

Final Research Paper

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Monsters and Metaphors:

Ken Dahl's Radical Reorientation of the Personal Experience of Illness Through Comics

“Imagine never kissing anyone on the lips again.”

So begins this harrowing personal account of comics creator Ken Dahl's imaginative and dramatic experience with the symptoms and the aftermath of herpes. Captivating his audience with hysterical imagined scenarios, mystified monsters, and ironic real-life personal encounters, Dahl creates an educational comic, informative and inspired. His imaginative bobble-headed characterizations of the regular, work-a-day American and the various alternative lifestyles Dahl is ostensibly a part of, paired with his handwritten explosions of wit lends itself to humorous mockery of a social landscape in which everyone is complicit in one's own situatedness. In Dahl's world his characters grapple with the narrow frames through which they have been identified and identify with, and rather than this be a depressing, hallowing fact of life, there is a playfulness in his stories that transcend the bleak objectification of the human condition.

Through sly humor, sarcastic juxtapositions, and a wandering eye, Dahl reenacts real-life scenarios whilst tilting and obscuring the preconceptions in them. As *Monsters* recreates Dahl's traumatic dissolution into a life contingent on herpes, he gives testimony of the coercive and discriminatory attitudes toward illness, recreating and contesting the systems through which

individuals perpetuate and engage in censoring the body, both personally and collectively. In representing herpes diagnosis on a personal level, *Monsters* presents an innovative and fresh representation of illness in society. Weaving through narratives of romantic relationships, workplace dramas, and attitudes toward sex, this is not a hokey STD information guide—though it most definitely is informative and supported by facts—rather Dahl’s opus is a multilayered narrative of the social context of illness.

Monsters emerges as a significant work from which normative conceptualizations of medicine and society can be deconstructed and renegotiated for a more socially aware and relevant understanding of how illness operates personally and within society. In demonstrating how Dahl exposes cultural hegemonic practices in the experience of illness and reorients discursive medical discourse, I will link *Monsters* specifically to a heritage of Social Realism, a practice that reveals the social and political forces underpinning cultural events. Moreover, comics as a medium has developed realist devices, such that through its unique and innovative visual-verbal narratives, comics itself becomes a site where meaning is contested and discursive iconographies are challenged. Locating Ken Dahl's work within comics' recent renaissance, wider acclaim, and increasing scholarship, I will further establish its political impact and cultural significance.

Graphic Medicine: A Quick History

Comics as a medium has recently been heralded and optimized for the purposes of reconstructing contemporary narratives such as Dahl's comics accomplishes. Jeff Adams, lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, and professor at the University of Chester, demonstrates comics creators' use of this medium as a form of social realism, bound up with politics and ideology, in his recent academic publication *Documentary*

Graphic Novels and Social Realism. Evident in the recent renaissance of the comics world are comics creators who, recognizing larger political and cultural pressures that they felt compelled to resist and challenge, have developed and adapted realist strategies within the act of visual/textual resistance. In analyzing a few key graphic novels, Adams explores how where subject matter is thought of as above representation, the specificity of documentary and autobiographical accounts in comics is perhaps the most significant resistance that they offer to those aspects of commodification that reduce historical memory to mythologized entertainment. Thus, the contemporary audience may come to know or vicariously experience complex past events and experiences by means of narratives in comics form.

Indeed, comics have long been much more than super-hero stories; graphic novels are so varied across genres and subgenres; they include hybridized works of nonfiction, biography, fantasy, limitless in their reconstruction of literary norms. The rich narrative texture resultant of experimentation in comics works to enable questioning of the dominant tropes of invisibility and silencing. With Charles McGrath, former editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, catapulting widespread acceptance of comics in his 2004 article "Not Funnies," and comics writer and lecturer Roger Sabin's 2001 oversize book from iconic visual arts publisher Phaidon Press, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, examining and showcasing the evolution of comics works from disposable entertainment to significant cultural object, it has become commonplace to hear critics from the literary and arts worlds celebrating graphic novels as accomplishing critical reorientation of their respective fields. Meanwhile comics scholarship has taken off from within the comics world, with visionary Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art: principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, both comics works that engage academic readership of the medium.

