

Markus Oppolzer

Reading Autobiographical  
Comics: A Framework for  
Educational Settings



This book updates reader-response criticism as the foundation of aesthetic reading in the classroom by bringing it in line with cognitive theories in literary studies and linguistics. With the help of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's conceptual integration theory, which shares a surprising number of correspondences with Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*, it is possible to flesh out the latter's model of narrative meaning-making. In turn, this allows for a consistent reader-response approach to the medium of comics and auto/biography as one of its dominant genres. The fragmentation of comics narratives, but also of human lives and identities, requires such a theory that can explain how different perspectives and experiences can be blended into an experiential whole.

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## Reading Autobiographical Comics: A Framework for Educational Settings

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# Introduction

My original intention for this book was to provide a practical guide to teaching comics in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, based on a series of university courses on visual literacy, comics and picture books. However, this hands-on approach soon required major adjustments and made me reconsider a number of basic premises that I had taken for granted. The main challenge was not so much a lack of interesting ideas or useful activities, which are widely available (cf. e.g. Cary 2004: 70–156), but a concept of how to frame teaching sequences and integrate tasks in such a way that they serve a particular purpose, depending on the stage of transaction with a literary text. Reader-response approaches, which are introduced in part 1, require such a gradual transition from first, subjective impressions to a more profound (personal) understanding of a narrative, for which the usual pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading phases did not provide enough overall structure. Therefore, I adapted existing multi-step approaches to reading and developed a procedure in seven stages, which is introduced in part 2 of this thesis. It combines extensive reading in between lessons with intensive reading tasks for the classroom that encourage an ongoing dialogue with the text, but especially amongst students.

Another important adjustment was a greater focus on genre. The ubiquity of autobiographical material in alternative comics is undeniable, as evidenced by the most widely discussed and popular texts, such as Art Spiegelman's *MAUS*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. It seemed inappropriate to merely highlight the medium's unique narrative features without addressing the key concerns of its two major genres, superheroes and autobiography, which are singled out in Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith and Paul Levitz's *The Power of Comics* as requiring special attention (cf. 2015: 191–227; 229–62). Both have histories, influence creative choices and shape readers' expectations. Accordingly, the last part of this study is dedicated to 'autographics', Gillian Whitlock's term for autobiographical work in the comics medium (cf. 2006), which is ideally suited to address questions of authenticity, representation and fluid identities.

Over the years, it has become feasible to base a reader-response approach to graphic literature on related theories in comics studies (cf. e.g. McCloud 1994; Hatfield 2005; Groensteen 2007; Kukkonen 2013b; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015), but this necessitates a patchwork of texts that lacks overall coherence. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* seems to deliver all the key elements in

a neat package, but students tend to mistake his ideas and classifications for iron rules. While there *are* traces of a cognitive approach based on gestalt psychology (cf. 1994: 62–4), including his famous concept of ‘closure’ (cf. 1994: 66–9), his classification of panel transitions (cf. 1994: 70–4) is simply inadequate as an explanation of how readers make sense of comics. The biggest misconception is his insistence on a strictly linear reading path, which he associates with the arrangement of panels on the page (1994: 106/1–2). Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics*, which is much more compatible with a cognitive approach, confuses students with its highly idiosyncratic terminology, which makes Karin Kukkonen’s *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (2013b) the best compromise between accessibility and a reader-response orientation. Thus, part 4 of this thesis developed out of the necessity to integrate these diverse strands into a more consistent theory.

Since the canon of suitable literary texts for the classroom has been substantially extended (cf. e.g. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 39–50), there is the promise of transferable skills and competences that students acquire in one context and apply to another. While comics literacy involves a lot more than a transfer of concepts from prose or film studies, many of the practical questions that teachers have to face appear to be the same, such as the selection of texts, their meaningful integration into (thematic) lessons, general curricular aims, basic types of activities or reader-response criticism as the foundation of student-centred interactions with literary texts. Yet, students are genuinely surprised when they read Louise M. Rosenblatt’s “The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response” (1982) for the first time and discover that there is a difference between reading comprehension as a skill, aesthetic reading as an experience and narratological analysis as a largely formalist approach to literature. Certainly, they have heard about reader-response criticism, but they have never made a connection to their future profession. So ingrained is their conviction that reading is a language skill that has to be trained and tested, that a focus on the personal responses of readers is met with a healthy amount of scepticism at first. Years of academic training have put an end to their natural inclination to share their subjective experiences, which is clearly an asset for the composition of literary essays, but may turn into an obstacle when asked to inspire students to read.

Reading, it turns out, can be a misleading term, almost as multifaceted as the personal pronoun ‘I’ in autobiography, as it encompasses very different experiences and circumstances. A small child looking at picture books for fun engages in a different activity than a teenager reading young adult fiction for its themes, a university student studying Shakespeare for class, a parent reading to a child in the evening, a patient looking at magazines at the dentist’s, or a university professor perusing a literary classic in preparation for a lecture. Reading

is strongly contextualised and purpose-driven, but in this thesis it is treated as an experience above all else. When Werner Delanoy reminds his readers that he considers “Reader-Response Criticism (RRC) as a Starting Position” (2015: 21) for an engagement with literature in the classroom, I interpret this as a clarion call rather than a declaration of the obvious. Louise M. Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Michael Benton or even Lothar Bredella may become outdated or even forgotten rather sooner than later, as their ideas are insufficiently compatible with testable skills and competences. What does reading as an experience and a process mean then for contemporary teaching?

I had to go back to the roots and rediscover reader-response criticism and its pedagogical implications for myself, especially to clarify how the different forms of reading interact in the classroom. Accordingly, the first part of this book is dedicated to an exploration of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and Iser’s reading model. Yet, the roots run deeper than the 1970s, which required a contextualisation of their books in view of John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*. Instead of historicising and particularising national schools of reader-response criticism, my main focus is going to be on the overarching principles. At first, it seemed counterintuitive to explore aesthetic reading in such broad terms when the title of this book suggests a narrow focus on autobiographical comics, but, fortunately, there is a deep connection between Iser’s model of reading and comics studies. At one point in *The Act of Reading* he describes the gaps in a narrative in the following way: “Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole network of possible connections which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning” (1980: 196). What may seem overtly metaphorical and elusive in the context of prose, is directly visible in comics. Even staunch defenders of classical narratology have to explain how readers make sense of what looks like a series of fragments on the page. Approaching existing comics scholarship with a potential link to reader-response criticism in mind produces more than just circumstantial evidence. In *The System of Comics* Groensteen directly credits Iser (cf. 2007: 114), which is only fair, as ‘iconic solidarity’ and ‘braiding’ are applications of Iser’s reading model to comics. Charles Hatfield’s ‘art of tensions’ (cf. 2005: 32–67) is equally inspired by Iser, whose *The Act of Reading* forms the conceptual basis of *Alternative Comics* (cf. 2005: xiii–xiv). Last but not least, Scott McCloud’s ‘closure’ and his typology of panel transitions reveal certain commonalities with Iser’s theory through gestalt psychology. Thus, it became necessary to ‘update’ reader-response criticism and build a bridge between Iser and comics studies via cognitive approaches to literature, especially Theory of Mind. This undertaking became the basis for the third part.

However, it was not Theory of Mind that provided the necessary building blocks, but cognitive linguistics and especially Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. As I shall argue throughout, Iser's gestalt-forming and conceptual integration theory are uncannily similar in their basic tenets. Working on an integrated theory was facilitated by Catherine Emmott's *Narrative Comprehension* and Barbara Dancygier's *The Language of Stories*, which directly applies blending theory to the study of literature. Thus, I discovered a more productive application of a reader-response approach to comics in cognitive linguistics than in Theory of Mind, which is hampered by a computational model of cognition and seems too entangled with classical narratology. Most cognitive linguists, however, have fully embraced embodied cognition and their theories remain unburdened by the heritage of literary studies. In the context of comics, this can be a good thing, as transmedial narratologists are tempted to rely too closely on concepts familiar from prose or film. To couch my claim in more precise terms: for a meaningful approach to comics as a narrative medium, cognitive linguistics and multimodal analysis are more productive than classical narratology. I develop this argument further in part 4.

As *The Way We Think* offers such a substantial contribution to reader-response criticism and comics studies on a conceptual level, I noticed a rapid integration of more and more theories into what Dancygier would call a "mega-blend" (2012: 56). This might provoke resistance from colleagues who would like to keep these theories neatly apart. I found an unlikely ally in Herbert Grabes, whose article "Encountering People through Literature" draws parallels between reader-response criticism and recent offerings in cognitive (literary) studies. Commenting on the latter in a somewhat polemical manner he observes that "the novelty seems to consist foremost in the change of vocabulary" (2008: 131) and that Alan Palmer's claim to a new approach to reading characters "shows that he was not sufficiently aware of the research that had already been done" (2008: 133). Indeed, there is a tendency in cognitive approaches to literature to add a passing reference to reader-response criticism, but then present some of its key tenets as supposedly new discoveries. Still, cognitive approaches have made substantial progress, such as conceptual integration theory in direct comparison to Iser's gestalt-forming, which warrants a detailed comparison in itself. Since some of the central concerns in teaching literature and culture are also cognitive in nature, such as empathy and perspective-taking, I include a discussion of these concepts in part 3, which is meant to produce greater coherence across the entire book and strengthen the close ties between (cognitive) literary theories and the practical teaching of literature in educational settings.

Looking at the finished text of this study, it seems ironic that the initial impetus was to address practical problems in the classroom, which is now only evident in part 2, where I promote a procedure of reading literary texts with students in seven stages. Therefore, it was important to explain how this book evolved and why its table of contents covers many concepts that do not seem to blend easily. In the following, I present the five major parts in a more systematic fashion. At the end of this introduction I address a few practical concerns, such as my approach to citation.

Part 1 introduces basic tenets of reader-response criticism. John Dewey's *Art as Experience* may appear to be an arbitrary starting point, as he refers back to significant developments in the nineteenth century: Dewey quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comments on the active involvement of readers (cf. 2005: 3–4), frequently refers to William James's psychology (cf. 2005: 58, 75, 95, 124, 128, 175, 214–15, 218, 225) and uses both French impressionism and expressionism as illustrations of a keen interest in capturing the immediate experiences of sense impressions (cf. 2005: 73–75, 86, 89, 133). In short, I could trace experientiality further back than *Art as Experience*, but for most of the theories presented in this study Dewey is an important cornerstone, in certain instances even the Rosetta Stone through which seemingly disparate discourses become comparable and translatable into each other's terms. Louise M. Rosenblatt based her transactional theory directly on his philosophy and defended Dewey's position throughout the various editions of *Literature as Exploration*, originally published in 1938, and especially in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* against narrow-minded formalist approaches (cf. 1994: 4, 15). I refrain from a detailed analysis of Wolfgang Iser's theories in isolation or within their immediate intellectual context in favour of highlighting the obvious correspondences to Dewey and Rosenblatt. Both Ben De Bruyn's *Wolfgang Iser: A Companion* and Robert C. Holub's *Reception Theory* are excellent introductory discussions of Iser's place in reader-response criticism in general and the type of reception theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) as developed at the University of Constance in particular (cf. Holub 2010: 82–106). This also includes the significant influence of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics (cf. 2010: 36–45) and Roman Ingarden's phenomenology (cf. 2010: 14, 22–9) on his work, and of all the major critical debates it triggered (cf. De Bruyn 2012: 97–100). Instead, I choose to foreground his indebtedness to Dewey (cf. Iser 1980: 132–3, 142) and Ernst Gombrich (cf. 1980: 14, 90–1, 119–20, 124, 127). I treat Iser's model as an important precursor to cognitive (literary) studies and comics theory, which guides my selection of concepts and ideas throughout part 1. This includes a comparison of Iser's 'consistency-building' (cf. 1980: 18) and Daniel Kahneman's description of 'System 1' operations as

very fast, subconscious mental processes, in contrast to more effortful, conscious noticing ('System 2') (cf. Kahneman 2012: 20–5). I use this distinction as a shorthand throughout this book to emphasise the difference between reading as a flow experience and as a form of analysis. Iser's model is more complex than presented in these pages, but it became necessary to find a compromise between an acknowledgement of its intricacies and maintaining the overall momentum of the argument as well as facilitating comparability across theories. It is also possible that readers of this book are not familiar with one or several of the larger contexts I work with, which means that the introductory nature of what I am going to present is equally in service of readability.

The second part discusses the practical consequences of embracing aesthetic reading in educational settings, especially the roles of students and teachers in the literature classroom. To facilitate reading as a process, I present a model in seven stages (based on Michael Benton) that takes students from first impressions via pair and group work to more guided rereading tasks across several lessons. Unavoidably, this mixes different types of engagements with texts, especially in the form of a gradual transition from aesthetic to more analytical reading, so I am careful to keep them conceptually apart at first to highlight their different purposes. There is also the potential problem of treating theories that look at young native speakers learning to read for the first time and those focusing on much older students in an EFL setting as if these were the same circumstances. This appears to be the case with Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (cf. 2004), which I use extensively throughout part 2. However, I take his cognitive approach to be applicable to a broader context than recognising letters for the first time. The kind of segmentation that I propose combines extensive reading at home with intensive reading tasks in class, which requires a re-evaluation of pre-, while- and post-reading activities. By associating the stages with different functions and contextualising activities in a temporal sequence, I shall demonstrate that the usefulness of certain task types can be further specified. My general model may not address some of the specific choices teachers have to make in real-life situations, but I hope that, in its present form, it strikes the right balance between general applicability and sufficient argumentative support for the individual steps. What reading as a process also promotes and requires is the creation of learner texts (cf. Legutke 1996) as intermediary steps in an ongoing transaction with the narrative.

While the first two parts conceptually operate within the familiar territory of reader-response criticism and aesthetic reading, the third one addresses cognitive approaches to literature. Here it makes sense to distinguish between two basic paradigms: the first, which is closely tied to artificial intelligence research,

treats the brain as a computer-like information-processing device that produces fact files on all the phenomena it encounters and learns by regularly updating them. This has come to be known as schema theory, which is introduced in the second chapter of the third part, followed by a focus on reader-related feelings and empathy in particular. Based on Daniel Batson's classification of eight phenomena labelled as empathy and adding cognitive theories that correspond to these views, I provide a more complete picture of what is involved in taking perspectives and identifying with characters. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Suzanne Keen's and Howard Sklar's decidedly critical stances towards empathy.

While cognitive literary studies, especially in the form of Theory of Mind, is rooted in schema theory and reveals a strong affinity to narratology and critical analysis, 'embodied cognition' treats humans as organic bodies whose brains are integrated into a larger network of sense organs. According to this second paradigm, we learn holistically by interacting with our environment, which means that we can form concepts long before we consciously pay attention to the input and rationalise sense impressions. There are close affinities between Dewey's philosophy and this conceptualisation of learning through experiences. The most radical strand of embodied cognition can be found in philosophy, where it is known as 'enactivism'. It attempts to explain cognition without recourse to mental models, which is feasible for very basic interactions, but impossible as a theory of reading. Marco Caracciolo's more moderate enactivist approach to literature persistently cross-references Dewey (cf. 2014: 22–3, 49, 51, 73–5, 77, 89–90), which serves as another indication how central *Art as Experience* has become as a foundational text of experiential approaches. This constitutes the core of the fourth chapter. Enaction plays a central role in comics studies, where characters have to appear embodied all the time, but also in autobiography, where the material body is widely acknowledged as the source of subjectivity (cf. Smith & Watson 2010: 49–54). Accordingly, I begin a longer argument in part 3 that explores to what extent readers can use their daily experiences to understand fictional characters and vice versa, which is continued in part 4 in the context of cartooning.

The final two chapters of the third part are dedicated to cognitive linguistics, which I find essential when cross-referencing central tenets of reader-response criticism with cognitive approaches to literature. Here, I introduce conceptual integration or blending, which I consider to be a more developed and more widely applicable theory than Iser's gestalt-forming. I shall use key concepts of blending theory (e.g. vital relations, compression, material anchors) to explain comics narration and autobiographical work in the last two parts. It has to be

explicitly stated at the outset that Fauconnier and Turner's blending theory was neither intended as a theory of reading, nor is it fully accepted as a general theory of cognition. However, I regard Barbara Dancygier's application of their key ideas to literature so intriguing that I adapt her approach for my study of comics and autobiography. Dancygier's terminology of 'viewpoint compression', 'narrative spaces' and 'anchors' may sound alien at first, but I intend to provide enough examples to prove their worth. Equally important is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, as conceptual metaphor theory provides an essential link between embodied cognition and metaphorical thinking. Instead of looking at surface phenomena, such as specific literary metaphors in poetry, they argue that all of our thinking is metaphorical in nature and that we often use a more concrete source domain (e.g. money) to make sense of a more complex target domain (e.g. time). Conceptual metaphors have a specific notation in cognitive linguistics, which is TIME IS MONEY. Based on this basic understanding, metaphors produce so-called 'entailments', which are specific verbal expressions, such as "You're *wasting* my time" (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 7).

The importance of conceptual metaphor and metonymy is immense when looking at comics, which takes us directly to part 4. Here I argue in greater detail that the most popular theories of comics have always been cognitive in terms of their basic orientation. In chapter 2 I address the widespread confusion over what 'graphic novels' are in relation to comics. Based on Danny Fingeroth's simple classification (cf. 2008: 4) I present and explain medium, format and genre as three distinct categories, which makes the 'graphic novel' a popular publication format of comics. I also return to the concept of embodiment and differentiate comics from other picture stories with the help of Amy Spaulding's argument that comics dramatise events and present entire scenes instead of compressing them into single images (cf. 1995: 5, 15). The exact same argument applies to an acknowledgement of Rodolphe Töpffer as the inventor of the modern comic, who began to visually 'act out' the mundane adventures of his characters. These considerations have to be understood in the larger context of cartooning, which is the main focus of chapter 3. Many of the key concerns of this thesis, such as style, blending, foregrounding, conceptual metaphors, embodiment, emotions and empathy, can finally be presented in an integrated manner. Chapter 4 follows Hatfield's reader-response approach to comics to discuss blending phenomena in the context of the four tensions he postulates: words vs. images, the single image vs. the series, the series vs. the page and the experience of the narrative vs. its overall design. These gaps have to be cognitively bridged with the help of the readers' imagination. Here I get a chance to contrast and discuss McCloud's 'closure' and Groensteen's 'iconic solidarity' in terms of blending. I finish with a



case study of the first chapter of Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, which I reference throughout part 4 to achieve greater consistency. My intention is to combine the concepts and theories that I will have accumulated at this point and apply them in a more coordinated fashion to a single text.

Part 5 shifts attention to the importance of genre and especially to autographics as a particular variety of life writing. I argue that the medium provides cartoonists with possibilities that may not be available to the same extent in other media. This has partly to do with the narrative strategies each medium affords, but also with institutional frameworks, such as the popularity of certain titles and subgenres. Based on Liz Stanley's *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*, I argue that the two genres are inseparable and that the inclusion of relatives and friends in one's own life narratives raises important moral questions that are highly relevant in our times. Social media allow for instantaneous self-publication and this often involves the coincidental or deliberate implication of others. Students are constantly engaged in autobiographical work, testing life course models in view of their own wishes and possibilities and negotiating identities with their peers and parents. Chapter 2 explores one of the most important questions in this context: when and to what extent are humans coerced to produce rationalised and complete accounts of their lives? I use the Galen Strawson controversy and a discussion of Tilmann Habermas's articles to take a critical look at a widespread demand for social accountability and at the necessity to train teenagers to engage in autobiographical reasoning. All of chapter 2 is dedicated to the idea that autobiographical work is a blending phenomenon: diachronic and synchronic identities have to be integrated into a coherent sense of self. Considering photos as material anchors in autobiographical reasoning and as problematic pieces of evidence in an otherwise hand-drawn account of a person's life, I attempt to show that autographics can contribute to the development of critical media literacy. To provide a more practical application of these ideas, I frequently refer to the publication *Autobiographies: Presenting the Self*, which was edited by Wolfgang Hallet (cf. 2015a), as it presents very useful activities to promote critical thinking in the context of autobiographical work. Chapter 3 is dedicated to one of the central concerns in autobiographical studies, which is the truth claim of such narratives. It makes sense to treat autobiographical comics in a similar way to documentary film – as constructions of reality. They are narratives that utilise strategies known from fiction. Despite readers' temptation to embrace autobiography as testimony, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is impossible to maintain, which makes comics autobiographies excellent objects of study for the classroom. In her seminal *Autobiographical Comics* Elisabeth El Refaie

offers a whole set of strategies that cartoonists use to negotiate the veracity of their narratives (cf. 2012: 135–78). Truth, in this sense, is a performance, which readers experience as authentic and emotionally resonating or not. In the fourth chapter autobiographical 'I's with their different ontological levels of existence, functions and perspectives become the centre of attention. Following a discussion of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's typology, I explore how narratology constructs identities in a model of communication that is split between narration and focalisation. Like El Refaie, I argue in favour of the 'implied author' to make sense of autobiographical narratives. Chapter 5 draws attention to embodiment again, this time in the context of beauty ideals, illness and disability. Before that I address (cognitive) approaches to characters and characterisation, especially the question of reading bodies. I close this part with a brief look at diary comics to present a form(at) that is very different from the graphic novel and allows for a type of autobiographical writing/drawing that is unique to the form. Consisting of four panels only, these strips represent a genuine form of publication that foregrounds unique moments and experiences rather than key events in a plot. One of the aims of this thesis is to demonstrate that reading means experiencing characters entangled in very specific situations and social interactions, in which we as readers vicariously participate.

Finally, I want to address a few concerns that have more to do with formal aspects than content. I deliberately refrain from using footnotes throughout the entire book, which has a number of practical reasons. First of all, the text is intricate enough in many parts. Adding footnotes with even more explanations and cross-references made it too unwieldy, as some explanations became longer than the text they were meant to clarify. By completely abstaining from this second channel of communication I was forced to decide whether a piece of information was worth including or not. In rare cases a sentence may read like an afterthought or comment rather than an integral part of the argument, but this is a small price to pay in view of the simplification that the absence of footnotes brought. In some instances the listed authors may not present a point in exactly the same way, but my attempts to explain these subtle differences to my own satisfaction led to the aforementioned digressions.

I keep page references as short and clear as possible. I leave out the name of authors whenever they are presented in the main text and limit the number of sources to only two, wherever possible. In some cases I want to demonstrate broad consent or substantial evidence, which is signalled through longer enumerations. I refer to the individual panels of a comic page after a slash, e.g. 9/6 indicates the sixth panel on page 9. Throughout, I use plurals for readers and their reading experiences. Both Iser and Rosenblatt consistently refer to 'the reader' with the

pronoun 'he', which means that in some cases it is grammatically impossible to work around that. I adopt the plural 'gestalten' as it appears in *The Act of Reading* (cf. e.g. 1980: 188), rather than the English plural 'gestalts', as it is used equally consistently by cognitive linguists (cf. e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 122). When it is necessary to distinguish between autobiographers and characters in their stories, I use the surname for the cartoonist and the first name for the protagonist. Accordingly, Thompson is the creator of *Blankets*, but the protagonist of the comic is teenage Craig. Finally, I had to find consistent labels for the chapters of the book. The largest units are called parts (e.g. 5. Autobiographical Comics), which are subdivided into chapters (e.g. 5.1. The Conceptual Ambiguity of Autobiography) and finally into sections (e.g. 5.1.1. A Struggle with Definitions). If not otherwise indicated, references to other chapters are always restricted to the same part.



# 1 Reader-Response Criticism

## 1.1 Reading as a Journey

Towards the beginning of *The Act of Reading* Wolfgang Iser borrows Henry Fielding's "simile" (1968: 813) from Book XVIII, Chapter 1 of *Tom Jones* to illustrate the central tenets of his theory:

... the reader is likened to a traveller in a stagecoach, who has to make the often difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving viewpoint. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey. At no time, however, can he have a total view of that journey. (1980: 16)

This passage introduces some of the key concerns that we can trace from John Dewey's *Art as Experience* via Iser's reader-response criticism and Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory to Lothar Bredella's aesthetic reading (cf. 2010: 18–30) and further on to cognitive literary studies, comics theory and, finally, the reading of autobiographical comics in educational contexts. Despite the fact that Iser almost immediately abandons this comparison, which George Lakoff and Mark Johnson would call a 'conceptual metaphor' (cf. 2003), it deserves a more elaborate exploration.

Iser makes an important distinction between an 'often difficult journey', implying an ongoing, partly challenging experience, and a single moment in time, which precludes a 'total view' of the narrative. This is significant, as it challenges a widespread expectation that, for example, at the end of the journey, all the pieces magically fall into place and the puzzle is solved. Iser, however, stresses the fragmentation and idiosyncrasy of experiences that do not automatically add up. The reader has to relate the pieces to each other 'within his memory', even when significant elements are missing. This foregrounds the reading process as an ongoing journey and a cognitive operation that positions readers as active creators of meaning instead of recipients of information that is contained within the narrative. Iser is mostly concerned with the 'moving viewpoint' that is predetermined by the stagecoach's route, presenting the scenes in a temporal sequence and from specific angles that are meant to determine readers' perception to a certain extent. The middle sentence of the quotation above provides an important connection to the cognitive theories that become prominent in

part 3: “Naturally, he [the reader] combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency” (1980: 16).

First of all, I take ‘naturally’ to mean ‘automatically’, as there is a clear difference between reading and narratological analysis. In *Biographia Literaria* Samuel Taylor Coleridge argues that readers “should be carried forward [. . .] by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself” (1983: 14; see also Dewey 2005: 4; Benton & Fox 1985: 10), as long as it does not lead to a superficial engagement that is only interested in “striking lines” (1983: 14) and fails to recognise the aesthetic whole. It seems to me that Coleridge describes reading as a flow experience in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s sense (cf. 1991), which can be a complex and demanding challenge, but is handled with ease by experienced readers. Certain passages may demand their full attention, but most of the narrative is actualised without much cognitive strain (cf. 1991: 4, 49–50, 54). If we think of the way we drive cars almost on auto-pilot – paying attention only when the situation requires it – we have a perfect illustration of how every activity can become a flow experience. The cognitive psychologist David Groome explains this phenomenon in the following terms: “cognitive processes become automatic as a result of frequent practice, as for example the skills involved in driving a car, in playing a piano, or in reading words from a page. However, we have the ability to override these automatic sequences when we need to, for example when we come across an unusual traffic situation while driving” (2014a: 18). Accordingly, reading is largely a subconscious and interactive process to which we only attend with heightened awareness when the text requires it. In the case of literature, foregrounding and defamiliarisation (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 4–6) on all levels of composition play a central role in achieving what Coleridge describes in the following way: “at every step he [the reader] pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him forward” (1983: 14). The unfamiliar or surprising stops us in our tracks and, by retracing our steps, we find new orientation and momentum to continue with our journey. The complexity and strain of the reading process, which Iser acknowledges as an “often difficult journey” (1980: 16), is a contested issue to which we shall frequently return.

Secondly, readers/travellers can only make sense of what they notice, not of what the journey has to offer. The tour guide of the coach trip, the narrator, has to select suitable locations and sights, hire local guides, arrange for a few surprises along the way and then present these elements in a chronological and coherent way. Despite the comforts of a modern coach, the tour can be challenging. A flood of new impressions, from the tour guide’s narrative via the individual encounters with locals and unfamiliar settings to one’s own responses, have to be brought in

line with the documentaries one watched at home, the travel guides and holiday brochures one consulted and the recommendations of friends and strangers. The tourists may have arrived with different expectations – ranging from a quiet, relaxing trip via an educational journey to an exciting adventure. Thus, individuals have to establish a “pattern of consistency” (Iser 1980: 16) that allows them to integrate different impressions into a more unified experience. This includes revisiting previous stops in one’s mind and comparing different stages of the tour with each other. Although many viewpoints are predetermined – a beautiful vista here, an observation platform there, chosen by the tour guide and complemented by ongoing narration, the readers/travellers are likely to respond very differently and return with their own stories to tell. The most cherished memories are personal experiences and discoveries that were unique to this particular trip and to a single person. The tourists may even return with “travelled eyes” (Rushdie 1995: 11), seeing their own cultural circumstances in a different light. Like all conceptual metaphors, *READING IS TRAVELLING* manages to capture certain aspects of the experience very well, while obvious differences tend to be obscured (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 10). Since our “conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 3), we take a closer look at conceptual metaphors in part 3.

Thirdly, what readers compare and combine in memory are the contents of mental spaces, not the information provided by the text. Iser offers one possible explanation for this mismatch, which is that readers do not pay enough attention, but there are several factors that influence what we notice. In other areas of language learning, such as grammar, teachers accept the simple formula that input is not intake, but under the influence of narratology, which tends to operate with an “ideal reader” (Iser 1980: 27), expectations are much higher concerning instant narrative comprehension. That is why proponents of reader-response criticism distinguish between aesthetic reading and narratological analysis. The “total view” (Iser 1980: 16), which Rosenblatt calls the “public meaning of the text” (1982: 271), remains inaccessible and an abstraction that is not compatible with the experiences of individual readers. This view corresponds to Rosenblatt’s insistence that the same text can be read very differently: “not even the total text represents an absolute set of guides; multiple and equally valid possibilities are often inherent in the same text in its transactions with different readers under different conditions” (1994: 75; see also 122–3).

Regarding this issue, Iser addresses the struggle that even professional critics face when they attempt to disentangle themselves from the idiosyncrasies of their own narrative experiences: “While we are caught up in a text, we do not

at first know what is happening to us. This is why we often feel the need to talk about books we have read – not in order to gain some distance from them so much as to find out just what it is that we were entangled in. Even literary critics frequently do no more than seek to translate their entanglement into referential language” (1980: 131). Rosenblatt raises a similar point about professional readers: “even the most objective analysis of ‘the poem’ is an analysis of the work as they themselves have called it forth” (1994: 15; see also 137, 141). Since patterns of consistency can only come from individual minds, literary studies has long since embraced different approaches, which are then homogenised to a certain extent through the negotiation and co-construction of meaning within academic circles – a far better model for the classroom than having to guess what teachers think that texts mean. Like all travellers, students like to share personal experiences of the journey, which raises the question how they can transcend their first impressions and arrive at more qualified responses to the text.

## 1.2 Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory

Both Iser and Rosenblatt understand reading as a cognitive “interaction” (Iser 1980: ix) or “transaction” (Rosenblatt 1994: 17) between readers and text. Therefore, Rosenblatt distinguishes between the work of art as a physical object, which she calls ‘text’, “a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols” (1994: 12; see also Dewey 2005: 1, 86, 222, 228), and the ‘poem’, which “presupposes a reader actively involved with a text and refers to what he makes of his responses to the particular set of verbal symbols” (1994: 12; see also 53). Like Iser, Rosenblatt tried to find a simile that would adequately capture this relationship. Based on Dewey’s metaphor of a “musical score” (2005: 113) she conceptualises the reader as a “performer, in the same sense that a pianist performs a sonata, reading it from the text” (1994: 28; see also 13–14). Iser expresses the same idea in more theoretical terms: “The iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified” (1980: 65; see also 64; De Bruyn 2012: 115; Dewey 2005: 88). This is an interesting claim. From Iser’s point of view, the story world is neither the real world nor a mirror image of it, but a “blueprint” (Rosenblatt 1994: 86, 88) or ‘construction manual’ that consists largely of symbols and suggests to the creators (the readers) how to build something from the materials available to them. If the ‘product’ is the meaning of the text, it makes sense that Iser sees comprehension as “a productive process” (1980: 59; see also 108) and claims that “the meaning of the text is something that he [the reader] has to assemble” (1980: ix).



These similes imply that there is some room for creativity and interpretation. Looking at certain passages in Iser's *The Act of Reading*, one could get the impression that individual readings inevitably lead to diverse results: "Consistency-building is [...] a structure of comprehension" that "depends on the reader and not on the work, and as such it is inextricably bound up with subjective factors and, above all, the habitual orientations of the reader" (1980: 18; see also Rosenblatt 1994: 11). Accordingly, "a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways" (1980: 178). At other times, maybe to fend off charges of complete subjectivity, reader-response critics are willing to substantially curtail readers' interpretative freedom. Iser, for example, states that the "process of assembling the meaning of the text is not a private one, for although it does mobilize the subjective disposition of the reader, it does not lead to day-dreaming but to the fulfillment of conditions that have already been structured in the text" (1980: 49–50). The word 'must,' for example, appears more frequently in *The Act of Reading* than one would suspect. On the very first page Iser states: "A description of the reading process must bring to light the elementary operations which the text activates within the reader. The fact that the latter must carry out the instructions shows implicitly that the meaning of the text is something that he has to assemble" (1980: ix). Rosenblatt offers an equally strong image for the influence of the textual structures on the reader, but then returns agency to the latter: "Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he [the reader] marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem" (1994: 12; see also 1964: 126). By taking the "middle position" (Holub 2010: 101) between formalism/determinism and constructivism Iser and Rosenblatt's reader-response criticism becomes vulnerable to attacks from both sides. Sometimes they propagate a rigid system according to which readers mainly execute the instructions of the text (cf. Holub 2010: 100, 102, 133), presumably as a defence against New Criticism, which was still the dominant critical paradigm in the 1970s (cf. Iser 1980: 15; Rosenblatt 1994: 41). Robert Holub objects that "the text as a stable and determinate structure often manages to intrude into the very heart of reception theory" (2010: 149), where its power to control the readers is called upon "to prevent what threatens to be a totally subjective and arbitrary reader response" (2010: 150).

Maybe Rosenblatt's original simile, which she abandons in favour of the musical score, is still the better choice: the reader as a modern-day theatre director who intends to put *Hamlet* on the stage (cf. 1994: 13; see also Holub 2010: 44). Here, the tension between a fixed textual source and the affordances of the stage (cf. Rosenblatt 1994: 67) is mirrored in the readers' creative limitations

(cf. 1994: 129) and interpretative freedom. Every reading and performance of *Hamlet* – either in the readers’ minds or somewhere on stage – is always already an interpretation and adaptation of the text. For Rosenblatt, this involves a “reenactment of the text” (1994: 13; see also 28) or, in Iser’s terms, “literary texts initiate ‘performances’ of meaning” (1980: 27; see also Benton 1992: 14–18). Accordingly, readers are faced with similar challenges as the actors of a play. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Richard Gerrig develops this idea at some length:

Readers are called upon to exercise exactly this same range of skills. They must use their own experiences of the world to bridge gaps in texts. They must bring both facts and emotions to bear on the construction of the world of the text. And, just like actors performing roles, they must give substance to the psychological lives of characters. (1998: 17)

In other words, they ‘inhabit’ the characters to flesh them out as ‘real’ human beings, but without ever losing track of who is who. In “Identifying with Metaphor: Metaphors of Personal Identification” Ted Cohen provides some context for the attempt of readers to ‘become’ the characters of a literary text.

In achieving such an identification, I think, one engages in a dialectic of metaphorical understanding. B is trying to grasp A, to gain some sense of this other person. He likely begins with A=B and then moves back and forth between A=B and B=A, shifting and adjusting. This is the blending one attempts in imagination, a blending of oneself with another, and here one must add to and subtract from oneself. (1999: 407)

Cohen believes that this results in “imagining some third person, some new person, some blend of what I know of you and what I know of me” (1999: 402). Since readers have to rely on their own resources to make sense of characters and their specific circumstances, there is a danger of projecting too much of oneself onto characters, which Cohen finds problematic: “the triumphal assumption that we can easily understand one another is as sinful as the refusal to attempt any human understanding at all” (1999: 404). With certain types of literature, such as tragedy, Cohen proposes that “the impossibility of complete identification contributes to the work’s power” (1999: 406), but I would extend this logic to all literature. In part 3 I explain in detail why empathy requires a more complex operation than straightforward identification.

For Rosenblatt, the play script, which she calls the ‘text’, is merely a means to an end: the important thing is the performance, which she calls the ‘poem’: not “the words, as uttered sounds or inked marks on a page, constitute the poem, but the structured response to them. For the reader, the poem is lived-through during his intercourse with the text” (1994: 14; see also 69). When Rosenblatt argues that the reader is “actively involved in building up a poem for himself out

of his responses to the text" (1994: 10), she refers to the fact that consistency can only be achieved among the mental spaces in working memory. According to reader-response criticism, the emerging gestalt, the tentative meaning, is twice removed from textual evidence. Strictly speaking, students do not make sense of texts, but of what they have read:

Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew. Fundamentally, when we speak of understanding a work, we are actually reporting on what we have made of the signs on the page. [...] Drawing on our own resources, we each have called forth and synthesized from that text a structure of concepts and sensations that for each of us is the work of art. Understanding requires an interpretation of this experience. (Rosenblatt 1995: 107)

This creates an interesting tension between having theories about a narrative and knowing that there is far more to discover than individuals can grasp on their own. In communicative language teaching, this opinion gap naturally leads to a discussion among peers of how they have understood the text differently and ultimately requires a return to the textual basis at a later stage of the reading process. Through this specific sequence learners retrace their steps back to the source.

Rosenblatt's transactional approach to reading is ultimately a social event that has to include stages of joint meaning-making, leading from one's first subjective impressions via class discussions to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of a text. Both Iser and Rosenblatt endorse the "intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations" (Iser 1980: x), as "the very existence of alternatives makes it necessary for a meaning to be defensible and so intersubjectively accessible. The intersubjective communication of a meaning will show up those elements that have been sacrificed, and so, through the negativity of one's own processes of meaning assembly, one may again be in a position to observe one's own decisions" (Iser 1980: 230; see also 22, 25). In other words: even if the reading process led to a satisfying experience, most of the involved processes may have been subliminal to a large extent (cf. Rosenblatt 1982: 269). Sharing one's views with others, however, invites a re-examination of one's attitudes and may necessitate a rereading of certain key scenes. Rosenblatt turns this very idea into a precondition for all literary teaching: "the successful teacher of literature makes the classroom a place for critical sharing of personal responses" (1966: 1003). Since all readings are equally valid and gain currency in a "free exchange of ideas", this contest of the most convincing readings "will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in the light of others' opinions" (1995: 104). This feedback loop among peers is considered to

be more conducive to a re-evaluation of one's own reading than an intervention by a teacher: "that others have had different responses, have noticed what was overlooked, have made alternative interpretations, leads to self-awareness and self-criticism" (Rosenblatt 1982: 276).

For both Iser (cf. 1980: 16) and Rosenblatt readers have to keep an open mind and be willing to overcome their limitations: "the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process" (1994: 11). This "process of continual correction" (Iser 1980: 167) is already triggered by clues in the text that constantly force readers to check their images and gestalten for their suitability. Rosenblatt lists two "prime criteria of validity" that represent the minimal requirements for a reading: "that the reader's interpretation [should] not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis" (1994: 115; see also 1966: 1001). Surprisingly, she can be quite harsh when readers do not follow the text's ample guidance: "Undisciplined, irrelevant or distorted emotional responses, and the lack of relevant experience or knowledge will, of course, lead to inadequate interpretations of the text" (1966: 1001). How this movement from subjective responses to greater objectivity can be organised by teachers in the literary classroom, is a central concern of the next part. In the following chapter we look at framing and how the temporal sequence of reading influences our experiences of a text.

### 1.3 Frames

In Rosenblatt's transactional theory an interaction with a text starts *before* the reading begins, which means that it is always framed. She dedicates the third chapter of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* to the reader's stance (cf. 1994: 22–47), which she conceptualises as a mental framework or set of expectations that readers bring to a text and that determines their reading until textual evidence forces them to revise their initial approach. This is also one of the central arguments in Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* where he calls "our own expectations" a "mental set" that significantly influences "the deciphering of the artists' cryptograms" (2014: 53; see also 190–4).

Rosenblatt uses two terms, 'efferent' and 'aesthetic', to designate two basic modes of reading: 'efferent', an invented adjective that she derives from Latin 'efferre', 'to carry away', suggests an interest in the literal and factual, such as scanning a text for specific information; an 'aesthetic' reading, however, is geared towards personal responses and the experience of the literary text itself (cf. 1994: 24–5). These stances are understood to affect all aspects of readers'

transactions with texts: “The distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic reading, then, derives ultimately from what the reader does, the stance that he adopts and the activities he carries out in relation to the text” (1994: 27; see also Benton 1992: 1). However, she finds it “*more accurate to think of a continuum, a series of gradations between the nonaesthetic and the aesthetic extremes*” (1994: 35; see also 27), which returns us to the idea of a middle ground between reading comprehension as the extraction of information and reading as a personal experience and a form of self-discovery.

Rosenblatt’s focus on framing is highly relevant, as Werner Wolf has demonstrated in several articles on its importance to literary interpretation (cf. e.g. 2006, 2014). He states that “*narrative* is a major cognitive frame whose application is elicited by certain clues, ‘keys,’ or ‘framings,’ typically and preferably at the outset of a reception process” (2014: 126; see also 2006: 22). Readers’ expectations are shaped by such paratextual devices (cf. Genette 1997) and “then are applied to the entire artefact under scrutiny, at least as a default option” (Wolf 2014: 128). While ‘narrative’ may be a rather broad framework, generic markers often determine whether a book is bought and read in the first place (cf. 2014: 132). In turn, the ways in which authors position their books in relation to generic traditions lead to a more or less conscious negotiation on the readers’ part of whether this classification is warranted or not (cf. 2014: 135). In this sense, framings do not only provide basic orientation, but invite a specific attitude or stance that initially determines all aspects of the reading process:

... framings [...] help the recipient to select frames of interpretation or reference relevant for the work under consideration. If the abstract frames can be described as tools of interpretation, their codings in framings are the (visible or imagined) labels on the tool-box that induce the recipient to choose the correct tools. By pointing to frames as tools or guides of interpretation, framings – and this applies also and in particular to the special form of framing borders – likewise fulfill an essentially interpretive, but also a controlling function. Most importantly, framings mark an artefact as such and distinguish it from its surroundings by indicating the special rules (frames) that apply in its reception. (Wolf 2006: 26)

The impact of frames and framings has two important consequences for this study. On the one hand, they play a central role in the way narrative fiction is introduced and contextualised in the classroom, which has a long-lasting effect on how students transact with a text. On the other hand, reading autobiographical texts requires some preparation on the teacher’s part, especially during the later stages of the reading sequence, if the ultimate goal is critical media literacy.

In *The Act of Reading* Iser addresses the influence of generic markers only indirectly when he presents the challenges of (post)modernist texts. These

consciously subvert essential interpretative frames and rely on advanced reading skills to compensate for a lack of clarity: “It is typical of modern texts that they invoke expected functions in order to transform them into blanks. This is mostly brought about by a deliberate omission of generic features that have been firmly established by the tradition of the genre. Thus the narrator’s perspective now denies the reader the orientation it traditionally offered as regards evaluation of characters and events” (1980: 208). He comments more explicitly on genres and reader expectations in his “Interview” with Norman Holland and Wayne Booth:

This reciprocal conditioning which occurs in [the] time-flow of reading is also influenced, of course, by the ‘genre.’ The genre is a code element which invokes certain expectations in the reader, given his familiarity with the code. In this respect, I would regard the genre as part of the repertoire, though there is no doubt that the many elements of the repertoire encapsulated in each text will not be equally well known to every reader of the text. Nevertheless, the basic differences between genres will precondition different attitudes towards the text, and this applies equally to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. (Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 65; see also Bruner 1986: 7)

Although leaving aside paratextual information to a large extent, Iser *does* acknowledge the impact of first impressions on the process of reading: “The sequence of image-building is overshadowed by what has been produced in the first instance, which inevitably has repercussions on the way images qualify and condition each other in the time-flow of our reading” (1980: 149; see also 186; Rosenblatt 1994: 54). To better understand framing in reader-response approaches, it may help to briefly introduce two narratological theories that are directly related to Iser’s model, but work with a more predetermined reader or viewer experience.

In *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978) Meir Sternberg starts with the premise that first impressions are so strong that they tend to overshadow later evidence to the contrary. Based on Carl Iver Hovland’s edited volume *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion* (1957) Sternberg uses this ‘primacy effect’ to explain how writers manipulate their readers’ emphatic responses to characters by setting up expectations that are later proven to be partially or completely misguided. He summarises the results of Abraham S. Luchins’s “Primacy-Recency in Impression Formation” (cf. Hovland et al. 1957: 33–61) in the following way:

Due to the successive order of presentation, the first block [of information about a character] was read with an open mind, while the interpretation of the second – in itself as weighty – was decisively conditioned and colored by the anterior, homogeneous primacy effect; the leading block established a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to

which subsequent information was subordinated as far as possible. (1978: 94; see also Smith 2004: 268; Gombrich 2014: 191; Kahneman 2012: 82–3; Gerrig 1998: 233)

The cognitive frame or mindset that is established through the primacy effect, in this case a first judgment of a person's character, is so influential that readers become blinded to further revelations that contradict this assumption. Instead of questioning their own faulty image, they “construct and maintain in each case an integrated, unified view of character in face of the objective evidence to the contrary” (1978: 95). This plays an important role in the context of impression management (cf. Goffman 1959) and more specifically in how autobiographers present themselves at the beginning of a narrative to invite readers' attention, empathy and curiosity. We find some interesting comments on that matter in Sternberg's study, where he is largely concerned with the “expositional unfolding of Odysseus's personality” (1978: 90) in Homer's *Odyssey*. While the protagonist is first presented as a great war hero by other characters in books I-IV, his character is then revealed to be more complex than that by granting the readers access to his actions and thoughts (cf. 1978: 104). In this case, the primacy effect is used to maintain Odysseus's status as a heroic figure while gradually introducing new and partly incompatible character traits from book V onwards (cf. 1978: 101–28). Sternberg is interested in formalist aspects of literature and the subversion of readers' predictions, but he cannot escape cognitive concerns. The “unexpected retrospective illumination” (1978: 100) that he presents as the end result of elaborate narrative ploys relies on readers who have to experience this kind of illumination, notice a discrepancy with their expectations and reconcile the new insight with previously held beliefs. This may even trigger a rereading of previous passages to facilitate the assimilation of the new information (cf. Rosenblatt 1986: 123).

David Bordwell adopts Sternberg's concept of the “primacy effect” in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985: 38), which means that he also favours a structuralist manifestation of an otherwise cognitive process. Although he acknowledges spectators' central importance by dedicating a whole chapter to “The Viewer's Activity” (1985: 29–47), he is fascinated by the idea that a film teaches the audience how it wants to be read: “A film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of *operations*” (1985: 29). This is so central to Bordwell's understanding of film that he proposes this form of viewer guidance as the very definition of narration: “We can, in short, study narrative as a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on the perceiver. I shall call this process narration” (1985: xi; see also 33).

Although Bordwell subscribes to a constructivist notion of meaning-making that places viewers at the centre of his theory, he sees a unique chance in guiding their reception of a narrative through a careful orchestration of perspectives. He uses Gombrich's basic argument in *Art and Illusion* that the sophisticated presentation of images from a specific perspective creates the illusion of realism (cf. 2014: 221), which is, in fact, a highly conventionalised optical trick that does not reveal how things really are. On the contrary, it represents a specific view, a unique angle:

What a painter inquires into is not the nature of the physical world but the nature of our reactions to it. He is not concerned with causes but with the mechanisms of certain effects. His is a psychological problem – that of conjuring up a convincing image despite the fact that not one individual shade corresponds to what we call 'reality'. (Gombrich 2014: 44)

In accordance with the primacy effect, Bordwell ascribes the first scenes of a film a unique role: “The sequential nature of narrative makes the initial portions of a text crucial for the establishment of hypotheses” (1985: 38), which are then constantly tested throughout the reading process (cf. 1985: 31). What is more, similar to Iser's comment on postmodern texts, film directors can play with the viewers' expectations: “Narratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver's search for coherence” (1985: 38). This deliberate accumulation of narrative gaps foregrounds the importance of readers' cognitive involvement, which has led to the proclamation of an 'ideal reader' as an elegant solution to avoid any concern with cognitive processes and readers' actual responses. This notion of a perfect recipient was forcefully opposed by both Iser and Rosenblatt (cf. Iser 1980: 27; Rosenblatt 1994: 140–1).

Returning to the centrality of readers' interpretative frameworks, Bordwell addresses the question of genre competence directly at the end of his chapter on “The Viewer's Activity” (1985: 29–47). He explains that the experienced spectator is “prepared to justify events and motifs compositionally, realistically, and especially transtextually” (1985: 45). The first refers to a reading of a narrative according to its own logic and structure, the second according to our knowledge of the real world, and the third to our in-depth understanding of the genre to which the film belongs: “Whatever the cues in this film [*Rear Window*], our expectations are funded by knowledge of other films in the tradition. We motivate transtextually” (1985: 44). Contrary to Iser, who only implicitly acknowledges the impact of genres on reading, Rosenblatt's approach is very much in line with Bordwell's:



Past literary experiences serve as subliminal guides as to the genre to be anticipated, the details to be attended to, the kinds of organizing patterns to be evolved. Each genre, each kind of work [...] makes its own kinds of conventional demands on the reader – that is, once he has set up one or another such expectation, his stance, the details he responds to, the way he handles his responses, will differ. Traditional subjects, themes, treatments, may provide the guides to organization and the background against which to recognize something new or original in the text. (1994: 57; see also 55–6; Gombrich 2014: 194, 268)

This is the basis for Rosenblatt’s “concept of selective attention” (1994: 43; see also 184; 1986: 123; Gombrich 2014: xviii, 157), which means that the cognitive frame or stance predetermines the selection of elements for the actualisation of the text. With the exception of formulaic genre fiction, literature usually challenges or even actively subverts readers’ expectations. This is why Rosenblatt proposes a flexible and transactional system:

In broadest terms, then, the basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues; the adoption of an efferent or aesthetic stance; the development of a tentative framework or guiding principle of organization; the arousal of expectations that influence the selection and synthesis of further responses; the fulfillment or reinforcement of expectations, or their frustration, sometimes leading to revision of the framework, and sometimes, if necessary, to rereading . . . (1994: 54; see also Kafalenos 2006: 147–8)

Paratexts, such as interviews, reviews, (book) trailers and posters, covers or title pages, are highly significant, as they contain an interesting and not always consistent mix of clues, genre markers and framings that can provide a first orientation. We rarely encounter, buy and read books out of context. Rosenblatt acknowledges the influence of such settings in the following way:

Various signals have been developed to alert readers to the types of texts and hence to the appropriate stance: the categories under which books are shelved in libraries, the differences between titles of nonfiction and fiction, the reports of book reviewers, the frequent use of headings such as “Fiction” or “Poetry” in the tables of contents of magazines – even, sometimes, the insertion of the phrase “a story” after a title. This may be an adaptation to the fact that readers themselves often are not conscious of the difference in stance required by different texts, but need such prior signals to adjust their approach to such materials. (1994: 79; see also Nünning 2014: 74)

Like Wolf (cf. 2014: 132), Rosenblatt differentiates between contextual framings, “the ways in which readers are given cues extraneous to the text” (1994: 80), peritextual signals, which can be found on the cover or in the front matter, and those that are integrated into the main text (cf. 1994: 81).

The first scene, then, as Bordwell demonstrates, plays a crucial role in confirming, modifying or undermining viewers' or readers' initial expectations. In addition, it establishes a point of reference for later scenes and begins a transaction with readers that is significantly shaped by the narrator's behaviour: his or her presence, style, attitude and guidance are bound to affect readers' responses to the text. Therefore, the beginning of the reading process is a delicate stage, which needs extra attention in educational settings. Not only do teachers select the text and frame it in particular ways, but they also have certain expectations that need to be communicated clearly, especially when the overall purpose is not aesthetic reading, but language work, reading comprehension, narratological analysis, the development of genre competence, cultural studies, formal writing tasks etc. For Rosenblatt, these approaches exist on a spectrum from an aesthetic to an efferent stance, and certain activities are likely to mix both. In part 2 I present an organisational framework that facilitates reading as an ongoing process in stages, in which tasks play a more specific role in the transition from an aesthetic to a more analytical framework.

#### 1.4 Iser's Model of Meaning-Making

Iser's conceptualisation of reading is the backbone of this thesis, as it anticipates some of the central theories in parts 3 and 4 (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003; Dancygier 2012; McCloud 1994; Groensteen 2007, 2013), for which the following overview shall serve as a point of reference. At the same time, it contextualises the terms and concepts that have been introduced so far and allows for a brief discussion of the model's shortcomings.

The most important aspect of Iser's "wandering viewpoint" (1980: 109) is the distinction between and coordination of different perspectives, which he conceptualises – outside the theory of focalisation – in purely optical terms: "perception and interpretation depend upon the standpoint of the observer" (1980: 84). This demonstrates a close relation to Bordwell's film narratology and Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. On a macrostructural level Iser identifies "various lines of orientation which are in opposition to one another" (1980: 47), which he correlates to the major subject positions that a text offers to a reader:

As a rule there are four main perspectives: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text. What they do is provide guidelines originating from different starting points (narrator, characters, etc.), continually shading into each other and devised in such a way that they all converge on a general meeting place. We call this meeting place the meaning of the text, which can only be

brought into focus if it is visualized from a standpoint. Thus, standpoint and convergence of textual perspectives are closely interrelated, although neither of them is actually represented in the text, let alone set out in words. Rather they emerge during the reading process, in the course of which the reader's role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern. (1980: 35; see also 21, 47, 96)

This is a more elaborate version of the metaphor *READING IS TRAVELLING* and contains the same basic ideas: the meaning of a text exists on a higher level of blending or gestalt-forming than the individual perspectives offered in the text, a process that Barbara Dancygier calls "viewpoint compression" (2012: 97). Iser explicitly states that identification with a character is *one* of many access points to a narrative, but should not be confused with the meaning of the text. Nowhere is this more important than in the context of autobiographies, where the temptation to adopt the narrator's perspective without any critical distance is substantial.

From these textual structures Iser differentiates four external perspectives that rely more directly on the cognitive involvement of the reader. First, there is the "meaning of the text" (1980: 35), which he describes elsewhere as "a dynamic happening" (1980: 22). This corresponds to the individual reader's understanding of the narrative as an "ongoing process" (Rosenblatt 1994: 9; see also Turner 1994: 236) and as guided by textual structures. Iser explains that the "meaning must inevitably be pragmatic, in that it can never cover all the semantic potentials of the text, but can only open up one particular form of access to these potentials" (1980: 85; see also 145; Dewey 2005: 46). The particular stance or standpoint adopted in an ongoing engagement with a text determines the present understanding of the narrative. As we have seen with the primacy effect and the impact of interpretative frames, readers tend to rely on one dominant framework that seems to work for the present moment until proven inadequate.

For casual readers who encounter a narrative text for the first time, the process of meaning-making is far less reflected than that of professional readers. Gombrich correctly observes that our interactions with texts are based on the "assumption that things are simple until they prove to be otherwise" (2014: 231), by which he means that we do not consciously interrupt the flow of reading to overanalyse scenes and look for additional layers of meaning. In his meta-study *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* Frank Smith draws the same conclusion based on decades of research. Much like Rosenblatt he states that the "interest is always in the experience, rather than in the information. The intentional acquisition of information, especially at the arbitrary behest of others, is one of the most tedious and unnatural activities

anyone can engage in” (2004: 55). A more ‘natural’ form of reading has to have “some bearing on the reader’s purposes” (2004: 189), since “we remember what we understand and what is significant to us” (2004: 190). This is not so much a question of laziness than of cognitive overload and the limited capacity of our working memory (cf. 2004: 87; see also 96). This insight leads Smith to the same conclusion as Gombrich:

The first interpretation that comes to us is the one that makes the most sense to us at the particular time, and alternative and less likely interpretations will not be considered unless subsequent interpretations fail to be consistent or to make sense, in which case we realize our probable error and try to recapitulate. One interpretation usually satisfies us, provided it makes sense, so we don’t waste time looking for a second. [. . .] We don’t expect to find more than one meaning for the same sequence of words. (2004: 39; see also 24)

This characterisation of the reading process typical of casual readers is completely at odds with the concept of the ‘ideal reader’. It also highlights the discrepancy between the enjoyment of reading that schools are supposed to foster and the unstated expectation that students should be capable of providing a detailed retrospective analysis of a text after a first reading. Smith ironises this discrepancy between the public meaning and the casual reader’s satisfaction with a personal experience:

The very notion that comprehension is relative, that it depends on the questions that an individual happens to ask, is not one that all educators find easy to accept. Some want to argue that you may not have understood a book even if you have no unanswered questions at the end. They will ask, “But did you understand that the spy’s failure to steal the secret plans was really a symbol of humanity’s ineluctable helplessness in the face of manifest destiny?” And if you say “No, I just thought it was a jolly good story,” they will tell you that you didn’t really comprehend what the story was about. But basically what they are saying is that you were not asking the kind of questions they think you should have asked. (2004: 26)

Within reader-response criticism we find the same rejection of the “total view” (Iser 1980: 16) or the “ultimate meaning” (Iser 1980: 98), which is Iser’s second external perspective. It represents an impossible, complete understanding of the text in all its intricacies. This is criticised by Iser as “the illusion of a false totality” (1980: 12). To make this point clearer I include Dewey’s example of the cathedral, which is meant to illustrate the fallacy of “simultaneous vision” (2005: 228), which corresponds to an abstract, disentangled view of an object in its totality.

A cathedral, no matter how large, makes an instantaneous impression. A total qualitative impression emanates from it as soon as it interacts with the organism through the visual apparatus. But this is only the substratum and framework within which a

continuous process of interactions introduces enriching and defining elements. The hasty sightseer no more has an esthetic vision of Saint Sophia or the Cathedral of Rouen than the motorist traveling at sixty miles an hour sees the flitting landscape. One must move about, within and without, and through repeated visits let the structure gradually yield itself to him in various lights and in connection with changing moods. [. . .] An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically. An experience is a product, one might almost say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world. (2005: 229; see also 311)

The meaning of a text, Dewey suggests, is a by-product of readers' interaction with it. The aesthetic experience is to be had in the intimate moments, the discoveries of 'enriching and defining elements,' the interaction with the object and, most importantly, on repeated visits. Because of all these factors Iser dismisses the "ideal reader" as "a purely fictional being," since the ability "to realize in full the meaning potential of the fictional text" (1980: 29) would require an impossible reading position. Meaning can only result from a personal interaction with a text "at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (Rosenblatt 1994: 20).

Yet, Iser sometimes seems to suggest that, as long as readers correctly follow all the instructions (cf. Holub 2010: 102), the "message or meaning of the text can be organized" (Iser 1980: 81) in exactly the way the writer intended. Norman Holland, who studied readers' responses empirically and became later known for his work in cognitive studies (cf. Holland 2009), found fault with Iser's seeming overreliance on the text, as his research suggested that readers came up with vastly different interpretations by projecting their own personalities and ideas onto the text (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 58–9). To understand Holland's objection we have to take a brief detour, this time to a more restricted, schematic understanding of meaning-making as we find it, for example, in Emma Kafalenos's *Narrative Causalities*:

*meaning* is an interpretation of the relations between a given action (or happening or situation) and other actions (happenings, situations) in a causal sequence. *Interpretation*, in the restricted sense in which I use the word in this study, refers to the process of analyzing the causal relations between an action or happening and other actions, happenings, and situations one thinks of as related. (2006: 1; see also Bordwell 1985: 34–5, 51)

She thus limits 'narrative competence' to a meaningful ordering of the events as temporally and causally related, which is more or less a reconstruction of the 'fabula' (cf. 2006: 2, 15, 25, 58–60, 113, 130). It reduces the work of art to the perspective of the plot and the readers' involvement to a puzzle game of what came first and why. This limitation allows for a complete picture at the end of the reading process: "Finally, when we reach the end of the narrative and construct

a complete configuration – a final fabula – ideally we will interpret the function of the given event once again, this time in relation to all the information we have amassed” (2006: 151). However, even Kafalenos’s functional approach (cf. 2006: 6) cannot work without the readers’ involvement: “the meaning of an event is subject to interpretations that can vary for people in our world as well as for characters in fictional worlds, and also for readers (listeners, viewers)” (2006: 16). The ‘meaning of an event’ offers an excellent transition back to Iser.

In *The Act of Reading* he makes a surprising distinction between the meaning of the text, the first external perspective we discussed, which “must be assembled in the course of reading”, and ‘significance’, “the reader’s absorption of the meaning into his own existence” (1980: 151) which is the third (theoretical) perspective (after the total view). He suggests that readers are capable of building a story world, reconstructing the fabula according to the text’s internal logic and producing a consistent reading partly or even completely independent of personal relevance:

The experience of the text, then, is brought about by an interaction that cannot be designated as private or arbitrary. What *is* private is the reader’s incorporation of the text into his own treasure-house of experience, but as far as the reader-oriented theory is concerned, this simply means that the subjectivist element of reading comes at a later stage in the process of comprehension than critics of the theory may have supposed: namely, where the aesthetic effect results in a restructuring of experience. (1980: 24)

Not surprisingly, Holland objected to this concept and so do I. The problem is the temporal sequence according to which a mechanical, text-induced actualisation comes first, which might *then* be followed by an emotional impact on readers “at a later stage” (Iser 1980: 24). It contradicts the basic principle of an ongoing transaction, which is precisely Holland’s second point of criticism in the interview (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 59–60).

To understand Iser’s somewhat unusual claim we have to look at it from within his theory. In contrast to real life, the world of the narrative does not exist prior to readers’ transaction with it. Consequently, we cannot respond to and have opinions about something that is not present yet. This leads him to a conceptualisation of reading as a two-step process in which the construction of the story world has to precede deeper cognitive and emotional involvement with the text: “consistency-building has nothing to do with explanation. It is a passive synthesis occurring below the threshold of our consciousness while we read. Consistency-building establishes ‘good continuation’ between textual segments in the time-flow of reading, and is thus an indispensable prerequisite for assembling an overall pattern” (Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 64). This does

not mean that the aesthetic object is the same for every reader, as the process of subconscious consistency-building completely relies on readers' reading competence and 'theory of the world', as Smith calls it (cf. 2004: 13–15). However, Iser's attempt to split the reading flow into different processes and competences that may or may not involve conscious and emotional responses in varying degrees, creates an artificial separation that is more indebted to the model than to actual reading practices. Most importantly, it is hard to reconcile with Rosenblatt's stance, Genette's paratexts, Wolf's frames, Bordwell's film narratology or Sternberg's primacy effect, which all rely on aesthetic reading as a precondition rather than as an after-effect.

Although Lothar Bredella believes that "all understanding is interpretation" (2010: 51), by which he means subjective, he finds it necessary to distinguish between the two terms for educational purposes: "Understanding means that we grasp content more or less automatically without conscious effort", while he defines "interpretation" as "an attempt to improve our understanding of the text" (2010: 51), which he associates with specific, analytical tasks that students engage in after the initial reading. This point is also raised by Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel*:

reading literature analytically, with an aim of sharing or comparing insights with others or producing interpretations, is a highly specialized activity that (for most people) requires training. This education disrupts students' habitual reading patterns with new demands – attention to privileged details and patterns, to symbolic objects, to loose ends, to contextually relevant information – depending on the approach. (2010: 86)

It is paramount to keep these types of reading both conceptually and practically apart, as the aims and responses are quite different. Iser is correct in assuming that many cognitive processes take place subconsciously, such as consistency-building, and that the flow of reading may not be interrupted by conscious reflection for long stretches of time, but this largely automated understanding of a text is clearly coloured by personal preferences and emotions. If aesthetic reading is meant to be a holistic process, the split into theoretical stages of meaning-making that do not even reach consciousness seems to be futile, especially without any empirical proof.

