The next section explains and offers examples of how comics were used, both as a method and mode of representation, within a research project on veganism and animal advocacy.

### ***Visualising Vegan Biographies***

This section explains the specific way that comics were used in the project, providing a rationale for their use, and offering some examples of the data produced through the project, with brief analysis and discussion. Methodologically comics were employed in two ways. Firstly, participants were asked to produce comics about their lives, which would supplement the biographical interview data. Secondly, an autoethnographic comic was produced about the research project, as a means of examining the potential for comics as a mode of representation in academic contexts. The participant produced comics, and the autoethnographic comic each represent forms of 'Visual Biography'. This section discusses each in turn, beginning with the comics created by participants Erin and CJ.

The research project utilised a mixed-methods approach, and entailed initial and follow-up biographical interviews with 12 vegan animal advocates<sup>3</sup>. The interviews were wide ranging and focussed on the lives and experiences of those involved<sup>4</sup>. Following the biographical interviews, participants were invited to produce comics about their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> In total interviews were conducted with 18 different participants, 12 of which produced data that were included in the final write up. Of those 12, 7 submitted comics.

<sup>4</sup> The content and findings of the non-visual narrative and biographical dimension of the research is detailed in the monograph 'Understanding Veganism: Biography and Identity' (Stephens Griffin, 2017).

With the help of a participant information sheet, as well as verbal face-to-face guidance from me, participants were asked to create a visual document that related to their own biography, as well as issues to do with animals, animal rights and/or veganism. This posed significant challenges (discussed in the next section), as well as allowing for some interesting, engaging, and non-conventional research data to be produced, in line with the principles of visual sociology and comics studies.

*Comics as method*

**[FIGURE 1- ERIN'S COMIC]**



Erin presented a single page, sixteen-panel comic that focused on her experiences of meeting and discussing issues surrounding veganism with non-vegans. The comic employs humour and uses simple anthropomorphic sketches and text to convey its

message, which is centred on the theme of normalization, in relation to the hostility and antipathy faced by vegans in day-to-day scenarios.

The comic begins with the smiling faces of a cat and a dog. They each have their eyes closed and are smiling, and seemingly content. They are labelled to indicate that the cat is Erin (*'me'*) and the dog is *'someone I don't really know'*. The decision to use cats and dogs might be deliberately symbolic of things like antagonism and difference, similar to the use of mice and cats in Art Spiegelman's (1991) *Maus*. This is a common trope in comics and allows pre-existing societal understandings about animals and their relationships to subtly contextualize a narrative. A speech bubble coming from the dog's mouth reads *"Oh, vegan? That's like, sort of like, vegetarian, right?"* This is the first very subtle hint at potential future conflict. The tone is friendly and inquisitive, but often these conversations get less friendly and respectful as they go on (Joy, 2010). It is also interesting to note the symbolism the dog (typically the aggressor) asking the cat (typically the one being chased) questions about their life with insistence, despite not really knowing them.

In the next panel, the cat responds thusly: *"Yeah! Sort of; I don't eat any animal products, so... No meat, no dairy, or eggs 😊"*. The smiley face sign indicates Erin's intended affability and willingness to engage. The descriptive text reads *'It always sounds so negative like this!'* further contextualizing Erin's desire to remain light in tone. The dog responds with *"Oh, okay... Cool! Wow. But you eat fish right?"* This is probably familiar to a vegan audience, because it shows the dog's misunderstanding of what the cat has just said. The dog has never considered the idea of not eating meat, to the extent that 'fish' is seen as something that does not come from an animal. The descriptive text reads *'questions seldom vary'*, which alludes to how tiresome answering questions of this nature can become. This is further underlined in the next panel *"since when was fish not an animal?"* These panels are representative of the theme of normalization- in this sense the way in which eating meat is normalized in society, and other approaches are positioned as abnormal and therefore undesirable and problematic. 'Normalization' is a social process, by which certain behaviours, identities, ideas and actions come to be recognized as 'normal', and consequently, neutral, taken-for-granted and objective. It is particularly associated with the work of Michel Foucault (1977), who theorised normalization as the process by which an idealized norm of conduct is socially constructed, against which all conduct is judged, and rewarded or punished accordingly. Vegans are subject to questions of the sort depicted by Erin on a daily basis, and through them they are routinely forced

to justify their decision and choices in a way that non-vegans seldom have to. Seemingly benign conversations like the one presented in the comic arguably represent part of the normalizing process, whereby veganism is challenged and its abnormality is reinforced. Though this exchange is friendly, it represents a fundamental lack of understanding, which is frustrating and dispiriting for Erin.

