

“Is it alright if I cry?”: considering (un)grievability through intermediality in Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland*

Aura Nikkilä

To cite this article: Aura Nikkilä (07 Aug 2025): “Is it alright if I cry?”: considering (un)grievability through intermediality in Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2025.2541884](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2025.2541884)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2025.2541884>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 07 Aug 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

“Is it alright if I cry?”: considering (un)grievability through intermediality in Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland*

Aura Nikkilä 

Department of Art History, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

In *Fatherland* (2014), Nina Bunjevac reconstructs the tragic life story of her father Peter, an ultranationalist terrorist, who died in 1977. The narrative of Bunjevac’s graphic memoir revolves around the father’s life and death while placing his fate in the contexts of the tumultuous political history of the former Yugoslavia and the Yugoslavian diaspora in North America. Photographs and other intermedial elements play a central role in *Fatherland*, both visually as well as in regard to the narrative. In this article, the focus is on the ambivalent grievability of the father in light of Judith Butler’s theory of ungrievable lives. The analysis discusses how Peter Bunjevac’s grievability is approached and unravelled through different functions of intermediality.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 October 2024
Accepted 25 July 2025


KEYWORDS

Graphic memoir; grievability; intermediality; photography; terrorism; Yugoslavia

Introduction

The cover image of Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland* (Bunjevac 2014) is a drawn version of a portrait photograph of a young man, meticulously combed and neatly dressed (Figure 1). The man’s face is frozen into an expression that is hard to interpret – it could either be a mischievous grin or a nervous smile. His elusive gaze is directed outside the frame of the picture, towards his right. The man in the drawn photograph is Peter Bunjevac, the author’s father, an ultranationalist terrorist, who died when Nina Bunjevac was three years old. In this article, I read *Fatherland* as Bunjevac’s attempt to not only narrate but also to understand her father’s life.

Fatherland consists of two parts: the first takes place in the late 1970s and is narrated from the perspective of Bunjevac’s mother, while the second traces key moments in the history of the former Yugoslavia as well as the past of the author’s family. We learn that Peter Bunjevac was born in 1936 to Serbian parents in a Croatian village in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and that his early life was marked by domestic violence, neglect, war, and loss. In 1959, after serving time in prison for political dissidence, he defected to Canada where he became involved in an anti-communist Serbian terrorist organisation called ‘Freedom for the Serbian Fatherland’. In August 1977, he died in an explosion while preparing attacks on the supporters of the Communist Yugoslav government.

CONTACT Aura Nikkilä  amnikk@utu.fi  Department of Art History, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

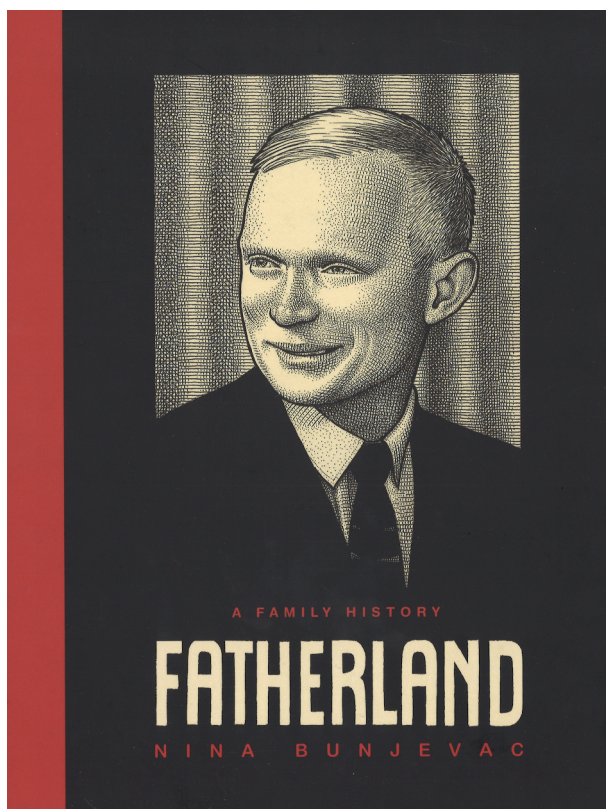


Figure 1. The cover of Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* (2014).

While scrutinising the life events of the father, the graphic memoir also displays parts of the early life of Nina Bunjevac, who was born in Canada in 1973 but spent her childhood and teenage years in Yugoslavia. In *Fatherland*, the narrative is centred on Bunjevac's father's life and death, but instead of a straightforward chronological order, events unfold in a circular manner: the first part is framed by the year 2012, from where Nina and her mother look back at the family's life between 1975 – when Bunjevac's mother fled to Yugoslavia with her two daughters, reluctantly leaving the family's first-born, Petey, in Canada – and 1977, when Peter died. The second part travels further back in time, delving into the history of the Balkan Peninsula and covering three generations of Bunjevac's paternal bloodline beginning from the early 20th century. This section jumps back and forth in time between the lives of Peter's grandparents and parents, Peter's childhood, as well as Nina's own childhood, while also focusing on the multiple political frictions of 'the fatherland'.

In this article, I analyse *Fatherland* as Nina Bunjevac's reconstruction of her father's life story – a reconstruction that calls attention to Peter's (un)grievability. In this reconstruction, intermediality plays an important role. In addition to the portrait photo of the father, Bunjevac's graphic memoir contains multiple drawn versions of photographs, mostly family photos but also portraits of Yugoslavian political figures. *Fatherland* is the life narrative of Peter – the father – but it also

casts a critical eye on the former Yugoslavia – the fatherland. Photographs, along with other intermedial elements, create connections between the familial and the national in the graphic memoir, placing the father's fate in the context of the upheavals of the former Yugoslavia and the Yugoslavian diaspora in North America.

