

## **Tracing the Invisible: Lynda Barry's Comics\***

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Turning to Lynda Barry's distinctive comics which interweave autobiography, fiction, and teaching manuals, this article expands on the different ways in which the invisible is present in Barry's works, encompassing elements that challenge visual representation and those that constitute the backbone of comics expression. The article unpacks Barry's incorporation of collage and its constituents of untutored drawing through considering key theories surrounding the trace and the archive. The valorisation of marginalized and ignored image-making practices (such as children's drawings and untutored drawings) are examined through concepts surrounding animation, possibilities of connecting through drawing and alternative ways of conceptualizing both the making and reception of art.

**Keywords:** comics, trace, collage, archive, art practice, affect, animation, children's drawing, untutored drawing

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“The thing I call my mind seems to be kind of like a landlord that doesn’t know its tenants.”  
(Barry, 2008, p. 5)

“So where’s the comic? The comic is somewhere between the person who made it and the person who’s looking at it. It’s a relationship.”  
(Misemer, 2020, p. 174)

## Comics Invisibles

In his landmark *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud famously termed comics an invisible art because so much happens outside of the frames and between the panels. Comics, McCloud points out, function largely through all the information that is cut out from the panels and through the blank spaces of the gutters. Cutting away and working with ellipses is part of what McCloud calls the secret labor of comics (see Chute, 2013). While much ink has been devoted to the limits of closure and the soundness of McCloud’s claims about comics (see, for instance, Pizzino, 2021; Miller and Worden, 2022), comics studies has perhaps only broached the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the connections between comics and the invisible. This is also evident in the rich variety of artistic responses to the central question of the Invisible Lines project: “How to draw the invisible”. Comics invisibles include all that which lies beneath the surface of the line, and the visible limits of its support of page, book, canvas, tablet etc. These invisibles include, on one hand, unsayable and unvisualizable elements of comics. On the other, they also include the invisible elements that are part of the system of comics such as the gutter that does invisible work or the act of braiding (Groensteen 1999). All of these invisibles play a central role in Lynda Barry’s comics.

This article traces these different kinds of invisibles discernible in Barry’s comics, combining Barry’s very distinctive comics vocabulary with medium-specific concerns to show how these invisibles reflect the functioning of the comics medium while testing, and even stretching, the medium’s limits. For this, the article adopts two perspectives, that of the graphic trace and the archive and the animated nature of Barry’s art and the connections that flow from it. Its final section turns to how Barry’s comics teach the invisible.

Although we only infrequently encounter the word “invisible” in Barry’s works, accessing and representing the invisible is one of the most recurrent themes in her graphic novels. Since many of her books also interrogate the medium of comics and the act of comics making, the invisible underpinning comics is a key theme. The panoply of comics invisibles is perhaps most evident in her works that function as teaching manuals or have a DIY component such as *One Hundred Demons* (2002), *What It Is* (2008), *Picture This* (2009), *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (2014) or, most recently, *Making Comics* (2019). Notably, these books are probably her least comics-like publications and distance themselves from the common notion of what comics are and should be: they skirt the basic

constituents of comics - panels, word balloons, even to a certain extent a recognizable character, because Barry herself shapeshifts and adopts changing personae (as is perhaps most evident in *Syllabus*, in which her professor and past personae appear in varying forms). Nevertheless, all of these elements are implicitly present. While we intuitively categorize these works as comics, they also espouse the form of the diary and the notebook. They therefore have a strong comicitous quality, to take up Colin Beineke's term which allows for identifying how comics-like elements persist beyond traditional forms of comics.

While autobifictionalography (*One Hundred Demons*, p. 5) and manuals have often coexisted in Barry's works, her most recent graphic novel, *Making Comics* seems to suggest a shift towards the drawing manual. These manuals advocate a return to the more hybrid use of images and words that populate children's worlds, but are relegated to the margins of the worlds of older children and adults. This practical but also unusual and distinctively Barry-like guide to making comics (which contrasts, for instance, with Scott McCloud's earlier *Making Comics*) is useful for identifying the comics invisibles that underpin much of Barry's comics work.