In concert with these comics, Stuart Hall's much broader *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices: Culture, Media and Identities* has proved indispensable for its comprehensive outline of the way language, visual images, and discourse work in systems of representation. And only quite recently, a specific critical vocabulary with which to appreciate the multidimensional sophistication of comics has been developed primarily by Hillary Chute, English professor at the University of Chicago and formerly a Junior Fellow in literature in the Society of fellows at Harvard University, in her numerous scholarly articles, including "Introduction: Graphic Narrative" and "Ragtime, Kavalier & Clay, and the Framing of Comics." Comics' accessibility across readership and location outside of a critical framework (up until the twenty-first-century), has yielded experimental and playful works that are able to contest rules of representation and hierarchies of meaningfulness, and Dahl's *Monsters* demonstrates that in his choice of the graphic medium as a site in which to pursue more complex and productive analyses of health, illness, medicine, and society. The complex visual-verbal practice Dahl utilizes in *Monsters* is innovative not only its capacity to protest dominant and discursive representations, but also for productively and ethically revisiting, reorienting, and renegotiating the personal experience of illness.

Furthermore *Monsters*' unlikely topic, the disorienting autobiographical experience of herpes diagnosis, connects Dahl to a larger dialogue jettisoning imperial substructures of the medical world. The twenty-first-century has seen an increasing disillusionment with scientific medicine and the mythology of the beneficent, god-like physician, but there is also—paradoxically—a growing dependence on medicine to provide the answers to social as well as medical problems; access to affordable healthcare is widely regarded as a universal right. In the recent second edition of *Medicine As Culture: Illness, Disease, and the Body in Western*

Societies, Deborah Lupton, Associate Professor in Cultural Studies and Cultural Policy and Director of the Centre for Cultural Risk Research at Charles Stuart University, Australia, illuminates why attitudes toward medicine are characterized by such strong paradoxes in a broad overview of the way medicine is experienced, perceived and socially constructed in western societies.

Monsters: Reorienting Illness through Comics

As *Monsters* recreates Dahl's diagnosis with herpes, he narrates the drama of a life derailed by the insinuating and discriminatory attitudes toward illness and their role in cultural hegemonic censorship of the body. This system, perpetuated by individuals on the self and collectively, has been largely informed by the imbedding of public health discourse in which the body is regarded as dangerous, problematic, ever-threatening to run out of control, attract disease and pose imminent danger to the rest of society. (Lupton 37) Dahl examines how disgust and fear dominate individual's initial reactions to representations of illness at the beginning of *Monsters*, when a TV commercial portrays a herpes-infected couple enjoying the outdoors, and a thought bubble reveals Dahl's narrow-minded musings: "Ew. How dare these people think they still have a right to have sex? First they were dumb enough to catch herpes, and now they want more opportunities to infect other people too? How irresponsible! How inconsiderate!" (6) Later, when Dahl himself is diagnosed with herpes, no longer free to recline on his sofa and offer commentary on distant Others' sexual behavior, he turns those attitudes inward, policing and ridiculing his own body. The roots of this widespread belief that individuals are solely responsible for their disease and must police their own behavior, as a modern manifestation of the system of control that medical discourses have imbedded in western society, is examined through Dahl's testimony and recreation of past experiences.

In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* Michel Foucault argued that the modern state's preoccupation with controlling bodies en masse developed in the eighteenth century when a new discourse emerged that situated disease as an economic and political problem for societies. Concerns about the spread of infectious disease resulted in measures taken by the state to confine bodies and control their movements. At the beginning of the twenty-first-century, this discourse has evolved to exhorting people to take responsibility for maintaining their own personal health. From embarrassing high school sex ed classes to overdramatic clinical films and handouts, health promotion rhetoric narrows its focus on individual associations with lifestyle disease, legitimizing ideologies and social practices by making statements about how individuals should conduct their bodies. In being aware of the public gaze, the individual unconsciously exerts disciplinary power, both over others and over the self. (Lupton 37) Dahl's *Monsters* brings these elements of self-censorship, obsessive control, and compulsive self-ridicule out in the open, to reveal how in this process power relations are rendered invisible, dispersed and voluntarily perpetuated by subjects upon themselves and collectively.

