Elisabeth Krieber

Comics, Intermediality, Remediation, and Gender: Subversive Strategies in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter have identified comics as an "ideal test case for intermedia theory" (2015, 191). As they explain, "While graphic narratives are transmedial phenomena due to their remediation potential, they are also intermedial narratives based on words and images that collaborate to relate stories" (191). This observation provides an excellent starting point for this chapter as it includes essential terminology pointing to the key approaches in intermediality studies from a literary and media theory perspective. In this chapter, I will begin by introducing these central terms and approaches, before illustrating how intermediality and remediation are connected to the category of gender. In a discussion of examples from Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015 [2002]) and its film adaptation by Marielle Heller (2015), I will then address how intermediality can be mobilized to negotiate the portrayal of gendered experiences and challenge patriarchal traditions.

In their statement, Rippl and Etter describe comics as "intermedial narratives" (191). Before exploring in more detail what exactly makes the medium intermedial, it is necessary to briefly outline their understanding of the term *medium/media*. As they point out in their essay, defining media is a complex undertaking, and it is approached in different ways depending on the disciplinary background and academic community of the researcher. For instance, while English-speaking media studies generally considers media to be "mechanical, electronic, and digital (mass) media such as photography, telephone, radio, film, TV, video, and the Internet" (192–193), the German tradition investigates the term *medium* more generally as "the material side of the sign, i.e., its carrier – it is that which mediates" (192).[1] Based on the latter understanding, Rippl and Etter argue that graphic narratives are "*per se* intermedial phenomena" (197): they combine words and images, two distinct media that package meaning in different forms. Their definition of comics, however, proposes a "combined approach":

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1 For a further discussion of the different definitions and uses of the *medium*, see for instance Ryan (2004, 15–20), who addresses "the ambiguity of the term" (16) based on various conceptions of the medium in different disciplines. See also Packard (2016, 56–73), who likewise focuses on the different definitions of the comic as a medium, form, or narrative.

> According to semiotic approaches, graphic narratives are representational codes based on two media, words and pictures; according to cultural, material, and technical approaches, the graphic narratives' semiotic types, word and picture, are based on the medium of the printed book. We suggest a combined approach which – in analogy to film – understands graphic narrative as a medium that is able to tell stories through the combination of word and image. (Rippl and Etter 2015, 194)

The specific intermediality that defines comics, however, extends beyond the interaction between words and images. When referring to comics as an intermedial phenomenon, Rippl and Etter draw on Irina Rajewsky's typology of intermediality. Arguing from a literary studies perspective, Rajewsky identifies intermediality as a term that "designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media" (2005, 46). She further suggests that the concept of intermediality offers new perspectives to approach texts or media products that also recognize "medial border-crossings and hybridization" (44) and thus demonstrate "a heightened awareness of the materiality and mediality of artistic practices and of cultural practices in general" (44). Furthermore, she proposes specific analytical subcategories for different forms of intermediality: *medial transposition* – the "transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium" (51); *media combination*, which describes medial phenomena that comprise multiple media, such as film, theater, performance, etc. (51); and *intermedial references*, where one medium evokes or imitates the representational techniques of another medium (52). Comics, as Daniel Stein emphasizes, can be productively investigated in terms of all three of Rajewsky's categories:

> They are a form of media combination because they integrate images and words into one storytelling apparatus; they thrive on exchanges with other media (film, radio, television, literature, painting); and they practice intermedial referencing, evoking (and provoking) literary styles, imitating (and influencing) cinematic techniques, or suggesting sound. (Stein 2015, 421)

Rajewsky further distinguishes intermediality – "as a term for all those phenomena that [...] take place *between* media" (2005, 6) – from intramediality, which concerns relations within the same medium, and transmediality, which does not emphasize any interaction between media but refers to "the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media" (46).[2]

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2 Rippl and Etter also refer to Werner Wolf's explanation of intermediality (2005, 253–255), who distinguishes the term from intramediality, which he refers to as "'homomedial' relations" (an example of which is intertextuality), and transmediality as "phenomena that are non-specific to individual media" (196).