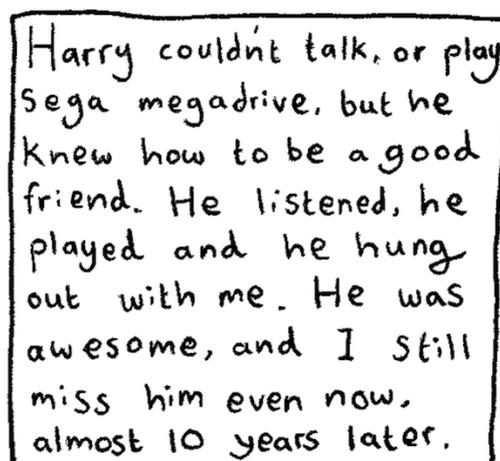
The next panel explains that *“to me, and lots of other vegans, it’s not just about your “diet”- it’s more of a “lifestyle choice”. I try to live a “good life”*. Conversations with strangers tend to immediately boil veganism down to the very basic, micro-technicalities of what being vegan entails, rather than engage with the broader, philosophical and ethical ideas that inform it. Here Erin is showing that whilst her diet is one of the most noticeable aspects of her veganism, it is not the most important aspect of it. The next panel humorously refers to the use of the term *“good life”*, juxtaposing the ethical desire for positive living, with the consumerist notion of wealth and possessions (*“4 poster bed, enough money to never worry, very smart phone/stuff”*). Erin clarifies *“I mean I want to be a decent living organism! Make decisions, which have the least negative impact. That is my motivation for going and staying vegan”*. Then, the next panel shows Erin’s cat avatar once again, smiling and waving. The text reads *“so, most of my interactions in the world tend to begin with: Hello! Can I help you with anything?”* Erin has set out very clearly why she is vegan, and her reasons for doing so, and these are rooted in a desire to have the least possible negative impact, and to be a *‘decent living organism’*. The second half of the comic begins with a disclaimer, *“Caution: lots of text ahead”* and demonstrating Erin’s awareness of the medium, where images generally take up more space than text. The use of images, panels and speech bubbles, affords it the unique characteristics of the comics medium, in particular, juxtaposition of images, and differing types of text (where text in speech bubbles is distinct from text in panels). The use of panels also allows for the pacing of a comic, and a different reading experience.

To summarize, Erin’s is a concise and focussed exploration of some of the typical everyday experiences of vegans and, implicitly, the assumptions made about them, and the hostility faced by them in normalizing contexts. The imagery also conveys messages and ideas surrounding conflict and hostility that would not necessarily have emerged from text alone (especially the cat versus dog symbolism). This contributes to other research in the field of hostility towards veganism and vegans themselves (Joy, 2010; Cole and Morgan, 2011; Cole, 2008).

FIGURE 2A: CJ'S COMIC



FIGURE 2B CJ'S COMIC



CJ<sup>5</sup> produced a humorous and touching narrative, biographical comic, which tells the bittersweet story of his relationship with his first ever pet, a dog called Harry. It covers a number of issues, and is explicitly rooted in the biography of the author/artist. The key theme identified is *interspecies companionship*. Within this is an implicit rejection of

<sup>5</sup> Comic © CJ Reay 2012 (this participant specified on their consent form that they wanted to be explicitly credited).

speciesist ideas about the value of friendships and relationships between differing species (Ryder, 2000).

The comic starts by placing CJ's childhood friendship with Harry in the context of its unusualness. CJ sets the tone by stating that his "*when I was younger my best friend wasn't a boy. My best friend wasn't a girl either...*" and then in the next panel, he explains "*my best friend was a big hairy dog called Harry*". Here we see the first image of Harry, portrayed as an affable, friendly dog. Harry and CJ are best friends, but this is unusual in comparison to others, who may have animal friends, but not animal 'best friends'. This also indicates lack of hierarchy in CJ's understanding of his friendship with Harry. They exist on the same level, in spite of the fact they are from different species. Having introduced Harry, the comic then tells the reader that CJ and his friend '*shared lots of experiences*', once again, the word '*shared*' indicates a level of parity in their story. It is not a case of CJ experiencing things, and Harry being a subordinated figure. They both have agency in the narrative.