Subjugation acting through and upon the body confounds the individual's experience of illness such that it can be thought of as beyond representation, or "unutterable," as described by Judith Butler (Adams 77). Indeed, though the terrors of pain, suffering, and illness have long been the very foundation of drama, authors and artists alike have traditionally struggled to express the personal experience of illness with any unitary, fixed meaning. In Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill," she described this conundrum,

English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and headache. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love,

has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. (Lupton 59)

This inoperable vocabulary, restricting the author or artist's desired effect in representing personal experiences with illness, serves as a reminder that the pathway from signifier to signified is not natural or predetermined, rather its social construction has been developed through the discursive evolution of public health rhetoric.

In fact, the use of metaphorical discourse is commonly applied to illness and disease, but metaphor has proved problematic specifically for its tendency to naturalize the social. In *Illness As Metaphor* and *Aids and Its Metaphors*, influential essays examining the way disease has achieved cultural resonance, popular commentator Susan Sontag argued that the stigmatizing nature of the metaphors of disease has negative implications on the personal experience of illness. "As long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease," says Sontag, "most people...will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have." (Lupton 61) Through threatening imagery and metaphor like war, fear, violence, contamination, gender roles and control, common illness metaphors work to keep the diseased, debilitated, and disfigured safely within the bounds of their private tragedies, leading to a form of social oppression that isolates them, renders them deviant, and impairs their functioning. Perceiving this form of subjugation in his personal experience of diagnosis with herpes, and compelled to resist and challenge it, Dahl takes on the project of reorienting existing metaphors and crafting radical methods for representing illness.

In Dahl's attempt to contest these representational practices lies a connection to a larger history of Social Realism, defined by Jeff Adams in his recent *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism* as political and critical practices that analyze the social conditions underpinning

the cultural events represented in artworks and later in graphic novels. Although stylistically and culturally dissimilar, the uniting trend in realism is that each example is responsive to the dominant conditions prevailing in their respective states and polities; comics can thus be considered realism firstly in the context of the European bourgeois in which it was created and secondly, as a critical commentary toward the colonial nation-state formations of nineteenth-century. (Adams 40) Like authors Zola and Baudelaire in the nineteenth century, who problematized the colonial project when they referred to the contradictory rituals of class, and European avant garde artists who leant positive value on the depiction of low, humble, commonplace, dispossessed, and marginalized, many alternative comics creators today use the medium to challenge the postcolonial cultural hegemonic structures through socially aware and politically active narratives. From its root in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, the time period that, through the rise of the popular press and the spectacle of advertising, translated the world into a fantasy visual display of signs and symbols, comics have long been engaged in endorsing or contesting the visual forms of colonialism and commodity culture. In this process comics call into question the imperial operations of intertextuality—the accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being read in the context of other images (Hall 233)—materially exposing, renegotiating, and contesting the forged link between the colonized and the colonizer's imagination, exhibiting the reinvention of signifying social constructs in the medium itself.

The social realist discourse moreover indicates the value of comics as a medium, like in the Frankfurt School in the early 20th century, when Brecht said, "reality changes; in order to represent it modes of representation must also change," (Adams 37) and advocated practices that resist dominant order through normalization and assimilation in pop and avant garde art forms.