The first part of Rippl and Etter's statement establishes that comics are not only an intermedial but also a "transmedial phenomenon due to its remediation potential" (2015, 191). As Stein elaborates, comics "share non-media-specific elements with other media (tension management, heroic characters, serial storytelling)" (2015, 421). What is more, comics have always been determined by "a constitutive interrelationship with other media" (Sina 2014, 100 [trans. E.K.]), which also characterizes their remediation potential. While literary studies mainly uses the term *intermediality* to discuss the interaction between different media, *remediation* is a concept used in media studies to investigate intermediality as "a basic cultural and medial phenomenon" (Rajewsky 2008, 50 [trans. E.K.]).[3] The term was introduced by David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who proposed that media generate themselves by referencing and reiterating other media. In fact, even their definition of the medium – "a medium is that which remediates" (1999, 65) – defines intermediality as a fundamental condition for all media: "Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all" (55). The history of comics, for instance, is characterized by its "intermedial interplay" (Sina 2014, 100 [trans. E.K.]) with film, which Véronique Sina identifies in the evolution of both media. She notes that in order to constitute themselves, "comics and film repeatedly exchange, copy, imitate and quote each other" (109 [trans. E.K.]).[4] Intermediality, transmediality, and remediation have thus significantly shaped the history of comics. Further, the various transgressions of media boundaries as well as comics' self-reflexive mediality, defined by an artificial aesthetic that draws attention to its own processes of representation (Sina 2016, 60), determine negotiations and representations of gender. As Sina explains, "Due to its (hyper-)medial composition, the comic has the potential to critically question (stereotypical) strategies of (medial) gendering and – under certain circumstances – to subvert them" (26 [trans. E.K.]).[5]

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3 Since remediation theory does not focus on the specific forms and functions of intermedial practices within given media configurations, but, more generally, on the fundamental correlation between different media, Rajewsky specifies that literary studies and media studies work with different concepts of intermediality (2008, 59).

4 Sina traces this interplay from its beginnings in film history to modern comic adaptations. She highlights the precursors of cinematographic technology, which set sequential images in motion (2014, 102), the first animations as well as the remediation of themes and contents of popular film and television productions in comics (108). Finally, Sina describes the innovative fusions of the aesthetics of comic and film in current screen adaptations of popular comics as a "new, unbounded way of storytelling" (114).

5 The term *hypermedial* originates from Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory. According to Bolter and Grusin *hypermediacy* – foregrounding processes of signification and mediation – and *trans-*

Thus, the categories of media and gender are closely intertwined. Andrea Seier explores this entanglement in *Remediatisierung: Die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien* (2007). In her book, Seier transfers Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity[6] to media studies by discussing how, based on Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory, individual media can be understood as "performative acts of mediation" (70 [trans. E.K.]) that constitute themselves through processes of repetition and reiteration (68). She further suggests that a performative understanding of media and remediation benefits gender-oriented investigations as it emphasizes the crucial interconnection between the representation of gendered identities and the mediality of their representation (139). In her analytical examples, Seier focuses on the medium of film, claiming that "cinematic representations of gender should be examined as a site not only for the actualization but also for the transformation of gender discourses" (140 [trans. E.K.]). Building on Seier's observations and her idea of remediation as a "performative concept of intermediality" (Sina 2016, 23), Sina then explores the *comicfilm* as a site for this transformation and the subversive representation of gender (21). Her term *comicfilm* describes visually innovative, contemporary film adaptations of comics that draw attention to the interplay between both media by integrating the mediality and aesthetics of comics (for instance, by means of animation technology) (22). They therefore lend themselves to exploring the constitutive intersections between media and gender (269).[7]

Examining Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* as well as its film adaptation by Marielle Heller, the following analyses will demonstrate how intermediality and remediation can be mobilized as subversive feminist strategies of representation. Gloeckner's *Diary* is an innovative example that utilizes comics' essential intermediality to illustrate a female coming-of-age experience. Unlike prototypical comics, organized in sequences of panels arranged in a grid layout, *Diary* is characterized by a heterogenous and fragmented format that combines prose, illustrations, and comic sequences to tell the story of Minnie Goetze (Gloeckner's fifteen-year-old

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parent immediacy – aiming for seemingly immediate representation – are two strategies that shape the "double logic of remediation" (1999, 5). As they explain, "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5).

