“Iconic vs. Realistic Representation in Ariel Schrag’s Potential” [SLIDE 1]

[SLIDE 2] In her application of narrative theory to young adult literature, Andrea Schwenke Wylie describes the way that various types of first-person narration work to “establish confidence between the narrator and the narratee” such that the narratee feels like “the listener in the story rather than a reader outside the story” (192). Along with Michael Cadden and John Stephens, Wylie notes that young adult readers may be seduced by this sort of “engaging narration,” which can encourage unquestioned identification and may create what Cadden terms “single-voiced narratives,” texts that “provide only one argument or position on a matter” and thus may prompt reader compliance or allegiance to potentially conformist attitudes (148).

[SLIDE 3] Maria Nikolajeva points out that beyond identification with the narrator, there is also the matter of identification that can occur between the reader and a focalized character. Nikolajeva claims that in contemporary fiction, “the tendency is to make protagonists more like ordinary people, which implies that subjectivity of the text shifts from the narrator to the character. It is natural” Nikolajeva continues “that authors want the reader to be engaged in their characters’ trails and questions; otherwise the reader [would] simply put the book aside” (201).

For the most part, literary critics have praised those authors who attempt to create a distance between the narrator and the narratee by providing readers with subtle, but persistent opportunities to differentiate themselves from the first-person narrator, often through the narrator’s own ironic self-scrutiny. [SLIDES 4, 5 AND 6] A young reader’s ability to stand apart
from the narrator or from a focalized character has been viewed by Nikolajeva and Cadden, among others, as an essential step in the development of mature reading practices.

[SLIDE 7] Up until this point, I have referred to the examination of reader identification as it applies to text-only narratives, but I would now like to ask what type of narratology is necessary in the analysis of graphic novels, where models of reader identification are complicated through the introduction of visual imagery. [SLIDE 8, 9, 10 AND 11] One of the central tenets of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993) is the idea that when readers look “at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face, [they] see another;” however, when they view a highly iconic image, they see themselves (36).

[SLIDE 12] I would now like to turn to an examination of an comics creator who consciously moves away from the iconic depiction of female adolescence, Ariel Schrag, who alternates between the iconic and the realistic mode in her graphic novels, *Awkward*, *Definition*, *Potential*, and *Likewise*. [SLIDE 13] Schrag explains, on her website, the genesis of these texts: I wrote each book during the summer after the school year I was documenting. The books cover crushes, band obsessions, new friendships, drinking and smoking pot, my obsession with science, coming out as bi, coming out as gay, falling in love, losing my virginity, my parents’ divorce, and the personal and social complications of writing about my life as I live it. *(Schrag, Website, n. pag.)*

Given that Schrag was a teenager when she wrote and published the first three novels in the series and that her texts were initially published by an underground comics in an entirely unedited form, they provide a rich resource for scholars interested in young adult literature written by young adults. They are also important to an examination of issues of reader identification vis-à-vis modes of visual representation. [SLIDE 14] In a 2009 interview with
Bitch Magazine, Schrag reflected on how her literary and comic influences impacted her artistic choices:

I was really into in Ulysses how different parts of the book are in different styles. Some is stream of consciousness, some is like a play, some is a romance novel, some has medical jargon…it sort of varies depending on what the theme or content is… I thought it was a really cool thing to do with comics because there would be this visual difference that would stick out. I was also really inspired by in Maus, the part where he finds his Dad’s comic; I really like how you’re going along and there’s this comic where everything’s dark and it’s all woodcuts, it’s drawn in a totally different style and it’s all dark, and you close it and you’re back to the regular sparse white drawings. (qtd in Berlatsky)

[SLIDES 15 AND 16] In Potential, Schrag initially depicts herself as a sort of iconic “every girl” who is extremely conscious of her performance of gender and who is sometimes dishonest with herself regarding her sexual identity. [SLIDE 17] The realistic mode of depiction enters the narrative when Schrag is dreaming and her unconscious desires and fears are openly expressed. By portraying herself with almost photographic accuracy during these revelatory moments, Schrag establishes a distance that preserves the uniqueness of her own contemplation regarding gender and identity. The unreal dream state becomes real, and the real becomes personal and transformative, which can serve as commentary to young readers who struggle with establishing a sense of self that is authentic.

In the iconic mode, Schrag’s 16 year-old self is deeply influenced by heteronormative attitudes, even within the relatively gay-friendly environs of 1990s Berkeley. Even after she proudly announces her status as a lesbian and begins a relationship with her classmate, Sally, Schrag engages in consensual, planned sex with her male friend, Zally, because she believes that
only by having sex with a boy can she claim to have lost her virginity. The night before her encounter with Zally, Schrag enters one of her dream states in which her realistically depicted self admits that having sex with Zally is more like engaging in a wrestling match than engaging in a meaningful sexual experience – a view that her waking, iconic self suppresses.

[SLIDES 18 AND 19] I would argue that Schrag’s moves between the iconic and the realistic mode are meant to suggest that facing one’s self honestly, even if these confrontations occur in the space afforded by dreams, is a necessary part of maturation. Unlike many mainstream graphic novels, in which the iconic mode proceeds uninterrupted, Schrag’s text asks the reader to think carefully about the character with whom they might identify, whether that identification is based upon the desire to conform or upon a true connection. In texts that feature members of underrepresented or marginalized groups, identification has the potential to have a different level of resonance, depending upon the reader’s perceived subjectivity, but regardless of whether Schrag is drawing and writing about herself, her family members, her friends, or her lovers, she creates detachment by cycling from the iconic to the realistic, creating a layered reading experience.

In “Visual Perversions: Race, Sex, and Cinematic Pleasures,” Eve Oishi discusses the transformative power of witnessing visual culture, in this case film: “the pleasure and danger inherent in the experience of viewing reflect the paradoxical process through which concepts of self and other are formed through the visual, as well as the ways in which the visual experience of the cinema is shaped by ideological structures of power and looking outside the cinema” (644). I would apply this same way of thinking about the relationship between the viewer and the film to the reader and a comic text; in fact, I would argue that the reader who encounters the depiction of female adolescence in a realistic mode is far more likely to discover elements of
herself through the seemingly paradoxical experience of understanding her distance from the protagonist. When no pitch is being made for compliance between narrator/character and reader, the reader is freed to identify or not to identify – to smile in recognition or to flinch in wonder or horror. This flexibility of response echoes Nikolajeva’s claim that “if we want to foster children as mature readers, the first and most important step is to make them aware of the identification fallacy” (202).

Bibliography