Since comics is commonly unacknowledged as anything other than convenient pop culture, “perceived as intrinsically 'commercial', mass produced for a lowest common denominator audience, and therefore outside the notions of artistic credibility,” (Sabin 8) comics remains outside of the critical machinery that comes with such status, allowing creators in the medium a freedom to appreciate the borderless space in which to play and experiment with creative and mobilizing forms of sociopolitical commentary. Adams (referring to the plural term graphic novels) describes resultant innovations of this experimentation,

They employ the means of popular and commodity culture, and yet seem to remain resistant to it; they adopt the visual detritus of that culture... and yet produce effects of considerable profundity; they are often ambiguous in their sequence and juxtaposition of image with narrative, but manage to reference moments of great importance and gravity, and authenticity is achieved by seemingly inauthentic means. (64-65)

With the use repetitive images and recognizable symbols, comics as a medium can effectively expose discursive iconography and establish conscious, overt modes of representation through their engagement of feelings, attitudes, and emotions and mobilization of fears and anxieties in the viewer at deeper levels. Comics' heritage within, and literal embodiment of, mass media intertextuality—comics are a language in that they combine to constitute a weave of writing and art which has its own syntax, grammar and conventions, and which can communicate ideas in a totally unique fashion: words and images are juxtaposed together to generate a mood; timing between images is manipulated for dramatic effect; and cinematic cutting of frames creates extra movement—has leant comics-creators the flexibility and the devices with which to reorient normative representations in language and images.

The deconstructive and reorienting artifice within comics form lends itself to subject matter that is similarly countercultural, and for Dahl this content goes beyond contesting discursive, metaphorical representations of illness to address the material manifestations of cultural hegemonic structures in the experience of illness. In America's consumer culture, as the location of discipline and control, the body itself is commodified; it must be groomed and maintained through the consumption of marketed goods for its own achievement in value. (Lupton 38) Focusing on lifestyle disease, public health rhetoric influences individuals to believe that the products they consume will reflect their own experience of self and concept of the world. From Dahl's representation of the TV commercial for a herpes-related pharmaceutical product—"ask your medical provider if you're wealthy enough to avoid chronic incurable suffering (6)"—to the array of dubious naturopathic remedies he collects—"things can get a little weird when you can't afford health insurance (128)"—*Monsters* meditates upon the contemporary hunger for the momentary illusion of well-being, health, and psychic security, toward which individuals purchase and consume their own personal preference of self-proscribed goods. For example, in *Monsters*, though Dahl has stripped herpes of its mythology ("it's just a little skin condition! (126)"), his reliance on products that promise to rid him of symptoms and ease his discomfort, moreover insinuates herpes into his life. "The harder I tried to get rid of my disease," says Dahl in an image revealing the copious cold-sore products in his pockets, "the further it imbedded itself into my life. I carried it everywhere I went. (131)" Significantly, the narrative of Dahl's *Monsters* occurs totally outside the medical establishment; in choosing to situate the traumatic experience of herpes diagnosis within a wider community, coding herpes as an intrinsic part of his personal experience, a signifier always attached to him wherever he goes, Dahl reveals how the medical frame itself is a socially constructed phenomenon, reflective of subverted and narrow

imperial ideologies. Thus, in the process of challenging the imperial project of medicine, Dahl locates the hierarchical structures of clinical knowledge and the commodification of the body in consumer culture to be the stage on which health promotion rhetoric's focus on individual associations with lifestyle disease is enacted.

While both the artifice of comics and the subject matter covered within a key work may be easily implicated as a social realist's challenge of the social and political undercurrents of the historical moment in which it is created, relating the medium's political impact is more involved. An opposing viewpoint may dictate some comics as simply engaged in reproducing discursive practices without contesting them, but Robert Sabin, in his 2001 *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, showed how comics, in fact, has a long heritage of countercultural significance and radical social inquiry. The flourishing world of alternative comics today, Sabin proved, is informed by "underground comix," a movement in comics that followed the hippy generation. Though they were typically self-published and their readership never came close to the superhero comics produced by major publishers, comix were able to disseminate ideas and concepts that major publishers would find inflammatory and censor. Punk fanzines from the late 1970s took up where underground comix had left off, continuing the cultural expression of adult themed, often marginalized subject matter. At its ideological core was a romanticized belief in working class culture, worth of rebellion for its own sake, and fetishization of real or imaginary violence. The anarchist lean and edgier, darker tones continue to be the foundation of independent comics, as well as more mainstream comics, like *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, and *Batman: the Dark Knight*.