CJ then goes on to describe a number of 'first time' experiences he and Harry shared, some of which are humorous in nature. These are where the theme of the comic, *interspecies companionship* is most clearly evidenced. The first of these single-panel anecdotes describes a day of sledging where Harry urinated on some other children, whilst they were playing in the snow. The image shows the offending incident with the children running away screaming. The next panel describes a 'Fun-Run' where Harry ran six miles in the wrong direction. The image shows several people running after him shouting his name in an attempt to stop him running off. The next panel shows a disastrous haircut in which Harry ended up looking "*like a poodle*". Until this point the tone of the comic, both in imagery and text, has been very light hearted, comical and joyful. From this point onwards the tone shifts.

The final few panels of the comic illustrate CJ's sadness at the death of his friend. The next panel shows an image of a far more sombre scene, where a less vibrant looking Harry is sleeping next to an empty chair, with a young CJ wondering aloud why Harry doesn't seem to want to go for a walk. The text explains that this is "*the first time I noticed he was getting older... and later, getting sicker too*". The tone here is foreboding, through the text, both descriptive and sad, and the image which conveys the feeling that Harry is no longer his silly, youthful, active self, but is now older, his mortality more apparent. The words explain that Harry is aging, but the image gives a sense of the impact of aging on Harry's body. The panel shows a sleeping dog and the naively asked question "*do you*

*not want to go for a walk today?"* Harry's body is aging, and CJ is witnessing the inevitability of the aging process, through the experience of his companion; in this sense their companionship is embodied. Then the next panel shows CJ's experience of saying goodbye, where he is shown with an ill looking Harry, and an adult, explaining, "*he won't feel any pain*". Here Harry is going to be euthanized, due to ill health. Harry's agency is gone, and CJ is forced to deal with losing his friend. Once again, Harry's deteriorating health highlights the embodied aspect of their relationship. The dog CJ once ran around outside with, and took on walks, is now unable to live on without considerable discomfort. The assurances that Harry won't feel pain in being put to sleep, also highlight Harry's embodied experience of pain, and CJ's awareness of it. The comic ends with CJ explaining that although Harry couldn't "*talk or play Sega Mega drive*" he was still a good friend. This shows that species does not have to be a barrier to friendship, and in a wider socio-political context, shows how CJ feels animals should be included within the realms of 'the social'. The comic ends with a traditional 'tribute' style image of Harry Reay, complete with a scroll showing his year of birth and death. The fact that Harry is given a surname, and the kind of tribute normally reserved for humans, once again shows that Harry was a loved and respected friend and equal. Data such as this is useful in providing an engaging and emotive Visual Biography of CJ, as well as of Harry.

