

Writing the Self, Drawing the Self: Identity and Self-Reflexivity in Craig Thompson's Graphic Memoir *Blankets*

La representación verbal y visual del «yo»: Identidad y autorreflexividad en la memoria gráfica *Blankets* de Craig Thompson

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to identify some of the key conventions and narrative patterns that graphic memoirists may use in order to articulate their own sense of identity, and deal with issues of truth, ethics, and representation through visual and verbal combinations. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) serves as a poignant example of the semiotic resources that are relevant to an analysis of the autobiographical comics genre: the inscription of subjectivity and the spatial dimension of temporality. Drawing on Charles Hatfield's critical model (2005), this article examines the various ways graphic narratives mediate identity, enter into (and out of) autobiographical pacts, and «perform» authenticity.

Keywords: Graphic Memoir, Identity, Autobiographical Pact, Self-reflexivity, Authenticity, Craig Thompson.

RESUMEN: Este artículo plantea, como eje argumentativo, la identificación de algunas convenciones genéricas del cómic autobiográfico mediante las cuales se articula la construcción de la identidad y se abordan aspectos relativos a la veracidad, la ética y la representación del «yo» en un medio verbo-visual. La memoria gráfica de Craig Thompson *Blankets* (2003) servirá de base para el análisis de algunos recursos semióticos del género autobiográfico: la representación de la subjetividad y la dimensión espacial de la temporalidad. A partir del modelo crítico postulado por Charles Hatfield (2005), se examina la identidad fragmentada del sujeto autobiográfico, la doble naturaleza del pacto narrativo –verbal y visual– y la noción de autenticidad.

Palabras clave: memoria gráfica, identidad, pacto autobiográfico, autorreflexividad, autenticidad, Craig Thompson.

Graphic life narrative has stretched the boundaries of traditional autobiography. Comics have taken a decidedly autobiographical turn in recent years and triggered innovative criticism that responds to the demands of the complexities of «cross-discursive» texts (Chute and DeKoven, 2006: 769). In *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, American comics theorist Charles Hatfield (2005: 112) acknowledges that autobiography has become «a distinct, indeed crucial, genre in today’s comic books—despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of “nonfiction”». While prose autobiography relies on language to construct the self, in comics autobiography the fragmented self is simultaneously created and communicated in distinctive ways and in different semiotic realms. Graphic life narrative requires that we explore other elements just as important as the verbal mode in order to convey meaning to the reader. Here, text is approached as «texture» (Whitlock and Poletti, 2008: v), including linguistic, visual and spatial modes of meaning-making, as well as audio and gestural elements (Jacobs, 2008: 64-68; Jacobs and Dolmage, 2012: 73).

The juxtaposition of verbal memoir and cartoon self-images offers a unique way for the artist to articulate his or her own sense of identity. The Canadian comics theorist Bart Beaty (2007: 164) argues in *Unpopular Culture* that «the ability to move between representational and subjective modes [...] situates the play of reality and subjectivity as central to the autobiographical project». Graphic memoir, or autography,¹ inherently foregrounds in its dual form—the

1. In current critical usage, the term «memoir» designates a story *from* life, whereas «autobiography» is defined as the story *of* a life (Barrington, 2002: 20; El Refaie, 2012: 4). Memoir is thus expected to «depict the lives of real, not imagined, individuals» (Couser, 2012: 15). «Life writing» typically refers to all kinds of personal narratives, including letters, diaries, confessions, oral history, and travel writing (Adams, 2000). Other current labels for the genre are: «autographics», a term coined by Gillian Whitlock (2006) after Leigh Gilmore’s groundbreaking 1994 study; «autographic memoir», adopted by Julia Watson (2008) and Anna Poletti (2008); «autography», a term employed by Jared Gardner (2008); «graphic life writing», used by Herman (2011) and «graphic novel memoir» by Chaney (2011 a); «periautography», which translates as «writing about or around the self» (Olney, 1998: xv), and Lynda Barry’s hybrid neologism «autobifictionalography» (2002: 7). As Whitlock and Poletti explain, «the term [autographics] deliberately signals its progenitors within itself: biography, autobiography,

writing of the self and the drawing of the self—the tension between «the losses and glosses of memory and subjectivity» and «the act of self-representation» (Gardner, 2008: 6). Autography is a good term for Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), which addresses the complex nature of an evolving self and the externalization of the past, using the multimodal form of comics.²

