

# #27

## TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE FATHER: SHARON OLDS' *THE FATHER* AND ALISON BECHDEL'S *FUN HOME*

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**Abstract** || This article explores a series of visual-textual devices used in the representation of father figures in the poetry collection *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992) and the graphic memoir *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006). I argue that literature can contribute to undo the conflation of paternity and patriarchy by portraying fathers as complex, fallible, and above all real individuals, as opposed to the disembodied abstract principle that has been prevalent in Western cultures. I will contend that the subsuming qualities of the dominant fiction can be subverted via a series of formal mechanisms related to the visual field that seek to foster reader engagement. In doing so, both *The Father* and *Fun Home* provide alternatives to traditional representations of the father figure.

**Keywords** || Fatherhood | Father-daughter relations | Gaze | Haptic visuality | Ocularization | Comics

### Dues formes de mirar el pare: *The Father* de Sharon Olds i *Fun Home* d'Alison Bechdel

**Resum** || Aquest article explora una sèrie de dispositius visuals-textuals utilitzats en la representació de figures paternes en el poemari *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992) i la novel·la gràfica *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006). Exposo que la literatura pot contribuir a desfer la fusió de paternitat i patriarcat quan es retrata als pares com a individus complexos, fal·libles i, sobretot, reals, en oposició al principi abstracte incorpori que ha predominat en les cultures occidentals. Sostindré que les qualitats subjacents de la ficció dominant poden subvertir-se a través d'una sèrie de mecanismes formals relacionats amb el camp visual que busquen fomentar la participació del lector. En fer-ho, tant *The Father* com *Fun Home* brinden alternatives a les representacions tradicionals de la figura paterna.

**Paraules clau** || Paternitat | Relacions pare-filla | Mirada | Visualitat hàptica | Ocularització | Còmics

### Dos Maneras de Mirar al Padre: *The Father* de Sharon Olds y *Fun Home* de Alison Bechdel

**Resumen** || Este artículo explora una serie de dispositivos visuales-textuales utilizados en la representación de figuras paternas en el poemario *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992) y la memoria gráfica *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006). Argumento que la literatura puede contribuir a deshacer la fusión de la paternidad y el patriarcado al retratar a los padres como individuos complejos, falibles y,

sobre todo, reales, en oposición al principio abstracto incorpóreo que ha prevalecido en las culturas occidentales. Sostendré que las cualidades subyacentes de la ficción dominante pueden subvertirse a través de una serie de mecanismos formales relacionados con el campo visual que buscan fomentar la participación del lector. Al hacerlo, tanto *The Father* como *Fun Home* brindan alternativas a las representaciones tradicionales de la figura paterna.

**Palabras clave** || Paternidad | Relaciones padre-hija | Mirada | Visualidad háptica | Ocularización | Historietas

## 0. Introduction: Fatherhood Revisited

In both popular literature and academia, in fiction as well as in non-fiction works, there has been a fatherhood boom. Many have seen in fatherhood a suitable blueprint for transforming masculinity, confident that fathers hold the key to a renewed, more nurturing and even ethical version of manhood.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the 1990s, the interest in new fatherhood models has soared, becoming a staple in cinema, television, popular literature, magazines, advertising, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Whereas some authors identify this trend as positive, underscoring its transformative potential (Recalcati, 2014), there are reasons to perceive it as yet another iteration of hegemonic masculinity (Hamad, 2014: 15–6). In many cases, these so-called new models are buttressed by the same old ideals of paternity we are used to—only adorned with slight variations that make them appear novel and up-to-date.<sup>3</sup>

To rethink paternity outside the mold of the traditional absent father has proven to be a daunting task. One needs to wonder whether a change in dominant discourses, however positive it might be, will be enough to transform our conception of fatherhood in a profound manner. In other words, it would be necessary to assess to what extent this master discourse can be effectively dissociated from the patriarchal order that fosters and fuels it. This issue ought to be addressed first so that an alternative model of fatherhood, and by extension masculinity, can become viable in the first place.

The existing conflation of paternity and patriarchy hinders the potential development of models for fatherhood that diverge from the norm. This conflation becomes explicit in what Kaja Silverman calls “the dominant fiction,” that is, “the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father” (1992: 34). The dominant fiction assumes the normative heterosexual family as the kernel unit of the social order, whose symbolic center is the mythic, patriarchal father<sup>4</sup> and, by proxy, “the white heteronormative father figure” (Shostak, 2020: 4). Inasmuch as “it announces itself fundamentally as a *fiction*, a myth,” the dominant fiction “disguises” the conflation or confusion of the multiple registers for “father” (Shostak, 2020: 4–5; original emphasis). Failing to identify these multiple registers as separate reinforces the idea that the father is an essentially bodiless entity that agglutinates individual fathers, paternal metaphor, and patriarchal authority, and makes it nearly impossible to distinguish the power of an individual father from the power of patriarchy (Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace 1989: xiv; xi).<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, representing father figures that break away from cisheteronormative models—fathers who are ill, disabled, queer, or elderly, just to mention a few possibilities—could help exposing the constructedness of dominant narratives of paternity.