6 In her seminal publication *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender does not exist as a stable identity category but is performed, which, in her definition, means constituted through the "stylized repetition of acts" (1999, 179) informed by sociocultural conventions.

7 For instance, Sina's analysis of *Sin City* examines how the exaggerated, abstract aesthetic of the comic is adapted on screen and, in both cases, presents a subversive repetition of heteronormative gender roles. For her detailed analysis, see Sina 2016, 87–146.
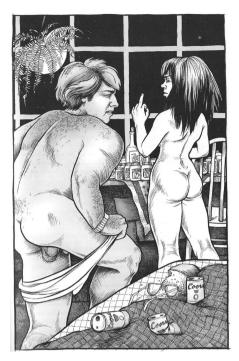
Fig. 1: "He said he didn't like stupid little chicks like me trying to manipulate him …". Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, 79.

alter ego) and outline her subjectivity. This format allows Gloeckner to introduce multiple perspectives by visually commenting on Minnie's diary entries and staging, as Hillary Chute phrases it, "a conversation between temporal and discursive layers, between text and image, as the 'visual voice' in Gloeckner's adult hand enters the text to dialogue with Minnie's child voice" (2010, 83). She thus utilizes this visual voice to comment on Minnie's description of her affair with her mother's thirty-five-year-old boyfriend Monroe and critiques the "systemic misogyny" (Rosenberg 2007, 396) that defines her adolescence. Gloeckner focuses on the complexities of Minnie's awakening sexuality, sparked by the abusive affair, and in the process "authorizes a complex tectonic shift ungrounding patriarchal visual and textual structures" (396). She thus paints a nuanced picture of female adolescence and sexuality, mobilizing the medium's political feminist potential to foreground "the underrepresented lived realities of women" (Chute 2010, 91). For instance, a full-page illustration visualizes an excerpt from Minnie's diary entry in which she describes an argument with Monroe after one of their sexual encounters (Fig. 1). Minnie refuses to get dressed and threatens

to tell her mother about the affair. As her diary entry recounts, "[Monroe] said he didn't like stupid little chicks like me trying to manipulate him" (Gloeckner 2015, 78). This statement captions the illustration, which contrasts Minnie's self-confident presence with the representation of Monroe, who is exposed from a distinctly unflattering perspective. Minnie proudly owns her nudity by responding to his angry stare with her middle finger. Instead of displaying her as victim, the visuals provide "a mocking counterobjectification, a female gaze at work" (Chute 2010, 81). By reading Minnie's extended middle finger as directed at both Monroe and the reader, Chute further specifies how the image exemplifies a feminist critique that "destabilizes the dominant visual mode (of culture, of pornography), which is aligned with the predatory identificatory [male] gaze" (81).[8] As this illustration ridicules Monroe's behavior while emphasizing Minnie's rebellious agency, it further demonstrates how Gloeckner uses her visual voice to manipulate. "The form 'comic' sets up a tension that I like," Gloeckner explains in an interview with Andrea Juno. "When I'm telling a story, it might be a sad or depressing tale, but the medium allows me to be slightly ironic. It allows me to put humor in, and rise above projecting myself as victim" (Gloeckner 1997, 159). While the medium of comics offers many ways to combine images and text (see, e.g., McCloud 1993, 153–154; Rippl and Etter 2015, 205), Gloeckner relies on its foundational intermediality and "cross-discursive" (Chute and DeKoven 2006, 769) structure to juxtapose Minnie's unfiltered teenage voice with her own adult reevaluation.[9]

Gloeckner also relies on intermedial references to illustrate how Minnie resists the male gaze. An in-text illustration captioned "I have a towel around my head and Noxzema on my face" (2015, 163) constitutes a parodic citation of a Renaissance painting titled *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars* (1594) (Fig. 2). The original painting depicts two women sitting in a bathtub – one pinching the other's nipple. Both look at the viewer instead of each other, which renders the display artificial and staged – an impression reinforced by the red curtain that frames the scene. As Olga Michael concludes, the original painting therefore rep-

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8 By addressing Gloeckner's female gaze and strategies of counter-objectification, Chute builds on insights from feminist film theory. In particular, she draws on Laura Mulvey's explanation of the *male gaze*. Mulvey addresses the gendered structures of looking and visual pleasure in the cinema in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, famously arguing, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (2012 [1975], 62).

