Looking on the dark and bright side: Creative metaphors of depression in two graphic memoirs

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Abstract

When people speak or write about their experience of depression, a small number of metaphors often dominate their accounts. This article uses two graphic memoirs to show how comics artists may creatively transform such entrenched metaphors by drawing on the socio-cultural conventions and formal properties of the medium.

Keywords: creativity, depression, graphic memoir, metaphor

Introduction

In 2010, two British graphic memoirs about the experience of suffering and recovering from clinical depression were published to considerable popular and critical acclaim. The stories in Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales* are based on the diaries he kept during his work as a health care assistant on an acute psychiatric ward, while also detailing his own struggle with severe anxiety and depression. Drawn in a style that is influenced by the stark woodcuts of Belgian artist Frans Masereel (Spurgeon, 2011), Cunningham's memoir is deeply affecting, but in an unobtrusive, reticent way. *Depresso,* by Brick, the alter ego of travel writer John Stuart Clark, approaches the same topic, but from a very different angle. Mixing the comic with the tragic, and using a style of cartooning that is almost manic in its intensity, *Depresso* is an irreverent, and, according to the blurb on the book cover, "only semi-fictional" account

of Tom Freeman's mental breakdown and slow, painful recovery. It also covers the history and science of depression and rages against the failure of the British National Health System to provide adequate treatment.[1]

The two books could hardly be more different in terms of the narrative techniques and visual styles they employ, but they do have one striking feature in common: Both are replete with metaphors that express the (semi-)autobiographical protagonist's experience of mental suffering in more concrete and tangible forms. According to recent research, it is not at all unusual for people to use metaphor when talking about depression, with the most common ones representing the experience as darkness, decent, a heavy burden, or being trapped in a tight space. The process of recovery is typically framed in terms of a battle or journey (Charteris-Black, 2012; Fullagar and O'Brien, 2012: Levitt et al., 2000; McMullen, 1999). Many personal written accounts and literary narratives of depression employ a similar range of metaphors (see Clark, 2008). For example, the metaphors William Styron uses in his popular memoir, *Darkness visible* (1990), have been found to draw on highly conventional cultural models of depression, although the author was able to reassemble them in a way that was clearly helpful to a lot of readers (Schoeneman et al., 2004).

For conceptual metaphor theorists (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; 1999; Johnson, 1987; Turner, 1996), the discovery of such regularities in the use of metaphorical language is not surprising. They believe that metaphor is a fundamental property of all human thought, which allows us to understand abstract areas of our lives in terms of more concrete and embodied experiences. Such "mappings" between two conceptual domains tend to generate clusters of conventional metaphorical expressions. Since sad feelings tend to express themselves in a slumped body posture, for example, metaphors based on the notion of depression as a burden are widespread. Similarly, we all experience a connection between the absence or presence of light and our subjective sense of well-being, resulting in a universal tendency to understand

and describe negative experiences and emotions in terms of darkness. Metaphors that are used over and over again are also highly indicative of contemporary attitudes towards particular areas of reality, because they tend to be the ones that are "satisfying instantiations of a 'conventional' or culturally shared model" (Quinn, 1991: 79; see also Kövecses, 2005). For instance, the description of depressed feelings as sinking or falling is likely to reflect both embodied experience and dominant cultural values, with "down" being correlated not only with illness and death, but also with low status, moral deficiency, and lack of individual agency and power (McMullen, 1999).

If metaphors are, indeed, based on shared bodily and cultural experiences, then they may offer a solution to one of the key paradoxes at the heart of all life writing, namely how experience, as something that is utterly subjective and personal, can ever be shared with others (Scannell, 2001: 406). Illness narratives, in particular, are often expected to provide an empowering way for individuals to bear witness to their own unique experiences, but also to offer comfort to readers who have themselves suffered from the disease or who wish to understand and empathize with what someone else is going through. This paradox is addressed by Cunningham in an interview with *The Comics Reporter*, where he describes his delight at discovering via the reactions of his readers that "[w]hat I thought was an experience particular to me, has turned out to be more universal than I supposed" (Spurgeon, 2011). Metaphors may play a pivotal role in helping memoirist achieve this dual purpose.

Yet there is also a flip-side to the use of metaphors as a way for people to share their experience with others: Some metaphors may become so entrenched that they are almost impossible to escape, shaping our attitudes and behaviors in harmful ways at the level of unconscious or barely conscious thought processes. As Susan Sontag put it in her book about the dominant metaphors of disease in the United States, "it is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has

been landscaped" (1978: 3/4). For example, many contemporary illness narratives draw on war metaphors that organize people's experiences into a coherent story of triumph over enemy combatants. Such metaphors are deeply unhelpful for people who have not achieved a positive outcome to their health problems, and whose sense of guilt and failure may be reinforced by having their experiences framed in these terms.