Rosenblatt, it has to be noted, also differentiates between "the evocation and the reaction" (1994: 65) or "the production of the work" and the "stream of feelings, attitudes, and ideas [that] is aroused by the very work being summoned up under the guidance of the text" (1994: 48), but there are two significant differences: first, personal (ir)relevance and emotional responses in general are instant or "concurrent" (1994: 48; see also 69; 1982: 270), as Rosenblatt puts it.

In “The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response” she specifically criticises the idea that cognition precedes emotional responses: “The notion that first the child must ‘understand’ the text cognitively, efferently, before it can be responded to aesthetically is a rationalization that must be rejected” (1982: 273).

Secondly, her transactional theory acknowledges a whole spectrum of responses ranging from the efferent to the aesthetic. These are not polar opposites but always co-present and intermingled, depending on reader’s stance and the text-type: “This permits the whole range of responses generated by the text to enter into the center of awareness, and out of these materials he selects and weaves what he sees as the literary work of art” (1994: 27–8; see also 66; 1998: 886). For Rosenblatt, personal feelings are as much a resource to make sense of literary texts as are more analytical categories. She criticises “the formalist fallacy” (1994: 155), by which she means “efferent treatments of literary texts” (1994: 162), and opposes the “theoretic division” of the work of art, which should be understood and read as “an integral whole” (1995: 44). Smith is equally averse to the idea of breaking down reading into processes and skills (cf. 2004: 8–10), as understanding is supposed to be a holistic endeavour. Since teaching necessarily involves more guided transactions with texts, this is not tenable for the classroom, but purely analytical tasks can be pushed back to later stages of the reading process. Even though both Iser and Rosenblatt claim the middle ground between formalism and constructivism (cf. Rosenblatt 1994: 37), one can spot a difference between the two approaches: despite Iser’s condemnation of ideal readers (cf. 1980: 29), his theory belies a clear preference for highly intelligent, rational and experienced readers who know how to handle a text. Rosenblatt’s students, who sat in her poetry classes, started out as readers whose “notes reflect, one might say, a rudimentary literary response” (1994: 7). Thus, she seems to have a more realistic perspective on what can be expected during specific stages of the reading process. In the literary classroom, personal relevance plays an important role as a motivational factor and thus becomes a key component of each reader’s stance towards the text (cf. Lütge 2012: 195).

The fourth and most important of Iser’s external perspectives is the “moving viewpoint” (Iser 1980: 16), a subject position of actual readers in relation to the text, which invites them to coordinate the perspectives locally, but also increasingly on a higher level. Rosenblatt sees the reader as a “mediator among the various structures that present themselves to consciousness” (1994: 42) or a weaver, working on a tapestry that connects textual elements through personal significance (cf. 1994: 88, 90). The moving viewpoint may coincide, at times, with one of the four major structures or perspectives inscribed in the text, such as



the protagonist's point of view, in case readers strongly identify with the central character. A more complex relationship is the one between the moving viewpoint and the implied/fictitious reader's perspective: "the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. No matter who or what he may be, the real reader is always offered a particular role to play" (Iser 1980: 34; see also 38). The wandering viewpoint is different from this inscribed perspective, as readers may not identify, for example, with a strongly propagandistic text that has a very clear vision of its addressees and how they should respond. Iser is adamant that the reader's role "emerges from this interplay of perspectives, for he finds himself called upon to mediate between them, and so it would be fair to say that the intended reader, as supplier of *one* perspective, can never represent more than one aspect of the reader's role" (1980: 33). In other words, while the implied/fictitious/intended reader is a textual structure, the moving viewpoint is the relation of actual readers to the text, which always transcends any of the perspectives on offer.

There are three basic implications here for the teaching of literature: first, that the total meaning or 'message' of a narrative is a chimera, or an abstraction at best that does not reflect the complexity of the work of art in its procedural nature. The conceptual metaphor that MEANING IS A (RARE) SUBSTANCE that can be dug out of the earth/text, purified and exhibited as a shining object is misleading. This implies that students who do not 'get' the meaning either do not dig deep enough or confuse pebbles for precious stones. Such a materialist reading reduces meaning to a piece of information that can be objectified, evaluated and shared. It corresponds to the public meaning of the text that is equally purified from all personal entanglements and represents a timeless treasury of the best things humans have written and thought about the text. Rosenblatt addresses this problem when she states that literature "lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information" (1995: 27), which she associates with efferent reading. What any teacher of literature has to work with are the (emotional) responses of students that may not correspond to the expected insights, but whose systematic neglect teaches learners that whatever they have to say counts for little. Secondly, traditional approaches privilege one point in time of the meaning-making process, which is when everyone has read the text. This seems logical from the perspective of narratology, as all pieces of the puzzle have been revealed and students are supposed to have a complete understanding of the text. However, 'having-read' comprehension is very different from aesthetic reading. Especially when a teacher's role is to be understood as a facilitator of reading as an experience (cf. Delanoy 2015: 20, 35), a lot

more has to happen before the final discussion of the book in a teacher-centred lockstep phase. And thirdly, scenes with specific character configurations (cf. Emmott 2004: 103) and interactions are the main access points for narrative understanding. Dewey argues that readers' experiences of a text are bound to such details: "The esthetic portrayal of grief manifests the grief of a particular individual in connection with a particular event. It is *that* state of sorrow which is depicted, not depression unattached. It has a *local* habitation" (2005: 94; see also 95–6). Summaries and similar retrospective tasks tend to ask for the elimination of the specific in favour of global insight, whereas reader-response approaches are mostly interested in the dynamic interaction with the text before the final conclusions are drawn.

Iser's model of reading is built on the contrast between a foregrounded perspective under current consideration, which he calls the 'theme', and all previously encountered perspectives, which form the 'horizon': "As perspectives are continually interweaving and interacting, it is not possible for the reader to embrace all perspectives at once, and so the view he is involved with at any one particular moment is what constitutes for him 'the theme'" (1980: 97; see also 98–9). Since the whole narrative consists of such vantage points, the "theme of one moment becomes the horizon against which the next segment takes on its actuality" (1980: 198; see also Dewey 2005: 199, 211), which in Sternberg's or Bordwell's theory means that we are constantly primed by previous moments or scenes for an encounter with the next. While this teleological drive of narrative construction does have a significant influence on meaning-making, the interaction between themes is not limited to priming, but equally includes a re-evaluation of previous scenes in light of recent developments and revelations. Iser acknowledges this phenomenon as "reciprocal spotlighting" (1980: 114; see also 118, 148, 197, 202; Rosenblatt 1994: 85; Dewey 2005: 116) and explains the concept in the following manner:

The continual interaction of perspectives throws new light on all positions linguistically manifested in the text, for each position is set in a fresh context, with the result that the reader's attention is drawn to aspects hitherto not apparent. Thus the structure of theme and horizon transforms every perspective segment of the text into a two-way glass, in the sense that each segment appears against the others and is therefore not only itself but also a reflection and an illuminator of those others. Each individual position is thus expanded and changed by its relation to the others, for we view it from all the perspectives that constitute the horizon. In this respect the literary text avails itself of a mechanism that regulates perception in general, for what is observed changes when it is observed – in accordance with the particular expectations of the observer. (1980: 97–8; see also 99, 116)

This is the most important departure in this model from the strict temporality, linearity and teleology of classical narratology, as narrative comprehension is presented here as based on a relationship between and the mutual illumination of story elements across perspectives and scenes. It is a translinear process that runs backwards and forwards, establishing a tentative web of meaning across the narrative. Iser even introduces a new term, the 'retroactive effect', to specifically address, in Sternberg's terms, the "unexpected retroactive illumination" (1978: 100) of previously encountered scenes:

In most literary texts, however, the sequence of sentences is so structured that the correlates serve to modify and even frustrate the expectations they have aroused. In so doing, they automatically have a retroactive effect on what has already been read, which now appears quite different. Furthermore, what has been read shrinks in the memory to a foreshortened background, but it is being constantly evoked in a new context and so modified by new correlates that instigate a restructuring of past syntheses. (Iser 1980: 111; see also 114, 115, 155; Rosenblatt 1994: 10, 57–8, 60–1, 85, 134)

Sternberg calls the same phenomenon "the bi-directional processing of information" by which he means "the play of expectation and hypothesis, retrospective revision of patterns, shifts of ambiguity, and progressive reconstitution in general" (1978: 98; see also Benton & Fox 1985: 14). Another important concept is the introduction of a 'foreshortened background' in the form of 'past syntheses', which means that the story information we operate with is not atomistic or compartmentalised, but stored as *gestalten* or holistic construals. The groundwork for these ideas can be found in Dewey (cf. 2005: 189).

It is Iser's general conviction that the flow of any narrative cannot be as smooth and steady as our advanced reading skills make us believe (cf. De Bruyn 2012: 131–2). He argues that the 'themes' are set off against each other by gaps: "Wherever there is an abrupt juxtaposition of segments, there must automatically be a blank, breaking the expected order of the text" (1980: 195). When readers begin to compare and contrast related themes, which illuminate each other, a referential field is set up whose elements they are able to simultaneously view within their field of vision at any particular moment. In reader-response criticism synthesis is based on synopsis in the original sense of the word: we understand things by seeing them together. The gap has an almost paradoxical function in this context: on the one hand, it sets apart units of narrative organisation; on the other hand, it ties these segments together through the connective tissue that readers produce in response to the text (cf. Iser 1980: 197). In Iser's system image-building is "polysynthetic" (1980: 148), which means that there are several (potential) narrative strands that readers have to keep track

of. Dewey, almost randomly, calls these gaps ‘problems,’ “intervals” (2005: 164), “seams and mechanical junctions” (2005: 199) or “pause” (2005: 179), but otherwise the theory is surprisingly similar:

Without internal tension there would be a fluid rush to a straightaway mark; there would be nothing that could be called development and fulfillment. The existence of resistance defines the place of intelligence in the production of an object of fine art. The difficulties to be overcome in bringing about the proper reciprocal adaptation of parts constitute what in intellectual work are problems. As in activity dealing with predominantly intellectual matters, the material that constitutes a problem has to be converted into a means for its solution. It cannot be sidestepped. (2005: 143)

According to Iser every text features “strategies” that “organize the *internal* network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader” (1980: 96). They may seem insignificant, but they orchestrate the activation of previous segments to become part of the referential field. “The organizational importance of these strategies becomes all too evident the moment they are dispensed with. This happens, for instance, when plays or novels are summarised, or poems paraphrased. The text is practically disembodied, being reduced to content at the expense of effect” (1980: 86). According to Iser, a summary smooths over the “surprising twists and turns” (1980: 112), the “processes of focusing and refocusing” (1980: 113) and other important interruptions of the narrative flow on both micro-structural and macro-structural levels. Iser argues that “the strategies disrupt consistency-building” to shake readers out of a false complacency and force a “continual oscillation between involvement and observation” (1980: 128). Since reading is a “self-corrective process” (Rosenblatt 1994: 11; see also 1964: 125), the text continuously reminds readers of the kind of work they are supposed to do:

... the reader’s communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify. It is cybernetic in nature as it involves a feedback of effects and information throughout a sequence of changing situational frames; smaller units progressively merge into bigger ones, so that meaning gathers meaning in a kind of snowballing process. (Iser 1980: 67; see also 167, 201–3; Dewey 2005: 143, 179, 199, 228).

Contrary to Frank Smith, Iser chooses to overemphasise the cognitive strain that every reading demands. Information is not offered in a continuous flow of easily digestible bits, but as discontinuous fragments that have to be actively pieced together by a highly involved creative reader. This gradation of complexity can be explained when we look at the literary texts and readerships that Smith, Rosenblatt and Iser have in mind. While the first focuses on early reading

experiences of native speakers with age-adequate texts, Rosenblatt derives her practical examples from teaching poetry to undergraduates. Iser, however, relied on introspection, which establishes a context that sees university professors engaging with the most demanding texts of the literary canon. Therefore, he naturally associates literary writing with formal complexity and the concept of defamiliarisation or 'enstrangement' (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 4–6; Iser 1980: 43, 61, 87–8, 93–4), which constantly destabilises and questions a facile auto-assembly of narrative information into a consistent storyline. Writing about "energy expenditure and economy in poetry", Shklovsky addresses precisely this point: "If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously-automatically" (1998: 4–5). Importantly, Shklovsky identifies the danger of automatisisation and numbness in real life and postulates art as the only cure: "And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (1998: 6). The strategy of art, according to Shklovsky, is to shake us out of our complacency to see things afresh for what they truly are. It is not hard to notice an echo of Plato's allegory of the cave here. This may explain why Iser's reading process is an "often difficult journey" (1980: 16). He consciously places different texts and genres on this continuum of complexity with (post)modernist prose fiction representing one end of the spectrum and genre fiction and "propagandist literature" (1980: 83) the other. Surprisingly, he groups film with lowbrow fiction, because we are presented with a complete picture that we do not have to construct on our own (cf. 1980: 138). This confusion of his own sophisticated process of consistency-building and gestalt-forming with a literal picture is inappropriate. He even claims that a photograph "excludes me from a world which I can see but which I have not helped to create" (1980: 139). This is the old prejudice that visual narrative media lead to an "impoverishment of the mental image" (1980: 139), because they put a pre-conceived world on display. Part 4 sets out to demonstrate that Iser's own theory is perfectly suited to discredit such a claim and works even better with comics than with prose fiction.

From a contemporary perspective, the most confusing aspect of Iser's terminology is the fact that he uses 'schema' to describe a textual structure, whereas in cognitive psychology it designates a "mental pattern, usually derived from past experience, which is used to assist with the interpretation of subsequent cognitions" (Groome 2014a: 8). Iser, however, prefers 'image' or 'gestalt' instead,

with a slight difference in meaning: he tends to use 'image' for the smaller scale, such as our understanding of a character or situation, and 'gestalt' for a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative itself on a meta-level. Otherwise Iser's grasp of cognitive activity is surprisingly accurate: "The actual content of these mental images will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed" (1980: 38; see also Dewey 2005: 63; Benton 1992: 31, 33). Concurrently, new information reshapes the very structures we use to make sense of the world. This is essentially how all learning works (cf. Smith 2004: 13, 200; Bordwell 1985: 31). Both reader-response theorists and cognitivists claim that this type of experience does not only affect future reading, but our interaction with the world at large: "there is no doubt that processing a text is bound to result in changes within the recipient, and these changes are not a matter of grammatical rules, but of experience" (Iser 1980: 32).

The similarity between Iser's model and cognitive theories can be easily explained through gestalt psychology, to which Iser's model of reading is largely indebted and which was a German forerunner of schema theory. Accordingly, Iser proposes a simultaneous bottom-up/top-down process through which readers keep projecting the 'images' they have created of various characters, relationships and contexts onto the narrative while adapting them in view of new hypotheses or evidence. These cognitive representations are not pictures in a traditional sense: "Our mental images do not serve to make the character physically visible; their optical poverty is an indication of the fact that they illuminate the character, not as an object, but as a bearer of meaning. [. . .] The image produced is therefore always more than the facet given in one particular reading moment" (1980: 138). This is a counterargument to Iser's own claim that visual narrative media show too much of the story world and impoverish the imagination. Since the 'image' of a character is that of a 'bearer of meaning' and not a photorealistic representation, it should not matter whether a character is portrayed by an actor, drawn by an artist or created in prose by a novelist. Significantly, the 'image' is also not a 'fact file', but a blend of experiences that have been drawn from different contexts.

In Iser's theory, the essence of literature and the reason why we read can be found in the fault lines that he calls gaps: "Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole network of possible connections which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning" (1980: 196). The signs acquire their meaning only in relation to other signs, which requires a "synthesizing process" that "is not sporadic", as "it continues throughout every phase of the journey of the wandering viewpoint" (1980: 109). Iser

follows Saussurean semiotics very closely here: “each textual segment does not carry its own determinacy within itself, but will gain this in relation to other segments” (1980: 195; see also De Bruyn 2012: 110). This is where the parallels between gestalt psychology and semiotics come to the fore in Iser's theory. On all levels of the reading process an element can only gain meaning against a background of similar elements: sign vs. signs, theme vs. horizon, gestalt vs. gestalten.

In his preface to the sixth edition of *Art and Illusion*, written in 2000, Gombrich identifies semiotics and psychology as mutually exclusive competitors for the ultimate theory: “There never was an image that looked like nature; all images are based on conventions, no more and no less than is language or the characters of our scripts. All images are signs, and the discipline that must investigate them is not the psychology of perception – as I had believed – but *semiotics*, the science of signs” (2014: xv). Gombrich's reassessment of his own approach is ultimately misguided as he cannot shake the conviction that a single theory should be able to explain the complexity of the reading process – semiotics *or* the psychology of perception. The solution is that *both* are indispensable. Iser's reliance on constructivism and gestalt psychology is well founded, after all, as is his insistence that the text guides perception. By constantly revising our models we manage to come closer to a fuller understanding – at least in our own terms: “A gestalt closes itself in proportion to the degree in which it resolves the tensions between the signs that are to be grouped” (Iser 1980: 124). Since literature tries to keep readers on their toes, several images or gestalten are competing for dominance in terms of their capacity to explain the ever-shifting meanings of a text: “The impeded process of ideation, however, allows a variety of definitive gestalten to emerge from the same text” (1980: 188). In other words: the “process of consistency-building” involves “the selection of a gestalt” that provides superior closure in contrast to those that came before, starting with “the formation of an initial, open gestalt” (1980: 123).

In the case of aesthetic reading, there is a danger of narrowing down the range of potential explanations too quickly and too early (cf. Iser 1980: 124). This can be explained through the primacy effect and produces false images in service of an ongoing quest for coherence: “Consistency-building itself is not an illusion-making process, but consistency comes about through gestalt groupings, and these contain traces of illusion in so far as their closure – since it is based on selection – is not a characteristic of the text itself, but only represents a configurative meaning” (1980: 124). These illusions may influence or even overshadow a reading in two dramatic ways: either the readers or viewers are so enamoured with the narrative or indoctrinated by others that their blindness

does not allow for any other reading than the one they bring to the text; or, in case the evidence to the contrary cannot be ignored, they are likely to suffer a disappointment or enjoy a pleasant surprise 'out of the blue'.

Iser tries to reign in such 'misreadings' by claiming that readers' projections never completely mislead them as "the gestalten remain at least potentially under attack from those possibilities which they have excluded but dragged along in their wake" (1980: 127). He explains this point further: "for each decision taken has to stabilize itself against the alternatives which it has rejected. These alternatives arise both from the text itself and from the reader's own disposition – the former allowing different options, the latter different insights" (1980: 230). As we have seen, Gombrich and Smith insist that readers pursue *one* interpretation rather than tracing alternate readings at the same time, but Iser's model allows for competing interpretations and polysynthetic gaps as part of the interactions between theme and horizon. Open gestalten may not be fully fledged and consciously available all the time, but they offer a valuable background against which the current theory can be tested in one scene after the next. To put this into perspective, Iser assumes highly complex (post)modernist literary works that may involve unreliable narration, an ongoing uncertainty about the ontological status of characters, or the presentation of the same events from different perspectives consecutively. In these cases different potential readings are the norm rather than the exception.

## 1.5 The Overdetermination of Literary Texts

We have already encountered Iser's bold claim that the "iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified" (1980: 65). What is the nature of the story world then, that Iser warns us against a false sense of verisimilitude? It is easier to start with what it is *not*: "the very term *fiction* implies that the words on the printed page are not meant to denote any given reality in the empirical world" (1980: 53; see also Dewey 2005: 287). In factual or scientific texts that are intended for efferent reading, writers define the terms they use as precisely as possible and ask the readers to understand the world in exactly these terms. Ideally, the signifieds match, especially in technical discourse, where the whole point of a predetermined terminology is to avoid misunderstandings as much as possible. Narratives, however, invite the readers or viewers to understand them in their own terms, often through indirect means: "the world must be translated into something it is not, if it is to be perceived and understood" (Iser 1980: 64). For Iser symbols "constitute this



nongiven element, without which we could have no access to empirical reality” (1980: 64). Thus, narratives do not require readers to respond to the world, but to the situations they artfully set up: “It is clear that if a literary text represents a reaction to the world, the reaction must be to the world incorporated in the text; the forming of the aesthetic object therefore coincides with the reader’s reactions to positions set up and transformed by the structure of theme and horizon” (1980: 98; see also 128–9). Thus, Iser opposes the concept of mimesis, as the literary work of art does not imitate or document reality: “The literary text performs its function, not through a ruinous comparison with reality, but by communicating a reality which it has organized itself” (1980: 181). It reconfigures and overdetermines (cf. 1980: 48–50) elements taken from real life to create particular effects.

Overdetermination is a helpful concept to explain the differences between real life and art and how artists manage to highlight aspects of reality that would otherwise go unnoticed. Iser uses the term ‘repertoire’ to designate all those elements that have been selected from real life in service of an aesthetic aim: “The aesthetic value conditions the selection of the repertoire, and in so doing deforms the given nature of what is selected in order to formulate the system of equivalences peculiar to that one text; in this respect, it constitutes the framework of the text” (1980: 82; see also 109; Dewey 2005: 91, 93, 112; Fludernik 2005: 38–9; Stockwell 2002: 126–7). This foregrounding of elements (cf. Stockwell 2002: 14) occurs twice: once through the selection of the repertoire from a vast background of socio-cultural contexts and, again, through the wandering viewpoint that draws our attention to specific themes set off against the horizon. This leads to an intense spotlighting and overdetermination of those elements that have not only been selected for the repertoire, but again foregrounded within the text itself. Dewey explains this effect in the following manner: “For art is a selection of what is significant, with rejection by the very same impulse of what is irrelevant, and thereby the significant is compressed and intensified” (2005: 217). Accordingly, I disagree with Jerome Bruner and Alan Palmer who claim that literary texts are underdetermined and thus indeterminate because they contain gaps (cf. Bruner 1986: 24–5; Palmer 2004: 34). I rather follow Iser, who proposes that the gaps are carefully chosen and orchestrated to defamiliarise and, thus, foreground specific beliefs and norms that would otherwise go unnoticed. As we shall see, comics scholars know the same principle as “amplification through simplification” (Mc Cloud 1994: 30; see also Mar & Oatley 2008: 177) by which certain elements of a composition become salient against a starkly reduced background. Iser’s view of literature is not based on a deficit-model. When Palmer goes on to argue that we need our real-world knowledge to make sense of the characters in a narrative

text, there is nothing to object to: “The reader can cope with the gaps in the continuing consciousnesses of fictional minds because in the real world we experience gaps in other real minds too” (2004: 199). However, there are two important caveats: fictional minds are much more accessible through the intervention of art and, secondly, the same logic applies *vice versa*: we also learn to read real life through the experience of art.

While the repertoire suggests a certain familiarity and provides a starting point for the reader/viewer, the unique configuration of the work of art decontextualises and defamiliarises the selected elements and makes the reader/viewer experience them afresh under the guidance of the text: “Experiences arise only when the familiar is transcended or undermined; they grow out of the alteration or falsification of that which is already ours” (Iser 1980: 131–2). Robert C. Holub captures this idea really well: “Through the repertoire, therefore, the literary text reorganizes social and cultural norms as well as literary traditions so that the reader may reassess their function in real life” (2010: 87). This reconfiguration of familiar elements to lift cultural blindness can also be found in Victor Turner’s seminal essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” in which he describes defamiliarisation as an educational tool to make young men undergoing a rite of passage aware of the cultural world in which they live by taking them out of their familiar environment and placing them in a unique relation to it:

much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of liminal *sacra* may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the “factors” of their culture. I have myself seen Ndembu and Luvale masks that combine features of both sexes, have both animal and human attributes, and unite in a single representation human characteristics with those of the natural landscape. One *ikishi* mask is partly human and partly represents a grassy plain. Elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration, the monster or dragon. Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted. [. . .] During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. These constituents are isolated and made into objects of reflection for the neophytes by such processes as componental exaggeration and dissociation by varying concomitants. (1972: 105; see also Bruner 1986: 26, 123)

Literature serves a similar function (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 183–4), which Dewey describes in the following way: “We are, as it were, introduced into a world

beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves” (2005: 202). Through selection, concentration (cf. Dewey 2005: 204, 207), reconfiguration and overdetermination writers turn the raw materials of life into narratives that highlight and examine what would otherwise be ignored or quickly passed over (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 34; Dewey 2005: 87, 99; Gombrich 2014: 121). Most importantly of all, literature “provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*” (Rosenblatt 1995: 38), which results in “an enlargement of our experience” (1995: 40; see also Dewey 2005: 302). This is a critical point for Dewey. Defamiliarisation should not be an end in itself, so that reading becomes “disconnected from other modes of experience” (2005: 9), but a way to reconnect with life. However, if an artist “acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind” (2005: 52), readers’ experience may be dramatically lessened.

Overdetermination means that all the elements that have been selected may be referential to a certain extent, but they play more prominent roles within the text itself. They may have an additional symbolic function, exemplify a thematic concern and contribute to the internal network of meanings: “an ‘overdetermined text’ causes the reader to engage in an active process of composition, because it is he who has to structure the meaning potential arising out of the multifarious connections between the semantic levels of the text” (Iser 1980: 49). This process is guided by the textual strategies: “the main task of the text strategies is to organize the *internal* network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader” (1980: 96).

Thus, “the elements of the repertoire are highly determinate” (1980: 85); they are made to stand out – both in relation to their old context and their new place in the narrative: “The very process of selection inevitably creates a background-foreground relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background” (1980: 93). What in real life may be just what it is – such as a chance encounter with a stranger on a train – has to gain significance far beyond a random event to warrant inclusion in a narrative. But if it does, it surely has been transformed, deformed or reformed to take an eminent place in the sequence. That is why Bordwell ascribes all elements of a film such an important status: “All film techniques, even those involving the ‘profilmic event,’ function narrationally, constructing the story world for specific effects” (1985: 12). With just two hours of narrating time, every scene, every visual element, every shot and frame has to count. Since narrative is a perspectival art, the unique ‘vision’ of a writer or director reshapes the material “to enable us to see that familiar reality with new eyes” (Iser 1980: 181). For Iser, the literary text

cannot be a representation of reality, as the wandering viewpoint functions as an optical instrument that provides readers with a unique view: “the work is in no way a mere copy of the given world – it constructs a world of its own out of the material available to it. It is the way in which this world is constructed that brings about the perspective intended by the author” (1980: 35; see also Dewey 2005: 77–8).

For Iser, artistic foregrounding is an eminently political act: “literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms” (1980: 3). The cultural work that narratives perform is such that they foreground what has been consciously or negligently obscured: “the borderlines of existing systems are the starting point for the literary text. It begins to activate that which the system has left inactive” (1980: 72). In terms of literary history, thus,

... we can reconstruct whatever was concealed or ignored by the philosophy or ideology of the day, precisely because these neutralized or negated aspects of reality form the focal point of the literary work. At the same time, the literary text must also implicitly contain the basic framework of the system, as this is what causes the problems that literature is to react to. (1980: 73)

This quotation only makes sense in the context of overdetermination and double foregrounding. The repertoire draws elements from the real world and thus reproduces social structures in the narrative. The unique configuration of these elements, however, together with the orchestration of perspectives and the wandering viewpoint produce a very specific point of view and attitude that invite readers to look at the represented world in a particular way. In this sense literature teaches readers to become better readers of both fiction and real life: “The novel fulfills its didactic purpose by developing the reader’s own sense of discernment” (1980: 216), which is made possible by “the rearranging and, indeed, reranking of existing patterns of meaning” (1980: 72; see also 74, 181, 212; Dewey 2005: 252). Iser’s use of the term ‘didactic’ is interesting, as he otherwise denounces “rhetorical, didactic, and propagandist literature” as genres that “generally take over intact the thought system already familiar to its readers” (1980: 83; see also 190). Iser believes that defamiliarisation invites critical thinking and allows the reader to be “placed in a position from which he can take a fresh look at the forces which guide and orient him, and which he may hitherto have accepted without question” (1980: 74; see also 213, 218; Rosenblatt 1994: 145; Dewey 2005: 99). Iser’s humanist agenda makes him believe that great literature exists outside of socio-political discourses, almost like a pure form that teaches compassion and discernment, a panacea against the stupidity and indoctrination of mass media.

“Iser is convinced [...] that reading is not only about aesthetic appreciation or the formation of meaning, but also about personal transformation” (De Bruyn 2012: 129) and conducive to the propagation of “enlightenment ideals” (Holub 2010: 97). In this sense, a comparison to the functional aspect of Turner’s rite of passage or Plato’s allegory of the cave may not be too far-fetched: in all three instances the confrontation with an altered reality has a direct and significant bearing on our understanding of a reality that has become so familiar to us that we have lost all discernment concerning its constituted nature.

Iser is aware of the challenges that are involved in this Herculean task of dragging the reluctant dupes, spoon-fed by mass media, into the light: “Reading, as it were, against the grain is far from easy”, as the reader must overcome “his own prejudices” (1980: 8; see also De Bruyn 2012: 130; Rosenblatt 1994: 187). Dewey describes this fundamental reorientation in similar terms: “For ‘taking in’ in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful” (2005: 42). This is also tied to his distinction between ‘recognition’ and ‘perception’: “In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme. Some detail or arrangement of details serves as cue for bare identification. It suffices in recognition to apply this bare outline as a stencil to the present object. [...] Perception replaces bare recognition. There is an act of reconstructive doing and consciousness becomes fresh and alive” (2005: 54). Reading, in Dewey’s sense, relies on both types: as trained readers we instantly recognise the words, often whole groups of them, but the meaning-making process involves perception. The true work of art – in Dewey’s view – reconfigures reality in such a way that it elevates the aesthetic experience of readers into a form of enlightened communion. In stark contrast, “[o]rdinary experience is often infected with apathy, lassitude and stereotype” (2005: 270; see also Bredella 2010: 214). In order for a work of art to leave a lasting impression on a human being, there has to be a challenge and an engagement on all levels of existence:

There is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions whose funded result constitutes the meanings with which we grasp and understand what is now occurring. Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past. When past and present fit exactly into one another, when there is only recurrence, complete uniformity, the resulting experience is routine and mechanical; it does not come to consciousness in perception. The inertia of habit overrides adaptation of the meaning of the here and now with that of

experiences, without which there is no consciousness, the imaginative phase of experience. (Dewey 2005: 284)

Dewey tries to capture this all-encompassing engagement with the verb 'to mind': "'mind' denotes every mode and variety of interest in, and concern for, things: practical, intellectual, and emotional" (2005: 274). Again it becomes apparent how closely Iser builds his theory on Dewey's: the routine and mechanical application of genre knowledge to a formulaic novel does not engage readers, as the text only confirms what experienced readers already know. Instead of instant recognition the kind of aesthetic reading that Dewey and Iser have in mind takes time and effort (cf. Dewey 2005: 182–3).

To put this approach into perspective it may help to quickly reference Daniel Kahneman's bestseller *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. This is a book about systematic biases of intuition that can be explained through the metaphor of two complementary systems in the brain: one is thinking fast and relies on norms, prototypes and intuitions (System 1), the other is thinking slowly and requires conscious effort (System 2). System 1 "continually constructs a coherent interpretation of what is going on in the world at any instant" (2012: 13; see also 71) and with little effort. It works on autopilot, completely independent of conscious control (cf. 2012: 20; see also Turner 1994: 32–4; Gerrig 2011: 37, 45; Groome 2014a: 17–19), and roughly corresponds to what Iser calls consistency-building in his theory (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 64; Kahneman 2012: 50–1, 75–6, 85–8). However, System 1 operations rely on all the resources of an individual, including emotions, intuitions and personal preferences. In contrast to this, "System 2 is activated when an event is detected that violates the model of the world that System 1 maintains" (Kahneman 2012: 24). From a literary studies point of view defamiliarisation is the cause of cognitive strain and triggers the activation of System 2. This is why, for Iser and Dewey, there is a direct connection between the complexity of the work of art and its potential to provide a real experience. Overdetermination, as the strategic selection, deployment, aggregation and foregrounding of narrative elements and clues, guides consistency-building in very general terms (System 1), but it also prepares for striking revelations and deeper insights by activating System 2 and establishing translinear connections.

Kahneman also deserves credit for accepting that the stereotypes of System 1 are the only framework we have to make sense of the world. Without them instantaneous consistency-building would be impossible:

*Stereotyping* is a bad word in our culture, but in my usage it is neutral. One of the basic characteristics of System 1 is that it represents categories as norms and prototypical exemplars. This is how we think of horses, refrigerators, and New York police officers;

we hold in memory a representation of one or more “normal” members of each of these categories. When the categories are social, these representations are called stereotypes. Some stereotypes are perniciously wrong, and hostile stereotyping can have dreadful consequences, but the psychological facts cannot be avoided: stereotypes, both correct and false, are how we think of categories. (2012: 168–9)

What does a fight against stereotypes involve then, when they are all we have? Based on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s views on prejudice, which seem to be the same as Kahneman’s, Lothar Bredella and Werner Delany come to the following conclusion:

We must pre-judge in order to be able to judge the text or another culture. For Gadamer “prejudice” is not a negative term. Prejudices as prior understanding play a constitutive role in the process of understanding. They determine how we understand from behind our backs. Therefore we are not conscious of them. But when we encounter others who think and feel differently we might become aware of them. Thus the encounter with others is necessary for a critical reflection of our prejudices. (1996: ix)

If our thought processes are mostly subconscious and prejudiced, how is it possible then that something like “expert intuition” (Kahneman 2012: 11) develops, which allows for the accurate analysis of a complex situation within split seconds, based on minimal evidence? The answer is simple: “mental activities become fast and automatic through prolonged practice” (2012: 22) or, as Dewey puts it: “Of course there are recognitions that are virtually instantaneous. But these occur only when, through a sequence of past experiences, the self has become expert in certain directions” (2005: 182). Research has shown that chess masters reach the highest level of performance after “at least 10,000 hours of dedicated practice” (Kahneman 2012: 238). This allows System 1 to draw from a vast store of experiences and insights that the layperson simply does not have. In addition, “subjects who possess a great deal of expert knowledge about a subject are particularly good at remembering material which relates to their field of expertise” (Groome 2014b: 163), simply because they are personally invested and enjoy engaging in the activity.

Overdetermination, as the orchestrated guidance of readers’ attention, can be understood as a didactic tool that foregrounds patterns that are supposed to be noticed (cf. Nünning 2014: 39, 42). The psychologist Keith Oatley describes this phenomenon with the help of the medium film: “in the discourse structure of film – how different from our own real lives – the camera and microphone are always at exactly the right spot, at exactly the right moment, with exactly the right angle, so that we can observe just the transaction that is essential to the

plot” (1999: 445). This is why overdetermination is the exact opposite of realism and verisimilitude.

Gombrich, who is mainly concerned with the illusion of realism in painting, understands the medium as a particular selection of signs and affordances into which the artist has to translate what he or she sees (cf. 2014: 30, 56). What is more, his “style, like the medium, creates a mental set which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees” (2014: 73). This has to do with the impact of culturally available frames, such as genres, that artists rely on and through which they develop distinct styles that become recognizable, even across vastly different subject matters. Gombrich explains the matter thus: “There is no neutral naturalism. The artist, no less than the writer, needs a vocabulary before he can embark on a ‘copy’ of reality” (2014: 75). He argues that artists arrive at their own individual styles through “the rhythm of schema and correction” (2014: 92).

Patrick Colm Hogan presents an interesting example in the context of jazz improvisations (cf. 2003: 7–28). He claims that the music has to be challenging, but still comprehensible as a pattern (cf. 2003: 9–10), so that the genre remains transparent as a blueprint or formula, but embellished with enough variety and original ideas to make it highly engaging. Hogan uses John Coltrane’s 1961 jazz record *My Favorite Things*, which is a cover version of the popular hit from the musical *The Sound of Music*, to illustrate the difficult balance between easy recognition and complex deviation from the established pattern. On the part of the musician this requires mastery of the established pattern (cf. 2003: 19, 69) to be then able to focus on the improvisations and innovations. The listener is primed by the “themes and basic phrases” that “are already in the listener’s long-term memory” (2003: 21), so that the variations of the theme can be much more daring, precisely because the pattern is so familiar.

Gombrich acknowledges that “the revulsion from the formula is a comparatively recent development” (2014: 128) and that most artists start out by imitating and experimenting with established patterns. For Gombrich it is important that the “schema on which a representation is based will continue to show through the ultimate elaboration” (2014: 92). This play with schemas – Gombrich’s term for the established aesthetic structures of a work of art – is central to his theory and is mirrored in readers’ engagement with a text, which equally takes place between convention and innovation:

The work of art is thus a challenge to the performance of a like act of evocation and organization, through imagination, on the part of the one who experiences it. It is not just a



stimulus to and means of an overt course of action. This fact constitutes the uniqueness of esthetic experience, and this uniqueness is in turn a challenge to thought. It is particularly a challenge to that systematic thought called philosophy. (Dewey 2005: 285)

In this context Iser argues that texts take readers out of their comfort zone and open up a “third dimension” (1980: 218; see also Benton 1992: 23) which is situated halfway between the familiar and the new and allows for “the heightening of self-awareness which develops in the reading process” (1980: 157). He describes this ‘third space’ in between the familiar world of readers and the circumstances of the narrative in the following way:

He is caught, as it were, between his discoveries and his habitual disposition. If he adopts the discovery standpoint, his own disposition may then become the theme of observation; if he holds fast to his governing conventions, he must then give up his discoveries. Whichever choice he may make will be conditioned by the tension of his position, which forces him to try and achieve a balance. The incongruity between discovery and disposition can generally only be removed through the emergence of a third dimension, which is perceived as the meaning of the text. The balance is achieved when the disposition experiences a correction, and in this correction lies the function of the discovery. (1980: 218; see also 213, 217)

In other words: the literary text challenges readers to integrate new discoveries or experiences into their existing mental frameworks: “the acquisition of experience is not a matter of adding on – it is a restructuring of what we already possess” (1980: 132; see also 152, 210, 221; Rosenblatt 1994: 145; Bredella 2010: 78). The function of literary texts, according to Iser, is for narratives to contain enough of the familiar to provide basic orientation, but, at the same time, enough of a challenge to make readers connect the dots under the guidance of the text.

Iser never tires of stressing the unique qualities of fiction that lie precisely in its unrealistic, strongly selective, defamiliarising and perspectival treatment of real life. Towards the end of *The Art of Reading* he adds a further essential difference that stresses the unique role of fiction in human understanding:

the final gap *can* only be closed through a fiction, since it is both the function and achievement of the literary work to bring into existence something which has no reality of its own, and which can never be finally deduced from existing realities. Now for all the given material that goes to make up a mental image, it is only the fictive element that can establish the consistency necessary to endow it with the appearance of reality, for consistency is not a given quality of reality. And so the fictive element always comes to the fore when we realize the projective nature of our mental images. This does not mean that we then wish to exclude the fictive element from our images, for this is structurally impossible anyway – without the fictive link there can be no image. But it can mean

that, through our awareness of the fictive closure, integral to our acts of ideation, we may be able to transcend our hitherto fixed positions, and at least we shall be conscious of the intriguing role which fiction plays in our ideational and conceptual activities. (1980: 225)

Here he claims that all human understanding is creative and requires a leap of the imagination, often in the form of metaphorical thinking. Just like rituals, which are heavily invested in metaphor, stories have the power to invite closure, which is a blend of seemingly irreconcilable matter into a unified whole that transcends the gaps and inconsistencies. Only through overdetermination, defamiliarisation and the moving viewpoint can narratives reposition us in relation to the world we live in. For the literary text is an optical instrument that allows for new insights to be gained from reading, whose consistency-building and meaning-making require an ongoing negotiation of different perspectives.

## 2 Transaction in Educational Settings

### 2.1 The Ease of Reading

The previous part on reader-response criticism started with Wolfgang Iser's comparison of the reading process to an "often difficult journey" (1980: 16), which I then qualified by emphasising the different types of application that writers such as Frank Smith, Louise M. Rosenblatt or Iser himself had in mind. They can range from a young native speaker's first encounter with picture books to a university professor's tenth rereading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in preparation for an academic essay. Yet, we refer to all these cultural practices with a single verb – 'to read'. In everyday situations the context provides sufficient clues which type of reading is meant in each case (e.g. text messages, good night stories, body language, Tarot, newspapers, between the lines, romances, horoscopes, cartoons), but the matter becomes more complicated with educational settings.

While aesthetic reading, reading comprehension and narratological analysis are three distinct types of engagement with texts, they are often presumed to unfold automatically and concurrently. Based on this logic, students are expected to articulate their personal responses, understand the basic facts of the narrative (who? where? when? etc.) and comment on artistic choices (e.g. narration, focalisation, time structure, character constellation, style) after a first encounter with the text. However, sharing personal observations, extracting information from a piece of writing and looking behind the scenes are not exactly the same thing. Therefore, Rosenblatt felt the need to differentiate at least between aesthetic and efferent reading, which she associates with different cognitive frames and readers' expectations. Frank Smith criticises that reading comprehension tasks, which are supposed to check a basic and allegedly neutral understanding of a text, are already "subject to personal predilection" (2004: x), influenced by narratological analysis and closely tied to the extraction of facts. Rosenblatt does acknowledge a whole spectrum of responses, ranging from the aesthetic to the efferent (cf. 1994: 27–8), as the two stances are sometimes difficult to separate. For the purposes of critical reflection, however, they are conceptually kept apart in this chapter. She indicates that "various stages in a developing process" (1994: 7) can lead – via the negotiation and co-construction of meaning – from highly subjective first impressions to a more reflected and justifiable reading of a text. Chapter 3 develops such a staged approach in greater detail. For the moment, we look at factors that influence various perceptions of reading, ranging from a basic skill that almost everyone will eventually master to erudite explications

of the most sophisticated works of art that human genius has ever blessed the world with.

In “A Performing Art” (1966) Rosenblatt is concerned with the formidable challenges that literary classics pose to the uninitiated: “As the reader submits himself to the guidance of the text, he must engage in a most demanding kind of activity” (1966: 1000). In the same essay she encourages her fellow teachers to muster “the courage to admit to our students that the actual business of recreating a work is difficult and tricky and sometimes frustrating, but always exciting and challenging” (1966: 1003). While she rejects “a single interpretation which the teacher can impose”, she is worried that a *laissez-faire* approach would stifle the students’ development: “Undisciplined, irrelevant or distorted emotional responses, and the lack of relevant experience or knowledge will, of course, lead to inadequate interpretations of the text” (1966: 1001). Therefore, she asks for “a very stringent discipline” (1966: 1001) that takes students to task in case they falter in their self-improvement and do not work to the best of their abilities.

All proponents of aesthetic reading are caught in this double bind: on the one hand, they acknowledge and actively encourage the constructivist nature of reading; on the other hand, they promise that through an ongoing process of rereading, self-correction and the negotiation of meaning in pairs and groups, students will eventually produce an adequate interpretation of the text. Looking at the humble beginnings from the vantage point of advanced interpretation/analysis, even ardent advocates of aesthetic reading, including Rosenblatt herself, find this challenge daunting. Since it is the teacher’s responsibility to organise the transitional stages in between, which gradually shift the balance towards greater objectivity and sophistication, the teacher’s role as a facilitator of reading (cf. Delanoy 2015: 20, 35) requires much more attention.

A similar double bind is evident in German publications on (aesthetic) reading in the classroom. While a commitment to reader-response criticism has produced several collections of student-focused activities (cf. e.g. Caspari 1994: 157–225; Haas, Menzel & Spinner 1994: 24; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 71–82; Freitag-Hild 2010: 102–21; Haas 2013), there are also more recent attempts to establish a classification of reading competences that can be trained and tested (cf. e.g. Hallet, Surkamp & Krämer 2015). While a focus on traditional reading comprehension and narratological analysis is conducive to such an endeavour, the re-definition of aesthetic reading as the application of a specific set of skills (cf. Diehr & Surkamp 2015: 25–7, 33; Hallet & Nöth 2015: 48) creates certain problems. Apart from the temptation to treat literature as a container of information, such a procedure also favours a top-down approach that retrospectively

defines certain milestones from the vantage point of school-leaving exams, which tend to be standardised tests. I am more inclined to agree with Christiane Lütge who states that “the very search for – testable – literary competences seems full of contradictions and leaves us with an insoluble dilemma” (2012: 195). She identifies these current challenges by observing that the lists of competences and the tasks based on these descriptors “may not (yet) fully reflect the complexities and intricacies of teaching literature” (2012: 195). However, this apt comment also reveals a more fundamental issue: we have begun to treat literature as a serious problem – not only due to external exigencies, but in and of itself. Extending reading to multiliteracies and listing every single aspect as a separate competence has added further complications. In *Films, Graphic Novels & Visuals: Developing Multiliteracies in Foreign Language Education – An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Daniela Elsner, Sissy Helff and Britta Viebrock make such a point: “Learners today face enormous perceptual challenges due to immensely complex communication technologies that often make use of visual icons” (2013: 7). The same logic is then applied to comics: “It is obvious that the reading of graphic novels requires an enhanced power of concentration, along with multimodal reading strategies, just like the reading of internet-pages, hypertexts or other multimodal twenty-first century texts does” (Elsner 2013: 64).

The attempt to save literature by enlisting as many contexts in which it can be usefully instrumentalised has led to a situation in which the few texts that are read in schools are needlessly burdened with unrealistic expectations. Reading an autobiographical comic in the classroom may now serve the development of language competences (e.g. reading comprehension), motivational, attitudinal, aesthetic and cognitive competences, cultural studies, multiliteracies (especially comics literacy, visual literacy and critical media literacy), literary literacy (e.g. genre competence, narrative competence), and so on (cf. Lütge 2012; Hallet et al. 2015). Provided that teachers know what all these categories require as independent approaches to multimodal texts, their interrelations and potential synergies still require a lot of work on a conceptual level. While in academic settings it has become the norm to approach a text from a very specific angle in an already specialised field, there is always the implicit pressure that teachers in secondary schools and their students are supposed to cover a text in its entirety. Together with a PISA-induced demand to make reading a more controllable, testable and efficient activity, there is a trend to quietly discard the idea of aesthetic reading and return to a stronger focus on analysis in the precious little time that is reserved for literature (cf. Delanoy 2015: 24–5). This is clearly at odds with the idea that students are supposed to enjoy reading and develop personal connections to books.

Looking again at certain conceptualisations of aesthetic reading that were introduced in part 1, we find a number of instances in which reading is presented as both easy and automatic: Iser's concept of consistency-building is described as a fully automated process; so is his understanding of "light reading" (1980: 219), which closely follows generic conventions. The readers' first impressions, their personal responses to art, are seen as happening 'naturally' in Dewey's theory (cf. 2005: 2–4). This is mirrored in Monika Fludernik's model of a 'natural' narratology, in which the first three levels are more or less automatic and based on daily experiences and culturally established patterns of storytelling (cf. 2005: 43–5). Fludernik associates some of the key concerns of narratology, such as characters, themes or plot, with level 1, which is the most basic (cf. 2005: 339–40). This affinity between storytelling and daily experiences directly relates to the appreciation of students' responses in the transactional theory of reading: "That personal knowledge which every child brings into the classroom and which long pre-dates any abstract awareness of poetic process and technique or of critical method, is not to be despised and might usefully be encouraged much further up the school than is commonly the case" (Benton 1986: 62). This is at odds with Iser's claim that art has to be difficult to generate true experience or Wolfgang Iser's observation that literary prose is not 'natural' and requires a very specific set of reading skills (cf. 2015b: 10). Such a discrepancy can only be solved by specifying the contexts and purposes of reading, but also by conceptualising it as an ongoing process that involves different stages. Before letting the aesthetic and the efferent merge again into what Rosenblatt calls "the capacity for thinking rationally about emotional responses" (1995: xviii), her two approaches to reading are now described as diametrically opposed in order to clarify how task-design and testing are directly influenced by how one conceives of reading.

In the case of an efferent stance, students retrieve facts based on standardised forms of enquiry, so that the results can be presented in highly regulated formats (text types) and evaluated according to predefined criteria. In traditional literature classes these are book reports, summaries, literary essays, character portraits, answers to comprehension questions, a time line based on the reconstruction of the story out of the discourse or any other task that requires detailed analysis, close (re)reading and/or the extraction of information. Although these formats are assumed to test reading comprehension, they involve general language competence, productive skills and an intimate knowledge of the generic conventions of the form in which the results have to be presented. This is Rosenblatt's elaboration of the same idea:

With traditional concerns of the literary critic, the literary analyst, and the literary historian as models, the “study of literature” has tended to hurry the student reader away from the evocation, to focus on efferent concerns: recall of details, paraphrase, summary, categorization of genres, formalistic analysis of verbal techniques, “background knowledge” and literary history. (1986: 126)

Such assignments often encourage students to treat the literary text as a self-contained unit and often demand retrospective, abstract and synoptic analysis on a macrostructural level. Students are required to disentangle themselves from the ‘lived through’ quality of aesthetic reading and focus on what the text intends to communicate in general terms. This may take the form of the lowest common denominator or “the message” of the text, which “implies that a work of literature has a single meaning” (Grimm, Meyer & Volkmann 2015: 179). In this sense a better term would be ‘having-read’ comprehension, as the progressive form of the verb evokes the wrong associations. Here is one of Smith’s arguments against such ideas:

So-called comprehension tests in school are usually given after a book has been read and as a consequence are more like tests of memory. [...] If I say that I comprehended a certain book, it doesn’t make sense to give me a test and argue that I didn’t understand it, although I may have understood it differently from the test constructor. (2004: 26)

Students are often asked to follow predetermined strategies and paths to reach a specific goal, collect information accordingly, organise it, restructure it and present it within the framework of a narrowly defined text type, such as a poster presentation, a book report or similar formats. All of this is closely tied to reading as a skill and the conventional way of teaching literature as a purely cognitive analysis that serves the extraction of information. It is far removed from how people read as a hobby, but all the more tempting, as its product-orientation makes testing a lot easier and allows for the operationalisation of specific steps.

Aesthetic reading acknowledges the fact that there is no escape from responding to a narrative on a personal level, which has been widely propagated and defended by Lothar Bredella (cf. e.g. 1996; Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004) or Werner Delanoy (cf. 2002; 2015). Narratives – and instances of life writing in particular – rely on personal experiences in a double sense: not only do they present the embodied life of a character (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 71), but they also heavily rely on the readers’ ability to bring them to life by engaging with the story world and turning the script – Rosenblatt’s musical notation or blueprint – into a fully realised experience. This involves personal, emotional and ethical responses, which have to be the starting points for any educational engagement with a text. It requires the ability to empathise with characters and

understand their entanglements in specific situations rather than in general terms. Fludernik stresses “the peculiar micro-textual dynamics of plot episodes in which reader expectations are apt to be upset at each and every turn, just as the protagonist’s intentions and goals are likely to be interfered with, requiring continual reorientation relative to the character’s overall aims and needs” (2005: 21–2). These are not mere distractions or fillers, but essential to our experience of the narrative and our understanding of the main characters. A summary, understood as a collection of the major events in chronological order, explicitly asks readers to disregard the aesthetic qualities and nuances together with personal experiences, associations and emotional responses. There is no doubt that the ability to write concise summaries represents an important and highly valued skill, indispensable in many occupational fields (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 26), but it is less apparent how this relates to aesthetic reading and why literature is particularly suited for such a task.

First and foremost, the aim of aesthetic reading is to understand oneself better, other people, different cultures, ideologies and contexts – not by gathering information, but through entanglement and vicarious experiences. Dewey, as we have seen, sees a continuum between everyday life and aesthetic experiences (2005: 2), as both feed into each other and produce long-lasting effects on human beings. He directs his criticism specifically against the idea of making art difficult by separating it from ordinary life and creating exclusive contexts and locations:

The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits. For, when what he knows as art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse towards experiences enjoyable in themselves finds such outlet as the daily environment provides. (2005: 4)

From Dewey’s point of view art needs to have a level of experientiality that is accessible without years of training: “It is quite possible to enjoy flowers in their colored form and delicate fragrance without knowing anything about plants theoretically” (2005: 2). For exactly the same reason the psychologist Richard Gerrig rejects Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” (1983: 6), as it creates an artificial separation between types of experiences that should be seen as a continuum (cf. Gerrig 1998: 17). He uses the expression “*willing construction of disbelief*” (Gerrig & Rapp 2004: 267) to illustrate the problem that – more often than not – humans are rather willing to accept narratives as the truth and that it takes conscious effort to establish a critical distance and recognise design and bias. The essence of teaching cultural studies and critical media literacy in the



classroom could be summarised as establishing and maintaining this distance. While identification with characters and situations often occurs naturally, further steps have to nudge readers away from a facile acceptance of a single perspective as ‘the truth’. However, and this is really the main point here, students also have a right to experience narratives for themselves before teachers add new layers of complexity to the ongoing discussion and confront them with other views.

Frank Smith believes that students can develop a level of appreciation and understanding that may not match the teacher’s desired interpretation (cf. 2004: 26) and still be valid in its own way. To him reading is a naturally developing set of skills that is needlessly complicated by theories:

Reading is complex, but so also are walking, talking, and making sense of the world in general – and children are capable of achieving all of these, provided the environmental circumstances are appropriate. What is difficult to describe is not necessarily difficult to learn. One consideration that this book emphasizes is that children are not as helpless in the face of learning to read as often is thought. (2004: xi)

The most relevant observation in this paragraph is that things can be easily learned by doing them – “*Children learn to read by reading*” (Smith 2004: 169). According to Smith, it is hard and ultimately unnecessary to describe in detail all the skills that are involved: “Every time a new text is read, something new is likely to be learned about reading different kinds of text. Learning to read is not a process of building up a repertoire of specific skills, which make all kinds of reading possible. Instead, experience increases the ability to read different kinds of text” (2004: 188–9). Smith, it has to be restated, has young readers in mind who learn reading for the first time, mainly through practice and an intuitive grasp of what is required.

Briefly returning to our comparison of reading to driving, we may observe that, although a complex set of skills is involved, nearly everyone can achieve a passable mastery of cars independent of advanced motor skills or cognitive skills. There also seems to be consensus that most people learn to drive by steering actual cars as a holistic experience (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 184) under increasingly difficult circumstances while receiving a lot of scaffolding through an experienced instructor who helps whenever necessary, but otherwise lets learners drive on their own.

Dewey and Smith’s point is that the problem of reading – or experiencing art in general – is not that this experience is so very different from everyday life or other human activities, but that it is constantly framed as if it were. Instead of emphasising the continuities between lived experience and literary reading,

it has often been taught as a very technical, excessively analytical pursuit that involves elaborate terminologies and insider knowledge. Smith, however, begins his book *Understanding Reading* with the bold claim that reading is what we do all day long:

We read the weather, the state of the tides, people's feelings and intentions, stock market trends, animal tracks, maps, signals, signs, symbols, hands, tea leaves, the law, music, mathematics, minds, body language, between the lines, and above all [...] we read faces. "Reading," when employed to refer to interpretation of a piece of writing, is just a special use of the term. We have been reading – interpreting experience – constantly since birth and we all continue to do so. (2004: 2)

If everything we do in life results from a form of reading, Smith has to take the next logical step and propose that "reading cannot be separated from thinking. Reading is a thought-full activity. There is no difference between reading and any other kind of thought, except that with reading, thought is engendered by a written text. Reading might be defined as thought stimulated and directed by written language" (2004: 27). Instead of singling out reading as the most complex skill outside of normal cognition, he presents it on a continuum with other thought processes – the two flow into each other and are, in fact, the same thing. Cognitively speaking, this is correct, as there is no separate brain area for reading. We also rely on the same semantic and episodic memories to interpret real life and fiction. This continuum – the naturalness of storytelling and reading – is going to be a major concern in the third part of this thesis. However, and here I disagree with Smith, if we want to become chess masters, we have to play chess at increasingly higher difficulty levels. The flow experience of mastery requires endless hours of practice in the specific field, not pattern recognition in general.

Smith's most surprising move is to claim that the situations presented in narratives are, in fact, easier to read than those in real life because of the over-determination of literature. The text offers a controlled environment and a guided experience that focuses readers' attention on foregrounded elements instead of leaving them exposed to random events and the noise of unrelated bits of information. In this sense, art is indeed different from life.

The thought in which we engage while reading is like the thought we engage in while involved in any kind of experience. Fulfilling intentions, making choices, anticipating outcomes, and making sense of situations are not aspects of thinking exclusive to fluent reading. We must draw inferences, make decisions, and solve problems in order to understand what is going on in situations that involve reading and situations that don't. Reading demands no unique forms or "skills" of thought. An enormous advantage of reading over thinking in other circumstances is the control that it offers over events. (2004: 191–2)

In *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds: The Cognitive Value of Fiction* Vera Nünning presents the same argument (cf. 2014: 41) and then goes on to quote Keith Oatley, who explains that fiction is easier to read than real life, as it provides far more context for characters' thoughts and actions (cf. 2014: 42, 90, 187, 297; see also Mar & Oatley 2008: 173, 176). This is a staple of reader-response criticism and one of many links to cognitive literary studies: "art provides a more complete fulfillment of human impulses and needs than does ordinary life with its frustrations and irrelevancies. Undoubtedly, such a sense of fulfillment and emotional equilibrium is largely due to the intense, structured, and coherent nature of what is apprehended under the guidance of the text" (Rosenblatt 1995: 33; see also 37, 42–3; Dewey 2005: 44–6, 49). In *Aspects of the Novel* E. M. Forster dedicates a whole chapter to this idea (cf. Forster 1985: 43–64). Not shy of occasional hyperboles, he offers the following comparison:

In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessionals exist. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. (1985: 47; see also 64)

Despite the untenable polarisation between art's eminent transparency and life's depressing obscurity, Forster confirms Rosenblatt's observation that the laboratory conditions of the literary text allow for much more controlled and precise experiences than real life could ever offer.

Even 'listening' to a severely disturbed 'mad monologist' (cf. Allrath 1998) provides readers with more information and insight than any real-life encounter with the average stranger, during which they do not have the luxury of reading people's private thoughts for dozens of pages. Contrary to real life, where things may occur unexpectedly or seemingly out of context, the controlled environment of the narrative offers a plethora of highly relevant insights. In her book on *Narrative Causalities* Emma Kafalenos raises this point when considering autobiography and placing events into a larger meaningful context:

... life is generally more difficult to interpret than narratives are because we are left to determine where we are in a narrative sequence without the guidance of novelist, playwright, or historian. In our own experiencing of the world, each of us takes on for ourselves the historian's task: to decide which segment of the ribbon of life to consider as a related set of events. (2006: 131)

Narratives are always framed and actively guided. They foreground important elements and remove the noise of daily life. Smith uses the concept of

redundancy to explain why it is possible to understand printed text even when not all the details are clear to us and why authors manage to reduce a narrative to a mere blueprint, relying on our ability to fill in the rest: “Redundancy exists whenever the same information is available from more than one source, when the same alternatives can be eliminated in more than one way. And one of the basic skills of reading is the selective elimination of alternatives through the use of redundancy” (2004: 63). What Smith means is that Iser’s gaps could be filled in any number of ways, but that the text provides enough hints so that highly unlikely solutions can be immediately discarded. Iser’s comment on light reading suggests that, in his opinion, certain genre offerings are so predictable that we can draw conclusions based on a minimum amount of information. As long as the cognitive frame that pre-structures the reading of a romance novel is not actively challenged, readers become almost telepathic: they know things before they read them and see things before they happen. In this case, System 1 drives the operation and provides what we call intuition – the best guess under present circumstances. Smith’s concept of redundancy does not involve the repetition of the same elements within the text, but the maintenance of a cognitive frame through intermittent reinforcement: “In making use of redundancy, the reader makes use of prior knowledge, using something that is already known to eliminate some alternatives and thus reduce the amount of visual information that is required. Redundancy represents information you don’t need because you have it already” (2004: 65). Students, for example, can narrate entire plotlines based on the genre label alone. They can list prototypical characters, objects, locations and actions. Provided that a narrative follows the standard plot very closely, there is little to learn: every aspect is just a confirmation of what readers already know. In this sense, creating engaging narratives is a tightrope walk between boring (cf. Smith 2004: 60) and overwhelming the readership. Smith’s argument – which is very close to Iser’s – seems to be that there is usually a comfortable amount of redundancy. Experienced readers may pick up things faster, but redundancy works in such a way that the necessary clues accumulate over time and insistently point in certain directions. The most outlandishly complex narratives may turn out to be surprisingly accessible once the novelty of the first encounter has worn off.

In this context it is interesting to look at Gombrich’s view of how much information is available in paintings in contrast to real life when we try to make sense of an object: “It is hardly necessary to stress how immeasurably richer is the information we have at our disposal in this process of trial and error when we move around in the real world, compared with the interpretation of representations” (2014: 232). He points out different angles, touch and the movement of objects

that all provide a richness of information that is not available in visual art, which makes “perceptions [...] not disclosures but [...] essentially prognostic in character” (2014: 232). However, he quickly acknowledges the artist’s use of “redundancies” (2014: 233) that attempt to cancel out ambiguity and pure speculation. What looks like a deficit model of art is, in fact, its greatest strength. With the help of salience, overdetermination, defamiliarisation and redundancy, all the unnecessary information that can easily be supplied is left out and the essential elements are strategically foregrounded. The same effect can be achieved in film through various means, such as shallow focus, and with “amplification through simplification” in comics (McCloud 1994: 30; see also Mar & Oatley 2008: 177). By taking out or blurring the background, for example, the characters and their emotions are automatically emphasised. In other words, by losing information, by reducing the complexity of real life, those elements that the artist wishes to highlight become all the more visible. In this sense, cartooning is a radical application of Iser’s concept of overdetermination.

Smith’s defence of reading as a basic skill among others does not end here. Like Ansgar Nünning and Carola Surkamp (cf. 2010: 194, 198; see also Nünning 2014: 18) he argues that human thought is essentially based on storytelling in the first place, that we can only make sense of the world by narrativising it. In this sense, stories are much closer to a ‘natural’ way of understanding life than other forms of presenting information:

The human brain runs on stories. Our theory of the world is largely in the form of stories. Stories are far more easily remembered and recalled than sequences of unrelated facts. The most trivial small episodes and vignettes are intrinsically more interesting than data. We can’t see random patterns or dots (or clouds or stars) without putting faces or figures to them. [...] Thinking thrives on stories, on the construction and exploration of patterns of events and ideas, and reading often offers greater scope for engaging in stories than any other kind of activity. (Smith 2004: 192; see also Nünning 2014: 61)

This closely resembles Monika Fludernik’s argument in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (cf. 2005: 36–7, 41), where she sets out “to redefine narrativity in terms of cognitive (‘natural’) parameters, moving beyond formal narratology into the realm of pragmatics, reception theory and constructivism” (2005: xi; see also 16–17). From this point of view “man’s enmeshment or engagement with his environment operates as a central constitutive feature and as a fundamental cognitive frame” (2005: 7; see also 311), so that stories become a natural outgrowth of a body’s interactions with the world. Within her constructivist framework of embodied cognition, real-life experiences, conversational storytelling and literary art are all based on bodily experiences and our ability to become

emotionally involved (cf. 2005: 10, 12–13, 17–19, 313, 318). She even grounds her definition of narrativity in this type of experientiality (cf. 2005: 13).