A self-proclaimed image-wrangler (Kirtley, 2012), Barry writes about seeking images and visualizing the invisible. She incorporates several of her own and found images that offer a means of getting closer to the invisible. This is evident in the richly collaged pages from *What It Is* and *Picture This*. They perform the work of unpacking and surpassing the tension between idea and form and of self-judgement, aspects which also perform - and shape - much of the invisible work leading to the finished comic. The kinds of images that are invisible or invisibilized in different ways include:

- images that she finds in her imagination, often based on memories (such as the demons emerging from the "One Hundred Demons" exercise);
- images that she cuts out (of magazines, of different objects and materials and her own art);
- images that are thrown away or given to her (such as the images made by her students during class which they didn't want to keep).

The invisibles in Barry's comics, often themes and concerns that are wrangled with and accorded visual form, include: the power of the image for channeling, communicating and even healing; the mystery of image-making and creation; the inexpressibility of childhood; and the aliveness of children's drawing and untutored drawings in general. Additional invisibles engaging in invisible or behind-the-scenes work, influencing the creative processes of the comic include the demons, which play a central role in *One Hundred Demons* and persist in her other works, acquiring both friendly and threatening forms by personifying personal and creative anxieties. Barry also tries to represent other kinds of invisibles that challenge the limits of visual representation, such as music and dancing or smells to creating multisensory experiences. The invisible in Barry's work is therefore located in the universal and transmedia issues of making ideas emerge, and giving ideas

an appropriate form, of the unsaid and the unsayable (as is the case with the demons populating *One Hundred Demons*), the not drawn or the undrawn (drawn and then erased).

Possible methodologies giving form to the invisible in Barry's work include:

- the connections between childhood memories, and childish and untutored drawing styles;
- collages incorporating scraps of the everyday, the ordinary, alongside drawings destined to be thrown away or other archives that are not accorded institutional space, such as the documents stored by the elementary school teacher Doris Mitchell and incorporated by Barry in *What It Is*;
- the importance of drawing by hand and by extension, the affective connections suggested through the artist's implied presence and through the visual forms of communication;
- the role of comics as an accessible means of collaboration and connection.

Although Barry's invisibles are much more tangible than McCloud's, they seem to do comparable work, that of layering the narrative and establishing connections. They play a central role in the teaching philosophies and exercises she interweaves in her books. Barry tries to unpack the secret labor of comics by connecting it to more universal practices of finding images and the stories they harbor individually or in a network.

The pages from *What It Is* exemplify this by asking pertinent questions about the processes of creating and perceiving pictures, including questions about the sources of images (imagination, memory, perception) and their content and evaluation "What is the difference between a ghost and an image?" (Barry, 2008, p. 56), "What is a bad drawing? What is a good drawing?" (p. 76), "What makes something meaningful?" (Barry 2008, p. 96). And of course, the central, interconnected two questions about value judgments, that continue to haunt Barry: "Is it good? Does this suck?" (Barry, 2008, p. 123).

The centrality of this interest in tracing the sources of images, how they are transferred and what they communicate, is also evident in *Syllabus* which combines exercises and material of three years of courses Barry taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: "What It Is", "Making Comics", "Write What You See" and "Unthinkable Mind", the title of which resembles the first college art class Barry took, "Writing the Unthinkable", taught by Marilyn Frasca (Chute, 2014, p. 60). From these, the title page displays "Unthinkable Mind" more prominently than all the other courses, confirming the influence of Frasca's approach to art education which I will elaborate on later in this article.

Barry's other comics are also on a mission to grasp the "unthinkable" or everything that remains outside the confines of language and are, therefore, invisible. Her quest for a means of communicating the hidden unfolds in an almost obsessive way, filling up single-lined composition books with an energy that expresses a *horror vacui* through their intense, elaborate, but also playful and philosophical pages. Often resembling the exercise

books used in her classes, all of Barry's books tease the boundaries between comics, diaries, sketchbooks and teaching manuals: they combine exercises she uses in her own teaching, and sometimes even her students' materials, autobiographical episodes and meditations.