### *Comics as mode of representation*

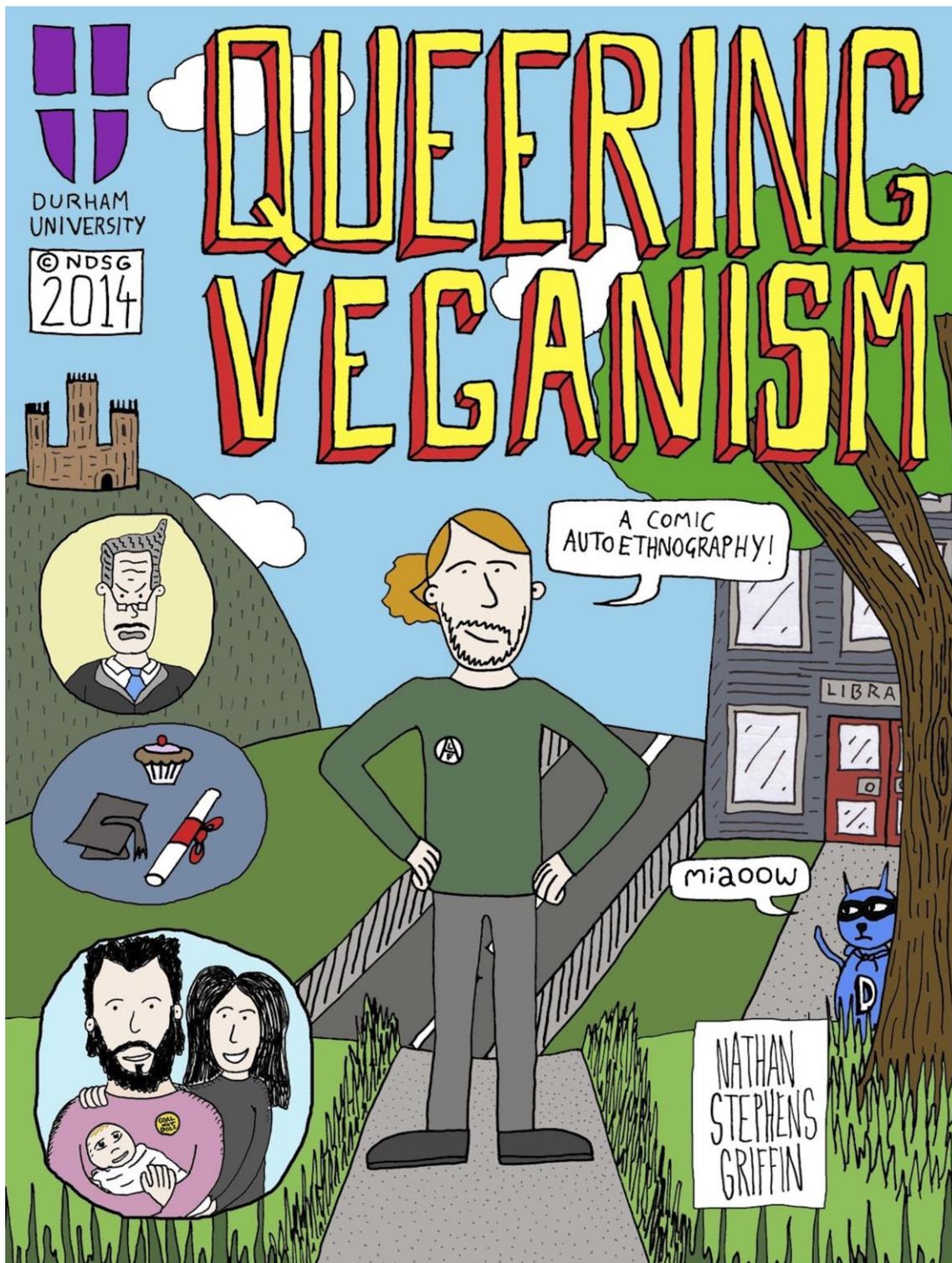
As discussed earlier, visual and autoethnographic methods were used as part of a broader biographical approach to the project. In its inception the project drew from a broad and diverse base of theoretical literature, connected by interpretivist epistemologies and constructionist ontologies (Schutz, 1967; Lorde, 1977; Law, 2004). These ideas underpinned the research and informed the use of deliberately reflexive methods and non-traditional modes of representation (Muncey, 2010). The project was also heavily influenced by Pink's (2014) arguments around the value of visual ethnography; in particular her rejection of objectivist approaches in favour of reflexivity and focus on subjectivity specificity of experience.

In practical terms this resulted in the creation of a 'visual autoethnography' in comic form, based on my own biography and experiences conducting the research. Throughout the project and fieldwork I kept detailed ethnographic field notes, and used these to create a comic. I also considered the questions I was asking participants relating to their biography and veganism, and attempted to address these through the comic. This

underlined my subjective standpoint as a vegan conducting research into veganism, who identifies as queer. The visual autoethnography aimed to ‘trouble’ formal modes of representation within academia, and to assess the potential of comics as a mode of academic representation. Autoethnography strives to challenge the conventions of social research, placing the human being behind the research at its centre. In doing so, it may provide an accessible way of representing the mess of a real research process, which is “grounded in everyday life” (Plummer, 2003: 522).

Jones and Adams (2010) argue that autoethnography is a ‘queer’ method. Both refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus on fluidity, intersubjectivity and responsiveness to particularities (Plummer, 2005; Ronai, 1995; Spry, 2001 in Jones and Adams, 2010). Both refuse to close down inventiveness, refuse static legitimacy (Foucault, 1981; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005 in Jones and Adams, 2010). Both embrace an opportunistic stance towards existing and normalizing techniques in qualitative inquiry, choosing to borrow, refashion and retell methods and theory in inventive ways (Hilfrisch, 2006: 218-19; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004; Plummer, 2005 in Jones and Adams, 2010) Both place selves at their centre, whilst simultaneously working against a stable sense of experience. Both are deeply political, displaying a clear commitment to refiguring and refashioning, questioning normative discourses and acts, and undermining and refiguring how lives (and lives worth living) come into being (Denzin, 2006; Warner, 1993; Yep, Lovaas and Elia, 2003 in Jones and Adams, 2010). Jones and Adams, (2010: 209) explore the multiple possible uses of autoethnography, especially in ‘*journeys of self-understanding that are relational and not restricted by the limits of categories, while proposing challenges to normative ideologies and discourses*’. Thus, autoethnography was compatible with the theoretical framework of the project.