Like Dewey, the proponents of aesthetic reading and most cognitive scientists, Smith believes in the unavoidable subjectivity of making sense of the world and literature in particular (cf. 2004: 27). Thinking and feeling become mutually dependent and strongly intertwined processes: “Readers always read *something*, they read for *a purpose*, and reading and its recollection always involve *feelings* as well as knowledge and experience. Reading can never be separated from the intentions and interests of readers, or from the consequences that it has on them” (2004: 178; see also 68; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 42). In some passages Smith sounds exactly like Dewey or Rosenblatt:

What is experience? [. . .] It is synonymous with being, with creating, exploring, and interacting with worlds – real, possible, and invented. It is engagement and participation, always involving the emotions and often including a deliberate quest for uncertainty. It is an essential condition for being human and alive. Reading is experience. Reading about a storm is not the same thing as being in a storm, but both are experiences. We respond emotionally to both, and can learn from both. The learning in each case is a by-product of the experience. We don’t live to acquire information, but information, like knowledge, wisdom, abilities, attitudes, and values, comes with the experience of living. (2004: 70)

If Smith’s concept of reading as an experience sounds radically different from what some teachers may expect from students who engage with texts, we have a clear indication why there is such a mismatch between what students actually take away from a text and what conventional ‘reading comprehension’ tasks ask for. Accordingly, Smith offers a concept of comprehension that foregrounds the importance of the text to the individual reader’s expectations:

Comprehension doesn’t entail that all uncertainty is eliminated. As readers, we comprehend when we can relate potential answers to actual questions that we are asking of the text. [. . .] In fact, as we acquire information that reduces uncertainty in some ways, we usually expand our uncertainty in other ways. We find new questions to ask. We comprehend when we can ‘make sense’ of experience. (2004: 60; see also 62, 162).

In addition, Smith emphasises one of Iser’s key ideas: a total understanding of a text is not possible, which means that the reading of a text is never completed. Unless students are explicitly asked to pursue a specific line of enquiry based on efferent reading, they engage with narrative texts to the extent that the different elements can be synthesised into a larger pattern that is sufficiently integrative. This depends largely on the readers’ expectations and what they intend to achieve by reading a certain text. Thus, comprehension is always limited, preliminary

and bound to a specific reader-text transaction (cf. Delanoy 2002: 3–4). When teachers intend to go beyond the scope of what each student has managed to glean from the text on his or her own – depending on individual theories of the world and to what extent they are and let themselves be challenged by a text – this has to happen in consecutive steps. The kind of interpretation that teachers are often interested in has to be arrived at gradually, via several steps and across a number of readings. This raises two important questions that are specifically dealt with in the next two chapters: what is the role of the teacher in this process and how should the steps be organised to facilitate a smoother transition from first impressions to a more informed and balanced reading that withstands the critical questions of other readers? The transmission-model of education is anathema to the organisation of meaningful encounters and experiences with texts in which students, for lack of a better metaphor, are detectives who “regard the information offered by texts in a more general sense as *evidence* rather than as a message, the basis for a response or understanding rather than the content of comprehension” (Smith 2004: 69). For Smith, searching for this evidence has to be propelled by an overall idea or hunch of what the narrative is and where it is going. Comprehension is driven by what we know, a tentative meaning, rather than abstract terms or concepts.

Accordingly, Smith is opposed to “the tendency to fragment reading and reading instruction into packages of decontextualized ‘basic skills,’ none of which particularly engage thinking” (2004: 27). Iser’s *gestalten* or images are exactly what Smith has in mind here: “Recognition, whether of dogs and cats or written words, is not a matter of breaking something down to its components, but of integrating it into a larger context” (2004: 2). In “Cognitive Science and Dewey’s Theory of Mind, Thought, and Language” Mark Johnson discusses this experiential background as a basic tenet of Dewey’s theory that is just as valid today:

Imagine that you have just entered a colleague’s office. There is an all-encompassing way it feels to be in that place, and the unifying quality of that place is clearly different from your own office. Your experience is a blend of perceptual, emotional, practical, and conceptual dimensions intertwined in that particular place. Granted, as soon as you enter the office, you have already begun to recognize objects, mark patterns, and focus on various parts of the entire setting, but Dewey argues that all of this discriminating activity takes place within a unified experienced background out of which objects, people, and events emerge. (2010: 132)

Without the overall meaning it makes little sense to talk of any details: “The qualitative situation is primary and objects emerge within it, relative to perceiving, acting agents who have values and purposes. In other words, we do not start with properties or objects and then combine them into experiences; rather, we start

with integrated scenes within which we then discriminate objects, discern properties, and explore relations” (2010: 133).

In *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective* (1999) Catherine Emmott proposes a reading model that works with such ‘integrated scenes’, which she calls ‘contextual frames’. The narrative constituents do not exist as independent events, characters, objects, locations and times, but they are entangled and bound to each other (cf. Emmott 2004: 123). They gain meaning in particular configurations in specific contexts. Therefore, she claims that “for narrative fiction the reader needs to create and maintain a mental model of the context” (2004: vii) instead of keeping track of characters, locations, objects etc. in isolation. Readers become entangled in narratives (cf. Iser 1980: 131) because the characters are. Similar to Iser’s model of theme and horizon, Emmott argues that contextual frames interact with and recall each other across the entire network. This is quite a departure from the conventional understanding of plot: “Narrative is usually defined as a succession of events but another important feature of narrative texts is that some or all of the events are described as they take place within a particular context. As a result, these events are ‘brought to life’ for the reader, being ‘acted out’ rather than presented in a summary form” (2004: 236). Vicariously ‘living through’ (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 38) these scenes – being actively entangled – is very different from stating what happened. We need to have a holistic understanding of what the scene is about before we can determine what the details mean. The following chapter looks specifically at the role of teachers to set up and facilitate different engagements with literary texts that favour aesthetic reading over the extraction of information.

## 2.2 The Teacher of Literature as a Facilitator

Werner Delanoy’s “The Complexity of Literature Teaching in the Language Classroom” (1996) is an excellent starting point for a clarification of the teacher’s role in students’ transactions with literary texts. It originated in a contested interpretation of *Dead Poets Society* with a group of first-year university students of English whose responses did not live up to Delanoy’s initial expectations. Like most teachers, he had a specific reading in mind that was “politically motivated” (1996: 62; see also 64–6) in his case. He had hoped they would take a critical stance towards the class and gender hierarchies of the film or, at least, embrace such an approach as eminently meaningful as soon as it was introduced to them. This led to a frustrating “clash” (1996: 63) between Delanoy’s interest in deconstruction – a “relatively narrow” focus, as he later admits (1996: 77; see also 79) – and the students’ strong emotional bonding with the main characters (cf.



1996: 65–6) that did not allow for any critical distance. This breakdown of communication ultimately required a substantial shift in methodology:

Despite our conflicting interests, it seemed to me that both an aesthetic and a political approach could lead to important insights. The problem which arose from this situation was how further learning steps could be structured to foster a dialogue between the two approaches. What I mean by dialogue in the context of literature learning is that all the partners in interaction (e.g. aesthetic texts, teachers, students) should have the right to articulate their interests without any of them dominating the other(s). In addition, a dialogue should give everyone the opportunity to enrich their own perspective by confronting different viewpoints. (1996: 66)

Delanoy did not abandon his “emancipatory aims” and the teacher’s responsibility “to support students in developing complex identities” (1996: 72), which one could link to the concept of ‘critical (media) literacy’ in a broader sense. However, this is something that students have to develop themselves, as Delanoy acknowledges, under the guidance of the teacher. The literature classroom has to become a ‘playground’ of ideas and emotions to enable experiments with different interpretative approaches (cf. 1996: 72–3). This requires “three elementary pedagogical principles, namely *active learner participation*, *process orientation* and *dialogic problem-solving*” (1996: 75; see also 75–7). Delanoy did not lose sight of his ultimate goal – “to question the film’s socio-political implications” (1996: 77), but he accepted the fact that “all the learning steps should be related to the interests and abilities of the learners”, which “required a careful structuring of the learning process” (1996: 76). After reconsidering his methodology, he came to a conclusion that represents a fitting summary of the points raised so far: “acts of teacher mediation can intrude upon the relationships between the learners and the aesthetic text. Teachers of literature in an EFL-context, therefore, should be particularly sensitive to how their role as a facilitator of aesthetic experience can influence their learners’ response and classroom interaction” (1996: 84). This is a remarkable statement as it addresses a teacher’s potentially harmful intervention in the students’ interactions with texts. Accordingly, Delanoy associates the specific challenges of teaching literature mostly with the question of how to acknowledge the individual students’ reading experiences in a meaningful sequence of lessons that does not foreground the teacher’s own interpretation and thus embraces the students’ contributions as equally valid (cf. 2002: 35).

In the past it was more acceptable for teachers to have students read out aloud, elicit responses to check whether their answers matched the public meaning of a text, point out important textual features in the form of a model analysis or simply tell them why this work is widely recognised as a perennial classic (cf.

Delanoy 2002: 138). Michael Benton openly criticises such “conventional classroom practice where the teacher takes the class on a guided tour through the poem, pointing out the main attractions of such sight-seeing and inevitably imposing his or her own ‘reading’ on the whole experience” (1992: 92; see also Collie & Slater 1988: 7). Reader-response criticism and aesthetic reading, in contrast, are about the transformative processes and experiences that occur while students are transacting with a text. Taken seriously, this would reduce a teacher’s involvement in class to a marginalised role, as Eva Burwitz-Melzer observes (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 225). Since teachers cannot and should not do the reading for their students (cf. Collie & Slater 1988: 8), Burwitz-Melzer redefines their duties as those of mediators and coordinators, of instigators and organisers of new learning processes, much in the same way that Delanoy reconceptualised his own role in the classroom as that of a facilitator (cf. 1996: 84; see also 2002: 4–5, 135–6).

While the role of the teacher as a facilitator is unanimously accepted in general terms (cf. e.g. Grimm, Meyer & Volkmann 2015: 20), there is a temptation in teaching literature to directly explain what a work means and how it should be read in view of the educational context for which it was chosen (cf. Sklar 2013: 159–60). During a first encounter with a narrative, students are not likely to arrive at an understanding that requires substantial cultural and historical background knowledge (cf. Delanoy 1996: 76). Yet, providing all the necessary information beforehand comes with its own problems: “If students are informed about the biographical, historical, cultural and social background they might not relate the text to their concerns and interests but read it with the expectation that it will confirm what they have been taught about the biographical, historical, cultural and social background” (Bredella & Delanoy 1996: xi). If one takes aesthetic reading seriously, then efferent reading should not be the starting point of an engagement with literary texts, which are ideally suited to address real-world issues in an aesthetic form and allow readers to explore a new and maybe unfamiliar world before it becomes categorised and rationalised.

This is why Rosenblatt proposes a reading process in several steps that assigns the teacher the role of facilitator: “It seems so much easier all around if the teacher cuts the Gordian knot and gives the students the tidy set of conclusions and labels he has worked out. Yet this does not necessarily give them new insights. Hence the emphasis throughout this book on the teacher’s role in initiating and guiding a process of inductive learning” (1995: 232; see also Collie & Slater 1988: 8). Rosenblatt raises an important point here: if teachers are not interested in how students respond to a text, but simply want them to know, for example,

why it has accumulated so much cultural capital, it is far more efficient to simply teach that kind of knowledge. When students are asked to gather the public meaning of a text by reading it, which naturally involves filtering it through their own consciousness, while the information they are supposed to find is neatly summarised online, it would be highly impractical to read the book. No matter what they would find in there, it cannot possibly live up to what is already out there in terms of the accumulated insights of countless readers. If we thus reduce literary texts to sources of information, then some people's reservations about literature in the classroom are fully justified:

Some will concede that the school and the teacher have the responsibility of developing constructive attitudes toward human relations but will ask, Why suggest this round-about way of transmitting such insight? [...] Why take the time of a literature class for discussions suggested by the haphazard accidents of student reactions? [...] Would it not be preferable to eliminate any such topics from the literature classroom and to depend on a more orderly method of presenting this information to the students? (Rosenblatt 1995: 225)

There are three simple reasons why aesthetic reading – at least as a starting point for a wider discussion of a literary text – is indispensable: (1) readers have to discover its meaning for themselves by finding a connection between what they read with their own lives and interests. From a cognitive point of view this is the only route to effective learning. It is also the only way to develop an interest in reading. If learner autonomy should become a reality, we have to trust students to discover things on their own. (2) Following Dewey (2005), Sternberg (1978) and Iser (1980), a work of art is constructed in such a way that it provides a unique guided experience that would be ruined by removing its aesthetic qualities. Through overdetermination, defamiliarisation and redundancy it creates effects that can only fully function in a sequential and contextualised manner. (3) These effects have to be experienced and responded to in an ongoing process that is constituted of specific narrative situations. There is no shortcut to that: “No one else can read a literary work for us. The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself” (Rosenblatt 1995: 264).

In *Teaching Literature: Nine to Fourteen* Michael Benton and Geoff Fox redefine the role of the teacher accordingly: “The main emphasis of the teacher's job is not, in fact, *explication du texte* but the cultivation of individual and shared responses to the text” (1985: 24; see also Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 50–1, 62–5). What is even worse is a constant elicitation of the ‘right’ answers (cf. 1985: 18, 107; Collie & Slater 1988: 8), which usually involves posing suggestive questions

till one of the students manages to guess what the teacher wanted to hear. The only solution is to choose social forms of interaction that prevent teachers from dominating classroom discussions during the early stages of reading a text. The reasons for this are simple: (1) teachers are frequently under pressure to achieve concrete results within a limited amount of time; (2) they are usually quite familiar with the literary text, which puts them at an advantage and makes the students' contributions appear sadly inadequate; and (3) they may be tempted to showcase their own superior knowledge by surprising students with profound observations. Based on Carol Feldman's research on teacher behaviour, Jerome Bruner observes that "the use of modal auxiliary markers in teachers' talk to students and in their talk to each other in the staff room" is significantly different: "Modals expressing a stance of uncertainty or doubt in teacher talk to teachers far outnumbered their occurrence in teacher talk to students. The world that the teachers were presenting to their students was a far more settled, far less hypothetical, far less negotiatory world than the one they were offering to their colleagues" (1986: 126).

Burwitz-Melzer (cf. 2004: 237–324) singles out the lockstep discussion of literary texts as the appropriate social form to complement aesthetic reading, presumably because it is still the most widely used form to treat literary texts in the classroom. However, based on her own observations of specific classroom settings, she notices that lockstep discussions are frequently handled badly, as teachers tend to dominate the discussions (cf. 2004: 248, 256, 292), ask narrow questions (cf. 2004: 291, 295–6), change their plans halfway through the procedure (cf. 2004: 295), or simply fail to organise the sequence appropriately (cf. 2004: 322). That is why Aidan Chambers makes the postponement of the teacher's input one of the basic requirements for the literary classroom: "The teacher doesn't offer her reading of a text until late in the discussion so that hers doesn't become the privileged point of view, or the one that determines the agenda" (1996: 45; see also Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 51; Delanoy 1996: 84). Accordingly, "the topics selected for discussion must come from the readers as a group rather than from the teacher or indeed from any dominant person" (1996: 70).

Since it is unlikely that a whole group of students is going to respond equally enthusiastically to a literary text, even when it was carefully chosen, teachers have to take into consideration that some students – given the chance – may criticise or even reject it for not conforming to their expectations. This is the risk of treating them as equal partners. With close friends and family members we accept the fact that tastes vary substantially, which means that not all twenty students in class are going to embrace the book we have chosen for them to read.

There are two decisive factors that may help to raise the acceptance of a text: the proper framing of the reading at the very beginning and an opportunity for students to voice their concerns *early* in the process. Nothing could be more detrimental to students' motivation and enjoyment of a narrative than forcing them to read a book in its entirety that they find hard to digest at the very beginning. Framing the text, scaffolding learners' engagement with it and listening to first responses are three of the most important duties of the teacher as a facilitator at the beginning of the reading process (cf. Delanoy 2015: 35–6).

Negative responses to a work of art are a natural part of life: we are eager to recommend books that we enjoyed reading, but we are equally vocal about mixed feelings, outright boredom or instant rejection. The important difference in an educational setting is that teachers have to channel these emotional responses so that they become productive (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 241). Generally speaking, language teachers have to enable students to adequately express themselves in different social settings and text types, which also has to include the articulation of criticism. Benton and Fox argue that, if we really want our learners to become independent and critical thinkers, we have to let them articulate their views: “if we want pupils to be discriminating, we must expect – even hope – that they will sometimes discriminate *against*. If we want to honour the individual reader's response, there is little consistency in ignoring negative responses” (1985: 107). Thus, language work also has to include the coordinated verbalisation of criticism: “readers usually need the means to work out negative responses, just as they need the opportunities to develop their positive responses” (1985: 108). This is the only way that students “believe that genuine negative responses will be honoured” (1985: 108). Otherwise they fall silent.

Since Delanoy takes reading as a process very seriously (cf. 1996: 75–6), he is fully aware of problems that may occur early on and that require a teacher's intervention in the form of “motivational encouragement” or “a careful and reflective response” (cf. 2015: 35). He conceives of reading as taking place in several steps, as this is the only way to intervene and help students out of a reader response that leads to an increasingly negative attitude. He also propagates his own version of critical (media) literacy, which he calls “*resisting*” (*Widerstehen*) (2002: 103; see also 7–10, 91–112). Most teachers would not see a problem when students enthusiastically embrace a text and love to talk about it. This returns us to the example we started with: Delanoy's discussion of *Dead Poets Society* with a group of undergraduate students. The problem was not, surprisingly, that they did not respond to the text, but the exact opposite: that they were so entranced by the narrative and identified with the teenage protagonists to such a degree that they

lost all critical perspective. What made the situation impossible to resolve was Delanoy's hope that they would perform one of the most complex tasks imaginable – a critical deconstruction of the film's underpinning ideological message – after what I gather to be the first viewing. From the students' perspective, the critical attitude was built directly into the narrative's structure: a rebellion of the younger generation against the antiquated traditions of a powerful establishment. Delanoy expected them to notice that the protagonists were all white, male, well-to-do (cf. 1996: 65) and only faced typical first-world-problems: girlfriend issues and daddies who did not approve of acting careers. Due to the extreme jarring of expectations there was no easy solution and Delanoy had to completely revise his plan: with hindsight he describes his first approach as something that students might experience as “an alien reading strategy aimed at killing their reading pleasure” (1996: 76). Jerome Bruner believes that a dialogic approach is essential to critical thinking and that one's stance – including the teacher's – has to be marked as one among many possible views:

For what is needed is a basis for discussing not simply the content of what is before one, but the possible stances one might take toward it. I think it follows from what I have said that the language of education, if it is to be an invitation to reflection and culture creating, cannot be the so-called uncontaminated language of fact and “objectivity.” It must express stance and must invite counter-stance and in the process leave place for reflection, for metacognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language or image what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it. (1986: 129)

Students' blind acceptance of whatever the partners in the dialogic process – texts, peers, teachers and their own readings – have to offer is difficult to discourage, as it functions as a comfortable form of scaffolding or framing. Since the transaction with the text comes first and readers are likely to embrace whatever writers have in store for them (cf. Gerrig & Rapp 2004: 267), a necessary strategy is to develop the individual's critical stance in a sequence of activities. For obvious reasons this can only happen as a “gradual shift from the pursuit of student interests” (Delanoy 1996: 77) to a more guided engagement with the text. This should not mean that students are tricked into believing that they get a chance to articulate their personal views, but then teachers take over and refocus their attention onto what really matters.

When the teacher's role changes to facilitator, the students' roles have to change accordingly, meaning that they have to become more active: “Helping children engage in the drama of reading, helping them become dramatist (rewriter of the text), director (interpreter of the text), actor (performer of the text), audience (actively responsive recipient of the text), even critic (commentator

and explicator and scholarly student of the text), is how I think of our work as teachers of reading” (Chambers 1996: 5). Yet, for students to perform these roles, they have to actively take them on and this includes the role of the critic. Lothar Bredella (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 101–9, 132) differentiates between three overlapping reader roles – the participant, the observer and the critic – that could be roughly correlated to three stages in a gradual development from subjectivity to greater objectivity. Bredella sees a hands-on, playful and immersive approach for the participant, a more critical and distanced perspective for the observer, halfway between the text and his or her own theory of the world, and a completely rational and analytical outsider’s stance for the critic. One important thing to note is that students always train with a text for the next reading. Sometimes teachers believe that the new information or critical categories should be immediately available to students, but this only works in highly controlled settings. A more analytical approach to literary texts *can* become natural and automatic (cf. Nünning 2014: 298), but the prerequisites have to be established first. Rosenblatt demonstrates a lot of optimism when she states that, “when the transactions are lived through for their own sake, they will probably have as by-products the educational, informative, social, and moral values for which literature is often praised” (1982: 275). However, for students to take on the central role in the classroom, they need some training and this has to be organised with the help of texts.

One of the advantages of addressing contemporary issues through the reading of literature is the idea that it offers a sandbox or laboratory for experiments, both for the creator and the co-creators, the readers (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 190; Dewey 2005: 150; Bredella 2010: xxxviii, 20, 32, 76, 81; Nünning 2014: 36–7). Rosenblatt considers it essential that “the individual be liberated from the provincialism of his particular family, community, or even national background” (1995: 184), which is intended to have a double effect. It broadens readers’ horizon by introducing them to contexts inaccessible within their own world, but also creates some distance to their familiar environments, which are relativised through the presence of different perspectives. This invites a reader to move into what Iser calls the “third dimension” (1980: 218), a space between “his own habitual disposition” and “his discoveries”, which allows for a balance between the two and which Iser associates with the meaning of the text. It is a give and take between text and reader. Dewey states that a real experience requires effort (cf. 2005: 182–3) and Bredella argues that reading goes beyond a simple identification with characters: “we do not only identify with characters and feel with them. Literary texts also encourage us to reflect on how we are involved. There is a self-reflexive or meta-cognitive element in reading literary texts because we are not forced to

take part and interfere” (2010: 48; see also Rosenblatt 1995: 228). Yet, for all of these effects to take place and shape, teachers have to step back and let learners find out for themselves.

As we have seen so far, all approaches to aesthetic reading involve a system of steps that gradually leads students from their first impressions to a more accomplished and more articulate reading of a text. The challenge for the teacher, as we have seen in Delanoy’s example, is to organise and accompany this process as a facilitator of learning. In the following chapter we look at different models to conceptualise such a transition.

### 2.3 Reading in Stages

Although Rosenblatt is the earliest proponent of a staged approach, her references to the concept remain rather vague. She explains that she invited her students “to make articulate the very stages that are often ignored or forgotten by the time a satisfactory reading has been completed” (1994: 9–10), but she refrains from defining them. Her conceptualisation of the reading process can be inconsistent at times. In some instances she follows Iser and sets out “to differentiate between the reader’s evocation of the work and his interpretation of that evocation” (1994: 69), which requires “an effort to describe in some way the nature of the lived-through evocation of the work” (1994: 70). In other sections of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* she suggests that the two stages cannot be separated, as they are happening at the same time:

Once the work has been re-created, it seems, the reader-critic can respond to it, evaluate it, analyze it. To limit the reading process to the production of the work, however, with the critical responses a purely subsequent activity, oversimplifies the actual reading transaction. Even as we are generating the work of art, we are reacting to it. A concurrent stream of feelings, attitudes, and ideas is aroused by the very work being summoned up under guidance of the text. (1994: 48)

Under the influence of Dewey, Rosenblatt usually favours an understanding of reading as a holistic and unique experience during the original evocation of the work of art, but here she makes a concession, as interpretation *can* occur as a natural part of any transaction with a text. Still, she prefers to conceptualise interpretation as a distinct second step, especially in educational settings, that involves “a reexperiencing, a reenacting, of the work-as-evoked, and an ordering and elaborating of our responses to it” (1994: 134). Delanoy objects to such a clear distinction between a ‘natural’ or aesthetic first reading and a more objective or efferent rereading (cf. 2002: 68), as both are part of an ongoing process that involves a constant re-vision of one’s understanding of a text’s meaning.



This is how Bredella and Delanoy formulate this idea: “Reading is conceived as a process in which students go through various phases of understanding. Thus they can become aware of how understanding develops and learn to articulate and discuss their responses with fellow students in order to clarify and modify them” (1996: x). According to this principle, it is more important to organise stages of engagement that require students to keep an open mind and participate in the ongoing dialogue, instead of ascribing these steps explicit functional priorities. At the same time, verbs like ‘develop’, ‘learn’, ‘clarify’ and ‘modify’ signal that sequences of lessons need to have goals that can only be reached via a series of interlocking tasks. What is required, then, is a staged approach that leaves some room for flexible forms of engagement and individual development while working on a shared goal in dedicated sections of every lesson. Before we reach that point, a few more preliminary considerations concerning the sequencing of tasks are in order to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

In “Readers, Texts, Authors” Rosenblatt acknowledges that “strands or aspects of the extremely complex process going on during the reading transaction can be abstracted as interpretation, evaluation, criticism directed toward the emerging evocation” (1998: 887). However, to keep the transaction with the text ‘pure’ from any efferent interference, she postpones any serious discussion or analysis to the time when everyone has read the text: “After the reading, say, of *Middlemarch*, this interpretive effort may continue more explicitly in, for example, the testing of different psychological concepts or schema to explain a character’s behavior” (1998: 888). For someone who acknowledges that reading as a process involves several stages, it is unusual that she would cling to the traditional pattern of having students read hundreds of pages on their own without giving them a chance to respond to the text. The “felt meaning that constitutes the experienced work” (1998: 888), which is the echo of the first evocation, has to be a strange abstraction, as “[l]arge-scale texts such as novels or epics cannot be continually ‘present’ to the reader with an identical degree of intensity” (Iser 1980: 16). Therefore, my intention for this chapter is to draw more attention to the early stages of reading that can be equally organised and guided. When students read chapters at home, it may not be possible to make their immediate aesthetic responses available for classroom work, which is much easier with poetry, but one can get a lot closer to the original evocation of novels and work with aesthetic responses that mirror the phases of reading through which students pass.

Nünning and Surkamp approach staging through the widely established pattern of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities (cf. 2010: 71–82), which correspond to a certain extent to framing, evocation and interpretation.

Although these authors offer a plethora of useful ideas and activities, they acknowledge that this model is better suited for short texts that are read together in the classroom, while longer narratives may require a more differentiated approach (cf. 2010: 74). In the case of novels, the reading process may stretch over several lessons, may go back and forth between intensive and extensive reading, and may involve very different social forms and activities, such as several pre-reading and post-reading tasks within the context of the while-reading stage. In the introductory chapters of their book, Nünning and Surkamp treat literature as a collective term, before they distinguish between poetry, drama, prose, film, and radio plays. When looking at the chapter on prose, the suggested while-reading activities could be for mini-sagas or *Middlemarch*. This explains why some of them are more suitable for lessons that accompany a longer while-reading stage, while others seem more appropriate for short stories. The intended broad applicability of the book also produces a typology of activities that caters to very different interests and tastes: traditional reading comprehension, language work, aesthetic & creative responses (e.g. drama techniques), keeping reading/response journals, narratological analysis, summary writing, reconstructing texts from fragments, gap-filling activities, reconstructing the timeline, analysing scenes and characters etc. (cf. 2010: 74–6). When dealing with longer narrative texts, the logic of the three stages is hard to maintain: after reading the first chapter of a book, students engage in activities that are ‘post’ in relation to chapter one, ‘while’ in view of the entire narrative and ‘pre’ in terms of anticipating chapter 2. Therefore, a staged approach for longer texts has to assign some of these activities more specific slots and functions within a sequence of lessons.

In his own book on how to teach literature Delanoy criticises Bredella and other proponents of aesthetic reading in the classroom that they do not offer sufficient support for teachers who are interested in turning these ideas into more manageable concepts (cf. 2002: 6). He finds a more suitable model in Benton and Fox’s four phases of reading: feeling like reading; getting into the story; being lost in the book; and having an increasing sense of an ending (cf. Benton & Fox 1985: 11–12; see also Benton 1992: 33–5). While the first mirrors Nünning and Surkamp’s pre-reading phase (cf. Delanoy 2002: 71), with a focus on framing the narrative, working with predictions and the students’ expectations, while finding the necessary motivation, the second phase is an important addition: this is the first encounter with the narrative, when the readers are “invited to play a game devised by the author. The rules are given in the first few pages” (Benton & Fox 1985: 12) and the readers have to find their orientation and decide whether they are willing to play along. This is close to David Bordwell’s concept that a “film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of *operations*” (1985: 29) by

making “the initial portions of a text crucial for the establishment of hypotheses” (1985: 38). Thus, “[e]very film trains its spectator” (1985: 45), as he later proclaims. This experience can be quite overwhelming, as so many things are introduced at the same time that readers may find it quite challenging to cope with this flood of information. With authentic texts the language alone may pose unique challenges. This stage is called ‘getting into the story’, so it is essential that students do. That is why Delanoy sees a necessity to offer support and guidance at this early point, a few pages or a chapter into the narrative (cf. 2015: 35; 2002: 72). Some of the difficulties can be addressed during the previous stage (framing/lead-in) and partly remedied by alert teachers, but the crucial point is to give students an opportunity to voice some of their concerns early on.

In contrast to Nünning and Surkamp’s while-reading phase Benton and Fox’s ‘being lost in a book’ is exclusively concerned with aesthetic reading and thus personal responses to a text. The misleading phrasing of ‘being lost in a book’ suggests a random affair, but the authors differentiate between four stages – picturing, anticipating and retrospectively, interacting, and evaluating (cf. 1985: 12–16), which should be actively encouraged, guided and accompanied through specific tasks (cf. 1985: 119). The first process has to do with mental world-building, the second with Iser’s theme and horizon structure, the third with positioning oneself in relation to the text, and the fourth with the development of a moral attitude towards the characters and the overall narrative. In each case, the readers are supposed to be transported into and thus living inside the secondary world into which they have projected themselves. Benton and Fox encourage active interventions on part of the teacher in that “activities have to be found to sustain interest and revive involvement on the journey through the book” (1985: 118). They also introduce the idea of so-called “response points”, which are “pre-determined points” in the narrative at which students are asked to engage in an “introspective recall” (1985: 6). They take notes on what has just occurred, what is likely to happen, how they feel about these developments and where they see themselves in relation to the narrative. This activity is still very popular, for example in the form of Judith Dodge’s “Interactive Bookmarks” (2005: 34, 41–2), for which Dodge lists several activities.

Due to the close ties Benton and Fox have to reader-response criticism, they suggest activities that encourage the “twin processes of anticipation and retrospection” (Benton & Fox 1985: 14). This is also related to Meir Sternberg’s concept of “the bi-directional processing of information” by which he means “the play of expectation and hypothesis, retrospective revision of patterns, shifts of ambiguity, and progressive reconstitution in general” (1978: 98; see also Benton & Fox 1985: 14; Dewey 2005: 189). While the first type – anticipation – is widely

established in teaching in the form of making predictions, especially during the pre-reading stage, the rereading and reinterpreting of previous sections should be equally important. Sternberg speaks of the possibility of “unexpected retroactive illumination” (1978: 100), e.g. in the case of detective novels (cf. Benton & Fox 1985: 14) or narratives with a twist at the end that completely changes our perspective on everything that has transpired. Iser calls the meaning-making process in reverse the “retroactive effect” (1980: 111; see also 114, 115, 155; Rosenblatt 1994: 10, 57–8, 60–1, 85, 134) through which our memories become transformed: what we thought we knew about a character or situation is reshaped through new evidence that has come to light. Unfortunately, in their chapter on “Teaching the class novel” (1985: 115–34), though Benton and Fox ask students to document their reading progress through journals, logs, wall charts, time lines, maps, family trees, and notes (cf. 1985: 121–5), they do not pay a lot of attention to activities that specifically ask for a re-evaluation of what has already happened. Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, who borrow quite a few of these documentary formats for their own *Literature in the Language Classroom* (1987), finally do, as we shall see shortly. The fourth stage, ‘having an increasing sense of an ending’, does not refer to readers’ awareness that there are only a few pages left to read, but rather to their ability to conclude the narrative for themselves in a meaningful way, which corresponds to Iser’s progress from open to closing gestalten.

There are two significant disadvantages to this model. The first is that the while-reading stage (‘getting lost in a book’) is again undifferentiated. Although Benton and Fox offer several promising ideas how this process could be conceptualised, they say little about the stages in between. Secondly, there is no post-reading stage at all. Benton & Fox are so dedicated to the idea of aesthetic reading that they do not address other aspects that may play a role in a TEFL setting. Therefore, Delanoy redefines their ‘sense of an ending’ by shifting the focus to ‘getting out of the text’ (cf. 2002: 74–5) to compensate for this limitation. Even though he stresses the necessity to build a bridge between reading and interpretation and acknowledges the possibility of encouraging reflection and interpretation *while* reading, he clearly prefers a separate sequence of lessons that focuses on interpretation *afterwards* (cf. 2002: 75).

It is Collie and Slater who finally address the problem that the while-reading stage has to be fully segmented to make it work (cf. 1988: 36). This was anticipated by Benton and Fox, as we have seen, but it is much further developed here, especially for reading prose fiction. Although contemporary methodology has absorbed most of the activities that are collected in *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities* (cf. Nünning & Surkamp

2010: 71–6), the segmental approach, for which they were designed, has become one option among others and is largely kept alive in Engelbert Thaler's books *Teaching English Literature* (cf. 2008: 105–7) and *Teaching English with Films* (cf. 2014: 134–42). Collie and Slater address the crucial point that certain activities only make sense during specific stages of the reading process, such as “Reassessing” or “Continuing predictions” (1988: 53–4). We have seen this already with the pre-reading stage or Benton and Fox's ‘getting into the story’, but they add several more steps that are unavoidable when tackling longer reading texts together. For such lessons, which now contain proper pre-, while- and post-reading activities within the suprasegmental phase of while-reading, they offer a tentative lesson plan (cf. 1988: 37). Instead of their preferred option of reading a new segment with the students as the main focus of each lesson, I am more in favour of the second: “At other times, class time is used to introduce a new aspect or theme, using a passage students have read at home, with the aim of deepening their insight into the book's literary features” (1988: 37). Although the entire first session and the beginning of each consecutive one should be dedicated to students' responses and specific interests, rereading becomes increasingly important to find evidence in the text and gradually shift the focus towards interpretation and analysis.

Collie and Slater's teaching sequence on William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (cf. 1988: 93–162) is split into twelve sections, which correspond to the twelve chapters of the novel, and contains activities for every single stage of the entire procedure. This arrangement promises a substantial advantage over the mix-and-match approach, since all tasks gain importance due to their strategic placement in the overall design. Like all meaningful tasks, they help to train important competences, but they also interconnect with each other within and across lessons by continuing or building on previous activities during key stages of the process.

However, the authors only partially realise the potential of such a set-up. As the subtitle of the publication reveals, Collie and Slater try to cater to various audiences, which means that they mix types of activities whose reasons for existence range from pure entertainment to absolute necessities in terms of British curricula at the time. They cover everything from basic reading comprehension via substantial language work to highly personal responses, from traditional product-orientation via group discussions to creative responses, and from essentialist and formalist notions of plot and characterisation via explorations of different readings to idiosyncratic judgements. At the same time, they never sufficiently explain why and in which specific contexts these activities are more or less suitable. The only exceptions are practical

considerations, such as time constraints, the potential fun to be had or the workload of the teacher. In short, these activities are motivated by very different aims, sometimes mutually exclusive ones. What Collie and Slater do tackle is retrospective reading. They rely substantially on Benton and Fox's approach and the different forms of documenting the reading process, repeatedly asking students to retrace their steps (cf. 1988: 37, 53–4, 85–6). This is finally a methodology that attempts to accompany the reading process of prose fiction itself and does not rely on what Rosenblatt calls "the recollected evocation" (1988: 887).

The last model I discuss before presenting my own staged approach is Michael Benton's "Reading and responding to poems – a flexible methodology" (1992: 89). In a very short chapter, "Poetry in the classroom" (1992: 87–95) Benton offers a framework that is closely tied to Rosenblatt's theory and relies on a "reader-response-centred methodology", for which "a phased procedure for individual work as a lead-in to group activity is fundamental" (1992: 87–8). To guarantee a "shift from individual apprehension of the poem through successful activities towards a fuller comprehension" (1992: 88) Benton suggests specific steps in a predetermined sequence. Though he includes "multiple exit points" to introduce the "flexibility that poetry-teaching needs", his framework is far from coincidental and "attempts to honour the principles" (1992: 88) of Rosenblatt's legacy. In general, there are three main stages: an individual transaction with the text that leads into pair or group work, which, in turn, is followed by more formalised responses. For the individual transaction, which he associates with apprehension (in contrast to comprehension later on), he suggests a "preparatory lead-in", an initial reading that is accompanied by "[e]nabling tasks" that lead to the articulation of and reflection on personal responses. Although the written notes can be rudimentary, Benton believes in the medium of language: "Using writing to think with in the form of jottings helps extend the time we give, it helps to keep the aesthetic experience central and enables meanings to be evoked, and it helps us to take possession of the works of art and make them our own" (1992: 118). Benton closely follows Dewey's model of aesthetic reading here in which "direct and unreasoned impression comes first" (2005: 151), which is nourished and cultivated so that it leads over into discrimination. "The phase of reflection in the rhythm of esthetic appreciation is criticism in germ and the most elaborate and conscious criticism is but its reasoned expansion" (2005: 152). There is a direct line here from immediate personal response via articulation and reflection to intersubjective communication. For Dewey, but also for Delanoy, as we have seen, this process has a political dimension: "an audience that is itself habituated to being told, rather than schooled in thoughtful inquiry, likes to

be told” (2005: 312). However, this ‘schooling in thoughtful inquiry’ has to be implemented by teachers and has to start with individual students’ awareness of and reflection upon their own – sometimes confused – responses. Benton argues that “we need to facilitate pupils in this procedure which, through self-monitoring, enables readers to represent to themselves what they think, through reflecting enables them to hold and refine their ideas, and through expressing these ideas enables them to assess their own reactions against those of their peers” (1992: 88).

This step is also important for the subsequent phases of Benton’s framework, when students plan to share their insights in pairs and groups and co-construct the meaning of the text. Such a step is essential in Benton’s approach as a gradual transition into comprehension, which requires a testing of one’s own premises, argumentations among peers, shared detective work to argue in favour or against different readings etc. This is then followed by performances and other creative activities, until more formalised responses become a possibility. These are usually based on the accumulated work of the groups (cf. 1992: 90). The most striking aspect of Benton’s procedure is that he completely refrains from whole-class discussions till the very end. What this model proposes is a more focused and logical progression in smaller steps that establishes clear priorities in terms of transactions: student – text, student – students, students – teacher. Group work and peer feedback are the important in-between steps that lead the individual from first impressions to a more considerate and better articulated interpretation of a text. This serves to avoid an early confrontation between the individual student’s un(in)formed thoughts and the teacher’s potentially unrealistic expectations:

In many cases there is an unbridged gulf between anything the student might actually feel about the book and what the teacher, from the point of view of accepted critical attitudes and his adult sense of life, thinks the pupil should notice. This often leads the student to consider literature something academic, remote from his own present concerns and needs. (Rosenblatt 1995: 59)

In pairs and groups, students can test their preliminary hypotheses and ideas, pursue and argue certain claims, but also return to the literary text for confirmation, *before* they are asked to share their thoughts with the whole class. While classrooms may blur the lines between public and private settings, especially when teachers and students have known each other for a long time, a lockstep discussion is still the most public forum within this community.

The context for the following framework is an attempt to find a middle way between extensive reading at home, using a reading response journal, and

intensive reading in the classroom that is more typical of shorter texts. It relies on a distinction between largely aesthetic reading, which takes place at home, and a gradual introduction of efferent/factual/analytical reading that takes place in school and carries over into mini-assignments that are completed at home and presented as postings on a gated online discussion forum. One key concept of Collie and Slater's model is always valid in such a context:

It is most important that the parts of a book which are to be read by students on their own should be related to the ongoing pattern of activities in the classroom. Follow-up tasks can be used that depend upon prior home reading, or some aspect of the passage read can be incorporated into the next classroom activity [. . .]. What is essential is to link class and home work, to help maintain an overview of the whole book as we go through it. (1988: 12)

Like most teachers, Rosenblatt argues that "in any actual class the different phases will not be so sharply separate. The creation of a setting for personal response is basic, as is a situation in which students stimulate one another to organise their diffuse responses and formulate their views" (1995: 74). Following Michael Benton's lead, I also believe that the various stages can be defined in more precise terms without turning the framework into a straight-jacket. On the contrary, it is intended to open up spaces for an ongoing dialogue that has room for students' personal responses, but also the pursuit of a single concern over several lessons.

### **Stage 1: Framing**

The first and the last stage frame the engagement with a literary text in a double sense. The former carefully leads into the narrative by establishing links to the context(s), into which the reading is embedded, but it also establishes the framework within which the text will be read and discussed. The final stage summarises the sequence of lessons and leads out of it by highlighting its importance for present as well as future contexts and purposes. Eva Burwitz-Melzer associates the beginning and the end of a class reading with increased teacher activity (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 225–8). Importantly, she singles out the planning stage, which has to precede the contextualisation of a book in the classroom. If the teacher's role as a facilitator is meant to become a reality, elaborate interventions during the long suprasegmental while-reading phase should be reduced as much as possible, which requires extensive pre-planning during the early stages. Since the dominant role of the teacher is going to be significantly reduced, the roles of the students have to expand accordingly. Thus, it is indispensable to establish a work environment that is conducive to open discussions



and the exploration of different interpretations, but also to learner autonomy and a pro-active engagement with texts. During the final stages, after many individual transactions with the text, the necessity to compare results and to find some form of closure requires an increasingly stronger presence of the teacher.

The choice of texts has to reflect the students' stage of development and their interests: "If the high school student reads the *Odyssey* or the Book of Job or *Romeo and Juliet*, it should be primarily because at this point in his life this particular work offers a significant and enjoyable experience for him, an experience that involves him personally and that he can assimilate into his ongoing intellectual and emotional development" (Rosenblatt 1960: 307). Although the canon of literary texts for the classroom has been significantly widened in TEFL (cf. e.g. Thaler 2008: 16–21; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 7; Lütge 2012: 200), even carefully chosen and age-appropriate texts are not automatically transparent and still require substantial work. When a graphic novel, like John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell's *March: Book One*, is supposed to introduce students to the language of comics, the genre of auto/biography, the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the United States and its historical context, but also to important intertextual links to the Fellowship of Reconciliation's *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957) or Lewis's own prose autobiography *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, it should become obvious that all of these aspects cannot be addressed during a single reading. This foregrounds the importance of a syllabus, which has to ensure that previous engagements with texts can help to prepare for this particular reading.

Regarding *March: Book One*, my segmentation for two university courses led to the following subdivision: pp. 5–35 (frame narrative & chickens), pp. 36–62 (racial segregation & school), pp. 63–88 (Martin Luther King & non-violence), and pp. 89–121 (lunch counter sit-ins, prison & SNCC). With only four sessions – excluding framing (stage 1) – this sequence is significantly shorter than a segmented approach in film-based language learning, which may require six to twelve lessons, according to Thaler, with segments of around 15 minutes each (cf. Thaler 2014: 134–6). In this case, students were asked to read the four parts at home and we had 90 minutes to discuss each of them in class. At university, the contextualisation or framing of a text is often determined by the title of the course: for "Comics in the EFL Classroom" my focus was on how comics narrate; for a cultural studies course the text served as a first introduction to the Civil Rights Movement. Since it is impossible to cover all relevant aspects, choices have to be made early on how exactly students can benefit from the text at all, which context should be foregrounded and how the neglected dimensions of the text could be addressed if students become interested in them.

Especially in secondary school it is unlikely that the narrative is treated as a literary text in its own right, but ‘exploited’ (e.g. Collie & Slater 1988: 14, 57, 123) for specific purposes, which means that a compromise has to be found. A framework that provides the sequence with a strong purpose and clear aims is preferable to choosing random activities that are somehow useful or ‘fun’. Yet, these intentions have to be made explicit during framing, including the narrative’s role in this procedure. At the same time, personal responses have to be accepted as the starting point for any engagement with the literary text. Thus, the transition from first impressions to a more coordinated engagement with the work of art has to be actively organised, e.g. in the form of activities that encourage a negotiation of meaning. Since all approaches to literature are concerned with readers’ responses in more or less direct ways, it is possible to reformulate a number of academic and technical concerns (e.g. focalisation) as questions that invite readers to look at the same phenomena from a different angle (e.g. empathy) – at least during the early stages of reading. This facilitates a transition from a holistic and aesthetic reading of a text to a deeper personal understanding that is generated through an ongoing dialogue with other perspectives – including theoretical approaches.

Framing a narrative is a delicate business, as a teacher’s contextualisation is going to affect students’ reading in significant ways (cf. Bredella & Delany 1996: xi; Wolf 2006; 2014). They become primed to look out for predetermined textual signals, which corresponds to Rosenblatt’s “concept of selective attention” (1994: 43). This, in turn, influences their first encounter with the literary text. Should teachers raise the wrong expectations, the mismatch between the framing and the actual reading experience can discourage students from reading on. Collie and Slater offer a complementary introduction to framing from the students’ point of view:

For students about to explore the unknown territory of a new literary work, the first encounter with it may well be crucial. First impressions can colour their feelings about the whole enterprise they find themselves engaged in. They are likely to be approaching the experience with a mixture of curiosity, excitement and apprehension. [...] students need to be convinced that the task ahead is not an impossible one; that, even if there are difficult passages to negotiate, it can be done with success and tangible rewards. Many learners fail to persevere with a book because they find the initial encounter simply too daunting. It may be that the first page is bristling with difficult words; or perhaps the territory they have wandered into seems so totally different from their own surroundings that they never quite succeed in identifying with it. That is why it seems to us well worth spending extra time on orientation and warmup sessions, either before the book is begun or along with the first reading period. (1988: 16)

‘Getting into the story’ is very important. It can be prepared for through framing, but also through pre-reading activities (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 71–4), which are more concerned with the readers’ first encounter with the book. In the case of visual narratives, posters (film) and covers (picture books, comics) are ideal starting points, as they usually offer a glimpse at the visual style, the genre, the main characters, the setting, potential conflicts and/or themes. In addition to that, posters and covers contain a large number of short verbal texts, most importantly the title, which add further bits of information. Some readers’ potential negative experiences with the first part can be mitigated at the beginning of the next lesson, provided that the while-reading stage is segmented.

Depending on the complexity of the sequence, framing can take place at the end of the previous lesson or take up a whole period. There are also practical matters that have to be kept in mind throughout the planning stage and that need to be addressed in class: access to the text, segmentation, schedule, guiding questions/worksheets and the introduction to the online discussion forum, which is used for the rest of the sequence.

## Stage 2: Reading

Stage 2 covers Michael Benton’s three steps of first encounter, articulating one’s immediate responses (e.g. by answering questions on a worksheet) and reflecting on them: “Indeed, the informality of this procedure seemed a benefit rather than a problem to the students: using writing to think with to make purposeful yet provisional comments on a text is quite different from producing ‘final draft’ writing” (1996: 38). Bredella also argues that for “the pedagogical significance of aesthetic experience it is crucial that we encourage students to articulate what they feel while they are reading” (1996: 12; see also 18–19). These may be mere notes jotted down for one’s own benefit, but they ask students to capture/formulate a thought in a few words. This is an important first step, as Jerome Bruner states in reference to Lev Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language* (1996): “Language is (in Vygotsky’s sense as in Dewey’s) a way of sorting out one’s thoughts about things. Thought is a mode of organizing perception and action” (1986: 72).

This stage ends with a post on an online discussion forum. Students can decide which of their jottings is worth sharing with the whole group, but they are also invited to comment on other students’ contributions. The first time around this can take the form of free associations. Here is the unedited post of a Ukrainian exchange student responding to the first part of *March: Book One*. She did not study English, but joined our group out of an interest in comics.

Just finished reading the passage and I wish he tell more stories about his childhood:-). With this “chicken story” I am totally retreated into my childhood memories. How come I am not a leader of any Civil Rights Movement yet?!:-) The page number 30 really impressed me because I did almost the same thing with the birds when I was in my ‘teens. With my friends we found a place where we did “an official” graveyard for the dead sparrows, which we found dead somewhere in the surroundings from time to time. And yes, we also put a hand-made cross on each grave. I even found out that I missed one thing in my childhood adventures - to baptise animals:-)

Poor boy. . . I understand his protest against chicken on the dinner table as I had exactly the same thing with my favourite rabbit. And i still can't understand how does my mother dare to break our geese neck with her hands as each time I see her feeding them, she is so kind to this animals. It is a great pleasure for me to remind my childhood though these pictures and images. I am really curious about the story and looking forward until I can read it all.

P. S. and I still speak with my canary bird at home. Luckily I got married recently and now I can speak with my husband instead))) (12 October 2015)

This response may be unusual, but it illustrates a few important points. This student attempts to understand the text by relating it to her own experiences. She can ‘feel’ what this episode means without understanding how it relates to the entire narrative in several significant ways. Her reading is far from trivial and provides several opportunities to relate her own experiences to thematic concerns that become more transparent in later parts of the narrative. There is also empathy without a confusion of identities. But most importantly of all, she has not been retrained to ignore her own responses in favour of standardised answers or a narratological approach. Aidan Chambers, who tries to promote reading literature with younger learners as close to real life as possible, believes that students should be “encouraged to gossip informally to each other and to their teachers about their reading” (1996: 3), as this is what they would do with narratives they encounter in a private setting. He goes on to argue that, in everyday life, people “retell the story and talk about what they liked and didn’t like” and “delay discussion of meaning (interpretation and significance) till they have heard what their friends have to say. In other words, the meaning of a story *for that group of readers* emerges from the conversation” (1996: 8). In this sense, the discussion forum offers an opportunity to collectively find orientation and work towards a first tentative understanding of the text before this process is intensified during the next stage. Concerning the types of responses, one can observe certain recurring phenomena, e.g. that the first posts influence the ones that come later or that students occasionally react to narratives in extreme terms, just as they do in real life (love/hate). However, there are two measures in place that regulate contributions to a certain extent. Despite the fact that the forum is closed to the general public

and thus offers a protected environment, it is still accessible to everyone within the group, including the teacher, which requires at least some consideration what is worth sharing with others. Secondly, guiding questions can point out what is worth recording in the first place, which may then serve the development of one of these responses into a post.

In their section on reading response journals Nünning and Surkamp offer a list of prompts that ask students to relate to the text on a personal level (cf. 2010: 54): jotting down thoughts and feelings, associating the text with personal experiences, making a list of questions or unresolved issues, noting down first impressions of characters, thinking of similar texts, making predictions about the following chapters, remembering the most striking element/scene etc. There are just a few modifications I would suggest: a first encounter with literary characters can be ambivalent, so I would not ask for love (“really liking”) or hate (“really loathing”) reactions, but have students focus on aspects of the characters’ lives that they (1) can easily relate to; (2) can somewhat relate to; (3) cannot relate to. Questions of this type encourage a broader spectrum of responses. Although some questions can ask for negative reactions, the overall purpose of the initial encounter should be to motivate students and get them interested in the text. Still, it may be prudent to offer students an opportunity to voice their concerns, either as part of the guiding questions or during the initial discussion in class.

In some cases it makes sense to work with so-called “response points” (Benton & Fox 1985: 6; see also Dodge 2005: 34, 41–2). The two most obvious ones are right before the reading starts and immediately afterwards. In the first case, one has to be careful of self-fulfilling prophecies, as questions can be very suggestive (Do you generally like romantic comedies?) and strongly influence the reading. In between, there are turning points, chapter endings, cliff-hangers, surprise revelations etc. that may warrant a look backwards, an evaluation of the present situation and/or some anticipation of what is to come. Although these activities involve an artificial interruption of the reading flow and some form of preliminary analysis, they are not too intrusive and can be useful as early forms of minding and noticing, helping students to connect with the narrative.

As stated above, students then choose *one* of their answers on the worksheet and post it on the discussion forum. Feedback shows that some students find this step already quite challenging and spend a lot of time thinking about which point to choose and how to present it. This is exactly what Benton has in mind for this step, which is to encourage a transition from first impressions towards the formulation of an idea in writing. It invites students to reflect upon their answers, make sense of what they have noted down and rephrase a bullet point until it becomes a meaningful contribution to a group discussion. At the same

time, they are asked to comment on one of the other posts, which requires an active engagement with other perspectives. Some students are brave and go first, others only read, comment and then post. There is no need for teachers to be constantly present and comment on every single idea, especially not the first time around, but during the next meeting they have to refer to the state of the discussion online and organise pair or group work that reflects the points already raised. Otherwise the students' responses would become detached from class work and relegated to a separate, 'unofficial' network. Two important advantages of these online posts are that they provide teachers with a first orientation how students have responded to the text and students, who are reluctant to speak up in class, with an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing co-construction of meaning.

Stage 2 remains the vital link between home reading and in-class discussions throughout the sequence of lessons. New perspectives and insights feed into the next round of questions for home study, which, in turn, set up the next session. What changes throughout is the balance between aesthetic and efferent reading in favour of the second. While the first set of guiding questions is almost exclusively dedicated to personal responses, the second begins to ask students to actively trace new and ongoing developments they have noticed. When reflections on the first part did not contain any efferent reading, this is an opportunity to revisit scenes from previous chapters and approach them from a different angle, e.g. in view of new revelations.

There are at least seven types of activities that work well for the forum: personal responses and emotions (e.g. likes & dislikes; favourite line/panel/scene; strongest emotional response; biggest question mark); posting passages/panels/stills and commenting on them (e.g. social tensions & conflicts; turning points; an interesting use of colour); imaginative and creative explorations and transformations (e.g. adding characters' thoughts to a panel or still); value judgements and ethical considerations (e.g. taking sides, pros & cons); presenting the results of online research (e.g. cultural references, intertextuality); comments on other students' posts (negotiation of meaning); or the recommendation of websites or YouTube clips (e.g. background information). Concerning the comments on other students' posts, it may seem superfluous that they congratulate each other on what they have found out or that they are surprised by how they have responded to the literary text in a strikingly similar fashion, sometimes even elaborating on a point or providing additional examples, but in each of these cases something important is happening. They are testing their own ideas to see which of them are widely or partly shared or do not find a lot of support. More often than not – especially at

university – some students are courageous enough to defend a minority view, especially when they do not like a text. All these perspectives provide excellent starting points for further discussions.

With some groups it is possible to develop a sense of discovery, that there are things to be found within the text and online that can be shared and appreciated. Students can post quotations/paragraphs (prose), lines (poetry), stills (film) or panels/pages (comics) that they find intriguing; that illustrate/contain a strong view or emotion; that represent a turning point; that remind them of previous situations/scenes; or that showcase an interesting use of language/style. Bredella repeatedly argues that “understanding literary texts activates our cognitive, affective and evaluative competencies” (2010: 47; see also 6, 18, 33; see also Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 42, 44–9), so these should be catered to and then further developed in class discussions.

Collie and Slater offer a whole range of ‘snowball’ activities that are designed to keep track of what is happening in the narrative on a macrostructural level (cf. 1988: 51–6). While some of them revolve around simple summaries of chapters, others are more intriguing, such as “Reassessing” (1988: 53). Here students are asked to do the same activity again, such as judging the main character’s current situation and predicaments. This automatically invites comparisons to the previous iteration and students learn in a very visible way how dramatically characters, situations and relationships can change. It makes sense to work with a portfolio in such a context (cf. Benton & Fox 1985: 122; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 55) to keep track of the different activities and collect learner texts and ideas for later, more efferent and product-oriented stages of the reading process.

The essentialism of character portraits and constellations seems odd for entire narratives, but they make sense in this strongly contextualised, process-oriented format, precisely because they help to trace and visualise change. Alan Palmer comments that “we tend to overestimate the importance of a person’s character in finding an explanation for the way in which they behave in a particular situation and underestimate the importance of the situation that they are in” (2004: 245). Evidently, Collie and Slater hold on to such an essentialist notion of character (cf. 1988: 81, 112), which they believe is gradually revealed as a fixed set of traits that can be neatly combined into a complete picture at the end of the reading. For obvious reasons, this is incompatible with the basic idea of character development and the progressive nature of the reading process. Palmer has a point in that scenes do not communicate objective information about isolated story constituents, but reveal the particular entanglement of characters with each other and the story world. Our ‘knowledge’ of characters is not grounded in facts (age, nationality, religion, siblings, hobbies etc.), but in our experience of

their responses to other characters and situations. We get a feeling of who these characters are in specific contexts and learn more about them by comparing their reactions and relationships across time.

Depending on how much time teachers have to treat the narrative in class, more analytical questions concerning the main focus of the sequence can be added to the guiding questions for the second reading at home and then be pursued with greater intensity. This is always a balancing act, as students should still be given the opportunity to relate the findings to their own interests and experiences. Rosenblatt does not tire of warning teachers of an abrupt transition from aesthetic to efferent reading tasks: “Out of misguided zeal, the student is hurried into thinking or writing that removes him abruptly and often definitely from what he himself has lived through in reading the work. It therefore becomes essential to scrutinise all practices to make sure that they provide the opportunity for an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work” (1995: 66–7; see also 268; Benton 1992: 88). Her attitude is mirrored in Benton and Fox’s credo “to honour the validity and importance of the individual’s response” (1985: 7). At the same time, Rosenblatt is concerned with “stock responses” and “stereotyped, superficial, and unshaded reactions” (1995: 98; see also 95), which suggests that an exchange of ideas is necessary to overcome superficial or narrow views.

### **Stage 3: Think-Tank**

The online part of stage 2 has the added benefit of functioning as a teaser. The students are offered glimpses into other readings and may be curious to find out more about how others have responded:

Learning what others have made of a text can greatly increase such insight into one’s own relationship with it. A reader who has been moved or disturbed by a text often manifests an urge to talk about it, to clarify and crystallize his sense of the work. He likes to hear others’ views. Through such interchange he can discover how people bringing different temperaments, different literary and life experiences, to the text have engaged in very different transactions with it. (Rosenblatt 1994: 146; see also Pike 2003: 64, 69–70)

Bredella repeatedly stresses the importance of speaking about reading experiences (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: xiii), of intersubjectivity as defined by Jürgen Habermas (cf. 2010: 9–10) and of the negotiation of meaning as a central aspect of individual meaning-making (cf. 2010: 62). Both Dewey and Rosenblatt single out the appreciation of art as a communal activity that is especially conducive to the negotiation of shared beliefs and meanings: “For it is by activities that are shared and by language and other means of intercourse that qualities and



values become common to the experience of a group of mankind. Now art is the most effective mode of communication that exists” (Dewey 2005: 298; see also Eldridge 2010: 254; Rosenblatt 1998: 911; Benton 1986: 34–47).

Rosenblatt, who can be quite pessimistic about readers’ first impressions of a text, sees this next step as a necessary corrective: “He [The reader] needs to become aware of the points at which his own concerns have led to excessively emotional or biased reactions, or his lack of experience and knowledge have prevented adequate participation in the work. He needs to scrutinize his response to the various aspects of the work, in order to achieve a more unified patterning of it” (1960: 309; see also 1995: 267). Chambers is more sympathetic in this regard: “An understanding of meaning isn’t arrived at straightaway and all at once. It is discovered, negotiated, made, arrived at organically as more specific and practical questions [...] are discussed” (1996: 43; see also Benton & Fox 1985: 126, 147).

To preserve an openness of interpretation, a free exchange of ideas and “a refinement of each reader’s unique experience” (Benton & Fox 1985: 102), it is essential to organise the third stage in the form of pair or group work and reduce the role of the teacher to that of a facilitator of independent learning. Although referring to the reading of poetry, Benton and Fox stress a number of points that show the importance of pair and group work to the students’ engagement with the text.

The sort of benefits that accrue in pair and group discussions of poems and which are much harder to achieve in all-class discussions are: the willingness to tolerate uncertainty, misunderstanding and ignorance; the sense that whatever they make of the poem it will be uniquely theirs; the awareness that, since they are in control of the talking, they can return to parts of the poem when they like and so fit their sense of the details into a growing appreciation of the whole. (1985: 30)

This provides students with the opportunity to test and refine their readings in small circles of peers before going into a lockstep discussion of the narrative. Some may still hesitate what to make of the text and may need more input before making up their own minds. This is Chambers’s main argument who likes to call this stage the “think-tank” (1996: 16):

The private motivation here of joining in discussion is a conscious attempt to sort out with other people matters we recognize as too difficult and complex for anyone to sort out alone. The public effect of this conscious pooling of thought is that we come to a “reading” – a knowledge, understanding, appreciation – of a book that far exceeds what any one member of the group could have achieved alone. Each member knows some part of it, but no one knows it all. (1996: 17)

It is not hard to see a link to Lev Vygotsky's approach to learning through social interaction and scaffolding in particular (cf. 1966: 103–4, 107; Bruner 1986: 73–4), but here it is the group that provides the necessary guidance.

Since emotional and intellectual responses are intertwined in the students' evocation of the narrative, Rosenblatt believes that the "discussion of literary experiences makes possible rehearsals of the struggle to clarify emotion and make it the basis of intelligent and informed thinking" (1995: 226), which means that students can learn "to develop the ability to *think rationally within an emotionally colored context*" (1995: 217). Collie and Slater offer a very helpful summary of these points:

Pair and group work are now well established as a means both of increasing learners' confidence within the foreign language and also of personalising their contact with it. Although it may seem paradoxical we have found that shared activity can be especially fruitful in helping the learner find a way into what is usually an intensely personal and private experience, that of coming to terms with and inhabiting an author's universe. In the creative endeavour of interpreting this new universe, a group with its various sets of life experiences can act as a rich marshalling device to enhance the individual's awareness both of his or her own responses and of the world created by the literary work. On a more practical level, working with a group can lessen the difficulties presented by the number of unknowns on a page of literary text. Very often someone else in a group will be able to supply the missing link or fill in an appropriate meaning of a crucial word, or if not, the task of doing so will become a shared one. Shifting attention away from the text itself to such shared activity is often conducive to the creation of a risk-taking atmosphere. With the group's support and control, the individual has greater freedom to explore his or her own reactions and interpretations. Above all, we hope that the group will stimulate learners to reread and ponder the text on their own. (1988: 9)

This "*sharing of responses*" (Delanoy 2002: 87) feeds into the rereading of texts *while* the group is still working on the book. Thus, a return to the narrative is a natural part of group work. When students disagree on a point or cannot remember the scene in detail, they go back to the text and attempt to find evidence. This ties in with Benton's general conceptualisation of the reading process: "'Detective imagination' is still the best précis I can find to describe the author-reader relationship" (1992: 44). In contrast to prose fiction, where it can be hard to find a particular scene without any previous mark-ups, comics are much easier to navigate. Panels or even whole pages can be read at the same time and directly discussed, especially when the verbal text is strongly reduced. These spontaneous forms of rereading do occur regularly with university students, but may require some encouragement with students in secondary education. Collie and Slater also see benefits for fast readers who rush through the text – either because they are transfixed or want to get through it as quickly as possible: "Group activities or

task sheets also make the ‘rapid’ student reread, sometimes with a new focus of attention, and this is usually very beneficial from both a linguistic and a literary point of view” (1988: 13). Rosenblatt is convinced that rereading is an essential part of the students’ communication about the text:

We are used to thinking of the text as the medium of communication between author and reader [. . .]. Perhaps we should consider the text as an even more general medium of communication among readers. As we exchange experiences, we point to those elements of the text that best illustrate or support our interpretations. We may help one another to attend to words, phrases, images, scenes, that we have overlooked or slighted. We may be led to reread the text and revise our own interpretation. Sometimes we may be strengthened in our own sense of having “done justice to” the text, without denying its potentialities for other interpretations. Sometimes the give-and-take may lead to a general increase in insight and even to consensus. (1994: 146; see also 1995: 272)

Contrary to a situation in which students have to guess what teachers want to hear, they get a chance to learn something from and about each other (cf. Delanoy 2002: 157). More importantly, “in respect of story-reading, we have no idea where our pupils are unless we begin from some description of reader-response” (Benton 1992: 34; see also Delanoy 2002: 86, 157), which, in this case, is provided in the form of online posts, in-class discussions and short group presentations, which is the last step of stage 3 and carries over into stage 4. The latter are essential to inform the whole class about the progress of the individual groups, which may have worked on different topics. Depending on how much time the class has to study the text, a stage 3 discussion can be very free, like a book club session, or more organised by deciding which aspects the groups should focus on. These can be based on the questions listed on the first worksheet.