### ***Chasing Invisibles, Part One: Trace and the Archive***

An earlier work of Barry's, *One Hundred Demons* combines the exercise of a sixteenth-century Japanese Zen Buddhist monk with autobiographical episodes. The exercise takes the form of free painting. The artist is encouraged to follow the strokes of the brush to see which demons emerge forth. The graphic novel announces itself as "a book of autobifictionalography": here, and in other Barry books, autobiography and fiction are as inextricable as the acts of interrogating the comics form, remembering through it and teaching it. Originally published in 2002, *One Hundred Demons* had not been an easy book to place at that time because of the hybridity of the form. It was issued by Sasquatch (before it was acquired by Penguin Random House), a publisher of visual books, which paid special attention to the objecthood of the books published.

The monster which accompanies Barry's explanation of the inkbrush exercise is indicative of the mystical powers Barry ascribes to her images (fig. 1). This mysticism is not without its tongue-in-cheek and even self-deprecating, and hence comicitous, humor. The frontispiece with demon, Barry's monkey avatar and a demon creature in the process of becoming in the monster offers a false and even unreadable table of contents, beginning with an introduction and a chapter titled "selfhood" (Barry, 2017). The book is divided according to different demons, also invisibles, listed in the second table of contents which includes: nuisances such as head lice, feelings such as hate and qualities such as resilience. Many of the demons are connected to childhood memories, including "Dancing", "Common Scents", "Lost Worlds" and "Lost and Found", which is both about classified advertisements and the unwanted transition from childhood to adolescence.

As can already be seen from the "Introduction" to *One Hundred Demons*, Barry plays with the very limits of comics in her quest to find lost images (fig. 1). The title, "Introduction" is placed in a speech balloon emerging from the multiple-eyed demon's mouth. The frame seems to work almost as a picture frame and Barry and her demon are almost posing for a family photograph. The double page spread also evokes other graphic arts and forms of picture making: the signature stamps evoke the Japanese art of printmaking; the drolleries adorning the borders evoke medieval art in which the margins offer spaces of improvisation for the manuscript illuminator. The drolleries, comprising monsters, also recall countless doodles that many of us indulge in. The lined notebook page thrusts us into the well-regulated space and time of school. The contrast between the formal, established art practices and everyday, familiar elements shows how Barry works across worlds and frameworks. At the same time, the labels, of "author", "demon" and the

tools used for resurrecting the demons, make the double exercise of creation and exorcism accessible for the reader. Instead of the gap or the gutter between panels, it is the gap, often invisible because it resists visualization, between the artist and the reader that is bridged here: Barry accomplishes this through breaking down the process of creation. While this is comparable to any practical guide book, such as Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning* or McCloud's meticulous *Understanding Comics* or *Making Comics*, among others, Barry makes this process both personal but also transferrable and reproducible for the reader, because it is based on minimal prerequisites, including minimal artistic skill. Her style reinforces this impression of accessibility. Further, she posits making art as a necessity for self-understanding, and selfhood, in lieu of an expression, and honing, of artistic skill.



Fig. 1: From *One! Hundred! Demons!*, p. 6. Copyright Lynda Barry. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly..

Graphiation (Marion, 1993) and the connected notion of trace (Derrida, 2014) and the concepts surrounding animation, especially animatedness (Ngai, 2017) and animistic media (Kwa, 2023; Ingawanij, 2021) are useful for unpacking the connections between the invisible and Barry's approaches to image-making. Let's begin with unpeeling the layer of drawing which lies at the heart of comics but also connects it to other visual forms (Grennan, 2022; Chute, 2016). Philippe Marion's theory of graphiation or graphic enunciation, which emphasizes the interactive essence of drawing, including how it is situated between artistic and collective styles, transposes Jacques Derrida's notion of trace, which has a strong connection to absences and the archive. Both absences and

archive are key concerns in this mapping of the invisible in Barry's comics and in comics in general:

La trace [...] c'est quelque chose qui part d'une origine mais qui aussitôt se sépare de l'origine et qui reste comme trace dans la mesure où c'est séparé du tracement, de l'origine traçante. C'est là qu'il y a trace et qu'il y a commencement d'archives. Toute trace n'est pas une archive, mais il n'y a pas d'archive sans trace. Donc la trace, ça part toujours de moi et ça se sépare. Quand je dis «reste», la trace part de son origine, moi par exemple, et reste comme trace, ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle l'est substantiellement ou essentiellement ou existentiellement. [...] j'essaie de soustraire la sémantique du mot «reste» à l'ontologie, c'est-à-dire que le reste n'est pas une modification de «être» au sens de l'essence, de la substance, de l'existence. La trace reste, mais ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle est, substantiellement, ou qu'elle est essentielle, mais c'est la question de la restance qui m'intéresse, restance de la trace au-delà de toute ontologie. (Derrida, 2015, p. 49)

One of the many dimensions of the invisible in Barry's comics is the power of the image and the mysterious act of image-making itself which, like her stories follow a (seemingly) free, automatist logic as, for instance, in the stories that emerge from found images. As can be seen from the above quote, the notion of trace and what Derrida calls *restance* or what remains beyond the trace, helps track down how drawings and objects that Barry combines are recontextualized while maintaining links with possible, alternative archives built on what would generally be relegated to waste, in particular the waste of cultural memory (Assmann, 2012; for more on comics and their archives, see Crucifix, 2023).

This is evident in the collaged double page spreads separating the demon-stories in *One Hundred Demons* (fig. 2). In the collage preceding the demon of resilience associated with childhood, Barry's presence as graphiateur, a maker of traces elaborates a dialogue between a childhood photograph of hers, a comics drawing, a photograph of a flower, a toy, additional drawings and scraps of fabric.



Fig. 2 From *One! Hundred! Demons!*, p. 62. Copyright Lynda Barry. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

Exemplifying what Barry calls “bumpiness” (Chute 2010, p. 110) the collage textures complicate the reading process. Chute likens Barry’s use of collage to the Pattern and Decoration movement in the fine arts that emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s and valorized feminine, domestic and handicraft arts. It brings in a specific three-dimensional quality, a *trompe-l’oeil* effect while also destabilizing notions of authorship and authorial genius. In addition to connections with the feminist, grassroots Pattern and Decoration movement, the intensity of the collages also shares affiliations with art brut practices. In particular, the pages recall the *horror vacui* approach of outsider art and the freeness and disbanding of logic (expressed through the rejection of perspective, reality etc.) associated with both outsider art and children’s drawing.

This all-over and messy quality offers the possibility to incorporate several kinds of invisibles through the textured layering and the avoidance of linearity. In offering multiple possibilities to explore and to weave connections (see Postema, 2013), the messiness of the collage channels the unsaid and sometimes even the unsayable. It reverses the presumed simplicity of comics, imbuing the spaces of the pages, the content of the drawings and the potential narratives with ambiguity. It nevertheless remains comicitous through the drawing of the little girl and even through the words written in the windows, which recall comics panels. In this collage, and elsewhere in Barry’s comics, part of the messy element is connected to the imitation or recuperation of childish and childlike drawing. Thierry Smolderen terms such processes polygraphic gestures and has elaborated on the combination of different graphic voices and styles and the connotations acquired in light of their historical and contextual use (Smolderen, 2014). Barry’s insertions, and copies, of art by children and students challenge the simplicity associated



with comics by pushing untutored, childish drawing into the limelight. This permits Barry to visualize another “invisible” element, that of childhood, moving from her own autobiographical childhoods and other, often anonymous individual’s childhoods to notions of collective childhoods created through the juxtaposition of different traces made by different, untraceable authors. Highlighting the power of these drawings also opens up space to allow for non-academic drawings by adults.