### **FIGURE 3- NATHAN’S COMIC FRONT COVER**



The visual autoethnography was presented as a separate insert, alongside the thesis itself (which followed typical conventions of a doctoral thesis). The insert deliberately conformed to the conventions of the traditional single-issue comics I used to buy and collect as a child, and the cover design aimed at catching the eye of potential readers, as a means of addressing the classic assertion that doctoral research will invariably stay on

a shelf, never to be read by anyone. The front cover also foreshadows key aspects of the narrative, for example the image of the ‘angry academic’ with whom I argue in one of the chapters, as well as the ‘blue cat’ which symbolised the health issues that I experienced when conducting the research (see Figure 6). The cover also shows the Cathedral on the hill the University Library, as two key symbols of studying at Durham University. Whilst the comic would ideally be read alongside the thesis, it is deliberately written and presented in a way that it can be read separately, and still make sense. This is because I think comics can be a valuable and accessible means of communicating with diverse audiences (Han, 2008) and I hope that people who are interested in my research, but who might not ordinarily have the desire to sit and read a PhD thesis, would read and enjoy the comic.

**FIGURE 4- NATHAN’S EARLY LIFE**



#### *Responding to Delamont: Whose Was I On?*

One might reasonably ask, what is the value of making a comic about yourself as part of a PhD project? Surely this is a classic example of Delamont’s (2009: 2) robust critique of autoethnography as “almost entirely pernicious. [It] is essentially lazy – literally lazy and also intellectually lazy.” In order to address this, it is perhaps beneficial

to describe the comic in more detail. My comic was separated into six chapters, each of which dealt with a different aspect of the research process, including with my early life (see Figure 4), my eventual decision to go vegan, my everyday experience as a postgraduate, the fieldwork itself, some health difficulties I experienced which impacted the project, and finally a summary of the projects findings. Figure 5 offers an example of an experience I had during the course of my research where I got into a heated public debate with a senior academic, who was critical of the project, on the grounds that, as a vegan, I was too biased to study animal advocacy. As opposed to representing intellectual laziness, I saw it as being an exercise in intellectual honesty. The personal thing I discussed impacted on the project, and would have been, I feel, wrong to leave out. Rather than being narcissistic, I saw the comic as self-awareness. I centre myself in one aspect of the project, but with the aim of contextualising the narratives of the participants. I was the research instrument, and my own biography and health issues etc. were relevant to the study itself.

Those who favour the use of autoethnography, highlight its ability to “*critique the situatedness of self with others in social contexts*” (Spry, 2001: 710). In other words, autoethnography can provide a valuable means of explicitly demonstrating the subjectivity of the individual conducting the research, whilst maintaining a focus on the social. My mixed methods approach was developed in response to both sides of this debate and aims to allow for critical self-reflection that dispels the “*myth of the invisible, omniscient author*” (Tierney, 2002: 66) and producing work which is both dynamic and accessible (Jones, 2006). The main body of the project maintained a strict focus on the participants, also addressing charges of laziness through demonstrating fieldwork and critical intellectual thought in the manner of a conventional thesis.

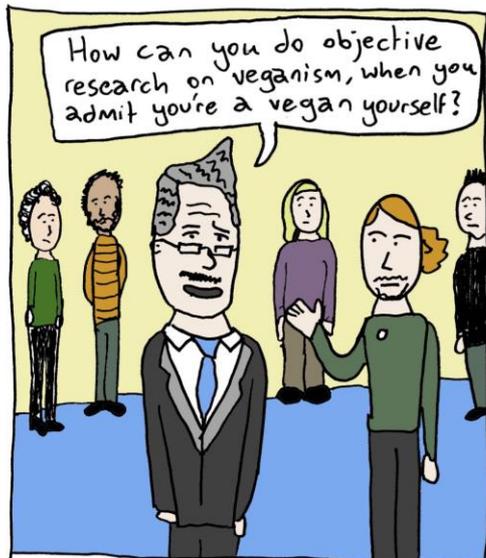
#### **FIGURE 5A POSTGRADUATE LIFE**



I once took part in a poster competition that was judged by someone who I knew to be very ardently in favour of vivisection.



