

When Public Figures Become Comics

Reinhard Kleist's Graphic Biographies

The genre of graphic biography is booming internationally. In the German context, Reinhard Kleist's works confirm this trend. A successful artist based in Berlin, Kleist is the author of seven book-long biographies of public figures. His characters range from writers to famous politicians, musicians, and professional athletes with traumatic stories. This article examines how Kleist's graphic biographies differently embrace the possibilities and challenges of narrating and depicting real-life persons and their experiences. It discusses how the graphic biographies strike a balance between factual and fictional details in reconstructing the original story, to which the artist will never have full access. Because graphic biographies are built around the characters they portray, this article uses Kai Mikkonen's theory of characters in comics as a framework to show how Kleist renders real-life figures as characters at the intersection of factual and fictional narration. By focusing on Kleist's *Der Traum von Olympia* (2015) and *Der Boxer* (2012), two works that describe traumatic stories embedded in their respective socio-political contexts, it explores how graphic biographies incorporate historical reconstruction, journalistic account, and personal story in rendering their characters. The article shows how these graphic biographies not only portray individual lives, but ultimately encourage reflections on similar stories that may remain untold.

1. Introduction: Reinhard Kleist's Graphic Biographies

For over twenty years, Berlin-based comics artist and illustrator Reinhard Kleist has been producing works that manifest his talent for visual storytelling and his interest in real stories. Kleist, the first cartoonist to receive the German Youth Literature Award and the winner of the 2018 *Max und Moritz Prize* for best German-language Comic Artist, is an eclectic author, whose projects range from comics to travel sketches, film posters, live drawing to the rhythm of music performances, and works in theater.¹ Yet, one genre in particular defines his oeuvre as a whole: Between 1994 and 2018 Kleist has completed seven book-length graphic biographies. Centered on public figures, these works portray, in a variety of styles and forms, the life of writers (*Lovecraft*, realized in collaboration with Roland Hueve), politicians (*Castro*), musicians (*Elvis, Cash. I See A Darkness*, and *Nick Cave. Mery on Me*), and athletes (*Der Boxer* and *Der Traum von Olympia*).² While some of these personalities do not need an introduction, others may be less known to general audiences, and, by depicting their extraordinary lives in the comics medium, Kleist brings them one step closer to new readers.

When considering these works together, one may wonder about the connections among their protagonists. Indeed, as Linda Warley and Alan Filewod (2016, 155) remark, “[a] work of biography immediately raises the question of

the motivation of the author.” While Kleist’s characters belong to different national and social backgrounds, follow different career paths, and chase different dreams, their lives have something in common, as the author himself reveals. In interviews and public talks, Kleist has repeatedly stated that what led him to choose these figures was his interest in “broken characters”, who have experienced dark to fatal moments in their lives (cf. Wachtel / Kleist 2017).³ From dictatorial power to drug abuse, from imprisonment to fatal escape, Kleist’s graphic biographies focus on experiences that are exceptional, but not unique. Because of the complex history of the medium, which developed as part of both the mainstream industry and alternative scene, biographical stories in comics often depict lives that fall outside the “bourgeois models of individualist subjectivity associated with the ‘great men’ school of biography” (Rifkind 2016, 181). Opening up their pages to tragic and conflicted figures, Kleist’s comics show the complexities of human experiences and the frailty that often lies behind success stories.

Kleist plays with the conventions of the biographical genre and positions his figures in the context of existing sources—be it testimonies, photographs, or other biographies—which he uses to create his graphic works. While the author consults these sources to illustrate his stories, fact and fiction inevitably mix. On the one hand, Kleist acknowledges available materials and his works testify to the research he conducted before drawing them. Paratexts further support his biographies in the form of forewords, afterwords, or short essays by guest contributors. On the other hand, the author openly comments on the need to rely on his imagination and to find plausible solutions to fill the gaps that these stories present to him. Because biographies are narrated stories, each of them constitutes but one possible version of someone’s life. Many readers will approach a graphic biography with the expectation of getting a full, historical account. Some will read it with the awareness that what they hold in their hands is an aesthetic representation of a biographical account. Others will be surprised to realize how much a biography does not end at the individual level, but speaks to many more lives which may share common goals and struggles. The processes of remembering, writing, and drawing are necessarily selective and, while verbal biographies rely on the power of words to create an image of the character, comics biographies combine the processes of verbalization and visualization. In its combination of fact and fiction, what does the graphic biography add to the representation of human lives? Does the comics medium engage the genre of biography in unique ways? How does the use of text and images shape the experience of life-writing?