Graphic narratives inscribe autobiographical experience, mediate identity, and «perform» authenticity through visual and verbal combinations. Thompson's autography is such a text, a memoir about memory and acts of storytelling. *Blankets* is an intimate coming-of-age story of his childhood and adolescence in a small town in the American Midwest. The narrative is an autobiographical account of his evangelical upbringing, sexual awakening and loss of faith in an orthodox Christian environment. As a *bildungsroman*, *Blankets* deals with emotional and intellectual growth, and the complexities of determining one's identity while trying to break free from parental influence.³

1. Narrativizing the self

For a long time, critical writing about autobiography focused on texts by «great men» and was dominated by essentialist notions of a unique, rational and coherent self (Gusdorf, 1980: 35). More recently, however, this concept of unified «identity across time» has been critiqued by theorists of autobiography who claim that the androcentric formulation of these consciously constructed narratives limits the scope of autobiographical studies to the perspective of white, upper class men and excludes those of different ethnic groups, social classes, or genders: «anyone's life story could now lay claim to being equally worthy and intrinsically interesting» (El Refaie, 2012: 15). In their discussions of such texts, some scholars argue that we continually construct our identities through narrative as a way to deal with the discontinuity of our lives. Narrativization is thus the way we re-order our experiences and make them coherent through the stories

autobiographics» (2008: vii). Graphic memoir belongs to «the spectrum of «out-law» genres of autobiography» (Pedri, 2013: 127).

2. All images in this article are used for research purposes and belong to their copyright holders. They are used under the general rule of academic fair use, as it is a visual art form that is researched in CLR (an open-access, non-profit academic journal).
3. Craig Thompson's graphic memoir *Blankets* attracted several comics awards in 2004: the Eisner Award for Best Writer and Best Graphic Album, and three Harvey Awards for Best Artist, Best Cartoonist and Best Graphic Album of original work.

we tell ourselves and others (Jacobs, 2008: 71). These, in turn, are conveyed via different media and shaped to a considerable degree by the expressive resources associated with a given semiotic environment. The medium-specificity of stories is an aspect that bears crucially on autobiographical discourse in general: «the way any given narrative derives at least part of its meaning or effect from the medium in which it is told» (Herman, 2011: 231).

The genre of autobiography itself underwent radical change in the middle of the twentieth century, as the canonical concepts of singular truth and unique selfhood, stable across time, gave way to a view of the self as fractured and tacitly plural. As Betty Bergland rightly observes, «the autobiographical subject must be understood as socially and historically constructed and multiply positioned in complex worlds and discourses» (1994: 131). Directly addressing the question of the fluidity of self-identity, Paul John Eakin contends that «narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience» so that «the writing of autobiography is properly understood as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part» (1999: 100). Since then, autobiography has gradually included previously marginalized voices and matched the realities of current production, publishing or consumption, favored by changes in the literary marketplace (Gilmore, 2001: 16-17).

For autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune, the explicit connection of the author, narrator and protagonist entails «a referential pact» with the reader (1975: 14). This nominal identity, established in the text itself or in the paratext, implies a tacit agreement between author and reader that safeguards the veracity of the text «insofar as it circumscribes the reality it seeks to render as well as the degree of resemblance it aspires to» (De Bloois, 2007: n. p.). According to Lejeune, it is this textual criterion that distinguishes autobiographies from first-person fictional narratives. In these texts, in parallel with autobiographies, the narrating I (the self who tells) can be viewed as a later incarnation of the experiencing I (the self told about), but in contrast with autobiographical accounts, in fictional narratives the narrator's claims about events he or she experienced earlier dispel the possibility of any truthful self-portrait (Herman, 2011: 232-233). Lejeune (1989) argues that once the reader has grasped this central self-referential gesture, he or she will orient differently to narratives that make a claim to fact—that is, to life stories that are emotionally truthful to the way authors perceive and remember their lives: «autobiography should thus be seen as a mode of reading rather than simply as a way of writing» (El Refaie, 2012: 17). Lejeune emphasizes that the question of truth-value must be assessed in relation not only to veracity but also to sincerity. In his discus-

sion of textual autobiography, Lejeune makes a distinction between identity, the extra-textual presence of the author as a name on the cover (the «factual» basis of the pact), and resemblance, «a secondary aspect», arguing that the authenticity of a first-person account admits distortion, forgetfulness, or even lying (1975: 39-40). Michael Sheringham argues that Lejeune's referential pact does not imply «any specific kind of relationship» between the textual «I» and its extra-textual counterpart (1993: 20). The subject of autobiography, he asserts, is a textual self, constructed in language and shaped into narrative, a form of othering that sacrifices authenticity: «a hybrid, a fusion of past and present, self and other, document and desire, referential and textual, *énoncé* and *énonciation*—not a product but a process» (Sheringham, 1993: 21).