In a broad sense, comics, like all media, is intermedial per se (see Elleström 2021, 4), specifically by virtue of its quintessential combination of words and images (Stein 2015, 421). I am, however, interested in the intermediality of *Fatherland* in a narrower sense; in what Rajewsky (2005, 53) labels *intermedial references*, that is, instances where one medium 'thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means.' Following Elleström's (2017, 670) categorisation, my interest lies in the area of *media representation* as I am looking at examples of one medium representing another. My analysis discusses how other media, especially photographs, are referenced and represented in *Fatherland*. Simultaneously, I argue that Peter Bunjevac's grievability is approached and unravelled through different functions of intermediality.

In my analysis, I uncover multiple functions of intermediality in *Fatherland*, for example the functions of unlocking memories, underlining the mediated nature of the narrative, displaying the vacillating nature of memories, (de)constructing familial and national ideals, and authenticating the events pictured. In the context of the father's grievability, three functions play a more significant role, namely the functions of building and maintaining connections between people, indicating geographical and mental distance between people, and placing Peter's life in specific geographical, historical, and political contexts. Some of these functions take place primarily inside the storyworld, while others reach outside it, towards the reading experience.

Previous analyses of Bunjevac's graphic memoir take intermediality into account in some measure as the role of the photographs is regularly addressed. According to Antic (2023, n.p.), the use of archival material in *Fatherland* establishes 'a sense of authentic representation'. However, Antic (2023, n.p.) also notes that Bunjevac's drawings of family photos are far from idealised. Similarly, Obradović (2020, 48) understands *Fatherland* as kind of family photo album that opposes the demands of the genre, that is, the 'compositional principles of happiness and harmony'. In her analysis, Michael (2022) centres on visual and textual circularity in order to reflect on how the medium of comics can convey nuanced articulations of perpetrator life stories, and analyses the recurrent portrait photograph of Peter through the concept of braiding.¹ Precup (2018, 2020) regards *Fatherland* as an investigation into the history of Yugoslavia in conjunction with the life of a perpetrator. According to Precup (2020, 124), it is precisely through photography – instead of memory – that Bunjevac reconstructs her father's image.

In what follows, I will first place *Fatherland* in the contexts of intermediality, (auto) biographical comics, and conceptualisations on postmemory and ungrievable lives. Then, I will explore the functions of intermediality in *Fatherland* vis-à-vis Peter Bunjevac's grievability by focusing first on photographs in the familial realm before moving to photos in the political realm. Finally, I will discuss different aspects of contextualisation taking place in *Fatherland*.

The (un)grievable father

Fatherland is ‘a memoir about an absent father, written by a daughter who does not remember him’ (Precup 2020, 108), and this premise is displayed to the reader on the very first pages of the comic. After a collage-like page that introduces the initial setting and time – Toronto 2012 –, the narrative opens with a circular image of a bird nest with three eggs against a black background. On the following page the image is revealed to be a drawn reproduction from a TV nature show that Nina is watching in her apartment. Panels showing the TV and Nina concentrating on her drawing are accompanied by the show’s voiceover. The image of the nest is repeated shortly thereafter, affirming the eggs in the nest to be a visual metaphor of the three Bunjevac children (see Antic 2023, n.p.; Michael 2022, 93; Obradović 2020, 59). In addition to implying the importance of intermedial elements in the narrative, the drawing of the nest and the depiction of Nina drawing it spotlight Bunjevac’s stance in relation to the story: she is drawing her version of something she has seen and heard from somewhere else. In other words, the drawn reproductions of the nest underline the mediatedness of the narrative.

That the graphic memoir begins with Nina drawing the nest is noteworthy also because this passage visually aligns the autobiographical avatar with the author of the comic. Unlike in literary autobiographies, in autobiographical comics there is a ‘requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one’s self’ (El Refaie 2012, 51). In other words, since comics is a visual medium, the author must also ‘visualize the self’ (Köhlert 2019, 14). Bunjevac’s gesture of making herself visible in *Fatherland* is especially important since, as Precup (2020, 109) argues, in the comic ‘the biographical and the historical seem to overpower the autobiographical’. Nina Bunjevac, indeed, is not the protagonist of the narrative, but by drawing herself into it she underlines her own position: instead of an outside observer she is an investigator of her *own* family’s undisclosed past.

The fact that *Fatherland* is the father’s story mediated to us in the form of the daughter’s representation is also emphasised through the recurring photograph of the father first seen on the cover. Photographs, especially family photos, have an important role in written memoirs as illustrations of the text but also as forms of authentication (Schmitt 2022, 2). Photographs are still considered to have evidential capacity exceeding other types of images, even though it is commonly acknowledged that ‘processes of selection, construction, and the imposition of narrative’ are as common to photographic practices as to any image making (Mickwitz 2016, 29). Actual photographs are included in many documentary comics, famous examples being the three reproduced photos in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–1991) and the alternation between photographs and drawn panels in Didier Lefèvre, Emmanuel Guibert, and Frédéric Lemerrier’s *Le Photographe* (2003–2006).