This article explores a series of visual and textual devices used in the representation of father figures in the poetry collection *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992) and the graphic memoir *Fun Home* (Alison Be-

## Notes

- <1> For further reading on fatherhood renewal, see Recalcati. For an in-depth comment on the U.S. case, particularly men’s movements of the 1990s and their emphasis on fatherhood, see Keith and Messner.
- <2> The analyses of Faludi and Hamad are particularly pertinent to illustrate this point.
- <3> For an in-depth exploration of this issue, see Michael Kimmel’s *Angry White Men* (2013), especially chapter 4, “Angry White Dads.”
- <4> Silverman posits that the symbolic order is governed by the Law of Language, i.e., the universally applicable principle that any individual must be castrated in order to enter the symbolic order that precedes us all, and the Law of Kinship Structure, or the patriarchal rule that puts women in the position of tokens that men exchange, and “equates the father with the Law, and hence exempts him from it” (1992: 42). The dominant fiction imposes an “imaginary resolution” that consists in the belief in “the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father,” which exempts fathers from submission to the Law of Language (1992: 42).
- <5> Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace identify Lacanian psychoanalysis and its tendency to conceptualize the father as an abstract function as the main source of this confusion.

chdel, 2006). Both authors compose ambivalent portraits that present fathers as despots who are nonetheless fallible and thereby capable of (some form of) love. Using examples taken from these works, I examine how literature may contribute to expose the conflation of paternity and patriarchy by portraying fathers as complex, fallible, and above all real individuals, as opposed to the disembodied abstract principle that has been prevalent in Western cultures. I will contend that the subsuming qualities of the dominant fiction can be rendered visible via formal mechanisms related to the visual field that foster reader engagement. In doing so, both *The Father* and *Fun Home* provide alternatives to traditional representations of the father figure.

### 1. Mutual Recognition Outside the Logocentric Order: *The Father*

In *The Father*, Olds chronicles her father's succumbing to throat cancer and the aftermath of his death. The speaker harbors a profound longing for paternal love and recognition that remains unfulfilled, for the father is out of her (emotional) reach. Since language-based communication with the father is not viable due to this lack of recognition, the speaker focuses instead on the sensual aspect of their relationship. In turn, sensuality is closely entwined with the visual, first as manifestation of the daughter's profound longing for paternal love, and later as a means to chart and identify with the father's body.

One of the main symptoms of the father-patriarchy conflation, crucial to how fathers have been traditionally represented in Western culture(s), is asomia, that is, bodilessness (Yaeger, 1989: 9). Father figures have generally been conceived as abstract and universal principles of law and authority, not bound to biology. Paternal asomia is intrinsically connected to gender essentialism insofar as "[p]aternal authority is associated with culture against maternal nature" (Oliver, 1997: 5). Nevertheless, this opposition is in itself quite paradoxical:

Patriarchy is founded on [...] the father's natural authority because of his natural strength or aggressive impulses. [...] After grounding the father's authority in nature, our philosophers and psychoanalytic theorists have disassociated the father from nature by disembodimenting him. [...] His body must be evacuated to maintain images of his association with culture against nature; his body threatens a fall back into nature. (Oliver, 1997: 5)

There is one notable exception to paternal asomia exemplified by the virile body. The virile body emerges as "a representative of control and power," an "antibody" that symbolizes "the overcoming of the body" that is inherent to "manliness" (Oliver, 1997: 128). The difference between virile and female bodies is that virility allows control over bodily fluids: "unlike women's bodies, men's bodies do not secrete fluids and become subjected to flows that are out of their own control, so their bodies, unlike women's bodies, are clean and have proper boundaries" (Grosz qtd. in Oliver, 1997: 131). The representation of the paternal body in *The Father* challenges this very notion by pre-

senting us a “large man gone small with cancer” (Olds, “The Picture I Want,” 2019: 10), an infantilized version of the father who is now unable to take care of himself:

[...] adjusting the drip, wiping the dried  
saliva out of the corners of his mouth,  
making sure the cup for the mucus  
was near him, and the call button pinned to the sheet  
*like a pacifier tied to the bars of a crib.* (Olds, “The Want,” 2019: 14;  
emphasis mine)

This image provides a stark contrast with the father the speaker remembers from her childhood—a virile yet absent father:

Now that he cannot sit up,  
now that he just lies there  
looking at the wall, I forget the one  
who sat up and put on his reading glasses  
.....  
It's as if I abandoned that ruddy man  
with the swollen puckered mouth of a sweet-eater,  
the torso packed with extra matter  
like a planet a handful of which weighs as much as the earth, I have  
left behind forever that young man my father [...] (Olds, “The Present  
Moment,” 2019: 20)

Whereas the virile body stands for physical control, the diseased body “frequently refuses to maintain the distance that marks separation between subjects; when the body is overwhelmed by illness, it begins to swell, ooze, sweat and bleed until it intrudes upon public space” (Tanner, 2006: 24). Once it has been marked by illness, the paternal body can no longer be a virile anti-body. Contact with someone afflicted with a disease “feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo” because that contact “is felt to be obscene—in the original meaning of that word: ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses” (Sontag, 1978: 6; 8). In this sense, the paternal body in *The Father* “bears the burden of abjection” insofar as the ill body is perceived as “inhuman” or “alien” (Zakin, 2011: n.p.). It is not “lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order [...] borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 2002: 232).<sup>6</sup> It is hinted that, prior to his illness, the speaker had sublimated her father as object of her desire. The only tenuous connection between father and daughter appears to occur via the gaze, in particular the zooming gaze. Zooming introduces “a dramatic reduction of the distance between the viewer and the viewed,” and in their view reveals a profound “desire for intimate relationship or attachment with the gazed object” (Padva and Buchweitz, 2014: 5). The act of zooming enforces “a unidirectional process in which the zoomed object cannot look back at the viewer,” which marks it as “a violent act” that threatens the privacy of the object “by turning the covert into the overt” (2014: 5). Thus, it introduces a hierarchy whereby

<6> For Kristeva, corporeal waste represents “the objective frailty of symbolic order” (2002: 259). She distinguishes two broad types of polluting objects, “excremental” and “menstrual,” and contends that the former and “its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)” stand for “the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (2002: 260). However, the danger to identity comes from within, as in the pollution represented by “menstrual” polluting objects. In the case of *The Father*, the danger comes from within, even though the subject is threatened by an alien element (cancer). In this sense, the father’s body portrayed by Olds bears resemblance to the feminine body.

the object being-gazed-at becomes powerless in front of the gazer. It also disrupts the possibility of face-to-face recognition: though the subject may look at the Other, the Other cannot possibly look back.

Nevertheless, this aforementioned hierarchy of zooming is reversed in *The Father*. The daughter's longing is so overwhelming that it renders her powerless, making her *subjected* to his gaze instead of subject of the gaze. In "The Waiting," the poem that opens the collection, the father sits "unmoving, like something someone has made" in his living room at the break of dawn (Olds, 2019: 3). Although he knows he is being watched, he remains static, "as if a piece of sculpture could sense / the gaze which was running over it" (2019: 3). Undisturbed by the daughter's intrusive gaze, he waits for her to come closer: "the kiss / came to him, he did not go to it" (2019: 3). The father's object-like passivity coexists with the fact that he retains his power over his daughter. A mirage of paternal subjectivity appears in "The Lifting" as he calls his daughter's name, an interjection that she understands as a command for her to look:

Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I  
turned my head away but he cried out  
*Shar!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked.  
He was sitting in the high cranked-up bed with the  
gown up, around his neck,  
to show me the weight he had lost. I looked  
where his solid ruddy stomach had been  
and I saw the skin fallen into loose  
soft hairy rippled folds  
lying in a pool of folds  
down at the base of his abdomen,  
the gaunt torso of a big man  
who will die soon [...] (Olds, 2019: 15–7; original emphasis)

Here the act of looking is a full-on stare that has been actively requested by the father. He is in command of how he displays himself. If "The Waiting" portrays the father as reduced to "the material status of a body that moves steadily toward death" (Tanner, 2006: 27), "The Lifting" demonstrates that he retains control over the daughter even though she is the agent of the zooming gaze and he fulfills the role of object of that same gaze. This control is further exemplified in the recursive image of the daughter staring at her motionless father, powerless and unable to secure his attention. For instance, she describes herself seeing him "lying on the couch in the unlit end of the / living room on his back with his mouth open" (Olds, "The Dead Body," 2019: 39). In "Natural History," the speaker compares her father's stillness in his grave with her memories of him as he lay "asleep, passed out, undulant, lax, / indifferent" (2019: 59). The same image reappears in "Waste Sonata":

[...] I stood  
 in that living room and saw him drowse  
 like the prince, in slobbrous beauty, I began  
 to think he was a kind of chalice,  
 a grail, his love the goal of a quest,  
 yes! He was the god of love  
 and I was a shit. [...] (Olds, 2019: 76)