2. The autobiographical self in visual-verbal narratives

The notion of autobiographic authenticity in the comics medium applies not only to verbal narration but also to visual representations. On the one hand, the idea of truth telling, which stands at the center of autobiography, raises expectations in the reader of a privileged relationship between a narrative and the life it claims to represent. On the other hand, readers tend to accept in comics the subjective, mediated nature of reality, partly shaped by their experiences and expectations of how the world is presented in this medium (Versaci, 2007: 74). Graphic memoirs do not generally claim to offer a mimetic representation of the world, but rather an interpretation of the events as they are subjectively perceived by the artist (Fig. 1). The visual style of graphic memoirists often draws its power less from its faithful rendition of reality than from the indexical traces it seems to offer about the artist's genuine characteristics: «although readers are on one level acutely aware that graphic memoirs are always about personal interpretation, not historical facts, there can be something uniquely «real» about such an openly subjective worldview, particularly when it is presented within a coherent narrative» (El Refaie, 2010: 172). The medium of comics has a variety of ways of suffusing the image with emotion. Conscious or unconscious elements of mental life conveyed in comics autobiography, such as thoughts, emotions and dreams, can only be communicated implicitly through facial expressions or the use of abstract symbolism.



Figure 1. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 571. © 2003 Craig Thompson

Wrapped up with the question of «truth» is the relationship between drawing style and iconic resemblance in graphic memoirs. In autobiographical comics, the identity of the author, narrator and character is established verbally (in the text and sometimes in the paratext). In a medium where the textual self is represented visually, however, the notion of physical resemblance is an important signal of authenticity: the comics reader is likely to judge an author's sincerity from his or her spoken words and actions, and seek further evidence of identity in the form of a visual equivalence between the drawn character and the extratextual author. Some artists are concerned to give shape to an

inner sense of self more than to outward features, while others avoid grappling directly with the question of physical likeness by drawing themselves and their entourage as animals. Resemblance is, though, a matter of degree (Miller, 2011: 243). A comics artist's self-portrait can be highly realistic or deliberately ironic, with some comics creators even reverting to self-caricature. Such cartoon drawings can reflect the authentic self and convey effectively the characters' traits and shifting states and emotions. As Hatfield (2005: 117) observes, «the crux of the matter is the way the cartoonist chooses among expressive conventions to create a cartoon «likeness» (more accurately, sign) that conforms to his/her inward sense of self».

In social semiotic theory (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 160-62), the concept of visual modality refers to the degree to which any kind of visual representation (works of art, drawings, photographs, advertisements) best reflects the truth as image producers and observers see it with their own eyes. The dominant standard by which visual modality is judged in Western societies is a form of naturalism that assesses reality on the basis of how much an image resembles what one would ordinarily see with the naked eye. Visual modality is thus seen to reside primarily in particular stylistic features, or «modality markers», which act as reliable cues to the truth of visual representations: the presence or absence of background and depth, light and shadow, saturation and modulation, color differentiation, brightness, and the degree of detail rendered. In contrast to visual modality, the concept of authenticity, developed by German media scholars (Wortmann, 2003), offers an alternative approach to the relationship between representations and reality. They place more emphasis on the performed element of truthfulness than on picture-immanent stylistic features. In their view, the authenticity of an image is based not so much on the properties of a text (lifelike images), but rather «on its apparent indexical referentiality» (El Refaie, 2010: 168). In the case of graphic memoirs, truthfulness does not increase with levels of stylistic visual naturalism; the mediated role of the artist is always foregrounded, which means that such works are never regarded as faithful renditions of reality. Instead, their authenticity is linked to the subjective perception of the artist and is partly shaped by the conventions and expectations surrounding the production and consumption of a particular genre:

Autobiographical comics are an excellent example of a genre that relies primarily on producer-oriented forms of authenticity, where the claimed special relationship between the representation and reality is linked to the performed integrity of the comic artist, [...] who is very aware of and makes no attempt

to hide the fact that all representation necessarily involves selection, perspective and interpretation. (El Refaie, 2010: 171, 165)