Different than many literary memoirs, Bunjevac’s graphic memoir does not include a single photographic facsimile. The picture of the deceased father, like all the photographs included in *Fatherland*, is rendered in Bunjevac’s distinct drawing style. *Fatherland* is the daughter’s interpretation of her father’s life and the family’s history, and the photograph of the father is not only an instrument of authentication but, more importantly, a recreation of an earlier representation. In reworking this photograph and reconstructing the story around it, Bunjevac is dealing with what Marianne Hirsch has

termed ‘postmemory’, a concept originally coined in relation to the photographs reproduced in Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Hirsch 1997). Postmemory is at stake when traumatic memories of the previous generation are mediated ‘through an imaginative investment and creation’ (Hirsch 1997, 22). According to Hirsch (1997, 23), ‘[p]hotographs [...] are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory.’

Most analyses of *Fatherland* link the graphic memoir to postmemory. For example, Precup (2020, 122–123) places it amongst other autobiographical comics dealing with both memory and postmemory – especially in relation to absent fathers, due to its ‘subject and extensive use of photography and other archival elements’. Michael (2022, 84) underlines the narrative’s dependence on photographs as the reason for its ‘status as a work of postmemory’, but notes that *Fatherland*, unlike most works of postmemory, ‘concerns the child of the perpetrator’ instead of the descendants of survivors of mass violence. What sets Bunjevac apart from other comics artists working with postmemory, such as Spiegelman and Alison Bechdel, is that she never knew her father – she was only one-year old when she moved to Yugoslavia with her mother and three years old when Peter died. Therefore, it is appropriate to problematise the framework of postmemory in relation to *Fatherland*, as Precup does in her analyses. According to Hirsch (1997, 22), a deep personal connection is what sets postmemory apart from history, but in Precup’s (2020, 119) view, in *Fatherland*, the narrator maintains an emotional distance to the depicted events.²

Bunjevac’s detachment from her father’s story can indeed work as an impediment to postmemory, and the emotional distance conveyed by the graphic narrative might be due to a lack of a personal connection. However, I argue that it has more to do with the fact that Peter’s was a life that is not thought of as grievable. Butler (2010, 1) summarises her theory of ungrievable lives as follows: ‘If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.’ According to Butler (2004, 2010), the lives of people such as the Palestinians or the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are repeatedly framed and perceived in public contexts as something outside the category of ‘human’ and therefore ungrievable. Bunjevac’s emotionally distanced narration can be considered through such a lens: Bunjevac’s father was a terrorist, planning on taking other people’s lives, and thus his own life might not be (seen as) grievable.³ Butler (2010, xxix) writes about those human beings whose lives are usually framed as expendable, that ‘if their very bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack, then they are already deprived of life before they are killed’. As a terrorist in the making, Peter can be perceived as a ‘vessel of attack’, that is, an ungrievable life. In *Fatherland*, Bunjevac approaches this ungrievability from multiple angles, specifically through photographs.

Drawing (from) photographs

The last panel on the aforementioned page showing Nina drawing the nest includes, in addition to the nature show voiceover, the sound of Nina’s mother knocking on the door. The sound penetrates the panel’s borders, indicating by its intrusion the centrality of the mother’s memories in the narrative. When Nina’s mother Sally enters the apartment, she notices a photograph on the table. Nina tells her mother that the

photograph is a printed street-view image, but to the reader it appears as a blank sheet. It takes four more panels before Sally recognises the house in the picture – and before the picture is shown to the reader. Bunjevac's verbal narration, set on top of the panels, reflects the mother's selective memory: 'One thing I always found particularly annoying about my mother is her inability to remember anything of real importance[.] Now [...] I finally understand just how crucial this selective memory has been to her survival' (Bunjevac 2014).⁴

The following page reveals the image to be a picture of the Bunjevac family's old house in Welland, Canada. The photograph is set on the table to make Nina's mother return to the memories she has long suppressed, or as Kuhn (1995, 12) has written about memory work: 'The photograph is a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection.' What is anticipated by the knocking sound disrupting Nina's work is now confirmed: the mother is the primary source behind the memoir, but at the same time the credibility of her memory is called into question. The street-view photo has multiple functions: it instigates the mother's reminiscence in the storyworld and consequently displays the fickle nature of remembering, while also highlighting the mediatedness of the narrative. In addition, it also establishes what the photograph of Peter on the cover and the drawn reproductions of the nature documentary stills already imply, or as Obradović (2020, 48) writes, the street-view photo 'draws the reader's attention to the importance of photographic discourse' in the comic.

To demonstrate the central role of family photographs and their function of both constructing and deconstructing familial ideals in *Fatherland*, I will look at two examples. The first one is in the second part of the graphic memoir where Bunjevac recounts how her parents came to marry. It is the early sixties and Peter is living in Manitoba, Canada, working in the mining industry. Lonely and homesick, he places a pen-pal advertisement in a Belgrade-based sports magazine. On a whim, Sally's mother Momirka replies to Peter's advert and attaches a family photograph to her letter. This photograph sets the letter apart from all others as the family's teenage daughter Sally catches Peter's eye. The photograph is first shown in Momirka's hands as she places it in an envelope and in the following panel Peter stares at the photo with evident admiration. Then, the verbal narration discloses that the correspondence between Peter and Sally has lasted over a year, during which they have exchanged 'dozens of letters filled with cordial tenderness and carefully staged photographs' (Bunjevac 2014) (Figure 2).