Further the blooming production and readership of comics at a global level has opened up the medium to a number of interesting cultural influences that reorient Eurocentric forms with

unfamiliar and radical conventions. “In the last century western cultural influences swept the east,” says McCloud in his *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, “so too have eastern and African ideas of fragmentation and rhythm swept the west... the traditional emphasis in western art upon the primacy of foreground subjects and continuousness of tones gave way to fragmentation and a new awareness of the picture plane...” (82-83) Scott McCloud illustrates how the vast publication and distribution of manga in the west has enabled the introduction of conventions that were commonplace in manga but not elsewhere. In particular, its impact on the art of comics is such that the form is as subtractive as it is additive:

The idea of elements omitted from a work of art are as much a part of the work as those included has been a specialty of the east for centuries; in the graphic arts this has meant a greater focus on figure/ground relationships and negative space. (83)

Alternative comics creators have begun using the method identified by McCloud as “aspect to aspect,” a frame transition device (in contrast to the more common image transition “action to action”) which allows the reader to dwell on the aspects of a scene. Presenting seemingly disconnected still life or landscape, the comics require an element of conceptual rumination that engenders in the reader moments of reflection and deliberation. (McCloud 112-113) Moreover, Adams argues the use of unfamiliar devices in recent alternative comics is compelling to the realist discourse both because of cultural difference and novelty—as the reader unwittingly learns characteristics of a particular convention, it becomes momentarily easier to recognize the familiar rendered as unfamiliar, “a reminder once again that all marks are subject usually tacitly to interpretation prior to recognition, evidence that the pathway from signifier to signified is not natural or predetermined”(69). The craft of comic storytelling has been imbued with eastern culture's tradition of the cyclical and labyrinthine, lending itself to meditative recollection and

memory, while western art and literature remain on the whole quite goal-oriented. As alternative comics creators assume the wandering, conceptual methods from manga for countercultural narratives, they are able to focus more carefully on staging socially-aware and observant accounts of past events or experiences.

Indeed, there emerged a space in the twenty-first-century for more complex and imaginative stories and artwork than ever before. Transformation of the way comics are produced has created a market for countercultural and diverse examples of the medium, putting comics creation in the hands of the grassroots organization of zinesters and underground comics artists. Conveniently packaging Dahl's comics that had been only narrowly made available through self-publishing and the illicit use of Kinko's xerox machines, his first book *Welcome to the Dahl House: Alienation, Incarceration, and Inebriation in the New American Rome* from Microcosm Publishing, a small distributor that celebrates DIY and punk aesthetic and ethics, reflects this phenomenon of culturally-relevant, DIY zine making and its insinuation into wider, more diverse cultural production. This resurrected medium has gone from the disposable, cheaply drawn comics-as-children's entertainment to widely-arrayed subject matter books printed on photo-quality paper and even fully painted artwork. (Sabin) Marvel and DC have dabbled in creating more personal comics, but it has been the independents and small presses that have really advanced the marketing and production of what has been come to be known as graphic novels. Fantagraphics, Kitchen Sink, Top Shelf, and Oni Press's mission is to publish stories that cover marginalized subject matter have been made possible by technological advances in printing quality and direct trade with specialty comics bookstores.

Moreover, though some may argue against the wider significance of these countercultural narratives and minority art forms, alternative comics are increasingly viewed as worthy of

mainstream and scholarly attention. In July 2004 *The New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story on graphic novels, asserting that comics are enjoying a “newfound respectability right now” because “comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal.” The author, Charles McGrath, former editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, demonstrated how graphic novels fit into American culture, launching comics into mainstream appeal; his work is responsible for graphic novels earning a spot on the *New York Times Best Sellers* list. Meanwhile in the past ten years, scholarly journals *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Twentieth-Century Literature* have been publishing an increasing number of works that explore the academic aspects of comics. These articles by Hilary Chute, as well as her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, have developed a specific critical vocabulary with which to appreciate the multidimensional sophistication of comics.