#### **Stage 4: Lockstep**

When teachers take over for the duration of this stage, a lot of important things have already occurred. They have witnessed three consecutive steps of the students’ engagement with the narrative – online posts, group discussions and the short presentations of results – and they are keenly aware of how everyone has responded to the text. There are six significant differences to walking into a class discussion unaware of the students’ first responses: (1) experienced teachers do not have to test students on whether they have read the text; this is fairly obvious from looking at the personal responses, which are relatively difficult to fake. (2) All students have been actively involved in some capacity – even the quiet ones. Ideally, they have found some orientation and are able to verbalise their first, or already their refined responses to the narrative. (3) Leaving

aside the initial framing, teachers' own readings have not affected the views of the students yet; diverse interpretations are still actively pursued. (4) There is no need to start a discussion of the narrative from scratch. One can quickly enter an ongoing debate that is already meaningful to the students and directly refer to online posts, group discussions and preliminary results. (5) While reading and listening to the students' responses teachers have had an opportunity to compare the students' concerns with their own plans for the sequence and adapt the strategy accordingly. (6) It is much easier to address potential difficulties the whole group or single students have had with the text. Especially during the first iteration of stage 4 it is necessary to address misreadings, points of criticism or an outright rejection.

When we started to discuss the adaptation of John Green's YA novel *The Fault in Our Stars* in a course on film in the EFL classroom (2015), I invited students to be honest and post their first reactions online. This is how a male student responded to his first viewing:

So I watched the movie without knowing really anything about it, apart from it being a love story with two sick teenagers in the main roles. I also knew that it has been regarded highly by many people so I felt that I would have a good idea about how the movie would play out. Unfortunately, I was right. I don't want to say that it is a bad movie but I fail to see how it offers anything new or special. I really liked the supportive cast and also the first half of the movie, it has a good sense of humor and the interaction between Hazel and Gus is fun to watch. However, the movie keeps following this pattern in the second half of the movie where obvious "plottwists" decide the dynamic of the movie and alot of the good aspects from before fail to transit and adopt to the new situation. (11 October 2015)

I addressed this point in class and we used the advantages of the think-tank to collect criteria for the selection of films, to discuss the idea of teaching one's personal favourites, to list arguments for and against *The Fault in Our Stars*, and to look for strategies to handle negative reactions. The fourth group worked on the premise that the overall aim of language teaching should be communicative competence, so it was important to them to find means – meaning text types – that let students express their negative responses in a meaningful way: honest debates in the classroom, negative reviews or a parody of the film. We also asked the student if he had a better idea which film to choose and he suggested *50/50* (2011) with Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Seth Rogen, directed by Jonathan Levine and written by Will Reiser, who based the script on his own experiences with cancer. He argued that it had a very similar premise, but was not that melodramatic and avoided a tear-jerking ending, which he did not like. The rest of us were not familiar with the film, but I used it for the class on illness narratives

instead of *The Fault in Our Stars* a few months later (2016). The following week the same student wrote a new post for the forum.

Hello everyone, so I spent some time thinking about what we talked about last week and what my point of view on the movie is/was. I am usually more focused on the plot of a movie and this is what I mainly talked about earlier. Also, for me, if I were to show a movie in class would be along the lines of recommending a movie and I usually only recommend movies that I highly regard, if I wanted to deal with a certain topic, I'd make sure to use the best choice of material as far as I know and since I honestly believe that there are better love/teenage/cancer movies out there, I opted against using it in a classroom situation. However, I have come to realize that for a classroom situation and for a movie there is more than the acting and the plot development, whether I focus on them or not. (19 October 2015)

He added two of the arguments we discussed in class – one being the interest of the students, the other some points his colleagues raised that he had not thought of, such as the comparison between the novel and the film, the possibility to discuss generic differences between novel and adaptation and voice his concerns in this context.

The point here is not that we convinced him in the end that my choice of film was not that bad after all. Rather, had I promoted the advantages of using *The Fault in Our Stars* in the classroom without an open debate first, he may have never said anything. I believe that the same logic applies to literature in the classroom. Students should not be taught to ignore their personal responses and concerns, a point that Chambers raises frequently in relation to younger learners:

Dismissing what children “really think” leads to their disaffection from school-based reading. Or they play the game “Guess what’s in teacher’s head”: they report as their own the kind of responses they sense the teacher wants to hear. This reduces literary study to a kind of multiple-choice comprehension exercise with the teacher as the only person in the room whose observations about a text are acceptable. To be praised or given credit, everyone else must pretend to have understood the book in the same way the teacher has. As a result pupils learn to distrust their own experience of a text and, because they become skilled at saying things they have not thought and felt, they are corrupted by deceit. (1996: 38)

This is not just problematic in terms of their development as human beings, but also in terms of finding a genuine purpose for communication in the language classroom. This student’s concern over the movie triggered a very productive debate in the classroom and a longish statement on the forum that was not part of any assignment. The other students were more willing to contribute to class when they could work on issues that they had identified as important to the

group or to help a peer to sort through his concerns. The resulting discussion did not match what I had planned for that meeting, but it was not too far removed from some central questions we were going to address later in the term.

However, if teachers finally want to discuss their own understanding of the text during stage 4, this approach offers a far better chance of preparing students for classroom activities, as they have already passed through several stages of active engagement with the text and of negotiating their preliminary readings. It is also possible that individuals, groups or the whole class struggled with the text much more than anticipated, that they got side-tracked by a longish debate over what turns out to be minor details or blindly followed the lead of those who posted the first comments or dominated group work. In some cases it may be necessary to actively guide stage 3 by turning unusual or wrong claims on the forum into the subjects of discussions or clarifying them directly during stage 4. Another advantage of this staged approach is that we are only 20–30 minutes into the first lesson, assuming that the initial pair or group discussion took about ten minutes and the reporting back another 10–20 minutes. To clarify some of the issues that have been raised, it makes sense to follow up on the posts, discussions and group reports. This may take any number of forms, such as continuing with the discussion in lockstep, returning to the text to find evidence for unusual claims or introducing an interesting counterargument that has been overlooked so far – ideally gleaned from one of the students' own contributions.

While stage 3 asks for students' personal and active engagement, co-creating and re-shaping the meaning of the text, stage 4 introduces the idea of rereading and playing text detectives. Ideally, as stated above, the starting point should be students' own interests, but it may also be necessary to draw their attention to something they do not see yet. Instead of telling them straight away, all of these activities should work with different hypotheses that concern the meaning of the text (cf. Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 9) and involve students in active investigation. There is enough guidance and control through task design, which means that stage 4 discussions can evolve directly into stage 5 group work which enables students to find out for themselves. This way, it is more likely that a greater number is actively involved and it gives teachers another opportunity to witness first-hand how students are progressing and what they still find difficult. After group presentations, teachers can still add elements that have been overlooked or note down a point that needs to be addressed during one of the next activities.

There should be an ongoing dialogue in several configurations that goes back and forth between individual meaning-making, shared responses in pairs and groups and lockstep discussions, so that one stage feeds into the next.

Throughout the sequence students produce several learner texts, of which their notes and online posts are just the beginning. All of these steps prepare them for the more efferent, complex and product-oriented text types that may have been planned for stage 6: “Note-making and informal discussion along these lines [anticipating, retrospecting, picturing, interacting, and evaluating] build upon the reading experience, take the pupils back inside the story, indicate to them that their individual responses are both valid and valued and provide a sound basis for a more considered response, perhaps in essay form, when this is required” (Benton 1992: 35; see also 51). Michael K. Legutke argues that teachers need what he calls “process competence” (1996: 102) to organise activities in a meaningful way and skilfully adapt the pre-planned structure depending on how students’ discussions of the text are progressing.

There is also a chance to (partially) revise the prepared handout for the next chapter(s) to integrate an investigation that students would like to conduct, that now seems necessary in light of how the debate has been progressing. While the first handout was largely about first impressions and personal responses, the second can introduce more efferent reading tasks, if teachers are hard-pressed for time. A compromise between the two would be to indicate to students what to look out for, but letting them find their own examples and explanations. Guiding questions should also invite rereading by encouraging comparisons between the present and previous chapters. Students usually begin to understand the centrality of the chicken episode to the overall design of *March: Book One* only retrospectively:

I chose this panel – event though it’s from the first section – because I’d like to hear your opinion about a ‘theory’: What if the chicken story and Lewis’ attitude is not just a story, but an analogy to the situation of black people in the US? It has already been discussed a bit further down, as Sophie and I had the same impression, but Mario thought it might be too far fetched. What do you think? Do you see a parallel or do you think it is just an ordinary story about chickens? (20 October 2015)

Since reading has a lot to do with pattern recognition, finding similarities and differences between characters, scenes, or between protagonist and reader, synopsis in the sense of seeing things together as an interpretative strategy should be encouraged, especially with visual narrative media such as comics.

Stage 4 has to occur in every single lesson to get everyone on the same page and see where the discussion is going. This usually involves letting students present ideas, clarifying problems that students have had, connecting different lines of the debate and organising the next steps. Teachers should actively tie knots in the textual web that is the joint reading of the text, but the strands to work with

have to come from the students in equal measure. Autonomous learning means to let students find out for themselves, even if they need substantial guidance. In most cases this requires a return to the text. Should the end of a class discussion coincide with the end of a lesson, students go back to stage 2, which means that they read the next section, work on their personal responses, but also focus on questions that have been newly introduced. The organisational path is that of a spiral. While the steps are repeated, adding 5, 6 and 7 during the next three lessons, everything is taking place on a higher level of awareness.

### **Stage 5: Rereading**

There are several reasons why a return to the text is indispensable. First of all, this framework relies on a specific sequence that initially promotes extensive aesthetic reading at home, but then requires more intensive reading in the classroom. Secondly, students are still operating with first impressions and half-formed ideas at this point. In fact, they have just started reading the narrative. Collie and Slater observe that “[y]ou can never really ‘finish’ a book, except on a superficial level. Rereading always produces new insight, new perceptions, a deepened response” (1988: 94). Cognitive psychologists, such as David Groome, argue that “the retention of a memory trace will depend on the depth to which it has been processed during the encoding stage” (2014b: 166), so students have to return to a more intense study of the text.

Throughout the whole process students *are reading* the text as long as they are engaged with it. The segmented approach reminds everyone that reading is an ongoing process and that the narrative should be the centre of attention. Accordingly, the only meaningful way to solve a problem with contradictory readings is a return to the text, not a debate on what may or may not have occurred. Students should be encouraged to become text-detectives (cf. Benton 1992: 44), who, in contrast to first impressions, now operate with a hunch or a working theory that has to be substantiated. Accordingly, they reread certain sections to check whether their impressions and theories are defensible (cf. Legutke 1996: 97), which may happen naturally during stage 3, but has to become the central concern of stage 5. Chambers states that, “to take us beyond statements of the obvious, to reach thoughtful interpretations and develop understanding, we need to discover what it was that caused us to think, feel, notice, remember, reason as we did. We need to think about how we know the things that occurred to us” (1996: 50–1; see also Rosenblatt 1995: 107; Smith 2004: 42; Benton & Fox 1985: 108). This search for evidence can and should be organised by teachers who guide students through the process, help to decide



which tasks to set for the pairs or groups and who suggest appropriate forms in which the results can be presented. Pair and group work may seem an odd suggestion at this point, but the co-construction of meaning should carry over into as many activities in the classroom as possible. There is enough time for individual meaning-making during the following stage 2 reading assignment. Comics have the added benefit that scenes are easier to find in a book and that a joint reading becomes productive more quickly, as there is less text to be read and pictures can be analysed together reasonably well.

Thirdly, this framework encourages the (re)exploration of key scenes and the entanglement of characters in specific circumstances, instead of summaries and character 'fact files'. These engagements with the text can and should take on a more systematic and analytical form, based on "thinking that is a *consequence* of reading, that might transpire in concurrent or subsequent reflection" (Smith 2004: 27). Rereading parts of the narrative always leads to new insights and inferences. As Rosenblatt observes (cf. 1994: 48), aesthetic and efferent readings are not always easy to distinguish, and here they are likely to blend into each other. For language learners in an EFL context, the execution of a meaningful task and a deeper understanding of the text are likely to go hand in hand. There is still a significant difference between getting into a scene and judging the same occurrence retrospectively in view of its place in the overall structure of the text.

When Collie and Slater offer their recommendations on how to teach successful summary writing, their comments provide a perfect illustration of the contrast between scene and text, reading and 'having read', the aesthetic and the efferent stance, as well as teaching literature and teaching language:

Discussion about why one summary is preferable to the other can be followed by the group task of rewriting one to provide a more satisfactory summary, more complete, without irrelevant details, etc. This activity is useful in helping basic comprehension of the events and themes in the chapter. It also focusses attention on stylistic matters, and it aims to develop the reading and writing skills which are traditionally thought to be fostered by *précis* work: the ability to identify and extract key concepts in a lengthy prose passage, distinguish between essential points and illustrative or supportive material, and finally, express ideas concisely. The activity may therefore be appropriate to more advanced levels. (1988: 112)

Asking students to separate the wheat from the chaff, to glean the 'essential points' from the 'lengthy prose passage', with its distracting 'illustrative or supportive material', sounds almost offensive to a teacher of literature, but this is the logic of summary writing. Collie and Slater correctly state that it works best with 'more advanced levels', because it is counterintuitive and a pure form of efferent reading. Naturally, younger and less experienced readers are inclined to

report on what they find interesting and relatable, but summary writing would require them to disentangle themselves from the narrative experience as much as possible.

No matter what activities have been chosen for stage 5 – drama techniques, creative writing tasks, narrative analysis or gender studies, all require an exploration of a scene as their basis. Teachers may be tempted to forego rereading and directly introduce the activity they have in mind, but this is bound to produce superficial results. If students are supposed to develop and showcase a deeper understanding of a scene, they have to be granted enough time to look at it closely. This is especially important in the context of a semiotic analysis, as there is a real danger of separating form and function. Benton suggests a blending of the two in what he calls “narratology in action” (1992: 51), which introduces and trains various competences by working directly with the literary text. Nünning and Surkamp raise a similar point by stating that a semiotic reading of narratives has to be motivated by a functional analysis of these signs in view of the larger picture (cf. 2010: 37, 232; see also Bredella 2010: 33). A semiotic reading, in this sense, does not ask students to interpret isolated signs or collect all instances of a certain type, but to approach the text with a hypothesis, ideally their own understanding of the sequence, and then find evidence in favour of or against it. When Nünning and Surkamp praise the rationality and teachability of formal analysis and the advantages of mastering a more systematic approach to literature (cf. 2010: 66), this still has to be seen as serving a better understanding of the text, as the meaning of signs cannot be determined outside of the specific contexts in which they appear. Since there is no “*form-to-function mapping*” (Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 37), signs have to be explained in terms of their semiotic habitat: they ‘live’ and ‘breathe’ in particular places and reading should not be confused with textual autopsy. Lothar Bredella promotes the idea that a reading approach in terms of top-down processes and larger sense units (global understanding) should be strengthened, as the importance of single signs can only be determined in view of a projected larger context (cf. 2010: 29, 255; Bredella & Burwitz-Melzer 2004: 2, 7, 15).

A fourth argument in favour of rereading can be made in terms of the theoretical frameworks that were introduced in part 1 of this thesis. Sternberg’s “unexpected retrospective illumination” (1978: 100) or Iser’s ongoing “retroactive effect” (1980: 111) highlight the readers’ constant revisitation of previous scenes that now appear in a different light. This bidirectionality of the reading process can be integrated into educational tasks. In Iser’s model we frequently change our expectations of what is to come, but also our memories of what has already occurred. Even if we do not reread these sections deliberately, we revise

our understanding of them. In his essay on the impact of Dewey and Rosenblatt on pedagogy, Mark Faust draws the conclusion that “their work cries out for an emphasis on rereading as a crucial aspect of literary aesthetic experience” (Faust 2001: 41):

readers who sustain their engagement with a text long enough to make something more substantial than a mere gathering of impressions and reactions, have begun to realize the aesthetic potential inherent in all lived-through experiences with language. It ought to be obvious that such a view of aesthetic reading almost requires either full-scale rereading or more likely some form of (re)reading for its fullest realization. [...] attentive reading itself requires a constant process of reenvisioning what we remember having read in light of what is presently before our eyes. (2001: 46)

This last sentence is revealing, as it emphasises Iser’s idea of simultaneously holding two themes – the present one and a previous one retrieved from the horizon – in mind for mutual illumination. It also captures the autobiographer’s work very well, as it sheds light on the past, but, in turn, undergoes a continuous process of reenvisioning the present in view of what has transpired. I would like to quote Dewey’s observation on cathedrals again, as it perfectly illustrates the necessity of revisiting a work of art to have an experience in the first place:

One must move about, within and without, and through repeated visits let the structure gradually yield itself to him [the visitor] in various lights and in connection with changing moods. [...] An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically. An experience is a product, one might almost say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world. (2005: 229; see also 311)

It is very likely that the first, fleeting impressions that students have of a text are not sufficient for an experience, by which Dewey means a profound and lasting impact on an individual’s self. The prerequisite for such a response is at least a personal connection, a getting-to-know. It may be a tired cliché to compare books to friends, but one aspect of the analogy is certainly true: you build friendships over time and not based on first impressions.

## **Stage 6: Conclusions**

Stage 6 begins when students have finished the book and completed the last reading assignment during stage 2. Despite a seemingly circular structure, this model resembles a spiral, which means that students reach a higher level of awareness with every completed loop. The final part of a narrative – the ending – may have special significance and usually deserves a discussion on its own terms before turning students’ attention to so-called post-reading activities that

encourage a greater detachment from the reading process itself and favour a retrospective look at the narrative in its entirety. This could also be conceptualised as the transition from a 'sense of an ending' to Delanoy's 'getting out of the text' (cf. 2002: 74–5). There are narratives that stage a satisfying conclusion, often by employing highly conventionalised tropes, but that does not mean that students gain a better understanding of the text. A final twist of the tale could lead to Sternberg's "unexpected retrospective illumination" (1978: 100) and make readers question and revise some or all of their conclusions, but even a far less dramatic open ending can leave readers puzzled. The idea of perfect closure is neither realistic nor compatible with the transactional approach: "Coming to the end of a literary work is really only a staging point, a temporary distancing from a continuing process of appreciation and understanding" (Collie & Slater 1988: 79). This raises the interesting question what students are supposed to do then, considering that many traditional post-reading activities have already been completed in relation to the individual parts. The reproduction of the public meaning of the literary text in the form of highly generic formats is questionable, especially since students have worked on a detailed understanding of specific contexts, rather than on gathering facts.

These preliminary readings and insights have been documented across a substantial number of learner texts, which may already represent blends of previous class work. They exist in the form of memories, annotated texts, notes and lists, online postings, drawings and maps, photos and collages, collections of quotations, weblinks & other sources, worksheets, protocols etc. These may seem like pieces of a puzzle, which they are in a way, but students should be able to see larger patterns by now, provided that the activities were designed to build on and relate to each other. These material anchors (cf. Hutchins 2005) help students to verbalise their own understanding of the text in more formal and elaborate ways. At the same time, a conscientious teacher has pursued a specific focus or approach throughout the sequence, which can now be summarised, discussed and reviewed in relation to the entire narrative.

Some of the most popular tasks and activities for the post-reading stage have to be scrutinised to determine which ideas about reading they implicitly propagate and what purpose they ultimately serve. They often come in long lists (cf. Collie & Slater 1988: 79–92; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 78–80), which suggests that they are somehow all equal and that there is a free choice between them. However, they have to serve the overall design of the teaching sequence. Some of them may seem highly appealing, but they could still be inappropriate in a specific context. If these activities are just added on as an opportunity to train random language skills, students may feel cheated, especially when a connection

to their own reading is lost or the previous activities do not lead up to a meaningful conclusion. It may not always be clear whether the activity serves a better understanding of the literary text, or whether the work of art is exploited to train some competence that is not related to reading at all. Many of the tasks also ask for advanced productive skills and/or require substantial generic competence that has to be trained beforehand (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 241; Hallet 2011: 5).

The review, which the CEFR explicitly lists as a text type that teachers should work on with their students (Modern Languages Division 2011: 62), is a hybrid genre halfway between a personal reading and a more rationalised and formalised expression of one's thoughts. In this sense, it is fully compatible with Rosenblatt's progression from aesthetic reading to criticism, which she conceives of as a continuous process of development:

As the reader savors the experienced evocation, registers its quality, first during, then after the reading event, it becomes possible to reflect on the experience and to look at the text to see what unique combinations of signs, what juxtapositions, might have contributed to the experienced ideas and blended feelings. Thus, the reader becomes a critic, and the professional critic begins as a reader, embracing all such activities, putting them into a larger context, and communicating these experiences and reflections to others. (1998: 888; see also Dewey 2005: 321–2; Chambers 1996: 22)

The review is very close to the kind of work taking place in the literature classroom, as we find the same movement from first impressions to a more considerate and refined reading that includes examples from the text to illustrate and support the argument. Most importantly, reviewers are expected to find their own angle, which they develop throughout the text, but there is no need to compete with academic essays or repeat what every reader familiar with the narrative already knows. Reviews come in very different shapes and sizes, from fan videos and semi-professional critics on YouTube via pop-culture magazines and tabloids to quality newspapers and magazines on to scholars at the other end of the spectrum. The internet offers numerous examples for free, which can be used for classroom discussions or as models to be criticised or emulated. As a more formal conclusion to a personal reading within the context of such a teaching sequence, they are better suited than most other formats.

## **Stage 7: Closure**

Especially in the case of elaborate stage 6 activities there is a need to mark the ending of a longer sequence that is drawing to a close. It would be unfortunate to end with a rushed presentation of group work and leave no room for discussions

or a final closing remark, pointing out what students have achieved, what they have learned so far, or how this work relates to larger contexts and interests. Everyone involved should share a moment of accomplishment, such as appreciating the learner texts and lively discussions. Some questions that have been left unanswered can be acknowledged, as much as those that were discussed at great length. This closes the frame that was opened by stage 1.

This is not meant as a prescriptive model, as teaching situations can significantly vary. At university, there is a fixed rhythm of weekly in-class meetings, providing students with plenty of time for reading and posting. The sequence of English lessons in a secondary school is usually more irregular, sometimes with just a day in between, which makes extensive reading a problem, let alone completing worksheets and posting comments online. The underlying principles, I believe, are still relevant.

This framework presents a compromise between aesthetic and efferent reading with a gradual shift towards the latter. In Anglophone traditions based on Rosenblatt's transactional theory there is a strong tendency to defend aesthetic reading at all costs against the exploitation of literature for other purposes. This may be more feasible in a native-speaker context, but the reality of the EFL classroom is usually a lack of time that requires teachers to compromise (cf. Legutke 1996: 101). Thus, guiding questions and a discussion forum are soft interventions that gradually direct students from the first impressions of the early stages to more reflected and substantial readings. The online forum has a number of advantages: (1) it is easy to set up, use and keep track of; (2) it has a positive effect on the social interaction within the group, especially at university, where students only meet once a week; (3) it adds a stage of reflection and negotiation outside of the classroom, which is informal enough to propose and test ideas in a safe environment; (4) it (pre)structures first impressions for classroom discussions and thus builds a bridge between personal notes and the collective co-construction of meaning; (5) it provides scaffolding and models for students who are struggling with the text and/or the task; (6) it asks for everyone to become involved; (7) it keeps a record of students' responses that are closer to the initial reading than many text types that are produced much later in more standardised formats; (8) it provides teachers with an excellent summary of first impressions and the students' further discoveries throughout the whole sequence, which, in turn, (9) allows them to plan lessons that cater to the students' interests; and, finally, (10) this documentation may serve for further research into readers' responses and learner texts.

In many ways these posts are similar to a reading diary or a log (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 53–5; Benton & Fox 1985: 42, 121–2; Benton 1992: 35–6, 94),

but there are also significant differences: they are selected and represent a more developed form in comparison to mere jottings. Social media add an interactive element by allowing students to comment on each other's ideas and provide feedback. Since there are always in-class activities in between and students become more competent readers of the text *while* they are reading it, they are automatically primed to look out for themes or other aspects discussed in class and can respond to more complex guiding questions during the second, third or fourth iteration of stage 2. The system works like a spiral: not only do the stages have different functions, but the next iteration of the same stage already takes place at a higher level and is embedded in a different context than the previous one. With a reading diary or log that is kept in private, there may also be some progress, but students work on their own without substantial input from their peers.

There are, of course, also problems and pitfalls. From the students' perspective this is still work and, with few exceptions, the forum is kept alive by having the posts count as active contributions to class and, thus, the final mark. Students are fully aware of the fact that peers and teachers are going to read their statements. They may be influenced by what others have already shared, by what they believe teachers want to read or by their wish to present themselves in a particular way. Accordingly, these learner texts are not pure expressions of readers' responses and only provide circumstantial evidence. In the best case, groups embrace the opportunity to share their thoughts and discoveries through this channel. There is a natural curiosity to learn what the others have posted, so the quality of these contributions influences the overall acceptance and usefulness. In the worst case, students have to be reminded of assignments, which they reluctantly and drudgingly complete. If teachers abuse the system by increasing the workload or pushing for purely analytical tasks, the students' motivation is likely to dwindle.

A teacher's presence on the forum requires a delicate balance between, on the one hand, showing presence, such as reading, acknowledging and commenting on contributions, and, on the other hand, letting students be among themselves. This works better when teachers understand their role as being readers in the group and not the language police scrutinising and evaluating every single comment. In rare cases it is necessary to intervene and correct statements that are factually not true and may negatively influence future work on the text. The workload of teachers can be reduced by limiting one's own contributions, but the students' statements have to be read in preparation for class, as the stages are interlinked. Their order is important, as students should get a chance to make up their minds and test their ideas in progressive steps before they are asked to verbalise their reading in a lockstep discussion. This means that teachers may

only reach stage 4 during the first lesson, which is fine. The worst case scenario would be to proceed from a stage 2 aesthetic reading without any guidance or while-reading activities to a stage 6 lockstep discussion of the public meaning of a literary text.

The age and language level of the students have a significant influence, of course. While younger, more inexperienced readers need longer stage 3 and 4 sequences, older learners may be able to handle more complex analytical tasks with less preparation time. In this case, going back and forth between stages 4 and 5 resembles a task cycle. Still, there should always be a progression from aesthetic to efferent reading, from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, from learner texts to more formal text types, and from more experiential to more analytical activities. The same applies to university students, where the situation might seem different as they *do* have to learn how to write academic essays and engage in highly specialised forms of analysis. However, following these steps at the beginning of introductory courses, at least with the first text, makes a difference as students need to be trained how to read and this system provides a lot of feedback.

Due to the segmentation of the narrative, the seven stages and a return to certain activities and concerns in a spiral fashion, activities have to be carefully chosen for the specific steps and their place in the overall design. If we take a book's cultural context as an example, such as the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the case of *March: Book One*, it becomes relevant to ask how much of it has to be addressed during framing (stage 1), to create curiosity and contextualise the narrative. Yet, it may also feature in a stage 2 task, when students pick one aspect of the narrative that they do not understand, engage in some online research and post their findings. It could also play a role in a stage 3 discussion, as students suddenly realise that they require more information, which could be provided as a short informational input by the teacher or a video clip during stage 4. The cultural context can become the main motivation for a stage 5 rereading task, e.g. by having students look at the specific way certain social groups are depicted in the narrative, or it may provide the topic for a more elaborate stage 6 activity that critically looks at the long-term development of a farm boy into a political activist and member of the SNCC. Task design and the distribution of information cannot be incidental in this case, since the cultural context is likely to be a teacher's main focus for the sequence. Instead of tying these considerations to *March* in particular, this staged approach can help to clarify what tasks should be selected for specific positions in the sequence.



## 2.4 Learner Texts & Activities

It has already been clarified how this framework relies on learner texts that are produced during stages 2 to 5, in contrast to more formalised text types, such as a review, which become relevant as late as stage 6. In an article subtitled “Learner Texts and the Teaching of Literature in the EFL Classroom” Michael K. Legutke describes the concept in the following manner:

In an attempt to make sense of a text, i.e. to make it coherent, the student-reader needs to mobilize prior knowledge, reflect on the appropriateness of his/her frames of reference, predict events, hypothesize outcomes, compare and re-adjust assumptions and expectations. The student-reader will have to respond to areas of indeterminacy by filling gaps and articulating the text's silences with his/her imagination. In short, making sense depends on the reader's productive and creative efforts, on his or her co-authorship, so to speak. Under classroom conditions such co-authorship is not only influenced by the structure of the text but also by the activities of the other readers: the teacher and, of course, fellow students. Learner texts grow out of these special conditions of literature teaching. They are, if you like, materializations of individual and collective readings. (1996: 93)

To guarantee a progression from first jottings to more elaborate responses, teachers need to “think about work for individuals and groups to do *during* the reading of texts – of novels particularly – which might develop, in all our pupils, the processes which characterize a skilled reader” (Benton & Fox 1985: 109). Legutke conceptualises such a reader as an “active and creative learner who is seen in a dynamic relationship with the target text, the tasks, fellow learners and the teacher” (1996: 92). Since this framework includes steps that are to be completed at home, there is a certain danger of doubling the workload by assigning the reading itself and then a number of tasks that accompany it. Legutke's concept of learner texts has the advantage of treating notes, comments and jottings as auxiliary texts that do not take a lot of time to create and help to keep the focus on the reading itself. Still, they provide a valuable documentation of the various encounters with the narrative and the progress that learners make from one stage to the next. Most importantly, they are not meant for assessment:

In the traditional transmission classroom texts produced by learners are generally seen as ways of assessing the success or failure of the learner to master the input. They are produced essentially for the teacher. There is a vital difference between those texts produced for the teacher and the ones mentioned above. What distinguishes them is that they enjoy a different status. Conceived and produced by learners for their own benefit to communicate their own meaning, they are not principally targets for the teacher's need to assess progress but are seen as valid contributions to a mutual process of creating meaning and making sense of the world. (1996: 100)

Representing a first step in the transition from experience to the verbalisation of ideas in standardised form(at)s *and* in the foreign language, learners are faced with the challenge of having to find out *what* they want to say, but also *how* they can express their ideas. Legutke makes an important distinction between established text genres, such as plot summary, essay or review, as strongly regulated forms that are created *after* the reading, and learner texts that are produced *during* the reading process, that are less formal and serve individual and collaborative processes of meaning-making (cf. 1996: 100). This raises the question which text types may serve as learner texts. Legutke identifies three broad categories: “unstructured and structured reading responses (codified in response protocols or reading diaries)”, “more or less elaborate inter- and extra-textual variations” and “more or less elaborate reflections on the reading process, the public process of negotiating meaning, but also on the private and collective process of text production” (1996: 93–4). Looking at Legutke’s classification it becomes clear that he conceptualises learner texts in purely aesthetic terms. The first category covers all the reactions to literature that occur during stages 2 and 3, the second category includes the whole range of creative responses which belong mostly to stages 5 and 6 in my framework, and the third type may occur during stage 2 as a comment on someone else’s post or in the form of notes taken during a stage 3 discussion. Legutke seems to dismiss learner texts that are produced as responses to more analytical tasks during stage 5. These ask learners to return to the text and find evidence for their own readings of the narrative or in relation to the overall focus of the sequence. Strictly speaking, this is efferent reading, but I would still count them as learner texts.

Legutke’s essay raises important questions concerning how learner texts turn into more elaborate and formalised genres, but also how to classify various responses in a meaningful way. Rosenblatt tends to distinguish between activities that encourage aesthetic and efferent reading, so Legutke associates the former with personal notes and preliminary jottings, the latter with traditional written responses. However, this would reduce the spectrum of meaningful production tasks to stages 2 and 6 without any intermediary steps. What is missing are those transitional activities during stages 3–5 that are dedicated to the co-construction of meaning. Accordingly, a third category is needed that involves the analytical skills of efferent reading, but retains the personal interest and informal responses of aesthetic reading. An early stage 5 rereading task fulfils these requirements, as it demands a more systematic analysis of the text based on the subjective experiences and the global understanding of readers. However, due to a reoccurrence of stages across several lessons, the depth of engagement can be adjusted as needed. While the first stage 5 activity usually requires students to study a

specific scene again in greater detail, a later stage 5 may encourage a comparison with a related scene, leading over to a discussion of larger narrative patterns. This raises the question whether the efficiency of certain task types should not be measured according to their placement within and facilitation of specific educational steps within a larger framework.

Daniela Caspari begins her discussion of creative activities for the literary classroom with the ambition to classify a bewildering plethora of tasks that are often enumerated in long lists without any meaningful indication of the learner level, the required language skills, the complexity, estimated duration, aim or scope of the activity (cf. 1994: 15–16). She lists six criteria that she deems essential for any consideration of creative activities (cf. 1994: 164): the exact location within a sequence of activities; the type of interaction (e.g. a short mental reflection vs. a written essay); the focus (e.g. process, product, personality of students); the extent of learner autonomy; the learner's stance and type of involvement (e.g. playful, analytical); and the task's suitability to train language competences. There are three factors that limit the book's usefulness for the model presented above. First of all, a substantial part of the classificatory system is more concerned with experimental writing and creative responses to literary texts rather than reader-response theory in a narrower sense (cf. 1994: 167–200). Secondly, the important chapter on the role of creativity during the reading process discusses and criticises too many existing theories without providing sufficient orientation (cf. 1994: 200–14). And, thirdly, the functional integration of a task in a sequence of activities becomes again tied to the traditional pre-, while- and post-reading stages (cf. 1994: 214–25). While the book offers a treasure trove of activities and a broad range of perspectives on creativity in the classroom, it does not address the logical sequence and interdependence of tasks in a systematic fashion.

Since I promote a staged approach to reading, I turn to Benton and Fox's *Teaching Literature: Nine to Fourteen* as well as Collie and Slater's *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Both of these books prioritise the process of reading and subjugate the choice of activities to their placement within an ongoing engagement with a literary text. As the titles reveal, they are concerned with different educational settings: middle-school students and EFL learners respectively. In chapter 1 ("What happens when we read stories?") Benton and Fox speak of a journey and four different phases (cf. 1985: 11–12), which have already been introduced. The first list of suggested activities appears in the context of genres in chapter 3 (cf. 1985: 33–69) and then again in chapter 6, which is dedicated to "Teaching the class novel" (cf. 1985: 115–34). Here, they first seem to relate back to the four phases (cf. 1985: 119–20), but then abandon the idea and list twenty-one activities for while-reading (cf. 1985: 121–6) and another twenty-eight

for post-reading (cf. 1985: 127–31) – grouped according to social forms: five tasks for solo work and twenty-three for “pairs, groups or the whole class” (1985: 127). Benton and Fox refer to these ideas as “suggestions” or “techniques” (1985: 120). While most of them are really useful and sufficiently described on their own terms, they are not interlinked and pertain to very different categories. In the following, I use the book’s numbering to quickly refer to the suggestions. “*Reading journals or logs*” (1985: 121), for example, are a form of documentation that contain personal responses in the form of “speculations”, “judgements, comparisons with their [students’] own experience, illustrations of characters, reflections on moments or themes from the book, comments on how the author is telling the story and notes about their own experiences prompted by the book” (1985: 121). This is intentionally a free format, but documents very different types of interactions with the text at very different stages of the engagement. Next is a portfolio-type “*extended journal*” (1985: 122) for which we do not get a context of use. 3, 4 and 7 are prediction tasks, but very different in terms of scope. “*Supposing . . .*” (7) asks students to explore the continuation of the narrative through improvisational theatre. 3 and 4 are covered in the journal under ‘speculations’, which shows that we have moved to a completely different set-up: from extended reading at home to in-class activities. 5 asks students to note down genuine questions they have while reading, which fits into the same category of looking ahead. “*Character or theme wallcharts*” (6) are a means of keeping track of what is going on in the narrative and belong to the category of retrospective reading. Returning to chapter 1 we see that Benton and Fox’s second general activity is called “Anticipating and retrospecting” (1985: 14), which clarifies why these activities go together. It is a pity that the list of suggestions in chapter 6 is not explicitly based on the theory and classification offered in chapter 1. Suggestion 8 introduces a new type of activity which asks students to create a speech or thought balloon for a character. Here the emphasis shifts to an exploration of a character’s feelings and thoughts. 9–11 belong to the broader category of keeping track that was introduced in 6 for characters and themes. They are called “*Family tree*”, “*Time lines*” and “*Maps*” and are intended to chart out social relations, temporal progression and locations. “*Thumb-nail sketches*” (12) asks for “lightning sketches of characters, settings or incidents” that can then be used to compare the “pictures in the head” that students have formed of different aspects of the story world. This is again a new context as students are asked to compare their different readings and impressions. 13–16 and 20 continue with the idea of exploring characters through creative tasks, in this case advice, interviews, diaries, letters and impression notes. 17 requires students to record striking thoughts in response to the narrative, which conceptually

belongs to the journal (1). 18 sees the teacher acting as the author and answering questions about the text, which is related to 5. “*Literary consequences*” is another prediction activity and belongs to 3, 4 and 7. The final task, “*Reports*” (21), uses the very formal structure of school reports to work as a template for the description of certain characters.

What can we take away from this analysis? First of all, there are types of activities that belong together, but they are never explicitly declared as groups. The first is about picturing the story world and making sense of what is happening while students are reading (1, 5, 17); this includes, first and foremost, finding out about the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the characters (8, 13–16, 20); the next is about sharing these ideas with others (12, 18) and finding out what they think. A third group of activities traces the development of the plot in terms of anticipation (3, 4, 7, 19) and retrospection (5, 9–11) and a fourth type uses a highly formalised template into which efferent information has to be slotted (21). What this list – like so many others of this type – fails to represent is the temporal sequence, the movement from aesthetic to efferent reading, from first impressions to refined arguments, from learner texts to teacher texts etc. It is also insufficiently linked to the theoretical framework, which means that it describes the activities for what they *are* rather than what they are *for*. In short, despite the announcement of a staged approach, the ‘suggestions’ in Benton and Fox remain unrelated.

Collie and Slater have organised their book according to four stages, which they call “First encounters”, “Maintaining momentum”, “Exploiting highlights” and “Endings” (1988: iii). They dedicate a chapter to each of them, and then demonstrate what happens during these stages when working with a novel in the classroom, in this case William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. In the section on “Gaining momentum” they introduce “Home reading with worksheets”, for which “a shared feedback or discussion time in class becomes a necessary follow-up” (1988: 38), which corresponds to my stages 2–4. Where they deviate from the framework presented above is their reliance on traditional teaching methods. For example, they promote “question-and-answer worksheets”, as “these are the most familiar of all, and the easiest to prepare” (1988: 38). Students are asked to complete such a worksheet at home or, alternatively, a multiple choice test (cf. 1988: 39–41). The following stage 3 pair work requires students to ask each other the questions on the handout and “monitor the answers given orally by the other student” (1988: 41). This is just the beginning of a whole series of questionable ideas that are incompatible with the reading model propagated by Benton & Fox and with the framework presented in these pages. When Collie and Slater introduce worksheets for the first time, they add a special precaution: “Care must be

used, however, to avoid the kind of situation where the student merely gives what is obviously the desired 'right' answer; or questions that simply lead students to a particular point in the text, where the answer is clearly to be found" (1988: 38). Six pages later (cf. 1988: 44) they include a true or false activity based on *The Great Gatsby*, which – by its very definition – requires correct answers.

This is a real pity as the book contains a number of important ideas, such as "snowball activities" (1988: 51–6). They mirror Benton and Fox's 'anticipating and retrospecting' in that they require students to do the same exercise again for different parts of the book to document changes of all kinds. In the context of graphic organisers, the authors suggest to focus on the "[r]epresentations of characters, their introduction into the story, [and] their growing or changing relationship with each other" (1988: 53). In the next chapter on post-reading activities, however, they introduce "*Sculpting*", for which a student arranges actors/characters in such a way that their poses express their fixed traits and relationships:

The sculptor chooses a 'character' and asks him or her to stand, sit, or take up any position or expression which seems appropriate to that character's essential personality traits. A cleared area of the classroom is the sculpting arena. Another 'character' is now asked to come forward and the sculptor places him or her in an appropriate position relative to the first character, that is, near if the sculptor sees them as close, or far apart if they have little connection with each other. (1988: 81)

The problem is that both observations cannot be true at the same time. Either characters have changing relationships and develop along a particular trajectory, which is called a character arc, or they have essential personality traits and unchanging relationships, which may only apply to sitcoms, formulaic genre fiction and some children's stories. 'Sculpting' only makes sense as a stage 5 activity based on one particular scene, but it becomes problematic during stage 6, as do character constellations and portraits that try to capture essences. These should be stage 2 or stage 5 'snowball activities' that have to be repeated a number of times to demonstrate to students that characters change, along with their relationships. For their discussion of *Lord of the Flies* Collie and Slater suddenly claim that "Sculpting [. . .] can also be used in the middle of the novel" (1988: 139). Their reason is the following: "In this chapter [VII: Shadows and Tall Trees], there is a subtle but definite shift in the relationships between several of the characters. [. . .] This makes it a particularly appropriate point for sculpting" (1988: 139–40). Together with uninspiring reading comprehension tasks and a lot of language work for its own sake, these contradictions are harmful to an otherwise excellent book. They undermine the very purpose of having a structured

approach in the first place, which would require a selection of activities with specific functions within the overall design.

Britta Freitag-Hild provides such a rationalisation for both her typology of activities for inter/transcultural learning (cf. 2010: 110–21) and their configurations for specific teaching sequences (cf. 2010: 166–8, 204–5, 268–71), which is a major advantage over lists of suggestions that tend to promote heterogeneous goals. She even presents staged approaches to Ken Loach's *Ae Fond Kiss* (cf. 2010: 159–96) and Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (cf. 2010: 197–253). However, this remarkable efficiency comes at a price: students have to keep pace with a strongly pre-programmed and teacher-centred pursuit of specific goals. In the case of *Ae Fond Kiss*, the first lesson offers an open exchange of ideas about the trailer (2010: 384), but then there seems to be an overreliance on stage 4 discussions (cf. 2010: 384–7) without sufficient opportunities for students to work on their own responses. For *The Black Album* both the framing in form of pre-reading activities (cf. 2010: 388) and the guiding questions that accompany the first encounter with the text (cf. 2010: 204) leave little room for personal reactions that do not correspond to the chosen approach. This foregrounding of one particular reading may not be necessary, as the texts manage to speak for themselves. There is much more variety in the task design in the middle part of the sequence, compared to *Ae Fond Kiss*, but the activities continue a trend of eliciting specific responses. While most books lack a clear progression based on careful pre-planning, Freitag-Hild demonstrates how this can be achieved. At the same time, aesthetic reading may lose its importance as a starting point of literary encounters, if efferent reading dominates the sequence of lessons.

Acknowledging the fact that teachers have to combine aesthetic reading with other, more analytical pursuits, the seven stages allow for a gradual shift from personal responses to more efferent concerns. This is possible by combining extensive reading at home (stage 2) with intensive rereading in the classroom (stage 5). Posts on the online forum and a stage 3 discussion at the beginning of every lesson encourage students to pursue their own lines of inquiry, which lead to stage 4 group presentations and lockstep discussions. These, in turn, can set the agenda for more analytical tasks during stage 5 and the following lessons. A teacher's initial framing (stage 1) and the choice of text alone usually provide sufficient guidance to guarantee discoveries that are also conducive to a teacher's ulterior plans. Students are more than likely to transition from first reactions to a more systematic inquiry under the influence of the dialogic reading process in class and online. Instead of taking centre stage, a facilitator should organise classroom interactions in such a way that students work on their own as much as possible. Important questions that need to be addressed can

often be transformed into stage 2 detective work or a stage 5 task. Every lesson primes students to look for indications in the text that may validate readings that have been discussed in class. Going through several iterations, stages do not repeat themselves, but become more focused in service of a collective process of meaning-making. Stages 2 and 5 serve as the main engines that accommodate a gradual shift from personal responses to the analysis of scenes as contextual frames to more synthetic tasks that begin to prepare for stage 6. In between (stage 4), teachers always get a chance to steer the ship by coordinating activities, summarising results, announcing further steps, adding points to the discussion in different forms and keeping track of the larger goals.



## 3 Cognitive (Literary) Studies

### 3.1 The Return of the Reader

Wolfgang Iser's ample use of optical metaphors indicates that he is concerned with the mind's eye and readers' construction of meaning as a mental process. This part sets out to highlight the striking similarities between core concepts of reader-response criticism and cognitive approaches to language and literature, a circumstance that has been frequently implied or directly pointed out (cf. e.g. Bredella 2010: 24, 78; Hogan 2003: 160; Keen 2010: xi), but not sufficiently explored. When Andreas Müller-Hartmann calls reader-response criticism a 'modern' literary theory (cf. 2007: 197), I could not agree more, but it is in need of a re-evaluation and a re-contextualisation in terms of cognitive (literary) studies.

Cognitive literary studies is a sprawling and bewildering new field of inquiry that is prone to speculation and draws its facts and – more often than not – its inspirations from cognitive sciences across a number of disciplines. David Groome identifies these research areas as follows: experimental cognitive psychology, computer modelling, cognitive neuropsychology and cognitive neuroscience (cf. 2014a: 5). For practical purposes, I mostly rely on a select number of authors, such as Antonio Damasio (2000) in the area of neurophysiology, or the work of cognitive psychologists, such as David S. Miall and Don Kuiken (1994, 2002), whose research is explicitly in the area of reading. In the field of cognitive literary studies some names, such as Alan Palmer (2004, 2010) or Suzanne Keen (2010), feature more prominently than others and the same applies to cognitive linguistics, where I mainly rely on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (2003) next to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's *The Way We Think* (2003). I have to leave out whole disciplines, such as philosophy, with enactivism being the sole exception.

What complicates matters further is the historical development of research. It is essential to draw a "distinction between first-generation and second-generation cognitive science" (Caracciolo 2014: 16), by which Marco Caracciolo means a computational and an embodied model respectively. In essence, this is the question of whether the brain is an independent computer-like machine that is carried around by a living organism, or part of a larger integrated network of systems/organs that spans the entire biological body and transacts with the environment holistically (cf. Caracciolo 2014: 19). This distinction is useful, as it provides the metaphorical and conceptual basis for the two approaches to

literature we have dealt with so far: efferent reading, such as ‘rational’ narratological analysis, is based on schema theory and the computational model of cognition. Aesthetic reading, however, proposes a holistic approach that is more in line with embodied cognition and enactivism.

The next chapter introduces schema theory and its view of the brain as a ‘file clerk’ that opens folders retrieved from a vast library, based on incoming ‘requests’, uses the available information to make sense of input and updates the files to match the new situation. For this system to work, we need to have representations of everything that exists in our brains: “Whenever we try to deal with any aspect of the world in any way, we necessarily form a model of that aspect of the world” (Hogan 2003: 40). In *Story Logic*, David Herman relies on exactly the same mechanism to conceptualise

... narrative understanding as a process of building and updating mental models of the worlds that are told about in stories. In other words, story recipients, whether readers, viewers, or listeners, work to interpret narratives by reconstructing the mental representations that have in turn guided their production. (2002: 1)

Norman N. Holland calls this the “bi-active model of reading”, as the input determines which folders are opened, but the content of the folders determines our responses. Holland, who is a strong proponent of a reader-active model, calls this the “compromise position” (2009: 175), as the text is still assumed to dominate both perception and cognition. During the heyday of reader-response criticism he found Iser’s approach to reading too unidirectional and mechanistic (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 58–9). While it is true that Iser stresses the overdetermination of literary texts, often to the extent of Meir Sternberg (1978) or David Bordwell’s (1985) narratological approaches, his model of meaning-making is more complex than that and mirrors Fauconnier and Turner’s conceptual integration theory, which is going to be a major argument towards the end of this part.

Schema theory developed out of joint research programmes on artificial intelligence and human cognition and led to the complex conceptual metaphor that **THE BRAIN IS A COMPUTER**. As the example of bottom-up and top-down ‘processing’ demonstrates, we have become so accustomed to these metaphorical entailments that we take them to be literal – a phenomenon we are going to encounter again and again: we use the language of computers to refer to organic processes which have little to do with a binary code or hard drives. Our own interactions with computers are highly metaphorical, precisely because there is no natural similarity. We talk to them as if they were people, we arrange folders on our ‘desktop’, we throw old files into a bin, and we even believe that there

are photos stored in neat boxes inside the hard drive. All of these things do not exist literally, of course, but we prefer the illusion that they do (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 22–24, 131).

Neither do computers have sense organs nor experiences, so programmers had to create schematic representations of objects, locations and procedures to make it possible to, first of all, identify them, and, secondly, interact with them. This approach assumes that our interactions with the environment are equally based on the conscious application of models and schemata. Learning and reading are thought to be based on the retrieval and storage of knowledge. New information is added to a vast semantic network where terms are organised in(to) hierarchies. The problem here is that this computational approach relies exclusively on semantic memory and tends to disregard three important resources that humans have: personal experiences, embodied cognition and emotions. Based on Endel Tulving's research (1972) Groome makes

... a distinction between episodic memory, which is our memory for events and episodes in our own lives, and semantic memory, which is essentially our general knowledge store. Perhaps the most important difference between these two memory systems is that episodic memory involves the retrieval of a personal experience associated with a particular context (i.e. the place and time when it occurred), whereas semantic memory involves the retrieval of facts and information (such as the meanings of words), which are not attached to any particular context. (2014b: 177)

It is easy to see how this distinction relates to John Dewey's emphasis on experience and Louise M. Rosenblatt's discrimination between efferent and aesthetic reading and why narratologists, such as David Herman, are more in favour of schema theory. In the former case, reading is conceived of as a dynamic transaction with the text, based on a holistic approach, for which all human resources are needed: "Everything that we know and believe is organized into a personal *theory* of what the world is like, a theory that is the basis of all our perceptions and understanding of the world, the root of all learning, the source of hopes and fears, motives and expectancies, reasoning and creativity" (Smith 2004: 14). This equally applies to reading, which is more than an extraction of information: "Reading [...] is best regarded as something done by people rather than by brains" (2004: 11).

Accordingly, chapter 3 addresses the importance of emotions and empathy, which are ignored in the computational model for obvious reasons. In *Cognitive Poetics*, Peter Stockwell begins chapter 11 with a surprising recontextualisation of his efforts up to this point:

The experience of literature, as described so far throughout this book, is one of rational decision-making and creative meaning construction. However, reading literature can also often be an emotional process, a felt experience, even offering a bodily frisson of excitement and pleasure, the prickling of the hairs on the back of your neck and a line or an idea or a phrase or an event that makes you catch your breath, and remember it for a long time afterwards. (2002: 151)

Yet, readers' emotions, life experiences and entanglements with narratives provide more than passing sensations: they are constitutive of reading comprehension itself. Without some degree of empathy, characters would never come alive. Not least due to Suzanne Keen's seminal book on *Empathy and the Novel* (2010) has literary studies rediscovered the emotions of readers. Following Keen, I present a systematic exploration of empathy in its various facets – eight, to be precise (cf. Batson 2009) – to shed some light on a concept that is not only central to literary reading, but also quite ambiguous.

The fourth chapter introduces embodied cognition, which proposes that humans intuitively understand new situations based on previous experiences in similar contexts. Faced with a hammer, we may remember specific situations that carry special autobiographical meaning. Otherwise, we have an immediate sense of its functional uses – called affordances – from handling different versions of this tool. In every single case, direct experience provides the basis for our interaction with the object and not abstract knowledge (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 241; Lakoff 1990: 50–2). This is how Antonio Damasio describes this phenomenon in *The Feeling of What Happens*:

we store in memory not just aspects of an object's physical structure – the potential to reconstruct its form, or color, or sound, or typical motion, or smell, or what have you – but also aspects of our organism's motor involvement in the process of apprehending such relevant aspects: our emotional reactions to an object; our broader physical and mental state at the time of apprehending the object. As a consequence, recall of an object and deployment of its image in mind is accompanied by the reconstruction of at least some of the images which represent those pertinent aspects. (2000: 183)

The same applies when we meet a person: very little conscious information comes to mind. At best, we remember the previous encounter or something we wanted to say or do. We are more likely to have an instant understanding of what is appropriate behaviour and how we are supposed to feel about this social encounter. At best, information always comes as a package that includes emotions and evaluations, especially where people are concerned. Thus, embodied cognition is a more recent iteration of Dewey's basic idea that cognition and experience are inseparable. This equally applies to reading and our encounters with

characters. Instead of creating ‘fact files’ that are filled with abstract data, we learn to read their entanglements, especially personal relationships.

Embodied cognition has diversified into three major strands that try to explain how we are able to understand other people: first, there are researchers who assume that we gradually develop our own folk psychology that helps us read other human beings. This is known as ‘theory theory’. It is the most ‘narratological’ of the three, as it tends to associate body codes with specific meanings. Secondly, many cognitive psychologists (cf. e.g. Oatley 2016, Green 2004) believe that we run a quick internal simulation – another metaphor – to compute how the other person feels and thinks. This is known as ‘simulation theory’. Both of them are frequently taken together and referred to as ‘Theory of Mind’ or “mind-reading” (Zunshine 2006: 7). A third group, the enactivists, who are philosophers rather than psychologists, attempt to trace this ability to repeated encounters with similar social situations and cultural training, which neither requires a theory – which is considered to be too close to a mental model approach – nor a simulation, since our brains are not computers into which we feed data and wait for the results. Despite these differences, they all share a strong concern with social interactions and the ability to ‘read’ other human beings. As a cognitive approach to reading literature, Theory of Mind foregrounds the importance of characters and privileges readers’ understanding of social minds (cf. Palmer 2004, 2010) over the traditional concerns of classical narratology.

In the last two chapters, the focus shifts to cognitive linguistics. The centrality of conceptual metaphors has already become apparent with the example that *READING IS A JOURNEY*, but this is just the tip of the iceberg: to understand how comics encode experiences we also need to look at image schemas and conceptual metonymy. Finally, I want to demonstrate how Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of blending (2003) can be understood as a meaningful conceptualisation of reading, especially through a discussion of Barbara Dancygier’s *The Language of Stories* (2012), which represents an interesting point of comparison for Iser’s model. Since this has been a very swift introduction to a rekindled interest in the reader, it is now necessary to look at these theories in greater detail.

### 3.2 Mental Models

In their seminal study *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (1977) Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson offer a rationale how “a convergence of interests at the intersection of psychology and artificial intelligence” is motivated by similar concerns in the two fields: “What is the nature of knowledge and how is this knowledge used? These questions

lie at the core of both psychology and artificial intelligence” (1977: 1). While the questions may have been strikingly similar, the observed phenomena were clearly not and led to curious generalisations: “For both people and machines, each in their own way, there is a serious problem in common of making sense out of what they hear, see, or are told about the world” (1977: 2). Retrospectively, this statement may seem odd, but it is a clear indication of how the two disciplines were inspired by each other: “If we understood how a human understands, then we might know how to make a computer understand, and vice versa” (1977: 8). Unfortunately, this influence tended to be one-sided at times:

we both believe that we need computers as the metaphor in terms of which we create our theories and as the arbiter of the plausibility of our theories. There is such a range of problems and procedures involved in the understanding process that to not use a computer is simply not to know whether what you are theorizing about could ever possibly work, let alone be right. (1977: iv)

This is exactly the same problem as looking at reading from the point of view of holistic understanding or advanced narratological analysis. What seems to be a straightforward process that most children can eventually master, becomes associated with “such a range of problems and procedures” (1977: iv) that the theory of acquisition for the first is increasingly bogged down by obstacles imported from a different discipline. Perception in general, and reading in particular, does not have to be extremely complicated just because it is difficult to describe in technical terms or to teach a machine how to do it. This is one of Frank Smith’s central arguments: “We live in an enormously complex and complicated world, but the times when individuals are actually confused, even babies, are remarkably few” (2004: 3; see also 23).

In his widely acclaimed *Story Logic* (2002), David Herman sets up the same trap for himself. He begins the book in the following manner: “Understanding long, detailed, and formally sophisticated literary narratives is for many people a natural, seemingly automatic process. Early on, however, artificial intelligence researchers showed that enormously complex linguistic and cognitive operations are required to generate or comprehend even the most minimal stories” (2002: 1). And then he proceeds to introduce a system of story comprehension that may be brilliant in its depth of analysis, but is as convoluted as any AI researcher could dream of. Herman starts from a very simple premise: we have to keep track of the development of characters as it is their motivations that drive the narrative. Yet, as a narratologist, he is more interested in “mapping the trajectories of individuals and objects as they move or are moved along narratively salient paths” (2002: 8), for which he has to establish the “principles for narrative

microdesigns”, which “include coding strategies used to apportion particular facets of storyworlds into *states, events, and actions*” (2002: 6). These actions are then broken down into the “elements of the canonical description of an action” (2002: 62), of which he lists five major types, three of which have subcategories. Herman becomes so entangled in the details of his own classificatory system that he loses track of his initial aim to establish narrative as “a basic and general strategy for making sense of experience” (2002: 24).

Another aspect of this confusion of narratological analysis with reading is the idea that readers “reconstruct the storyworlds encoded in narratives” (Herman 2002: 5). Herman explains the process in the following way: “storyworlds are mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate” (2002: 5). He believes that we ‘transport’ to the storyworld and then keep track of everything that is going on by updating our files – mental frames – with every new bit of information. This is incompatible with gestalt psychology and reader-response criticism, which both favour a holistic approach and readers’ intuitive meaning-making (cf. Miall 2006: 292). Based on their empirical research Gail McKoon and Roger Ratcliff developed a minimalist hypothesis in the 1990s according to which System 1 (cf. Kahneman 2012) operates locally as long as possible:

We claim that there is only minimal automatic processing of inferences during reading. Our hypothesis is that readers do not automatically construct inferences to fully represent the situation described by a text. In the absence of specific, goal-directed strategic processes [e.g. analytical tasks], inferences of only two kinds are constructed: those that establish locally coherent representations of the parts of a text that are processed concurrently and those that rely on information that is quickly and easily available. (1992: 440)

In other words, readers do not (re)construct storyworlds, the correct chronological order of events or character biographies automatically – unless they are foregrounded in the narrative itself and have direct relevance. Then we notice them and ‘mind’ in Dewey’s sense. As long as readers can make sense of a scene, there is no need to over-interpret, or, to be more precise, to interpret at all, if we understand interpretation as a conscious (System 2) operation. A coherent understanding of text does not require sophisticated analysis (cf. McKoon & Ratcliff 1992: 456; Smith 2004: 87, 96).

McKoon and Ratcliff offer a simple example: “Mary stirred her coffee” (1992: 457). The minimalist hypothesis suggests that we do not complete the picture by adding a spoon, which is the most important object in this scenario. As long as we have a general understanding that makes sense to us, there is no need to elaborate. A complete misreading of Iser would be to assume that he meant

gaps in the situational model (cf. McKoon & Ratcliff 1992: 458). The generative power of gaps has to do with readers' understanding of how the foregrounded elements of the narrative can be put into meaningful relations to each other. There is a significant difference between acknowledging the usefulness of generic schemata to make sense of basic situations, which corresponds to Iser's automatic consistency-building, and claiming that we have to recreate all elements of the storyworld as a mental model in our brains. Tests have shown that readers need a lot of cognitive effort to trace the placement of objects in the virtual space of the story, reconstruct the floorplan of houses based on a reading, or any similar task that exceeds an understanding of what has been explicitly foregrounded (cf. McKoon & Ratcliff 1992: 461; see also Johnson-Laird 1990: 158–62; Emmott 2004: 46–50). Criticising Philip Johnson-Laird for his “equation of natural story-reading with ‘a superficial understanding’”, Catherine Emmott points out that “salience and reading purpose” have to play a much larger role in cognitive approaches to reading: “The majority of readers may not be concerned about the precise positions of objects in a room because this is generally not the main point of reading a passage like this” (2004: 47). What is required is an understanding of “the actions of the central characters and an overall impression of the location” (2004: 47), unless, of course, the narrative specifically invites the readers to pay special attention to details.

In her article “Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space” Marie-Laure Ryan perfectly states the case:

It takes a specific agenda – such as the present project – to attempt the systematic reconstruction of the ‘textually correct’ map of a fictional world. It was only on my third reading of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* that I reached what I hope is a reasonably complete and accurate representation of the topography of the novel. My first reading was a reading for pure pleasure. (2003: 217–8)

As McKoon and Ratcliff argue, the point to be made is not that it cannot be done through goal-directed strategic processes, as Ryan illustrates, but that highly abstract thinking and world-building are not a natural part of reading. Like Ryan, Emmott makes a difference between herself as “a first-time reader of the story” and as “an analyst” (2004: 256). She also offers an interesting observation on the inclusion of maps as peritexts of prose fiction: “Occasionally novels do include lay-out drawings and maps, but presumably readers consult these diagrams when necessary rather than memorize them. The fact that these diagrams are deemed necessary in such cases perhaps indicates that the narrative text is not a good means of conveying this information” (2004: 49). In her article “‘Situated Events’ in Fictional Worlds: The Reader’s Role in Context Construction” Emmott



offers an extensive argument why the characters' fictional environments cannot be separated from their experiences:

The idea of the reader mentally controlling 'contextual frames' is rather different from traditional notions of 'place' in narratology (e.g., Lodge, Rimmon-Kenan). 'Place' is usually thought of as the location itself and is conveyed by descriptions (e.g., Chatman, Hamon). In the model described in the previous section, information about a particular place would be stored in a location representation, whereas a contextual frame provides information about the 'placing' of characters and objects in a spatio-temporal configuration. The notion of contextual frames provides a model of the reader actively tracking the dynamics of the fictional world and assembling a context from and around the events which occur. Also, rather than drawing a dividing line between the characters and the location, this puts the emphasis on each character being surrounded by the people and the location. This provides a view of our physical environment which is social in nature – our actions can only be fully understood by taking into account who is around us." (1998: 191)

Manfred Pfister uses the term "configuration" to refer to "the dramatis personae that is present on stage at any particular point in the course of the play" (2000: 171), but Emmott extends this concept to all salient elements and their interrelations. An interesting parallel between Iser, Emmott and Pfister is how they conceptualise meaning-making as drawing different contextual frames or salient elements together for mutual illumination: "The identity of a dramatic figure takes shape and evolves in the series of configurations in which it participates, and the contrasts and correspondences that develop between one particular figure and the others become clear when they are meaningfully juxtaposed on stage" (Pfister 2000: 172).