Three of the photos exchanged between Peter and Sally are presented to the reader as a stack drawn on top of the panel. Two of the photos show Sally posing in different settings and the third one is the same portrait photograph of Peter as on the cover. Here, intermediality acquires the function of building connections between people as it is through the letters and photographs that Peter and Sally's relationship begins and develops. Bunjevac's choice to label these photos 'carefully staged' is no coincidence since in the letters and the accompanying photos Peter's true nature is concealed. Consequently, Sally's mother, a former partisan and a devout communist, agrees to her daughter marrying Peter, an exiled military officer and a (future) Serb ultranationalist. In general, family photographs tend to be 'carefully staged' since they are typically used for constructing an idealised image of a family, and images can be recognised as family photographs both in terms of what they show and 'from how they show it' (Rose 2010, 11).



Figure 2. Photographs exchanged as part of the correspondence between Peter and Sally. From Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* (2014).

In addition to its composition, a family photograph is defined by how it is treated, or how it is 'a participant in family photography practices' (Rose 2010, 23). Many of the family photos in *Fatherland* are presented consistent with such practices: sent in an envelope along with a letter, held in the hand to be looked at, or placed in a family photo album. The second example of the central role of family photographs in *Fatherland* comes in the form of a family photo album which has multiple functions. This section is four pages long, and each page includes just one photograph on a black background with a thin white line framing the page. The photographs show Nina and her sister Sarah posing in various settings and outfits. In the storyline, these pictures are set after Sally escapes with her daughters to Yugoslavia, and the photographs are captioned with years and seasons. Introducing this section, the verbal narration reveals that the photographs were taken by Bunjevac's maternal grandfather (Figure 3). 'The sole purpose of these photographs was to show my father that we were well taken care of, and happy' (Bunjevac 2014), the narration asserts, but the images contradict the words. Even as the photos might prove that the children are being taken care of, happiness, an emotion usually associated with family photographs, is not the impression conveyed. The children's expressions are gloomy and there is reluctance in their poses.

Accompanying the caption leading to the photo album section there is a pair of hands holding one of the photographs also shown as part of the album. These hands, supposedly Peter's, are life-sized, appearing as a duplicate of the reader's hands holding the graphic memoir. In line with what Scherr (2013) calls haptic visibility,⁵ the hands invite the readers to participate in the story, to put themselves

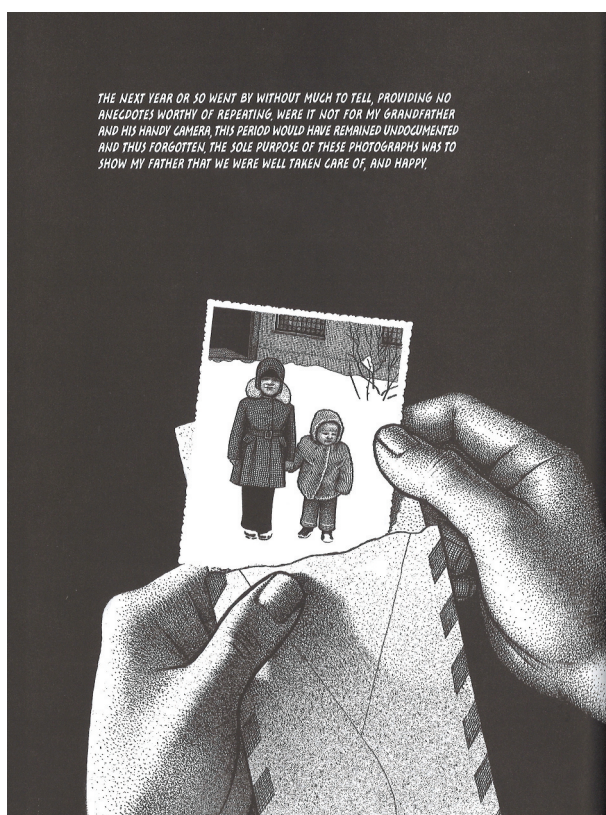


Figure 3. The page preceding the photo album-like section. From Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* (2014).

in the place of the father who receives photos of his children from the other side of the world. Here, Peter's life is rendered into a grievable one by visually aligning the reader with Peter's point of view, while the photo album functions to indicate both the geographical distance between the family members and the father's affection towards his daughters.

Just like the photographs Nina's parents exchanged, the photos in the album are 'carefully staged', although in a double meaning. First, they are constructions of the family's self-representation, intended to show the father overseas that they are carrying on with their lives. The pictures adhere to the main purpose of family photographs as a record: they are 'visible evidence that this family exists' (Kuhn 1995, 44) – and, in this case, away from the father. The reader does not have access to Bunjevac's family photo album other than through the mediated photos in the graphic memoir, so one can only assume that the drawn images are based on real photographs – that is, images that 'exist [also] outside of the narrative' (Santos 2019, 80). Even though these photos are presented to the reader in a very convincing way, they are followed by a page that bears the same appearance of a photo album, but instead of a photograph, the white borders contain an ominous picture of crows perched on power lines against the backdrop of a thunderstorm. This image is revealed to be an illustration of Nina's grandmother's dream that predicts Peter's death, making the reader re-evaluate the truth-value of the preceding photographs in the 'album'.