This article reflects on how the comics medium functions in portraying the lives of public figures within Reinhard Kleist’s graphic biographies. My focus lies on two biographies in particular, *Der Traum von Olympia* and *Der Boxer*. While both protagonists had remarkable athletic careers, their tragic stories are indisputably less known than the lives of the other public figures Kleist depicts. In this regard, it is telling that the book covers of these two graphic works are the

only ones, compared to Kleist's other biographies, which depict their protagonists together with other figures. Furthermore, because their stories speak to the socio-political times in which they lived, the intersection between facts and fiction becomes especially relevant. After providing a brief introduction to the genre of graphic biographies, I will first discuss *Der Traum von Olympia* and consider how Kleist represents his characters to shape both an individual and humanitarian portrait. I will then analyze how *Der Boxer* merges an individual story and a traumatic, collective past that speaks to the destiny of many other persecuted people. I will conclude the essay by considering how these biographies can be read as humanizing portraits, which visualize individual destinies, but, at the same time, address other stories that remain untold.

2. Reality and Characters in Comic-Book Biographies

In an article titled "Life drawing: the boom in comic-book biographies", published on *The Guardian* website, David Barnett (2017) takes note of the increasing number of graphic biographies: "Covering subjects from Einstein to Audubon, the graphic form is tempting more and more biographers." Indeed, since the publication of Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir *Maus* in 1986, the genre of graphic life narrative has entered "a new 'golden age'" (Rifkind 2016, 178). The success of this genre is international and can be seen in the biographies that portray the lives of various historic figures, including Anne Frank, Rosa Luxemburg, Matthew Henson, Frida Kahlo, Barack Obama, among many others. Reinhard Kleist's prolific production of graphic biographies belongs to this growing endeavor to visualize extraordinary lives in the medium of comics. This phenomenon encourages us to ask new questions about the medium, its relation to other biographical forms, and its ability to accurately portray the lives and experiences of the subjects.

Warley and Filewod (2016) suggest the ways in which comic biographies both engage traditional issues in biographical representation and pave the way to new experiences. As they write,

Biographical stories told in comics are complex texts that engage issues of how the past is remembered and memorialized, how the subject of the biography is represented by another person who can never fully know or understand her subject, and how the medium of comics mobilizes readers to engage in particular kinds of reading and interpretive experiences. (154)

Warley and Filewod address the complexity of the medium, from the act of remembering preceding the composition, which is inherently selective, to the choices of representation, and the final reception of the work, which relies on both preceding steps. In each of these stages, interpretation plays a decisive role, resulting in specific formal choices that are offered to the reading audience. Warley and Filewod indirectly point to an issue that has preoccupied narratologists and biography scholars for decades, and still does, as new forms of life-writing emerge. The thorny question about the relation between fact and fiction in

(auto)biographical writing is indeed an old one, because biographical stories are based on real people, but necessarily represent an act of mediation through words, drawing and subjective styles. Because the author “can never fully know or understand her subject”, interpretive decisions necessarily become part of the biographical portrait. In the introduction to *Experiments in Life-Writing*, Julia Novak (Boldrini / Novak 2017, 9) comes to the conclusion that

[i]t seems that the proliferation of experiments in the vast field of life-writing has created particular challenges for developing any reliable criteria for an absolute distinction between factual and fictional narrative—a distinction that is, however, felt to have profound implications for the readers and subjects of auto / biographical texts.

While Novak limits her discussion to experimental verbal texts, her conclusion seems even more poignant if applied to the possibilities of the comics medium, in which the visual and the verbal elements coexist, and the possibilities of deviating from ‘reality’ may multiply in the textual-visual mode of representation. Indeed, the words and images coexisting on the page may shape portraits that accurately represent real-life figures, but their respective hyperbolic or oversimplified language might also idealize or caricature. Pascal Lefèvre (2013, 51) advances this approach when he asks: “So if, metaphorically speaking, deviation is a crucial part of the genetic code of the comics, why would one try to report about reality in this medium? It seems almost a *contradictio in terminis*.” Lefèvre (*ibid.*, 52) tries to come to terms with this apparent contradiction by showing how comics position themselves vis-à-vis different forms of factuality and make use of “some prototypical codes and conventions of the documentary” in creative ways. Exploring the possibilities of photographs, digital means, historical documents and journalism, comics variously embed and reframe elements of reality in their stories, striking different levels of balance between factuality and fiction.