While these recent discourses on comics corroborate a case for the impact of the medium and its effectiveness in cultural critique, it may not be possible to conclusively prove its worthiness without case by case analysis of comics works. The call for an in-depth analysis of *Monsters* itself calls to mind Jeff Adams' contention that the radical resistance of comics is predicated upon the very specificity of its subject matter. In the manner of a recreation of primary experience, comics comprise a complex network of references, allusions, and ambiguities facilitating the contemporary audience's vicarious experience of past events. By means of such complex narratives, comics creators testify to past events beyond the reification that commodity cultures represent yet paradoxically, overtly uses the visual tropes of commodity culture. Adams refers to the painstakingly detailed, highly specific visual and narrative methods, which comics creators have chosen to develop and perfect, despite being a sometimes grueling and thankless job. Within that choice, of pursuing comics as their form of expression and

creating diverse and innovative narratives that resist commodification, lies comics creator's true value. Indeed, in the above analysis of the cultural hegemonic nature of health promotion rhetoric, the history of social realism, and the countercultural comics context, a broad structure for understanding Ken Dahl's *Monsters* is presented, but a closer look at the complexities in the relationships of his specific verbal subject matter and visual renderings over his chosen (somewhat autobiographical, possibly embellished upon for the sake of exact craft) book's timeline is necessary for evaluating its overall impact.

Dahl's second published work, and his first lengthy graphic novel, *Monsters* benefits from his previous accumulation of strategies and symbols as a zinester for the radical reorientation of normative social and political expressions. Aware of the public gaze's affect on the individual for unconsciously exerting disciplinary power, Dahl makes the familiar mythologies of illness strange by expertly crafting a wandering tale of the personal woes of diagnosis. When herpes first insinuates itself into his life, Dahl revisits the difficulty he had expressing himself, such as outlined by Woolf and Sontag, literally by utilizing familiar narrative devices, like wearing Charlie Chaplin disguise, and mobilizing metaphorical discourses. For example, Dahl muses, "Let's face it: nobody wants to fuck a monster...and become a monster themselves," (55) and follows a vampire-self as he wreaks havoc on a small town of fearful Americans. His careful staging of the familiar predatory metaphor, in fact, inverts the villain. Dahl asks us to reconsider the vampire-imagery,

You just want what everyone else wants—acceptance; affection; inclusion; and of course, survival. Just for that...you're considered a menace by a world of petty, violent bigots who always have god, the law and the majority on their side...always doomed to defeat at the hands of "normal," "clean" alpha males who take their privilege and

entitlement for granted. (55-56)

As the sequence follows the vampire-Dahl, marginalized to the shadows of town, Dahl juxtaposes the discursive practices of the status quo, referencing hypocritical widespread acceptance of unethical industries, like McDonalds, and historically extremist violent practices, like witch hunts. The effect is to turn the familiar around on itself to locate absurdity in this cultural hegemonic structure: “look at all those 'clean,' homogenous faces...all content to hate and reject what they can't be bothered to understand,” says the vampire, “when will they realize they're the real monsters?” (56) From Dahl's experimentation with the form of social oppression that isolates the diseased emerges a dialogue of collective blame, in which all are complicit, be it overtly or subconsciously, in discursive practices.