He took one look at my poster and it was clear that he'd already made up his mind.



A small crowd gathered to watch our 'debate'.



Needless to say I didn't win... The competition, that is. (I held my own in the debate).

FIGURE 5B POSTGRADUATE LIFE



As a part of the greater whole, the comic hopefully also avoids Delamont's criticism that autoethnographic research intrinsically focuses on the wrong people, betraying Becker's question "*whose side are we on?*" (Becker, 1967 cited in Delamont, 2009). A doctoral project focused solely on my own subjectivity was not something that I think would have been very useful or beneficial to the field of study in this instance. It

made sense to engage with autoethnography as a methodological approach, but for this to supplement the main focus of the project- the biographies of the participants involved. Having created a comic about my life does leave me open to Delamont's (2009) criticism of autoethnography being essentially narcissistic, although hopefully it is written and constructed in such a way as to avoid the full excesses of this. It attempts to be self-critical, rather than self-aggrandising.

Overall, I felt the comic was successful in emphasising my subjective standpoint within the research, explaining my embodied experience conducting the research, and underlining the centrality of reflexivity within the project. It meant I could reflect on my own veganism, my queer identity, and my experiences of mental illness, all of which central to my biography, all of which might otherwise be deemed irrelevant to a rigorous academic study. In containing this reflexive content within the comic, I attempted to address criticisms of autoethnography, maintaining focus on the participants in the main body of the thesis, whilst also providing an avenue for being open about my own subjective biography in a visual way. I feel the comic was successful in producing an accessible research document that can be read by a diverse audience, and hopefully gives the thesis life beyond the shelf and beyond academic audiences.

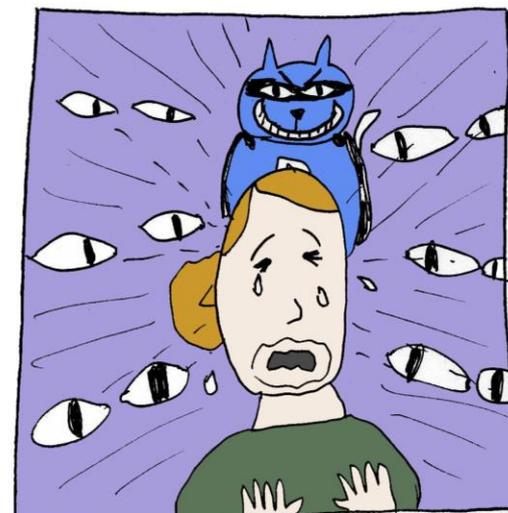
#### **FIGURE 6- MENTAL HEALTH**



In spite of my worries, my presentation went fine. However, later on, at a social event, I got talking to a guy who really criticized my research



Normally I relish a debate and handle myself well, but this time something wasn't right. My heart was beating really fast and I felt like everyone was watching and listening in. I felt horrible.



Then, without warning, I burst into tears. I could not stop crying. It was incredibly embarrassing.



I thought "whos gonna hire a lunatic who can't have a debate without crying?"  
I felt like my entire academic career was over then and there.

### Challenges

This section describes the key challenges faced when using comics in social research. Three of the key obstacles identified were participation, specifically, participants lack of

confidence in their ability to actually create a comic, issues over anonymity and ethics, and the issue of how best to go about analysing narrative visual data.

### *Participation*

A key challenge I faced in using comics in this project was the reluctance of participants to create comics, almost always as a result of a lack of confidence in their drawing abilities. If I were to adopt a similar approach again in future, I would make participant confidence one of the key concerns when conducting the fieldwork. Despite my efforts, and my assurances that the 'quality' of the illustrations was not the focus, the numbers speak for themselves. Out of the 18 people interviewed, data from 12 of whom was included in the final project, only 7 people actually produced comics. This speaks to two things. Firstly, time and energy: participants had already given so much to the project, by agreeing to sit and engage with lengthy biographical interviews. These were, at times, emotionally fraught and difficult. To then expect them to go away with 'homework' was perhaps naïve on my part, and it speaks to the kindness of participants that so many did submit comics in the end. The second barrier to participation in the comic component was participants lack of confidence in their ability to create a comic. Indeed, those participants who had an interest in drawing or art were far more likely to produce a comic (although not always), but this was not a prerequisite for participation. I did my best to reassure participants, and gave examples of a range of comics, from the very basic to the very conventional. If I were to adopt similar methods in future I would arrange a 1-to-1 workshop session with participants, built into the time set aside for interviews, where together we could brainstorm ideas, and even work on a comic. I have conducted comic workshops outside of a research context, and in spite of my limited illustration abilities, it is my belief that comics are a medium that should be open to all. Ones' ability to draw accurately should not preclude them from participating in the medium. Ultimately, participants produced a wide range of interpretations of the comics- including photo collages, diagrams, and standalone images. I was very happy with the results, and in future will focus more specifically on how I can more actively facilitate participants in creating a comic.