The character-protagonists of the biographies represent the ultimate anchor to reality in the genre of comics biography. Therefore, the ways in which fact and reality meet in character representation deserve particular attention. In his study on *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Kai Mikkonen (2017) reflects on the centrality of character as an organizing and interpretative element of comics:

[T]he depiction of a character in a sequence of images gives the reader access to the story through a clear unit of attention that can be followed. [...] On the other hand, a continuing character allows the reader to gradually construct a person-like entity engaged in some action or situation and have a sense of the story content: The narrative is *about* a particular character or group of characters. (90-91)

Characters are interpreted by readers as mimetic reconstructions of real-life people, and, for this reason, moments of deviation or distortion in their representation become particularly significant. In a chapter devoted to the “Characterisation in Comics”, Mikkonen shows how the nature of the comics medium may compromise the verisimilitude of the characters represented through “[t]he demands of graphic drawing and style, the use of caricature, and the rich symbolic language of comics” (*ibid.*, 195). Realistic depiction and caricature become the two poles of graphic characterization, between which a whole range of possibilities opens. Starting from these considerations, the analysis that follows focuses

on how characters function as the main narrative elements of Kleist's graphic biographies and how, beyond their mimetic qualities, they become embodiments of experiences that characterize larger groups. Kleist shapes his characters via complex portraits that rely on both the verbal and narrative tracks, which allow the readers to reconstruct their identities. The instances of deviation and distortion from the established portraits become important interpretative moments as they highlight the tension between factual representation and aesthetic choices.

3. *Der Traum von Olympia: A Personal and Humanitarian Portrait*

Der Traum von Olympia (2015, translated as *An Olympic Dream* in 2016)⁴ depicts the “traumatic odyssey” (Kleist 2016a, 7) of Samia Yusuf Omar, a Somali athlete, who participated in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, striving to win for her country. Despite arriving last in the 200-meter race, Samia continued to chase her dream of again representing Somalia at the London Olympics, but she tragically perished before fulfilling it. After boarding a Libyan rubber raft that would take her to Italy, Samia Yusuf Omar drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in 2012—she was 21. In the preface to the graphic work, Kleist writes:

Every day, we see images of people trying to reach Europe by boat, but we are usually unaware of the traumatic odysseys – taking weeks, months, sometimes years – that lead up to these desperate, often fatal, crossings. (Kleist 2016a, 7)⁵

Different from many other stories of escape and desperate crossing which remain unheard or at the margins, Samia's tragedy attracted the attention of journalists, writers, and illustrators.⁶ *Der Traum von Olympia* shows how, through the powerful combination of facts and fiction, images and text, Kleist creates a character that embodies the personal and individual struggle of this refugee story, while using the graphic biography to raise awareness to the many similar destinies that remain untold.

Kleist uses different strategies to foreground the reality of Samia's life, positioning it within factual paratexts. In the preface to the graphic novel, the author thanks Teresa Krug, the journalist who personally knew Samia. Through their collaboration, Kleist was able to get access to more details about Samia's past and also managed to work with Samia's sister, whose input was essential in reconstructing her story. The closing of the graphic novel also reinforces the tie to factuality. After Samia's story is concluded, Kleist inserts a three-page coda in comics form, which shows the former Somali runner Abdi Bile, as he honored Samia Yusuf Omar at the London Olympics. The reader can access the original speech, which provided inspiration for these drawings, thanks to Kleist's inclusion of the Youtube video's title (cf. Taajir Studio 2012). By interjecting Abdi Bile's commemorative words of Samia's tragic destiny with scenes that represent Samia as a runner and a refugee, Kleist gives factual and emotional closure to the story. As Julia Ludewig (2016, 235) remarks in her review of *Der Traum von Olympia*, “Kleist weaves facts and fact-like fiction into a captivating story that

gives the recent migration crisis a human face.” As if to once again ensure the importance of facts and sources, the German and the English editions close with a short essay, written by two journalists, Elias Bierdel and Teresa Krug, respectively. The gesture towards journalism adds a new layer of objectivity to the work of storytelling that Kleist has carefully constructed in this visual biography.

Since the visual rendering of the other touches on ethical questions of representation, the use of the comics medium to memorialize a human tragedy may raise concerns. The German journalist Elias Bierdel, the author of the Afterword in *Der Traum von Olympia*, explains that he had never imagined that the tragedies he witnessed while working with the association *borderline europe* could become the subject for a comic book until Reinhard Kleist shared his first drawings with him (cf. Kleist 2015, 144).⁷ Elaborating on the reasons why he overcame his initial scepticism and came to recognize Kleist’s graphic work as a masterpiece, Bierdel praises the renunciation of “false pathos” (“falsches Pathos,” *ibid.*), which, in turn, hints at the truthfulness of Samia’s portrait. Rather than transforming her into some kind of heroic figure, Kleist lets Samia Yusuf Omar emerge as the young athlete and fighter she was.