As I argue in the first part of this article, the choice for memoirists is not between simply recycling dominant cultural metaphors and avoiding all figurative language completely. A more interesting and effective solution is to use metaphors in a creative way, thereby exploiting the communicative benefits they offer, while avoiding the danger of being trapped in damaging unconscious thought processes. Drawing on Carter's (2004) understanding of creativity as something that is both novel and appropriate, I suggest that metaphor creativity includes the discovery of new connections between two areas of experience and the imaginative reinterpretation of conventional metaphors. In order to be considered truly creative, however, the new metaphor must accord with our basic embodied experiences, as well as being well suited to the medium and context of communication. Each medium, I argue, thus offers unique opportunities for, and constraints on, metaphor creativity. Certainly many of the illness narratives that have been created in the comics medium over the past 40 years, including works about the experience of suffering from cancer (Brabner and Pekar, 1994; Marchetto, 1994; Small, 2009), spina bifida (Davison, 1990), epilepsy (David B., 2005), and mental illness (Clell, 2002; Green, 1995; Forney, 2012), use highly unusual metaphors to great effect (cf. El Refaie, 2012; Lykou, 2010; Squier, 2008; Tensuan, 2011; Williams, 2014).

The second part of this article analyses the metaphors in *Psychiatric Tales* and *Depresso* in order to illustrate and develop my arguments. Both books exploit the formal tensions inherent in the comics medium – between words and images, and between sequence and

layout, for instance (Hatfield, 2005) – in order to find many new ways of representing metaphors of depression. The visual nature of comics, in particular, seems to encourage a process whereby metaphors are reinterpreted and adapted in novel ways. As Forceville and Urios-Aparisi point out, "[o]ne mode's potential to render 'meaning' can never be completely 'translated' into that of another mode – and sometimes translation is downright impossible" (2009: 4). Visual metaphors thus never express exactly the same meanings as their verbal counterparts, even if the underlying thought patterns are similar. Comics artists are also able to draw on the associations of the medium with humor, fantasy, irony and subversion that many people, particularly in the English-speaking, are still likely to hold, even though it has recently begun to enjoy much greater recognition by the educational and literary establishment. As Brick's postscript demonstrates, he is well aware of lingering prejudices and happy to exploit them for his own satirical purposes: "If you've been affected by any of the issues in this book, getta grip. It's only a comic!" (Brick, 2010: 263).

1. Depression, metaphor, and creativity

The term "depression" comes from the Latin *deprimere*, which translates as "to press down," and is thus itself metaphorical in origin. It replaced the earlier concept of melancholia, the less severe forms of which were considered in the late medieval and Renaissance periods to be afflictions of the mind that were likely to affect particularly sensitive, intellectual men, such as artists, noblemen, and intellectuals. However, as the presumed origin of depressed feelings shifted over time from the mind to the genitalia, they were devalued and became more closely associated with women. This development coincided with the emergence in advanced capitalist societies of ideas relating to the high value placed on individualism and

autonomy, both of which are typically less readily available to women than men (McMullen, 1999; Schiesari, 1992).

The 20th century also saw the rise of psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioral theories, which linked depression to personality features, family dynamics, and early childhood experiences. In the 1970s, the focus of explanations for mental disorders shifted again, this time to chemical and neurophysiological explanations, supported by brain-imaging technologies and new drugs. However, as Metzl (2003) indicates, this does not mean that our understanding of depression is now free from socio-cultural frames of meaning: "Genetics, neurochemistry, and pharmacology might claim to uncover universal facts. But these facts are interpreted only through the cultural moments in which they are given meaning, mediated through the particulars of specific time periods, philosophies, aesthetics, genres, and other broad contexts into which pharmaceuticals come to circulate" (2003: 18). Metzl's analysis of media representations of psychotropic drugs in the US of the second half of the 20th century reveals that traditional notions of gender roles were maintained, with white men still typically assumed to be doctors, and white, middle-class women scripted into the role of patient.

The enormous variations in the way the combination of symptoms that we now call depression has been labeled, explained and treated throughout history attest to the significance of the social-historical contexts in which our understandings and practices of mental illness are based. So, although depression seems to be much more common among women than among men, with studies of general populations and primary health care users consistently showing up to double the number of women as men receiving a diagnosis of depression, this may reveal more about gender roles and expectations than about any significant biological differences (McMullen, 2008: 127).

When people try to grasp and articulate the specific ways in which depression affects them, metaphor seems inevitable. According to the standard view of metaphor in a cognitivist

framework, metaphors are grounded in basic experiences of bodily actions and sensory perceptions, although cultural values and practices, both past and present, are also likely to shape their use and interpretation (Deignan, 2003). These metaphors provide a rich resource which individuals can exploit in order to create meaningful stories about their experiences. There is evidence, for instance, that Chinese individuals suffering from depression draw on both Western cultural models and traditional Chinese medical philosophy when constructing metaphors of the heart and the brain – or a combination of both – to describe their thoughts and feelings (Pritzker, 2007). Another example of the cultural variability of metaphors comes from Japan, where the emotions are sometimes thought of as being shaped by the pressure exerted by various meteorological phenomena, including wind, rain, thunder, clouds, and fog (Shinohara and Matsunaka, 2009: 273).