The practice of zooming is maintained throughout the father's illness, only that it leads to an unexpected finding. As the speaker's zooming gaze examines the father's now ill body, charting the presence of putrid matter and excremental fluids, she realizes that her father "was a / shit" (Olds, 2019: 76). As she refuses to avert her gaze, mortality and materiality emerge to re-signify the paternal figure, and the understanding emerges that he is nothing but a body that will soon turn into waste, not a deity whose love must be earned. Regardless, this moment of cognizance does not placate the daughter's desire for recognition. From the speaker's perspective as a healthy subject, the father's nakedness in "The Lifting" represents the very real threat of the abject rendered visible. Still, she reacts with amazement at how very similar they are:

[...] Right away  
 I saw how much his hips are like mine,  
 the long, white angles, and then  
 how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,  
 a chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,  
 .....  
 his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he  
 shows me his old body [...] (Olds, 2019: 15)

Despite the proximity of the abject, the speaker remains unfazed. In "The Picture I Want," readers follow her gaze as she leans on her father's shoulder introducing a close-up of the lumps in his neck: "my face as near / to the primary tumor as a dozing baby's / lips to the mother's breast" (Olds, 2019: 10). This feminization of the paternal body is a direct consequence of abjection, in the sense proposed by Kristeva. Nevertheless, the daughter sees through rejection and into the features they share. Upon realizing how similar their bodies are, zooming facilitates kinesthetic evocation as the speaker finds in the material body a suitable vessel for wordless communication. Most of the moments of intimate communion between father and daughter are silent and rely heavily on the tactile dimension, thereby suggesting that touch can make up for words. A clear example of this is found in "The Look":



[...] so I slid my hand between his hot back and the hot sheet and he sat there with his eyes bulging, those used India-ink-eraser eyes that had never really looked at me. His skin shocked me, silky as a breast, voluptuous as a baby's skin, but dry, and my hand was dry, so I rubbed easily, in circles, he stared and did not choke, I closed my eyes and rubbed as if his body were his soul. I could feel his backbone deep inside, I could feel him under the rule of the choking, all my life I had felt he was under a rule. He gargled, I got the cup ready, I didn't vary the stroke, he spat, I praised him, I let the full pleasure of caressing my father come awake in my body, and then I could touch him from deep in my heart,

.....  
 [...] and he lifted his head shyly but without reluctance and looked at me directly, for just a moment, with a dark face and dark shining confiding eyes. (Olds, 2019: 17)

In this poem as well as in "My Father's Eyes" the father acknowledges his daughter's presence in what we might call an act of semiotic<sup>7</sup> recognition:

[...] And once, when he got agitated, reaching out, I leaned down and he swerved his blurred iris toward me and within it for a moment his pupil narrowed and took me in, it was my father looking at me.

.....  
 and I thought of that last glint, glint without warmth or hope, his glint of recognition. (Olds, 2019: 31)

The speaker's acceptance of, and identification with, the object body undermines the centrality of the word in the process of mutual recognition. Nevertheless, the paradox arises when the speaker represents this scene outside of language by means of the (written) word of the poem. Olds's poetry cannot fully escape logocentrism and the Symbolic order from which it emanates. It is my contention that this act of semiotic recognition without words and the written word are brought together through the use of haptic visuality. According to Laura Marks, "haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality" (2000: 163).

<7> The semiotic can be defined as "the materiality of language, its tonal and rhythmic qualities, its bodily force. [...] Mobile and provisional, moving through the body of the not-yet subject, the semiotic is a chaotic force anterior to language, unlocalizable because it courses through an as yet undifferentiated materiality in which the infantile body is not yet distinct from the maternal body" (Zakin, 2011: n.p.). For further reading, see Kristeva and Zakin.

However, the mutual process of recognition between father and daughter occurs in the diegetic level of the poem, where their bodies are both stripped off their material dimension. Here the concept of the “lyric second body” discussed by Anne Keefe proves to be an ideal complement to haptic visuality. For Keefe, Olds’s emphasis on the body is an attempt to re-create on the lyric plane “what Merleau-Ponty would call ‘the second body’”:

this lyric second body is constructed in and through language within the space of the lyric poem.[...] [B]ecause sensory experience is inextricable from the body and presupposes subjectivity, it is perhaps only through the aesthetic re-creation of subjective experience such as that which occurs within the space of the lyric poem that we can ever facilitate a return to the body’s experience from a perceptual remove. (2015: 259)

The second body within the lyric space of the poem accounts for Olds’ representation of her own sensorial experience. In turn, the only way we can experience the father’s abject status is filtered through his daughter’s scrutinizing gaze. Furthermore, the lyric second body enables father-child recognition and identification as it shields and preserves the integrity of the daughter’s sense of self in contact with abjection. It is the speaker’s second body which mediates the experience of the paternal abject body—a shield placed in between the real daughter and the father, but also in between the readers and the father. This mediating role becomes apparent in poems such as “Last Acts,” where the speaker fantasizes with washing her father’s face. The tactile dimension of this action, conveyed through haptic visuality, invites us readers to accompany the speaker’s gaze as she declares:

I wish I could wash my father’s face,  
take cotton from the dirt of the earth  
and run it over his face so the loops  
lick in his pores before he dies. [...]  
.....  
Now I want to feel, in the rowelling  
of the cloth, the contours of his pitted skin,  
I want to wash him, the way I would scrub  
my dolls’ faces thoroughly  
before any great ceremony. (Olds, 2019: 21)

The inclusion of verbs of action such as “wash” and “scrub,” together with references to specific fabrics in contact with the body, evokes a highly sensual portrait of this intimate moment. The speaker’s hand and gaze both follow the “rowelling” movement of the cotton over the face, evoking a pricking sensation against “the contours of his pitted skin” through the cloth. The action being described is not as central to the poem as the rendition of the father’s body filtered through the speaker’s touch. The poem manages to translate the sensations

of two bodies in contact with each other without recourse to visual descriptions, simply focusing on the myriad sensations provoked by different materials and textures in contact with one another.

When her father finally dies, the speaker evokes his smell, a mixture of “yeast,” “sour ferment,” “wide cement,” “a sidewalk of crushed granite,” “the smelling-salts / tang of chlorine” of a “pool in summer,” and “mold from the rug in his house” (Olds, “His Smell,” 2019: 37). The primal feeling that smelling evokes further stresses the father’s complete abandonment of the symbolic order. Father and daughter have travelled back to a pre-symbolic moment that only exists as such posthumously, in the lyric space of the poem. Here the possibility of contact is completely removed from the logocentric order and reduced to the animal-like act of the daughter smelling her father’s corpse, “breathing him in / as you would breathe the air, deeply, before going into exile” (Olds, 2019: 38).

## 2. “A stunning glimpse” into the Father’s Inner Life: *Fun Home*

Alison Bechdel’s memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* chronicles the author’s ill-fated relationship with her late father, Bruce Bechdel. The discovery of his double life as a closeted gay man in rural Pennsylvania during the 1960s and 1970s profoundly affects Alison, who has just come out as a lesbian when her father unexpectedly passes away. The memoir represents an attempt to bear witness to Bruce’s hidden life and connect with him, albeit posthumously. Prior to Bruce’s death, father and daughter had managed to get closer to each other through the tentative exploration of their shared queerness—something that Bruce refers to as “some kind of... identification” (Bechdel, 2006: 220). Years after his passing, Bechdel manages to break free from melancholia via writing by reimagining her bond with her father as one of queer filiation, in a conscious effort to reconnect with her father through the suspected affinity that was already in the making before his passing.

Queerness is connected to the redemptive act of telling that transforms her remorse into a sympathetic act of witness (Cvetkovich, 2008: 113). In this regard, the memoir represents an opportunity to create an alternative that is not based on a traumatic event and that simultaneously pays homage to her father’s closeted queerness as a direct yet tragic precursor of her own sexual identity. Through her acts of rereading and recognition Bechdel pursues the ultimate goal of outing and reclaiming her father, as Julia Watson puts it (2008: 44). In doing so, Bechdel inserts Bruce into her personal genealogy of referents, hence creating a queer canon of her own. Meghan Fox underscores the fundamental “influence” that Bruce holds over Alison’s “artistic development and queer sensibility,” and goes on to argue that “Bechdel thus supplants the centrality of paternity as both

a canonical and social structure with a model of queer kinship that offers affinity in place of filiation,” hence downplaying the importance of biological filiation (2019: 514).<sup>8</sup>

In an attempt to rule out the circumstances surrounding her father’s death, which she assumes to be suicide, Bechdel goes back and forth in time, revisiting all kinds of material evidence. *Fun Home* is rife with painstaking drawings of actual photographs, newspaper clips, book covers, and other assorted memorabilia. She resorts to the archive in search of what I would call a surrogate firsthand testimony, composed of a wealth of different elements through which she hopes to gain access to her father’s experience of the original event. However, the archive she assembles cannot speak for Bruce. We have no way (and nor does the author) to gain access to Bruce’s experience or testimony, which leaves a blank space that is filled in by his daughter’s narrative.<sup>9</sup> Immersed in a process that Valerie Rohy defines as “a case of documentary obsession” (2010: 341), Alison is torn between the “absolutely, objectively true” she prizes and the impossibility of obtaining it (2010: 353).