The author renounces any decontextualized pathos by grounding the character’s story in the socio-political context of Somalia and in Samia’s personal life. The initial scene of the graphic narrative provides the geographical and political background for *Der Traum von Olympia*, depicting where Samia and her family come from. Through a move traditionally reserved for description in literary texts, a splash panel introduces the reader to 2008 Mogadishu, a city heaving with small houses and tents. In what looks like a regular market day, small groups and individual figures walk on the street, or attend to everyday activities. Traces of war and destruction are present from the very first page of the graphic work, in which we see a damaged building deprived of its roof that occupies the center of the panel. A series of small panels follows on the next pages, showing the excitement of Samia’s family and supporters as they gather to watch her competing at the Olympics and try to set up an old television to broadcast the race. In these opening pages, the reader is introduced to Samia, her thin body in a baggy t-shirt on the screen, as she stands at the starting line to compete against “machines! Solid muscle!”, as one of her Somali supporters defines the other athletes (Kleist 2016a, 13).



Fig. 1: The first graphic representation of Samia in Kleist's biography (Kleist 2015, 11).⁸

Samia arrives last in the qualifying round and is shown as she runs behind the other athletes, encouraged by the audience's cheering (Kleist 2016a, 14). This image returns in the many online videos posted to celebrate and commemorate Samia's life and her resilience at her first competition, which probably served as an inspiration for Kleist's drawings.

Samia quickly turns from an object of admiration to the speaking subject of the graphic biography and the narrator of her own story. To achieve this, Kleist inserts text boxes containing first-person Facebook posts by Samia, most of which he admits to have "fictionalised [. . .], except for one: her desperate call for help from Tripoli, which she addressed to Teresa Krug" (Kleist 2016a, 7).



Fig. 2: The first Facebook post Samia addresses to her friends (Kleist 2015, 17).⁹

These posts serve a double purpose: on the one hand, they give a voice to Samia, and, on the other, they frame the narrative and provide contextual information to the reader. They contain details about Samia's life prior to her time as an Olympic athlete, and also include further references to life in Somalia. For example, the reader learns that Samia's father was condemned to death because the family did not adhere to Sharia law. As her mother was forced to find a job to support the family, Samia dropped out of school to take care of her siblings and the children of her sister, who had left Somalia to find work in Europe. Upon returning to Mogadishu after the Beijing Olympics, she had to face the

challenges of training in Coni Stadium, which she describes as “a bit different than at the Beijing Olympic Games” (Kleist 2016a, 26). Her insufficient diet further complicates her training. Even though Samia tries hard to be an athlete, life in Somalia hinders her efforts to become a competitive Olympic runner. By allowing Samia to voice her struggles through the instant form of Facebook posts, Kleist gives the reader “direct” access to the character’s thoughts about her personal and political challenges.

Kleist highlights the threats Samia endures in Somalia by representing her encounters with Al-Shabaab, the militarist authority in Mogadishu.¹⁰ Samia’s mother warns her even before she leaves the house to go for a simple run: “If you hear any shooting, turn back straight away [. . .] And put a scarf on your head!” (Kleist 2016a, 22). The militants, who already appear as grey shadows on the German book cover, target Samia as a woman and an athlete. In the first panel in which we see them, the men of Al-Shabaab are sitting in the back of a pickup truck, holding rifles as they drive through the city (Kleist 2016a, 20). When Al-Shabaab personally confronts her, Samia is attacked for her subversive behavior as a woman runner. Kleist depicts the threats and oppression Samia experiences insofar as most of the image is taken up by the militia members and Samia’s figure is relegated either to the semidarkness or to a corner of the panel. The threats continue and once again we see Samia as she is physically confronted and attacked by two members of Al-Shabaab. Samia shows her back to the reader as she listens to the two men, one with a covered face and the other with a very stern expression, as they violently intimidate to her: “Do you think that when you’re in another country you can do what you want? // Have you forgotten how women are supposed to behave? // You’re insulting your people, your prophet and your country!” (Kleist 2016a, 30). In spite of the risks she runs, Samia continues to train, which leads to a death threat that reaches her via text message. As the violence escalates, Samia decides that the only way she can escape Al-Shabaab is by leaving her country.