Second, these photographs are drawn on the pages of the comic by Bunjevac, who through juxtaposing the verbal narration and the girls' serious poses challenges the conventions of family photography that aim to reproduce the ideal of a happy family. Bunjevac reconstructs a family photo album of her own inside the graphic memoir, and by doing so works in a similar manner to compiling an actual family photo album: 'In choosing, sequencing, organising and captioning the photographs for the album, the person responsible transforms the meaning of selected images into an intensely individualistic expression' (Willumson 2004, 66). Bunjevac's transformation of the photographs into drawings further emphasises the idea of the album as individualistic expression – or, as Nabizadeh (2014, 178) has argued when analysing the drawn versions of photographs in Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), the 'transposition of the photograph into a hand drawn form [...] involves the author in an intimate restaging of her family's history'. The notion of Bunjevac reconstructing a family photo album can be extended to the graphic memoir in its entirety by understanding *Fatherland* as Bunjevac's reconstruction of her family's past.

In this reconstruction, Peter's (un)grievability is approached through family photos in multiple ways. In addition to the function of (de)constructing familial ideals, the family photos also draw attention to both the distance between Peter and his children and the bond between them. On the one hand, by depicting Peter – if only for a moment – primarily as a father missing his children, and aligning the reader with his point of view, Peter's character is shown in a more humane light. On the other hand, as the reliability of photographs is called into question, for example by indicating the 'carefully staged' nature of the photos exchanged between Bunjevac's parents, Peter's unreliability is underscored. Even as the narrative enables empathy with Peter, the reader is repeatedly reminded of his ambivalent nature. In the next section, I will move to political photographs and analyse how placing Peter alongside other ambivalent characters elucidates the larger historical and geographical context that led to his undoing.

From familial to national: portraits of not-so-great men

The same photographic portrait that occupies the cover of the graphic memoir – one of the 'carefully staged photographs' exchanged between Peter and Sally – also takes up one page in the middle of the story accompanied by a news clipping reporting Peter's death. This picture seems inconsistent with the image that the graphic memoir otherwise constructs of Peter: it conveys a sense of coyness and there is warmth in the man's eyes, whereas in the narrative Peter is portrayed primarily as uncommunicative and hostile. One trait that defines the father throughout the narrative is visible also in this portrait, namely his elusiveness. Even as he smiles, Peter avoids the viewer's gaze (see Michael 2022, 125), this gesture suggesting the ambivalence of his character already on the cover.

Precup (2020, 122) points out that the cover of the graphic memoir makes a visual reference to the Nazi flag through its colours: the black that frames Peter's photograph and the red that extends from the spine of the book to the covers (see also Michael 2022, 87; Obradović 2020, 48) (Figure 1). Michael (2022), 87–88) argues that the extremist nationalistic ideologies harboured by Peter are a continuation of Nazi ideologies, but that the cover additionally alludes to the impact of the horrors of WWII on Peter. As Bunjevac

(2014) explains in the narrative, in 1941, after the Axis invaded Yugoslavia, Croatia became a German satellite state. In addition to Jews, Romas, and communists, Serbs were added to the list of ‘undesirables’. Peter’s father was deported to and executed in a concentration camp while his family ‘spent the rest of the war fearing that they would be next to board the train’ (Bunjevac 2014). According to Michael (2022, 88), ‘the cover, and [. . .] the narrative as a whole, trigger a plurality of ambivalent perspectives on Peter’s becoming a perpetrator in the broader context of WWII and the Cold War.’ In other words, the cover symbolises both Peter’s extremist political ideologies and the traumatic events of his childhood.

When the portrait of Peter is depicted in the bundle of photographs exchanged by Bunjevac’s parents, Peter’s gaze is directed at two photos of Sally, underlining his infatuation. In the other two depictions, his gaze ipoints towards a blank space on the left, in the Western tradition seen as the direction that marks the past. Consequently, the photograph symbolises Peter’s longing for the past, for the lost fatherland. The subtitle of *Fatherland* is ‘A Family History’,⁶ but while it does recount the history of a family, it also intertwines with history on a more general level, with the history of Yugoslavia, transatlantic migration,⁷ and transnational terrorism.

The second part of the book includes several portraits of political figures from Yugoslavian history. The choice to juxtapose family photos with political portraiture ‘spells out the intrusion of the political into the personal’ (Precup 2020, 120). This juxtaposition places the family’s past in the context of Yugoslavia and makes the reader consider Peter’s actions against the backdrop of (ultra)nationalistic ideologies. The political portraits are also ‘carefully staged’, albeit for other reasons than the family photos. Whereas the conventions of family photography are usually deployed to construct an ideal family, the conventions of political portraiture aim, especially in the case of dictators, to construct the ideal of a strong nation through images of powerful leaders (Goldberg 1991, 152).

While highlighting the horrors and shifting power positions of WWII and recounting the oppression of the post-war years, Bunjevac’s detailed exploration of the history of the Balkans lays bare the dangers of adoring the political figures pictured in the portraits. Many of the political portraits included are, as Michael (2022, 95) notes, ‘similar to that of Peter.’ The recurring portrait of Peter places him among the other controversial men pictured in *Fatherland*, such as Ante Pavelić, the founder of the fascist organisation Ustaše, and general Milan Nedić, the prime minister of the puppet government of German-occupied Serbia during WWII.

Bunjevac places Peter on the continuum of ‘great men’ not just through the recurrent photographic portrait but also by drawing a visual parallel between Peter and a bust of the Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović on a page that shows Momirka’s visit from Yugoslavia to Canada in 1968. Momirka, a former partisan, is ‘aghast at the sight of her war enemy, so clearly displayed in [the family’s] living room’, to which Peter comments that it is ‘a bust of a true hero’ (Bunjevac 2014). Peter is pictured here in profile with his black shirt blending in with the background, making him appear as ‘a bust modelled on sculptures of political and national heroes’ (Obradović 2020, 56). Equating Peter visually with dictators and war criminals exemplifies the impact of (ultra)nationalism on individuals. Peter’s nationalistic ideology is shown as a result of the political upheavals of his old

home country, specifically the complex juxtapositions of different groups of people that are formed variably on the basis of political ideologies, nationalities, religions, and/or ethnic separations.