The overflowing or messy quality of Barry’s pages have additional implications, especially for accessing the invisible or that which challenges possibilities of representation. Messiness helps convey the complexity of experiences but also their tangled and interconnected essence, as Barry points out: “Once a student asked me why I liked ‘messed-up’ drawings so much. They don’t look ‘messed-up’ to me. There is a realness in them that is hard to come by” (Barry, 2019, p. 50). In collaboration with animation that is discussed further below, messiness helps generate a certain form of punkish truthfulness in Barry’s works (see also Szép 2020, pp 53-78). While scholars have often categorized Barry as a feminist cartoonist (see de Jesús, 2004), Susan Kirtley points out that Barry’s aesthetic, especially in her early weekly strips is inscribed in “a shared culture of destruction and authenticity” (Kirtley, 2021, p. 107). Kirtley adds that Barry’s serialized comic strips, which preceded the graphic novels I mentioned, worked to “constitute a community of punk - an audience that simultaneously sought to destroy mainstream notions of what a comic strip ‘should’ be, while positing something more authentic, more real in its wake” (Kirtley, 2021, p. 114). The politics of Barry’s comics veers towards dismantling mainstream aesthetic and cultural hegemonies rather than gender-based ones. This continues in her bookish and manual work. It is connected to Charles Hatfield’s identification of a “working-class strain of autobiography” in alternative comics (Kirtley, 2021, p. 149), which often relies on the technique of “ironic authentication” that sidesteps the necessity of a truthful account or representation (Kirtley, 2021, p. 159-160).

Messiness also has strong connections to the notion of comics as a traumatized medium proposed by Christopher Pizzino in *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature* and in his *ImageText* article, “Comics and Trauma” (Pizzino, 2017). In this article, Pizzino turns to the “Time Flies” episode opening the second volume of *Maus*, to elaborate on autoclasm or self-breaking as “one of the strongest features of contemporary comics: a deep attunement to, and elaboration of, the complex and often contradictory dynamics of cultural status, and of the way those dynamics, in all their historical and cultural specificity, inexorably shape what the creator draws.” The messiness of Barry’s comics demonstrates an alternative, even opposite, strategy to autoclasm by unpacking the potential of children’s drawings, untutored styles and non-sequential logics to counter the objections of simplicity and childishness that have been levied against comics.

Messiness is closely connected to the unskilled facet which is accorded a central, generative locus of all of Barry’s comics. When expressing her doubts about teaching comics especially in the light of criticism levied against her comics - “faux naïve style”, too

wordy, crude characters, overflowing panels - Barry emphasizes her aim to transmit “the power of comics as a way of seeing and being in the world and transmitting our experience of it” (Barry, 2019, p. 14; fig. 3). The messiness of her pages conveys the complexity of such experiences through visualizing their tangled, interconnected essence.



Fig. 3 From *Making Comics*, p. 14. Copyright Lynda Barry. Used with permission from *Drawn & Quarterly*.

Closed shapes by children dominate the page above. In one of them Barry writes across the separations, treating them as panels: “a closed shape/containing ~~containing~~ something/becomes something else/the force you seek is at hand” (*Making Comics*, p. 14). This force lies not only in the image but in the form and the succession of shapes and the words and images inside them, aspects that are essentially comicitous.

As suggested through the discussion of *trace* above, Barry’s collages of found objects, personal items, student’s drawings and lists, and other elements often rescued from trash

bring in an archival dimension to Barry's graphic novels, simultaneously exemplifying an archival methodology or how to counter traditional archives, an archive-in-the-making given the processual and collaborative nature of the comics, and a curated archive. Questioning notions of the archive and archival policies on one hand, Barry also highlights possibilities of creating with archives and how comics and notebooks can function as archives. In addition to this archival dimension, the acts of recuperating, preserving, (re-)arranging and collaging are also a means of establishing new connections to overlooked works and the individuals behind them. Tracking down the invisible in Barry's works, then, points towards the myriad of ways in which comics connect with, touch and affect their readers, how they draw, braid or weave, connections. This can also be linked to the notions surrounding animation and the communicative facet of trace.