The visual presence of the autobiographical subject (explicitly stylized as a cartoon persona and drawn anew in each panel) both intensifies and complicates self-representation when transposed to the field of comics: the multiple and fragmented nature of identity is foregrounded even more. Douglas Wolk (2007: 21) claims that «cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception». Hatfield argues that the artist's core identity cannot be represented in autobiographical comics because of the display of successive, and multiple, versions of the drawn self that challenge the notion of the subject as a finished essence and dismantle the concept of a singular truth:

[S]elf-assertion of the author rests on the plasticity of his self-image, on his awareness of the slipperiness of individual identity. The core identity [...] is precisely what *cannot* be represented, and it is this very lack that, ironically, prompts the project of self-representation. If this constitutive absence underlies autobiography in general, it becomes especially clear in the form of comics, where a series of discrete images, each one substituting for the one before it, represents sequence and continuity. The syntax of comics—specifically, its reliance on visual substitution to suggest continuity—puts the lie to the notion of an unchanging, undivided self, for in the breakdowns of comics we see the self (in action over a span of time) represented by *multiple* selves. [...] The representation of time through space, and the fragmentation of space into contiguous images, argue for the changeability of the individual self—the possibility that our identities may be more changeable, or less stable, than we care to imagine. (Hatfield, 2005: 126)

The medium of comics escapes the difficulties outlined by Elizabeth Bruss (1980: 297) in a controversial article in which she claimed that film ontologically precludes the subjective self-awareness of autobiography and «forbids that the same person can be both the figure on the screen and the one whose consciousness is registering that figure». Charles Hatfield (2005: 117) argues that the impersonal cinematic eye, a further concern for Bruss, is replaced by a subjective vision, traced on the paper by the artist's hand (visual «graphiator»), and asserts that «visual narrative tends to dismantle the first-person point of view, dividing the person seeing from the person seen». Within the limitations of this dualistic approach, Hatfield (2005: 115) enumerates the salient differences between comics autobiography and text-based autobiography:

The cartoon self-image, then, seems to offer a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity. [...] *Seeing* the protagonist or narrator, in the context of other characters and objects evoked in the drawings, objectifies him or her. Thus the cartoonist projects and objectifies his or her inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance. It is the graphic exploitation of this duality that distinguishes autobiography in comics from most autobiography in prose. Unlike first-person narration, which works from the inside out, describing events as experienced by the teller, cartooning ostensibly works *from the outside in*, presenting events from an (imagined) position of objectivity, or at least distance.

This dichotomy—sense of intimacy (emotional *expressivity*) and self-distance (outward *impression*)—is essential to the construction of an autobiographical self, since «all self-narration is about time and [moral] self-distance» (Currie, 2007: 100). In graphic memoir, however, the mediated and iconic nature of the testimony highlights the split between autographer («person seeing») and autobiographical subject («person seen»), allowing the narrator to be both the detached observer and the victim of grief (observed). In the comics form, the disjunction between autographer and narrated subject (cartoon persona) «is etched on every page, and the hand-crafted nature of the images and the «autobiofictional» nature of the narrative are undeniable» (Gardner, 2008: 12). In *Blankets*, we sometimes do not see what Craig is seeing, but we see Craig himself (Fig. 2), in the visual equivalent of a third-person narrative: «[d]ivorced from overtly first-person gestures in textual captions, I-cons remain visual objects of consumption for readers. [...] They are always on view, being viewed rather than merely revealing the view» (Chaney, 2011b: 23-24).



Figure 2. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 135. © 2003 Craig Thompson

One of the most striking features of autobiography in graphic narratives is the tension between the style of the text and that of the drawings, which offers «a constant visual reminder of the hand of the illustration artist, much more so than the writer's traces» (Carney, 2008: 195). Following Philippe Marion (1993), Jan Baetens argues that the enunciation in graphic narratives is both verbal and visual and that these two conflicting registers (words and images) do not encompass the same impression of objectivity and subjectivity (Carney 2008: 83). In the stylistic features of comics—lines, contours, colors, drawings, calligraphy—the reader discovers the traces of «graphiation», the idiosyncratic gesture which produced the drawing (Baetens, 2001: 147). Consequently, the visual performance of the autobiographical pact may be a more important signal of authenticity than its verbal equivalent: «it would seem, then, that the pact can be both visually and verbally realized in autobiographical *bande dessinée*, which allows not only for the identification of the extratextual model with the drawn character as the source of the dialogue in speech balloons, but also with both the verbal narrator of voice-overs and the graphiator responsible for graphic line, composition, framing, and layout» (Miller, 2011: 244-45). Graphic memoirs often include many metarepresentative panels showing the character-narrator at the drawing board or the metonym of the artist's drawing hand (Fig. 3), which create a «self-portrait effect» (Lejeune, 1983: 137-40). As Carney (2008: 196) rightly observes, many «alternative» comics artists «infuse their work with a sense of the handmade and personal that deliberately evokes the «subartistic» and «amateurish» as a means of endowing an aura of the authentic and personal to the image and to the narrative voice of the comic».