Bunjevac's critical stance regarding the arbitrary ethnic differentiations made between Serbs and Croats is visible in the likeness of Peter and the Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito in *Fatherland*. Bunjevac (2014) states that she has done extensive research in order to 'get to the bottom of the conflict between [...] these two almost identical groups'. Peter was born to Serbian parents, and Tito's parents were Croatian and Slovenian, but based on Bunjevac's depiction they could be mistaken for brothers. The resemblance between the two men additionally alludes to the dangers of carrying out actions based on extreme political ideologies regardless of which end of the political spectrum they are located on. This is exemplified by the terrorism conducted in the name of ultranationalism by 'Freedom for the Serbian Fatherland' and the human rights violations directed at 'the enemies of the state' during the post-war years in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Tito.

Most of the photographic portraits of political leaders reproduced through drawing in *Fatherland* are prime examples of nationalistic or military propaganda, showing the subjects in a grandiose manner. Challenging the nationalistic ideals usually constructed through such portraits, Bunjevac has also included less commonly seen photographs in which the 'great men' are shown as not-so-great: defeated, hunched, on the brink of their own death. While illustrating the post-war years under the rule of Tito and the Communist Party, Bunjevac shows the Chetnik resistance leader Draža Mihailović in handcuffs waiting for his execution, and the head of Ustaše Ante Pavelić in a hospital bed after an assassination attempt.

Peter, too, is represented on the verge of collapse both visually and verbally, again showing him in a slightly more humane light. Presented with an ultimatum that he must choose 'between his family and his goddamn terrorists', Peter's reply to his wife discloses that he is anything but enthusiastic about his involvement in the terrorist organisation: 'I am too deep in this shit and I cannot get out of it' (Bunjevac 2014). The further the narrative progresses, the more despairing Peter is. He is shown smoking and drinking and with his head in his hands, verbally described as 'desperate' and 'a nervous wreck' (Bunjevac 2014). Eventually, Peter attempts suicide by slashing his wrists. Peter's grievability is underscored by his affection towards his children, made clearly visible as he writes Sarah, Petey, and Nina's names on the wall with his blood before passing out from haemorrhage.

By showing certain Yugoslavian figures both in an idealised manner as well as on the brink of their ruin, Bunjevac highlights that the greatness of these men depends on the point of view – for Momirka, Draža Mihailović is an enemy, and for Peter, a hero. Equating Peter with these controversial figures further bolsters the ambivalence surrounding his character. The father's actions are put into context also through other intermedial elements than familial and political photographs.

Contextualisation through intermediality

Before moving on to other intermedial elements, it is important to consider the wider contextualisation taking place through the photographic discourse in *Fatherland*. Traditionally, one of the central qualities of photographs has been their indexical appeal, or 'that brief moment of the real world in front of the camera' (Edwards and Hart

2004, 2). Photographs, even drawn ones, are used in comics for their referential qualities (Postema 2015, 85), that is, as historical documents to increase the narrative's perceived veracity. Cook (2012, 129) argues that 'within comics, photographs are commonly rendered in a drawing style that is strikingly more realistic than the style adopted for the remainder of the surrounding comic.' In line with these ideas, Pedri (2024, 218) places *Fatherland* amongst a number of graphic memoirs in which 'photographic images stand out for their stark contrast to cartooning'.

I would, however, disagree with Pedri, seeing that Bunjevac has drawn the photographs in the same stylistic register as the rest of the comic. Therefore, on the one hand, the truth-value commonly associated with photographs extends to the whole graphic memoir, to such an extent that the reader accepts *Fatherland* as a truthful description of Peter's life story, even though it is mediated through the memories of family members and Bunjevac's representation. In other words, the photorealistic style 'gives the same status to witnessed and unwitnessed events, thus legitimizing both the mother's story and the daughter's imagination' (Precup 2020, 122). On the other hand, by leaning visually more towards (photo)realism than to caricaturistic expression, Bunjevac's representation calls the referentiality of photographs into question: the realistic aesthetic can be regarded as a strategy that actually challenges the authority and authenticity, or the 'objective purport' (see Cook 2012) of the photographs.

In addition to photographs, the pages of *Fatherland* contain other (drawn versions of) historical documents, such as newspapers, postcards, letters, and maps. These intermedial documents function as material evidence validating the oral testimony given by Bunjevac's mother – even as this evidence is mediated through Bunjevac's drawings. The different documents are – just like the photographs – incorporated into the story in Bunjevac's own handprint, reconstructed as part of her own artistic expression. The graphic narrative forms a context for the intermedial elements but the contextualisation also works the other way. For example, the multiple maps in *Fatherland* illustrate the transnational history of Bunjevac's family but also place the family history in the context of the shifting power relations of the Balkan Peninsula as well as the Yugoslavian diaspora in North-America. Many of the maps demonstrate the family's back-and-forth migration between Yugoslavia and Canada, and the sense of movement is reinforced by aeroplanes drawn on top of the maps and arrows pointing in the direction in which people are moving.⁸ As well as the recurring maps, the letters exchanged between Nina's parents at different times symbolise both the attachment but also the physical and emotional distance between the family members.