In contemporary Western societies, the process of falling ill and recovering is most commonly described in terms of a journey, but it is also often conceptualized by sufferers as a battle, both with themselves and with the effect of the illness on their lives. The following metaphors are to be found most frequently in people's oral accounts of the feelings associated with depression: Firstly, there is the metaphor of depression as a state of darkness. Although it is probably based in the universal sense of fear and gloom evoked by the lack of light at nighttime or during spells of bad weather, it also thought to carry echoes of the formerly wide-spread assumption that melancholia was due to an excess of black bile (McMullen, 1999). A second long-lasting metaphor that is often evoked by people with depression is that of the mind, head, or body being pressed or weighed down by a burden. Metaphors of decent are also common, with female suffers of depression in Australia, for instance, often describing "falling, going downhill, crashing, or descending into a state of depression" (Fullagar and O'Brien, 2012: 1066). Another highly conventional metaphor is one which represents depression as a form of containment or entrapment. Based on his analysis of

qualitative interviews with British men and women who had experienced depression, Charteris-Black suggests that many seem to experience depressed feelings as being located within the self, while the self, in turn, is described as being contained by depression "in a three-dimensional space such as a 'pit,' 'hole,' or 'bubble'" (2012: 207).

These conventional metaphors of depression can be adapted to suit the particular stories sufferers wish to tell. Ann Jurecic believes that the creators of illness narratives are driven by "the desire to give meaning to lives lived in uncertainty," and that their stories will inevitably involve "imperfect but necessary fictions" (2012: 42). According to Frank (1995), there are three main types of stories that ill people use to try and make sense of their experiences: The "restitution" narrative is based on the deep-seated human desire to recover from disease and return to a previous state of health and normality. It is the culturally preferred narrative in contemporary western societies, since it places great trust in Medicine and offers people a way of denying the inevitability of death (1995: 77-96). The "chaos" narrative, by contrast, is born of a complete lack of hope, which leads to the absence of any sense of coherent sequence and causality. Indeed, strictly speaking, chaos narratives can only be lived, not told, because the very act of imposing narrative order on experiences already implies a measure of structured, reflective understanding (1995: 98). In "quest" narratives, finally, illness is seen as the occasion for setting out on a journey towards greater acceptance or personal improvement: "What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience" (1995: 115).

When people talk or write about their experience of suffering from depression, their choice of metaphors is likely to depend upon which of these three narrative types is dominating their story at a particular moment. For example, journey and battle metaphors have a clear beginning, middle, and end, thus providing a perfect fit for narratives revolving around a restitution or quest plot, while metaphors of darkness, descent, burden, and

containment all form one half of a binary pair, which means that they are equally well able to convey a state of chaos and the hope of recovery and transformation. A study of short-term psychotherapy sessions in the US (Levitt et al., 2000), for instance, found that in the sessions with the most positive outcome, metaphors of carrying a burdened morphed over the course of the therapy into metaphors of unloading the burden. Similarly, Australian sufferers often used active metaphors of movement and transformation to describe their changing sense of self as they started to feel better: "These metaphors of recovery stood in stark contrast to the death-like stasis of depression: sun shining or climbing, or moving out of the blackness, hole, or pit" (Fullagar and O'Brien, 2012: 1068).

According to Carter (2004), at least some of the metaphors used in spontaneous talk are likely to be creative. Creativity is typically understood as "an ability to produce work that is *novel* and *appropriate*" (2004: 29; italics in the original), in the sense that it departs from traditional practices and provides a fitting resolution of problems existing within certain defined parameters. It also often involves "novel analogies or combinations between conceptual elements which have been previously unassociated" (2004: 47). Following this definition, metaphor creativity may be said to include both the use of entirely novel mappings between two areas of experience, and the reinterpretation of conventional metaphors in ways that depart from established practices. In either case, the creative process is constrained by the principle of appropriateness. A metaphor of depression is only appropriate and thus truly creative if it does not contradict our intuitive embodied experiences (if it is *apt*, in other words), and if it is used in ways that accord with the user's specific communicative purposes in a defined social, cultural, and discursive context.

Carter (2004) is convinced that the difference between everyday creativity and artistic or poetic creativity is just a matter of degree.[2] Similarly, Lakoff and Turner (1989) suggest that even the most illustrious examples of literary metaphor are typically based on the same

conventional metaphorical patterns that underlie our ordinary thinking, although poets are often able to find ways of extending, elaborating, questioning, or combining metaphors in fresh, idiosyncratic ways, thereby guiding us beyond their "automatic and unconscious everyday use" (1989: 72).

A good example of a poetic use of metaphor can be found in psychologist Martha Manning's memoir about her depression, *Undercurrents* (see Dyer, 2008: 47). Manning (1995: 195-196) recounts the medieval French legend of St. Martha, who subdues a fire-breathing dragon by sprinkling holy water on its tail and then leads the docile beast into town with her silken belt. Pondering the significance of the tale to her struggle with depression, the author admires the saint's decision to ally herself with the object of her fear, and wonders whether her own illness might also be treated as a troublesome travel companion rather than a dangerous enemy. In Lakoff and Turner's terms, Manning can be said to have extended and elaborated the conventional metaphor of recovery as a battle against an enemy, by including elements that are not ordinarily included in the mapping and specifying existing elements in an unusual way. Combining the battle metaphor with the equally common journey analogy, she also explicitly questions some of the logical entailments of these conventional ways of thinking about depression.