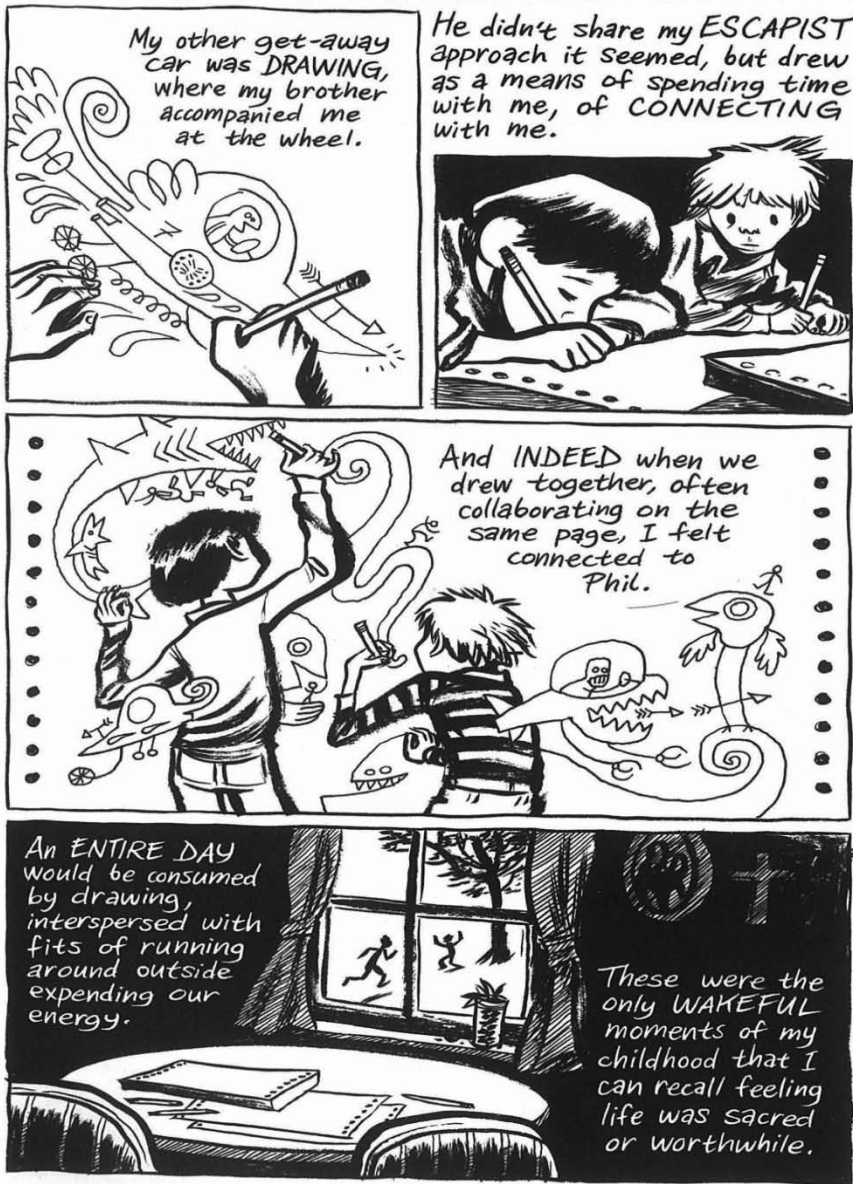


Figure 3. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 44. © 2003 Craig Thompson