### ***Chasing Invisibles, Part Two: Animation and Connection***

In order to expand on the second dimension of tracing invisibles, which builds on the notion of trace and archive, I turn to animation as an umbrella term combining theoretizations of animatedness and animism to unpack the central dynamics behind Barry's image work and its use of invisibles: animation is the act of making images come alive, or resurrecting images but also of making images move through the repetition and braiding that lies at the heart of comics. The energy implied in animation also allows for different kinds of ambiguities and consequently, space, for invisibles to thrive, most notably in the case of marginal and ignored images.

The concept animatedness based on Sianne Ngai's affect-based aesthetic theory and Shiamin Kwa's discussion of comics as an animistic medium complements the notion of trace and contributes to understanding what Barry wants her images to do, beginning with the very search for images. In her chapter on life writing in John Porcellino's comics, Kwa describes Porcellino's comics as functioning as "an animistic medium of uncertainty", requiring the reader to shift positioning and interpretational frameworks, sometimes within the same page (Kwa, 2023, p. 185). I would like to take this line of thought further while also drawing connections with Sianne Ngai's notion of animatedness (which has already been used by Scott Bukatman in his analysis of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*) to highlight the aliveness of the comics form and the uncomfortable subtexts underpinning animation, from the transfer of racialized caricature to the tension between the increasing mechanization of society and stratified and categorical notions of individuality. Heavily racialized, the state of animatedness is relegated to marginalized groups which are portrayed as excessively emotional while lacking power or possibilities to act (Ngai, 2007, pp. 80-125). A marginalized medium in many ways, comics images are animated in a way that often relies on caricatural exaggeration. The strong childish element persisting across Barry's comics reconfigures the notions of animatedness, to acquire different nuances that can be read in light of cultural legitimacy, as pointed out above, and understandings and

uses of drawing and notions of good and bad drawings. In Barry's works, animatedness is also present as expression that cannot be contained within the customary limits of form.

Lynda Barry's latest, unique genre of comics manual, *Making Comics*, begins with an assertion of the untutored style, of drawing the way we once drew as children, which has a certain "aliveness" to it. "Kids speak image," writes Barry (Barry, 2019, p.8) and this is the kind of language that she strives to teach. Such drawings, according to Barry, are impossible to copy or to "animate". Animation is also connected to her strategy for comics which she claims is "not about developing characters ...(but) about waiting to see who shows up in certain circumstances" (Barry, 2019, p. 13, my insertion in parentheses). Animation or breathing life into images also plays a role in the many synesthetic experiences Barry generates through her comics, such as the demon of smells in *One Hundred Demons* and the representations of music and dancing that recur in most of her comics and graphic novels.

In *Making Comics*, she illustrates – or animates – a 4K student's fire story and juxtaposes it next to several fire drawings by children (Barry, 2019, pp. 16-17). She also draws over the lines of children's drawings or copies them to capture their affective power, to establish connections through the very act of drawing and through placing all drawing on an equal plane. This shifts preconceptions regarding the persona of the author or artistic genius as a font of originality (which is also comparable to the practices of the Pattern and Decoration movement and to the valorization of art brut as art in its own right).

Expanding on Marion's notion of graphiation, Jan Baetens has pointed out how problematic it is to conflate graphiation with an original personal style because all style is an outcome of several levels of negotiations, between tutored and acquired styles and styles that are deemed appropriate for a certain subject matter or context. Baetens highlights the communicative nature of style itself, present in the nature of the "the trace that both communicates between and connects the graphiater and the reader" ("C'est dans la trace que communiquent - et communient - le graphiateur et le lecteur", Baetens, 1996, p. 232). Barry too emphasizes the relationality of comics and their dependence on the viewer as already suggested by the second quote at the beginning of this article: "Who creates a comic? The person who draws it or the person who sees it?" (Barry, 2019, p. 88) The implied answer is both and more, if we bear in mind the discussions of trace and its connections to official and unofficial archives.