Samia’s journey constitutes the center of her biography, and her resilience emerges through Kleist’s visual and textual narrative. Samia completes parts of the trip with her Aunt Mariam, who, frustrated with life conditions in Addis Ababa, decides to accompany her in hopes of a better life in Europe. The two women leave together from Ethiopia, where Samia had spent some time, only to realize that female athletes are not welcome in the training facilities and that her visa could not be renewed. In a Facebook post that conveys the sense of anxiety and uncertainty before the journey, Samia comments: “When I think about how far it is, I get anxious. 1,000 kilometers, can you imagine? How long will it take?” (Kleist 2016a, 55). Samia and Mariam are portrayed in a large panel as they walk against traffic, leaving the city behind and moving towards a new, unexplored territory, whose unfamiliar features are conveyed through the lack of any panel frame (Kleist 2016a, 55). The impossibility to ‘contain’ this scene mirrors the unimaginable challenges that the long road ahead presents. The style Kleist selects for this section of the story conveys the hardship, unpredictability, and risk this journey entails. When Samia and Mariam encounter the traffickers

that are in charge of taking them to Libya for the first time, the figures tend to lose both their contours and specific features and become stylized bodies that inhabit the gray space of the frame.



Fig. 3: Two of the panels that depict Samia and Aunt Mariam's encounter with the traffickers (Kleist 2015, 54).

The loss of precise physical features goes hand in hand with the lack of humane understanding. Samia and Mariam have no negotiating power in their transactions with these men, who deal with their lives in purely monetary terms. Samia and her aunt are depicted as aghast auditors in these transactions, during which they are forced to trust people who evoke in them feelings of uncertainty and fear. The solidarity and mutual support the two women find in each other only provides brief consolation. Indeed, while their documents are being checked, Mariam is detained and Samia runs off after her aunt orders her to do so. The next leg of the journey is a long and excruciating walk through the Sahara Desert, under the scorching sun, made even harder by weight of the water Samia carries on her shoulders. The panels once again lose their frames as if to suggest the impossibility of containing the struggle of the moment and the vastness of the desert the migrants have to cross (Kleist 2016a, 69).

When Samia and Mariam's dreams are ultimately shattered, the style of the graphic biography again changes to mirror the collapse of their hopes. The first attempt to leave Libya fails as the coast guard intercepts the boat. The migrants are stopped and detained. The two pages of symmetrical moment-to-moment panels—the only two in the whole graphic biography—visualize Samia's detention, the rigid policing of imprisonment and the segregation that only adds to the hardship she has already experienced (Kleist 2016a, 108-109). Her reunion with Aunt Mariam only temporarily alleviates her pain. A new state of anxiety and apprehension begins when they find out that a rubber raft and not a boat will take them across the Mediterranean. And yet, there is no going back. For several pages, the panels only include images and the textual rendition of the humming motor. Then, the first text bubbles interrupt the silent narration in order to voice the reactions of the migrants before the raft runs out of gas. The last panels of the graphic novel show Samia, as she tells a baby on the raft how beautiful running is. She equates running with flying and finally with reaching

heaven. The final moments of the tragedy are not visually presented. Instead, Kleist uses an image from a running competition to end the graphic novel: Samia beats her adversaries and wins. Her beaming face closes this story of sorrow and leaves it to the reader to fill in the gaps of the last terrible moments of her life.

During her journey, Samia interacts with other migrants, whose stories receive brief visibility in the main narrative. On the packed pick-up truck that crosses the desert, proximity turns into intimacy and personal struggles and dreams are shared, interrupting tense, long silences. One of the fellow migrants, a fisherman, confesses that he wants to go to Europe “where the fish are” (Kleist 2016a, 79). Another man shares his dream to start a new life in Europe together with his family. Stories of “a friend of a friend” (ibid., 81) also circulate, generating hopes and expectations in the listeners. In these depictions Europe becomes a paradise where work and richness abound. And yet, at the same time, Europe seems to be an unattainable destination. A man contradicts the hopeful stories told by other migrants when he remarks “Europe ... They don’t want us there” (ibid., 83). The fear of being rejected encapsulated in this comment turns into another series of silent panels as the truck gets engulfed into a cloud of dust and darkness.

In his preface, Reinhard Kleist asks “So why does the story of Samia Yusuf Omar stick with us and not one of the many thousands of others about those who died such cruel deaths?” (ibid., 7). Different from many refugees, who remain unnamed, Samia’s presence at the Olympics gave visibility to her story and made it possible for the author to gain access to the details of her tragedy. In this graphic biography, the power of the literary word merges with the visuality of images to create an intense portrait of a personal account. While the focus of the graphic novel is Samia Yusuf Omar and her personal story, Reinhard Kleist manages to raise awareness for and to humanize countless refugees’ stories.