Like Herman, teachers may be tempted to ask "who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world" of the narrative (2002: 5), but literature deals in entanglements and readers do not primarily store factual information unless foregrounded. In a network model of cognition "the connections between items of information are regarded as being as important as the information itself" (Emmott 2004: 51), a point that remains underspecified in Herman's *Story Logic*, despite claims to the contrary:

Interpreters of narrative do not merely reconstruct a sequence of events and a set of existents but imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which, besides happening and existing, things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief, and so on – both for narrative participants and for interpreters of the story. More than reconstructed timelines and inventories of existents, storyworlds are mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response, encompassing

sympathy, the drawing of causal inferences, identification, evaluation, suspense, and so on. (2002: 16–17)

To put this whole argument in a nutshell: while our reading is heavily schema-based when System 1 engages in automated consistency-building and finds instant connections on a localised level, we rely far less on global inferences, cognitive storyworld models or more abstract schemata – like narrative or genre models – to make sense of specific scenes. Here, contextual frames play a far more important role, which are mental representations of scenes and character relationships rather than facts.

Yet, even with the most mundane, everyday situations, the notion that our thinking is based on abstract, generalised mental models is counterintuitive at first, as all of our experiences result from specific contexts. Accordingly, when Schank and Abelson developed their theory of schemata, they had to start with episodic memory:

The form of memory organization upon which our arguments are based is the notion of episodic memory. An episodic view of memory claims that memory is organized around personal experiences or episodes rather than around abstract semantic categories. If memory is organized around personal experiences then one of the principal components of memory must be a procedure for recognizing repeated or similar sequences. (1977: 17–18)

In other words: to avoid constant cognitive overload and to allow for quick reactions during life-threatening circumstances, humans had to develop a system that relied on the recognition of and automated response to general patterns (System 1) and reserved conscious processing (System 2) for deviations from the norm.

Some episodes are reminiscent of others. As an economy measure in the storage of episodes, when enough of them are alike they are remembered in terms of a standardized generalized episode which we will call a script. Thus, rather than list the details of what happened in a restaurant for each visit to a restaurant, memory simply lists a pointer (link) to what we call the restaurant script and stores the items in this particular episode that were significantly different from the standard script as the only items specifically in the description of that episode. (1977: 19; see also 37)

Since these ‘generalized episodes’ are cultural models that are shared by a community (cf. Stockwell 2002: 33), it is possible to start with the pointer and then only narrate what was noteworthy about a situation. Many conversations start with: “You cannot imagine what happened to me at/during . . .”. Thus, the schema is evoked first and then we just report the unusual circumstances, which requires some skill in making the details cohere without repeating large parts

of the routine (cf. Schank & Abelson 1977: 45). This applies to oral storytelling as much as to other types of communication: "People, in speaking and writing, consistently leave out information that they feel can easily be inferred by the listener or reader" (1977: 22; see also 23). This is different with young children who still have to learn how to abstract and tend to narrate entire episodes: "A child must learn that experiences that differ by a few small items are in fact best handled by one script. Early on in the script acquisition process, children do not realize this, and often see no similarity in events that seem nearly identical in form to an adult" (1977: 232).

Most of the gap-filling that daily life requires of us is pretty mundane. Therefore, art focuses either on the unusual or a fresh look at familiar things that deserve closer attention. In this sense, reading relies to a large extent on schemata for Iser's automated process of consistency-building, but the point of doing that is conscious attention to that which is artistically foregrounded and special. Accordingly, schemata are relevant standardised models against which the literary comes to the fore. This is also the central difference between teaching language and literature: while formulaic, schema-based teaching makes sense to enable students to master standard situations and text types, an engagement with literature requires more than identifying genre markers or narratological categories.

Schank and Abelson's theory also clarifies that we approach situations holistically, that we always start with general orientation and overall meaning and then attend to the particulars: "In understanding it seems doubtful that people first do a syntactic analysis without recourse to meaning and then [*sic*] look at the meaning. People understand as they go" (1977: 16). In daily routines, we basically assume that everything is going according to plan and that the new situation is going to be as comfortably boring as the few hundred times before (cf. 1977: 67). In this sense, we use schemata to project what is going to happen. In an educational setting, predictions are a natural and important part of reading and can help, as in real life, to establish some basic orientation. When teachers come back to the initial list of predictions after a reading sequence, students should be praised for noticing deviations from the generic patterns and not for getting everything right in the first place. This is another reason why rereading and the analysis of specific scenes is so important, to get a sense of how the work of art is more than its generic backbone.

The concept of schemas predates Schank and Abelson's approach by a few decades, of course, and is usually traced back to Frederic Bartlett's *Remembering* (1932) and Jean Piaget's observations on children's developmental stages in *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1926). This is how Piaget explains the

holistic approach to cognition in the context of using tachistoscopes in experimental research, which are devices that showed test subjects images or words for milliseconds:

Recent research on the nature of perception, particularly in connexion with tachisto[s]copic reading, and with the perception of forms, has led to the view that objects are recognized and perceived by us, not because we have analysed them and seen them in detail, but because of “general forms” which are as much constructed by ourselves as given by the elements of the perceived object, and which may be called the schema or the *gestaltqualität* of these objects. (1926: 131)

Bartlett was equally influenced by Gestalt psychology, as was Iser many decades later. The former’s schema theory is described by Groome in the following manner:

we perceive and encode information into our memories in terms of our past experience. Schemas are the mental representations that we have built up from all that we have experienced in the past, and according to Bartlett we compare our new perceptual input with our schemas in an effort to find something meaningful and familiar. Any input which does not match up with existing schemas will either be distorted to make it match the schemas, or else it will not be retained at all. (2014b: 161–2; see also 2014a: 8)

Bartlett never tires of stressing that these schemas are not fixed forms, but constantly evolving patterns or sets of various experiences that are connected by a common interest. As much as schemas shape our perception, they are equally modified by new experiences. Bartlett discusses the conceptual metaphor **THE BRAIN IS A STOREHOUSE** to highlight its shortcomings:

In any case, a storehouse is a place where things are put in the hope that they may be found again when they are wanted exactly as they were when first stored away. The schemata are, we are told, living, constantly developing, affected by every bit of incoming sensational experience of a given kind. The storehouse notion is as far removed from this as it well could be. (1964: 200)

In essence, we learn about the world by updating these models. Here is Piaget’s version of the same idea, which he calls ‘assimilation’:

... reality data are treated or modified in such a way as to become incorporated into the structure of the subject. In other words, every newly established connection is integrated into an existing schematism. According to this view, the organizing activity of the subject must be considered just as important as the connections inherent in the external stimuli, for the subject becomes aware of these connections only to the degree that he can assimilate them by means of his existing structures. (Piaget & Inhelder 2000: 5)

In contrast to ‘assimilation’, the process of ‘accommodation’ involves “the modification of internal schemes to fit reality” (2000: 6), which leads to a significant re-structuring of existing patterns.

Since “all mental organization is schematic in nature” (Mandler 1984: 2), according to Jean Matter Mandler, there have been attempts to classify mental models. In *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts* (2003) Patrick Colm Hogan uses a distinction between “representational schemas”, or schemas in a narrower sense, which he associates with the mental lexicon, taxonomies and lists of features for each entry, and “procedural schemas” (2003: 44), which are usually called scripts or “event schemas” (Mandler 1984: 13), which Mandler identifies as “the stereotypical knowledge structures that people have acquired about common routines” (1984: 75). Here is Schank and Abelson’s definition:

A script is a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context. A script is made up of slots and requirements about what can fill those slots. The structure is an interconnected whole, and what is in one slot affects what can be in another. Scripts handle stylized everyday situations. They are not subject to much change, nor do they provide the apparatus for handling totally novel situations. Thus, a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation. Scripts allow for new references to objects within them just as if these objects had been previously mentioned; objects within a script may take ‘the’ without explicit introduction because the script itself has already implicitly introduced them. (1977: 41; see also Stockwell 2002: 77; Smith 2004: 21–22)

Schank and Abelson’s most famous example is the restaurant script (cf. 1977: 42–6), which they reference throughout the book: “When we refer to ‘the’ restaurant script, therefore, we are relying on those stereotyped details which are culturally consensual” (1977: 55). The most important aspect of our reliance on scripts is that they belong to the automated processes of System 1 and save a lot of energy by not requiring conscious attention: “The waitress typically does what the customer expects, and the customer typically does what the waitress expects. There is great social economy when both parties know the script because neither party need invest effort deciding what the actions of the other mean and how appropriately to respond” (1977: 61). When our “predictive powers” (1977: 45) fail, however, it is fascinating to see how easily people get confused by minor adjustments to the familiar patterns, be it driving on the left side or waiting to be seated in restaurants. Since our understanding of literature is based on real-life experiences and the other way round, there is a feedback loop through which art and life inform each other: “Scripts are important not only in guiding our own action, but in understanding other people’s actions and reports of actions, including those reports that appear in literature” (Hogan 2003: 45).

While Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, which was published in the Russian original in 1928, attempted to schematise the text-immanent structures of fairy tales, the 1970s and 80s witnessed a veritable boom of explaining the comprehension of narratives in terms of mental models. Mandler's *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (1984) is a typical example which proposes an exact analogy between acquiring scripts through (and for) social encounters and developing story schemas by being exposed to narrative texts. Early on, she makes an important distinction between text-immanent and cognitive structures:

A story grammar is a rule system devised for the purpose of describing the regularities found in one kind of text. The rules describe the units of which stories are composed, that is, their constituent structure, and the ordering of the units, that is, the sequences in which the constituents appear. A story schema, on the other hand, is a mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the way in which stories proceed. The close connection between a story grammar and a story schema arises from the fact that the story schema is a mental reflection of the regularities that the processor has discovered (or constructed) through interacting with stories. (1984: 18).

In contrast to a feature-based narratological analysis, Mandler states that "much of the work of cognitive structures goes on beyond the reach of consciousness" (1984: xi), which returns us to Iser's idea of automated consistency-building and Kahneman's System 1 (cf. Mandler 1984: 32–5, 108; Kahneman 2012). According to this logic, "[w]hat is consciously noticed is a discrepancy from the normal values, the violation of an expectation" (1984: 35; see also 101; Stockwell 2002: 20), which brings Mandler's approach again in line with Iser and the concepts of selection, overdetermination and defamiliarisation: "The schema prepares the person to see certain kinds of things; consequently, little attention need be paid to those things that match the expectations, leaving attentional resources free to devote to the more unusual, and therefore more informative, items" (1984: 105; see also 26, 103).

In this sense, genre competence, which is a related concept, provides an essential first orientation and a meaningful way into a story, until the more narrative-specific elements gain prominence and supersede the generic schema. Retrospectively, a genre label may help to find back into a story and remember the details and deviations by working from a common ground towards the more unusual aspects. However, "with the passage of time, recall becomes more dependent upon a generic knowledge representation than on the specifics of individual statements" (Mandler 1984: 73). This is a point that Mandler proved empirically: "From these various recall studies, we have found support for the presence of an idealized form for a particular kind of story. The data provide

evidence both for the constituents of a story schema and for the sequences in which those units are strung together” (1984: 50; see also 105). Her research raises the question how the specific narrative relates to the generic model, the ‘idealized form,’ which can be answered by recourse to prototype theory and mental classifications.

Both are essential to schematisation in the context of the mental lexicon, as words and concepts are not stored separately, but in an organised manner: “we can say that *prototypicality* is the basis of categorisation, with central examples acting as cognitive reference points in the middle of a radial structure” (Stockwell 2002: 29). With scripts, we have seen that objects and roles are reduced to their generic functionality and have a fixed place in the overall pattern. Even in completely new settings it is easy to identify who is who and what is what without resorting to conscious analysis. This is possible because we abstract a prototypical situation from countless specific experiences that is universal enough to guide us through as many individual contexts as possible and allows us to attend to the specific elements that are new. “Prototypes are, basically, standard cases” (Hogan 2003: 45) and it takes children a long time to learn these cultural classifications by testing labels and finding out the optimal degree of specificity and/or generality. Stockwell explains these ‘basic level’ prototypes in the following manner:

The basic level tends to be the level at which we most commonly interact on a human scale with the category. We distinguish basic level objects at the point where they seem to have the most discontinuities with other objects in the world. Terriers are not as different from collies as dogs are different from cats. The basic level is also where most of the attributes of a category are optimally available – we tend to have more of a sense of ‘dogginess’ than ‘collie-ness’ or ‘mammal-ness’. These hierarchies of superordinacy and subordinacy are what allow us to use and recognise over- and under-specificity. [...] Recognising categories seems to be a two-stage process, involving a holistic perception of the category as an object (a ‘gestalt’ whole) followed, if necessary, by an analytical decomposition of the object into separate chained subtypes or attributes. (2002: 31)

There are three important things to notice in this context: prototypes provide an important, almost instantaneous first orientation that is sufficiently accurate. In most contexts an ‘analytical decomposition’ is neither possible nor necessary, as the main aim of operating with prototypes is automation. Scientists tend to break down – ‘analyse’ – objects into atomistic features or parts, but ‘reading’ in the broadest possible sense is about holistic perception, as Stockwell argues. Prototypes are necessarily stereotypes and there is no escape from them. All our thinking is based on preconceived or prejudiced ideas:

Our knowledge about an object or classes of objects, about an event or classes of events, about personality traits and social norms, can all be considered as small networks of

information that become activated as we experience these things and that function according to certain schematic principles. (Mandler 1984: 2–3)

Therefore, Mandler describes schemas “as sets of expectations” (1984: 13) as we do not objectively register what is out there, but rather judge to what extent new information conforms to our preconceived notions. Smith argues that predictions are central to our lives as human cognition is geared towards projection and extrapolation:

Everyone predicts – including children – all the time. Our lives would be impossible, we would be reluctant even to leave our beds in the morning, if we had no expectation about what the day might bring. We would never go through a door if we had no idea of what might be on the other side. And all our expectations, our predictions, can be derived from only one source, our theory of the world. We are generally unaware of our constant state of anticipation for the simple reason once again that our theory of the world works so well. (2004: 23; see also 25; Gombrich 2014: 155, 170–1, 254)

Still, there is hope to enrich engrained ideas with new and more diversified perspectives or emotions, so that System 1 may eventually call forth different associations: “The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the ‘stored,’ material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation” (Dewey 2005: 63). Schemas have to be prejudices to work effectively, but they can be reshaped over time in light of new experiences.

A second and related point concerns the cultural context: “The prototypical man for any given person will involve average properties, not of all men, but of men who are highly salient in that person’s experience” (Hogan 2003: 46), such as ideas about height, skin colour, overall build, clothes, posture etc. Prototypicality is culture-specific and thus malleable over time and especially in those areas in which we are still willing to learn. Travelling, living abroad or emigrating may pose a challenge to our established schemas, so that successful integration has to involve the modification of numerous prototypes. This does not primarily apply to details, but to basic forms of interaction.

A third and final point concerns the differentiation between prototype, example/*exemplum* and exemplar (cf. Hogan 2003: 46–7; see also Evans & Green 2006: 249). A prototype, as we have seen, best captures the sense of ‘dogginess’ or ‘restaurantness’ without being a specific example. Thus, it represents an abstract centre to which examples are related at various distances according to family resemblances (cf. Lakoff 1990: 12–16): “It seems that our cognitive system for categorisation is not like an ‘in or out’ filing cabinet, but an arrangement of elements



in a radial structure or network with central good examples, secondary poorer examples, and peripheral examples. The boundaries of the category are fuzzy rather than fixed” (Stockwell 2002: 29). This categorical system is ever-changing, especially when looking at exemplars, which are supposed to be the ‘central good examples’ of a specific type and may set new standards. Summarising recent research, Richard Gerrig suggests that we do not store a single prototype, but rather work with several exemplars as points of reference (cf. 2011: 40). This may be more appropriate in the context of literature, as a focus on the most prototypical examples as role models would be problematic. ‘Genre fiction’ is a derogatory term that is used for formulaic narratives that excessively follow a fixed pattern. When works of art emulate an exemplar too closely, they become clones or copies and may be seen as cases of plagiarism rather than works of creativity. In Hogan’s jazz example creativity is associated with the playful de- and re-construction of generic models (cf. Hogan 2003: 70–86). Artists have to be both skilful and familiar with the conventions to be able to play with them in a seemingly effortless manner. Readers acquire genre awareness by comparing and contrasting different texts, as exemplars are – by definition – not typical (cf. Stockwell 2002: 30). Therefore, the choice of text ensembles (cf. Delaney 2015: 20, 24, 29) for the classroom plays an equally important role in genre studies as it does in inter/transcultural learning.

Summarising the argument so far, there are two basic types of memory: semantic and episodic memory. The first is based on generic knowledge structures that play a crucial role in automated responses (System 1) and can be further subdivided into representational and procedural schemas. The second type encompasses specific personal memories. In cognitive poetics there is a strong bias in favour of the first, in aesthetic reading of the second. When students are encouraged to establish a personal connection with a text, this is much more likely to be based on idiosyncratic experiences and not on culturally transmitted generic conventions, such as restaurant scripts. What episodic memories share with scripts is their complex integration of spaces, objects, roles and procedures. However, while scripts remain at the generic level, they become a background in episodic memories against which the ‘tellable’ parts emerge. All these terms and classifications are metaphoric in nature, as it is still not entirely clear how memories are stored and retrieved. A practical solution that is also intended to bridge the gulf between cognitive and experiential approaches is the introduction of what Lakoff calls “*idealized cognitive models*, or ICMs” (1990: 68) and which Stockwell understands as “structures with which we organise our knowledge. Cognitive models consist of relations between categories, set up socially, culturally, and on the basis of individual experience, as

our means of understanding and negotiating the world and our lives through it” (2002: 33). Here we have an important step forward in that humans are no longer said to operate with particulars, but meaningful connections between semantic entries. Before we return to mental spaces and their networked interrelations in chapter 5, we look at two phenomena in which cognition is conceptualised as a holistic experience: empathy and enactivism. They relate to two central questions that every teacher of literature has to face: to what extent can students identify with the social world and especially the characters of narrative fiction? And, secondly, do we learn to read and manage social encounters through a bottom-up process of building competence via practice and intuition or through a top-down process of situational analysis and applying schemata?

### 3.3 Emotions & Empathy

#### 3.3.1 The Feeling of What Happens

While the previous chapter highlighted the representation and classification of generic knowledge, this one shifts attention to the interrelatedness of body and mind, or embodied cognition, which proposes a much closer tie between cognition, emotions and evaluations. Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* may serve as a useful point of departure for an exploration of the key concepts of cognitive studies after the dominant paradigm of the computational model began to fall into disrepute. Damasio deplores the fact that in first-generation cognitive science “the brain remained consistently separated from the body rather than being seen as part of a complex living organism. The notion of an integrated organism – the idea of an ensemble made up of a body proper and a nervous system – [. . .] had little impact in shaping the standard conceptions of mind and brain” (2000: 40). To counter this misconception, he redefines the conscious mind as an exploratory tool that serves human beings in their interactions with the environment. “The brain is a creative system. Rather than mirroring the environment around it, as an engineered information-processing device would, each brain constructs maps of that environment using its own parameters and internal design, and thus creates a world unique to the class of brains comparably designed” (2000: 322). Instead of engaging in computational processes, such as assessments, calculations and simulations – which all conceptualise the mind as being turned inwards – Damasio conceives of the mind as being directed outwards (cf. 2000: 28–9). It is intimately involved in human experiences and interactions: “rather than concentrating resources on our inner states, it is perhaps more advantageous

to concentrate one's resources on the images that describe problems out in the world or on the premises of those problems or on the options for their solution and their possible outcomes" (2000: 29). In this sense, curiosity is built into the system and humans are explorers by design.

If teachers are willing to accept Damasio's point of view, they are faced with three consequences that affect all aspects of their professional lives. First, thinking is not predominantly an independent manipulation of symbolic representations that are stored in the brain, but a key resource in a human being's holistic engagement with an environment. Secondly, emotional responses and evaluations are directly tied to cognition (cf. 2000: 16). Thirdly, learning in Piaget's sense of accommodation takes place by consciously noticing and directly interacting with specific objects. This may help to explain Damasio's seemingly cryptic explanation of where the title of the book comes from: "the presence of you is the feeling of what happens when your being is modified by the acts of apprehending something" (2000: 10). Meaningful encounters leave a trace in episodic memory and thus change who we are: "Extended consciousness occurs when working memory holds in place, simultaneously, *both* a particular object *and* the autobiographical self, in other words, when *both* a particular object *and* the objects in one's autobiography simultaneously generate core consciousness" (2000: 222). All memories are relational in this sense, as they come into existence through conscious interaction (cf. 2000: 20). Although Damasio acknowledges the role of schematic memory and automated processing, he shows more interest in subjective selves, autobiographical memory and an actively engaged mind. This can be explained based on his background in neurophysiological research, dealing with patients who suffer from an impaired consciousness (cf. 2000: 6) and whose ability to interact presents an important indication whether their minds can still reach out (extended consciousness) or are limited to core consciousness. For an empirical researcher such a situation requires a difficult triangulation between several factors:

Based on what we know about private human minds and on what we know and can observe of human behavior, it is possible to establish a three-way link among: (1) certain external manifestations, e.g. wakefulness, background emotions, attention, specific behaviors; (2) the corresponding internal manifestations of the human being having those behaviors as reported by that human being; and (3) the internal manifestations that we, as observers, can verify in ourselves when we are in circumstances equivalent to those of the observed individual. This three-way linkage authorizes us to make reasonable inferences about human private states based on external behavior. (2000: 83)

Despite these obvious limitations we keep "theorizing constantly about the state of mind of others from observations of behaviors, reports of mental states, and

counterchecking of their correspondences”, which Damasio calls a “natural human ability” (2000: 83). Through years of training, we become fairly good at it. Since actions, reactions, emotions and thoughts are part of an integrated system, we learn to complete a fuller picture based on a few hints: “Just as the music you hear is the result of many groups of instruments playing together in time, the behavior of an organism is the result of several biological systems performing concurrently” (2000: 87). In short, even without a theoretical background in music or behavioural sciences, we can still identify a sour note or register that something is wrong.

According to this logic, mental states become embodied and we learn to ‘read’ what another human being is doing, perceiving, thinking and feeling, based on physical expressions: “Consciousness and mind [. . .] are closely tied to external behaviors that can be observed by third persons” (2000: 12). Visual narrative media that may grant little access to characters’ thoughts and feelings rely on such an ability to ‘read minds’ based on social context and physical outward expressions, as we shall see in part 4. Like thoughts, emotional responses have to be seen as relational. They are not internal states or occurrences, but targeted at external objects and thus determine our interactions with them: “Emotion is critical for the appropriate direction of attention since it provides an automated signal about the organism’s past experience with given objects and thus provides a basis for assigning or withholding attention relative to a given object” (2000: 273). This (re)integration of thinking into a human being’s perception and experience is nothing new, as we saw with Dewey’s approach. This is how Bruner addresses a similar point in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*:

David Krech used to urge that people ‘perfink’ – perceive, feel, and think at once. They also act within the constraints of what they ‘perfink.’ We can abstract each of these functions from the unified whole, but if we do so too rigidly we lose sight of the fact that it is one of the functions of a culture to keep them related and together in those images, stories, and the like by which our experience is given coherence and cultural relevance. (1986: 69)

This also relates to the theory of social minds, that there is an “incontrovertible correlation between the private and the public” (Damasio 2000: 13). A lot of thinking takes place in a networked fashion, relying on other people and material anchors (cf. Hutchins 2005; Oatley 2013: 452).

For Damasio, emotions do not just occur at the same time as cognitive interaction takes place and thus may influence the outcome of the engagement, but they are directly tied and “integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making” (2000: 41; see also 43, 58). We do not extract factual information from

experiences, but store them as bundles that also include our emotions, feelings and especially appraisals. In simple terms, emotions are the raw materials (core affects) on which our feelings are based. When we become aware of emotions, we attempt to rationalise, explain and label them. In case we are successful, we call these constructs our feelings. Appraisals are judgements of value (evaluations) in a particular context that are guided by emotions, but do not have to be conscious (cf. Oatley & Johnson-Laird 2014: 134–7). For example, we may instantaneously like people and have no idea why. When we respond positively to a piece of music (core affect), often subconsciously at first, e.g. by listening to it on the radio for some time without even noticing it, we later interpret this mood as enjoyment. Thus, it becomes a conscious appraisal of the music and stored in our memory alongside the title of the piece and/or the name of the artist(s). When someone finally decides to buy the CD, emotions have played a central role all along. Not surprisingly, most advertising tries to capitalise on this interconnection, often through a manipulation of potential customers' passions, their nostalgia, sexual desire, pride, anger or a longing for social recognition.

The unavoidable omnipresence of emotions also returns us to Dewey's concept of experience and the need to acknowledge students' personal responses to texts in aesthetic reading. It may be prudent for professional narratologists to keep their feelings from interfering with their work, but in an educational setting, in which students are supposed to react to narrative texts – to *enjoy* literature, to become *curious* about characters and *sympathise* with them – it would be both counterintuitive and counterproductive to exclusively appeal to their rational minds. Emotions, as *The Feeling of What Happens* demonstrates, are a sign that people care and are actively – meaning cognitively – involved. Teachers may find themselves frustrated by first impressions that are coloured by strong emotions, but this is a much more appealing starting point than apathy and can lead to a productive return to the text.

Damasio differentiates between emotions, which are universal and accessible through physical responses to situations on public display (cf. 2000: 59, 73), and feelings, which he defines as private experiences and interpretations of such emotions (cf. 2000: 42). He observes that, etymologically, 'e-motion' refers to a movement, to "externalized behavior" (2000: 70), which we learn to read. Like factual information, we can recall, rationalise and newly appraise feelings, but also use them as the basis for future encounters with the same person or situation: "Well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly" (2000: 42). If we were not able to remember the specific 'feel' of social encounters, we would either not know how to behave the next time or cause irritation by completely ignoring

‘what happened’. This necessity to read and project emotional states in everyday interactions, sometimes based on little evidence, lets us anthropomorphise animals or even inanimate objects. This explains why we can sympathise with things or machines as long as their outward expressions broadly resemble physical signs of emotions. The same logic applies to cartooning, which heavily relies on our ability to read intentions and emotions into highly abstract representations of characters.

Damasio argues that emotions are part and parcel of System 1 operations, which explains why we can make decisions before we become conscious of them. This may also mean that we feel/know what we have decided, but cannot rationalise and verbalise it yet: “Language – that is, words and sentences – is a translation of something else, a conversion from nonlinguistic images which stand for entities, events, relationships, and inferences” (2000: 107). Based on his research, Damasio argues that “there must be a nonverbal self and a nonverbal knowing” (2000: 108), which runs counter to the widespread belief that all cognition is based on language and rational thought. In a short chapter entitled “The Naturalness of Wordless Storytelling” (2000: 188–9) he observes that “[m]ovies are the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds” (2000: 188). He postulates a correlation between how the viewer automatically integrates fragmentary ‘shots’ into a continuous action and how “the brain naturally weaves wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment” (2000: 189). In both cases consistency-building is achieved without much conscious processing.

### 3.3.2 Types of Reading-Related Feelings

Having established that emotions and, in turn, feelings are closely tied to cognition, it is now time to look more specifically at the role of emotions during and after reading and their relevance for the literary classroom. There is a tendency to reduce emotional responses to literature either to empathy or to sympathy and then limit that again to a very specific type of behaviour, such as taking a character’s perspective or developing a pro-social attitude. Following Damasio’s lead, I would like to demonstrate that a full range of reader emotions is ever present.

The first important realisation is that empathy is just one of four categories of readerly feelings that David S. Miall and Don Kuiken identify in their essay “A Feeling for Fiction” (cf. 2002: 223; see also Kuiken et al. 2004: 174–5). These are obviously related and influence each other to varying degrees; yet, they differ enough to warrant separate introductions. The first group consists of evaluative

feelings, which reflect readers' attitudes towards a specific text, a genre or reading in general, based on the overall experience, such as satisfaction, enjoyment, a sense of accomplishment or even eagerness to read more by the same author. "Evaluative feelings emerge early within the reading event, with gradual adjustment throughout [...], but they may affect readers' moods – and their readiness to reread the text – for some time afterward" (Kuiken et al. 2004: 174). Thus, feelings of this type are blends or meta-feelings that compress individual experiences into a single overall impression. This already starts with the first emotional reactions to a text, which significantly influence readers' attitudes and motivations throughout. The primacy effect is based on a blending phenomenon, as we begin to form initial concepts that determine our further reading experience. Whether that pattern is a general frustration with the difficulty of the text or intense excitement about the artistic rendering of a narrative, readers are likely to find more confirmation of their first impressions in the text. This is why students should get a chance to voice their concerns and exchange their views early on in the reading process.

Evaluative feelings are blends, or feelings about feelings, which means that they compress particular reactions into broader categories. In everyday conversations people are prone to share such global impressions, often exaggerating the responses through strong evaluative language. Thus, teachers are more than likely to encounter such responses at first. Quite a few students tend to love or hate a text, and find 'everything' inspiring, heart-warming, 'totally' boring or 'completely' exaggerated. Evaluative feelings are also very tempting for EFL students, as they only require a one-word answer. They sound like fundamentalist statements that are very far removed from the intricacies of the text that teachers would like to address rather sooner than later. Accordingly, evaluative feelings are often deemed inappropriate, understood as indications of the students' lack of sophistication or appreciation and, therefore, ignored. However, since feelings are directly tied to students' experiences of texts, they have to play a central role in classroom discussions. This is why I suggested using online discussion forums in the previous part. By collecting first responses that are more elaborate than single words and already contain a short explanation plus responses by other students, it is easier for teachers to prepare for the first meeting in class and channel the responses into productive discussions. Evaluative feelings are blends of the next three types of responses, which means that they can be traced back to their roots. As a consequence, students should be able – and actively encouraged – to decompress their generalisations, e.g. 'boring', and call forth more specific observations, e.g. that 'the characters resemble stereotypes', or even single incidences, such as that 'the protagonist behaves in the most predictable manner

in one particular scene'. This draws attention back to the text and makes it possible to (eventually) argue over some of these more specific points in pair, group or lockstep discussions.

Type 2 covers narrative feelings, which are emotional responses during the reading process that have an interpretative or evaluative function regarding situations (mood) and/or characters (empathy/sympathy). Since the importance of empathy vs. sympathy dominates discussions about emotional responses to literature, most of the latter part of this chapter is dedicated to a discussion of these phenomena. Richard Gerrig proposes a category of reactions that he calls "participatory responses", which "covers all noninferential responses in the performance of narratives" (1998: 27) and places them halfway between this and the next type. Whenever readers respond physically (being at the edge of their seats; hiding under a blanket; biting their nails) and/or verbally (Stay away! Don't go in!) to a scene, they are emotionally invested in the fate of the characters, but such reactions are also often deliberately set up and triggered by the narrative itself: "readers often experience suspense with respect to potential outcomes to which the characters are oblivious" (1998: 169). As a form of dramatic irony, this is such a widespread phenomenon that it has its own literary term. These 'pre-programmed', physical responses lead us to the next category.

The third group, called 'aesthetic feelings' by Miall and Kuiken, comprises fascination, interest, intrigue, surprise, shock, suspense, anticipation etc. These are evoked by "foregrounded structures" (2002: 224) or defamiliarisation and challenge the readers' understanding of the text (cf. Oatley 1994: 58–9). They are based on stylistic devices or artful plotting in Meir Sternberg's sense (cf. 1978), which entails the strategic suppression, manipulation and dissemination of information. For visual narratives this can be extended to include features of salience (cf. Machin 2011: 130–8). The materiality of the comic or picture book as a designed object, with the cover as the most salient element at first, automatically invites responses. To trigger conscious processing (System 2), defamiliarisation ruptures the flow of reading and calls for heightened attention. Miall even claims that "foregrounding is recognized by readers regardless of their literary training. Thus the literary effects created by foregrounding should be available to any reader with a basic competence in the language" (2006: 301; see also 304). Since the identification of, and reaction to such foregrounded elements can be predicted to some extent, narratologists and cognitive psychologists find it easier to work with and study feelings of this third type, as a surprise revelation is almost guaranteed to evoke some 'appropriate' response. They are also very useful for teachers who work with what Judith Dodge calls 'interactive bookmarks' (cf. 2005: 34, 41–2), which are predetermined positions in a



narrative at which students are asked to complete specific tasks – often cliffhangers in the form of suspenseful situations, moral dilemmas or the protagonist at his or her lowest point. However, they are equally relevant in the context of quiet moments and details that are easily overlooked, but may warrant slowing down and noticing, which can be done by ‘placing’ an interactive bookmark.

Instead of working with idiosyncratic reader responses that may occur at any point during the transaction with the text, which is a staple of teaching literature in the classroom, aesthetic feelings allow scientists to take control over empirical research settings. A close tie between textual structures and anticipated outcomes limits the scope of such studies which, in turn, generates more significant data. For precisely these reasons, psychological research into reading responses has to be taken with a grain of salt. Even in the published articles by some of the leading experts in the field, such as Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, we find caveats such as the following: “Numerous complications plague the measurement of both reading habits and social abilities, and these issues have been highlighted by the current study” (Mar et al. 2006: 705). One of the reassuring discoveries for an academic who feels more at home in the humanities is that empirical research – at least in this context – seems to be troubled in so many fundamental ways that any blanket judgement about the inherent superiority of the latter is untenable. Literary critics, such as Suzanne Keen, Marco Caracciolo or Howard Sklar, are worried about the implicit assumptions these studies rely on, from the literary theories to the standardised tests that supposedly measure empathy or pro-social behaviour in a reliable manner. Since it is impossible to discuss individual studies at great length, I highlight general shortcomings.

The most glaring limitation is the fact that psychology professors use their own undergraduate students as test subjects, which means that a very specific group of people represents the general reading public. The second problem concerns the complexity of the reading process itself. This is how psychologists describe the room for improvement: “In order to get an accurate measurement of actual reading behaviours, an experience-sampling method (e.g., daily diaries or occasional promptings by a digital recorder) would probably be ideal for future research. These methods, however, are quite time and resource-intensive, relying upon the long-term participation of motivated individuals” (Mar et al. 2006: 706). They acknowledge – somewhat implicitly – that the circumstances under which they have to conduct their research are not conducive to accurate measurements of natural reading behaviours, which would require a lot more funding and a long-term commitment by test subjects. But even then there would always remain the caveat that readers only report those reactions that they are willing to share, that they can remember or that are explicitly asked for by the test.

This takes us to the third limitation, which is the artificial setting: “Tests which show how people read sentences in laboratories [. . .] may not reveal how people read real texts in real situations” (Emmott 2004: 92). The fourth problem is the ‘experiencing-sampling’ that Mar and his colleagues engage in: there is no conceivable manner in which the actual experience of reading could be recorded, so empirical research has to drastically reduce the complexity: “Naturally, all reader response testing involves some form of ‘manipulation’ in the sense that some aspect of the reading process or the text has been isolated for examination” (Sklar 2013: 108; see also Emmott 2004: 16, 74). Furthermore, the individual responses that are officially recorded are always reactions to specific predetermined textual features. Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon provide some criteria for their selection: “At the heart of the successful development of psychonarratology is the identification of textual features. Here we present some criteria for what a valuable textual feature should be. We suggest that features should be objective, precise, stable, relevant, and tractable” (2003: 38–40). The value of these features, as Bortolussi and Dixon suggest, has more to do with the set-up of the study and the translation of individual reading experiences into quantifiable averages (cf. Caracciolo & Van Duuren 2015: 528) than their relevance to the work itself. The texts have to be very short, so that students can read them in one sitting. Many of them have been specifically written or at least adapted to work in this context. Psychologists even have a special term for these research-compatible narratives, which is “textoids” (Mar & Oatley 2008: 187; see also Emmott 2004: 16). Even with genuine literary texts, the selection process is rarely made transparent, although the whole point of the experiment is often to test how great works of literature have an impact on readers: “literary value seems to be equated with the researchers’ own assumptions and interests” (Caracciolo & Van Duuren 2015: 528). In this context, Mar and Oatley reveal a rather peculiar taste in contemporary fiction:

In more contemporary times, only a unique set of individuals succeed in producing and publishing public, crafted literary narratives. These authors are experts in understanding human psychology and behavior and may think deeply about an issue for years. By consuming the wisdom and observations of these individuals, we may thus stand on the shoulders of giants. (2008: 182)

The fifth problem has to do with the “completed experience” (Keen 2010: 84) of having read a book: referring to the post-reading tasks that psychologists hand out to their students, Keen criticises that “these questionnaires are necessarily retrospective and tell us nothing directly about either the experience or effects of reading” (2010: 85). There *are* some attempts to record readers’ immediate

responses through ‘think-alouds’ (cf. Miall 2006: 304–5), but this is also somewhat limiting as readers may only verbalise what has reached a level of clarity and can be meaningfully communicated. Referring to a study by Kuiken et al. (2004) Marco Caracciolo and Thom Van Duuren comment in the following manner on this issue:

... it may be wondered whether the object of this study is the reading experience per se (what we may label the ‘online’ reading experience), readers’ posthoc (‘offline’) reflections on that experience, or perhaps both at the same time. [...] The self-modifying feelings examined by the researchers emerge in readers’ ‘offline’ commentaries, but the source of these feelings remains unclear: is it reading the text, or is it rather the task of commenting on one of the passages? (2015: 530; see also Emmott 2004: 69)

And the ‘results’ of all these tests depend on the “inference-making of the researcher” (Emmott 2004: 95), as there is neither direct access to the cognitive processes themselves, nor an easy way to compare the more reader-oriented setups of think-alouds or reading diaries. This has to suffice for the moment as a precaution against a blind trust in empirical research that may be able to predict or elucidate certain trends or tendencies, but is riddled with difficulties the complexities of which I have not even touched upon.

Miall and Kuiken (1994) initially followed the path of researching reader responses to forms of stylistic foregrounding, which automatically limits the range of potential reactions. Readers may find unremarkable elements of a narrative – down to the single word – striking because of their unique biographies, predilections or cultural backgrounds. Miall and Kuiken, however, built on the premise “that stylistic features of literary texts deautomatize perception” (1994: 389). Of course, this does not happen randomly, but as an orchestrated attempt on the part of the writer to direct readers’ attention in such a way that they are more likely to recognise certain patterns that have been skilfully foregrounded in the narrative: “In literary texts [...], foregrounding is structured: it tends to be both systematic and hierarchical. That is, similar features may recur, such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors, and one set of features will dominate the others” (1994: 390). This can be related to what Iser means by “strategies” and how they “organize the *internal* network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader” (1980: 96).

However, contrary to Iser, who largely ignores emotions in his model, Miall and Kuiken embrace them as central to their concept of defamiliarisation: “de-familiarization evokes feelings, and feelings guide ‘refamiliarizing’ interpretative efforts” (1994: 392; see also 404). Since the flow of reading is purposefully

interrupted to foreground elements that the readers should not miss, they need some time to re-orient or 're-familiarise' themselves: "defamiliarization obliges the reader to slow down, allowing time for the feelings created by the alliterations and metaphors to emerge" (1994: 392). In this context, Miall and Kuiken even argue that both intratextuality and intertextuality serve the purpose of facilitating readers' (re)orientation within narratives:

... the feelings accentuated while reading foregrounded passages sensitize the reader to other passages having similar affective connotations. Furthermore, such accentuated feelings sensitize the reader to other 'texts' (e.g., personal memories, world knowledge) having similar affective connotations [...]. With such affectively congruent intra- and extra-textual resources, the reader 'refamiliarizes' or 'thematizes' the textual subject matter. (1994: 395)

As in Damasio's model, emotions take centre stage and provide the vital link between different, only loosely connected experiences. When confronted with a character's unfamiliar circumstances, readers are invited to bridge the experiential gulf by reaching out beyond the confines of their own lives. Since the autobiographical selves of readers are entangled in the narrative, readers notice that feeling tones cross over between their own memories and what the story offers them in terms of new experiences. Thus, they 'feel' their way into a narrative by anticipating potential developments: "Feeling-guided boundary crossing evokes personal memories and reflections in a manner that provides a framework for understanding subsequent narrative developments. In general, feeling exercises anticipatory effects by alerting us to the significance of an event that has begun to unfold" (Miall & Kuiken 2002: 227; see also Miall 2006: 304). This is the aesthetic complement or counterpart to text-based theories of foregrounding: we notice or 'mind' things because we care. Such a highly involved reading may lead to yet another type of emotional response, which completes Miall and Kuiken's classification.

The fourth group, self-modifying feelings, are again triggered by a narrative text, but leave a lasting impression that may even change readers' outlook on life. They are triggered by an intense reading experience that "has the capacity to implicate the self and deepen selfunderstanding" (Kuiken et al. 2004: 171). With the help of so-called "remembered emotions" (Miall & Kuiken 2002: 225; see also Oatley 1994: 62–3) readers flesh out narrative scenes by using personal experiences (episodic memories) to 'get a feeling' for a scene or situation.

This autobiographical comparison enable[s] the reader partially to reinstate feelings from an earlier time in life and use them to understand story characters and their actions. Remembered feelings, that is, the reinstatement of feelings across similar

situations, provide what we have called narrative feelings. In experiencing a fresh emotion, in contrast, readers realize something in a literary text that they have not previously experienced – or at least that they have not experienced in the form provided by the text. (2002: 226; see also Kuiken et al. 2004: 175)

This is when boundary-crossing or blending occurs and both input spaces – the personal memory and the character's situation in a narrative – contribute to a blended space that generates new meanings and insights which, in turn, shed new light on the input spaces. This is a phenomenon that Miall and Kuiken base on Cohen's metaphor of personal identification (cf. 1999), which is "a form of enactive reading that implicitly blends the fictional world with what readers know, believe, or feel about their own lives. [. . .] In these cases, the reader is, we suggest, confronting personal feelings and recontextualizing them in the light of the fresh feelings evoked during reading" (2002: 238; see also Davis et al. 1996). What Miall and Kuiken describe here as a fresh feeling is an emergent structure in a successful blend (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 42). For the moment it is sufficient to understand that Miall and Kuiken extend the concept of scripts to "affective scripts" (2002: 226; see also Kuiken et al. 2004: 176), so that remembered emotions serve as an emotional guideline for a narrative situation. When fresh emotions are involved, and this is where it becomes interesting, they may partially or even completely rewrite these scripts. In other words: they modify our personal memories and the feelings we attach to them. Miall and Kuiken believe that "the experience of feelings in one situation leads to the re-experiencing of those feelings in situations that are similar" (2002: 226), yet not entirely equal, so that the emotions are never a perfect fit and an approximation at best. Since personal memories become malleable through recall, the feelings we experience during the reading process may equally affect our understanding of the past. Thus, we may re-evaluate a personal relationship or a particular memory in light of what we have just read.

Catherine Emmott stresses the roundabout "way in which a reader converts strings of words into mental representations of characters which can prompt the reader to feel considerable empathy with those characters" (1998: 176). These emotions are evoked and attributed, but not directly present in the text. This has two important consequences: first of all, the concept of what it means to identify with a character has to be clarified. Empathy in the sense of becoming other characters or feeling exactly like them may be an illusion. Either the similarities are more superficial than we would like to acknowledge or the way we have helped to flesh out the characters has made them very similar to ourselves. Secondly, and this is more significant in the context of self-modifying feelings, which is about reading oneself rather than others, the slight mismatch between

the feelings we bring to bear on a story and the imagined experiences of the characters allows for a re-negotiation of our own feelings in the light of 'similar' experiences that characters have (cf. Miall 2006: 304). Thus, reading fiction may provide a safe environment to allow troubling memories to resurface, so that readers can explore them with the help of characters facing a similar situation. There are dozens, if not hundreds of picture books for children that address one challenge after the other: being afraid of the dark, facing up to bullies, getting braces, showing some courage, doing the right thing etc. Parents hope that reading these books with their children will lead to self-modifying feelings or – to put it more bluntly – have a practical effect. When the emotions are strong enough, this can lead to "boundary crossing" (Miall & Kuiken 2002: 227), what I call blending, which makes mutual influence more likely.

In this context, Kuiken et al. differentiate between two types of 'self-implication', which is their term for the entanglement of readers' autobiographical selves in the reading process. They use the terms 'simile' and 'metaphor' to describe the extent to which readers' personal memories become activated and implicated by a narrative: "the personal memories evoked during reading often capture similarities between aspects of a personal memory and aspects of the world of the text" (Kuiken et al. 2004: 183). In case of a simile, readers have the experience of a (strong) similarity, so that the protagonist appears to be very much *like* them. The stronger version is based on "metaphors of personal identification" that "depend upon an interaction between memories and world text that is not only self-implicating but also self-modifying. Enlivenment in this form is enactive" (Kuiken et al. 2004: 185). Kuiken et al. rely on Ted Cohen's work to highlight readers' potential for 'acting out' or 'role-playing' a character which may allow for a stronger presence of readers' autobiographical selves in the experience of the scene and a greater likelihood of the modification of personal feelings:

the momentary state of a reader's absorption within an author's, narrator's, or character's perspective can become self-modifying when the reader *metaphorically* identifies with that figure. Cohen has in mind a mode of identification resembling dramatic enactment: a figure in literature may be brought to presence, as in method acting, through the embodying experience of the reader. Within this mode of reading, the embodied self is present but subsidiary within a performance that enlivens and extends, rather than merely mimics, the character's demeanor in the world of the text. (2004: 179–80)

This is not the only theory that implies that 'enactment' may be a viable path to better understand both a character and oneself through a temporary blend of two personalities: "Within the moment of emerging metaphoric identification, the possibility of changing the reader's sense of self also emerges. Within

that transition, argues Cohen, there is an opening for self-modifying feelings” (2004: 180). This suggests that empathy and self-implication are two sides of the same coin, but not necessarily the same thing. As we shall see with Suzanne Keen’s criticism of empathy, feeling for and with characters does not automatically lead to real-life consequences of any kind. In this sense, Kuiken et al. may be right to keep them apart. Their claim is also much more modest than any educator could hope for, based on the results of their empirical research: “only some readers, perhaps those who become absorbed in experiential reading [. . .] will develop a coherent and self-modifying understanding of the meaning of foregrounded passages” (Miall & Kuiken 2002: 229). The self-fulfilling prophecy is very strong here: those who identify as avid readers are very good at it and naturally empathic (cf. Mar et al. 2006: 698, 707). Those who struggle with reading find it difficult. One last thing that has to be addressed is the difference between a literal performance in front of a public audience and the kind of enactment Kuiken et al. are referring to, which takes place during readers’ very personal transactions with a text. Self-implication becomes a possibility in the second case, precisely because the text triggers a (re)negotiation of very private concerns in a safe environment.

### 3.3.3 Transportation

In his 1993 study *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* Richard Gerrig concentrates on “two metaphors that are often used to characterize experiences of narratives: readers are often described as *being transported* by a narrative by virtue of *performing* that narrative” (1998: 2). This suggests that strong cognitive involvement and empathy may not only lead to self-implication and self-modification, but also to ‘transportation’. What makes ‘transportation’ or READING IS TRAVELLING a hazy concept, however, is the general vagueness of what exactly is involved. Since the heyday of reader-response criticism Gerrig (cf. 1998), Melanie C. Green and their colleagues have conducted substantial empirical research in the area of ‘transportation’, but this has not really helped to clarify the concept beyond the ‘engrossment’ and ‘immersion’ that Benton and Fox refer to (cf. 1985: 12) or that Collie and Slater praise: “The reader is eager to find out what happens as events unfold; he or she feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. The language becomes ‘transparent’ – the fiction summons the whole person into its own world” (1988: 6; see also Mar & Oatley 2008: 175).

In their article “Transportation: Challenges to the Metaphor” (2015) Bortolussi and Dixon criticise that “the metaphor of transport is accepted at face

value” (2015: 527) by their colleagues, which makes this “all-or-none, unitary approach” both “simplistic and misleading” (2015: 528). There is no doubt that readers report back that they feel very close to characters and right there next beside them, but what does that mean precisely? At one point, Green and her colleagues suggest that transportation is the starting point and not the end result of a successful engagement with a text:

Transportation into a narrative world may be a prerequisite for identification with fictional characters. Central to the process of identification is the adoption of a character’s thoughts, goals, emotions, and behaviors, and such vicarious experience requires the reader or viewer to leave his or her physical, social, and psychological reality behind in favor of the world of the narrative and its inhabitants. (2004: 318)

This seems logical in the context of ‘transportation,’ as we first have to enter the storyworld to meet the characters, but it also illustrates the limitations of the metaphor, which draws too much attention to a literal journey. When Iser compares reading to travelling, he means that the transaction with the text is an ongoing experience, that it can be exhausting but equally rewarding at times, that we encounter different points of view that allow us to look at the world from different angles and, finally, that, what we later call ‘the journey,’ is a retrospective abstraction of very immediate experiences along the way. In comparison, Gerrig and Green’s ‘transportation’ remains ambiguous, as it covers a whole spectrum of meanings that range from the literal to merely being actively engaged.

Gerrig’s ‘performance’ – the central element of transportation – resembles reader-response criticism’s active transaction with the literary work at one time, but may also refer to a close identification with specific characters, which is arguably not the same thing. Iser stresses the multiplicity of perspectives that readers have to coordinate over strongly identifying with the protagonist. This becomes obvious when Green et al. address the possibility of leading vicarious lives through role-playing and identifying with characters: “In essence, to identify with a character means seeing the character’s perspective as one’s own, to share his or her existence. Achieving such an altered state of awareness relies upon transportation into the story world” (Green et al. 2004: 319).

Overall, Gerrig’s *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* is a fascinating exploration of the impact of reading experiences on real life, but the two central metaphors remain underdeveloped. Gerrig states that they “serve both as shorthand expressions for what it feels like to experience narrative worlds” (1998: 2), by which he means that “a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now” (1998: 3; see also Green et al. 2008: 513). Yet, the same applies to daydreaming or any other flow experience during which humans become lost



in the activity and forget what is happening around them. If ‘transportation’ is similar to ‘flow’ (cf. Green 2004: 248; Green et al. 2008: 513–4, 532) or automatic, non-conscious, System 1 consistency-building (cf. Green et al. 2004: 315), where is the contribution of System 2, Bortolussi and Dixon ask (cf. 2015: 528–9). Green seems to suggest that the experience of flow keeps ‘transportation’ or active involvement alive, whereas conscious attention would take readers ‘out of the story. Bortolussi and Dixon take the opposite view, which is also problematic: “Our conclusion then is that the comprehension of literary narrative requires of necessity demanding, knowledge-driven cognitive processes and that highly transported readers must engage in a high degree of elaboration” (2015: 531).

The problem, as always, is discussing such matters without any specific context. Bortolussi and Dixon seem to have the Great Canon of English Literature and literary analysis in mind, for which a sustained flow experience would be highly unlikely. Green and Timothy C. Brock’s research, however, is focused on reading for pleasure, which in the case of ‘genre fiction’ (cf. Green & Brock 2000: 703) may indeed require little conscious attention. Here is how they describe the narrative they selected specifically for their research: “‘Murder at the Mall’ is a true story about a little girl, Katie, who goes to the mall with her college-age sibling. While at the mall, Katie is brutally stabbed to death by a psychiatric patient. The tragic story is moving and shocking” (2000: 703–4). I do not mean to ridicule this type of research, but it helps to put the results into perspective.

In her article “Understanding Media Enjoyment”, co-authored with Timothy Brock and Geoff Kaufman, Green specifically addresses the question of escapism and how “an enjoyable media experience [. . .] takes individuals away from their mundane reality and into a story world” (Green et al. 2004: 311; see also 314, 317; Green & Brock 2000: 702). The concept of a ‘page-turner’ is tailor-made for the uninterrupted flow of reading, during which it would be awkward to be taken out of the experience to search for the deeper meaning. Green and Brock embrace this form of unreflected or naïve reading as it naturally occurs in real life, especially with mainstream bestsellers:

Transported readers may be less likely to disbelieve or counterargue story claims, and thus their beliefs may be influenced. Next, transportation may make narrative experience seem more like real experience. Direct experience can be a powerful means of forming attitudes [. . .], and to the extent that narratives enable mimicry of experience, they may have greater impact than nonnarrative modes. Finally, transportation is likely to create strong feelings toward story characters; the experiences or beliefs of those characters may then have an enhanced influence on readers’ beliefs. (2000: 702; see also 703; Keen 2010: 83, 102)

Although 'getting into' a book or even 'becoming lost' in one seem desirable from an educational point of view, the complete identification with a character and the narrative's strong appeal to emotional responses eradicate all critical distance. Green and Brock address this point again in their discussion of results, which provide "further support for the distinction between transportation and cognitive elaboration" (2000: 712; see also 718). In other words, transportation is a System 1 phenomenon. In educational settings, reading as a process has to go back and forth between the intimate communion between readers and characters, the co-construction of meaning in small groups and more analytical tasks that require rereading and a critical stance. Otherwise, students may accept a text at face value: "Individuals' immersion in a work of literature may allow the implications of the narrative to become part of the reader's real-life beliefs" (Green 2004: 247).

The biggest problem with transportation and 'going further' into the world of the story is the suggestion that readers 'leave' their familiar surroundings and explore a new world while their own reality fades away: "To imagine what has been stimulated by aesthetic semblance entails placing our thoughts and feelings at the disposal of an unreality, bestowing on it a semblance of reality in proportion to a reducing of our own reality" (Gerrig 1998: 21; see also 173). Yet, a successful transaction with a text allows readers to familiarise themselves with 'the other' and realise that it has not been all that strange in the first place and can be integrated into their current understanding of the world (cf. Sklar 2013: 12). Gerrig quotes Marie-Laure Ryan's "*principle of minimal departure*" (1998: 13; see also Hogan 2003: 117; Stockwell 2002: 96; Palmer 2004: 35), which suggests that the gaps in the story world can be automatically filled precisely because the worlds are so similar. Thus, 'transportation' is a misleading term for a process that could equally be called 'assimilation' or 'integration'. What is more, from the perspective of reader-response criticism, there is no fully realised world to discover in the first place, but only a blueprint. What I can find out there or – in the case of books – in there is already made – at least partly – from the building materials available to me. The literary work of art does not so much invent completely new worlds, but defamiliarises the ones we know. When Howard Sklar states that "the intensity of readers' emotional responses to narratives depends greatly on the proximity of the events and the situations of the characters to their lives" (2013: 20), readers do not have to travel very far to have meaningful experiences.

Research in transportation is full of trivial insights, as System 1 is automated and thus inaccessible, which means that psychologists have to depend on readers' self-reports. Nevertheless, Green and her colleagues are undeterred in their conviction that "[t]ransportation into a media world can be measured with

a 15-item self-report scale” (cf. Green 2004: 313). The most consistent results are that avid readers report strong feelings of enjoyment, transportation and identification with characters, whereas “less-skilled readers find it harder to become thoroughly immersed in narrative” (Gerrig 1998: 19). Well-written narratives are more likely to draw in readers than ‘bad’ ones: “Just as a leaky boat does a poor job of transporting people across the water, poorly constructed narratives do not help readers enter the story world” (Green et al. 2004: 320). Yet, it can get even more basic than that: “Circumstances that prevent readers from being fully immersed in a narrative world reduce media enjoyment” (Green et al. 2004: 321). Further relevant factors include personal relevance, emotional investment and prior familiarity with the topic or the narrative itself (cf. Green 2008: 515, 522).

What research in transportation phenomena does demonstrate is that the key characteristics of successful reading mutually reinforce each other: a good book is more likely to draw in readers, who are more willing to be transported and become engaged with the characters, which makes them enjoy the narrative a lot more and lets them experience something new, which they feel is meaningful to their own lives. Although this may sound trivial, there is a kernel of truth that one can take away from this: reading, like any other human pursuit, depends upon a successful entry point that is going to positively reinforce other aspects, which in turn are going to contribute to the overall feeling of getting noticeably better at something. What it takes is to find the right books for every student.

### 3.3.4 Empathy

Finally, we can turn to Suzanne Keen’s work on narrative empathy, which provides some much needed orientation. Like ‘genre’, ‘empathy’ has been used for such a wide range of phenomena that the term has almost lost its critical potential. Keen is willing to ask uncomfortable questions and approaches the subject matter within a much broader framework than is usually the case. She senses a “resistance to empathy [that] is cultivated by academic modes of analysis that privilege critical distance and observations about style” (2010: 73), while she sees herself as a conscious supporter of “bringing affect to the center of cognitive literary studies’ reexamination of narrative fiction” (2010: xii). That this has not always been easy for a scholar closely affiliated with narratology and gender studies, makes for a more interesting engagement.

Empathy is a prerequisite for readers’ self-implication in narratives and the self-modifying feelings that, according to Miall and Kuiken, can literally change a person’s life. The two most popular ways of describing empathy is “the capacity to take another’s perspective” (2010: 27) or “to step into a character’s

shoes” (2010: 18). Although this basic idea of perspective-taking may seem straightforward and self-explanatory, there are several areas of critical contestation that make the matter more complicated: first of all, the term ‘empathy’ only entered the English language in the early twentieth century (cf. 2010: 55), but then gained so much currency that it began to replace ‘sympathy’ without completely eradicating it. The second problem concerns the goal of empathy: do we become better human beings, better readers, better mind-readers or maybe all three things in one package? This, in turn, raises the question whether ‘narrative empathy’, which is Keen’s term (cf. 2010: xxv), and real-life empathy are the same, closely related or even significantly different. Do we predominantly learn to understand ourselves better, as Miall and Kuiken seem to suggest, or others by sharing our feelings with them? The third problem is tied to the “multiplicity of reactions” (2010: 95) that are labelled as ‘empathy’, which is going to be the main focus for this section. A fourth problem concerns the question whether empathetic feelings have to be disentangled from cognition and studied separately: is empathy a spontaneous emotional reaction, part of an ongoing cognitive process that drives our meaning-making or an object of study in itself?

In his article “These Things Called Empathy” Charles Daniel Batson, a social psychologist, differentiates between eight different phenomena that have been referred to as ‘empathy’, each of them representing “a conceptually distinct, stand-alone psychological state” (2009: 3). Since Keen adopts this classification in her article “Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy” (2015), it seems appropriate to start with this categorisation and then critically discuss empathy in more general terms again. I adopt Batson’s exact headlines to highlight how he distinguishes between the concepts and then I further develop them by adding cognitive (literary) theories that, I believe, fit the categories. As with the distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading, I consider it helpful to keep the eight types conceptually apart, despite the fact that there are overlaps and that some distinctions may be too specific for educational settings.

“Concept 1: Knowing Another Person’s Internal State, Including His or Her Thoughts and Feelings” (Batson 2009: 4)

This has come to be known as Theory of Mind or simply “mind-reading” (Zunshine 2006: 4) in cognitive literary studies and is mostly associated with the work of Alan Palmer (2004; 2010) and Lisa Zunshine (2006). Due to its strong affiliation with narratology, I consider it closer to ‘theory theory’ than simulation theory (concept 6), but the two are often taken together. As a thoroughly analytical approach, Theory of Mind circumvents readers’ emotional investment in the narrative by claiming that we can reach an understanding of characters’

thoughts and feelings through a narratological analysis of the text. For literary scholars interested in cognitive studies, this has been a softer transition than fully embracing reader-response criticism or enactivism. Still, Theory of Mind breaks with classical narratology in significant ways, mainly by placing the characters and their social interactions in the centre of attention. This leads Palmer to denounce the traditional plot-fixation of narrative analysis:

It is difficult to combine subjects into a plot structure without compromising their subjectivity because they would then become simply elements in a narrative framework. This danger can be avoided if the idea of plot includes some notion of the multiplicity of characters' discourses and therefore becomes a more organic and flexible concept than the traditional approach. (2004: 156)

He redefines the actions or events of narratives as experiences of the main characters and thus follows Monika Fludernik's concept of experientiality (cf. 2004: 31–2). Since we can only understand characters through their interactions with others in specific contexts, Palmer emphasises “the process of reading and not the end product. The embedded narrative approach is primarily an attempt to explore fully the workings of dense and complex fictional texts. This is the process. The end products are the various purposes to which these explorations might be put” (2004: 21). He regrets “the fact that narratology has created clear boundaries between various aspects of fictional minds, even though the fictional texts themselves show that these boundaries are not clear at all” (2004: 28). Characterisation, focalisation and the representation of consciousness are seen as distinct areas of narratology (cf. 2004: 43), despite the fact that they are all key sources of information on characters. This general reorientation in cognitive narrative studies towards the centrality of characters is significant, even if it represents just a first step in the direction of embodied cognition.

However, looking at the details of Palmer's approach, it becomes obvious that it is indebted to schema theory and classical narratology in other respects. He claims that “we assemble [. . .] an *embedded narrative*”, that encompasses “the whole of a character's various perceptual and conceptual viewpoints, ideological worldviews, and plans for the future considered as an individual narrative that is embedded in the whole fictional text” (2004: 15; see also 121). The necessary information can all be found in the text, so readers have to be trained to extract it in its entirety:

The mental events, processes, and states that distinguish actions from mere doings are crucial to the concept of embedded narratives. A description by a narrator of a character's action is a description of the development of that character's embedded narrative. The reasons, motives, intentions, purposes and so on behind the action may be

explicitly specified by the narrator, they may be implicit but understood by the reader, or they may remain mysterious. However, they are always there in the storyworld. The core of the embedded narrative approach is the systematic analysis of the structure of mental events that lies behind the decisions that lead to actions and, specifically, of how this is presented in the discourse by the narrator. (2004: 122)

The impact of classical narratology is very strong here, as reading is conceptualised as “the systematic analysis of the structure of mental events” (2004: 122), for which Palmer replaces a traditional narratological category with his own idea of ‘embedded narrative’. This approach may be more relevant to professional narratologists, like Palmer himself, but not to the general reading public, who do not “strongly prefer to read a text for maximum cognitive payoff” (2004: 176). If teachers prefer a “narratology in action” (1992: 51), as Michael Benton suggests, it has to help students to transact successfully with texts and acknowledge their individual cognitive processes.