Humor and irony may offer particularly effective techniques for questioning dominant metaphors (El Refaie, 2005). Once a particular set of metaphors has become accepted as the "normal" way of framing an event, creating the illusion of a common sense link between particular areas of experience, it becomes very difficult to challenge them without being forced to enter into their frames of reference, and even harder to replace them with new ones. Faced with this difficulty, irony offers itself as a powerful creative strategy, as it represents a way of quoting and simultaneously subverting a particular view of the world (Sperber and Wilson, 1981). Conventional metaphors may also be used in such a way that their absurdity

and potential for comedy is highlighted, which may undermine the solemn, taken for granted nature of their underlying assumptions.

More recently, metaphor scholars within the cognitive paradigm have identified many other ways in which metaphors can be used creatively in both spoken and written discourses (Cameron, 2011; Müller, 2008; Semino, 2011; Semino et al., 2013). As they have demonstrated, the meanings of metaphors are inherently dynamic and flexible, with the same metaphorical expressions often acquiring entirely different connotations and functions when they are re-used within the same conversation or text, or when they are recontextualized across different genres and registers. Metaphors may also be organized into mini-narratives, or "scenarios" (Musolff, 2006), in which case even the most conventional idioms are often reactivated and brought to the discourse participants' conscious attention. Consequently, metaphor creativity "needs to be considered both in terms of the novelty or otherwise of underlying conceptual mappings, and in terms of the salience and originality of individual metaphorical choices and patterns" (Semino, 2008: 54). These choices and patterns will clearly be affected by not just by the specific genre and register, but also the particular medium in which metaphorical meanings are represented.

Because artists, poets, and professional writers are typically more aware of the potentials and constraints of the specific medium in which they are working, they are in a better position to exploit its unique opportunities for introducing creative metaphors into their stories or art. In his highly graphic and candid account of his obsessive-compulsive disorder, American cartoonist Justin Green (1995) demonstrates the extraordinary ability of the comics medium to represent the "grind[ing] against each other" of "the external and internal worlds" that is often experienced by people suffering from mental illness (Williams, 2014: 69), by using the visual metaphor of "pecker rays" emanating from his genitals and other body parts to represent his sexual fixation on the Virgin Mary, for instance. Likewise, Ellen Forney's

Marbles is replete with witty, inventive metaphors that explore the effects of her bipolar disorder on her life, including one image which represents the sufferer's mood states as a ride on a carousel: In her manic state, she is balancing on the horse's back with her head almost touching the top of the carousel, while her depressed alter ego has slid down from her horse and is curled up in a heap on the floor (2012: 59).

Kukkonen (2008: 95) believes that comics artists employ metaphor mainly "to bring multi-layered connections and a literary complexity to narrative." However, as I will demonstrate in the following section through the examples of *Psychiatric Tales* and *Depresso*, metaphors in comics about depression also fulfill the role of enabling readers to draw on their own embodied experience in order to grasp the thoughts, sensations, and emotions of the autobiographical protagonists. The specific properties of comics allow artists working in this medium to use conventional metaphors in creative ways, thereby allowing them to paint a vivid and convincing portrait of what it is like to suffer from this debilitating mental illness, but without simply recycling and reinforcing entrenched thought patterns.

2. Creative (verbo-)visual metaphors in *Psychiatric Tales* and *Depresso*

Psychiatric Tales opens a window onto the world of the acute psychiatric ward where Cunningham worked as an assistant for many years, revealing the very human stories of the people within and challenging many of the common stereotypes and prejudices about a range of mental conditions, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, dementia, and depression. The final chapter of the book centers on the author's own struggle with severe anxiety and depression, which was triggered by his attempt to continue with his highly stressful job, while simultaneously training to become a mental health nurse.

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Figure 1: *Psychiatric Tales*, p. 90; www.blankslatebooks.co.uk; darryl-cunningham.blogspot.co.uk

Cunningham's first major crisis is introduced through the use of a conventional metaphorical expression: "I was too fragile to survive such a high pressure course" (p. 90; see figure 1, panel 2). While this metaphor is not one of the most common ones identified by analysts of the discourse of depression, it is certainly not an unusual way of describing the start of a mental health crisis. It chimes with our intuitive understanding of the mind as a brittle object that is unable to withstand too much external or internal pressure acting upon it and that must therefore be carefully protected for fear of being destroyed (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Cunningham creatively elaborates and extends this basic conceptual mapping, translating it into a series of concrete visual images and thereby opening it up to new meaning.

In the third panel, the words "too easily broken" are accompanied by the drawing of a chain breaking in half, which "literalizes" a conventional metaphorical expression through a concrete and more specific visual image (El Refaie, 2003: 89). A chain is not a prototypically fragile object, as it is normally intended to withstand a great deal of force exerted upon it. Therefore, the choice of this particular image to illustrate the notion of the mind as a brittle object is unusual. It implies that the pressure Cunningham found himself under was so great that even the most resilient character would have cracked under its influence. Another creative aspect of this metaphor is that in most other contexts the notion of a breaking chain would have positive rather than negative connotations, typically signifying someone's liberation from physical or mental constraints. Yet here the breaking chain clearly stands for something undesirable, suggesting the removal of the tethers that allowed Cunningham to control his emotions and that anchored him to the world and the people around him. This

image, in turn, may for some readers trigger a metaphorical scenario in which the emotional self takes on the role of a wild beast that is unleashed by the depression.