### *Anonymity/Ethics*

The second challenge faced in the project related to anonymity and ethics, namely, the fact that some participants wanted to be named in relation to their comic, but not their

interview. Rose (2012) identifies three key interconnected areas of ethical concern relating to visual research; confidentiality/anonymity, consent and copyright. 'Copyright' refers to the ownership of a specific object, in this case, visual images. The creator of an image usually retains copyright to it, unless they are contractually precluded from doing so. To use images created by participants, I need their consent. Therefore, the issues of consent and copyright are fundamentally entwined. Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms informed participants that they will retain copyright to any drawings, images, artworks, other documents (etcetera) they submit to the project. They also give the choice of whether or their real names are with their artistic contributions. These factors were continually considered throughout.

Having designed the project with the intention of intertwining visual and interview data, I eventually decided to separate biographical interview data and visual data in both analysis and presentation in the research write up, rather than integrate the participants' comics and interview data throughout. I did this for two key reasons. Firstly, some participants wished to remain anonymous in their interview, but be named in relation to their comic- if participants are creating art for a project they have every right to receive credit for it, and this should not impact on their choice regarding the anonymity of interview data. I was concerned over jeopardizing anonymity of participants through connecting visual and interview data. This was further compounded by only seven participants submitting comics. Separating visual and interview data entirely meant that anonymity could be preserved more easily. Secondly, in focussing on the comics, rather than the specific authors, I was able to devote a substantive chapter to the analysis and discussion of comics together, including my own, rather than integrating comics throughout, in what might have been a fragmented way.

The autoethnographic comic also presented ethical issues. For example, I discuss my experiences growing up, including my friends and family. However, these people did not choose to be involved in the research, and therefore, troubles notions of informed consent. I made efforts to anonymise most people (especially those I don't know well), but ultimately, this project is done under my name, and certain people in my life will be identifiable. This problem is consistent with most autoethnographic work and is arguably irreconcilable. This is something those deciding to use the approach must ask themselves- is it worth it to include my own life, if it means compromising the anonymity of those around me?

## *Data Analysis*

The third key challenge related to data analysis, specifically, which approach to take when analysing visual data in the form of comics. In this project I adopted a simple thematic analysis when looking at the visual data (comics) created by participants, influenced by Denzin (1989) and Rose (2012). This was a mixed methods project utilising biographical interview, as well as visual methods. I tried to maintain consistency by using a simple form of thematic narrative analysis for both the interviews and the comics, with subtle differences between the two. Biographical Interview analysis focussed on the content of the conversations, rather than how ideas were expressed: what was said rather than how it was said (Reissman, 2002). I was interested in discovering the perspectives of the participants, rather than on establishing factual accounts of events (Miller, 2000). In particular, I was looking to identify ‘turning point’ moments in their narratives (Denzin, 2001), as well as identifying themes. I used a simple thematic analysis because of the relative simplicity of the approach, as well as its flexibility and intuitiveness. With the comics, I did not focus so closely on looking for ‘turning points’ (as very few comics included these kinds of revelatory or epiphanic moments) and instead, aimed to identify themes.

Having received and read the comics, I first identified key themes, informed by Rose’s (2012: 15-16) critical approach to analysing visual data. This involved three key stages of analysis: 1. Taking images seriously, by looking very carefully at visual images. 2. Thinking about the social conditions and effects of visual objects: especially as visual representations both depend on and produce social exclusions and inclusions. We must consider social, cultural, geographical, temporal context. 3. Thinking about one’s own way of looking at images. This involved an engagement with reflexivity and the situatedness of the researcher. In practical terms, this involved reading and re-reading the comics through, and noting dominant themes, not just in terms of the narrative, but in terms of messages and ideas conveyed visually too. The themes were organized, combined, synthesised, divided, throughout the process. Whilst similar to analysing interview transcript data, analysing visual data and images required a slightly different approach. I opted not to utilize a semiotic analysis, or other such established social research framework, instead opting to read participant created art as ‘comics’. That is, looking for narrative themes through words and images, as well as looking for apparent tensions between images and words.