‘Theory of Mind’, as the term suggests, operates with a form of ‘folk psychology’ – “everyday assumptions about the workings of the human mind” (Nünning 2014: 134) – and a ‘personality model’ (cf. Nünning 2014: 272–3) that allows humans to read other people’s minds in real-life encounters, but also characters’ behaviour in fiction. Zunshine claims that “our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (2006: 6) is trained on a daily basis, as the attribution of “states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are” (2006: 6). In fact, we are so used to it, that Zunshine describes mind-reading as a System 1 operation: “our tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states [...] seems to be so effortless and automatic (in a sense that we are not even conscious of engaging in any particular act of ‘interpretation’) because our evolved cognitive architecture ‘prods’ us toward learning and practicing mindreading daily from the beginning of awareness” (2006: 7; see also 16, 85). Like all System 1 operations, mind-reading only has to be “‘good enough’ for our everyday functioning: however imperfect and fallible, they still get us through yet another day of social interactions” (2006: 59).

In this context, literature can even be seen as a training ground for this “ability of human beings to make sense of the actions, intentions and thoughts of others”, as Vera Nünning explains (2014: 131), precisely because the literary treatment makes fictional minds and their various interactions more coherent and accessible, in some cases inviting us – through foregrounding – to slow down and pay closer attention. In contrast to real life, where we often rely on System 1 for quick orientation, literary texts provide readers with unique opportunities to dedicate

all their mental resources to an exploration of other people's minds. This ties narrative competence – or “narrative intelligence” in Herman's words (2002: 1) – directly to the skill of mind-reading (cf. Nünning 2014: 133; see also 136, 150). Vera Nünning offers a useful summary of how this is conceptualised:

Narratives structure, interpret and communicate knowledge about the human mind, about human communication, and human behaviour. They are based on and contribute to the interpretability of human experience. They can also serve to explain and disseminate beliefs about the way human minds work in specific interactive situations. Stories thus often popularise knowledge about theory of mind, but they do so not by way of disseminating abstract principles. Instead, they present specific acts of reflecting, communicating and behaving, and delineate the dynamic interactions between several characters. By showing human beings in specific (interactive) situations, they also enhance readers' understanding of the nature and scope of interactive encounters and of human communication. (2014: 150–1)

Relying on readers' highly advanced mind-reading skills, writers may take the opposite route and dispense with the usual assortment of ‘empathetic narrative techniques’ (cf. Keen 2010: 92–9). The twentieth century saw quite a few experiments of this type:

Hemingway could afford such a deliberate, and highly elaborate, in its own way, undertelling for the same reason that [, in *Mrs. Dalloway*,] Woolf could afford to let Peter's trembling “speak for itself”: our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there must be a mental stance behind each physical action and our striving to represent to ourselves that possible mental stance even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation. (Zunshine 2006: 23)

One point that has not been stressed enough is that, from a Theory of Mind point of view, and even more so in the enactivist paradigm, humans and literary characters do not have rich inner lives, but rich social and cognitive interactions with their environments. The need to read other people's minds only ever arises during social interactions, which means that the attribution of a state of mind is not so much based on guessing than on the study of circumstantial evidence in the form of speech, behaviour, gestures, body postures, facial expressions, proxemics etc.

Just as in real life the individual constructs the minds of others from their behavior and speech, so the reader infers the workings of fictional minds and sees these minds in action from observation of characters' behavior and speech. In one sense [...] we are invisible to each other. But in another sense the workings of our minds are perfectly visible to others in our actions, and the workings of fictional minds are perfectly visible to readers from characters' actions. Most novels contain a wide variety of evidence on

which readers base their conjectures, hypotheses, and opinions about fictional minds. (Palmer 2004: 11)

This leads Palmer to the “position that meaning is not inner, mysterious, private, and psychological, but outer, evident, public, and behavioral” (2004: 142). Mind-reading, in this sense, is a form of “social cognition” (Nünning 2014: 133) that can be fruitfully explored in contexts where humans lack this skill, which is the case with autism and Asperger’s. The great success of Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* can be understood in the context of foregrounding a complete lack of Theory of Mind, which is unusual for a general reading public that takes this ability for granted. In *Fictional Minds*, Palmer proclaims that “the constructions of the minds of fictional characters by narrators and readers are central to our understanding of how novels work because, in essence, narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning” (2004: 12). While Palmer’s reorientation of narratology in view of readers’ engagement with characters is an important first step, his overreliance on exhaustive analysis makes it difficult to reconcile this approach with Miall and Kuiken’s readerly feelings.

“Concept 2: Adopting the Posture or Matching the Neural Responses of an Observed Other” (Batson 2009: 4–5)

This idea has also been conceptualised as ‘motor mimicry’ or ‘facial empathy’ (cf. Batson 2009: 4) and was recently substantiated by the discovery of mirror neurons (cf. Gallese 2009). In this context it can be understood as a largely automated, physiological process that can even be observed in infants. Batson refers to some attempts to build a whole theory of empathy based on the close ties between neural response matching and motor mimicry (cf. Batson 2009: 5), which he quickly dismisses:

Perceptual neural representations do not always and automatically lead to feelings, whether matched or unmatched. And at a motor level, neither humans nor other species mimic all actions of others. To find oneself tensing and twisting when watching someone balance on a tightrope is a familiar experience; it is hard to resist. Yet we may watch someone file papers with little inclination to mimic the action. Something more than automatic mimicry must be involved to select those actions that are mimicked and those that are not. (2009: 5)

Amongst others, Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra have made efforts to tie mirror neurons to embodied cognition and to conceptualise new approaches to empathy in films (cf. Badt 2013), but such endeavours remain largely speculative for the moment. A second line of argument concerns the deliberate use of



mirroring facial expressions as a “higher-order communicative function” (Batson 2009: 5), usually to signal to another person that one understands how they feel.

“Concept 3: Coming to Feel as Another Person Feels” (Batson 2009: 5–6)

This may occur in the form of emotional contagion – ‘catching’ a group’s dominant response to an experience, e.g. as a member of an audience – or as empathy in a narrower sense, ‘matching’ emotions that are close to or exactly like those of another person. I have already discussed this second meaning in the context of Miall and Kuiken’s self-modifying feelings (cf. 2002: 232) or Gerrig and Green’s transportation. In contrast to concept 1, “coming to feel as another person feels” usually circumvents mind-reading by either being swept away by a mood or wave of emotions or employing affective scripts (remembered emotions) to close the distance between readers and characters, which in turn may lead to boundary-crossing and a feeling of identification, even if there can never be a perfect match. In Werner Delanoy’s example of watching *Dead Poets Society* with a group of university students we have already encountered a situation in which viewers experienced transportation, reported a complete identification with the protagonists, and showed signs of both self-implication and self-modifying feelings in the form of repercussions on the students’ beliefs (cf. Delanoy 1996: 65–6). While ‘transportation’ may be the only way to have students fall in love with narratives, it is not the easiest reading response to work with in the classroom. Over-identification leads to blindness in other regards and negates the obvious distance between readers’ diverse selves and the circumstances depicted in a narrative. As co-creators of the story, students may project too much of themselves onto the characters and fail to notice subtleties or cultural references that would otherwise defamiliarise the content. This plays a crucial role in the context of concept 4, where this discussion is continued.

Mimicry (concept 2) may play a role in coming to feel as another person, by triggering an emotional response, which can then be reflected back to the sender – in the form of a smile, for example. This is easier with basic emotions or what Keen calls ‘primitive empathy’: “Primitive empathy, or the phenomenon of spontaneously matching feelings, suggests that human beings are basically similar to one another, with a limited range of variations” (2010: 15). There has been substantial research on universal or basic emotions (cf. Ekman 2007), which has shown that they are essentially the same in all cultures, but heavily influenced by local conventions of how they may be acknowledged or openly displayed. These “*display rules*” (Ekman 2007: 4) become obvious when conducting research in cultures that frown upon the public exhibition of strong and/or negative emotions. However, the facial expressions that correspond to the eight basic

emotions can be read by all humans without specific cultural training, with some variation in recognition: “The results were very clear-cut for happiness, anger, disgust, and sadness” (Ekman 2007: 10).

“Concept 4: Intuiting or Projecting Oneself into Another’s Situation” (Batson 2009: 6)

This denotes an attempt to imagine oneself under different circumstances and may be called ‘aesthetic projection’ or ‘aesthetic empathy’. It is closely tied to the concept of *Einfihlung*, the German source of ‘empathy’. This could be a special gift of writers who are said to be more empathetic than the average population (cf. Keen 2010: 121, 123, 130–1). It involves an exercise of one’s own imagination and engages the mind in daydreaming and make-belief. In many ways it is an exercise in creative writing and very popular as an activity for the literary classroom (e.g. diary entry; speech and thought balloons). In contrast to concepts 1 and 3, ‘projection’ relies more on creativity and playful exploration to compensate for a lack of available information or shared experiences. Batson offers an interesting take on ‘projection’ that is relevant to educational settings:

... when the state of the other is obvious because of what has happened or been said, intuition or projection is probably unnecessary. And when the other’s state is not obvious, intuition or projection runs the risk of imposing an interpretation of the other’s state that is inaccurate, especially if one does not have a precise understanding of relevant differences between oneself and the other. (2009: 10)

This problem of ‘empathic inaccuracy’ (cf. Keen 2010: xiii, xxiv, 130, 139–40), which in this case means a false sense of understanding by imposing one’s own theory of the world onto a character or real person, is a major concern of Keen’s: “What if our empathy with others is only egoism, recognition of the self, painted over the other’s true experience?” (2010: 130).

As an activity for the classroom, projection is essential to inter/transcultural learning (cf. Freitag-Hild 2010: 113–14). In the pure form of Batson’s concept 4 it would be a tightrope walk between a potentially boring, but accurate regurgitation of what has been established in a narrative and a more exciting extrapolation that may lead students in directions that are hard to reconcile with the text. In the first case, the purpose of the activity would be lost and, in the second case, potential misreadings could be encouraged. Some creative tasks for the classroom, especially in the area of roleplays, can take the explorative aspect of projection quite far. Yet, there are two important safeguards in educational settings that prevent such activities from losing their undeniable worth. The first is that students are usually asked to gather enough information about characters, usually via a rereading task, and to compare their findings. Secondly, these learner

texts are then discussed, scrutinised, peer reviewed or simply commented upon by the teacher, especially when they are highly explorative. Aesthetic reading relies on meaning-making under the guidance of the text, so projection activities also have to lead from subjective impressions to the co-construction of meaning. In the case of enactment, it is necessary to discuss the performance with the whole class afterwards. Like all performances, roleplays are interpretations of the narrative, whose purpose is to provide a contribution to an ongoing discussion of a literary text. Projection tasks can be very quickly created, but they do require some considerations concerning the right balance between students' knowledge and speculation, but also the purpose of such learner texts for the immediate and ongoing exploration of a narrative.

“Concept 5: Imagining How Another Is Thinking and Feeling” (Batson 2009: 7) This is often referred to as ‘perspective-taking’, which represents a desirable and somewhat idealised reading position to be in, as it combines the analytical distance of concept 1 with the imaginative, empathic approximation that concept 4 endorses. All too often, perspective-taking is confused with the idea that “we take on the emotional experience of another as our own” (Sklar 2013: 24), which is not even the case with boundary-crossing in concept 3. The narrative, often through the protagonist’s experiences, functions as a catalyst that can exercise transformative power over the reader, but not by filling an empty container with a new emotion that was not there before (cf. Oatley 1994: 69). The problem for the teacher of literature is to find the right balance between a narratological study of characters’ thoughts and feelings and a complete immersion. Students may be in need of a gentle reorientation, depending on their current stage of transaction with the narrative text. Though I disagree with Sklar’s notion that readers can literally become the characters, he still has a point concerning the dangers of too much subjectivity:

These components of empathic experience suggest that empathy for a fictional character essentially places readers inside the experience – and particularly the emotional experience – of that character. Our immersion in that experience, furthermore, momentarily may impede, or temporarily suspend, our capacity to form judgments about that character, since we may, as it were, become too close to view the character’s reality objectively. In other words, since readers’ empathy may make it difficult for them to judge a character from the outside, they will tend to judge the situations that occur in the narrative from the character’s point of view. (2013: 48; see also 14, 53)

Suzanne Keen argues that “character identification [...] remains the single most important facet of response to fiction articulated by middlebrow readers” (2010: 60; see also 68). This is especially problematic with autobiographical texts

that invite a strong identification with the main character. Eventually, teachers have to drive a gentle wedge between readers and texts to establish a more objective point of view. The “manipulation of distance”, which may lead to an experience of “collapsed aesthetic distance” (Sklar 2013: 49), encourages a false sense of identification. Reader-response critics, like Iser, would also agree that a narrative consists of more than one perspective and that readers have to navigate between them. The problem is often over-identification, as we have already seen, and requires some active, task-based disentanglement.

‘Perspective-taking’, in this sense, can be likened to a half-subjective ‘over-the-shoulder shot’, a placement of the reader/viewer right next to a character without direct identification. This optical metaphor tends to obscure other important aspects, such as the central role of feelings, but it is good enough to capture this relative position. Since all eight categories are not pure types and may occur intermittently throughout a reading, it is futile to argue in favour of one to the detriment of the others. A general preference for ‘perspective-taking’ in educational contexts is its combination of two very popular approaches to empathy (1 & 4), which allows for rational analysis *and* the involvement of readers’ imagination. Since concept 3 is also dear to avid readers, but harder to work with in the classroom, it should still be possible to devise activities and ask questions that are not meant to be shared and discussed in class afterwards, but may support students’ transaction with the text. Britta Freitag-Hild’s category of “Interpretations- und Einfühlungsaufgaben” (2010: 113–14) mirrors the hybrid nature of ‘perspective-taking’: it combines Theory of Mind with aesthetic projection, narratology with creative writing, an efferent with an aesthetic stance. This has more to do with the belief that both are necessary to understand literary characters than with any sense of homogeneity within this group of activities.

“Concept 6: Imagining How One Would Think and Feel in the Other’s Place” (Batson 2009: 7)

In contrast to concept 5, which has an analytical/narratological component through its affiliation with Theory of Mind (‘theory theory’), simulation theory explores other people’s entanglements, thoughts and feelings through role-taking. Palmer first describes the concept as an approach that a method actor would take in the theatre, but then highlights its indebtedness to a computational model of cognition: “Simulation is not imagining me in that situation: it is imagining being the other in that situation. It means pretending to have the same initial desires, beliefs, and other mental states as the other person. We feed these into our inferential cognitive mechanism that then generates further mental states” (2004: 143). Simulationists believe that we can run invented scenarios

in our brain to determine their outcome, which helps us in the areas of risk-management and making important decisions. The same ‘virtual-reality software’ or “planning processor” (Oatley 1999: 444), they claim, can be employed to step into the shoes of other human beings and fictional characters: “Whereas computer simulations run on computers, literary simulations (drama, short-stories, novels) run on minds, in the imagination, or like a kind of guided dream” (Oatley 1999: 441). While this already sounds like a bold claim, simulationists even propose that we recreate the entire story world and run the scenarios within this setting, backwards and forwards (cf. Oatley 1999: 444), which allows us to build consistency and predict future actions: “A literary simulation [. . .] models objects, their attributes, and the interactions among the objects in the story world. Here, the objects almost invariably include human agents. The simulation works if a reader or spectator can get the whole thing to run – to imagine the story world with its people, and to become absorbed in it” (Oatley 1999: 441). This reveals a certain affinity to transportation, but the source of the experience is said to be a computation that we normally use to predict social scenarios. Varying the input data slightly, we can “mentally ‘try out’ different versions” (Nünning 2014: 249), which can then be appraised and ranked in terms of desirability.

Keith Oatley, one of the leading proponents of this theory, suggests that this represents the off-line mode of an interactive device that we rely on in all social situations: “A convincing theory is that consciousness is not so much a mechanism for deciding what to do immediately, but is a kind of simulation in which we relate our knowledge and memories of other people and ourselves to the current social situation and to possibilities for future social action” (2016: 624). This leads him to claim that fiction is also a kind of simulation, as authors use exactly the same procedure to conjure up stories (cf. 2016). However, since works of art go beyond simple mimesis and create new (social) worlds, they can also be seen as metaphors extended in time (cf. 2016: 618) that come with “directions to the reader about how to run the simulation” (1999: 443), which corresponds somewhat to Iser’s strategies. Although Iser may seem overtly vague about the exact process of consistency-building or meaning-making, he at least proposes a tentative theory. Oatley and his colleagues are surprisingly taciturn about how this ‘planning processor’ is supposed to work.

In contrast to the personality theory and folk psychology of concept 1 (often called ‘theory theory’), simulation theory proposes that we do not analyse characters, but understand them based on the outcome of our internal ‘stage plays’. In this sense, simulation theory is more enactive and process-oriented and thus closer to concept 4 than to any of the other dimensions of empathy presented here. Despite these conceptual differences, ‘theory theory’

and 'simulation theory' are understood as two strands of Theory of Mind (cf. Nünning 2014: 136–7; Batson 2009: 9), which makes matters more complicated than necessary. I treat them as separate approaches here (concepts 1 & 6) for the reasons presented above and choose to associate Palmer and Zunshine's Theory of Mind with analysis and narratology, while I associate the role-taking aspects of simulation theory with concept 6.

Concept 4, aesthetic projection, may seem to be the same thing as simulation, but it is not based on cognitive or psychological theories and simply relies on *Einfühlung* and the imagination (cf. Batson 2009: 7). In both cases readers have to work with a script or blueprint that is handed to them, but they can only rely on their own resources to make sense of it and 'perform' it: "The process of simulation is therefore dependent on and intertwined with the projections, value judgements and anticipations of readers" (Nünning 2014: 253). Another way of looking at the difference between concepts 4 and 6 is in terms of cognitive play (cf. Nünning 2014: 23, 73, 86, 193–4) versus the more 'technical' understanding of simulation: "simulation theory, like pretense theory, relies on a relatively 'mechanical' metaphorical construct to explain the reader's mental activity while reading. With make-believe [concept 4], the reference is to the structure and processes of children's play. In simulation theory, more often than not, the reader's mental activity is compared with that of a computer" (Sklar 2013: 17).

Despite this technically conceived simulator or 'holodeck', Oatley and his colleagues insist on the importance of role-playing and vicarious experience (cf. Nünning 2014: 36) that lets us imaginatively broaden our horizon and the range of our experiences. Simulationists believe in the whole package that reading provides: that we become better human beings, better readers and better mind-readers (cf. Mar & Oatley 2008: 180). They argue that this transformational power is due to the unique quality of literariness (cf. Mar & Oatley 2008: 182), so that the way "the events in a fictional story are carefully selected, foregrounded and manipulated adds to the value of fiction" (Nünning 2014: 39). In contrast to perspective-taking (concept 5), role-taking tends to maintain a clearer difference between actor and role. Readers have to simulate *all* the characters, not just the charming and relatable hero(ine), in the same way that a method actor has to transform into a mass-murderer when needed. Since easy identification is not always an option, 'adopting the goals of a protagonist' (cf. Oatley 1994: 69; Palmer 2004: 129) is considered a vital aspect of simulation theory, as an understanding of a character's past, present situation and motivations may be sufficient for some form of identification and emotional involvement. This is how Mar and his colleagues explain this aspect of role-taking:

One need only attend a Shakespearean play to observe that understanding and keeping track of the motivations, intentions, and beliefs of characters is paramount for narrative comprehension. Narratives are fundamentally social in nature in that almost all stories concern relationships between people; understanding stories thus entails an understanding of people, and how their goals, beliefs and emotions interact with their behaviours. (2006: 696)

Here, a strong affinity to ‘theory theory’ (concept 1) comes to the fore, which may explain the umbrella term of Theory of Mind for both approaches.

Simulation theory suffers from two fundamental problems: an underdeveloped concept of a ‘planning processor’, whose ontological status and base of operations are not sufficiently explained, and a tendency to collect various cognitive theories under the umbrella term of ‘simulation’. The best definition seems to be the notion that humans can run ‘what-if’ scenarios, for which the processor has to be fed with factual information taken from the narrative. At the same time, ‘running the simulation’ can lead to a whole spectrum of responses and developments, including a strong identification with a character. As with drama techniques in the classroom, which are the closest match in terms of task design, the results largely depend on the circumstances under which the simulation is performed.

“Concept 7: Feeling Distress at Witnessing Another Person’s Suffering” (Batson 2009: 7–8)

One of the prevailing notions within the humanities is that “empathic emotion motivates altruistic action” (Keen 2010: vii; see also Nünning 2014: 183), which is mirrored in the pop-cultural shorthand of depicting villains as sociopathic monsters or machines that are empathically impaired (cf. 2010: 9). One matter that is sometimes overlooked in this context is ‘empathic distress’ (cf. 2010: 19), which means that witnessing the suffering of others could lead to negative reactions, like anxiety, unease or a strong desire not to be confronted with the subject matter any longer. By attempting to implicate students emotionally and personally in what teachers consider highly appropriate narratives, they may still run the risk of disturbing some of them. Instead of feeling *with* or *for* the characters, readers may end up being distressed *by* the brutality of the depicted world. Instead of opening up and reaching out, they may retreat and block out the elements they cannot handle, which may lead to a rejection of the whole narrative. As Suzanne Keen shows in reference to Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (cf. 2015: 132–3), this is not a constructed case.

Students may also feel uncomfortable or self-conscious when they are confronted with a social reality that they or their families are not willing to face.

In this case, the truth may be equally hard to handle. From Sklar's point of view, taking students out of their comfort zone and confronting them with contexts that may not be so easily digested is all part of teaching and often a necessity to promote pro-social behaviour (cf. 2013: 40). There is no simple answer to the question which texts are appropriate for the classroom. Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir* is a fascinating exploration of eir teenage self's queer identity, but e depicts growing up to be a woman as a nightmare (cf. 2019: 35–7, 127–9, 220–1). Without the necessary framing, sufficiently mature students and a lot of discussions, this book has the potential to produce the same reaction as in Maia's aunt Shari: a lingering doubt whether this consistent devaluation of everything feminine is not a misogynistic stance on some level (cf. 2019: 195).

“Concept 8: Feeling for Another Person Who Is Suffering” (Batson 2009: 8)

While empathy is associated with the concept of feeling *with* another person or character, pity, compassion or sympathy are feelings *for* others and are more directly associated with ethics and pro-social behaviour. In this case, the suffering of another human being leads directly to the wish to translate one's reactions into real-life consequences. The interesting thing about sympathy is that it does not require perspective-taking at all: “readers need not empathize with a character in order to feel sympathy with him or her. [. . .] we do not have to understand a character to sympathize. The fact that we can recognize suffering without necessarily having experienced the particular suffering of a given individual (or character) effectively provides us with ways of identifying ourselves with him or her” (Sklar 2013: 53; see also Caracciolo 2014: 130). This is even supported by psychological research:

To feel for another, one must think one knows the other's internal state (concept 1) because feeling *for* is based on a perception of the other's welfare (e.g., that your friend is hurt and afraid). To feel for someone does not, however, require that this perception be accurate. It does not even require that this perception match the other's perception of his or her internal state, which is often the standard used in research to define empathic accuracy . . . (Batson 2009: 10; see also Mar et al. 2011: 824)

When charities run an ad on TV that shows starving African children, victims of a hurricane or survivors of a flood in Asia, most of the potential donors do not have any idea what it feels like to be a survivor of such catastrophes. Therefore, Sklar defines “four general components” (2013: 35; see also 53–9) that are required to engender sympathetic responses without having to rely on more involved forms of empathy: an awareness of suffering and ways of alleviating the situation; a judgement that this suffering is unfair and undeserved; sympathetic distress, by which he means feeling uncomfortable on behalf of the sufferer; and



a desire to help. All of these neither require an identification with the afflicted people, nor an actual understanding of how they feel. Although Sklar's strict separation of empathy and sympathy may help him to highlight the pro-social orientation that comes with sympathy and deliberation in opposition to Green's transportation, which is essentially escapism, he concedes that many others see a continuum, or even empathy as a prerequisite for sympathy (cf. 2013: 25). This also explains why Batson lists sympathy as the eighth variety of empathy. What they all share are different forms and conceptualisations of how the gulf between two individuals can be emotionally bridged.

Keen defines three distances at which narrative texts try to engage their readers: when we are asked to identify with members of our own in-group, which could be based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion etc. or combinations thereof, she speaks of "*bounded strategic empathy*" (2010: xiv), which is supposed to be the easiest. "*Ambassadorial strategic empathy*" (2010: xiv) refers to an attempt to win over one particular group of people for a specific purpose, such as charity work or political reform. "*Broadcast strategic empathy*" (2010: xiv) involves reaching out to every potential reader by appealing to a shared humanity. These types can and *do* appear in combination. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell's *March*, a trilogy of auto/biographical comics about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, addresses the African-American community as an in-group, invites young readers to become political activists (cf. 2013: 3) and appeals to everyone in terms of universally relatable experiences. Due to the unique qualities of literature, texts can even retarget readers' empathy from the most general (shared humanity/human rights) to more specific concerns (The Civil Rights Movement in the United States) to single lives (John Lewis). The entry point can be different for each reader, but the narrative may manage to extend readers' empathy to more specific concerns.

Although sympathy cannot be tied to specific genres, there is an undeniable link between victimisation or – more generally – the unfair treatment of characters (cf. Sklar 2013: 54) and many autobiographical and/or political texts that strongly encourage readers' responses in the form of sympathy: "Empathetic anger and an empathetic sense of injustice can each lead to personal, social, and ideological responses based on understandings of unfairness or evocation of righteous indignation on behalf of victims" (Keen 2010: 18–19). Sklar argues that 'broadcast strategic empathy', when characters are significantly different from the readers and a shared humanity is all that ties them together, is often sufficient to appeal to readers' sympathy. The title of his study, *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion*, is already a strong signal that

he considers ‘empathy’ or ‘perspective-taking’ as the weaker form when it comes to pro-social behaviour:

... one of the aims of schools ought to be to widen students’ sense of their “we group” in order to develop their capacity to feel compassion for people further removed from their own experience. While stories alone may not be able to foster this capacity, they can “persuade” readers to reevaluate and even to feel sympathy for those clearly, even radically, outside the boundaries of their “we groups.” (2013: 40)

While it is often suggested that narratives should be chosen that appeal to the students’ interests and facilitate a quick identification with the protagonist, Sklar invites teachers to select more challenging texts that may keep students at a critical distance from the characters, but allow for a more considerate sympathetic response than the easy path to empathy with protagonists that are too close to home: “I believe that emotional response generally, and sympathy particularly, can be usefully divided into notions of sensation and deliberation – in other words, what we feel and what we think” (2013: 29). Pro-social behaviour is a conscious decision to become active in real life and clearly needs the kind of deliberation that may be missing in the case of identification: “for emotions such as sympathy to possess ethical value, they must involve deliberation on the content of the experience itself” (2013: 32; see also Oatley 1994: 446; Keen 2010: 27–8). This returns us to Damasio’s argument that emotion and evaluation cannot be separated. For Sklar, emotions are not enough: they have to become appraisals that need to be tied to specific contexts. Stirring strong emotions in readers or viewers is often a prerogative of genres that are the least likely to have political undertones in Iser’s sense.

Although we have had a look at how empathy is conceptualised and discussed in different theories and contexts, what is still missing is a politics of the concept. Sklar positions sympathy explicitly against the widespread embrace of empathy as the more desirable reader response to narrative fiction. Since he only operates with two terms, we need to clarify what he means. Sklar seems to associate empathy with transportation (concept 3) or maybe even perspective-taking (concept 5) in case the aim is identification and not critical distance. Instead, he proposes a form of sympathy that combines emotional responses to a text with a political agenda. Otherwise, reading would lead to escapism or a self-congratulatory, ‘virtual’ engagement with a text instead of a pro-social orientation that has real-life consequences.

Keen was first in raising doubts about some of the exuberant claims that “[e]mpathy offers an almost magical guarantee of fiction’s worthiness” (2010: 62). She explicitly opposes “the empathy-altruism hypothesis” (2010: vii) by stating

that “the case of altruism stemming from novel reading [is] inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading” (2010: vii; see also xiv, 20, 35, 65–6). A further problem concerning this idea of literature as a panacea is that it might lessen its appeal to the younger generation: “By advertising novels as so relevant, personally beneficial, and immediately useful to self and society, do we not render unpalatable the very product we wish to place in the hands of the young?” (2010: 64). She ironically adds: “Novels, surely, can still be sexy, time wasting, and subversive – or do they have to be vitamin-enriched bowls conveying good-for-you moral fiber?” (2010: 64). In educational settings, striking the right balance between antibiotics and food-for-thought is challenging, especially when reading is conceived of as a moral intervention.

Keen’s book is a fascinating exploration of what empathy means to someone who fully acknowledges its importance, but is still struggling with some of the repercussions on traditional reading(s) and the extent of empathy’s impact on different readers. We have seen that the right degree of identification and empathy/sympathy is a delicate balance between the author’s intentions and the readers’ actual reactions, between textual structures and the readers’ associations, between familiarity and strangeness, between critical distance and transportation etc. If readers maintain too much distance, they are less likely to become entangled; however, if they become too caught up in the story, they lose all perspective and begin to see a complex subject matter from just one perspective. Keen’s scepticism is tied to her belief that “the empirical evidence for causal links between fiction reading and the development of empathy in readers does not yet exist” (2010: 124), which makes her doubt that empathy “inevitably yields the cultural and civic good of altruism and engaged world citizenship” (2010: 145) that many teachers may have in mind. She is worried by the claims of some psychologists who compress a number of tentative speculations and circumstantial pieces of evidence into a fully-fledged theory of how reading equals social competence. To balance this one-sided view, Keen highlights several factors that may impact this skill, such as personal dispositions (cf. 2010: 72), “generic and formal choices made by authors” (2010: xii), hereditary factors (cf. 2010: 3), social upbringing (cf. 2010: 3) as well as “historical and social contexts” (2010: 81).

For Keen, this whole matter comes down to a single question: “Do empathetic people make good readers, or do good readers become empathetic people?” (2010: xv). For educational settings, there has to be hope that the latter remains a possibility, but Keen is surprisingly sceptical: “teachers in particular [. . .] have employed narrative fiction to steer children toward greater empathy.

This widespread practice raises the question of whether empathy can in fact be taught through reading” (2010: 11; see also 12). Since this is not going to happen without any effort, teachers have to take a more active role: “Reading alone (without accompanying discussion, writing, or teacherly direction) may not produce the same results as the enhanced reading that involves the subsequent discussion” (2010: 91; see also 146–7). This returns us to Sklar’s observation that empathy/sympathy may be as much a result of class work as of reading itself, which is directly compatible with aesthetic reading. According to this logic, an engagement with the text is an ongoing process and the students’ response to the literary work is equally shaped by further classroom activities. Following Sklar, a teacher’s responsibility in the area of empathy/sympathy would be less about enabling identification, which he takes for granted, but more about bridging the gulf between the self-contained world of the book and the real-world issues that are addressed.

If literature should have an impact beyond the individual readers’ forms of self-implication, the meaning of the text has to be negotiated. Keen argues that pro-social behaviour is only possible “with the guidance of a teacher who connects the dots between reactions to fiction and options for action in the real world” (2010: 146), which is exactly the point why reading has to take place as a process and a sequence of steps. It also means that teachers who preach pro-social behaviour and intercultural understanding should be prepared to take the saying ‘Actions speak louder than words’ seriously. Students may be willing to become actively involved instead of feeling complacent about having addressed the issue in theory only. The classroom is one of the few remaining public spaces of civilised discussion and negotiation, which makes the activities tied to a reading crucially important.

### 3.4 Embodied Cognition & Enactivism

In *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey* (2010) Mark Johnson offers an article entitled “Cognitive Science and Dewey’s Theory of Mind, Thought, and Language” in which he sets out to demonstrate how closely connected the two are, especially concerning embodied cognition:

Dewey also anticipates some of the most significant empirical findings of recent cognitive science research on the bodily grounding of meaning. We have seen that in Dewey’s theory of mind and thought, there is no place for ideas as quasi-entities floating around in some disembodied mental space, subject to manipulation by an allegedly pure ego. On the contrary, meaning has to come from experience, and experience is at once irreducibly bodily, biological, and cultural. (2010: 136; see also 139)

In this sense, “[a]ll thinking arises from bodily processes of organism-environment transaction, and it takes whatever value it has from its ability to enrich and transform that experience” (2010: 129). Although Dewey has always been a staple of reader-response criticism and literature in the classroom, not least through Louise M. Rosenblatt’s influential work, his teachings seem to undergo a renaissance with the rise of cognitive studies. In Marco Caracciolo’s enactivist approach to literature, for example, Dewey is a ubiquitous point of reference (cf. Caracciolo 2014: 22–3, 49, 51, 73–5, 77, 89–90).

Throughout this thesis readers have already encountered the basic premises of embodied cognition, for example in Monika Fludernik’s observation that “man’s enmeshment or engagement with his environment operates as a central constitutive feature and as a fundamental cognitive frame” (2005: 7; see also 311). Even Schank and Abelson acknowledged that schemes and scripts have their origin in actual experiences, so that the efficacy of the restaurant script, for example, largely depends on taking the role of customer again and again:

A script must be written from one particular role’s point of view. A customer sees a restaurant one way, a cook sees it another way. Scripts from many perspectives are combined to form what might be considered the ‘whole view’ of the restaurant. Such a ‘whole view’ is rarely, if ever, needed or called up in actual understanding, although it might well constitute what we may consider to be one’s ‘concept’ of a restaurant. (1977: 42)

The same logic applies to objects and tools in particular (cf. Stewart 2014: 18–21). While they “are often defined by the scripts they relate to”, objects are first encountered in an interactive manner: “We would guess that for children, the definition of the object is, apart from its physical description, identical to its place in a script. That script is defined in terms of the first experience the child had with the object” (Schank & Abelson 1977: 225). In other words: for a long time children operate with the experiential knowledge of handling an object in a specific context. Much in the same way that we learn our first language in an implicit and strongly contextualised manner, so do we learn to interact with and within specific (social) environments. Daniel Hutto explains “practical knowledge” in the following way: “I know how to tie my shoes; to ride a bike; to play table-tennis; but these abilities do not rest on a kind of propositional rule following. It follows that we cannot say, even in principle, how we achieve such feats by articulating the set of tacit rules or maxims followed since there are none” (2005: 390; see also 395). Like native speakers of languages, we become native handlers of objects. Elena Cuffari et al. explain this type of learning as follows: “Growing up in the environments-ecologies-milieus that people do, we develop sensitivities

to certain acts and strategies of coping, and we incorporate the coping practices until they become constitutive of our way of being in the world” (2015: 1092).

This ties in with what John Stewart calls “a strong revival of a neo-Gibsonian ecological approach to perception” (2014: 4), by which he means James Gibson’s concept of affordances (cf. Edgar, Edgar & Pike 2014: 45). What follows is an explanation by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, but it has to be noted that they criticise Gibson for conceptualising affordances as characteristics of the environment instead of interactive properties:

In Gibson’s view, certain properties are found in the environment that are not found in the physical world per se. The most significant properties consist in what the environment affords for the animal, which Gibson calls affordances. Stated in precise terms, affordances consist in the opportunities for interaction that things in the environment possess relative to the sensorimotor capacities of the animal. For example, relative to certain animals, some things, such as trees, are climbable or afford climbing. Thus affordances are distinctly ecological features of the world. (1993: 203; see also Caracciolo 2014: 76)

Their argument is rather that “living beings and their environments stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or codetermination” (1993: 198). Graham Edgar, Helen Edgar and Graham Pike are more appreciative of Gibson’s contribution and see him as an early forerunner of embodiment in the field of cognitive psychology: “Gibson, rather than considering *how* perception operates, was much more concerned with what perception is *for*. That is, Gibson proposes that perception should be considered in terms of how it allows us to interact with the world we live in. [. . .] For Gibson, moving within the environment and interacting with the environment are crucial aspects of perception” (2014: 45). In this sense, Dewey’s ‘minding’ is as much a ‘doing’, as cognition, action and emotion go hand in hand: “Not only is art itself an operation of doing and making – a *poiesis* expressed in the very word poetry – but esthetic perception demands, as we have seen, an organized body of activities, including the motor elements necessary for full perception” (2005: 267). Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder stress that perceptual information is always stored together with interactive, sensory-motor experiences: “Neurologically, an imagined bodily movement is accompanied by the same pattern of electrical waves, whether cortical (EEG) or muscular (EMG), as the physical execution of the movement. That is, the imagining of a movement involves a kind of sketch of that movement” (2000: 68; see also 69). Even at higher levels of cognition/compression, motor memories never go away: “The connection between memories and schemes of action suggested by the preceding facts, along with the schematization of memories as such studied by F. Bartlett, makes such a reconciliation conceivable by emphasizing the importance of motor or

operator elements at all levels of memory” (2000: 83). This is how Johnson explains Dewey’s take on this matter:

Because Dewey rejects mind/body dualism, he regards the activity of thinking as just as much a matter of habits as any other form of human bodily activity. Just as when a potter employs motor skills to mould clay by means of the manual eye-hand habits she has painstakingly developed, so also the ways we think are the present result of developed and still-developing habits for working through experience. (2010: 131)

The dominant cognitive theories in linguistics are all based on embodied cognition, so it is far from a coincidence that Mark Johnson contributed to a collection of essays on Dewey’s philosophy: “The basic form of explanation is that meaning is grounded in our sensory-motor experience and that these embodied meanings are then extended, via imaginative mechanisms such as images, schemas, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, radial categories, and various forms of conceptual blending, to shape abstract thinking” (2010: 139). This is the content of the next chapter in a nutshell.

Enactivism, now, is an attempt to explain cognition “as an essential feature of living organisms” (Stewart 2014: 1) without any recourse to abstract mental models and prototypes. This “‘knowing how’ expressed directly in action” is conceptualised as “much more basic and much more generic than symbolic knowledge” (2014: 3; see also Hutto 2005: 389). Accordingly, enactivists explicitly position themselves in opposition to a “Computational Theory of Mind” (Stewart 2014: 1) and its two dominant strands – theory theory and simulation theory. An important foundational text is Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1993) in which the authors deplore the fact that “the computer model of the mind is a dominant aspect of the entire field” (1993: 4). On a basic level, the enactivists are worried by our western “tendency to overintellectualize our capacity to evaluate and understand” (Colombetti 2014: 147), but also by the tendency that the (natural) sciences have lost all contact to what human life is about. They even demand a return to what they refer to as “common sense” (1993: 148; see also 149), which is human sense-making in contrast to computational models:

The term *hermeneutics* originally referred to the discipline of interpreting ancient texts, but it has been extended to denote the entire phenomenon of interpretation, understood as the *enactment* or *bringing forth* of meaning from a background of understanding. In general, Continental philosophers, even when they explicitly contest many of the assumptions underlying hermeneutics, have continued to produce detailed discussions that show how knowledge depends on being in a world that is inseparable from our bodies, our language, and our social history – in short, from our *embodiment*. (1993: 149)

It has to be stated that – contrary to a later radicalisation of the concept (cf. Hutto 2005) – it was originally intended to form a counterweight to the western tradition by “complementing cognitive science with a pragmatic, mindful, open-ended approach to human experience, such as we find in the mindfulness/awareness tradition” (Varela et al. 1993: 53) of Buddhism. We have already encountered ‘minding’ and ‘noticing’ as relevant to learning, especially in the context of defamiliarisation and foregrounding. However, Varela et al. deny System 1 operations altogether and declare that cognition is always conscious (cf. 1993: 49–51).

Another important aspect of enactivism is that it attempts to explain basic, everyday interactions as encounters between an organism as an adaptive system and an environment: “our experience is always changing and, furthermore, is always dependent on a particular situation. To be human, indeed to be living, is always to be in a situation, a context, a world. We have no experience of anything that is permanent and independent of these situations” (1993: 59). Thus, they “propose as a name the term *enactive* to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs” (1993: 9). At this point it becomes obvious that enactivism attempts to operate largely on the basis of episodic memories: “all mental states (perception, memory, etc.) are of or about something” (1993: 15), which play a central role when the same situation arises again. Most importantly of all, cognitive phenomena are all tied to bodily experiences, as there is no perception, cognition or emotion that is not mediated through the body (cf. 1993: xvi, 65, 173). They reject the possibility “that information exists ready-made in the world and that it is extracted by a cognitive system” (1993: 140), as all information is bound to contexts and specific perspectives. Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo explain that “organisms cast a web of significance on their world” and “actively participate in the generation of meaning in what matters to them; they enact a world. Sense-making is a relational and affect-laden process grounded in biological organization” (2007: 488). This sounds suspiciously like a “radically constructivist” approach (Stewart 2014: 27), which is indeed what many enactivists are drawn to.

What is the added value of discussing enactivism in the context of teaching English? First of all, there is a direct link between the foundational texts of literary reading in the classroom, especially Dewey’s *Art as Experience* and Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, and the concept of grounding cognition in subjective experience without denying the influence of cultural practices. In this sense, we find an interesting revival, re-evaluation and recontextualisation of Dewey’s ideas in



modern philosophy. Enactivists also subscribe to what Lev Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development (cf. Vygotsky 1966: 103), as organisms can only deal with the next natural step in their development and instruction is largely pointless if it does not respect the stage the learner is in (cf. Stewart 2014: 9; Di Paolo et al. 2014: 44). Contrary to Vygotsky, who heavily relies on instruction and the transmission of knowledge and skills, enactivists understand social interaction as a dialogue, what De Jaegher and Di Paolo call ‘participatory sense-making’ (cf. De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007), during which both individuals contribute to a shared or blended space that produces emergent meaning. In any conversation we have to seek the common ground and find a common solution: “We don’t experience the other-in-interaction as totally obscure and inaccessible, nor as fully transparent (like an object fully constituted by my sense-making activity), but as something else: a protean pattern with knowable and unknowable surfaces and angles of familiarity that shapeshift as the interaction unfolds” (2007: 504). This means that misunderstandings are a natural part of communication as interlocutors can never completely know the other and predict everything that is going to happen. Cuffari et al. embrace misunderstandings as a key component of learning: “We see misunderstanding as a productive engine for renegotiating meaning and for going further in meaning sharing” (2015: 1120). Script-based interactions are an attempt to reduce the complexity of encounters by having humans take on predetermined roles, such as customer and waiter, but classroom interactions eventually have to allow for ‘participatory sense-making’. This may seem time-consuming and far less efficient than the transmission model, but the exact opposite is the case: in participatory sense-making both sides can benefit from the encounter. Students gain access to and comprehend a new situation or narrative only in terms of their previous experiences, so barring that route complicates or even hinders their reading process. This is why the seven stages of reading presented in part 2 contain as many interactive phases as possible.

Enactivism is a ‘learning by doing’ approach based on optimal challenges, which means that the enactivists endorse “pretend play” (Di Paolo et al. 2014: 76) in the social sphere. Although the situation is based on make-believe, it allows for the “construction of new environmentally and bodily mediated meaning” (Di Paolo et al. 2014: 76). More generally speaking, learning is based on active engagement and exploration:

Traditional distinctions between action and perception arise only as the specialisation of phases in an act of sense-making. Several examples that illustrate this point have been discussed in the enaction literature, but perhaps the simplest and clearest one is that of perceiving the softness of a sponge [...]. The softness of a sponge is not to be found ‘in it’ but in how it responds to the active probing and squeezing of our appropriate

bodily movements (e.g., with the fingers or the palms of the hand). It is the outcome of a particular kind of encounter between a 'questioning' agent with a particular body (sponges are solid ground for ants) and a 'responding' segment of the world. The confluence of lawful co-variations in this dialogue stabilises the cogniser's sense-making into an object. Movements are at the centre of mental activity: a sense-making agent's movements – which include utterances – are the tools of her cognition. (De Jaeger & Di Paolo 2007: 489)

Since utterances are conceptualised as (dialogic) movements in this theory, Cuffari et al. expand on this notion in a later article, which looks at “*linguaging as adaptive social sense-making*” (2015: 1089). In this sense, “*linguaging is a special form of social agency, through which linguistic sense-makers negotiate between interactive and self-directed metaregulation of moment-to-moment living and cognizing*” (2015: 1113). Thus, enactivists tie language-learning to sense-making in successively more involved encounters, so that language skills are built from the ground up as any other ability (cf. 2015: 1089).

Linguaging as the reflexive and reflective negotiating with one's self as with another is the 'seed' ability out of which abstraction, imagination, and reasoning grow, as one's sense-making powers incorporate the moves, perspectives and expectations of others, and the horizons of significance in which they are embedded. (2015: 1110)

One important consequence of this approach is that very young children can be competent language users and communicators, although – from a cognitivist perspective – they do not have established the mental models yet that supposedly guide all cognition (cf. 2015: 1091). This is how Cuffari et al. summarise this idea:

an enactive approach to linguaging will explain it as a kind of sensemaking, i.e. a way that human organisms monitor, evaluate, regulate and organize their existence. An enactive approach will relate linguaging to self-produced identities and to the regulation of coupling with environmental domains that support those identities. Linguaging will be understood as a way of living. It is this way of living, rather than a theory of mind, that speaking children share with other human interlocutors. (2015: 1092)

Di Paolo et al. argue that organisms “*participate in the generation of meaning through their bodies and action often engaging in transformational and not merely informational interactions*” (2014: 39). In other words: students do not just pass on and absorb information, they are more holistically involved and change as people – rather than as hard drives – through their interactions with peers and teachers. This is especially true of their bodies, which also have to be involved – rather than exclusively focusing on their brains (cf. Di Paolo et al. 2014: 42). Colombetti observes that “*living systems necessarily establish a*

*point of view*, and moreover a *concerned* point of view that *generates meaning*" (2014: 148), so that "meaning is always *relational*" (2014: 148). That is why all meaning-making has to start with the students' individual responses. In a more radical variant of enactivism, there is no objective meaning anyway, as the word 'meaningful' itself suggests that it is always relational. A group of people can agree on a particular meaning, of course, but then it is still meaningful to *them*. Enactivism was never intended to be an approach to reading, as the whole point of this philosophy is to explain how organisms – and not even humans at that – manage to adapt to and interact with their *natural* environments in the most basic ways. However, nothing spurs human imagination more than a lost cause.

Mario Caracciolo's enactivist approach to reading literature is far from radical as, early on, he is "ready to concede that language-based cognition does involve mental representations. This is why a psychologically realistic theory of narrative cannot do without mental representations" (2014: 35; see also 9). Following this logic, he is more interested in a reorientation of rather than an abrupt break with cognitive literary studies (cf. 2014: 3). His compromise takes the following form: he borrows the metaphor of entanglement from Wolfgang Iser (cf. 2014: 36) to explain how self-implication takes place by "having one's past experiences entangled in the process of reading" (2014: 34). Instead of mental models, Caracciolo relies on episodic memory and experientiality in Fludernik's sense (cf. 2014: 3, 9, 47–9). The other component is Oatley's 'simulation theory' (cf. 2014: 32, 94, 130–1), which blends readers' own experiences with those of characters. Here is Caracciolo's own outline of his approach:

Two psychological mechanisms play a role in this process: the first is the triggering of memories of past experiences – experiential traces, as they are known in the psycholinguistic literature. The second is mental simulation, which allows readers to put together past experiential traces in novel ways, therefore sustaining their first-person involvement with both fictional characters and the spatial dimension of storyworlds. All in all, there is a two-way movement between the background and narrative: like experiential machines, stories need experiential input, but also produce some output, since they can bring about a restructuring of each reader's experiential background by generating new 'story-driven' experiences. (2014: 5)

This means that narratives have the power to tap into and activate readers' episodic memories, which makes the experience more personal and emotionally satisfying (cf. 2014: 34, 36, 50). Yet, this is also important for another reason, as "stories cannot represent the characters' experiences, but only events and actions whose experiential dimension is supplied by readers through their own familiarity with experience" (2014: 23). He is more explicit about this point later in his book, when he applies reader-response criticism's concept of the text as a

blueprint to the (re)construction of emotional states: “There is no stand-in for the character’s experience here, but only linguistic-expressive-pointers that cue readers into attributing an experience to a fictional being because of their own familiarity with bodily experience” (2014: 104).

Caracciolo attempts to model a progression from “consciousness-attribution” to “consciousness-enactment” (2014: 25, 41, 110), which corresponds to a step from Theory of Mind in Palmer’s sense to Oatley’s simulation, with a much stronger focus on experientiality instead of mental models. This becomes obvious in the following statement: “consciousness-attributions are not based on reasoning, but on the identification of expressions of consciousness” (2014: 117). We learn how to attribute conscious states to characters based on real-life encounters:

... primary intersubjectivity enables us to grasp another person’s intentions in an embodied, online way through face-to-face interaction, without any need to infer them via a theory or by running mental simulations. This capability is closer to perception than to higher-order cognitive processes: [...] Primary intersubjectivity points to our ability to understand other people’s minds as directly accessible through their bodily behavior (for example, facial expressions and gestures). (2014: 142)

In other words, these are System 1 operations based on general experience. For consciousness-enactment, Caracciolo combines self-projection, role-taking, perspective-taking, self-implication, self-modification, sympathy and transportation into his own variety of empathy, which becomes obvious in the following passage:

... consciousness-enactment always involves an element of consciousness-attribution: consciousness-attribution brings in its wake a third-person stance toward a character, but in enacting a character’s experience readers imaginatively ‘try it on’ without completely giving up their third-person perspective (since the character always remains another subject). (2014: 49; see also 118)

He clarifies this point later in the book: “consciousness-enactment tends to build over time in the presence of the appropriate textual cues: it is a cumulative process that can spread across different ‘threads’ of our experiential engagement with narrative [...] The upshot is that consciousness-enactment comes in degrees” (2014: 124). However, it also goes back and forth between more and less engagement, as readers’ perspectives constantly change as the narrative progresses. This sounds a lot like Iser’s coordination of perspectives and partial identification with a character’s point of view: “in consciousness-enactment, the recipient’s story-driven experience is made to overlap, if only partially, with the experience attributed to a character. Consciousness-enactment, therefore, creates a tension

between the first-person undergoing of an experience and its second- or third-person attribution to a fictional being” (2014: 110; see also 122). Because of the wide spectrum of reader responses that have been subsumed under the umbrella term of Theory of Mind, such accounts of ‘consciousness-enactment’ tend to be rather confusing, as they involve anything from narratological analysis via simulation, perspective-taking and self-implication to enactivism.

When Caracciolo addresses what he considers to be the extreme point of the spectrum – perspective-taking – he follows an argument similar to Kuiken and Miall’s concept of self-implication and self-modifying feelings: “stories can have a feedback effect on interpreters’ experiential background at this level by inviting them to revise – in a more or less self-conscious way – their views and outlook on the world. Narrative can affect people not only imaginatively and emotionally, but also cognitively and culturally” (2014: 67; see also 141–2). This becomes even more obvious in the following statement, where appraisals are foregrounded as the major type of engagement with narratives: “Experience is not simply about reproducing the world as if from a detached, observer position. It is an online, engaged, embodied evaluation of ‘what is at stake’ in the world for creatures like us” (2014: 52; see also 64). Damasio’s argument about the inseparability of cognition and emotions is very evident in this context: “readers’ engagement with narrative texts is shot through with sensory images, emotions, evaluations – the stuff our experiences are made of, and that cannot be adequately accounted for within a computational model of the mind” (2014: 46). This experientiality that readers share with authors becomes the background against which the fictional characters’ lives are judged. Yet, to enable readers to get ‘a feel’ for the characters’ experiences – which they do not have as assemblages of signs – writers use specific expressive strategies to guide a process of increasing entanglement, which can take slightly different directions depending on the experiences individual readers bring to the text (cf. 2014: 49).

One way to do that is to rely on conceptual metaphors (cf. 2014: 21), which is the topic of the next chapter. This means that widely shared human experiences have found their way into language in the form of image schemas, basic metaphors and all the other figures of speech that build on these foundations. Language can trigger physical responses to imaginary scenarios as long as it manages to tap into our personal experiences: “we just have a gut reaction to the spider as soon as we imagine it crawling up our arm. What is remarkable about this phenomenon is the way mental and semiotic representations can draw on a level of our engagement with the world that is prelinguistic and non-representational” (2014: 38). In this sense language mainly works metonymically and not representationally: it is not so much the linguistic ‘depiction’ of a large, hairy spider

crawling up one's arm, but language's power to evoke – or provoke – a response, based on real-life experiences.

An important question in this context is the problem of how “the phenomenal qualities (or ‘qualia’) of bodily-perceptual experiences” (2014: 24) can be expressed through language, to which Caracciolo gives the following answer: “metaphors and similes are one of the expressive devices through which stories invite readers to enact the felt qualities of specific experiences in a way that [. . .] can have a deep impact on their background” (2014: 109). It becomes more interesting when he elaborates on how this takes place:

Metaphorical language adds a layer of complexity to this indexing process [language cueing experiences]: in order to convey the qualia of a bodily-perceptual experience, it points to another experience (usually, but not necessarily, at the same level of the background), asking the reader to conflate the two. The qualia conveyed to the reader correspond to what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) would call the “emergent meaning” of the metaphorical mapping – the value added that results from blending the two experiences. (2014: 108)

This is remarkably similar to Miall and Kuiken's approach presented above, who speak of “a form of enactive reading that implicitly blends the fictional world with what readers know, believe, or feel about their own lives. [. . .] In these cases, the reader is, we suggest, confronting personal feelings and recontextualizing them in the light of the fresh feelings evoked during reading” (2002: 238). The feelings attributed to or projected onto the character – what Miall and Kuiken call ‘remembered emotions’ and Caracciolo ‘experiential traces’ (cf. 2014: 46) – have to come from the reader, which may vary in their specificity. The unique longing for a cigarette may invite heavy smokers to instantly bond with the character, but everyone else is also familiar with cravings or, even more broadly, not getting what one wants, which may be sufficient for a basic understanding of the situation. Thus, we flesh out the characters with standard schematic knowledge that we automatically apply without much thought. Yet, art being art, the specific configuration of circumstances and the disposition of the character may invite what Miall and Kuiken call self-implication. The easier it is to relate to a character or situation, the more likely it is that the narrative can tap into our personal memories, which adds more flavour to the experiences we bring to the reading: “it is important to keep in mind that readers do not just attribute mental states to fictional characters – they attribute mental states with a qualitative aspect or with qualia in the broad sense” (Caracciolo 2014: 112).

This returns us to reader-response criticism's blueprints and musical scores: literary texts use cues and foregrounding to trigger reactions, associations,

appraisals, blends etc. but they do not represent reality in and of themselves or predominantly trigger world building. However, foregrounding occurs in an organised and orchestrated fashion, so that the gaps in narratives are highly productive. Therefore, I disagree with Caracciolo's suggestion that the gaps are qualitatively the same in both instances: "My argument is that, despite common assumptions to the contrary, the perceived world is as sketchy and 'gappy' as the mental imagery generated during the reading of narrative texts. This brings grist to the mill of my account of the structural resemblance between real experiences (perception) and story-driven experiences (imaginings)" (2014: 24). Art is much more 'expressive' – to use Caracciolo's own term, teleological and arranged. The power of art is to draw us in and invite self-implication, whereas real life is largely marked by the comfortable boredom of daily routines. There is no noise in the information – especially not in the most condensed verbal arts like poetry – where every single word is carefully chosen; but the same principle applies to all forms of artistic expression. In real life, people do not emote enough and we are often challenged to interpret the complexity of other humans' emotional states without sufficient clues. In art, facial expressions, gestures, body postures etc. are all carefully selected to be legible – or not, which is in itself meaningful, as everything we read is based on deliberation. When Caracciolo claims that narratives can 'express' an experience through such signs, which limits the range of potential responses, this is only possible because of art:

... insofar as stories draw on, and have an effect on, the experiential background of recipients, they can also express an experience by having recipients respond to the represented events and existents in certain ways. [...] fictional consciousnesses are (just like the consciousnesses of real people) attributed on the basis of external signs, such as gestures and psychological language, which we take as expressive of an experience. Consciousness-attribution is thus readers' most basic strategy for dealing with fictional consciousnesses. (2014: 114)

This does not mean that we do not read an angry face in real life and in fiction in largely the same way – especially in visual narrative media such as film or comics – but if the point of readers' engagement with texts is the reconstruction of fictional consciousnesses based on these signs, there is presumably more guidance in fiction. This is also what Caracciolo ultimately agrees to:

I would like to leave the door open for the idea that readers' access to other consciousnesses can be more direct when dealing with fictional characters than with real people. My proposition is that our engagement with fictional consciousnesses differs in degree, but not in kind, from our engagement with real ones, in particular when it comes to consciousness-enactment: we can enact the experience of another person in

real life too – that is to say, empathize with him or her – but we do not do it as often (and as intensely) as in reading texts . . . (2014: 113; see also 129)

The reason is that “[s]ympathy and empathy for characters (together with the related stances [. . .] ‘consciousness-attribution’ and ‘consciousness-enactment’) can be modulated through sophisticated expressive techniques” (2014: 66; see also 143). These operate within a number of large frameworks, such as sharing experiences with the writer through joint attention, “evolutionary, cultural and personal dispositions” (2014: 42) or genre knowledge. On the discourse level, Caracciolo argues, we encounter authors’ or narrators’ explicit evaluations and attitudes towards characters and situations, stylistic foregrounding, narrative structure, psycho-narration, focalisation, and characters’ points of view (cf. 2014: 42–4, 104, 126–9), which all offer a carefully calibrated guide as to how readers are supposed to read and identify with characters. These

. . . expressive devices at the micro-level of analysis [. . .] occur frequently in narrative texts. However, it is only the accumulation of these devices (i.e., when a story gives sustained attention to a character’s experience) that primes consciousness-enactment: a coordinated set of low-level triggers constitutes a higher-level trigger, inviting interpreters to enact a character’s consciousness throughout a larger textual unit. This process culminates in what I call “consciousness-focused narration”. (2014: 125; see also 41, 128)

The accumulation of cues, textual evidence or what Smith would call the in-built redundancy of texts (cf. 2004: 63–5), steers the readers in particular directions. Concerning internal focalisation, perspective-taking can never be complete, as “a consciousness is not a place *from which* we experience the world – it is, first and foremost, the medium *through* which we experience it [; . . .] a consciousness is not an object-like entity; it cannot be reduced to a spatio-temporal position from which we imagine some events and existents” (2014: 118). Again, this is tied to the idea that literature does not mimetically represent experiences as quasi-objects in literary texts, which readers take in as a piece of information: “characters’ consciousness and experiences cannot be represented as such by narrative texts; what we commonly call the ‘representation of an experience’ is the representation of an event in which a person (e.g., a fictional character) undergoes an experience” (2014: 30; see also 31). This is not to say that characters’ emotions cannot be accessed almost instantaneously, but this recognition usually relies on the somewhat circumlocutionary use of metaphor, metonymy and situational context rather than direct access. Readers have to share their own experiences and episodic memories with the characters to grant them an emotional depth that cannot objectively exist in the text.



What hampers Caracciolo's otherwise fascinating attempt to make enactivism compatible with literary studies is a twofold problem with a single root: despite the implicit claim that enactivism is a new paradigm that revolutionises the way we conceptualise cognition and reading in particular, there is a strong reliance on classical narratology and conventional approaches within cognitive literary studies. From the outset, Caracciolo acknowledges that he embraces Theory of Mind, especially simulation theory, which is based on mental representations and schema theory. When he addresses empathy and perspective-taking, traditional conceptualisations of focalisation based on textual clues become very prominent. The other problem concerns the case studies: they are rather short and not all that convincing. If we take Caracciolo's reading of Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (cf. 2014: 144–51) as an example, there is some new terminology, but very little else that cannot be explained through traditional means or Alan Palmer's social minds.

Despite these shortcomings, Caracciolo's book is still an important effort to build literary reading from the ground up and expand narratology beyond its narrow confines. He highlights the continuities between John Dewey, Wolfgang Iser, cognitive literary studies and enactivism in particular, which opens up a diachronic perspective and reveals a sensibility to continuities that is frequently missing from other publications in the same vein, such as Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds* (2004) or Barbara Dancygier's *The Language of Stories* (2012). Episodic memories, feelings and the experientiality of everyday life become readers' key resources in making sense of literary texts and the entanglements of characters in particular social configurations. Thus, he reinforces John Dewey's, Frank Smith's and Monika Fludernik's insistence on the continuities between real life and art. To build on Carraciolo's groundwork and to extend this approach to visual narrative media, we have to turn our attention to linguistics first.

## 3.5 Conceptual Metaphors & Blending

### 3.5.1 Basic Principles

Cognitive linguistics is essential to an experiential approach to literature and comics in particular, for which this chapter provides the theoretical foundation. The field's "Cognitive Commitment" is meant to ensure that the "principles of linguistic structure should reflect what is known about human cognition from other disciplines, particularly the other cognitive sciences" (Evans & Green 2006: 40). Accordingly, one can detect numerous parallels to the theories presented thus far.

The first central tenet of cognitive linguistics is a fierce opposition to “language as a formal or computational system” (Evans & Green 2006: 44), which Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green also call the “empiricist view” (2006: 44) or the “objectivist approach” (2006: 47). In this context, Lakoff and Johnson observe that the “set-theoretical concept of a category does not accord with the way people categorize things and experiences. For human beings, categorization is primarily a means of comprehending the world, and as such it must serve that purpose in a sufficiently flexible way” (2003: 122). This leads them to the conclusion that “at least some of the properties that characterize our concept of an object are *interactional*. In addition, the properties do not merely form a *set* but rather a *structured gestalt*, with dimensions that emerge naturally from our experience” (2003: 122). This is quite a departure for a linguistic approach, in that the meaning of words is neither in the text, nor in the brain, but emerges naturally through an interactive process. In enactivism, this is the foundation of all cognition. The prototypes we operate with – e.g. the words we use – are not sets of characteristics, but tentative, experiential gestalten (cf. 2003: 77–86, 210), very much in Iser’s sense, or ‘blends’ in conceptual integration theory. They are never ‘pure’, objective and shiny, but used, rough round the edges, somewhat fuzzy and ‘tainted’ by experiences and emotions. They are organised according to family resemblances (cf. 2003: 71, 122–3; Kövecses 2010: 109), rather than marked off by distinct sets of attributes. Experiential gestalten as “ways of organizing experiences into *structured wholes*” (2003: 81) allow for a holistic approach, which is essential, as “we need to classify our experiences in order to comprehend, so that we will know what to do” (2003: 83). The brain is naturally prone to ‘organic’ networking and establishing links between seemingly incompatible things, but less so to rational, ‘mechanical’ analysis in the sense of taking apart and looking at the functional value of items (System 2).

Since the acquisition and use of language have to be explained on the basis of general cognitive principles rather than a specific language module in the brain (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 41), George Lakoff affirms that “language is secondary” (2007: 273), meaning that we have to look at pre-linguistic, sub-conscious phenomena first, or in other words: at basic human experiences as the source of linguistic expressions. In the second chapter of their massive *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, entitled “The nature of cognitive linguistics: assumptions and commitments”, Evans and Green start with what they consider to be *the* foundational thesis of the discipline: “embodied cognition” (2006: 27). This mirrors enactivism’s basic premise that “the concepts we have access to and the nature of the ‘reality’ we think and talk about are a function of our embodiment: we can only talk about what we can perceive

and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience. From this point of view, the human mind must bear the imprint of embodied experience” (2006: 46; see also 44; Lakoff 1990, xiv-xv).