According to Forceville (1999), it is often hard to predict with any certainty whether particular verbal or visual representations would, in fact, be interpreted metaphorically by the majority of individual readers. Metaphorical meanings may be signaled either implicitly or explicitly in any semiotic mode, depending on whether there is or is not also a perfectly plausible literal explanation for the presence in a story of a particular element. The chain, for instance, constitutes a clearly non-diegetic insert into the otherwise realistic setting of Cunningham's flat, which will thus alert readers more strongly to the need to interpret this panel metaphorically, although the range and depth of their interpretations is likely to be contingent upon the genre in which the drawing is encountered. For example, readers typically pay more attention to metaphors in literary than in non-literary texts, and this heightened attention also increases the likelihood that the metaphors will generate rich ideas and fantasies (Steen, 1994).

The other visual metaphors on this page are more implicit, drawing on elements of visual style such as color, form and composition. The first panel shows Cunningham's head and shoulders in a white outline against a black background. In the second panel, his torso has moved down into the bottom right-hand corner, with the dark background now taking up the majority of the space. This panel layout and the heavy use of black subtly reflect and reinforce the common associations between depression, descent, and darkness. The dots and spiral patterns of various sizes in panel two appear to be prime examples of what Forceville (2011), drawing on Kennedy (1982), calls "pictorial runes," the "non-mimetic graphic elements that contribute narratively salient information" (2011: 875). Pictorial runes allow comics artists to visualize motion and/or convey characters' emotions and mental states. When twirls, spirals, spikes, or droplets appear around or above a character's head, for

instance, this typically suggests emotional affect, confusion, dizziness, or drunkenness (2011: 879-882). In this case, the runes are clearly meant to indicate Cunningham's inner turmoil. The zigzag pattern used in panel four seems to fulfill a similar function, although here it is detached from any depiction of the protagonist, suggesting instead that we are seeing the world through the distorting lens of his anxiety.

When the spiral and zigzag patterns are repeated in panels five and six (see figure 1), they are reinterpreted as concrete elements in the real world, representing a rug and a flickering television screen respectively. As Biebuyck and Martens (2011: 64) point out, in literary texts the complex interplay of metaphors often forms an additional dimension of narrativity, which encourages readers to create links between figurative and non-figurative parts of the text, and between metaphor and other tropes. Under changing narrative and contextual circumstances, "a figurative re-orientation of tropes may take place" (2011: p. 64), whereby what first looks like metaphor can turn out to be a literal reference or metonym, or vice versa. In our example, the abstract shapes are first introduced as metaphors for ineffable emotions, but are then anchored to literal, concrete objects within the story world. Whether or not this technique was employed deliberately by Cunningham, it constitutes an effective means of conveying the shift in a depressed person's perceptions of reality, as everyday events and objects acquire additional, disturbing meanings.

Comics are unique in the way that it is possible for every panel to have a potential relationship not just with other images on a double page, but with every other panel in the book as well, forming complex strands of correspondences through what Groensteen (2007) has termed *tressage*, or "braiding." These links can be established through various plastic or semantic similarities, including the repetition of particular objects, shapes, patterns, or colors. The drawing of Cunningham sitting in his living room in panel four on page 97 (see figure 2), for instance, represents an exact replica of the drawing in panel six on page 90 (see figure 1),

although the content of the speech balloon has changed. Even if the reader is not aware of this repetition on a conscious level, it is nevertheless likely to produce an underlying impression of circularity and stasis, encouraging a sense of empathy with the troubled protagonist's perceptions of the world, which at this point seem to be framed by a chaos narrative (Frank 1995).

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Figure 2: *Psychiatric Tales*, p. 97; www.blankslatebooks.co.uk; darryl-cunningham.blogspot.co.uk

This page (see figure 2) also reintroduces the metaphor of the mind as a brittle object, both verbally ("This is when I broke", panel 2), and visually. The first panel shows another picture of a breaking chain, although this time the two segments are slightly further apart than when it was first used (see figure 1), which hints at the escalation of Cunningham's mental crisis. Panels two and four contain pictures of a shattered window pane and a pencil snapping in the middle. Both objects may have actually featured in the artist's life at the time; it is perfectly plausible, for instance, that broke a pencil in frustration at his inability to "make anything of myself as an illustrator," as the accompanying text suggests. However, the repeated association between fracture and negative emotions in the immediate context of these two panels makes it clear that they should be read not as literal references but as metaphors for Cunningham's troubled state of mind, including the loss of his creative impulses.