9 Chute and DeKoven consider the medium comics to be "cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct" (2006, 769).
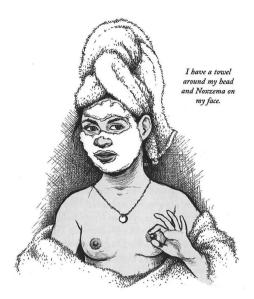
I have a towel around my head and Noxzema on my face.

Fig. 2: "I have a towel around my head and Noxzema on my face." Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, 163.

resents "the tradition of the adolescent female spectacle" (2014, 54) and appears to be directed at the male viewer.[10] Gloeckner overturns this perspective in her appropriation, which features Minnie alone in front of her mirror observing and touching her own body while wondering about the implications of continually being surveyed and assessed: "A body can depress you. You wonder: 'Is it fat? Is it ugly? What does it look like from behind?'" (2015, 163). While *Diary* continuously interrogates and challenges the *male gaze* (Chute 2010, 81), this illustration in particular foregrounds Minnie's self-determined observation of her body as a subversive feminist strategy of resisting traditional objectification, as it "ignores the male spectator and demonstrates a narcissism that refuses to provide voyeuristic pleasure" (Michael 2014, 56–57). Her masked face denaturalizes her image, and her critical self-surveillance challenges her status as an object of the male gaze, since Minnie is interrogating her body for her own pleasure. This illustration of Minnie's mirror image constitutes a subversive reiteration of patriarchal traditions, allowing Gloeckner to counter objectifying perspectives and denaturalize the female spectacle so prominently displayed in the original painting (Michael 2014, 58). Thus, the intermedial

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10 See Michael (2014, 56) for a discussion of the historical context of the original painting.

reference challenges the gendered position of the female subject on display, while Gloeckner's subversive citation exposes dominant masculinist traditions.

Marielle Heller's film adaptation of *Diary* recreates the source text's unique intermediality by mixing live action with hand-drawn animation. It therefore presents a special version of the *comicfilm* as defined by Sina.[11] The representational strategy of switching between animated sequences and live action remediates *Diary's* format, which relies on the juxtaposition of and alternation between prose, illustrations, and comic sequences. Like the illustrated diary, in which comic sequences sporadically take over Minnie's narration, with illustrations complementing her account, Heller's adaptation features animated sequences and ornamental animations that intrude into the live action. The mixture of live action and animation results in a "layered, collaged, multi-mode mise-en-scène" (Sonnenberg-Schrank 2020, 204) that emulates *Diary's* intermediality and similarly emphasizes the film's hypermediacy. However, while the illustrated diary uses its hypermedial format to create a dialogue between Gloeckner and her teenage alter ego, the film relies on its mixture of media to offer direct insights into Minnie's subjective experience and to immerse the audience in her mind. The hand-drawn animations externalize Minnie's creative imagination within the diegesis. At times, they manifest as complementary ornaments that illustrate her emotions; at other times, her drawings come to life or appear in the storyworld as animated characters. Sometimes Minnie herself turns into a cartoon.