Despite the fact that humans develop a fairly sophisticated and wide-reaching network of interrelated conceptual metaphors, the basic building blocks are primary metaphors that are based on direct bodily experiences (cf. Kövecses 2010: 7) and “arise spontaneously and automatically without our being aware of them” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 256). Here is how Lakoff and Johnson explain this ‘subindividual level’ (cf. Kövecses 2010: 309–11) that forms the basis of all cognition before culture and language begin to influence and modify a person’s conceptual system:

Since the mechanism of metaphor is largely unconscious, we will think and speak metaphorically, whether we know it or not. Further, since our brains are embodied, our metaphors will reflect our commonplace experiences in the world. Inevitably, many primary metaphors are universal because everybody has basically the same kinds of bodies and brains and lives in basically the same kinds of environments, so far as the features relevant to metaphor are concerned. (2003: 257; see also 119, 257, 259; Kövecses 2010: xi-xii; 195–213)

This includes basic spatial orientation (cf. 2003: 56–7; see also Kövecses 2010: 88) and the handling of objects, which have interactional properties (also called affordances) that invite or allow for certain types of engagements (cf. 2003: 120, 214–5). Thus, embodied cognition establishes the basic parameters for further experiences and linguistic expressions: “our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies) provide the basis for an extraordinarily wide variety of ontological metaphors” (2003: 25) and “are characterizable as multidimensional gestalts whose dimensions emerge naturally from our experience in the world” (2003: 121–2; see also 123, 162). An important component of this process of perpetual interaction is instant feedback: “our conceptual system emerges from our constant successful functioning in our physical and cultural environment” (2003: 180).

Although conceptual metaphor theory seems to be similar to enactivism in this respect, there are three significant differences. Despite the shared tenet that primary experiences are generated through direct interactions between organism and environment, cognitive linguistics operates with mental frames. Secondly, cognitive metaphor theory stresses that new insights can be gained by metaphorical thought – or blending – independent of immediate contexts, which includes creative/artistic work. Lakoff and Johnson argue that “meaning is negotiated”, which becomes the prerequisite for “an interactionally based and

creative understanding” (2003: 231). Thirdly, they fully acknowledge automated System 1 operations, which are anathema to enactivists: “what is deeply entrenched, hardly noticed, and thus effortlessly used is most active in our thought” (Kövecses 2010: xi; see also 34).

Our most basic interactions with the environment lead to the development of what cognitive linguists call ‘image schemas’ (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 46–7). These are “abstract concepts consisting of patterns emerging from repeated instances of embodied experience” (Evans & Green 2006: 179; see also 176). A simple example is the CONTAINER image schema (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 158). We begin to understand our own bodies as bounded objects or containers with things going in and out, but also our environment presents numerous examples of things contained within or passing into and out of other things. OBJECT is another essential image schema, but there are dozens, such as PATH, NEAR-FAR, UP-DOWN, PART-WHOLE, FULL-EMPTY etc. Their experiential basis cannot be restricted to visuals only, but includes all sensory perceptions (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 179; see also Oakley 2007: 216). In our conceptual system image schemas are “the foundations” (Evans & Green 2006: 180), as we use these basic, often spatial orientations to make sense of more abstract concepts via “metaphorical projection” (Evans and & Green 2006: 158). Not only is the body the source of our experiences, but also of our metaphors: “We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 29). Therefore, Lakoff and Johnson claim that we tend to conceive of everything as containers, starting with our own minds, which we can feed with new ideas.

The CONTAINER image schema leads to an understanding of our heads/brains as containers and of ideas as objects that enter the brain and come out again through our mouths in the form of language – ‘containing’ the idea in a sentence. In Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* Thomas Gradgrind, the schoolmaster, strongly believes in the idea of feeding facts to his students, the “little vessels”, who are supposed to get “ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim” (Dickens 1995: 9). This widespread misconception of how learning and meaning-making take place provided the impetus for one of the most important publications in cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*.

In their preface they explain that the main motivation to write this book was the realisation “that ‘meaning’ in these traditions [Western philosophy and linguistics] has very little to do with what people find *meaningful* in their lives” (2003: ix), which is closely tied to the necessity to “understand their experiences”

(2003: 116). So, naturally, “meaning is always meaning *to* someone. There is no such thing as a meaning of a sentence in itself, independent of any people” (2003: 184; see also 197, 205). It is also “not cut and dried; it is a matter of imagination and a matter of constructing coherence” (2003: 227) through inference (cf. 2003: 244). From these few statements alone it should become obvious that reader-response criticism and cognitive linguistics share a lot of common ground. When Evans and Green explain that “meaning arises from a dynamic process of meaning construction, which we call conceptualisation” (2006: 363), this argument is easily compatible with Louise M. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (cf. 1994). Since Evans and Green do not believe in the intrinsic meaning of words, they always consider the entire contextual frame: “conceptualisation is guided by discourse context, which forms an integral part of the meaning construction process. According to this view, meaning construction is localised and situated, which entails that pragmatic (context-dependent) information and knowledge inform and guide the meaning construction process” (2006: 367). Looking at the role of language, we find an uncanny similarity to Dewey’s “musical score” (2005: 113), Rosenblatt’s “blueprint” (1994: 86, 88) or Iser’s “*instructions* for the *production* of the signified” (1980: 65):

... cognitive semanticists argue that words are prompts for meaning construction rather than ‘containers’ that carry meaning. Furthermore, according to this view, language actually represents highly underspecified and impoverished prompts relative to the richness of conceptual structure that is encoded in semantic structure: these prompts serve as ‘instructions’ for conceptual processes that result in meaning construction. In other words, cognitive linguists argue that meaning construction is primarily conceptual rather than linguistic in nature. (2006: 214; see also 366, 368, 371; Coulson & Oakley 2000: 176)

Thus, the power of words stems from their artful arrangement and their ability to activate the mental capacities of readers or listeners. The process of meaning-making, which Iser calls *gestalt-forming*, does not primarily involve the creation or update of mental models, but the conceptual integration of several input spaces. With cognitive linguistics – as with reader-response criticism – the focus shifts from the containers, such as words, sentences, texts, mental models etc., to their interrelations. These links between conceptual spaces – what cognitive linguists call ‘mappings’ – become the central concern.

There are three basic ways of relating conceptual entities to each other: metonymy, metaphor and conceptual integration, which has already been introduced as blending. In the first case, both of the concepts belong to the same mental space and one activates and leads to the other. According to this logic, a cross may refer to Christianity, a logo to a brand, a stethoscope or

white coat to a doctor, a passport photograph to a person and so on. In each of these cases, we have a relatively close and conventionalised relationship that quickly calls the other concept to mind. Metaphor, however, requires two different, often very distant frames. Mapping – or “conceptual projection” (Evans & Green 2006: 286) – takes place when we use a more concrete, closer-to-daily-life frame to make sense of a more abstract idea or concept, which means that “conceptual metaphors are mostly unidirectional” (Kövecses 2010: 27; see also Evans & Green 2006: 296–7). Since the two domains are not directly related, “mappings are asymmetric and partial” (Lakoff 2007: 309), so that only certain structures are mapped – based on their shared image schemas (cf. 2007: 296). As its name reveals, conceptual metaphor theory is more concerned with the second type. To acknowledge that fact, metaphors come first, before we return to metonymy and finally look at blending in greater detail.

### 3.5.2 Metaphors

The previous section ended with a tentative definition of metaphor, which now requires an example to illustrate the type of conceptual projection that takes place. *TIME IS MONEY* uses the more familiar experience of managing a resource to structure an understanding of time according to the same logic. However, although we can ‘save’ time, we cannot take it to the bank and get dividends at the end of the year. That is why “cross-domain mappings” (Evans & Green 2006: 286) only shed light on certain aspects of the target domain and keep others in the dark (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 10). This ‘metaphorical highlighting’ (cf. Kövecses 2010: 91), which “necessarily goes together with hiding” (Kövecses 2010: 92), is the reason “why a single target concept is understood via several source concepts: one source just cannot do the job because our concepts have a number of distinct aspects to them and the metaphors address these distinct aspects” (Kövecses 2010: 135). In this sense, source domains work like prisms and create a certain perspective, such as introducing capitalist notions to human existence in the form of time management. This aspectual quality of metaphors is very similar to literature in general, where – according to Iser – perspectival structures also offer particular angles that readers have to navigate and negotiate. The power of metaphors lies in the tension between surprising revelations through the joining of vastly different frames and the jarring incongruities that such a creative mapping produces. Thus, metaphor “is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 193). Accordingly, metaphorical

thinking constitutes a process of approximation, a means of getting to grips with elusive, ephemeral qualities that are difficult to hold on to or to make sense of. It is creative, poetic and far from perfect. That is why we need several conceptual metaphors to grasp a single abstract concept – depending on the context and a particular person's experiences and approach. However, there are countless metaphors that have become so conventionalised that we take them for granted instead of questioning what they hide.

The idea that mental spaces, models, domains and frames are containers, bounded entities with fixed elements in them, is just a convenient way of talking about complex cognitive processes in terms of the familiar. There is no doubt about the network structure of long-term memory, so the question which box exactly contains one's understanding of what a hammer is, remains unanswerable, as there are no containers in the first place. Cognitive linguistics comes with its own set of labels for these conceptual spaces. In cognitive metaphor theory, for example, the preferred term seems to be 'domain': a "conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience" (Kövecses 2010: 4). In cognitive semantics, Charles Fillmore has established the label 'frame', which puts more emphasis on the relations than the containers themselves:

By the term 'frame' I have in mind any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available. I intend the word 'frame' as used here to be a general cover term for the set of concepts variously known, in the literature on natural language understanding, as 'schema', 'script', 'scenario', 'ideational scaffolding', 'cognitive model' or 'folk theory'. (2007: 238; see also Evans & Green 2006: 166, 211, 222)

For Fillmore, all the computational terms are insufficient as they disregard vital links between concepts and their contexts. The meaning of a thing is not an entity, but a network, so there is no possibility to speak about meaning in cognitive semantics without looking at the larger picture. Meaning is not of the kind recorded in dictionaries – isolated words arranged in an organised but otherwise arbitrary fashion – but of encyclopaedias or words in context (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 206–47). Lexical concepts maintain a figure-and-ground relationship to the background frame (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 222), so that their meaning only comes into sharper focus against the background and both depend on each other for their relevance (cf. Fillmore 2007: 243). They maintain metonymic relationships and evoke each other: "in the process of using a language, a

speaker 'applies' a frame to a situation, and shows that he intends this frame to be applied by using words recognized as grounded in such a frame" (Fillmore 2007: 246; see also 249; Evans & Green 2006: 160–2). This becomes especially relevant in the context of genres: "knowing that a text is, say, an obituary, a proposal of marriage, a business contract, or a folktale, provides knowledge about how to interpret particular passages in it, how to expect the text to develop, and how to know when it is finished" (2007: 243) This suggests that there is a metonymic relationship between genre markers and the whole structure, as in the case of 'film noir', 'private eye' and 'femme fatale'. However, Fillmore's concern is predominantly with more standard situations. A 'vegetarian' is not just a person who does not eat meat, but evokes a whole cultural context of dietary customs and expectations (cf. 2007: 245). To Fillmore, "words represent categorizations of experience" (2007: 238) and are schematic in nature, "a skeletal representation of meaning abstracted from recurrent experience of language use" (Evans & Green 2006: 216). The actual "meaning is a process rather than a discrete 'thing' that can be 'packaged' by language" (Evans & Green 2006: 162).

This is why the codified or lexicalised 'meaning' of words is idealised or prototypical rather than concrete and immediately accessible. In *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* Lakoff uses the term 'idealized cognitive model' (ICM) for prototypical or stereotypical schemas, such as 'mother' or 'marriage'. They "are relatively stable mental representations that represent theories about the world" and offer basic orientation in that they "guide cognitive processes like categorization and reasoning" (Evans & Green 2006: 270). This is less of a problem when we think of 'Tuesday' or 'weekend', which require an ICM of 'week' to make sense (cf. Lakoff 1990: 68–9), but more so with terms that are culturally loaded and are not questioned any longer, as System 1 automatically recurs to them without our conscious realisation. This is referred to as "back-stage cognition" (Evans & Green 2006: 368; see also Lakoff 1990: 6) in cognitive linguistics.

In blending theory, for comparison, the term 'mental spaces' refers to "very partial assemblies constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action. They contain elements and are structured by frames and cognitive models. Mental spaces are connected to long-term schematic knowledge, such as the frame for walking along a path, and to long-term specific knowledge, such as a memory of the time you climbed Mount Rainier in 2001" (Fauconnier 2007: 351). These are much more flexible and ad-hoc creations in working memory that co-exist as input spaces for on-line processes of meaning-making. When they are "entrenched" or "organized as a package we already know, we say that the mental space is framed and we call that organization a frame"



(Fauconnier 2007: 352). Despite these similarities, it is significant that cognitive metaphor theory relies on frames/domains, whereas blending operates with mental spaces, which signals a more experiential and experimental approach.

Both cognitive semantics and blending theory share this focus on spontaneous, strongly contextualised meaning-making, while cognitive metaphor theory, which originally sounded as radical as enactivism today, has transformed into a much more conservative pursuit since the publication of the programmatic *Metaphors We Live By*. Since then it has set out to prove that conceptual mappings follow a strongly regulated pattern or grammar which has been termed the “invariance principle” (Lakoff 2007: 279; see also Evans & Green 2006: 302). It proposes that projections work in a uniform way and that metaphors form a coherent system (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 299). “Metaphorical mappings preserve the cognitive topology (that is, the image-schema structure) of the source domain, in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain” (Lakoff 2007: 279). Originally, conceptual metaphor theory was very different from a schematic approach in that humans do not fill empty slots in a script or schema, but hold two or more frames in working memory, until they begin to form connections: “*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 5). This entails that “the only kind of similarities relevant to metaphors are *experiential*, not objective, similarities” (2003: 154). Since then, Lakoff’s interest has shifted from experiential contexts to a system of highly conventionalised metaphors: “Mappings should not be thought of as processes, or as algorithms that mechanically take source domain inputs and produce target domain outputs. Each mapping should be seen instead as a fixed pattern of ontological correspondences across domains” (Lakoff 2007: 275). This leads him to the claim that “metaphor resides for the most part in this huge, highly structured, fixed system. This system is anything but dead. Because it is conventional, it is used constantly and automatically with neither effort nor awareness” (2007: 293). Although conceptual metaphor theory is less helpful as a theory of reading as a process, it is indispensable to see how conceptual metaphors pervade our thinking and have become a vast network of interconnected domains that we do not even notice any longer.

A good example is the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor (cf. Turner 1994: 52), which is foundational to the genre of auto/biographical writing. Lakoff explains the mappings by referencing the event structure metaphor of which LIFE IS A JOURNEY is a more specific example:

In our culture, life is assumed to be purposeful, that is, we are expected to have goals in life. In the Event Structure Metaphor, purposes are destinations and purposeful action is

self-propelled motion toward a destination. A purposeful life is a long-term, purposeful activity and hence a journey. Goals in life are destinations on the journey. The actions one takes in life are self-propelled movements, and the totality of one's actions form a path one moves along. Choosing a means to achieve a goal is choosing a path to a destination. Difficulties in life are impediments to motion. External events are large moving objects that can impede motion toward one's life goals. One's expected progress through life is charted in terms of a life schedule, which is conceptualized as a virtual traveler that one is expected to keep up with. (2007: 288)

Such interrelated clusters or systems are typical of conceptual metaphors. They seem natural to us due to their ubiquity and their grounding in basic human experiences or image schemas. It is hard to imagine a meaningful life that is 'not going anywhere', which means not pursuing a culturally acceptable goal. Failing to live up to society's or one's own expectations is a pervasive theme in all autobiographical writing and further complicated in illness narratives – such as cancer memoirs – where the achievement of goals is severely hampered by the impact of the disease.

A point that has not been stressed enough is the important difference between the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY and the various metaphorical linguistic expressions or 'entailments' that are all based on this single idea: e.g. "He's *without direction* in life" or "She's *gone through* a lot in life" (Kövecses 2010: 3). In traditional accounts of metaphorical meaning, these surface structures would have been described as metaphorical, not the underlying concepts: "The word metaphor has come to mean a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system. The term metaphorical expression refers to a linguistic expression (a word, phrase, or sentence) that is the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping (this is what the word metaphor referred to in the old theory)" (Lakoff 2007: 267–8).

Conceptual metaphors, along with conceptual metonymies, play a significant role in comics narratives, as Kövecses argues, as they "are often depicted in a 'literal' way" (2010: 64; see also Lakoff 2007: 306), which means that abstract ideas, thoughts or emotions are externalised and literalised by visualising the image schemas on which they are based. Elisabeth El Refaie adds that in "contrast to the verbal mode, in which even the most abstract concept can, in theory, be given a verbal label, the depiction of an abstract entity in the visual mode is utterly impossible without the mediation of metaphors" (2003: 91). That explains why, for example, in an autobiographical comic the emotional toll of chronic illness has to be 'translated' into visual terms to make it accessible to readers (cf. El Refaie 2014: 153, 157). In the case of depression "the most common images representing the experience" are "darkness, descent, a heavy burden, or being

trapped in a tight space. The process of recovery is typically framed in terms of a battle or journey” (2014: 150).

This general principle is integral to all of conceptual metaphor theory: “we typically conceptualize the nonphysical *in terms of* the physical – that is, we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 59; see also 105, 109, 112, 115, 248; Kövecses 2010: 7, 77). Since spatial orientation and physical interaction with objects play such an important role in embodied cognition, a lot of these basic structures become mapped through metaphors onto more complex conceptualisations: “The Invariance Principle hypothesizes that image-schema structure is always preserved by metaphor. The Invariance Principle raises the possibility that a great many, if not all, abstract inferences are actually metaphorical versions of spatial inferences that are inherent in the topological structure of image-schemas” (Lakoff 2007: 280).

To illustrate this point, let us consider how J.R.R. Tolkien introduces Sméagol/Gollum in the second chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, where a high-low, up-down orientation serves as the basis for a complex metaphorical network developed throughout the books:

There was among them a family of high repute, for it was large and wealthier than most, and it was ruled by a grandmother of the folk, stern and wise in old lore, such as they had. The most inquisitive and curious-minded of that family was called Sméagol. He was interested in roots and beginnings; he dived into deep pools; he burrowed under trees and growing plants; he tunnelled into green mounds; and he ceased to look up at the hill-tops, or the leaves on the trees, or the flowers opening in the air: his head and his eyes were downward. (Tolkien 1989: 66)

Sméagol/Gollum has a scientific mind in the tradition of *Frankenstein* or *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, two novels that heavily rely on the same metaphorical network of ‘high repute’, hubris, baseness and downfall. Here is how Victor Frankenstein describes his despicable acts: “the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places” (Shelley 2012: 33). On top of that, we have Christianity, which is heavily invested in the same issues and adds light vs. dark and life/creation vs. death/necromancy to the network. It is no coincidence that the ‘new life’ that the villains of these novels create is based on the corruption and degradation of God’s creation: Frankenstein raises the dead, Jekyll corrupts himself, Sauron bends elves into goblins. The main point of this argument, however, is that cultures, religions and works of art employ overlapping conceptual systems based on image schemas and primary metaphors.

These primary metaphors are potentially universal, as “the major orientations up-down, in-out, central-peripheral, active-passive, etc., seem to cut across all cultures” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 24). However, they immediately become the basis for more complex metaphorical mappings, which means that cultures have a significant impact on metaphorical thinking: “The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (2003: 22; see also 14). These “partly depend on the physical environments they have developed in” (2003: 146; see also Kövecses 2010: 219), as the conceptual systems develop out of embodied cognition. Most importantly, cultures are not aware of their conceptual foundations and basic metaphors, as they are ubiquitous, deeply ingrained and seemingly natural.

That we conceive of the mind as a machine or of the visual field as a container, is something we do not realise any longer. “Ontological metaphors like these are so natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena” (2003: 28). By speaking about one thing in terms of another (e.g. *TIME IS MONEY*), we begin to “understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered” (2003: 8). This is so ingrained in our thought processes that we do not realise that this is just one way of looking at time. System 1, of course, operates with such preconceptions all the time: “This knowledge is largely unconscious, and it is only for the purposes of analysis that we bring the mappings into awareness” (Kövecses 2010: 10; see also 72). Cultural studies, critical media literacy and several other academic/educational approaches are premised on the insight that “the way we have been brought up to perceive our world is not the only way and that it is possible to see beyond the ‘truths’ of our culture” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 239). This returns us to Victor Turner’s description of the rites of passage he witnessed among the Ndembu (cf. 1972: 93–111), which are an interesting example of questioning the fundamental beliefs and metaphors a culture’s thinking is based on. Literature, as Viktor Shklovsky argues (cf. 1998), attempts something similar by ‘enstranging’ the familiar.

All of this metaphorical work is ultimately aimed at making sense of the chaotic, unknowable and fluid reality we have to face: “Human purposes typically require us to impose artificial boundaries that make physical phenomena discrete just as we are: entities bounded by a surface” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 25). We have to reduce or expand the scale of everything to match the human sphere of experience, as we can only grasp what is accessible to us in concrete terms (cf. 2003: 34). This requires, for example, personification (cf. 2003: 33–4) to introduce active agents where there are none, e.g. in the case of cancer, to make

the conceptual metaphor *EVENTS ARE ACTIONS* work (cf. Kövecses 2010: 56). Since causal relationships are fundamental to our thinking, their absence is so unbearable to us that we rather invent entities that are the source of inexplicable occurrences instead of accepting that the universe produces unforeseeable, random events. This way, the weather and its phenomena, illnesses, abstract concepts, inanimate objects etc. become personified and endowed with human qualities, so that they can perform intentional actions.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that conceptual metaphors are not tied to language alone, but to all modes of perception and expression (cf. Kövecses 2010: 12; see also 63). In this context, the role of art is said to “provide new ways of structuring our experience in terms of these natural dimensions. Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 235). These “*emergent metaphors* and *emergent concepts*” (2003: 58) are significant, as they allow for new experiences to be generated by bringing frames together that produce tensions and gaps. This mirrors Iser’s concept of meaning-making during reading, but extends it to multimodal texts, such as comics.

Since emotions play such a central role in aesthetic reading, it seems appropriate to finish this overview with a look at how they can be conceptualised and rationalised with the help of cognitive linguistics. The mechanism is exactly the same as with other abstract notions: they are “primarily understood by means of conceptual metaphors” (Kövecses 2010: 23; see also 380). Physical experiences (e.g. states, motions, orientations), but especially the vast field of force dynamics (cf. Kövecses 2007: 383), help us to make sense of their elusive qualities. Kövecses argues that there is a “master metaphor” (2007: 385) that provides structure and coherence to more specific conceptual metaphors: *EMOTIONS ARE NATURAL/PHYSICAL FORCES*. If we take anger as an example, the idea that *ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER* is a more specific variant of this basic principle. It also illustrates the fact that “heat-related words account for a large portion of all the expressions that are used to talk about anger in present-day English” (2007: 394). Cognitive linguists observe that this is not a coincidence, but directly related to embodied cognition: “we subjectively experience our bodies as containers, we have the experience of a fluid inside the body, we experience heat or lack of heat in certain parts of the body, we also feel pressure when angry, and so on” (Kövecses 2010: 126). In this sense, conceptual metaphors are tied to a “folk model of emotion” that includes observations about “certain physiological effects. Thus, anger can be said to result in increased subjective body heat” (2010: 184) and “is grounded in the experience that the angry person feels ‘hot’” (2010: 81). Since our episodic memory stores emotions together with embodied experiences, we can easily relate postures etc. to certain emotions through metonymy, which

means that “emotions can be, and are, comprehended via both their assumed typical causes and their assumed typical effects”, e.g. “*shame is a decrease in size*” (Kövecses 2007: 386). These are metonymical relationships in that a body posture, which is closely associated with a feeling, stands in *for* the feeling itself, although it is an effect *of* the feeling. This way, metonymies can be understood as the source of many metaphorical expressions, as the physical responses – e.g. perceived heat – then become the basis for metaphors, e.g. boiling with anger (cf. 2007: 382). These conceptual metaphors and metonymies are so ubiquitous and conventionalised in cartooning and comics that body postures as expressions of feelings are practically ‘lexicalised’ in the language of comics. Next to metaphor and metonymy, cultural models and related concepts (cf. 2007: 380), which are ideas about love, marriage, friendship etc., have an equally important influence, which, despite a shared physiological basis, makes emotion metaphors slightly different from one culture to the next.

### 3.5.3 Metonymies

It is now time to address the role of conceptual metonymies more systematically. Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövecses argue that “metonymy, like metaphor, is part of our everyday way of thinking, is grounded in our experience, is subject to general and systematic principles, and structures our thoughts and actions” (2007: 335). In contrast to metaphor, it is a “cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model” (2007: 336). Some metonymies are so entrenched that, for example, using the place instead of the institution – “The White House” for the administration of the United States, “Buckingham Palace” for the Royal Family, “Downing Street” for the British government or “Wall Street” for the financial sector in NYC (cf. Lakoff 1990: 77–8) – has become completely natural. We find entrenched metonymic relations in all conceptual categorisations and ICMs; otherwise, the instant activation of related terms would not be possible. The power of metonymy lies in activating the whole context by using a single element as a trigger.

This explains why Klaus-Uwe Panther and Linda L. Thornburg speak of a “substitution theory” (2007: 237) in the sense that metonymy represents a ‘stand for’ relation and “a predominantly referential shift phenomenon within one cognitive domain” (2007: 238). This means that metonymy can be very effective in providing an entry point to a whole domain, as it “is referential in nature: it relates to the use of expressions to ‘pinpoint’ entities in order to talk about them” (Evans & Green 2006: 311; see also 312, 315; Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 36). The meaning

of the source loses most of its significance and the metonymy becomes an index that points out and foregrounds something else (cf. Panther & Thornburg 2007: 242). If, for example, a character in a film wears a white (lab) coat, the costume draws little attention to itself, but identifies the wearer as a member of the medical profession. The functional utility of the coat, its original meaning and purpose, is not relevant at all. A relationship of metonymy, contiguity and proximity turns signs into conventionalised attributes of the person they are associated with. In visual narrative media, and in comics in particular, this is frequently used to express emotions or thoughts through conceptual metonymies by having the concrete stand in for the abstract, such as the physical effects for the feelings that produced them. Nervousness can be indicated through sweat drops, for example, which does not mean that the character is literally sweating in a scene. We know that this is a metonymy because the sweat drops stand for nervousness, whereas a metaphor would mean that we understand nervousness in terms of sweat, which does not make sense in this context (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 311). From personal experience we are familiar with the biological fact that a tense situation is likely to cause physical responses, such as increased transpiration, which means that cause and effect belong to the same idealized cognitive model (ICM) (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 312). Comics use metonymy as a convenient shorthand that allows for the representation of complex subject matters via radically reduced visual signs.

To illustrate the ubiquity of conceptual metonymies in everyday conversations, I would like to discuss the example 'I speak English' (cf. Radden & Kövecses 2007: 342), which seems so familiar that we do not question it any longer. That we accept this sentence as meaningful is rather astounding, as every one of its constituent elements raises questions. All three words, 'I', 'speak' and 'English', have a metonymic relation to the heterogeneous experiences that they 'stand for'. For a non-native speaker of English who lives in a German-speaking country the 'I did not speak English (well enough) for a very long time to warrant that claim and then only under very specific circumstances, e.g. as a teacher, as a tourist etc. The 'English' I spoke as a ten-year old was very different from the English I used in grammar school, during my year abroad twenty years ago, and the English I speak in class today etc. So both 'I' and 'English' stand in as wholes for the more specific parts they refer to. This is the GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC metonymy like "*Boys don't cry*" (Radden & Kövecses 2007: 343), which we usually call a 'generalisation'.

There are further metonymies present: 'speaking' may be the signature skill of language learning, but it has to stand in for a substantial range of knowledge structures, skills and competences that are necessary, but only implied

here, at best. It also expresses an ability or potential, something I could do, as a fact by foregrounding the active skill that best proves that the sentence is true, which is being able to speak rather than being able to read. The truth value of this statement cannot be expressed through modal verbs, which would immediately raise doubts: I could speak English. This is based on the ACTUAL FOR POTENTIAL or IMMEDIATE OVER NON-IMMEDIATE metonymies that also apply to constructions like “He is very helpful” (cf. Radden & Kövecses 2007: 343). In all these examples, what is expressed as a claim about the present – without providing any direct proof – relies on past events which become blended into a generic, highly underspecified statement that provides clues hinting at richer contexts of meaning, but do not mean a lot in and of themselves.

A similar thing happens when we identify our cars in a car park or ourselves in a group photo by stating: “That’s me!” We are not aware that this is a conceptual metonymy and that it requires a somewhat broad understanding of our personal identities that include tools and visual representations. In the second case, it is easier to find a rational explanation why we are willing to identify people via their faces: “We derive the basic information about a person from the person’s face. The conceptual metonymy THE FACE FOR THE PERSON is part of our everyday way of thinking about people” (Radden & Kövecses 2007: 335). This is not only relevant in terms of personal identification and daily conversations, but also to the ways in which visual narrative media grant access to characters’ inner states through facial expressions. “From a semiotic perspective, metonymy is related to indexicality” (Panther & Thornburg 2007: 242) in that it functions as a pointer to otherwise inaccessible contexts.

Apart from such conceptual metonymies, Radden and Kövecses also include basic semiotic relationships, such as conventional signs and symbols, under the umbrella term of metonymy, although these links are arbitrary and culturally determined (cf. 2007: 338). Here it is hard to draw a line between elements that naturally or culturally co-occur, provided that the distinction is possible at all. Is it more natural to associate sails with boats than to link a company’s logo to its name and products? In both cases the two elements belong to the same ICM, which means that, cognitively, there is no difference. In the case of ‘\$’ or ‘dollar’ for ‘money’, “the form metonymically stands for the concept it denotes” (Radden & Kövecses 2007: 338). These signs and concepts, then, have a metonymic relationship to reality in the form of ‘reference metonymies’. This approach would make all of language metonymic, as it claims that both thought and language have a shared metonymic basis.

An interesting claim that Kövecses puts forward is that “many conceptual metaphors have a metonymic basis or motivation” (Kövecses 2010: 185). This



is another grey area in terms of how far one is willing to stretch the concept. If all of our knowledge is stored in frames/domains/ICMs and all the links within them are metonymic, then many conceptual metaphors – in their entrenched forms – could also be understood as metonymies, as they are not mapping structure between domains but are conceptually bound to the experience of a single domain. Considering that the feeling of anger often co-occurs with a red face, sweat, heat, pressure, a need to control oneself to avoid any regrettable actions etc., it is feasible to argue that they form a coherent experience and thus a single domain. The metaphor would cease to exist, as soon as the mappings become fully integrated into a single domain. That is why blending theory distinguishes between cognitive processes and their mental or material products.

### 3.5.4 Blending

The most comprehensive introduction to conceptual blending theory can be found in Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's *The Way We Think* (2003). It adheres to the same tenets as all strands of cognitive linguistics, especially in its reorientation away from surface linguistic expressions to concepts, and here again from conceptual spaces to their networked interrelations. As in cognitive semantics, the importance of language is reduced to that of prompts (cf. 2003: 142–3, 146–7, 183, 277, 360). A further sign of continuity is Fauconnier and Turner's integration of conceptual metaphors into blending theory as one of its four basic types (cf. 2003: 127). Evans and Green try to alleviate potential tensions between the proponents of both theories by claiming that they are, in fact, complementary (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 435) and may fulfil different functions. While in conceptual metaphor theory the focus has shifted to a diachronic exploration of how the vast system of metaphors has come into existence, relying on systematic rules and conventional domains, conceptual blending theory is more concerned with meaning-making as a creative act. This is not to imply that blending theory has nothing to say about fossilised integration networks or complex cultural blends, but that it lends itself more easily to a conceptualisation of reading as an ongoing cognitive process. This becomes apparent in blending theory's reliance on mental spaces. Fauconnier and Turner state that these "are built up dynamically in working memory, but they can also become entrenched in long-term memory. For example, frames are entrenched mental spaces that we can activate all at once" (2003: 103; see also Fauconnier 2007: 365). It is important to understand that most mental spaces are "the products of blending" (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 104) and may, in turn, be reactivated and rebled (cf. 2003: 24, 279), much in the same way

as Iser describes perpetual gestalt-forming. While there is a clear purpose and teleological drive in Iser's theory of reading, Fauconnier and Turner understand blending as a basic cognitive mechanism: "Conceptual work is never-ending" (2008: 61). They discuss four types, two of which we have already encountered.

Filling the slots in mental models is the first and most basic blending phenomenon, which Fauconnier and Turner call a 'simplex network' (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 120–2). Here we have two spaces, a frame with roles, such as a form, and elements/values that fit these roles, such as personal data. By filling in the form we create a blend between the generic and the specific. The structural frame of the first input space is inflexible and determines the selection from the second input space.

The second type of blending is a 'mirror network' (cf. 2003: 122–6), which operates with at least four mental spaces. The two new ones are the generic space and the blended space. The generic space serves as a schema or "template" (Evans & Green 2006: 406) that indicates what we are looking for across the input spaces. In this way, its organising frame "provides a topology" that "specifies the nature of the relevant activity, events, and participants" (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 123) across all mental spaces involved in the network (cf. 2003: 122). Such a blend is easy to establish as the things we are looking for mirror each other: "Elements in the generic space are mapped onto counterparts in each of the input spaces, which motivates the identification of cross-space counterparts in the input spaces" (Evans & Green 2006: 404). A simple example is the blending of repeated experiences with slight variations into a single frame – such as a morning routine. The generic frame provides some structure when we look for common patterns across several days. We ignore all the information that is irrelevant for this search (e.g. outdoor temperature, type of breakfast) and only focus on things in common, such as the typical location, average times and the usual sequence of activities. This explains how prototypes, templates and generic models are created in the first place, which in turn serve as structures for generic spaces in future blends (cf. 2003: 116).

The third type is called a 'single-scope network' (cf. 2003: 126–31) and corresponds to the mappings of conceptual metaphors (cf. 2003: 127). Both input spaces have separate and potentially contradictory organising frames, but only one of them is used to organise information in the other. Therefore, projection is unidirectional (cf. 2003: 126) and circumvents potential contradictions by highlighting similar structures and ignoring elements that do not fit. Still, one cannot fail to notice "a highly visible type of conceptual clash" (2003: 129), as the organising frame of the target space is strategically ignored. With the *TIME* IS *MONEY* metaphor, for example, only a select few structures are mapped from

'money' onto 'time', for which we have to ignore a lot of the specific characteristics of the latter to make the metaphor work. The generic space emerges through cross-space mappings between the inputs and guides this process in turn. The blend represents the metaphor as an active network between the input spaces.

Fauconnier and Turner refer to the fourth type as a 'double-scope network' (cf. 2003: 131–5), which can be considered as the most complex type of blending. In this configuration all input spaces contribute elements to the blend *and* project their organising frames: "A double-scope network has inputs with different (and often clashing) organizing frames as well as an organizing frame for the blend that includes parts of each of those frames and has emergent structure of its own. In such networks, both organizing frames make central contributions to the blend, and their sharp differences offer the possibility of rich clashes" (2003: 131). Double-scope blending is the unique human ability to overcome differences with a shared vision: "conceptual integration networks offer a way to see unity behind the diversity of particular manifestations of meaning constructions" (2003: 137). Like Iser's model, it involves a 'seeing together' that favours the correspondences over the divisive matter. The 'emergent structure' or meaning is unique to the blend and a result of integrating several mental spaces at once (cf. 2003: 42). Complex blends are preliminary and tentative at first and may require further input to work.

There are three processes that facilitate "the creation of new meaning in the blend" (2003: 20): (1) composition refers to the establishment of new relations, combinations and the integration of different aspects; (2) completion involves the activation of additional cognitive frames and input spaces to add further structure and background knowledge, mainly to stabilise the blend; (3) elaboration or dynamically 'running the blend' allows for the emergence of new meanings by thinking further along the lines that have been established (cf. Evans & Green 2006: 409–10). When the network 'gels', it leads to what Fauconnier and Turner call 'global insight' or – to be more precise – "the impression of global insight" (2003: 323). This is a personal eureka moment that may be based on a System 1 blend, a sudden realisation out of the blue, or the result of running the blend consciously for some time (System 2).

What we call inspiration, creativity or epiphany are usually emergent meanings in a double-scope blend: "The products of conceptual blending are always imaginative and creative" (2003: 6). According to conceptual blending theory, creativity is not the invention of completely new things, but the imaginative recombination or modification of existing material (cf. 2003: 146–7; Evans & Green 2006: 400–1). Global insight energises and illuminates the entire network. The input spaces are not replaced by the blend, but they may be transformed

in light of the new insights: “The integration of events in the blend is indexed to events in both of the input spaces. We know how to translate structure in the blend back to structure in the inputs. The blend is an integrated platform for organizing and developing those other spaces” (Fauconnier & Turner 2007: 377). This process is known as “backward projection” (Evans & Green 2006: 410; see also Fauconnier & Turner 2007: 366) and is conceptualised in the following way: “As we project to a blend, we are also working on the entire network, and we may, for instance, recruit new structure to the inputs precisely to make it available for possible projection to the blend. [...] Input formation, projection, completion, and elaboration all go on at the same time, and a lot of conceptual scaffolding goes up that we never see in the final result” (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 72; see also 94, 129). Since “the connections between the blend and the inputs remain active, applying imagination to the blend has consequences for the inputs” (2003: 60–1; see also 44), which means that spaces “can be modified at any moment in the construction of the integration network. For example, the inputs can be modified by reverse mapping from the blend” (2003: 49).

Fauconnier and Turner claim that blending does not represent an unusual phenomenon or that it only occurs in artistic production, but represents a standard, largely automated cognitive process: “human beings are exceptionally adept at integrating two extraordinarily different inputs to create new emergent structures, which result in new tools, new technologies, and new ways of thinking” (2003: 27; see also 317). To facilitate this ease of conceptual integration, “blending operates largely behind the scenes. We are not consciously aware of its hidden complexities, any more than we are consciously aware of the complexities of perception” (2003: v; see also 5, 12, 14, 18, 33–4, 71). Like Iser (cf. 1980) or Kahneman (cf. 2012), they argue that consistency-building is largely automatic, but that we are, of course, aware of “the products of blending” (2003: 391; see also 57, 78) and can ‘run the blend’ actively: “Nearly all important thinking takes place outside of consciousness and is not available on introspection; the mental feats we think of as the most impressive are trivial compared to everyday capacities; the imagination is always at work in ways that consciousness does not apprehend; consciousness can glimpse only a few vestiges of what the mind is doing” (2003: 33–4). However, relying on System 1 comes with its own problems, as we have already seen with Kahneman:

Composition, completion, and elaboration all recruit selectively from our most favored patterns of knowing and thinking. This makes blending a powerful cognitive instrument, but it also makes it highly subject to bias. Composition, completion, and elaboration operate for the most part automatically and below the horizon of conscious observation. This makes the detection of biases difficult. Seepage into the blend can

come from defaults, prototypes, category information, conventional scenarios, and any other routine knowledge. (Fauconnier & Turner 2007: 392)

Since social media and our own habits only provide us with inputs that do not require more than a mirror network, using our own prejudices for guidance in the generic space, so that we can easily identify and blend the patterns we already know and prefer, we desperately need the double-scope blending of a democratic debate in which each person gets to project his or her own organising frame to the blended space. This is why Werner Delanoy speaks of dialogue as the essence of teaching (cf. Delanoy 2002, 2008). Of course, this may lead to a “highly visible type of conceptual clash, since the inputs have different frames” (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 129), but classroom discussion, as I have argued before, is essential in our society to learn how to co-create meaning through interaction. Teachers have to understand that their attempts at single-scope blending, for which one input space provides the organising frame for all the other input spaces (students), is not conducive to such an endeavour.

This has been an example of running an ad-hoc blend by bringing two distinct frames, conceptual blending theory and classroom discussions, together. The success or failure of such an attempt is determined by how appealing the emergent meaning of the blend is in contrast to the clash of structures, such as comparing mental processes to human interaction. Blends are never perfect and never finished. If the current state of this network is not appealing enough, we could run the blend a few more times and see if we can recruit structures from classroom discourse to illuminate how blending works. The important thing to realise here is that both Iser and Fauconnier/Turner claim that meaning-making works exactly like this: we keep at least two distinct input spaces in mind for mutual illumination and begin to see both in terms of each other.

We have already encountered double-scope networks, such as in Miall and Kuiken's theory of border-crossing and self-modifying feelings. Here the input spaces are, on the one hand, readers' memories, thoughts and feelings and, on the other, a character's unique circumstances (cf. Schneider 2012: 17). This leads to what Ted Cohen calls “imagining some third person, some new person, some blend of what I know of you and what I know of me” (1999: 402). Provided that new meaning emerges in the blend, self-modifying feelings have repercussions on the input spaces through “backward projection” (Evans & Green 2006: 410). Fauconnier and Turner speak of “the impression of global insight” (2003: 323), as the blend may also lead to wrong conclusions and the appropriation of characters. It is now easier to understand why some critics find the ‘metaphor of personal identification’ potentially problematic in the context of empathy. If

we understand the concept as a single-scope blend, it would mean that we project the organising frame of our own experiences onto the perceived life of a character, which would negate incongruous elements in favour of a harmonious blend, as we disregard specific circumstances that are incompatible with our own experiences. Since blending is usually a System 1 operation, the flow of reading can facilitate a superficial identification that makes us believe to be very close to a character and understand exactly how he or she feels. Or we conceptualise empathy as a double-scope blend, which I strongly suggest, but then there is no merging and complete identification. We still get the vital relations and emergent meanings – or ‘fresh feelings’, as Miall and Kuiken call the result – which affect both our understanding of the character and ourselves. At the same time, we are aware of the differences and see the undeniable importance of the text – the special insight – as resulting from a partial overlap or shared humanity rather than a perfect match of personalities. Since this is a very unusual context, I continue with a more relatable example.

Most personal computers still have a ‘desktop’, which is a computer interface that simulates an arrangement of typical office equipment, such as a calendar, a notepad, a wastepaper basket, folders, a calculator etc. as if they were spatially arranged on top of a desk (cf. 2003: 22–24, 131). Thus, a so-called desktop computer runs a simulation of the actual desktop on which it is placed, mainly to camouflage its alien presence and to make it more user-friendly. We have two input spaces with their own internal logic and organising frames: the domain of traditional office work and computers with their unique input devices, such as a keyboard and a mouse. The first frame provides familiar objects, but also typical activities: adding dates to calendars, taking notes, opening folders, looking for documents, throwing away stuff into the bin etc. In contrast, the computer requires the user to handle a mouse successfully (navigating, pointing, scrolling, clicking), to understand its organisational logic of ‘windows’, to navigate pop-up and pull-down menus, but also to click icons/buttons to get things done. When computers entered the workspace, all of this had nothing to do with the objects and activities in the other input space. The conceptual integration of these two frames required a lot of imagination. Importantly, the blend “is not the screen: The blend is an imaginative mental creation that lets us use the computer hardware and software effectively” (2003: 23). We still do office work, but in a novel way. We open folders by double-clicking them, we add files to folders by dragging one icon onto another instead of physically adding sheets of paper to a folder, we add notes or additional information to a document via a keyboard and save this new version over the previous one etc. There are, of course, also discordant elements – as with every double-scope blend – that we do not notice any

longer: the wastepaper basket sits on the desktop and has exactly the same size as all the other objects; all elements are aligned in horizontal and vertical lines; the content of folders is displayed as pop-up windows; and, most importantly of all, all these operations do not actually take place and none of the objects really exist. There are no calendars, photos, clocks, calculators, folders, desktops, notebooks, telephones etc. anywhere in the system. Since there is no physical desktop in the first place, nothing can be 'on' it. That all of this seems natural to us has a lot to do with the successful blends that are involved: as long as they work for us on a human scale, we are more than willing to live inside the blend. The mouse simulates a reaching of the hand, the double click opens the folder, the pop-up window equals the movement of bringing a sheet of paper closer to the eyes, the layout of text on the simulated page is made to look exactly like the real thing etc. In a line from hand writing to typewriters to desktop computers to tablets with styluses we find an ongoing attempt to create a perfect blend between two otherwise very different frames.

If blending is closely associated with the imagination and requires the active engagement of creative minds, the question arises whether blending could be too subjective, unpredictable and ephemeral. However, blends have already proven their worth in the form of scientific theories, religions, works of art, cultural artifacts, rituals and physical objects: "Cultures work hard to develop integration resources that can then be handed on with relative ease" (2003: 72; see also 321), which means that "cultural concepts are the products of successive blending over generations" (2003: 295). A second answer has to do with the cognitive operation of blending itself, which is far less obscure than Iser's gestalt-forming: "conceptual blending is a general, basic mental operation with highly elaborate dynamic principles and governing constraints" (2003: 37; see also 17, 29, 168). Any type of map or timeline, for example, from (human) evolution to world history, is a blend that compresses vast amounts of data into a simple list or drawing that fits onto a book page and can be comprehended in a fairly short amount of time.

There are a number of elements – or vital relations – that regularly become compressed in blends: time, space, identity, cause-effect, part-whole (metonymy), change, representation, role-value, analogy, property, (dis)analogy, similarity, category and intentionality (EVENTS ARE ACTIONS) (cf. 2003: 93–102). This sounds more complicated than it is, which can be illustrated with a simple example: the evolution of human beings has involved millions of individuals over millions of years, but when we watch a documentary on TV, we see one individual transform from what looks like an ape into a modern human individual in about a minute through computer animation. This is what Fauconnier and Turner call compression into uniqueness: millions of individuals become one

being, millions of years one minute, and a variety of locations all across the globe a single generic setting. In conceptual integration theory this is a “compression of ‘outer-space’ links into ‘inner-space’ relations under blending” (2003: 93). In other words: the numerous cross-space mappings, which are ‘outer-space’ from the point of view of the input spaces, become condensed into a single relation within the blended space itself. This is important, as we can store and retrieve coherent frames as single units – especially when they follow the subgoals of compression that Fauconnier and Turner have defined: “Compress what is diffuse. Obtain global insight. Strengthen vital relations. Come up with a story. Go from Many to One” (2003: 312).

This simplification of and disregard for elements that do not fit come with their own problems, but unfortunately we live by these metaphors and blends, no matter if we want to or not: “Human beings are evolved and culturally supported to deal with reality at human scale – that is, through direct action and perception inside familiar frames, typically involving few participants and direct intentionality” (2003: 322; see also 324). Through scaling, the shortening of time (syncopation), monocausal explanations, the *EVENTS ARE ACTIONS* metaphor and quick, dramatic changes, a real human life can become a hagiographic text, for example: “We can compress a lifetime not only by scaling it to run very fast but also by dropping out all but a few key moments (being born, meeting Christ, being shot through with arrows, going to heaven). Scaling and syncopation often work together” (2003: 314).

The Gothic cathedral is a great example of how a complex doctrine was literalised and materialised in the form of a building and turned into an experience for a largely illiterate group of church-goers (cf. 2003: 207–10). Based on perpetual blending, the Church was able to compress, for example, narratives from the Bible into single paintings, hagiographies into statues, the relationship of the congregation with God into architecture etc. These serve as material anchors (cf. Keen 2010: 67; Kövecses 2010: 279–81; Oatley 2013: 452) or encapsulated blends, as it were, that help to decompress the elaborate narratives on which they are based, activating the corresponding frames through metonymy. The rosary is another good example, as it compresses a very long chain of interconnected prayers into a physical chain with wooden beads that serves as a mnemonic device. However, there are also countless material anchors without a religious context, such as maps, rings or watches (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 195–8, 332) that are equally successful. Edwin Hutchins argues that the “ability to combine conceptual structure with material structure is a key cognitive strategy” (2005: 1556), which also extends to social practices, such as queuing:



Consider a line of people queuing for theatre tickets. This cultural practice creates a spatial memory for the order of arrival of clients. The participants use their own bodies and the locations of their bodies in space to encode order relations. The gestalt principle of linearity makes the line configuration perceptually salient. Our perceptual systems have a natural bias to find line-like structure. But seeing a line is not sufficient to make a queue. Not all lines are queues. Soldiers standing at attention in formation form a line, but not a queue. In order to see a line as a queue, one must project conceptual structure onto the line. (2005: 1559)

In this sense, a “physical structure is not a material anchor because of some intrinsic quality, but because of the way it is used” (2005: 1562). Following this logic, it becomes obvious how the human mind seeks material crutches in the environment that constitute a far-reaching support network of which we are no longer aware. Some also believe that they can gain access to other people – dead or alive – by visiting places or handling objects that are associated with them, which explains all cultures of remembrance:

This use of space as a prompt to blend events, intentionality, and times is a basic cultural instrument: We visit the graves of dead relatives, heroes, and martyrs; we visit the towns where Vermeer and Shakespeare were born; we return to our alma mater; we go to chapels or churches to pray even when there is no service, and of course the graves are either in the floor of the church or in the graveyard next to the church. Part of the motivation for these visits is the sense that, if we actually inhabit them, we can more easily integrate our thinking and emotions with the people, cultures, and events associated with them, no matter how ancient. (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 316)

Fauconnier and Turner stress the fact that “we need always to keep in mind the distinction between the *operation* of conceptual blending and the *cultural products* of conceptual blending” (2003: 215). Both are based on the same principles, but cultural artefacts are successful blends that have become entrenched and materialised, whereas blending as a process is a standard cognitive operation. Androids as blends of humans and machines are interesting and highly successful material anchors in science fiction literature, as they allow us to think through our own humanity and identity. The function of narrative, in this case, is to decompress the blend and explore the structures that have not been projected from the inputs due to their incompatibility.

The same can be said about life writing. We tend to forget that our own identities are blends (cf. 2003: 118), which Fauconnier and Turner explain in the following manner:

Personal identity itself involves a diffuse network of mental spaces whose compression in the blend creates the unique person. Conceptually, a person is involved in mental spaces over many times and places, through many changes. All those spaces contribute

to a blend that has the single unique person. There is a physical material anchor for this conceptual blend – the active living biological body that we can see and with which we can interact. We can hear its voice, and it can hear ours. When the person dies, the conceptual network with the unique person persists for us, if not for the person. (2003: 205; see also 95)

This, of course, is going to be a major concern of part 5, together with material anchors. By blending our experiences with other people across different encounters, “we are able to extract regularities over different behaviors by the same person to build up a generic space for that person – a personal character” (2003: 251–2). This observation illustrates the difference between a narratological and an aesthetic approach to literature: narratologists are interested in the generic spaces of the framework and their mappings, whereas aesthetic reading looks at the input spaces and blends. This is not to deny that both exist within the same framework and contribute to reading in a meaningful way: generic spaces provide global structure and orientation, but the imaginative work of reading takes place somewhere else.

Despite the fact that conceptual integration theory (blending) was never intended to be understood as a theory of reading, its general principles and cognitive operations share a number of characteristics with reader-response criticism. Louise M. Rosenblatt’s book, for example, carries two ‘input spaces’ and the blend in the title: *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. In *Teaching Literature: Nine to Fourteen* Benton and Fox define four input spaces – the new reading text, previous literary experiences, personal experiences and world knowledge, which can be blended into a reader’s unique understanding of a text. Significantly, they describe conceptual integration as a form of creative work:

In the act of creating, what the reader brings to a story is as important as what the text offers in the sense that we fit the reading of a new story into the blend of our literary and life experiences to date, drawing upon our knowledge of other fictions as well as upon analogies in the primary world, in order to make our own, unique meaning. (1985: 5)

The idea of the reading text as an ‘input space’, however, has to be rejected for a number of reasons: it is too complex for a single frame, it exists outside of human cognition as a material object in the world and, following the logic of reader-response criticism, it is a mere ‘blueprint’ that requires a human mind’s active engagement with it. However, this third point also offers a solution as to how blending theory and reader-response criticism can be brought in line. Literary texts prompt the construction of tentative mental spaces – gestalten – that are already blends, as our first impressions of a character, for example, heavily depend on a whole range of previous experiences with literary texts,

our personal memories and knowledge about the world etc. Much more importantly, the narrative immediately starts to invite cross-space mappings and further blends. Iser calls these prompts “strategies” (1980: 96), which encourage blending by foregrounding structures that are relevant to the narrative’s stage of development and overarching themes. These correspondences between conceptual integration theory and reader-response criticism are addressed in the next chapter, especially because they have not been sufficiently acknowledged yet.

### 3.6 Blending & Literary Studies

There are at least two major publications that propose an application of blending theory to reading literature: Barbara Dancygier’s monograph *The Language of Stories* and Ralf Schneider and Marcus Hartner’s edited volume *Blending and the Study of Narrative*. Since the collection of essays covers a variety of media, narratological categories and specific case studies, I restrict my discussion to *The Language of Stories*. Looking at Dancygier’s general conceptualisation of reading, one is struck by literally dozens of passages that seem to be directly taken from either Wolfgang Iser or Louise M. Rosenblatt’s books. Here is Dancygier’s argument against the idea that the public meaning of a text can be arrived at through one specific approach: “while meaning is not entirely indeterminate, it is also not determinate. It is a perfectly natural reaction on the part of those engaged with various sources of interpretation to feel that someone arguing for a single interpretation is missing the point” (2012: 9). She goes on to argue that “there is an impressive number of possible readings of the story all dependent on how the reader (not the text) construes the spaces set up” (2012: 38), so that “whatever understanding a reader might acquire, it is not contained ‘in’ the story, but can only be arrived at through the interaction with it” (2012: 203). This is Rosenblatt’s transactional theory in a nutshell. Astonishingly, Dancygier neither read Iser’s *The Act of Reading* nor Rosenblatt’s *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, judging from the absence of both titles from the bibliography (cf. 2012: 216, 219). She does, however, list Iser’s *The Implied Reader* for one brief reference only (cf. 2012: 58, 216).

Such a noticeable disregard for reader-response criticism can be found across all recent cognitive approaches to literature. A laudable exception is Marco Caracciolo, who extensively credits Iser (cf. e.g. 2014: 12–13, 36, 64, 68, 77) and even traces his own approach back to John Dewey (cf. 2014: 22–4, 51, 72–90). One potential reason for this discontinuity could be the substantial backlash against Iser’s idiosyncratic conceptualisation of the reading process since the heyday of reader-response criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Maria Bortolussi

and Peter Dixon (cf. 2003: 5–7), for example, condemn what they understand as an “indulgence in circular logic, speculative hypothesis, capricious use of terminology, and monolithic views of reading experience” (Bortolussi & Dixon 2003: 6). Iser’s work is ultimately worthless, they imply, because his arguments are not based on empirical research:

Although Iser’s intuitive descriptions of the reading process provide some interesting insights, they remain purely speculative because his text-based approach offers no method of validating the hypotheses. Consequently, his theory sheds little light on what actually transpires in the mind of readers during the reading process. (Bortolussi & Dixon 2003: 7)

Whether narrative psychologists should have the last word on ‘what actually transpires in the mind of readers’ has already been answered. Instead of discrediting Iser, it may be worth acknowledging the ‘interesting insights’ that anticipated some of the central concepts of blending theory. What he referred to as an image or a gestalt, is now called a blend. His ‘retroactive effect’ corresponds to ‘backward projection’, which Dancygier explains by stating that “subsequent blends throughout the process affect the understanding of the inputs” (2012: 56). Here is Iser’s explanation of this phenomenon:

In most literary texts, however, the sequence of sentences is so structured that the correlates serve to modify and even frustrate the expectations they have aroused. In so doing, they automatically have a retroactive effect on what has already been read, which now appears quite different. Furthermore, what has been read shrinks in the memory to a foreshortened background, but it is being constantly evoked in a new context and so modified by new correlates that instigate a restructuring of past syntheses. (1980: 111)

Iser’s terminology (‘foreshortened background’, ‘correlates’ or ‘syntheses’) clearly describes blending phenomena, even if he did not have the means to explain them in such a systematic fashion as Fauconnier and Turner managed to do. His idea of gradual gestalt-forming is directly mirrored in Dancygier’s following argument: “Similar meaning construction processes occur in longer narratives. Frames and mental spaces structure inputs, which then become integrated, possibly in ways specific to a reader, into the emergent blend. The process continues throughout reading, until the complete blend of the story emerges” (2012: 35). Here is a similar description relating to the final gestalt, which provides superior closure:

A ‘story’ can thus be discussed as a cognitive construct, a blend, emerging through the process of meaning construction triggered by reading. The role of the text is crucial in providing such prompts, but the emergence of the story relies to a comparable degree on the frames evoked in the reader’s mind, and on the construction of double-scope blends,

integrated into the mega-blend. The story is the mega-blend arrived at in the interaction with the text. (2012: 56)

The following quotation explains Iser's theme-horizon structure: "All these are mental spaces, activated for the duration of this part of the conversation, and then becoming latent until evoked again" (2012: 35). Both theories rely on the cognitive management of several mental spaces at once that may become reactivated much later in the narrative. In part I I argued that Iser's theory of gestalt-forming transcends the linearity of the narrative and dismisses the idea that, at the end of the narrative, a mega-blend provides global insight. Dancygier comes to the same conclusion: "The process of reading is thus not simply linear and does not rely primarily on the accumulation of information. It is a multidimensional process, reaching across narrative spaces in different directions" (2012: 197). These cross-space mappings are encouraged by "referential links [that] may be established not only backwards and forwards in the flow of discourse, but also across spaces" (2012: 118). When Dancygier introduces her concept of 'narrative spaces,' which are the equivalents of mental spaces in the context of reading, she highlights the fact that they are developed throughout the reading process and are potentially relevant to all scenes:

A narrative space is thus a construct which is set up through linguistic means and continues being elaborated through some parts of the text (possibly all). It is also subsequently enriched through blending and gradually starts functioning in the network leading to an emergent story. In these respects it is thus similar to a mental space, which participates in extended discourse. What constitutes a crucial difference, however, is the nature of the discourse, since a narrative requires that its primary spaces be maintained and elaborated until the completion of the reading process, until their role in the text is fulfilled. (2012: 37)

In other words: the retrieval of episodic memories (previous scenes) from long-term memory, but also their re-evaluation and reblending play a much larger role. Literary texts use foregrounding very effectively to invite cross-space mappings between current blends and previously formed gestalten. Iser's "response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text" (1980: 34) become prompts in blending theory (cf. Dancygier 2012: 54) or 'narrative anchors' that provide metonymic ties to narrative spaces (cf. 2012: 49):

I argued that the fragmented nature of most narratives requires specific narrative mechanisms which provide coherence links across different narrative spaces. I defined narrative anchors as expressions which set up or suggest the availability of narrative spaces, but do not elaborate them right away. Such 'place-holders' may activate new narrative spaces and allow them to remain active, but the spaces are elaborated gradually as the text unfolds, and often contribute to the topology of other space constituting

the story. The second function of anchors is 'link-building'. The links they set up may prompt what I have called cross-input projection – spreading of topology from one input to another and building the coherence and completeness of the emergent story. (2012: 42)

This means that the “emerging complex referential networks” (2012: 117) offer many different ways of connecting the dots. These ‘dots’ are “narrative anchors” or “narratively salient expressions which rely metonymically on frames and exercise our representational abilities” (2012: 50). This may happen, for example, through “repetition of some of that information” (2012: 43). Dancygier provides an example from Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* that foregrounds how narrative anchoring can be strategically used by authors to invite specific types of cross-space mapping:

Another type of anchor consists in evocation and repeated re-activation. A mention of Alex as wearing a blue, worker’s shirt but smoking ready-made cigarettes is a salient descriptive detail, and its reactivation in a different narrative space prompts the cross-input projection linking Alex to ‘him’ and making this cross-space identity available in both spaces. This type of anchoring relies as much on the reader’s attentiveness and memory as on the salience of the frames thus constructed and on the sheer number of anchors establishing and reestablishing the same cross-input links. Crucially, such anchors not only link the spaces, but also prompt projections of topology from input to input (narrative space to narrative space). (2012: 44)

This is why Michael Benton promotes the conceptual metaphor READERS ARE DETECTIVES (cf. 1992: 44). If meaning-making in reader-response criticism and blending are essentially the same mental operations, it should not be surprising that the role of readers is conceptualised in similar terms. For comics as a narrative medium it is crucial that “anchors may also be images which form an entire network of concepts and jointly give meaning to an abstract and difficult text” (Dancygier 2012: 43), which is going to be a major point in the next part, where Thierry Groensteen’s ‘braiding’ or ‘*tressage*’ (cf. Groensteen 2007: 145–9) – the comics term for this phenomenon – is still underestimated in favour of Scott McCloud’s strict linearity.

This brief comparison should serve as further proof that there are too many similarities between reader-response criticism and conceptual integration theory to speak of a coincidence. I would even claim that Dancygier’s approach is an updated version of reader-response criticism with a better theoretical basis and a clearer concept of how to conceptualise reading in progressive stages. Her tentative, exploratory approach is compatible with aesthetic reading, but not with data mining and narratological analysis. Blending theory is interested in meaningful links between spaces rather than in detailed lists of what they contain.

While the associations and potential links often appear out of nowhere – they are generated by System 1 – we can ‘run the blend’ consciously and see how far it takes us. Contrary to the right/wrong and relevant/irrelevant dichotomies of efferent reading, blends are never perfect. They are tentative projections of what is happening in a narrative, which always means sacrificing details that do not fit into one particular reading of a text. Yet, the emergent meaning in the blended space may be intriguing enough and, as long as readers can run with it, they are bound to do exactly that. A blend/gestalt is something on which readers actively work, but it can never be the same for everyone, perfect or complete. For the remainder of this chapter the focus shifts to key ideas in Dancygier’s approach that are either only partly addressed in reader-response criticism or not at all. These include ‘compression’ and ‘decompression’ as artistic choices and their interplay with the same processes performed by readers, her theory of focalisation and viewpoint compression, her interest in enactivism and the accompanying criticism of Theory of Mind, the impact of multimodality on blending and, finally, ‘fictive vision’.

Up to this point, we have mainly looked at blending as a meaning-making process that compresses several input spaces into a single blended space. However, most of the mental spaces we operate with on a daily basis are already frames: complex networks that can be retrieved all at once. This is especially true of literature, where writers/creators may rely on their readers’ ability to handle such blends with ease. At the same time, they may choose to decompress complex structures to allow readers to discover the connections for themselves. Accordingly, Dancygier speaks of these two processes as artistic choices and narrative strategies. The first is familiar from reader-response criticism. Here is John Dewey’s explanation again: “For art is a selection of what is significant, with rejection by the very same impulse of what is irrelevant, and thereby the significant is compressed and intensified” (2005: 217; see also 305). Iser equally talks about selection in the context of the repertoire (cf. 1980: 82; see also 109), which makes the selected elements to stand out and become “highly determinate” (1980: 85). When Dancygier describes the “crucial effect emerging out of the compression”, she stresses the artistic control over the material that leads to “an enhancement of the central themes and increased salience” (2012: 59). Since compression is crucial to blending, Dancygier argues that it “will affect all aspects of the narrative – time, viewpoint, characterization” (2012: 59). However, intense compression runs counter to the idea that readers can vicariously experience a character’s life as it unfolds in meaningful scenes and interactions with other characters. This is especially relevant in the context of autobiographical writing, where the authors begin their journey of self-exploration with mega-blends on which they

have been working for many years. These have to be decompressed first to allow for more accessibility and subtlety:

One's sense of uniqueness is a result of a highly compressed blend, but it is natural to decompress that whole when need arises, if only to be able to recognize the changes that inevitably occur. Decompression is thus the flip side of compression in that our need to achieve a holistic understanding of complex phenomena has sometimes to give in to the need to appreciate their inner complexity. (2012: 100)

Autobiographers have to 'unpack' their lives before the writing process begins, which usually requires them to take out the storage boxes and photo albums where the material anchors can be found. These may reveal details that were lost due to blending phenomena many years ago. Especially the self – the 'I' of autobiographical writing – has to be decompressed into various avatars and versions of the self that are likely to speak and act in sometimes radically different ways. The same applies to compromises or important decisions, which were preceded by conflicting points of view, which now have to be reconstructed to unravel their dramatic potential (cf. Dancygier 2005: 120). Writers may have a strong sense of the final blend, their present-day identities, but these have to be arrived at in a roundabout way: otherwise readers may consider these lives too streamlined and arranged (e.g. in the case of a hagiography), with all the elements carefully selected, sequenced and foregrounded in a strongly teleological manner. Yet, without a strong sense of identity, the autobiographical text would fall apart: "Compressing various images of ourselves along the dimensions of Time, Change, Cause-Effect, or Representation allows us to recognize the same person in a photograph of a five-year-old, in a valentine card written by a teenager to his sweetheart, and in a résumé attached to a job application" (2005: 102). It is indeed a difficult balancing act for autobiographers to find a meaningful compromise between compression and decompression and make their lives appear as a natural progression with emotional depth, despite the fact that they are heavily mediated and arranged.