4. Tormented Figures from the Past: Hertzko Haft in *Der Boxer*

Samia’s biography is embedded in the present migration crisis and its recent developments, to which Kleist obtained direct access through testimonies and contemporary stories. *Der Boxer* (Kleist 2012, English translation [*The Boxer*] 2014), by contrast, narrates life experiences that are part of Germany’s troubled past. Due to the temporal distance, factual reconstruction becomes more challenging and resorting to fictional details may seem inevitable. Similar to *Der Traum von Olympia*, *Der Boxer* was originally published in comic strips for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, before being turned into a comic book in 2012—which has since been translated into more than 10 languages. *Der Boxer* offers an intricate, multi-layered narrative by combining the personal story of the boxer and Holocaust survivor Hertzko Haft with the historical, collective events of National Socialism. Hertzko grew up in Belchatow (Poland) and from the age of 16 spent

several years in concentration camps, where he managed to survive thanks to his resilience and the protection he received from an SS guard, who selected him to compete as a boxer in show matches organized to entertain SS officers. After excruciating marches from one concentration camp to the next, Hertzko managed to escape and was finally rescued by American soldiers. *Der Boxer* portrays the long-term effects of the Holocaust on Hertzko, who emigrated to the United States and became a professional boxer with the name of Harry Haft, but never overcame the trauma of what he had experienced in Europe. Harry / Hertzko did not share the story of his past with anyone until much later in his life. It is with his promise, “One day I’ll tell you everything” (Kleist 2014, 7), that the graphic biography opens.

Kleist moves between individual story and historical events in a narrative that spans a lifetime. *Der Boxer* is framed by a car trip that Alan Scott Haft and his father Hertzko take during a family vacation in Florida. Hertzko is on a mission to find his young love Leah and forces the son to join him in his endeavor. This frame, narrated from Alan’s perspective, connects the temporal layers of the graphic biography through the figure of Leah, whom Hertzko promises to marry right before he is captured by the Nazis. The first section of the biography is a long flashback of Hertzko’s life from his childhood to the time he spends in concentration camps until his escape and liberation, and his final decision to move to the United States. His life in New York is the focus of the second section, which shows his career as a professional boxer up until the point when the Mafia pressures him into losing what will become his last fight. The third and final section depicts Hertzko’s encounter with Leah, who is the reason why he decides to move to the U.S. in the first place. Leah, now terminally ill, lives in Miami, and Hertzko wishes to see her once again. The work ends with this encounter and a view of Alan and Hertzko on the highway, circularly returning to where it started.

Kleist’s claim of authenticity in drawing Hertzko Haft’s story is already indicated by the book’s subtitle “Die *wahre* Geschichte des Hertzko Haft” (English edition: “The *True* Story of Holocaust Survivor Harry Haft” [my emphasis]). Indeed, to write and draw *Der Boxer*, Kleist made use of different sources available to him. After coming across Alan Scott Haft’s book about his father (Haft 2009), Kleist was unable to grasp how boxing could help anyone survive the Holocaust. Struck by Hertzko’s incredible story, Kleist decided to draw it and contacted Alan to learn more about his father’s life. Thanks to the photographs he received from Alan and the information he was able to collect, Kleist managed to recreate a fact-based graphic version of Hertzko’s life.¹¹ A further gesture towards the historical accuracy of the narrated events is the nine-page report that closes the graphic biography. Written by the sport journalist Martin Krauß, it is titled *Boxing in Concentration Camps* and not only includes details about Hertzko’s life but also reflects on the use of athletic activities as entertainment for the SS in the concentration camps (cf. Kleist 2014, 185-189). The report ends with a list of “Forgotten champions” (ibid., 189-193) including other prisoner-boxers who shared

destinies similar to Hertzko's but who have been forgotten. And yet, the faithfulness of the biography does not apply to every single detail of the narrative. In the case of some characters about whom information or photographs were not available, Kleist can only rely on his imagination. For example, the SS man who protected Hertzko, but whose identity is unknown, is called "Schneider" in the graphic biography (ibid., 187).

Following Alan's account, Kleist creates a character with whom readers may not always sympathize. Hertzko commits various acts of violence, including theft and murder, and he later turns violent and abusive towards his family. Resisting any authorial judgment on these actions, Kleist lets the images and the character speak for themselves. The past leaves marks on Hertzko, and Kleist represents the weight of these life experiences through the facial traits he chooses for the character. In most of the panels that depict Hertzko, we see his face marked by lines that are the result of physical labor (ibid., 61), exhaustion (74), and anger (108). The lines on his face ultimately become part of the character's recognizable features that are also identifiable in the face of Hertzko the father, whose enraged temperament is represented in the graphic biography. Kleist's work is not unique as a Holocaust graphic biography, but, in portraying Hertzko Haft as a tormented figure, who is both a victim and a perpetrator of violence, the work reinforces the difficult moral choices people faced during and after the Holocaust.

