

RESEARCH

Framing Violence and Serial Murder in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Green River Killer*

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The comics form has not remained untouched by true crime's massive surge in status across popular culture, especially in America. Comics as a form is uniquely positioned to represent violent and graphic narratives in such a way as to maximise reader affect and create a chronicle of crime that is both entertaining and captivating, guiding and being guided by the reader. Two comics have received massive critical acclaim for their portrayals of 'famous' American serial killers: Jeffrey Dahmer in Derf's *My Friend Dahmer* (2012) and Arthur Shawcross in Jeff Jensen & Jonathan Case's *Green River Killer* (2011). This article considers the framing techniques deployed in both comics. I consider how these two comics, distinct in their artistic presentation and their focus, frame their respective subjects and represent the complexities of serial murder. To conclude, I perform a close analysis of one framing aspect of *My Friend Dahmer* and expand on what the execution of this technique can tell us about comics as a true crime form.

Keywords: Crime Comics; Derf Backderf; Form; Jeff Jensen; Serial Killers; Violence

The aim of this article is threefold – to provide a very brief overview to the history of crime narratives in the comics form, to consider the specific ways in which comics is presenting these narratives – I am especially interested in what I've named 'tools of suggestion and implication' – and finally to look at two specific true crime comics and do some close analysis. How do these comics use these tools and to what effect? The comics I consider in this article are recent publications concerned with American serial killers. The artists of both books have curious relationships to the killer himself. Derf Backderf, author and artist of *My Friend Dahmer* (2012), was a high school friend of Jeffrey Dahmer, more widely known as the 'Milwaukee Cannibal'. *Green River Killer* (2011) is written by Jeff Jensen, son of the lead detective in the Green River case and

the prosecution of killer Gary Ridgeway, with art by Jonathan Case.¹ My contention that the comics form is able to create narratives in new and innovative ways by the very nature of the form and the high level of readerly input is not a new idea; indeed, I have made this point myself in other publications, as have other scholars of the form. I do not intend to rehash it here but take it further and argue that comics can do new, fresh things for *crime* narratives. The form works with the reader to bring them into the narrative, making them complicit in both commission and detection of the crime as I explain in due course.

Before I begin my close analyses of these texts, I wish to give consideration to the development of the American comics tradition and how crime fits into the form's patchy and tumultuous past. The generally accepted 'first' American crime comic is Chester Gould's strip 'Dick Tracy', first appearing in 1931. The strip included all the usual cast of characters – gangsters, police, lawyers – and *was* popular but crime comics gained a massive boost in popularity in 1942 with the publication of *Crime Does Not Pay*. This was the first 'true crime' comic; the stories were taken from newspaper accounts, history books and 'actual police files' and rendered in graphic, often stomach-churning detail. The popularity of the series led to a rash of other crime comics – all of which sold very well. Unfortunately, crime comics took a huge hit in 1954 with the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, Fredric Wertham's polemical book suggesting that comics (especially crime and horror comics) were the main cause of juvenile delinquency because of their depictions of violence, sex, drugs and 'adult concerns'. His book prompted the founding of the *Comics Magazine Association of America* and their 'Comics Code Authority'. Only books with the CCA logo could be sold – and no crime comic received the logo. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s with the birth and development of the underground comics movement that crime re-entered the picture. By blatantly flouting the rules of the CCA, underground artists could create crime narratives that were as violent and graphic as they liked and the genre was reinvigorated. There are now a great number of critically-acclaimed crime comics, notably Frank Miller's *Sin City* (1991–2000), John Wagner's *A History of Violence* (1997) and Max Allan Collins' *The Road to Perdition* (1998).

I wish to briefly consider three artistic and structural aspects that are used to excellent effect in crime comics. First, the gutter. This is the name we give to the (usually white) space between panels on the page. Comics theorist Scott McCloud argues that what goes on between the individual panels – ‘closure’ – is essential to effective comics writing and reading: ‘comics panels fracture both time and space [. . .] but closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality’ (1994: 45). Closure, he claims, is the grammar of the form and the entirety of the form hinges on the arrangement of elements, a point that Thierry Groensteen readily agrees with in his concept of arthrology: ‘the true magic of comics operates between the images, the tension that binds them’ (2007: 23). Rather than in film, where the viewer is a passive participant, moved along as the image changes within the space of the screen, in comics the reader must make the move across the gutter, deciding themselves how to do that. And the way the reader decides to ‘fill the gutter’ affects the way the narrative is read. It also affects the time span of the comic: did those two actions happen in seconds or hours? It is for the reader to decide what just happened. Comics creators are aware of the readerly input, and as such can create narratives in such a way as to force the reader into an active role.