Thus, the archive becomes not a warrant of truth, but rather the exposure of the feverish process by which truth is sought. For K.W. Eveleth, Bechdel’s archive fever engenders an alternative queer archive that is full of potential, as the whole memoir explores how telling the difference between reality and representations of it is a futile enterprise (2015: 96). Bechdel’s refusal to settle on a single account, instead foregrounding her own doubts as the story unfolds (McBean, 2013: 104), counters what could otherwise have been a decidedly monological account.

Through her act of narrative creation Bechdel takes over the author-creator role, replacing her father as the new master narrator. However, her “insistence on her own embodied vision” that is “essential to this contingent production of her knowledge about her family and her father” (McBean 2013: 115) sets her apart from her father’s despotic ways. Hers is a ‘limited narrator,’ a figure that introduces “epistemological limitations,” “philosophical skepticism referring to the multiple forms of perception and cultural creations of meaning,” and “reframing” as it emphasizes mediation (Assmann, 2017: 205).<sup>10</sup> In this case, the medium also contributes to foreground mediation, as we will see next.

Being “based on panels, frames, and gutters that translate time and space onto the page” (Whitlock, 2006: 968), the grammar of comics “calls readers’ attention to what they see, or don’t see, and why” (Chute, 2017: 34). In comics “pictures are part of the writing and the drawing moves rather than merely illustrates the narrative” (Chute, 2011: 108). This twofold narrative particularly stands out in the genres dealing with life writing, or autographics, which allow for “multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection” (Watson, 2008: 28; see also Warhol, 2011:

<8> For more on the relation between queer temporalities and (queer) history in *Fun Home*, see Cvetkovich, Fox, McCullough, and McBean.

<9> Bechdel depicts Bruce’s tragic fate as a likely consequence of his being confined to a closeted existence. In doing so, Bechdel approaches his life by applying the same categories she uses for herself—even though she acknowledges her bias: “I shouldn’t pretend to know what my father’s [erotic truth] was. Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself” (2006: 230).

<10> Philosophical skepticism in *Fun Home* is represented by queer potential, labyrinthine aesthetics, and the use of jagged temporalities, elements through which the narrator overtly questions the validity of concepts such as truth, veracity, or lies. For further information on the use of labyrinthine aesthetics, jagged temporalities, and recursiveness, see Eveleth and Pearl.

3–8).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, autographics introduces a further split in the form of autobiographical avatars, or “the drawn personae of cartoonists” (Watson, 2008: 28–9), an additional category to those of author, narrator, and character as separate entities that point back to the same extratextual individual (Lejeune, 1994: 61). In *Fun Home*, the autobiographical avatar is further split into child Alison, teenage Alison, and young adult Alison. The narrator engages with all of them by commenting on their actions, offering greater insight on their motivations, or detaching herself from their actions by introducing digressions. Interestingly, the narrator’s voice is confined to the verbal narrative level—unlike the characters, whose presence is registered in the visual as well as the verbal layer.

Mediation in *Fun Home* encompasses authorial mediation as well as reader mediation due to the role of closure in comics. Closure is defined as the process whereby readers fill in the gaps left in between panels; it demands active participation in the completion of the story by imagining possibilities of what occurs in the gutter space between panels: “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud, 2001: 67). In her attempts to find clues to recreate the paternal figure, Bechdel makes the most out of these fractures, as she looks back in time to discover hints of her father’s homosexuality that she had overlooked as a child (Cvetkovich, 2008: 114).

The role of reader mediation is of particular relevance in conveying the experience of afterwardsness, that is, the process whereby a subject relives and completes, usually as an adult, an event that had taken place in their childhood but was not fully understood back then.<sup>12</sup> What determines which experiences undergo this process of deferred revision is whether “it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate [the lived experience] fully into a meaningful context” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 2006: 112). Alison might not have had “direct knowledge of her father’s sexual desires or activities” as a child, but nonetheless witnesses “the secrecy and uncertainty that pervade the house, testifying to her inchoate reaction to that which cannot be narrated” (Cvetkovich, 2008: 121). Eveleth suggests that “Alison’s psychological trauma” is likely triggered by the fact that “intense privacy was the normal mode of conduct in the Bechdel house” (2015: 93). Instead of featuring her recollection of past events either as a child or as an adult, Bechdel opts to show us readers a recreation of the event that fuses both. The contradictions found between the visual and the verbal level captures the author’s belated realization of her parents’ turbulent marital life, as well as the toll it took on her and her brothers.

A good example of this fractured visual and verbal narration can be found in chapter 5, where she recreates a domestic quarrel while pondering the causes of her obsessive compulsive disorder. At the

<11> Gillian Whitlock has coined the term “autographics” in order “to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text” present in this particular genre, but also to shed light on “the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics” (2006: 966). Robyn Warhol’s “autography” addresses this same duplicity.