Compared to *Der Traum von Olympia*, *Der Boxer* is striking not only for its use of sharp, black lines, but also for the arrangement of panels, which becomes indicative of central moments in the biography. Moving away from the standard nine-panel grid, Kleist experiments with different page layouts such as multiple, unframed panels that recreate the mental space of Hertzko's memories; larger, zoomed-in panels that focus on important events; and twelve- or thirteen-panel pages, in which the abundance of scenes echoes the emotional intensity that is being represented. Indeed, because of the brutality of the events narrated, Kleist uses his style to foreground what he wants to reveal or hide what needs to be obscured or left out. Acts of violence that involve Hertzko are depicted, but their detailed visualization is spared and the reader is tasked with filling in the gaps. For example, readers soon learn that the text "Bang" inserted in the panel corresponds to a shot, but the comic avoids focalizing on the act of killing. Instead, there are instances in which images becomes blurry and the frames of the panels lose their contours to signal moments of extreme horror (ibid., 52). When Hertzko has to work in the crematory in Auschwitz, for example, the horror of what he sees causes a rupture in the narrative. As a consequence of Hertzko's mental breakdown, the narrative goes silent. Black becomes the dominant color except for the white space that allows the reader to see Hertzko's horrified expression.



Fig. 4: Selected panels that depict Hertzko's violent reaction in the crematory (Kleist 2012, 51-52).

Human figures lose their recognizable features and are reduced to either corpses or distorted faces, rendered ghostly through the use of an expressionistic style (51). This scene is particularly important because it will return in the narrative as a nightmare, which torments Hertzko in the years to come (89).¹² Such a style of representation, which uses black colors and different forms of distortion, allows Kleist to hint at the presence of violence in the story while sparing its complete, realistic representation. With its transfiguration, the comics medium manages to hint at the atrocities that Hertzko witnessed without needing to recreate them in detail in the graphic work.

Throughout the graphic biography, Hertzko is represented as an isolated character who fights for his own life, and only when he is reunited with his brother in Jaworzno, the two of them join forces to survive. Because of the continuous fights in which he is forced to compete, his life is represented in opposition to those of other boxers. After one of his victorious fights Hertzko states: "I never thought about the men being killed. Only about surviving" (Kleist 2014, 67). And yet, in spite of this dissociation, one feature that strikes the reader is the abundance of figures and bodies that fill the pages. Almost every panel contains human figures, while very few depict empty spaces. The abundance of bodies hint at the multiplication of identities that stands behind Hertzko's story. In his fierce effort to survive, Hertzko never forgets his family and first love Leah. In the trauma he experiences after being freed and realizing that most of his family members are dead, Hertzko is haunted by their faces. Two larger panels reinforce this idea.



Fig. 5: These two panels (Kleist 2012, 118 and 151) are striking in their similarity. By bringing together multiple faces, Kleist highlights how Hertzko's biography is part of a larger, more complex story.

Included in the second section of the novel, they represent the faces of his past. In the first panel (Kleist 2014, 118), the faces appear as a suffocating nightmare when Hertzko leaves for the United States on a ship and the smell of smoke evokes memories from his past. The faces that emerge from his memory become one with the black smoke of the ship, revealing that his past carries many other stories of people who may have perished, among them Leah. A similar image (*ibid.*, 151) shows Hertzko before his final fight against Rocky Marciano. Hertzko is represented as he walks alongside his parents and Leah towards the

ring, escorted once again by the faces of his past. It is significant that Hertzko will lose this fight, almost as if to suggest that he lets his supporters down. However, while he starts a new life with his wife Miriam in New York, his memories will not cease to haunt him, until he finally meets Leah again and decides to tell the story of his past.

Through his graphic choices and based on the sources at his disposal, Kleist reconstructs Hertzko's life and manages to highlight the traumatic events of his past. By creating a conflicted character in whom the images of a victim and of a perpetrator of violence coexist, Kleist confronts the reader with a complex biography, which mirrors the intricacy of Hertzko's real-life experiences. At the same time, *Der Boxer* shows how Hertzko's personal story cannot be read in isolation but is connected to the destinies of many other people who enter the narrative but remain at the margins. While the focus is on Hertzko, his survival and later life, the protagonist's story becomes only one of many similar destinies.