The second structural aspect that requires introduction is the ‘hyperpanel’, the term used to describe ‘everything that is visible on the open comics page’. This is, in short, ‘everything that’s visible on an open comics page or two page spread’. For Groensteen, comics analysis begins, ‘level of relations between the units [. . .] the level not of the ropes, but of the knots’ (2007: 5). Individual images or panels must also be considered within the wider panel of the page (the ‘hyperpanel’) and it is only within this ‘*quadrillage*’, to use Groensteen’s term, that the panel can be read and understood; *quadrillage* creates a structure on which the ‘language of the comic is written’ (2007: 28). Thus, what is displayed within the scope of a sweeping look is always carefully chosen, never random. Creators can use the physical layout of the page to create a larger image in the way the panels are displayed or to play with our sense of time. For example, a page in which all the panels are equally sized and laid out can suggest order and uniformity; adjusting the size and alignment of one panel

can drastically alter this. This is why hyperpanel reading is important: the reader is being given an overall sense of the mood without it impacting on individual panel images.

Finally, I introduce the page turn. This is a particularly curious aspect of comics that relates directly to the text's physical nature. If an event is depicted across several pages, the act of turning the page can make the reader complicit in a crime, an act of violence or some other event. A clear example of page turns that 'commit' a crime is found in Brian Azzarello's comic *Joker* (2008), in which the reader becomes complicit in a brutal gang rape. On the bottom of the right-hand page, the victim cowers in a corner – the page is turned – and she is a heap in the background, while the Joker walks towards the viewer, buttoning his trousers. The event happens in the page turn and the reader, in turning the page, makes it happen. There are two ways to view this: either as a coy way of allowing violence within comics but without having to show it directly or as a technique for bringing the reader very much into the narrative and make them complicit. I am more inclined towards the latter.

Having laid out the techniques of interest, I must suggest how they appear within the two aforementioned crime comics. Below is an example of a hyperpanel from *My Friend Dahmer*.

Figure 1 shows the moment when Dahmer picks up a hitchhiker named Steven Hicks, who became his first victim (Derf, 2012: 174–5). The slow movement on the left-hand page of the car drawing to a halt and then the much larger panel of the open door, alongside the 'silence' of the images – that is the fact there is neither dialogue nor caption – means the reader is entirely dependent on knowledge of Dahmer's crimes in order to make sense of the image. The three bandeau panels on the left-hand page suggest a relatively short time-span. The second image suggests one of two things. Either a frozen moment in which the door has just been opened and the image 'paused'. Or, if the reader places themselves in the position of Hicks, the timeframe is opened indefinitely to the amount of time it takes him to decide to get in. As the reader cannot know if he hesitated, it is for the reader to decide how long this panel lasts. The murder of Steven Hicks is well-known as the first murder in