As said, many of the intermedial elements in the graphic memoir allude to the tumultuous political history of the former Yugoslavia. When Bunjevac narrates the events that led Peter to defect from Yugoslavia, a specific newspaper is highlighted. In 1954, communist politician Milovan Djilas published several essays in the official newspaper of the Communist party of Yugoslavia, *Borba*, in which he criticised the opulent lifestyle of the party elite that was in stark contrast with the below-poverty-line lives of common people in Yugoslavia. Djilas' writings led to his expulsion from the central committee and he was publicly classified as a dissident. According to Bunjevac, many Yugoslavs agreed with Djilas but were divided into those who were afraid to show their support and those who were not. Bunjevac depicts the newspaper on her maternal grandparents' table while the grandfather voices his sympathy for Djilas. Momirka

hushes him, asking: ‘You wanna get kicked out of the army?’ (Bunjevac 2014). And indeed, on the following spread Peter, not at all subdued in his support of Djilas’ views, is expelled from the army and imprisoned. By displaying this rare alignment in the grandparents’ and the father’s political views, Bunjevac indicates that the discrepancy between the two sides of her family is not as fundamental as other instances in the narrative suggest – and that her father’s exile was originally due to his opposition of the illegalitarian actions of the Communist party.

A newspaper also plays a role in the depiction of Peter’s character in the domestic sphere. After starting a family with Sally, Peter seems to withdraw from family life behind a newspaper titled *Canadian Serbs*,⁹ this intermedial reference underlining the Serbian diaspora as the principal social and political context of the family. Precup (2020, 116, 118) associates Peter’s newspaper reading and his overall conduct in the domestic space with ‘an older model of masculinity’, connecting this ideal of traditional family roles to patriarchal social structures that also enclose the domestic and national violence that Peter has both witnessed and carried out himself.

Conclusion

The recurring photograph of the father she never knew plays a pivotal role in Bunjevac’s graphic memoir: it is like a mystery to be solved. Bunjevac’s childhood years were surrounded by a silence concerning Peter’s true identity and destiny, and it was not until she was a teenager that Bunjevac discovered the true cause of her father’s death. Kuhn compares the past to a crime scene: ‘if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain’, and by using those traces it is possible to piece together a reconstruction of the past (Kuhn 1995, 4), just as Bunjevac does with photographs and other intermedial elements.

As demonstrated in the analysis, intermediality has multiple functions in *Fatherland*, and some of these functions have an important role vis-à-vis the ambivalent grievability of the father. These functions concern predominantly the encounter between the reader and the graphic memoir. First, those intermedial elements that build and maintain connections between people in the storyworld on the one hand demonstrate to the reader Peter’s affection towards his family, making him appear more than just a ‘monstrous’ perpetrator (see Michael 2022). On the other hand, by underlining the constructed nature of the family photos, Bunjevac draws attention to the unreliability of the father. The intermedial elements that indicate distance between people display the rift between Peter and his family but also emphasise Peter’s familial feelings. The function of placing Peter’s life in specific geographical, historical, and political contexts is a central one with regard to Peter’s grievability: when seen in light of the violent circumstances of WWII, the history of transatlantic migration, and the political repression of post-war Yugoslavia, Peter’s character and his actions become easier to understand.

Bunjevac’s work expands its scope from the familial to the national and the transnational as Peter’s story is woven into a larger history of violence, war, politics, migration, and terrorism. The constitutive role of the family photos and the photographic portraits of political leaders in *Fatherland* draws attention to Peter’s fate as part of the history of Yugoslavia, or as Nabizadeh (2014, 174) argues: by re-shaping archival material in a biographical work, the comics artist can ‘illuminate the intersections between private

and public networks.’ Furthermore, through this re-shaping – or reconstructing – of archival material, it is possible to ‘explore inter-generational trauma’ (Nabizadeh 2014, 174). Accordingly, the intermedial elements in Bunjevac’s *Fatherland* locate Peter’s traumas – as well as the traumas his absence and the silence surrounding that absence has inflicted on the next generation – in a larger landscape of trauma that is tied to the history of Yugoslavia.

To conclude, I want to highlight a dialogue from *Fatherland* that encapsulates the ambivalent grievability of the father. In the first part of the graphic memoir, when Nina’s mother is sharing her memories of the 1970s, she recalls how Nina’s sister Sarah, seven years old at the time, took the news of her father’s death. ‘Mom, I’m really sad – is it alright if I cry?’ Sarah asks her mother when the grandmother cannot hear them (Bunjevac 2014). Sally and her daughters are not allowed to mention Peter’s name under the grandmother’s roof, ‘let alone show sadness over his passing’ (Bunjevac 2014). There is a clear comparison drawn between Momirka and Peter in the narrative: both are presented ‘as similarly authoritarian and intolerant of different viewpoints from their own’ (Antic 2023, n.p.). The difference is that the grandmother’s life is explicitly seen as grievable since, despite being a ‘difficult person and a bit crazy’, as Sally describes her mother, both Nina and Sally ‘miss her like mad’ (Bunjevac 2014).

As for Peter, the matter is far more complex, and throughout the graphic memoir Bunjevac calls the reader’s attention to the fact that grieving a perpetrator is highly problematic. Momirka’s attitude towards Peter is representative of the public view of terrorists in general as not grievable. To counter this, Bunjevac’s graphic narrative strives to find a life story behind the image of a terrorist, not to approve of but to understand the father’s deeds. ‘Of course it’s alright’ (Bunjevac 2014), Sally answers her daughter. The immanent ambivalence in the dialogue between daughter and mother reflects the position Bunjevac takes in *Fatherland* with regard to grieving Peter Bunjevac’s untimely death – as well as his tragic life.