5. Conclusion: Humanizing Public Figures in Graphic Biographies

Kleist positions his works at the intersection of reality and fiction by creating graphic biographies in which personal narratives, historical representation, and journalism come together. In so doing, *Der Traum von Olympia* and *Der Boxer* demonstrate how comics have the potential to accommodate and creatively re-frame different forms of documentary storytelling. While the mimetic construction and representation of characters anchor them to the reality of their narratives, the set of paratexts included in Kleist's works further hints at the factual connections that the biographies possess. These are, first of all, the stories of Samia Yusuf Omar and Hertzko Haft, whom Kleist depicts as resilient figures that fight through the challenges of their individual stories. Kleist renounces an act of glorification of these figures and highlights instead the tragic experiences that affect their lives. Through the stylistic tools at his disposal the comics artist manages to fill the gaps that these stories inevitably present, while entrusting his audience with the same task as they engage in the act of reading.

And yet, these graphic biographies achieve more than the representation of their protagonists' lives. As this article has shown, Kleist creates figures that, while foregrounding their personal experiences, also draw the attention to similar destinies. By including political and social discourses in the biographies, Kleist opens his works to accommodate more than just one individual life story. Indeed, *Der Traum von Olympia* and *Der Boxer* illustrate stories that are incredible, but not unique. Both the graphic works and the paratexts that complete them support this idea. Ultimately, these graphic biographies suggest how Samia and Hertzko's stories may be the first of a series of unheard biographies that have been relegated to the margins. In its hybrid nature of image and text, fact and fiction, the graphic biography becomes a space of encounter and exchange

where new stories can enter the main narrative. By bringing ‘distant’ figures closer to the readers and giving them a face, biographies in the comics medium visualize and humanize stories that often remain hidden behind facts and historical accounts.

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¹ As part of a multimedia project by the Franco-German television channel ARTE, in 2012, Kleist also worked with Syrian refugee children in the Kawergosk refugee camp in northern Iraq. Kleist organized an art workshop, "as a way of giving something back to the refugee community in return for the chance to be with them and witness their daily lives" (Spindler 2013). A complete list of Reinhard Kleist's works is included on his website (Kleist 2010).

² On November 20, 2018, Kleist shared a few pages from his new work on his Facebook page. Titled *Knock Out!*, it focuses on the life of the professional boxer Emile Griffith.

³ For a contribution on the topic see also Tampubolon (2014).

⁴ It is worth noting that *Der Traum von Olympia* is the first German graphic novel that has been translated into Arabic.

⁵ The original text in German provides a more detailed description of the perilous journeys on which refugees embark as they try to reach Europe: "Beinahe täglich stoßen wir beim Durchblättern der Zeitungen und Notizen, meistens am Rand, dass im Mittelmeer Menschen ertrunken sind, die mit absurd winzigen Schlauchbooten oder völlig überladenen Seelenverkäufern versucht haben, von der afrikanischen Küste aus Europa zu erreichen (Kleist 2015, 5).

⁶ See for example Giuseppe Catozzella's *Non dirmi che hai paura*, published in Italian in 2014 and in English in 2016 (*Don't Tell Me You're Afraid*), which retells the story of Samia Yusuf Omar.

⁷ "[Ich hätte] mir aber niemals träumen lassen, dass die unfassbaren Tragödien, mit denen wir uns bei *borderline europe* beschäftigen, je den Stoff für einen Comic abgeben könnten. Ja, ich hätte die Idee wahrscheinlich ohne weiteres Nachdenken als obszön zurückgewiesen. Bis mir Reinhard die ersten Auszüge seines neuesten Projekts zuschickte und mich um meine Meinung bat" (Kleist 2015, 144).

⁸ All images in this article are used with permission of Carlsen Verlag.

⁹ "Dear Friends, I'm sure you're wondering if I'm disappointed. Beijing was wonderful! It makes no difference that I came in last. So what? Next time I'll do better. That's how you have to think if you want to be a successful athlete. I'm sure that all of my friends and family saw me on TV. I'm really curious to hear what you all have to say when we see each other again" (Kleist 2016a, 19).

¹⁰ At the beginning of *Der Traum von Olympia*, Kleist includes two explanatory notes for the readers, the first being a clarification of Al-Shabaab (cf. Kleist 2015, 6).

¹¹ Kleist discusses the process that led to the completion of *Der Boxer* in a public conversation with Alan Scott Haft that was held at the Goethe-Institut Toronto in 2014.

¹² Another significant example of such a visual-narrative strategy can be found later in the biography, when Hertzko and his brother Peretz, who have been reunited, witness acts of cannibalism in the night. While the reader sees shadows moving among the bed bunks and killing a fellow prisoner, the details are hidden through the use of small panels and by the predominance of the color black (81).