<12> Even though *Nachträglichkeit* and afterwardsness roughly refer to the same concept, the former is used when discussing the original Freudian concept, whereas the latter is associated with Jean Laplanche’s revision of the same concept, *après-coup* (translated in English as ‘afterwardsness’).

verbal level, the narrating voice discusses Dr. Spock's explanation of the triggers for OCD in the bestselling *Baby and Child Care* while Alison's avatar reads the book. This drawing establishes continuity between the narrator's voice and the image, hence anchoring the extradiegetic level to the intradiegetic scene depicted in the panel. Henceforth, the narration featured in the intradiegetic level splits in two, and two parallel scenes develop simultaneously in the following panels' foreground and background respectively. While Alison keeps on reading in the foreground, one of Alison's brothers declares "Dad's home"; the speech bubble signals that the utterance takes place at the intradiegetic level (Bechdel, 2006: 138). The next panels depict Bruce's arrival at the family house, presumably late at night, and an argument erupting between him and Alison's mother. The fight takes place intradiegetically, in the panel's background; in the foreground, meanwhile, the Bechdel children keep on reading and watching television as if they did not notice what is happening (2006: 139).

In this fragment, the omniscient narrator never alludes to the background scene, even though she does see it—and, as author, we know she has written *and* drawn it. Remarks such as "[t]he explanation of repressed hostility made no sense to me" are accompanied by scenes in which we can see Bechdel's parents in the middle of a heated argument in the kitchen. The narrator adopts the same obliviousness that her avatar, child Alison, experienced as a child; but in her role of author who draws the page, she experiments with manifest contradictions within this twofold narrative. The information is displayed and set for us readers to connect the dots, making us participant of the feeling of belated realization that is seminal to afterwardsness.

The relevance of afterwardsness and its disruptive presence—finding cracks in the seemingly perfect surface of family life—stems from the way in which Alison sees, as opposed to the way her father sees. Sam McBean contends that the visual realm is experienced by young Alison as a patriarchal sphere of control, and specifically refers to the "visual landscape that her father creates in the home" and "his vision of her gender presentation" (2013: 107). Bruce's gaze pursued a homogenizing effect, insofar as he strove to achieve an "air of authenticity" through "his skillful artifice," making things "appear to be what they were not" (Bechdel, 2006: 13; 16). By contrast, Alison's gaze seeks to uncover what used to be hidden, even if that entails disrupting the perfect portrait of family life that her father so cherished. Her looking into her father's private life is as respectful as it is unapologetic. Freed from her father's controlling gaze, she is finally able to (re)direct the gaze the way she chooses.

Bechdel's witnessing gaze is shared with us readers through ocularization and enhances the posthumous feeling of communion between Bechdel and her father. In comics ocularization refers to "the framing of vision" as opposed to focalization, i.e., "the framing of information" (Pedri, 2015: 9): "Instead of introducing a subjective filtering of information, the shift in ocularization presents an objective seeing" (2015:

19). Put differently, ocularization allows readers to see exactly what a character in the intradiegetic level is seeing. In *Fun Home*, where secrecy and epiphany play a seminal role, ocularization functions as a mechanism to involve readers in her discoveries, making them complicit in Bechdel's look at her father's intimate life. Furthermore, it emphasizes that "vision is always mediated by bodies that have their own histories of vision— bodies that see from particular perspectives and that have particular relationships to the field of vision" (McBean, 2013: 120).

Even though focalization also plays a crucial role in representing Alison's way of seeing, as it often invites the reader to look at what she is seeing (see McBean, esp. p.108), ocularization is rooted in the particular (material) perspective occupied by Bechdel. This perspective is made explicit in the reproduction of photographs. Besides anchoring Bechdel's story in the real world, images provide reliable proof of a side of Bruce's life that she did not quite see as a child. The fact that Bechdel chose not to reproduce the original photos but to redraw them "opens them to interpretation," which in turn "grants them a different kind of encoded subjectivity" (Watson, 2008: 52).

Through acts of (re)drawing, Bechdel appropriates the material and thus the story, and consequently is able to discover a newfound sense of identification with her father. Her redrawings sometimes include her own hands, whose presence "invites the reader [...] to witness her own witnessing of the photographs" (McBean, 2013: 116). Likewise, Pedri suggests that the presence of Alison's hand in the panel, added to the over-the-shoulder effect that the shift in ocularization entails, is aimed at creating a sense of "authentic personal experience that has been filtered through Alison's recollection as well as her artistic rendition of that recollection" (2015: 20). McBean also notes that Bechdel's hand draws attention to the representation of "a partial and thus limited perspective" (2013: 117).