Notes

1. Thierry Groensteen’s ([1999] 2007) concept of braiding refers to the recurrence of a certain element inside a comic that enriches the semantic level of the narrative.
2. In an earlier version of her analysis, Precup’s criticism is more forthright: she argues that through the graphic memoir, Bunjevac herself ‘comes off as detached and unsentimental’, and that in *Fatherland* ‘the narrator seems to operate outside the common patterns of feeling one would expect such a disturbing familial tale to generate’ (Precup 2018, 220–221).
3. Butler’s theory has been used in comics studies previously. For example, Cvetkovich (2008), applies Butler’s ideas in her analysis of Bechdel’s *Fun Home* to the comics artist’s father, a closeted homosexual who had an affair with the babysitter of his children.
4. *Fatherland* does not contain page numbers.
5. Scherr derives her use of the concept from Marks (2000).
6. The subtitle is not included in all editions.
7. For an analysis of *Fatherland* through the lens of transatlantic migration and ‘the traumatic tolls of such peregrinations’, see Ulanowicz 2023.
8. Here I dissent from Precup’s (2020, 124) view, as in her interpretation, rather than conveying movement, the maps ‘provide a static view’ of ‘social upheavals and the displacement of populations and armies.’
9. In the comic the title is written in the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the Alfred Kordelin Foundation, the Kone Foundation, and the Juno Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies in the University of Turku, Finland.

ORCID

Aura Nikkilä  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0455-6482>

References

- Antic, M. 2023. "Spectral Legacies & Haunted Subjectivity: Feminist Temporality in Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* and *Bezimena*." *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*: 10. <https://maifeminism.com/spectral-legacies-in-nina-bunjevacs-fatherland-and-bezimena/>.
- Bunjevac, N. 2014. *Fatherland*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York: Verso.
- Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* Paperback ed. London; New York: Verso.
- Cook, R. T. 2012. "Drawings of Photographs in Comics." *The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 70 (1): 129–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2011.01504.x>.
- Cvetkovich, A. 2008. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (1 & 2): 111–128. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqs.0.0037>.
- Edwards, E., and J. Hart. 2004. *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203506493>.
- Elleström, L. 2017. "Transfer of Media Characteristics Among Dissimilar Media." *Palabra Clave* 20 (3): 663–685. <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2017.20.3.4>.
- Elleström, L. 2021. "The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations." In *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 1: Intermedial Relations Among Multimodal Media*, edited by L. Elleström, 3–91. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49679-1_1.
- El Refaie, E. 2012. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Goldberg, V. 1991. *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Groensteen, T. [1999] 2007. *The System of Comics*. Translated by Bart Beaty & Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Hirsch, M. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Køhlert, F. B. 2019. *Serial Selves. Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcxsx0t>.
- Kuhn, A. 1995. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London: Verso.
- Marks, L. U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Michael, O. 2022. "Looking at the Perpetrator in Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland*." *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 4 (2): 80–110. <https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.4.2.111>.
- Mickwitz, N. 2016. *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137493323>.
- Nabizadeh, G. 2014. "The After-Life of Images: Archives and Intergenerational Trauma in Autobiographic Comics." In *Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American*

- Narratives*, edited by D. Mihăilescu, R. Oltean, and M. Precup, 171–191. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Obradović, D. 2020. “Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac.” In *Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections*, edited by M. Kuhlman and J. Alaniz, 47–66. Leuven: Leuven University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2487428.6>.
- Pedri, N. 2024. “Photography, Intermediality, and Graphic Illness Narratives.” In *Hybrid Life Writing*, edited by A. Schmitt, 217–240. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51804-1_12.
- Postema, B. 2015. “Establishing Relations: Photography in Wordless Comics.” *Image & Narrative* 16 (2): 84–95. <https://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/817>.
- Precup, M. 2018. “‘To Dream of Birds’: Autobiography, Photography, and Memory in Nina Bunjevac’s ‘August, 1977’ and *Fatherland*.” In *The Canadian Alternative: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels*, edited by D. Grace and E. Hoffman, 207–223. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxnkx.17>.
- Precup, M. 2020. *The Graphic Lives of Fathers: Memory, Representation, and Fatherhood in North American Autobiographical Comics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36218-8>.
- Rajewsky, I. O. 2005. “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality.” *Intermedialités* 6 (6): 43–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar>.
- Rose, G. 2010. *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315577890>.
- Santos, J. 2019. *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics*. Austin: University of Texas Press. <https://doi.org/10.7560/318263>.
- Scherr, R. 2013. “Shaking Hands with Other People’s Pain: Joe Sacco’s Palestine.” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46 (1): 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2013.0004>.
- Schmitt, A. 2022. *The Photographer as Autobiographer*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08855-1>.
- Stein, D. 2015. “Comics and Graphic Novels.” In *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, edited by G. Rippl, 420–438. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110311075-024>.
- Ulanowicz, A. 2023. “Traumatic Peregrinations: Intergenerational Memory and Migration in Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland*.” *European Journal of American Studies* 18 (4): 18–4. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.21099>.
- Willumson, G. 2004. “Making Meaning. Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum.” In *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, edited by E. Edwards and J. Hart, 65–83. New York: Routledge.