The final panel on this page introduces another visual metaphor, which represents the protagonist's feelings of "unhappiness," "loneliness," and "grim poverty" by depicting him with a large hole in his chest. This represents an elaboration of the conventional container

metaphor, which, as mentioned above, conceptualizes the self as containing depressed feelings and/or as being contained by depression in a bubble, shell, hole, or pit (Charteris-Black, 2012: 206). In *Psychiatric Tales* the depressed thoughts and feelings are so negative that they form a kind of emotional anti-matter, which creates a void at the center of Cunningham's physical self. This visual metaphor is repeated in panel four of the following page, which describes the most desperate period in his life, when he is contemplating suicide and finds himself "haunting high places" (p. 98; see figure 3).

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Figure 3: *Psychiatric Tales*, p. 98 (detail); www.blankslatebooks.co.uk; darryl-cunningham.blogspot.co.uk

Here the foreground and background colors are reversed, with Cunningham's body drawn in white against a black backdrop and with a black hole where his chest should be. Although a strong contrast between lightness and darkness is intrinsic to the artist's style, which draws inspiration from a long tradition of European woodcut illustrations, in this book it is also used as a continuous theme to represent positive or negative thoughts and emotions. When Cunningham discusses the effects of depression in general terms or in relation to the patients he meets in the psychiatric hospital, sadness and anxiety are typically associated with images of shadows, clouds and rain, while recovery is indicated by drawings of the sun (e.g. p. 6; p. 21; p. 25). When he describes his own experiences of the illness, however, darkness and brightness are used in a more abstract way.

On page 98 (see figure 3), the first panel contains nothing but the word "darkness" in white letters against a uniformly black background. Panels that are entirely white, grey or black, often termed "blind" panels by comics scholars, typically signal a loss of

consciousness or sight, but they may also indicate a refusal to show events that are so painful and difficult that no visual representation can properly do them justice (Groensteen, 2010: 11). This may be seen as the equivalent of silence in verbal literary forms, which, according to Haberman (2011), often acts as a double-layered metaphorical system: "At one level, silence functions as a metaphor for the ineffable […] However, since silence, conceived as a type of negativity or absence, cannot be represented directly, it is in turn represented either metonymically or metaphorically" (p. 78). Thus, Cunningham's memory of this period of his life is shown to be so horrific that it resists any subsequent attempt to represent it, be it in a verbal or a visual form. Instead, it invites readers to project their own thoughts and feelings onto the blank space, which encourages them to engage emotionally with the author's experiences and perhaps, by extension, with the plight of all people suffering from depression. In this case, it is also possible to distinguish a third level of metaphoricity, where silence or "nothingness" is represented deliberately through the color black (rather than white or grey, for instance), thus reinforcing the close metaphorical association between darkness and depression.

Psychiatric Tales ends on an optimistic note, as Cunningham recounts how he was eventually saved by Prozac and his cartooning. The work was first published in installments on his blog, where it received an overwhelmingly positive response from readers, many of whom had been affected by mental illness themselves. This encouraged the artist to persevere with a project he had all but abandoned during the period of his depression. In the final panels, he is shown at his drawing board, encouraging readers to follow his example and try to identify whatever it is that helps them recover their sense of self and their connection with the world around them.

Brick also emphasizes the healing power of artistic creation, although he is much more skeptical about the value of psychotropic drugs, which are shown to exacerbate and prolong

the suffering of his semi-autobiographical protagonist, Tom Freeman. *Depresso* uses a dizzying array of metaphors of depression, often piling one on top of the other until the whole edifice threatens to topple over under the sheer weight of meaning. Most of the metaphors used are conventional in origin, but they are typically given an ironic twist or exaggerated to the point of rendering them ridiculous. One of the most striking and creative metaphors, which runs like a thread through the whole story, depicts Tom's experience of depression as a kind of dragon or giant white lizard (see figure 4).

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Figure 4: *Depresso*, p. 37 (detail); copyright Brick, www.brickbats.co.uk

It suddenly appears out of nowhere and gives Tom a terrible fright (pp. 35-36), but, once he has got used to its almost constant presence, he has spirited conversations with it and actually seems to find its company helpful and reassuring, occasionally even referring to it, with only the slightest hint of irony, as his "friend" or "guardian angel" (p. 40). At other times, it takes on a much more sinister aspect, mutating into a fearsome, fire-breathing dragon as a result of neglecting to take its "meds" (p. 101), and trying to coax Tom into committing suicide by jumping off the edge of a cliff (p. 132).

According to Shildrick (2002), we are both fascinated and deeply disturbed by those indeterminate, monstrous creatures that are neither wholly self nor completely other, because they symbolize "the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being": "They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject" (2002: 4). Brick's giant lizard clearly belongs in this category: it looks like a lizard or dragon, but behaves in recognizably human ways. As the extract from page 37 illustrates, it is utterly real and tangible to Tom, but invisible to everybody else, suggesting that it is intimately

linked to his vulnerable sense of self and shaped by his increasingly distorted perceptions of reality as the depression gets more severe. This complicated notion is conveyed brilliantly through a visual sequence that shows Tom as he catches sight of the lizard in a mirror (see figure 4).