For extended period of time Dahl, shocked by his herpes diagnosis, grapples with this new situatedness, at times reverting to self-abandon, avoiding his herpes problem, and at other moments, drowning in existential crises fueled by the mythology of herpes. The turning point in *Monsters*—preceded by a situation in which Dahl has hooked up with Megan without telling her he is HSV-positive and is confronted by mutual friends—comes as a long winded confessional pictorially represented as a dragon-like monster being deflated. “What makes this my responsibility,” he starts:

Of course I'm irresponsible! Of course I'm dishonest! How else would anyone ever kiss me again? Or share a bottle with me? Or spend the night in my bed? Or fall in love with me? Please don't take that away from me yet...please let me pretend I'm normal and clean just a little longer... (103-104)

His friend Lucy retorts by reeling in his wild imagination and putting him in his place, “Do you think you are the only person in the world with an STD?” As Lucy shares the graver situation she

is in having contracted genital warts, her ethical stance to not be “the same lying inconsiderate scumbag as the guy who infected (106)” her, opens the door to a wider community of experience in which Dahl's disease is shared. In addressing the isolating imagery of disease and literally deflating it, Dahl acknowledges that he must engage in an informed manner with his herpes-positive self.

Plunging himself into a pool of herpes information, detaching the myths from his personal experience of illness, Dahl engenders a self more concerned with healthiness, in contrast to being situated by dirty-infected characterizations. Radically reorienting his relationship to these discursive metaphors, Dahl illuminates certain moments of grave seriousness with the opposite narrative tool: daring to portray photographic afflicted genitalia representing the worst herpes cases only. Since sickness is so unattractive, Dahl defies the genre's old cartoon vocabulary in portraying so grotesquely the monstrous affliction that torments him. In a brief sequence that condenses everything you need to know about herpes, Dahl redirects his narrative from the mythological to the base facts. The clinical treatment of herpes strips it of its discursive power, “you can get herpes from pretty much anyone...at pretty much anytime...on pretty much any part of your body... why did no one ever tell me about any of this?” (117-118) allowing Dahl and his audience to detach itself from ill-conceived and widely perpetuated preconceptions.

More than just a response to the normative experience of illness, *Monsters* in fact reorients it to a space of collective experience and presents a reclamation of the personal aspects of illness. Firstly, Dahl indicates resolution in the form of strong interpersonal relations, like the one he achieves with romantic interest Hannah. In Part Two Dahl has addressed his behavior through a detailed a DIY sex-ed curriculum, and he has recoiled to a life contingent on the self-

proscribed rituals of living with herpes. And while in Part Three living with herpes hasn't gotten any easier, Dahl meets this fun and exciting companion. Founded upon mutual respect, Dahl's disease is neither here nor there for Hannah; having heard Dahl had HSV from outside parties, she independently educated herself on its symptoms and contagiousness, disassociating his person from the disease and actively discounting the normative stereotypes typically tied to it. In a Valentine's Day scene, full of excitement and fear, Dahl endeavors an anxious confessional; as he slowly retracts into the monstrous herpes blob of shame, Dahl first tells Hannah that he has herpes, and after when she responds with understanding, "sure, herpes can be embarrassing and maybe even uncomfortable, but come on... it's a skin rash! Don't be such a wuss!" (189) Dahl emerges at a final catharsis, "I feel like I've been waiting years for someone to say that..." (191). Through this trusting and open relationship, Hannah's acceptance serves to assuage Dahl's self-consciousness and lift him out of the self-inflicted cell of alienation. The social validation that Hannah affords Dahl is mirrored in the epilogue when Dahl himself resolves his issues with herpes, "I guess I've forgotten what the big deal was with you," he says to his herpes-blob pet, "you're just a skin rash that's in pretty much everyone over the ages of fourteen. Why was I so messed up about it?" (199)

Secondly, in engaging the audience in his unmediated recreation of the traumatic experience of disease, Dahl encourages a wider collectivity to gleam meaning and take inspiration from its resolve in and insistence of the healing power in interpersonal relationships. Serving as the visual witness, Dahl attests to the fate of truth within experience and leads the viewer personally through the manifest incongruities and inconsistencies of American consumer culture and the way its discursive social practices serve to categorize individuals and isolate them within the bounds of private tragedies. In the manner of recreating this primary experience, Dahl