In one scene, the intercutting of live action and animation also explicitly challenges the sociocultural restrictions that Minnie encounters while exploring her sexuality on her own terms. Introduced by her voice-over as "a young girl, driven astray by the lustful lure of the flesh, [looking] every bit the harlot she was bound to become," the animated sequence features a drawn version of Minnie as a giant woman striding through San Francisco. The sequence is intercut with live-action shots of Minnie and her high-school crush Ricky Wasserman making out in his car. As cartoon Minnie continues to walk along the streets, she meets Ricky's miniscule cartoon avatar, picks him up and presses him against her face. The film cuts back

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11 Sina has defined comicfilms as productions that rely on computer animation and digital technology to "experiment with the expressive means of film and the representational possibilities of comics through the targeted cinematic orchestration of comic-specific elements" (2016, 22 [trans. E.K.]). However, as she explains, the term *comicfilm* is a dynamic and heterogenous concept that is not defined by "a fixed, ontological 'core'," but shaped "in an ongoing, performative process of 'becoming' and change" (267). While *Diary* does not employ animation "to align the medium of film with the graphic concept of the medium comics" (111 [trans. E.K.]), it still presents a version of the comicfilm that uses animation to emphasize its hypermediacy and remediate the heterogenous form of Gloeckner's comic.

to the live action sequence as Ricky stops kissing Minnie and confesses that he is afraid of her passion and sexual drive. In the final part of the animated sequence, giant-Minnie's eyes fill with tears, and she drops Ricky on the street and runs away (Diary 00:45:36–00:46:45). Ricky's overwhelmed, intimidated reaction embodies what Deborah Tolman calls the "societal nervous breakdown" brought on by "girls who step out of the bounds of appropriate, controlled female sexuality" (2005, 8) – "appropriate" referring to the fact that they are sexual, "but primarily in ways that cater to boys' desire rather than to their own" (120). However, through Minnie's portrayal as a grotesque, monstrous female character "in the fashion of King Kong or Godzilla" (Sonnenberg-Schrank 2020, 215), the intercut animated sequence parodically challenges these gendered social restrictions on sexual desire "through visual exaggeration" (216). As Frederik Køhlert notes, an exaggerated portrayal of unruly femininity potentially "reconfigures it as a grotesque image of female empowerment" (2019, 35–36) that "challenges the prevailing cultural constructions of femininity through a parodic and troubling repetition of tropes belonging to patriarchal discourse" (34).[12] The unruly "parodic excess" (36) of Minnie as a giant cartoon figure allows for "the symbolic dismantling of male authority over her body" (34), especially when compared with Ricky's tiny cartoon avatar. Moreover, this specific representation references the cinematic trope of the monster and its helpless female victim, reversing their gendered positions.[13] The sequence remediates the heterogenous format of its source text to create this grotesque, transgressive representation of Minnie and relies on a combination of media to offer a simultaneous parodic evaluation of transgressive female sexuality.

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12 Køhlert makes this observation with regard to cartoonist Julie Doucet's work, who similarly portrays herself as a monstrous, transgressive woman in the central panel of one of her most famous comic strips, *Heavy Flow* (1991 [1989], 121–124).

13 Karen Hollinger, who investigates these gendered positions, observes that, across the different horror genres, "the monster is overtly, even excessively, masculine" (1989, 36–37). In her article, she draws on a psychoanalytical reading of the male monster in horror films, contending that the monster provides visual pleasure by mobilizing and simultaneously disavowing the male spectator's castration anxiety through fetishism and voyeurism (37), which she compares to Mulvey's observation about the cinematic representation of women and the *male gaze*. Hollinger concludes that "an intimate relationship seems to exist among the filmic presentation of the horror monster, the castration anxiety it evokes, and the cinematic representation of the female form" (36). Positioning women as victims of the monster obscures this relationship (38). *Diary's* reversal of these gendered positions and the portrayal of Ricky's helplessness combined with his fear of Minnie's sexual drive thus exposes the basic fear that "lurks behind castration anxieties and the fetishized horror monster," which Hollinger identifies as "a fear not of the lack represented by the horror monster but of the potency of female sexuality and the power of woman's sexual difference" (39).

Overall, both comic and film utilize their (inter-)mediality to examine the female image and its socio-cultural connotations. Gloeckner's work and its adaptation thus foreground the "constitutive intersection of media and gender" (Sina 2016, 269) by demonstrating how comics' multivalent intermediality and creative strategies of cinematic remediation can challenge stereotypical portrayals of female adolescence and sexuality, and critically engage with gendered experiences.

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