Hatfield (2005: 127) argues that «truth» in comics autobiography is «a matter of craft as well as honesty». Cartoonists often invoke a strategy of self-referentiality, or «ironic authentication», which he defines as «the implicit reinforcement of truth through their explicit rejection» (Hatfield, 2005: 125). This self-reflexive dimension highlights the constructed nature of the text and the autobiographical self: a subversion of the pact that paradoxically cements it by making demands on the reader's sophistication. A new sense of truthfulness can be created by deliberately foregrounding the artificiality of all representation. Thompson's graphic memoir becomes self-referential through references to the act of creation, thereby inviting readers into complicity. This ironic refraction constantly renegotiates the compact between the reader and the artist. In this metapanel (Fig. 4), Thompson draws on the comics' mode of representation, i. e., the patterned square of fabric has the same structure as the square panels ordered in sequence on the comics page. The images work as windows into the fictional world. What readers see in the panel images on the comics page are characters and depictions of events. Graphic narratives that draw such attention to their own conventions metanarrate themselves, i. e., they explore the comics medium and the possibilities of comics storytelling (Nöth, 2007; Grishakova, 2010). In his article on self-reflexivity in comics, Thierry Groensteen (1990: 163) classifies this instance as a «metaphorisation of the code». Along similar lines, W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 48) argues that comics become self-reflexive when «[meta]pictures show themselves in order to know themselves: they stage the "self-knowledge" of pictures».



Figure 4. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 183. © 2003 Craig Thompson

3. The circularity of mind time

Most scholars now recognize that recollections of the past «cannot escape the historicity of our gaze and our interests» and that «truth» in autobiographical narratives «becomes more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning of the past than of a historically correct representation or verisimilitude» (Kerby, 1991: 31, 7). All forms of life writing entail a degree of interpretation of the past through the filter of memory, which is not limited to the storage and retrieval of past moments. Rather, the work of memory involves a highly complex process of selection and reconstruction, at a subconscious level, of past events that were originally separate in time and space, and that may be recalled voluntarily or evoked involuntarily by a place, a smell, a word, an image, or a strain of music. Painful events are often remembered in the form of vague associative impressions and fragments of narrative. These unstructured recollections acquire a particular sequence and duration when they are «organized, integrated, and apprehended as a specific «set» of events only in and through the very act by which we narrate them as such» (Herrnstein Smith, 2004: 109). It is this experience of subjective time, with its gaps, circularities, substitutions and obsessions, that graphic memoirists want to recreate in the minds of individual readers. Serge Doubrovsky (1988) also recognizes the principle of the psychoanalytic cure in life narratives: the truth of the subject is transferred unto the *other*—the reader—who acts as therapist (Fig. 5). Autobiography is thus «a deliberate and self-conscious act of *communication*», whereby the events of a person's life are reconstructed and made public in order to be shared with their readers (El Refaie, 2012: 100).



Figure 5. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 59. © 2003 Craig Thompson

Narrative theory has explored exhaustively the presentification of the past through the themes of memory and the reliability of the narrator. In Part Three of *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur (1990) distinguishes between tales *of time* (time as a universal feature of narrative) and tales *about time* (narratives that explore the theme of time and the temporal logic of storytelling). For Ricoeur, the distinction is crucial for the so-called *Zeitroman*—Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*—because it is the conflict between psychic time, or internal duration (*la durée*), and clock time that is at stake in these narratives. Mark Currie's study of narrative temporality challenges Ricoeur's dichotomy on the basis that «narratives are often not only *about time*, but they are *about about time*, that is, on the subject of the backwards motion of time» (Currie, 2007: 4-5). Autobiography involves a process of moving forward in time by working backwards into the author's past, which produces a tension between the linearity of clock time and the circularity of mind time (Fig. 6).

The process of turning memory fragments into stories often entails a certain measure of self-reflexivity and irony in comics autobiography. As Janet Varner Gunn (1982: 140) rightly observes, autobiography is a performance, a game—a social act that calls for a «plural, not singular, reflexivity». Craig Thompson's *Blankets* ends with the main character's interior monologue (Fig. 7), a self-conscious reflection on the nature of writing about past events and on the nature of writing about them: «How satisfying it is», he thinks, «to leave a mark on a blank surface. | To make a map of my movement, | no matter how temporary» (2003: 581-82). Thompson's meta-narrative strategy increases the reader's awareness of the mediating role of the artist by deliberately foregrounding the artificiality of all representation. The last two pages show a small caption per panel, which renders the thoughts of the main character, Craig, who is in this scene by himself: «*Blankets* presents its final scene in full awareness of how things like “silence”, “privacy”, and a feeling of “meditation” are not naturally given but effected by conventions in comics representation» (Stevens, 2009: n. p.). This verbo-visual strategy paradoxically creates a sense of truthfulness, as Hatfield's concept of 'ironic authentication' suggests: «a show of honesty by denying the very possibility of being honest» (Hatfield, 2005: 125).