engages a complex network of references, allusions, and ambiguities that facilitate the reader's recognition—subtle aspect to aspect ratios reflect conceptually on sickness and self-identification; multilayered narratives contextualize suffering within personal experience, rather than medical discursive practices; and wry humor makes difficult subject matter approachable. Dahl's great innovation is in delivering the immediacy of his herpes problem through his own hand-crafted visual-verbal artistry, which makes this sexually transmitted disease so visually alarming. Strange and yet familiar, *Monsters* speaks to anyone who has herpes, knows someone with herpes, or even just has sex, emphasizing that diagnosis does not mean the end of your sex life—even if you fear that as much as Ken Dahl. Rather, *Monsters* fills a void where herpes diagnosis information leaves off, revealing the labyrinthine ways of dealing with diagnosis. The mobilizing effect of Dahl's work is apparent in the recognition he received from this healthcare worker at the San Francisco's Women's Community Clinic:

Monsters doesn't sugar-coat HSV. This book lets you know, in great detail, that it's no fun, painful, and can derail your life if you let it... A lot of folks think that hard data about herpes transmission is what they want, but statistics don't give you any idea with how to cope with a diagnosis. *Monsters* fills a real void in the world of herpes information. (Yvonne)

In espousing *Monsters'* effectiveness within the specific context of the above community health clinic, including its relatable material for clients, acclaim from practitioners, and recognition by people who might be in a position to effect change (its board members), as well as approval from the comics world—Dahl earned the 2010 Ignatz-award for Outstanding Story—diverse and widespread acclaim establish *Monsters'* reception as a politically effective example of comics medium. In concluding the long-winded tale of his obsession over the traumatic experience of

disease, Dahl ties in herpes itself to the reorientation of those same culturally hegemonic forms of situatedness that plague individuals in society. Dahl portrays the herpes blob saying to him “I’m just another lifeform trying to survive in this weird, fucked up world,” and Dahl responds with a pat on its head, “I know little buddy.” (200)

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The author, lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, and professor at the University of Chester, analyzes a few key documentary graphic novels to demonstrate comics creators' use of this medium and choice of subject matter as a form of social realism, bound up with politics and ideology. He finds that these specific comics creators who, recognizing larger political and cultural pressures that they felt compelled to resist and challenge, have developed and adapted realist strategies within the act of visual/textual resistance.

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Gabby Shulz, a published cartoonist and the 2006-2007 Fellow at the Center for Cartoon Studies recreates his personal experience with herpes diagnosis in this graphic novel. Moved to challenge the basic stereotypes and discursive forms of social oppression that shape individual's experience of illness, he crafted this imaginative and educational tale.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. Rev. ed. of *Comics & Sequential Art*: 1985. Will Eisner Studios for W.W.Norton & Company, Inc. New York: 2008.

Legendary cartoonist, Will Eisner, responsible for the first “graphic novel,” an extended continuous comics narrative in book form, explores the history of comics vocabulary and breaks

down the devices within comics form in this influential comics how-to book. A staple of any comics nerd, this book is the holy grail of any aspiring comics creator.

Lupton, Deborah. *Medicine As Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body in Western Societies*. Second Edition. Sage Publications Ltd: Thousand Oaks, California: 2003.

The author, Associate Professor in Cultural Studies and Cultural Policy and Director of the Centre for Cultural Risk Research at Charles Stuart University, Australia, explores attitudes toward medicine in a broad overview of the way medicine is experienced, perceived and socially constructed in western societies. Examining the ideologies of both the elite and the layman within cultural artifacts, such as literature, film, and art, she finds strong paradoxes related to the twenty-first-century's increasing disillusionment with scientific medicine.

Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. Phaidon: London, 1996.

The author, a writer about comics and lecturer at Central St. Martins in London, England, explores the history of comics since their commercial appeal flourished in post-World War II. He finds that comics aimed at adult-audiences have recently seen a renaissance, in part from countercultural heritages whose root was in the 1960s-70s era of civil rights, anti-war protests, and sexual revolution, and also due to the transformation of the production and marketing of comics.