Other forms of connectivity are also discernible in Barry's books. These connections form part of the "sticky" affective quality (Ahmed, 2014) of children's drawings and untutored styles in general. The traced hands that appear in Barry's works are ways of leaving traces in perhaps the most humanly connected manner: it reproduces a shape that is shared by all humans with a gesture that in itself is easily reproducible. These hands concretize the possibility of touching, bypassing fleshy membranes through drawing, forms and textures. They concretize the notion of "haptic visuality" that Rebecca Scherr transposes to comics: "a connective readerly address incorporating sensation and emotion in its communicative reach" that can be activated through the drawn line (Scherr, 2013, p. 21). The traced hands incorporated in Barry's books, which are also one of the first

exercises in her students' notebooks, capture the emotional connections enabled by art, the imprint of the creator and the possibility for everyone to create and to communicate through art. Next to a collaborative drawing made by eight hands and then copied by one, Barry writes: "A drawing may come from you but exists apart from you, in both matter and meaning to others. ... When I look at a drawing ... I'm meeting something and it's also meeting me... When I copy a drawing, I'm meeting it in a different way" (Barry, 2019, p. 102).

This elaboration on the relationality of lines recalls Tim Ingold's discussion of the line as the ultimate form of connection in his landmark *Life of Lines*:

since there is no life that is not social – that does not entail an entwining of lines – in a world of blobs there could be no life of any kind. In fact, most if not all life-forms can be most economically described as specific combinations of blob and line, and it could be the combination of their respective properties that allows them to flourish. Blobs have volume, mass, density: they give us materials. Lines have none of these. What they have, which blobs do not, is torsion, flexion and vivacity. They give us life. Life began when lines began to emerge and to escape the monopoly of blobs. (Ingold 2015, p. 4)

Before concluding with the possible invisibles in Barry's comics, I will briefly expand on Barry's mission to teach the invisible, which interweaves the impulses to animate and to connect with instructions and incentives to draw combining comics guidebooks and non-judgemental art theories and practices.

### ***Teaching the Invisible: Making Comics***

The contrast between McCloud's and Barry's approaches to comics is most obvious in their books sharing the same title, *Making Comics*. While McCloud offers a practical guide to making comics, emphasizing clarity and clear communication, using a very neat line and minimalist style to do so, Barry fills the pages of her books with drawings and text, opting for a messy and collaged aesthetic discussed above. Storylines and narrative structure are likewise fragmentary, episodic and even secondary, or sometimes completely absent. Barry nevertheless maintains a close connection to drawing manuals such as Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning*, which she is shown reading and also doing and redoing exercises from, especially in *Syllabus*. Alongside the big questions that punctuate the pages of *What It Is*, Barry, like Brunetti, works with constraints to activate drawing impulses. These include temporal constraints (drawing within two or five minutes), drawing with the non-dominant hand, using crayons, dividing up the pages, drawing certain topics, stories, characters etc. These constraints tackle certain anxieties, which are also invisibles, and include the drawing anxieties of her students, color anxiety and the prejudices associated with certain materials, such as crayons which, like color, are considered childish (Barry, 2014, p. 68). Another major anxiety, often visualized as a monster, an invisible, internalized demon, is self-criticism, based on the ways in which art is perceived and

criticized, which is perhaps most present in *One Hundred Demons* and the “Two Questions” section in *What It Is* (Barry, 2008, pp. 123-136).