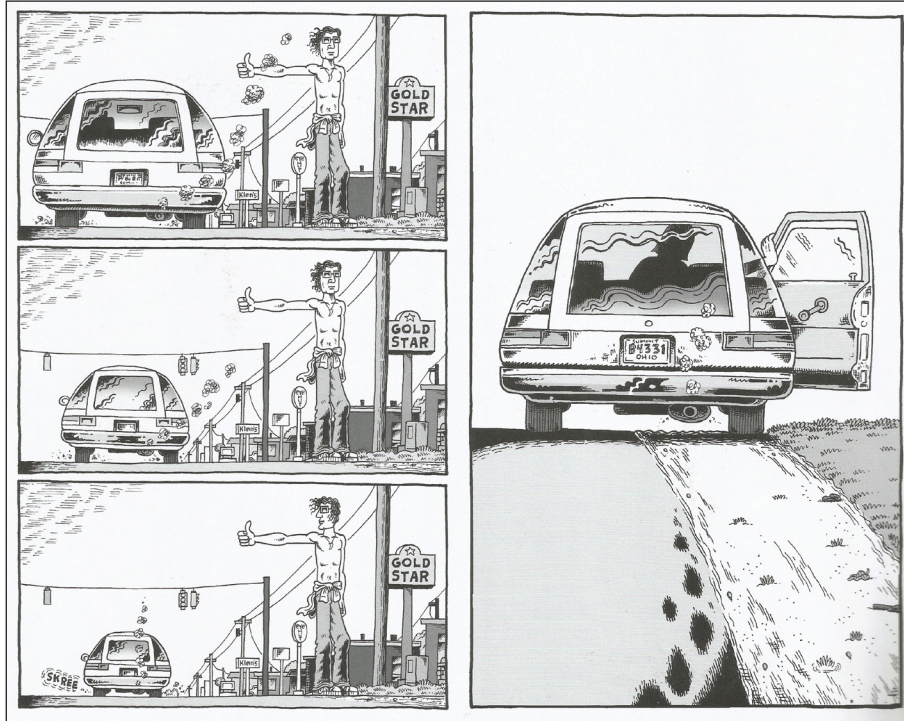


Figure 1: Derf (2012) *My Friend Dahmer* (New York: Abrams, 174–175). © Abrams New York. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

Dahmer's 'list' and, by this point in the story, the reader is aware of how things are going to end. The coyness of these images works well. It is Derf's way of letting the reader know exactly what will happen while also allowing readerly imagination to create the 'next page' of the story.

Immediately after the single page panel of the car with an open door, the comic begins a new chapter, titled 'Fade to Black'. Dahmer is stopped for driving erratically in the middle of the night (Derf, 2012: 180–1). The police pull him over, perform a field sobriety test and ask him about the contents of bin bags in the back of the car. He garbles out an answer and, miraculously is allowed to leave. As Derf reminds the reader a few pages later – and as is heavily implied by his exclamation in the top corner of the left-hand page of 'OH GOD' – the bags contain the body of Steven Hicks. Unlike the style of the rest of this comic, there is subtle disjunction of the panels across the

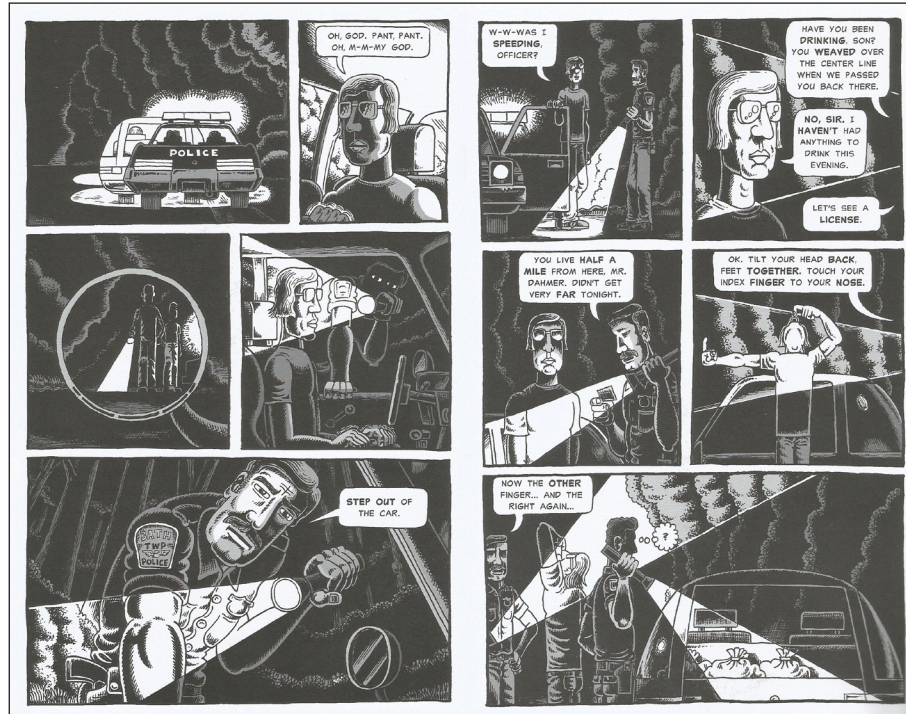


Figure 2: Derf (2012) *My Friend Dahmer* (New York: Abrams, 180–181). © Abrams New York. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