Figure 6. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 341. © 2003 Craig Thompson



Figure 7. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 581. © 2003 Craig Thompson

4. Experiential time in the graphic memoir

In the structuralist-narratological vocabulary so influentially developed by Gérard Genette (1988), discourse-time, or time of narration, refers to the temporal qualities of events as they are presented in written narratives, whereas story-time, or narrated time, designates the temporal order or chronology of events in a story. As Genette (1988: 33) himself acknowledges, discourse time in written narratives derives its pseudo-temporality from its reading, only in an act of performance, whether oral or silent: «the written narrative exists in space as space, and the time needed for «consuming» it is the time needed for crossing or traversing it, like a road or a field» (1988: 34).

One of the main weaknesses of Genette's approach is his understanding of time as a measurable sequence of events of a particular duration that can then be rearranged in a story. More recently, narrative scholars have begun to challenge traditional conceptions of narrative time. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2004), for instance, disputes the notion that story-time exists independently of its narration. She argues that events acquire a particular sequence and duration in and through their telling. Readers of a narrative, she observes, are encouraged to infer a particular sense of temporality from the storyworld, based on shared expectations regarding the conventions of genre, style and language. Cognitive narratologist David Herman is also critical of the structuralist account of narrative time. He suggests that some narratives are characterized by a «fuzzy» representation of the temporality of painful events as they are reshaped by memory in order to draw attention to the «always unfinished work of memorialization» (Herman, 2002: 232).

The young Craig experiences himself as an outsider due to his intense religiosity and artistic talents. Emotional abuse from both parents and teachers and sexual abuse by a babysitter compound his sense of alienation. At school, his teacher humiliates him publicly for writing a scatological poem about his abuser, «an eight-page poem about people eating excrement» (Thompson, 2003: 27). At home, Craig and his brother are molested by a male babysitter, an experience that gives the adolescent Craig a horror of his own body: «since a child, I was always DISPLACED from my body» (Thompson, 2003: 291).

In *Blankets*, the flashbacks of certain episodes from Craig's childhood are triggered by objects or thoughts. In one sequence, the autodiegetic narrator recalls an earlier memory of his abusive babysitter. The narration has returned to the events that took place in the English class (Fig. 8), but Craig's memory of how he failed to protect his little brother from sexual abuse is recurrent. The spatial nature of the comics medium makes it possible «to spatially juxtapose

(and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page» (Chute, 2008: 453). The tension between the linearity of clock time and the circularity of mind time is experienced as a kind of «aporia» (Currie, 2007: 92).



Figure 8. Craig Thompson, from *Blankets*, (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003) p. 32. © 2003 Craig Thompson

This scene shows the fluid time structures that characterize life narratives and the «fuzzy» temporality of traumatic events anchored in different chronological frameworks.⁴ It also demonstrates how readers are encouraged to infer a sequence of events that is not already given as part of the process of engagement with a narrative. This visual technique is used by graphic memoirists «to capture the unique qualities of traumatic memory, which involves the intrusion of the past into the present in the form of repeated flashbacks, hallucinations, and dreams» (El Refaie, 2012: 129).

There is a common misconception that comics can always be read more quickly than textual literature. In fact, some people may find the task of reading comics very challenging and time-consuming, particularly if they are not used to the medium. Marianne Hirsch (2004) adopts the term «biocularity» to draw attention to the distinctive dual opposition between visual and verbal text that occurs in graphic narratives. This double vision articulates the relationship «between the seeable and the sayable» in the comics medium (Mitchell, 1996: 47). Craig Thompson's graphic memoir presents a rounded depiction of the author himself, «in the form of a self-referential character to be seen and heard throughout the work» (Mitchell, 2012: 205). Texts such as *Blankets* are complex in the way they deal with the construction of identity and issues of truth, ethics, and representation.

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4. Throughout his memoir, Thompson relies on what David Herman has called «distributed temporality»: Craig's narrating 'I' is marked clearly as extradiegetic (outside of the first-order storyworld), while the narration of some stories from within the first-order storyworld can be attributed to young Craig's experiencing 'I' (which in turn becomes an intradiegetic narrating 'I').

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