Barry offers additional tools to overcome anxieties, which are connected to the art making philosophies that she is inspired by. Towards the end of *Making Comics*, Barry offers a new set of constraints relying on a selection of prompts, thereby moving away from Brunetti’s more spatiotemporally regulated exercises. Barry suggests making a “comics kit” comprising six bags: word bag, picture bag, scene bag, camera angle bag, character bag and setting bag. This offers a classic Barry mix, combining practical tools for making comics, some constraints and much that is ultimately left to chance. Barry also encourages copying images, a foundational component of artistic training. She emphasizes how the act of copying impacts thinking: “Copying is good for you because it takes time and – it requires a certain sort of sustained concentration that invites a different sort of thinking” (Barry, 2014, p. 184). Drawing figures not only as an act of “mark making” (Grennan, 2022) but an act that can reveal mysteries, or the invisible: “When we draw a person, along with what Simon Sparrow calls ‘the mystery form of that person,’ we are also drawing the mystery form of our line and our urge toward composition” (Barry, 2014, p. 70). The central aim of Barry’s courses and books is then not so much to produce comics but to use comics to generate images that can provide access to elements that are otherwise inaccessible: “By image I don’t mean a visual representation, I mean something that is more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive – a book, a song, a painting – anything we call an ‘art form’” (Barry, 2014, p. 15). Comics become a means of revealing the invisibles behind creation alongside the invisibles within the self and the invisibles contributing towards the creation of selfhood.

Correspondingly, Barry combines more conventional comics and cartooning practices with less conventional notions of art practice. She writes, “I’m after what Marilyn Frasca called ‘being present and seeing what’s there’” (Barry, 2014, p. 4). For Barry, one of the most important teachings of Frasca was that the work of art cannot be separated from those viewing it. Frasca rarely taught or commented on technique, focusing instead on what the artwork conveyed for the maker and viewer (Chute, 2014, pp. 60-61; Misemer, 2020). Frasca followed courses during the 1950s at the Cooper Union during the heyday of abstract expressionism before moving for a degree to San Francisco. The importance of textures, of spiritual qualities attached to painting, both representational and non-representational, play a strong role in her work. Most importantly, Frasca encouraged her students to look and to make without judging, to be attentive to the artwork in the process of becoming.

Barry also mentions two other psychiatric and psychological theorists which offer possibilities of accessing the unknown, the invisibles within the person making art and ways of visualizing those invisibles: Iain McGilchrist and Marion Milner. In *Syllabus* we see Barry reading McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Barry, 2014, p. 49), which is mandatory reading for her “Unthinkable Mind” class. McGilchrist proposes that the hemispheres (left, Emissary or

right, Master) result in different modes of perception and world views. Awareness of the two contrasting modes of perception contributes towards Barry's aim of "trying to understand how images travel between people, how they move through time, and if there was a way to use writing and picture making to figure out more about how images work" (Barry, 2014, p. 49) In *What It Is*, we see Barry reading artist and psychologist, Marion Milner's *On Not Being Able to Paint* (Barry, 2008, p. 133). Trained in Freudian psychoanalysis and a theorist of art practice in general and art by children, Milner was an advocate of free drawing and considered drawing a means of revealing aspects about the person making it (Milner, 2010, p. 172).

## Conclusion

McCloud's claim that "(t)oday's comics do their *dance with the invisible* better than ever before" seems to be especially relevant for Barry's works, which provide the ideal spaces for interrogating notions of comics, comics images and the invisible (McCloud, 1994, p. 208, emphasis in the original). As I have tried to show, the invisible in Barry's comics is closely connected to her concern of tracing the sources of images and how they are transferred and what they communicate. This is often intimately connected to childhood, to childhood memories, children and to children's drawings and, by extension, untutored drawings. While the invisible may in many ways seem out of our reach, images, and in particular comics images, woven together into narratives can help, as Barry's body of work suggests, in attaining glimpses of it and perhaps even glimpses of ourselves or, at least, our demons.

The invisible is also a found space, like the many drawings of Barry's students and images that she rescues from the trash can, finds in coffee stains (Barry, 2019, p. 94) or in her memory (Barry, 2008). The invisible in Barry's works remains closely connected to the specificity of comics, to what makes comics comics, beyond the word balloons, the panels and even the sequentiality, through the potential of creating and recreating hybrid storylines that interweave images and words. In creating stories that mediate between the personal and the collective, Barry's comics acquire a truthfulness through sustaining a reality that resonates on both individual and collective dimensions. Comics images likewise have an intersubjective, communicative function for the maker and the viewer.

## Biographical note

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