The exact center of the book features a double-page spread reproducing a snapshot Bruce took during a family holiday (Bechdel, 2006: 100–1). In it, babysitter (and Bruce's lover) Roy appears posing in his underwear, lying on the bed of the motel room that he and Bruce shared.<sup>13</sup> The snapshot offers Alison the chance to peek at her father's private existence: that is, it is not a surrogate testimony, but a closer look at the real thing. For Chute, the drawing of Roy's photo synthesizes "the concomitant identification and disidentification Bechdel feels toward her father," simultaneously a "dutiful tribute to and inhabitation of her father's illicit desire" (2017: 374). This identification is reinforced by the materiality of the piece of evidence: in holding the photo and looking at it, Bechdel inhabits her father's gaze, and thereby becomes a sympathetic witness to her father's hidden sexuality (Cvetkovich, 2008: 113). She can determine the value of the photo according to what it means to her (Cvetkovich, 2008: 116–7), which is in turn conditioned by her own public identity as a lesbian in a time and place different to those her father inhabited.

<13> This image has been described by Bechdel as "the core of the book" in a literal and symbolic sense insofar as its finding spawned the memoir: "About a year after Dad died, right after I got out of college, I was at home, sort of organizing all my stuff. That's when I ran across this photograph. It was a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades" (Chute, 2006: 1006).

Placing their queer affinity under scrutiny leads her to wonder whether their two seemingly separate lives might be “revealed to converge—to have always converged—through a vast ‘network of transversals’” (Bechdel, 2006: 102). The Proustian reference can be understood as the convergence of Bruce’s disparate facets as father and closeted homosexual, but also as the convergence of Bruce’s and Alison’s stories, first “inversions of one another” (Bechdel, 2006: 98) and later shown to be bound by queer filiation. The idea of convergence is explored—again, via ocularization—in a panel where Bechdel holds two snapshots in her hands, one of Bruce in his twenties juxtaposed to her own (Bechdel, 2006: 120). By letting us—rather, inviting us to—see the similarities for ourselves, Bechdel collapses the distinctions of author, narrator, character, and reader in the position of the gazer.

Unlike Bruce’s fabrication of the house as “a simulacrum,” “a museum” akin to a “still life with children” (Bechdel, 2006: 13; 17), Bechdel insists on breathing life into her creation by allowing readers to inhabit the labyrinth-house that is the book. She understands she cannot escape the inherent mediatedness of her account—but unlike her father, she does not conceal the least flattering elements. By doing so, Bechdel can construct what Cvetkovich calls an “archive of feelings” (2008: 119) whose elements “are important [...] because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past” (2008: 120). The archive of feelings, in its (re)created dimension, conveys the father-daughter relationship in a way that “depends on graphically embodying and enacting, not just telling, the family story” (Watson, 2008: 52). This act of witness enables Bechdel to process her father’s traumatic death and come to terms with her past. Reversing the typical Oedipal scheme, Bechdel achieves her symbolic independence not by killing the father, but by bringing him back from the dead through her art—as “a sort of inverted Oedipal complex,” as she herself puts it (2006: 230).

### 3. Conclusions

As this article has shown, both Olds and Bechdel find ways to achieve agency in the visual field that had been hitherto controlled by their respective father figures. The question arises of whether their gaining agency is conditioned by their fathers’ passing; in other words, whether they would have relented had they been alive. It appears that the experience of death not only prompts control to be taken over by the daughters, but also ushers in a reexamination of the paternal figure. This is especially noteworthy, considering the relevance of afterwardsness in *Fun Home*. Arguably, the de-idolization process in *The Father* could also be understood as a form of belated realization akin to afterwardsness.

Significantly, the finding of paternal fallibility and deviation from the norm of the dominant fiction—or rather, realization, for there is a notable epiphanic component in both—occur in the visual plane. Each



of the formal devices at play is conditioned by the specific features of each genre: namely, ocularization requires a visual medium, whereas the effect of zooming can be replicated verbally. Regardless, both techniques point back to the same kind of experience in terms of reader engagement, as Olds and Bechdel invites us to see with them, from their viewpoint. In doing so, they defy the paternal ban on the visual field, involving readers in the otherwise patriarchal experience of looking by sharing their agency.

Furthermore, their defiance corroborates that, upon closer inspection, the picture of patriarchal might is far from seamless. The material aspect of their respective acts of looking—the gaze directed at the abject, ill body of Olds' father, and Bechdel's embodied seeing—also challenge the disembodiment that is central in dominant fictions of fatherhood. The complex portraits in these two works demonstrate that the stern father of the patriarchy can be nonetheless capable of love, if provided with a body. As Kelly Oliver denounces, “our images of fatherhood should include an embodied loving father rather than just the stern symbolic father of the law or an imaginary father who collapses into either the symbolic father or the maternal body” (1998: 146–7). These and other representations of fatherhood that emphasize paternal embodiment prove that, while the conflation of paternity and patriarchy can be extremely hard to dismantle, the dominant fiction undergirding it can indeed be challenged.

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