spread of the hyperpanel, as shown in **Figure 2**. They are slightly out of line, creating an air of unease, but more importantly, each panel is disrupted by the flashlight beam. The way the beam falls in each panel creates a separate panel-within-a-panel. The reverse coloration (that is – not black on white, but white on black) immediately catches the eye and disrupts the ‘typical’ reading of the panels. Typical reading would be left-to-right across the page and then each image in turn, bubbles first, but in creating these internal panels, the image becomes disrupted and the reader is far more likely to find ‘straight’ reading difficult. In the final panel, which has two flashlight beams, this effect is further heightened. This final panel creates a visual link between Dahmer, in beam 1, and the bags, in beam 2. In case the reader had not understood what is happening, this panel emphasises the point vigorously – there is a body in the bin bags and Dahmer is now a murderer. The overall result is a hyperpanel

that does not sit comfortably on the page and a series of panels that contain other panels to create a disjointed and uncomfortable readerly experience. The reader is forced to abandon previously established reading practices and must now work in a different way.

Let us now consider the page turn. This is an example at the other end of the scale – away from the coyness of Derf's stopped car and the suggestion of the torch beams. This is the realm of the 'punch in the face' imagery that comics critics have long decried. Allow me to suggest you are reading through a comic and turn the page to find the following image.

This is a clear example of comics' ability to use the page turn to great effect. **Figure 3** is the first depiction of a body in *Green River Killer* (Jensen and Case, 2011:66). Up until this point, the police hunting the killer have not found any of the victims and this one is found by accident. In presenting this image on the verso side – necessitating a page turn – the artist is able to mimic some of the shock that may be felt by the officers who find the body. The image is presented as a page bleed – a page where the image fills the entire page with no border. Adding a border can allow an image to become frozen in time, as we saw with the *My Friend Dahmer* example, but here there is no such constraint. The image is not held in time at all and the amount of time it takes to read is entirely up to the reader; there is no artistic input in the creation of timescale here. The reader turns the page to find the body and can linger over the image for as long as they desire.

Through a series of short analyses, this article presents examples of artistic techniques in the comics arsenal and their application in crime comics. Why is this important? These techniques are important because they demonstrate how the comics form is taking a long-established genre and doing new things. They show that comics is able to do things that text-based literature and film cannot, using their materiality and readerly involvement to reinvigorate how we think about narrative and force us away from our pre-existing reading styles and generic preconceptions. The true crime genre is saturated with non-fiction novels and biographies of men like Jeffrey Dahmer and Gary Ridgeway; in positioning them on the comics page,



Figure 3: Jensen, Jeff and Jonathan Case (2011) *Green River Killer* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 66). © Dark Horse Milwaukee. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

the reader views them through a different (potentially unfamiliar) lens and forces a new way of interacting with them. The techniques discussed here allow the reader to become complicit in both crime and detection. As they move through the text, the reader is positioned as accomplice to the criminal (in allowing Steven Hicks to get into Dahmer's car) and assistant to the detective (in finding the splayed corpse of Ridgeway's victim). Our action creates crime; there is no inaction in comics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author's Note

This article derives in part from a previous article, published in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* in 2014, in which I analyse the use of spectacles as a double-frame to drive the development of the character of Dahmer, specifically his descent into murder. This article is not without its limitations; the most obvious of these is its length. It was my aim to write a short piece that demonstrated how form and theme are intimately connected for comics. I chose to work with one specific genre and a small number of technical tropes to ensure a clear argument and in order to suggest how this analytical method may be used in comics studies more widely. Furthermore, in this article I am not aiming to create a definitive study of the importance of readerly input in the creation of nuanced crime narrative, or indeed any other genre. Rather, I wish to propose several avenues for further study, both in the fields of crime fiction and comics. The points that I raise here regarding the importance of the reader are ones that are being grappled with across the wider world of narrative, by both practitioners and theorists. I would like to stress that the type of analysis one performs – and the likely conclusions drawn from those analyses – are dependent on the underlying theoretical framework. It is my intention that this piece be read as a springboard for other avenues of research and as a potential framework for close comics analysis.

Note

¹ Unfortunately, these publications have received little scholarly attention.

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