Mirrors and mirror images feature prominently in a large number of graphic memoirs, where they are typically used to illustrate the protagonist's problematic relationship with aspects of his or her sense of self (El Refaie, 2012). The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1977) argued that the so-called "mirror stage" from the age of six to eighteen months represents a vital phase in every human being's development. This is when we first perceive the reflection of our body in the mirror as an integrated and whole me, as opposed to the inner self, which is deeply fractured and volatile. The ideal of a complete, stable self is thus an imaginary construct, which is founded on a fundamental illusion. When mirrors are used in self-portraits, they can form a potent visual metaphor for the ambiguity involved in seeing something that both is and is not me, as well as for our inability to pin down our fluctuating sense of self: "Everyone's mirror is the site of repeated stand-offs between hope and disappointment, confidence and frank incredulity, between yesterday when things were looking up and the cold light of today. This unsteadiness is not just a function of the mirror, of course, for it occurs within our selves. But the mirror becomes a metaphor for this appalling mutability, its slipperiness reflecting our inability quite to grasp, or even clearly see, our ever-shifting selves" (Cumming, 2009: 148).

In the mirror scene in *Depresso* (see figure 4) Tom behaves like a young child who has just begun to grasp the notion of a separate self, striking several poses in front of the mirror to see whether he is, in fact, dealing with his own mirror image. Initially, it seems that the lizard simply represents Tom's depressed alter ego, but in the final panel it refuses to mirror his antics exactly and takes on a life of its own. Brick thus combines, extends, and elaborates the

conventional metaphorical meanings of mirrors and monsters, which are deeply rooted in shared developmental experiences and collective cultural myths, in order to show how Tom's depression is both an integral part of his self-identity and separate from it. Over the course of the book, the lizard also comes to represent Tom's hitherto unexamined family background and traumatic childhood experiences, which, as he gradually realizes, were probably largely responsible for his mental breakdown.

Even some of the most entrenched metaphors of depression, including the themes of darkness, burden, descent, and entrapment, are transformed by Brick's vivid imagery and satirical sense of humor. The scene shown in figure 5 may serve as just one example of the creative processes involved. It occurs at the end of a prolonged stay by Tom and his partner Judy in China, during which time the symptoms of his disease gradually abated, leaving him feeling "invigorated, purposeful, determined to get my life in the U.K. back on track" (p. 81). However, as he walks up the boarding bridge to the Terminal at London Heathrow airport, he feels as if every step is dropping him "deeper down the black hole of despondency" (p. 82). This metaphorical verbal expression is translated into the visual mode through a series of eight tall, narrow panels against a background that gradually fades from white, to grey, to black. The panels show Tom's lower body and legs in a step-by-step sequence, which is strongly reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's studies of human and animal locomotion. However, only the first picture is in an upright position, while the others are tilting back more and more precariously, with the final panel ending up in a horizontal position.

<FIGURE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS>

Figure 5: *Depresso*, p. 83; copyright Brick, www.brickbats.co.uk

On the following page, Brick further elaborates the themes of descent and darkness, and combines them with the metaphor of entrapment, as the narrator describes his sense of "*falling*, lurching as if in a lift held by failing cables, snapping, unraveling strand by strand" (p. 83, see figure 5). This is accompanied by a drawing, seen from above, of Tom in a small, narrow lift that is crashing down the shaft. The top of the lift is covered by a grid and metal bars, further emphasizing its trap-like nature. In the following picture the focus shifts from Tom's inner experiences to the external world of the UK border control. The majority of the panel space is taken up by a giant sign that lists all the rules, regulations and prohibitions that entrants to the country must abide by, ending with the hyperbolic exhortation to would-be immigrants to "not even think about" performing certain unspecified actions. Reading this sign reinforces Tom's sense of despair, which is illustrated through three overlapping freeze-frames in the center of the page that show him tumbling down towards a darker area in the background. At the bottom of the page the reader is returned to the "real" world of Heathrow airport. A series of six narrow panels, arranged along the bottom of the page like domino tiles that are about to be knocked over, show a series of snap-shots of the luggage conveyor belt, which appears to be moving from right to left in front of our eyes. To Tom's obvious consternation, it also delivers the white lizard, who welcomes him home with the sardonic greeting, "hello sunshine."

The page has a three-dimensional, layered quality to it, with panels depicting the outer world balancing precariously on the edge of the abyss of Tom's inner turmoil, which is represented by the pictures of him plummeting down a lift shaft and towards the dark, pit-shaped space in the middle of the page. The inherent tension in the comics medium between the sequence of panels and the surface of the page is thus exploited by the artist to convey both a vague impression of linear, chronological events and the more subjective experience of sinking deeper and deeper into hopelessness and despair. The page also combines quite

detailed, semi-realistic drawings in the background with more exaggerated, humorous cartoon characters in the foreground panels. By creatively adapting and subverting the entrenched mappings between depression, darkness, descent, and entrapment, Brick is thus able to render them more explicit and open them up to our critical reflection.