The autoethnographic comic posed a significant issue in terms of analysis, namely, how can one rigorously and meaningfully analyse one's own work? In the end, the decision was taken not to attempt to analyse my own comic, for fear of an endless feedback loop of meaning, but rather let it stand alone as a mode of representation to be interpreted and analysed by the reader.

This problem is consistent with autoethnographic work more broadly, and it was not my intention to solve the problem, rather address it as best I could. Sparkes (2000) argued that autoethnography sits on the margins of acceptability in terms of academic research, because conventional research paradigms do not necessarily have the tools or criteria with which to judge such accounts. Seventeen years later, I'm not sure this problem will ever be reconciled. Having discussed the key challenges I identified having used comics in this research project, the next section concludes the article, arguing for the place of comics in visual sociology.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary this article has argued that the visual biographical data yielded through the use of the comics medium represents a valuable tool in visual sociology, both as a method and a mode of representation. There are three key reasons for this.

Firstly, comics provide a means through which academic work can become more accessible. They are non-traditional, eye catching and appeal to potentially wider audiences. Having produced a comic as part of this project, means that I have a document I can give to people from outside my discipline, and from outside academia, which they can read, engage with, and understand what I did and why. This can also help to hold the project to account, by allowing more people to critically engage with it. With downward institutional pressure for greater 'public engagement' and 'impact', comics could provide an opportunity to reach more people, and share findings more widely.

Secondly, the comics themselves are a rich and valuable source of visual biographical data. For many, 'the visual' is the most significant human sense (Rose, 2012). According to Berger (1972: 7), "*seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak*". Jay (1993) has used the term 'Ocularcentrism' to describe

the centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life<sup>6</sup>. Berger uses the expression ‘ways of seeing’ to signify the complex process by which we engage with the visual; “*we never look just at one thing, we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves*” (Berger, 1972: 9, in Rose, 2012: 13). It is therefore imperative that we examine visual sources of data, and the comics created through this project are a rich source from which to draw.

Thirdly, in line with the tenets of Visual Sociology, using visual modes of communication and representation can open up new ways of thinking and understanding the social world. The comics medium presents unique opportunities for challenging readers and sharing knowledge. The characteristics of the medium mean it can do things that a traditional written paper can’t. For example, Duncan, Smith and Levitz (2015) argue that comics tend to derive focus and meaning from the specific juxtaposition of panels, text, images and speech presented in sequence. The medium therefore can present diverse and complex messages, particularly well suited to the focus on fluidity and ambiguity within queer studies (Jones and Adams, 2010), whilst also allowing for the more conventional, fixed, literal and linear modes of communication. This also links to Hague’s (2014) argument that our analysis and understanding of the comics medium should not be limited to conceptions of the visual. For Hague, comics are a multi-sensory medium, that are experienced as socially embedded performances, for example, through the visualisation of sound, through speech and ‘sound effects’; or the use of colour to represent temperature and its relationship to the Aristotelian sense of touch. As such, I would argue comics represent a valuable and dynamic means of expressing the complexity of lived sensory experience and biography.

Arguably, there is more and more scope and opportunity for serious scholarly comics and comics based research to be published in academic contexts, for example, with Visual Studies now accepting and peer reviewing submissions in the form of ‘Visual Essays’. The rationale behind the visual essay is that “*the scholarship would be accomplished by the visuals, rather than by the text primarily*” (Shortell and Lizama, 2017). Scholars are being encouraged to think about how they can communicate and

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the dominance of the visual has been challenged as problematic, particularly through feminist critiques of the ‘male gaze’, wherein, heterosexual male experience is assumed to be universal and women are objectified and disempowered (Mulvey, 1975).

demonstrate their critical thought and analysis in dynamic new ways, and I think this can only help to open up new possibilities and generate new modes of thinking and sharing knowledge. I hope that the evidence presented in this paper demonstrates the value and potential of comics as a tool of visual biography and sociology, and that it may encourage others to experiment with this complex, dynamic and engaging medium.

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