As Witek (1989: 43) points out, something that the comic book can do which prose alone cannot is to "keep previous scenes physically before the reader after the narrative has moved on." In this example, the image of Tom falling down the black hole of depression conveys a potent sense of terror and foreboding, which colors the following account of Cunningham's near total breakdown. However, like *Psychiatric Tales*, *Depresso* ends on a reasonably upbeat note, as the protagonist is shown to slowly work his way out of the depression. Brick draws on the conventional journey metaphor to represent Tom's gradual recovery, but again he elaborates and reworks it by giving it a humorous twist. The relevant sequence starts with a conversation between Tom and the lizard, with the latter hinting that it may be time for the two of them to part company and "go it alone" (p. 237). Using a string of clichés about the illness having given Tom the opportunity to come to terms with his past and discover his true self, the lizard then suggests that his companion should now "strike out on a *vision quest*." Tom retorts by complaining that he no longer knows where he is going: "All I see before me is a road chocker with *uncertainty*" (p. 237).

<FIGURE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS>

Figure 6: *Depresso*, p. 238; copyright Brick, www.brickbats.co.uk

The following page (238; see figure 6) shows Tom wheeling his beloved bicycle along a path towards a glittering city in the distance. The lizard, though no longer visible, makes a final wisecrack, "You sure?," which ridicules Tom's preceding comments about his all-

encompassing feelings of doubt and insecurity. The picture represents an obvious allusion to the famous scene in the popular 1939 American fantasy adventure film, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy and her companions are following the yellow brick road towards the Emerald City. This is just one of countless references to famous visual cultural artifacts, including films, literature, paintings, superhero comics, and graphic novels, which are used throughout *Depresso*. As Goddard (1998: 69) argues, in the case of such explicit and deliberate intertextual references "the second text doesn't have to work so hard – it can take for granted that the original text has left a trace which it can use to its advantage." Readers, however, have to work particularly hard in order to recognize what is being alluded to and then use their knowledge of the original text to understand its meaning and relevance in the new context. In the example discussed here, the main purpose of the allusion to *The Wizard of Oz* is probably to draw readers' attention to the pervasiveness in contemporary Western culture of metaphors that encourage us to conceptualize recovery from depression as a triumphant quest (Frank, 1995), and to show how trite and simplistic such conceptualizations often are.

Conclusion

When people talk or write about their experience of depression, they typically – and perhaps inevitably – draw on a range of metaphors, many of which appear to have become deeply entrenched in contemporary Western discourses. Charteris-Black (2012: 213) suggests that metaphors of depression "are like a series of brush strokes," in the sense that no single metaphor is able to express adequately the complex thoughts and feelings involved, and their gradual transformation over time. Extending this simile, we might say that each individual sufferer of depression uses their own brush strokes to paint a portrait of the illness, but that the final results will often look quite similar, because the same paints and color palettes are

employed. Some individuals are able to produce a picture that is significantly different and that reveals aspects of the disease that no one else was able to perceive as clearly. However, an image of depression can only be considered truly creative if it resembles the object of representation closely enough to be still recognizable, and if the artist is able to convey their intended meaning successfully by using the materials at their disposal in a skillful and appropriate manner.

Illness narratives typically aim to convey an individual sufferer's unique experiences of the disease, while also giving readers the sense that they can understand what he or she is going through. The effectiveness of metaphors in this context is due partly to their grounding in shared embodied and cultural meanings, and partly to their inherently dynamic and flexible nature, which means they can be easily adapted to fit illness narratives of restitution, chaos, and/or quest (Frank, 1995). As I have shown in this article, the formal properties and socio-cultural conventions of comics offer unique opportunities for sufferers of depression to reinterpret conventional mappings in creative ways, thereby leading readers beyond their automatic and unconscious use and opening up the possibility of new meaning and understanding. Humor and irony seem to represent particularly effective strategies for subverting entrenched metaphors.

However, as both Cunningham and Brick suggest in their respective graphic memoirs, the relationship between depression and creativity is deeply paradoxical. Although many highly creative people have been affected by depression, it is also clear that many sufferers of the disease are incapable of producing any meaningful work during its most acute phases. Perhaps this explains why so many literary accounts of depression are framed as retrospective accounts of a triumph over adversity, or as completed journeys to a more enlightened and elevated place (Clark, 2008: 4; Frank, 1995). Such stories fit in well with the deep-seated desire in contemporary Western culture for illness narratives that provide "coherent stories of

success, progress and movement," where "[l]oss and failure have their place but only as part of a broader picture of ascendance" (Stacey, 1997: 9). Yet they also obscure many aspects of people's subjective experience, imposing a logic and order on events and feelings that are likely to be much more complex and contradictory than the standard use of such metaphors suggests. What is so refreshing about both *Psychiatric Tales* and *Depresso* is that they are able to reinterpret conventional metaphors in unusual ways, thereby showing that the distinction between mental illness and normality, and madness and creativity, is never as clear-cut, or as black and white, as some people like to imagine.

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[1] Throughout this article, I will refer to the author/artist, narrator and protagonist of *Psychiatric Tales* by their shared surname, Cunningham. In the case of *Depresso*, I will use John Stuart Clarke's alias, Brick, when discussing the author/artist or the (semi-) autobiographical narrator, and Tom (Freeman) to indicate the protagonist. However, this should not obscure the complexity of the relationships in life writing between author, narrator, and protagonist, including the important distinctions between them. For a detailed discussion of these issues generally see Lejeune (1989), and, more specifically in relation to graphic memoirs, El Refaie (2012) and Maaheen (2009).

[2] For a contrasting view, see Cameron (2011).

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