To offer another example of compression from a semi-autobiographical text, I quote Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the second paragraph of chapter 1: "I really *did* go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground" (1991: 1). The last sentence is a great example of compression on a number of levels. The Dresden of WW II, of 1967 and the narrative's present-day Dresden become blended, as do the three time periods. For the traumatised narrator 13 February 1945 exists in the present, which explains his observation that tons of human bone meal must



be underneath his feet, which cannot be true in a literal sense. There is an immediacy and urgency to this statement that indicates that the narrator's various war memories have become compressed into a single image of victimisation. Thus, narrative compression condenses experiences and feelings, it intensifies through selection and concentration. First-time readers may not know what to do with this statement or read it as some ominous foreshadowing. An intelligent way of building redundancy into a narrative is to work on the central themes at different levels of compression, not necessarily in the order of growing complexity. While the basic aim of reading is to integrate the particulars into more and more involved concepts and networks of meaning, blends triggered by literary texts may also require readers to unpack or decompress them. A successful blend maintains vital relations with its input spaces or, to put it in simpler terms, retains traces of its history. Like a modern-day city, the complexity of the present configuration reveals traces of the past and offers visitors different access points to explore its hidden structures.

Dancygier ascribes the narrator the role of the puppet master who is firmly in control of every aspect of the narrative: "The intentionality is crucial in that the very act of storytelling assumes the intention to use the story in its proposed form to communicate some content, even if various forms of narrative experimentation disrupt the impression of consistency and purpose" (2012: 59). She locates the narrator in an extradiegetic space that serves as a reference point for the various perspectives presented in the text: "The narrator is assigned to an independent space (story-viewpoint space; SV-space), which has the entire story in its scope. The story itself is contained in the main narrative space (MN-space), which consists of a number of narrative spaces (NS)" (2012: 38). Iser insists that the perspective of the narrator should not be confused with the meaning of the text (cf. 1980: 35), but Dancygier is very tempted to privilege the storyteller's role and associates the final gestalt or 'mega-blend' with his or her perspective. Even if we replaced the narrator with the 'implied author', readers' successful transactions with a text always transgresses the response a writer attempts to trigger through textual strategies.

Instead of narration, Dancygier's approach is better suited to solve the problem of focalisation in autobiographical writing, where readers face a discrepancy between the narrator as the focaliser of the entire narrative and the various younger, experiencing selves with their own theories of the world and viewpoints. Her take on the coordination of perspectives seems more appropriate for this genre or traditional third-person novels than literature in general:

It is natural to assume that giving unmediated voice to characters constitutes some kind of stepping back on part of the narrator, a temporary yielding of the story viewpoint to a character. But there are reasons not to accept such an interpretation, since it would mean that characters' discourse is beyond the scope of the SV-space, and, more important, that narrative fiction changes viewpoint levels all the time, without any mechanism ensuring the coherence which allows us to see how individual instances of direct speech are incorporated into higher narrative levels, including the MN-space. Such an explanation in general terms seems to be offered by the concept of viewpoint compression, as elaborated throughout this book. (2012: 141)

Since Dancygier understands reading as blending, she has to argue in favour of a process through which different viewpoints become compressed into a single vision (synopsis): "viewpoint compression is a blending mechanism which attempts to account for the fact that zillions of low-level facts, observations, or thoughts are compressed into more manageable viewpoint spaces and used in the processing of the narrative as a whole" (2012: 112). Since a translinear concept of meaning-making requires readers to recall and work with several narrative spaces at the same time, these have to be stored in compressed form to make them readily available.

The co-presence of external focalisation, which is tied to the narrator, and internal focalisation, such as a character's perspective, is ubiquitous in the case of autobiographical comics, where the default setting is multiple and multimodal instances of focalisation: first-person verbal narration in text boxes, a (neutral) third-person visual point of view (cf. Mikkonen 2015: 106), a character's direct speech and another character's reaction, visualised through body language or verbalised in a speech or thought balloon, all within the same panel, is the norm rather than the exception. Kai Mikkonen speaks of "split verbal focalisation" (Mikkonen 2015: 103; see also Mikkonen 2008: 313) when the verbal narrator and a character express their points of view at the same time. In view of this complex layering of perspectives (cf. Mikkonen 2015: 106), Dancygier argues that we do not keep them separate throughout the narrative, but compress the viewpoints into a single meaning, which she ultimately associates with the narrator: "the multiplicity of viewpoints in narrative discourse is conceptually manageable because of a series of compressions bringing micro-level viewpoint up to the macro level of narrative spaces" (2012: 97; see also 67, 71–2). While a detailed narratological study of focalisation would introduce endless levels of complexity (cf. Zunshine 2006), readers easily manage to follow a scene, which means that they can keep track of whose points of view have been represented, but understand how the scene plays out as a unified whole. What is complicated to describe in terms of classical narratology, may be significantly easier to read.

Dancygier's approach is clearly in line with enactivism and embodied cognition, which means that we learn to read and interact with others through direct encounters (cf. 2012: 112–6). She even states that the elaborate theories of Theory of Mind (ToM) are “an impediment rather than an aid to narrative comprehension” (2012: 112), as “the intersubjective (or ToM) skills develop in the process of understanding actions in context, and not in attempts to get into people's heads” (2012: 114). She extends her criticism to the centrality of time in classical narratology and the meticulous reconstruction of the chronological order of events:

But in real situations we only follow the sequence to the degree to which we experience the events ourselves or are exposed to their results. Temporal sequence is rarely relevant to our understanding of events, but knowing their consequences is crucial. The sequence is a questionable criterion even in the most sequential of stories, but epistemic stance and understanding of causation seem to matter much more . . . (2012: 55)

By isolating the constituents of the story world and tracing their development across the entire narrative, narratologists tend to divorce them from their particular functions in specific configurations. Time *can* be an important element in the causal reconstruction of events, but otherwise readers are happy with the most basic and general orientation (cf. Emmott 2004: 47).

Marie-Laure Ryan, one of the leading transmedial narratologists, wrote an interesting essay for David Herman's edited volume, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, in which she discusses the importance of spatial orientation to readers' experience of a narrative and whether it is true that readers build mental models of the environments described in fiction. She quotes Herman as one of the leading proponents of the idea that readers reconstruct the story world, including spatial configurations (Ryan 2003: 215), only to argue against this notion for the rest of the text. Choosing Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as her main example, she starts her exploration with the following statement: “It takes a specific agenda – such as the present project – to attempt the systematic reconstruction of the ‘textually correct’ map of a fictional world. It was only on my third reading of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* that I reached what I hope is a reasonably complete and accurate representation of the topography of the novel” (2003: 217–8). To come close to anything resembling the “model reader” or “super-reader” (2003: 218) of the novel, she had to work exceptionally hard and “perform several corrections” (2003: 218; see also 237). The problem with a detailed reconstruction of this particular map is the way the relevant information is scattered across the whole narrative (cf. 2003: 219–21) and directly impedes systematic spatial orientation. At the same time, Ryan felt the need to rise to the challenge and fill in the gaps: “The famed incompleteness

of texts and the need to fill in informational gaps to reach a coherent interpretation is particularly acute when one tries to translate textual information into mental models of space, and these mental models into visual representations. A graphic map after all is not a cognitive map, but only the more or less faithful image of a cognitive map” (2003: 222). It is interesting that she assumes that a coherent interpretation has to involve topography, which, in this case, is obviously impossible for a highly trained reader like herself without marking all relevant data in the text, drawing numerous maps, cross-referencing the latest version with the book and repeating the process over and over again. Ryan asked a group of high school students to draw a map of the town after working on the novel for about three weeks and the results turned out exactly as one might expect: students developed very different map styles (e.g. tracing characters’ movements, sacrificing accuracy in favour of symbolic representations, adding illustrations or plot details), which demonstrates readers’ creativity and their unique approaches to literary texts more than anything else (cf. 2003: 228–30). Ryan draws the following conclusion: “The reader may thus be perfectly able to imagine the story’s main episodes without precisely situating each event on a global map” (2003: 235). The students were able to successfully and meaningfully discuss a novel of whose topography they only had a vague idea. This is possible, as Ryan suggests, when we acknowledge that readers are more concerned with the characters and their experiences than anything else in narrative fiction (cf. 2003: 236). While readers expect character arcs and trace them throughout the text, they are more reluctant to part with largely insufficient first impressions of a location: “I would like to speculate that once the map has been mentally sketched, it will be relatively resistant to new input or modifications. When new information conflicts with the reader’s mental model of space, it is easier to concentrate on the visualization of the current scene, and ignore the discrepancy, than to reorganize the whole map” (2003: 237). This serves as another reminder, much in line with Dancygier’s arguments, that the detailed narratological study of isolated elements is far removed from the experience of readers.

Since cognitive linguists claim that metaphorical thinking and conceptual integration are basic mental operations that do not necessarily require verbalisation, all of the theories presented so far also apply to other modes and multi-modal narratives in equal measure:

The blend is characterized by its own structure (emergent structure), but can then become an input to another blend, or series of blends. While blending can account for ongoing processes of meaning construction (as in following the course of a conversation or reading a comic strip and accumulating content until the joke gels in the final frame), they can also become entrenched as new expressions, such as compounds or idioms.

Blending also accounts naturally for multimodal contexts, where visual, linguistic, and aural prompts work in combination, as in film. (Dancygier 2012: 32)

As a consequence, narration as an analytical category becomes divorced from the idea that it has to be verbal. This is another important departure from classical narratology and aligns conceptual integration theory with transmedial narratology, where this is a basic premise. Here is Dancygier's rationalisation:

... while language is naturally treated as the basic environment in which stories exist, it is not indispensable to narrativity, since a story can be 'told' through visual means. The concepts required for a narrative to emerge (sequentiality, causation, chunks of experience, cultural framing of such chunks, image-schematic force-gestalts of conflict and restored balance, et cetera) are the same concepts which are required for other language conceptualizations to emerge, so we should perhaps advocate a stronger claim, such that narrative form relies on a specific cluster of such concepts. (2012: 28)

In the context of aesthetic reading and reader-response criticism the only meaningful question is, of course, whether readers experience a text as a narrative or not. At the same time, the way that a narrative invites conceptual integration is equally relevant. While Dancygier associates the overall artistic unity, vision and viewpoint with the role of the narrator, that does not mean that he or she has to be verbally present all the time. Narrativity, she suggests, is bound to a cluster of 'concepts' that invite aesthetic reading rather than efferent reading, with a strong focus on character development (sequentiality, causation, experience, conflicts).

One of the more interesting observations in Dancygier's study and the final point to be discussed here is 'fictive vision' (cf. 2012: 102–6). According to the logic of conceptual metaphor theory, we make sense of abstract or elusive concepts by 'picturing' them in more concrete terms, which can be expressed as UNDERSTANDING/KNOWING IS SEEING (e.g. I see what you mean.) (cf. Dancygier 2005: 106, 111). This aligns mental 'perception' (the mind's eye), or rather conceptualisation, with visual perception. Based on a reading of her prose examples, Dancygier argues that narrators use that as a strategy and frequently describe imagined or counter-factual events, rationalisations, internal struggles etc. as 'visions': "There seems to be a consistent strategy at play here whereby mental representations and conceptualizations are narrated as perceptions" (2012: 102). Despite the 'visualisation' of concepts in prose texts, it is still the readers who have to picture the situation for themselves. In comics, however, the externalisation and materialisation of internal states, feelings and thoughts is the norm. What readers witness is not a more or less accurate depiction of the narrative's story world, but direct access to how the narrator understands the feelings and thoughts of the characters, which is already a form of viewpoint compression,

in the sense that the private thoughts of characters are mediated through the narrator's visualisation of the narrative. They are narrativised in the sense that they have to fit into the narrator's overall vision and are rendered in the narrative's style. The most private thoughts – what in classical narratology would be internal focalisation – is very much externalised in comics, as experienced by the narrator:

The point of using mock-perception as a means of narrating conceptualization is not to give the reader access to a character's thought processes, or to verbalized statements which count as thought-content, but to allow the reader to *experience* the narrated reality through the eyes of the narrating Ego. In other words, using visual construals as a means of conceptualization may give the reader the kind of insight which results not necessarily from access to thought processes, but from immediate access to experience. (2012: 103–4)

This also redefines the classical distinction between showing and telling. In visual narrative media, there may not be a verbal narrator, so everything is automatically a form of showing. However, the visualisation of internal states as external phenomena is very different from the idea of detached, camera-like or pseudo-objective narration that is usually associated with 'showing'. I would argue that, in comics, the consistency in the depiction of characters, objects and locations is more indebted to readers' need to be able to recognise them across panels than to the artists' attempt to aspire to anything approaching realism. Even in so-called 'non-fiction' genres, such as autobiographical writing, documentaries, or reportage, there is often a strong tendency to sacrifice the markers of detachment and objectivity in favour of direct accessibility and the immediacy of experience – the 'here and now' vs. the 'there and then', which can generally be understood as a tension between the past tense of the narrator's voice and the immediate presence of the depicted scene. In this sense, narratives present their central issues or themes by dramatising them, e.g. staging problems or disputes as confrontations between characters. While this is blatantly obvious in drama, Dancygier describes this as a general characteristic of fiction:

It is not at all surprising that narrative choices would capitalize on the links between experience and higher cognition by appealing to the reader's experiential abilities, rather than rely on the 'telling' technique. It is thus possible to redefine and expand the idea of 'showing' by applying it to narrative choices which prompt experiential alignment. (2012: 106)

It is not a coincidence that Fauconnier and Turner, but also Dancygier choose the performing arts to illustrate the core principles of blending theory. The stage is a prime example of a blended space where, in the imagination of the audience,

actors become characters: “Dramatic performances are deliberate blends of a living person with an identity. They give us a living person in one input and a different living person, an actor, in another. The person on stage is a blend of these two” (Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 266). For the duration of the play audiences embrace the idea that what is unfolding in front of their eyes is real enough for them to be affected by the developing narrative, which means that “the ability to live in the blend provides the motive for the entire activity” (2003: 267). It requires spectators’ active participation, in the sense that “the drama story is a blend emerging out of the audience’s interaction with on-stage prompts and offstage frames” (2012: 145). Thus, characters and props function as material anchors (cf. 2012: 147, 158), especially when the latter are foregrounded by the stage action and then reappear in a later scene, so that they connect important elements of the play with each other and make theatre-goers recall important contexts from previous scenes (cf. 2012: 157). Live performances are also a great illustration of Dancygier’s concept of ‘showing’: “The visual choices made by the director help underscore the claims made above: the discourse of the play needs to represent the hidden inner thoughts of characters, and often relies on material objects to serve as addressees in linguistic constructions specializing in thought representation” (2012: 161). The soliloquy is just one of many strategies to externalise and visualise – through performance – the inner thoughts and feelings of characters and make them accessible to the audience.

Material aspects of theatrical space are exploited to profile subjective construals beyond the characters’ words and play a central role in prompting story construction processes. The reliance on materiality has a clear advantage over relying on discourse alone, since supporting psychological components of the story with speech and objects conveys information to the audience through multiple channels. Also, stage time is allocated to events based on their emotional impact, not verisimilitude. (2012: 164)

This last point is crucially important: in the theatre, showing has nothing to do with realism. Live performances are as artfully constructed as all narratives, but “the holistic nature of the theatrical experience” (2012: 142) allows for a vicarious entanglement in the ongoing action that is far removed from narratological analysis. A basic tenet of Dancygier’s theory and reader-response criticism in general, for that matter, is that this insight applies to all narratives, even if it is more evident in a live performance or in the cinema, where audiences cannot stop the narrative progression to second-guess or deconstruct the presented action.

As a bridge to the next part, I briefly introduce Amy Spaulding’s *The Page as a Stage Set: Storyboard Picture Books*, in which she explains dramatic changes – pun

intended – in picture books as a break with traditional storytelling in the late 1970s and early 80s:

When this [an increase in dialogues] joins the fact that the plot is being acted out as much as recounted by a narrator, it becomes evident that picture books are growing farther away from illustrated novels and closer to drama.

There is a type of picture book in which this dramatic leaning is very noticeable: those books which have adapted elements of the comic strip. The adaptation of comic book elements in these books is particularly interesting in relation to the idea, already mentioned, that a form of picture book is evolving in which the pictures and words join together to tell the story. Like picture books, the comics use pictures and text to tell their story, but they have grown out of the tradition of caricature and cartoon, rather than out of the novel and folktale as picture books did, so the emphasis on the art as the primary giver of information is natural.

Picture books and comics together represent a unique means of telling a story, a form of print narrative that is in many ways more dramatic than literary. Although they physically appear as books, they imitate dramatic performance, and the drawings become the counterparts of what would be presented in the staging of a theater or film production. (1995: 5)

Spaulding resorts to the terminology of film studies and calls these hybrid forms ‘storyboard books’, thus conceptually bridging the gulf between picture books, comics, film and theatre performances. What ties these visual narrative media together is an increasing reliance on showing: as Dancygier argues, even in prose a strong tendency towards visualisation and ‘acting out’ scenes can be detected, but this becomes much stronger in the context of visual narrative media, ranging from a balance in traditional picture books to pure performance in staged plays. This is how Spaulding comments on the transformation: “Traditional narrative forms tend to give the audience a sense of detachment, of reading something which has already concluded, while the dramatic forms gives [*sic*] a sense of immediacy, of watching a situation unfold as it is [*sic*] happening” (1995: 15). Generally speaking, comics take the exact middle ground on this scale, wedding traditional narration with dramatisation – literally and figuratively – but more often than not leaning towards the latter. Readers who encounter comics for the first time tend to treat them as heavily illustrated prose texts and forget that they are also stage plays in a sense. The comics historian Robert Petersen, for example, believes that the “rise of the graphic narrative in Europe parallels the rise in popular melodrama, and it is in this direction that we find some important similarities” (2011: xvi). He goes on to argue that “graphic narratives rely on representing things in a way that is predicated on our cognition of how we make sense of our known world. In this respect, the visual elements in a graphic narrative are like objects on stage: they are animated with potential



signification, adopting meanings beyond what they may simply represent in the everyday world” (2011: xvii). Writing about the hybridisation of picture books and comics, Spaulding offers the following observation: “Staging/Design is very important to any dramatic production, since it provides mood and flavor; in picture books the staging is an important part of the basic narrative. The author/artist, as playwright, also becomes director and cameraman, set designer and casting director, location manager and even costumer” (1995: 37). In the following part we look at how cognitive theories and stage metaphors help to make sense of a medium that often combines retrospective verbal narration with the immediacy of dramatisation.



## 4 Cognitive Approaches to Comics

### 4.1 Synopsis

In part 1 I used the term ‘synopsis’ to refer to Wolfgang Iser’s notion that readers generate meaning by ‘seeing things together’, which is guided by textual structures that activate previous themes or gestalten that have become part of the horizon. I developed this idea further by adding conceptual integration theory in part 3, which elaborates on the possible mappings between spaces. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner identify at least fifteen vital relations (cf. 2003: 101) that become compressed in the blend. In both cases ‘synopsis’ is a metaphor for cognitive operations that are happening in front of the mind’s eye. If we now turn to the architecture of a typical comics page, we find a conceptual illustration and materialisation of this reading model: the fragmented pieces of the narrative – the panels – are separated from each other by a blank space in between – the gutter – that requires readers to cognitively bridge the gulf. Even without any knowledge of gestalt psychology or blending, all comics scholars are challenged to explain how readers are supposed to make sense of this “mosaic art” (Nodelman 2012: 438). As a visualisation of an otherwise cognitive process the medium’s layout also illustrates Iser’s theme and horizon structure, in the sense that the panel(s) attended to by the readers form the present theme and the others around it the horizon. As the ‘wandering viewpoint’ of readers moves on to the next panel, the previous one becomes part of the background: the “theme of one moment becomes the horizon against which the next segment takes on its actuality” (1980: 198; see also Dewey 2005: 199, 211). The figure-ground relationship is very strong in comics and we shall return to this idea again later in this part.

One has to be careful, though, not to take this comparison too literally. Iser’s idea of reading is clearly not concerned with the integration of one sentence – or panel, for that matter – after the other into the ongoing story, but with the question of how the foregrounded elements and revelations of the present moment or scene relate to what individual readers have experienced so far as central to their understanding of the narrative. Iser’s approach is holistic and his theory of gestalt-forming rests on translinear integration, which is going to be an important argument against the existing linear conceptualisations of reading comics. Strictly speaking, meaning is not based on a correspondence between textual elements, but mappings between mental spaces that have been activated and set up for mutual illumination by these narrative structures. One could also say that

readers relate their current impressions, experiences and ideas to previous ones and begin to see larger patterns. At the same time, the panels on a double page of a comic are physically present as material/narrative anchors and remain so until readers turn the page.

A focus on cognitive approaches is not meant to discredit the “response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text” (Iser 1980: 34), since they are central to reader-response criticism’s understanding of narratives as blueprints or musical scores. The same principle is foundational to a number of cognitive (literary) theories. Catherine Emmott speaks of “long-distance links” (2004: 11) that connect contextual frames across entire narratives and Barbara Dancygier explains the role of narrative anchors as prompts for blending (cf. 2012: 42, 50). These are metonymic links that may evoke entire frames with a single word or image, sometimes using no more than a pronoun or a symbol. There is a whole spectrum of possibilities for blending in comics that ranges from literal synopsis – studying the section of the mosaic that a double page has to offer as a narrative unit, to the more elaborate conceptual integration of mental spaces that is triggered by textual structures. In comics these prompts take the form of verbal and/or visual signs, often in combination.

Comics studies already has two widely established concepts that resemble aspects of conceptual integration, which are Scott McCloud’s ‘closure’ (cf. 1994: 63–74) and Thierry Groensteen’s ‘braiding’ (cf. 2007: 145–9, 158). The first covers meaning-making processes on the micro-structural level of consecutive panels, while the second looks at translinear relations. Groensteen argues that the ‘iconic solidarity’ (cf. 2007: 17–20) between panels establishes links across the entire network and helps to activate and foreground stored memories of previous scenes that are scrutinised and re-contextualised in light of new revelations. It seems that he based his key concept of iconic solidarity and the polysyntactic function of the gutter on Iser’s *The Act of Reading* (cf. 2007: 114, 175). Importantly, the “moving viewpoint” (Iser 1980: 16) does not coincide with any of the textual structures or perspectives that are presented sequentially – but also concurrently, in the case of comics – to the readers (cf. Iser 1980: 35; see also 21, 47, 96).

Groensteen’s concept of ‘overdetermination’ (cf. 2007: 29) resembles Iser’s notion of foregrounding, as it ascribes a privileged spot to an element of the composition, which may result from the position of the panel on the page, its salience (e.g. size, shape), or its importance to the scene or the entire network (iconic solidarity). The gaps have a grammatical function in the narrative and invite both sequential and translinear blending, for which the groundwork can be found in Iser’s theory: “an ‘overdetermined text’ causes the reader to engage in an active

process of composition, because it is he who has to structure the meaning potential arising out of the multifarious connections between the semantic levels of the text” (Iser 1980: 49). This process relies on a silent understanding between creators and readers that narratives can be meaningfully reconstructed (cf. Groensteen 2013: 19). At the same time, this does not mean that readers have to detect and actively pursue every single possible connection while reading, but to pick up the most important drift of a scene, based on its foregrounded and repeated elements.

Iser’s retroactive effect, the process by which previously formed gestalten are “constantly evoked in a new context and so modified by new correlates that instigate a restructuring of past syntheses” (1980: 111), is a purely cognitive operation. In this case, a character may appear in a very different light in the present scene, which challenges readers to reconcile this realisation with his or her previous behaviour. Contrary to computational models of cognition, this does not involve filling the slots of mental models and thus updating files, but holding two specific social interactions involving the same character in working memory, exploring potential correspondences and obvious differences and actively working on a reconciliation of the two on a higher level of understanding (cf. Pfister 2000: 172). This can result in a tentative new gestalt or blend, but it could also mean that readers have to operate with two competing explanations for a certain amount of time. The fragmentation of a single character into several versions of itself is not unusual in autobiographical writing, where we usually encounter different younger selves that may resist easy blending or what Dancygier calls ‘viewpoint compression’. Chapter 4 is concerned with the question of how these two theories of reading comics – McCloud’s and Groensteen’s – compare to the cognitive approaches I introduced in the third part. The fragmentation of the comics narrative and the tensions between the disparate elements have to be extended, however, to the relation between words and images, which also become blended into a unified perceptual whole.

Comics scholars, who – judging from their bibliographies – have never heard of conceptual integration theory, use very similar terms and concepts to describe how reading takes place in this medium. Here is an example from Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith and Paul Levitz’s *The Power of Comics*: “The chief task of comic book creators is to reduce the imagined story to images encapsulated in panels. The reader must then work at blending those panels into a narrative experience” (2015: 153). In most cases, panels are not snapshots, single moments or atomistic building blocks of comics narratives, but already blends themselves. They contain compressed vital relations for which Duncan, Smith and Levitz, following Will Eisner, use the term “encapsulation” (2015: 108; see

also Eisner 2006: 39). Readers, then, have to find ways to further re-blend them into larger units – a process that Iser calls gestalt-forming. However, the blends within single panels may be intricately layered and highly compressed, which means that readers have to ‘unpack’ them first. In this sense, compression and decompression are both creative and receptive processes. Political cartoons, for example, often showcase a high degree of compression that challenges readers to identify and understand the whole network of mappings.

Charles Hatfield, to name a second example, describes the work of Jack Kirby in the following manner: “The power of drawings [...] stems from the tension between reading the image as a single moment and reading it as a synchronous compression of an extended length of time” (2012: 47; see also Baetens & Frey 2015: 166). According to Hatfield and other scholars (cf. e.g. Mikkonen 2017: 55), there is a fundamental ambiguity about the intensity of temporal compression in comics panels. Hatfield introduces the term ‘synchronism’ for the compression of time in *Alternative Comics* (cf. 2005: 54), where he discusses so-called ‘splash pages’. These are panels that cover entire pages and are typical of superhero comics. They foreground epic confrontations between the eponymous heroes and their arch enemies. Again referring to Kirby, he states that, although his “crowded spreads seem to capture discrete and explosive moments of action, in fact they represent extended spans of time in synoptic fashion” (2005: 54). Not surprisingly, many comics scholars, but especially the narratologists among them, are fascinated by the representation of time in the medium, which results in exceptionally long chapters on temporal structures (cf. e.g. McCloud 1994: 94–117; Schüwer 2008: 209–302; Mikkonen 2017: 33–70). In the context of reader-response criticism, however, the technicalities of representing and measuring time and space play a less significant role, as an exact reconstruction of events is not required for a successful transaction with a narrative. Yet, the ambiguity of comics panels as temporal blends is not the only challenge that narratologists have to face.

Not only does the direct transfer of analytical categories and procedures from film studies and other narrative media pose a problem (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 2), but the medium itself ostentatiously foregrounds the need for active readers’ participation. Martin Schüwer is an interesting case in point, as he sees a clear connection between time, memory and readers’ reception of a narrative text (cf. 2008: 242, 244), but he is reluctant to compromise his narratological approach. Therefore, he has to circumvent readers’ involvement by introducing a ‘memory of the comic’ that resembles what Iser calls ‘textual structures’, Dancygier ‘narrative anchors’ and Groensteen ‘braiding’ (cf. 2008: 241). These prompts are so specific, Schüwer claims, that readers only have to follow the given instructions (cf.

2008: 242), which encourage them to become analysts of the narrative and verify what the text strongly suggests (cf. 2008: 244). Acknowledging that McCloud's theory of closure has a strong cognitive orientation (cf. 2008: 275), he comments that blending in these cases is straightforward, as the textual structures only allow for a single resolution (cf. 2008: 276).

Kai Mikkonen seems to be more sceptical about the power of narratology to explain how reading works. He distinguishes narratology from “the proper interpretation of narrative texts and works” and demotes it to a specific stage in the reading process, especially when “the aim of analysis is to relate the narrative text to particular contexts of meaning” (2017: 9). Even within the narrow field of academic studies, he only grants it limited usefulness: “As a heuristic tool in comics scholarship, narratology can be conceptualised as a kind of preliminary stage of interpretation that directs our attention to the narrative features in a given work and helps to analyse and clarify the significance of those features” (2007: 11). He attributes its limited relevance to its predominantly generic orientation: “It is in the nature of narratology to seek what is most universal, conventional, and general about narratives, and attempt to describe and analyse these features as effectively as possible” (2017: 277). Having put narratology in its place, he then follows a traditional path, largely naming his chapters after such classical categories as time, narration, focalisation or characterisation (cf. 2017: v-vi). From a cognitive studies point of view, the most interesting chapter seems to be “Character as a Means of Narrative Continuity” (cf. 2017: 90–108), as it is concerned with characters as narrative anchors to counteract the fragmentation of comics narration. At first, Mikkonen stresses their importance as centres of attention and even refers to Alan Palmer's concept of ‘aspectuality’ later in the book (cf. e.g. 2017: 120). Since Palmer's well-founded criticism of classical narratology (cf. e.g. 2004: 28) is incompatible with Mikkonen's approach, the latter has to defend the particularisation of textual analysis as being motivated by the medium's multimodality:

The point in thus focusing on and isolating the question of the synthetic role of the character, i.e. their continuity-building function, from other considerations pertaining to characters, such as focalisation, characterisation (characters' person-like qualities), or the representation of speech and thought, is to better cover the visual and multimodal means of connectivity employed in comics . . . (2017: 91)

In the end, Mikkonen simply claims that characters are easy to identify and they propel the action, which he needs for an explanation of ‘continuity editing’, especially “*match on action*”, in the comics medium: “Thus, the character's (or characters') activity creates a visual bridge between the gaps – that is, the

shots – and conveys a sense of continuity in the scene. The effectiveness of this technique relies on its ability to suggest a simultaneous sense of temporal and spatial coherence” (2017: 93). This unites three of (comics) narratology’s fundamental shortcomings: characters are made to serve a function in (visual) plot development; narratological categories from other media (e.g. editing, shots) are directly imported without sufficiently discussing whether this is appropriate or not and the readers’ role is reduced to the passive acceptance of continuity editing’s supreme capacity for presenting action in a transparent way. Concerning the last point: I cannot shake the impression that many comics theories are still heavily invested in the superhero genre, for which continuous action plays a much larger role than in autobiographical work.

Mikkonen uses the very first scene of Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples’s epic science fiction tale *Saga* (2012) as his main example, which he begins to describe in the following way:

The first panels of the first scene, which depict the birth of the couple’s daughter Hazel, then confirm that the story is about these two characters [they are also on the cover]. Both Alana and Marko are shown in close-up images that focus on their emotional states and intimate relationship. The first panel is an extreme close-up of Alana, who is clearly suffering, while the second panel, an establishing image, shows her lying on a table with someone between her legs, helping in what is evidently a childbirth scene. The two characters’ emotional engagement with one another is then portrayed by an image and reverse image sequence where we first see the horned man Marko looking tenderly at Alana and commending the winged woman for her beauty, and then see Alana, suffering labour pains, looking less fondly back at him and responding with a sarcastic comment . . . (2017: 92)

What does not become sufficiently clear in all of this is that they are a mixed-race couple on the run who are persecuted for miscegenation. Marko has to assist in the birth of his daughter Hazel as they cannot go to a hospital without being imprisoned or worse. Mikkonen, however, uses the scene to explain ‘continuity editing’ in comics, which is fine in a study on comics narratology, but it also illustrates the limitations he addresses at the beginning of the book. Both monographs, Schüwer’s and Mikkonen’s, are excellent in what they set out to do, contributing to transmedial narratology in significant ways and revising concepts from classical narratology and film studies for this hybrid medium, but they also showcase how little they have to say about the cognitive processes that lead readers from textual prompts via tentative gestalt-forming to a complete reading (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 34–5).

My understanding of a cognitive approach to comics is broad and inclusive. In *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* (2013) Karin Kukkonen claims that “cognitive



approaches [. . .] are virtually nonexistent in comics studies” (2013a: 5), but this has to be seen from the perspective of cognitive literary studies and Theory of Mind in particular. From a reader-response or cognitive linguistics point of view there have been quite a number of attempts to apply cognitive approaches to comics (cf. Stamenković & Tasić 2014: 157). As I am going to demonstrate in greater detail, the link between McCloud’s ‘closure’ and Iser’s model is gestalt psychology, whereas the conceptual foundation of braiding in Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* seems to come directly from Iser (cf. 2007: 114). In this sense, and despite the otherwise semiotic orientation of Groensteen’s books (cf. 2013: 30, 55), I consider comics studies as already permeated by a cognitive orientation, even if the links have not been made sufficiently clear and the theories are not based directly on cognitive sciences.

Kukkonen acknowledges this common ground later in her book (cf. 2013a: 14, 27–8, 36–8) and traces her cognitive approach back to “hermeneutics, close reading, and rhetoric” (2013a: 7). Like Iser and Rosenblatt she conceptualises reading as a back and forth between the clues that the text provides (cf. 2013a: 13) and the readers’ “processes of meaning-making” (2013a: 7; see also 14, 27), thus opposing the idea of the inherent meaning of signs (cf. 2013a: 23). All the widely used textbooks and theories in comics studies propose some form of aesthetic reading or cognitive approach to comics, even though the connections are not always made explicit. Duncan, Smith and Levitz dedicate a whole chapter to “Experiencing the Story” (2015: 137–62), in which they emphasise the active role of the reader, who is faced with a fragmented narrative that has to be puzzled together. They are among the few who also acknowledge the affective responses of readers alongside their cognitive involvement (cf. 2015: 140).

A necessary qualification to my sweeping claim that the popular approaches to comics are essentially cognitive, has to be that they frequently single out aspects of the theories I have presented thus far without looking at the larger picture. They may contain passing references to reader-response criticism or Wolfgang Iser (cf. Groensteen 2007: 114; Hatfield 2005: xiii-xiv), a traditional schema approach to comics (cf. Lefèvre 2000), a grounding in Theory of Mind (cf. Kukkonen 2013a; 2013b), a focus on embodiment (cf. Kukkonen 2013a; 2013b; Baetens & Frey 2015: 174–6) or the suggestion that blending theory may be a suitable approach to comics (cf. Forceville 2016; Stamenković & Tasić 2014; Oakley 1998). In addition to that, comics scholars sometimes describe the reading process in such a way that it closely resembles blending theory. Dietrich Grünewald’s concept of ‘reading synthetically’ (cf. Grünewald 2000: 41) is a good example. This correspondence is probably due to Wolfgang Kemp’s application of gestalt psychology and reader-response criticism to art history (cf. Grünewald

2000: 42, 101–2; Kemp 1989). A number of teaching materials and academic studies in the Anglophone world directly reference Louise M. Rosenblatt in the context of reading picture books or comics in the classroom (cf. e.g. Arizpe et al. 2014: 37, Bakis 2014: 4), but this is not further explored in light of recent developments in cognitive studies.

In this study I have persistently highlighted the links that connect John Dewey with Louise M. Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, the tradition of teaching literature in the classroom, experiential approaches within cognitive literary studies, such as Monika Fludernik's natural narratology and Caracciolo's enactivism, and ultimately cognitive linguistics and blending. What connects most these seemingly diverse theories is a commitment to experientiality and embodied cognition, which is mirrored in Kukkonen's reading of comics (cf. 2013a: 7). Therefore, the experiential basis of blending phenomena needs to be addressed again. This serves to connect cognitive linguistics with the visual depiction of characters in specific scenes (contextual frames) and anticipates the centrality of embodiment in autobiographical studies (cf. Smith & Watson 2010: 49–54). Kukkonen argues that "a lot of the meaning readers get from textual elements does not depend on their competence in a code, but on more basic cognitive processes" (2013a: 18; see also 13, 20–1), by which she means "that a good part of our meaning-making is indeed grounded in our bodily experience of the world" (2013b: 9). I am less sure about the notion of "embodied simulations" (Kukkonen 2015: 54) and more inclined to believe that we learn to read social contexts, body postures and facial expressions based on personal experiences and social interactions in the enactivist sense (cf. Kukkonen 2013b: 15–16).

I am going to combine an exploration of embodiment in comics with a study of cartooning and Rodolphe Töpffer's views on his craft to arrive at a more differentiated understanding which aspects of comics narration are easily recognisable and which require readers' active involvement. In many situations characters' experiences are transparent and easily accessible, which means that we can read them 'like a book'. Foregrounding, repetition and especially contextualisation grant readers access to characters' thoughts and feelings without requiring a degree in psychology. Still, there are always nuances, ambiguous emotional states and larger thematic concerns that are easily overlooked or dismissed in a quick read-through, which is why the opportunity to return to the text, reread parts of it and negotiate its meaning in groups is so central to educational settings. The experiences of characters in specific contexts and the readers' aesthetic responses take precedence over efferent reading. In a similar fashion, Groensteen criticises the reduction of reading to the extraction of facts, and of narratives to plot points: it is not enough, he argues, "to find the intelligibility of

the story in order to follow the episodes”, as it “constitutes a formidable reduction of the work to the sphere of the action and of the event, a mutilation that retains only the actantial chain, which is only interested in what happens to the protagonists” (2007: 137).

Yet, before any of these aspects can be duly addressed, a basic clarification of terms is required to counteract a certain confusion over what comics are (cf. e.g. Pointner 2013: 27–9, 32–3, 39; Ludwig 2015: 299; Kutý 2015: 173). This has been provoked by the intrusion of so-called ‘graphic novels’ into the institutions of book culture (cf. Ditschke 2009; Hausmanninger 2013) and aggravated by misguided academic attempts to drive a wedge between comics with an ISBN number and those without (cf. Baetens & Frey 2015; Hescher 2016; for the distinction: de Vos 2005: 30). Since then, graphic novels have dominated the discourse about comics in educational settings (cf. e.g. Hallet 2012a; Elsner 2013), with the notable exception of Christian Ludwig and Frank Erik Pointner’s *Teaching Comics in the Foreign Language Classroom* (2013). In the next chapter I want to elaborate on the claim that graphic novels are a separate genre or medium and mark the next evolutionary step in the transformation of pulp fiction into respectable literature. These considerations may seem unnecessarily cerebral; yet, without clarifying the subject matter of this study, all other observations would lose some of their relevance.

For most of this part I follow Charles Hatfield’s concept of four structural tensions that readers have to face and overcome when engaging with comic books (cf. 2005: 32–67). Not only does Hatfield reference Iser’s *The Act of Reading* directly (cf. 2005: xiii), but he also makes a strong case in favour of reader-response criticism: “The reader’s responsibility for negotiating meaning can never be forgotten” (2005: xiv). He or she is faced with a “patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols”, which “presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretative options” (2005: xiv). Thus, Hatfield’s tensions can be brought in line with Iser’s basic mechanism of meaning-making: “Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole network of possible connections which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning” (1980: 196). Both Iser’s concept of mutual illumination as well as Fauconnier and Turner’s global insight are predicated on the idea that we can reach a higher level of understanding through the integration of frames whose structures are not easily compatible. In this sense, Hatfield’s tensions can be said to show a certain resemblance to John Dewey’s notion of defamiliarisation:

Without internal tension there would be a fluid rush to a straightaway mark; there would be nothing that could be called development and fulfillment. The existence of

resistance defines the place of intelligence in the production of an object of fine art. The difficulties to be overcome in bringing about the proper reciprocal adaptation of parts constitute what in intellectual work are problems. As in activity dealing with predominantly intellectual matters, the material that constitutes a problem has to be converted into a means for its solution. It cannot be sidestepped. (2005: 143)

Hatfield's tensions provide a helpful and sufficiently systematic approach to comics, which foregrounds the contrast between words and images, panels and series/sequences, panels and networks (braiding) as well as the meaning and the materiality of books. This covers all the essential elements or building blocks of comics, but, more significantly, they are introduced as relations rather than isolated features. I am going to integrate my arguments concerning a cognitive approach to comics within these four sub-sections.

Since cartooning represents the most prominent visual element of comics, it plays a significant role in all four tensions. To establish the necessary groundwork for a discussion of Hatfield, a separate chapter is dedicated to the most popular drawing style in comics. Here I want to highlight two important connections: the one is the close tie between comics and political cartooning in terms of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1994: 30/4). The other concerns the art of blending, which is central to newspaper cartoons, where double-scope networks are a widespread phenomenon. This provides a useful background when discussing the narrativity of images and the potential to compress a story into a single picture. Other important aspects of comics narratology, such as narration, focalisation, characterisation, or empathy, are addressed in the immediate context of understanding autobiographical comics. This also includes the more specific aspects of Dancygier's theory that I introduced in part 3. Instead of discussing all the individual problems comics narratology is still facing (cf. e.g. Mikkonen 2017: 9, 11), I prefer to limit myself to one genre only and explore how narratological theories can or cannot help to elucidate its specific structures.

The final chapter is dedicated to a case study of the first chapter of *Blankets*, which serves to establish an integrated approach that combines all the relevant elements I present piecemeal throughout this part. It should become obvious how the textual structures set up a network of clues that invite certain types of blends. I chose Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) as my prime example and source of illustrations for a number of reasons. The first is my ultimate concern with autobiographical writing in the comics medium, so it makes sense to stay within that premise and not expand the discussion to other genres. Up to this point I have tried to keep the arguments as universally applicable as possible to literary studies and the teaching of literary texts in the classroom. However, it is time to become more specific and lay the groundwork for the final part.

Secondly, *Blankets* is a modern classic and widely available. Despite their spectacular rise as the new darlings of book culture, comics are still prone to go out of print and may no longer be available. Thirdly, this autobiography introduces a variety of interesting tensions. It combines easy accessibility and sophisticated storytelling. It has a mostly covert verbal narrator, which automatically leads to a strong focus on visual storytelling. Many passages rely on an exaggerated cartoon style and others on a more restrained form of self-expression. The book presents an almost generic coming-of-age story against a very specific cultural background of religious fundamentalism and combines a simple, relatable narrative of falling in love for the first time with a more complex meditation on art, love/sexuality and religion. *Blankets* can be both brutally honest and “outrageously beautiful” (Wolk 2007: 209) in its renderings of the past. It weds self-indulgent, seemingly unreflected nostalgia for a particular time in Thompson’s life with a new orientation towards the future. For better or worse, it tells a very personal, autobiographical story with a creative license that is made possible by the label ‘illustrated novel’. Furthermore, the narrative represents an interesting merger of two sub-genres of autobiographical writing, the coming-of-age narrative and the portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man. Fourthly, it highlights the often problematic, but unavoidable practice of suggesting layers of complexity for the protagonist, while reducing other characters to stereotypes. In Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* fathers play an essential role, so they are granted more space and complexity than is usually the case in autobiographical writing. Douglas Wolk, who is otherwise highly appreciative of Thompson’s work (cf. 2007: 208), cannot help but observe that “he barely gives anyone else in the book credit for being a whole person” (2007: 208). It is therefore necessary to read against the grain and develop enough critical distance to notice how *Blankets* manipulates readers into accepting the victimisation of the protagonist as a grave injustice and siding with him for the rest of the narrative. Thompson reduces the verbal narrator, who is predestined to comment on the events from a distance, to a bare minimum and lets the scenes play out as they supposedly happened, thus foregrounding the experiences of his teenage selves. Wolk even diagnoses a lack of empathy (cf. 2007: 209), but I would explain Craig’s myopic view as a faithful rendering of adolescent self-absorption. His love interest Raina is rarely depicted as a real person, but very much as the target of his juvenile adoration:

*Blankets* is almost as starry-eyed and self-important as Thompson apparently was at the time. He never gives her anything like interiority or suggests that she might have had any significance other than being a perfect, stainless Celia for his work. That lack of empathy extends to almost all the other characters in the book, who tend to be either

saintly or despicable – the latter category includes a long list of hard-line Christians who terrorized Thompson in his youth and adolescence. (Wolk 2007: 209)

This may sound unfair, but there is a grain of truth in Wolk's observations that cannot be easily dismissed. Consequently, a reading of this text requires a complimentary focus on Raina's situation in life. Chapters III-VII of *Blankets* provide readers with enough information on her chaotic family life to establish a different perspective, but this has to be actively encouraged, as students are tempted to side with Craig. Many other characters are more or less silenced and rarely get a chance to demonstrate their basic humanity. They play roles in Thompson's re-enactment of his childhood and teenage years, but the director/playwright decides what these roles are. Craig's father, for example, is reduced to a monstrous antagonist in chapter I and rarely reaches more complexity than that of a Christian fundamentalist. Only towards the end of the narrative does he show some redeeming qualities. Accordingly, Craig's salvation is predicated on transcending his upbringing instead of attempting any form of reconciliation. Again, Wolk is very astute in his commentary: "In *Blankets*, he casts himself as a confused young hero, achieving his solipsistic victory by casting off the people and ideology that threaten to bring him down" (2007: 213).

I have frequently referred to Werner Delanoy's essay on teaching *Dead Poets Society* in the classroom (cf. 1996), which is a great illustration of how hard it is to read against the grain of a powerful narrative. I have to address this point again in part 5, but for the moment it is enough to realise that there is an ethical issue concerning the biographical writing that autobiographies automatically entail. Very often even the closest friends and relatives become secondary characters in order to stress the protagonist's uniqueness, pitiful isolation and heroic struggle against all odds. These tensions turn *Blankets* into an interesting reading text for older students, as the basic storyline that everyone manages to follow can then be complemented with activities that take the students back to specific scenes and invite a more detailed reading of the text. And, arriving at my final argument, readers of this study, who are introduced to comics for the very first time, may find it easier to have a single text as the main point of reference instead of being confronted with a mass of widely different styles and sub-genres, which become more relevant in the final part.

## 4.2 Definitions

Throughout this study I have referred to comics as a narrative medium, despite the fact that both of these terms have been contested. While there may be a widely established consensus that comics tell stories (cf. Stein & Thon 2015: 6–8;

Thon 2015: 67; Baetens & Frey 2015: 7–8; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: xi–xiii; Eisner 2006: 5, 127; Kukkonen 2013b: 49; Groensteen 2013: 5; 2007: 8–12; Wolk 2007: 11; Hatfield 2005: x, xiv), Stephan Packard is correct in pointing out that this may not always be the case (cf. 2013; 2016). Groensteen, for example, discusses “abstract comics” (2013: 9–10), named after an anthology published by Fantagraphics, but one could also add visual poems to this category of non-narrative comics (cf. 2013: 30–3). Within the context of a philological subject and for the purposes of teaching comics in the classroom this simplification is still warranted, as comics are specifically chosen as narrative texts. However, reading comics as literature comes with its own problems, as classical, post-classical and transmedial narratologists have turned their attention to the medium, often applying concepts, terminologies and analytical tools that do not quite fit (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 2). Mikkonen’s monograph (cf. 2017), but also Jan-Noël Thon’s publications (cf. e.g. 2014; 2015) bear witness to this ongoing struggle with and negotiation of existing concepts and tools for the purposes of narratological enquiry.

Concerning the second term, it is essential to differentiate between comics as a medium and different artistic forms or formats of publishing content, which are comic strips, comic books and graphic novels in most cases (cf. Fingerroth 2008: 4), but one could also include (Franco-Belgian) albums and web comics. While the choice of medium is concerned with the (multi)modality of the narrative, the semiotic codes that are used and their conventionalised combinations and potential tensions, the form(at) is closely associated with questions of mediality and materiality, the artistic ambition of creator(s), the practises of cultural industries and the established publishing formats that dominate the market place. This affects everything from length (four panels vs. 400 pages) via creative possibilities to the limitations set by editors, publishers and readers’ expectations, just to name a few obvious factors.

Karin Kukkonen’s definition of comics acknowledges the institutional contexts of creation, production, distribution and reception that play an important role in establishing and naturalising a medium: “comics are a medium that communicates through images, words, and sequence. A medium is constituted in three ways: (i) it is a mode of communication, (ii) it relies on a particular set of technologies, and (iii) it is anchored in society through a number of institutions” (2013b: 4). From my point of view, ‘medium’ is a conventionalised and widely recognised type of storytelling, which privileges the mode of communication (i) over technologies (ii) and institutions (iii). For other academic disciplines, such as media studies, these priorities may vary. Since the focus of this book is on educational settings, the classification of comics as a

narrative medium – alongside prose, film, (stage) performance, radio plays etc. (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 49) – is justifiable, as these are experienced as distinct ways of telling stories. At the same time, comics literacy can and should be expanded to include concerns that are usually associated with critical media literacy, as the business side of comics creation has a major impact on the types of narratives students are likely to encounter.

Genre, in contradistinction, constitutes a framework that affects content more than anything else. I use the term to refer to autobiography, which can take many forms (e.g. comic strip, comic book, graphic novel) and find expression in different media (e.g. comics, paintings, prose, film, installation art). These three terms – medium, form(at) and genre – are often used interchangeably or become redefined with every new publication. In *Reading Graphic Novels: Genre and Narration*, for example, Achim Heschler sets out to clarify the terminology:

... the basic terms ‘format,’ ‘medium,’ and ‘mode,’ which have been so heterogeneously employed, need to be (re)defined. First, I take comics to signify a medium rather than a genre. As a second step, I shall set up a general, prototypical, genre classification in which graphic novels figure as a (twice removed) subgroup of graphic narratives, the counterpart to verbal narratives [...]. With this, I shall consolidate the graphic novel as a genre, that is a historical text group. (2016: 4)

Heschler is eager to promote the ‘graphic novel’ as a more sophisticated way of storytelling, for which he employs the term ‘genre’ to set it apart as an evolutionary step: “All things reconsidered, it is impossible to ignore the ties of what was sold as graphic novels with the comics and book market, but this is only one side to the coin. On the other side, I see art works that differ absolutely or by degrees from traditional or merely lengthy comic books” (2016: 18). He is willing to acknowledge that ‘comics’ as a medium is a neutral term (cf. McCloud 1994: 6) and that all forms belong to it, but then he favours one publication format – the graphic novel – over another – the comic book. He seems to identify what I would call a genre – superheroes – with a specific form of publication, which may, in fact, contain any kind of content. Heschler goes on to list the ‘superhero novel’ as a subgenre of the graphic novel (cf. 2016: 51), which introduces two further complications: while the ‘graphic novel’ is defined via formal criteria, the subgenres are based on their content. This makes the term too imprecise for the kind of systematic classification he aspires to. Furthermore, when comic books are republished as graphic novels, their content does not change. Many of the classics from the 1980s, like Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* or Frank Miller, Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, were serialised at first. This runs counter to the establishment



of a canon based on seven levels of complexity that are supposed to distinguish graphic novels from comic books (cf. Hescher 2016: 56).

According to Danny Fingerroth's classification of American comics (cf. 2008: 4), there are three major types or publication formats, which are comic strip, comic book and graphic novel (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: xiii-xv; Groensteen 2013: 5; Kukkonen 2013a: 10; Stein & Thon 2015: 12). In the Franco-Belgian tradition, the main format is the 'album', while the internet provides completely new possibilities in terms of digital production, digital delivery and digital comics (cf. McCloud 2000: 22). McCloud associates the last type with 'the infinite canvas' (cf. 2000: 200-42), a liberation from the restrictions of the page, and technological innovations in terms of storytelling, which may then constitute a different format altogether. For a general readership, however, the most noticeable change has been the appearance of graphic novels in regular book shops.

The alleged inventor of the term 'graphic novel', Will Eisner, calls it "a form of comic book" (2006: 141), while Gail de Vos succinctly defines it as a comic narrative with an ISBN number (cf. de Vos 2005: 30). According to this logic, neither the medium nor the format determines the quality of the outcome. Since the days when comics first entered book culture in the form of 'graphic novels', with Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* as a trailblazer, they have witnessed a steady rise in appreciation, often at the price of concealing their lowly background. Hescher has to ennoble *MAUS* retrospectively as being "among the first graphic novels, *avant la lettre*" (2016: 81) to fit his narrative of steady progress. For this type of enculturation to work, it was easier for some 'Guardians of the Gutenberg Galaxy' – teachers, librarians, journalists, publishers, academics etc. – to conceive of the development as an evolutionary step that now separates graphic novels from their primitive ancestors:

Readers, reviewers, publishers, and booksellers (in store and online) have maintained the currency of the graphic novel and continue to use the concept as useful shorthand for either adult readership comic books or single volume comics the qualities (content or artwork) of which distinguish them as exceptional when compared to regularly serialized titles or more generic material (superheroes, sci-fi, or fantasy). (Baetens & Frey 2015: 3)

I would like to explore this transition from fandom to book culture a little further by turning to Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, which is a prominent attempt to establish the graphic novel's unique status *against* a background of comics production. A first important strategy is to use the singular 'the graphic novel', as if it were a clearly identifiable entity, and then ascribe human-like characteristics and a will of its own to it: "the graphic novel has a

strong preference for the book format” (Baetens & Frey 2015: 13) and “the one-shot formula” (2015: 14). When Baetens and Frey observe that “the graphic novel can appear in different print formats” (2015: 154), they seem to acknowledge the fact that many artists publish their books in instalments first, for example to garner some compensation for their work, which may take years to complete. However, what they ultimately attempt to do is to sever the graphic novel as a separate art form from any material restrictions. This claim is made explicit when they call it “a medium” (2015: 7), which suggests that it also constitutes a different mode of communication, relies on different technologies than comics and is produced, distributed and reviewed in different institutional settings, if we follow Kukkonen’s criteria again. While the third point is a valid observation from within book culture, the first two are impossible to argue.

The ‘graphic novel’ was – first of all – a marketing term and – due to its enormous success – has led to a “publishing phenomenon” (Baetens & Frey 2015: 2) that has transformed the business. There is no doubt that the successful re-branding of comics has opened the door for many artists to risk longer, more sophisticated titles, reach a broader audience, experiment with the form and even find a home at one of the major book-publishing houses, but Baetens and Frey propose essentialist differences that do not exist. It is not the graphic novel as an independent art form that shapes book publication, but book culture that offers new possibilities to comics creators.

I have traced the publication history of David Hine’s *Strange Embrace* in an article on remediation (cf. 2016) to highlight the close ties between creation, production, marketing, distribution and reception, but also the transformation of a somewhat obscure comic into a graphic novel. Its most recent republication materialised on Russell Willis’s digital comics store *Sequential*. It is interesting to observe how closely Willis ties artistic achievement to the marketability of graphic novels: “We see an opportunity to create an app that brings together material designed for adult sensibilities and through that creates a sophisticated brand for graphic novels and sequential art that is separate from the geek market” (Gravett 2013, n. p.). Willis deliberately contrasts his curated canon of exceptional works of art with the alleged rubbish of mainstream superhero comics, thus appealing to a readership that would feel uncomfortable with this type of association: “The brand image for graphic novels that a *Persepolis* or a *Maus* creates is damaged every time those titles are stood next to a man with his underpants over his trousers” (Gravett 2013, n.g.). The graphic novel is branded as a hot commodity and its cultural capital is increased by erasing its roots and natural affiliation, elevating it to the status of ‘proper’ literature.

Baetens and Frey persistently ascribe their own ideas and predilections to the supposedly independent agency of a publication format: “the graphic novel has tried to distinguish itself from comics, more specifically from the superhero comics” (2015: 10) by turning to “autobiography, reportage, and historical narrative” (2015: 20). This close association of the graphic novel with a dominant genre, in this case autobiography (cf. 2015: 12), leads to an unwarranted transfer of narrative characteristics from the dominant genre to the publication format, which mirrors the uneasy relationship between the medium of comics and superhero adventures. They observe that, in a graphic novel, “the narrator is much more present, both verbally and visually, than in the case of a comic book” (2015: 10) and that it is more “disposed toward realism” (2015: 10). Both claims may apply to autobiographical texts, but not to graphic novels in general.

Baetens and Frey’s attempts to establish the graphic novel as a separate medium often sound like a sales pitch to literary snobs: “the graphic novel has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics universe and has gained great respect” (2015: 2). At the same time, they make half-hearted attempts to assure their readers that they “do *not* take an elitist stance against the comic book tradition, including the underground comix” (2015: 3). Yet, when they praise the graphic novel’s artistic superiority, it is difficult to believe them:

The difference between comic books and graphic novels is *often* (it would be silly to deny it) but *not always* the difference between the collective and Taylorized way of working in the cultural industry [...] on the one hand, and the personal and subjective mode of the individual artist who manages to pervade all possible aspects of his/her creation, on the other hand. (2015: 18)

The problem is not that Baetens and Frey notice differences in quality between comics, which clearly exist, but that they tie the debate to publication formats and cultural capital. They are not deterred by the fact that leading artists, such as Art Spiegelman (cf. 2015: 1–2), or eminent critics, such as Charles Hatfield (cf. 2015: 18–19), find fault with this simplistic distinction: “Hatfield represents, in a very convincing and coherent way, the suspicion toward any too strong or sharp division between comics and the graphic novel” (2015: 18). However, they judge it “a little counterintuitive for a critical community (comics scholarship, visual studies, and cultural studies) to reject a concept and an idea that is being so widely used” (2015: 19). Their dismissal of academic reservations seems to be driven by the fear of “being left behind by practice and letting journalists, publishers, and booksellers make all the running” (2015: 19). This is an astonishing argument coming from an Oxford University Press title directed at undergraduate students.

Having established a working definition and categorisation of comics, it is now time to look at approaches that include this narrative medium within larger frameworks. In his book *Comics and Sequential Art* Will Eisner addresses “the unique aesthetics of Sequential Art as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (2006: 5). Unfortunately, Eisner uses the terms ‘comics’ and ‘sequential art’ interchangeably, despite the fact that his title suggests otherwise. When he describes comic books as “a successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose” (2006: 8), this definition may not even apply to all comics, not to mention sequential art in general. However, for a history of comics and a plausible separation from related art forms, it becomes necessary to draw a clear line between picture stories or sequential art, on the one hand, and the unique features of comics, on the other.

Robert S. Petersen’s *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (2011) is based on a distinction between what he calls ‘graphic narratives’ and comics as a particular type within this family of related art forms. While narrative paintings, woodcut novels or picture books compress scenes into distinct images, comics decompress and dramatise them across several panels. This is how Petersen describes Trajan’s Column: “As in the Parthenon frieze, the long composition contains clear visual nuclei that define units of action that make it possible to identify distinct narrative scenes, but the overall effect is of the unstoppable march of Roman armies toward victory” (2011: 15). By condensing whole battles into single ‘visual nuclei’ and then stringing moments of triumph together, Trajan’s Column offers a (clearly biased) summary of events, but it lacks all the necessary details and human interactions of drama that I consider to be typical of narrative comics. Using McCloud’s terminology (cf. 1994: 70–4), which is much better suited to distinguish comics from related art forms, the vital difference lies in the exclusive focus on scene-to-scene transitions in picture stories, whereas comics also require action-to-action transitions. For this reason I find all definitions of comics that are based on Eisner’s imprecise, as they equally confuse ‘comics’ with ‘sequential art’ (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: xiii; McCloud 1994: 9/5). An unfortunate consequence of this widespread confusion is that the history of comics is supposed to begin thousands of years ago (cf. McCloud 1994: 10–21), while, strictly speaking, this can only be true of ‘sequential art’. I find Amy Spaulding’s argument convincing that the increasing hybridisation between picture books and comics in the second half of the twentieth century was accompanied by a development away from double spreads as self-enclosed narrative units towards a dramatisation of scenes (cf. 1995: 5, 15). Like Spaulding and Dietrich Grünewald (cf. 2000: 17–27), Groensteen

foregrounds similarities between comics and the performing arts (cf. 2013: 84), which is again mirrored in Eisner's observation that writing for comics is "closest in requirements to playwriting" (2006: 122). Surprisingly, this is a very different definition compared to the one he offers earlier in his book, "a successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose" (2006: 8). My preferred umbrella term for comics, films and stage performances is visual narrative media, in which a story is 'acted out' through a sequence of scenes in which characters develop on a personal level through interactions with their social environments.

To sum up, all graphic novels are comics. Since they are published in book form, they tend to be longer, more involved and self-contained narratives. In most cases they are neither 'graphic', in the sense of violent or sexually explicit, nor novels (cf. Chaney 2011: 4–5). When comics entered book culture, some stakeholders in the business, such as publishers, journalists, librarians, teachers and academics, chose to classify these 'graphic novels' as a completely new phenomenon. This was largely motivated by mistaking the medium for its most prominent genre – superhero comics. As a consequence, graphic novels were conceptualised as an evolved 'genre' that had surpassed its primitive ancestry in every conceivable way. This led to further complications by confusing media (e.g. comics), formats (e.g. graphic novel), genres (e.g. life writing) and sub-genres (e.g. cancer memoir). My claim is that the great divide between comics and graphic novels has more to do with cultural capital, marketing strategies and – in some cases – a lack of historical awareness. I return to these questions at the beginning of part 5.

### 4.3 Cartooning

The standard representational style of drawing in comics is called "cartooning" (McCloud 1994: 42/1; see also Wolk 2007: 118–25). It resembles a minimalist approach to representation that builds on the principle of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1994: 30/4). The cartoonist removes all the details that are not absolutely necessary, which is often the background (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 122) once it has been established, and emphasises – or even exaggerates – those elements that are deemed vital (cf. Petersen 2011: xxi). This art of reduction foregrounds the key characteristics that are meant to be noticed by readers (cf. Töpffer 1965: 6–7). Duncan, Smith and Levitz argue that comics are "reductive in creation and additive in reading" (2015: 112; see also 138; McCloud 1994: 85), as artists strongly rely on readers' ability to perceive holistically – as a gestalt – what only exists in a fragmentary fashion on the page.

Conceptual metonymy is not only a key aspect of cognitive linguistics, but one of the core principles of cartooning (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 112–3; Eisner 2006: 42–3). Duncan, Smith and Levitz highlight the fact that comics as a medium relies entirely on the readers' ability to reconstruct complete images from mere fragments: "The comic book form cannot truly show the world of the story, but can only suggest it by employing the device of synecdoche, using a part of something to represent the whole of the thing. All images on the comic book page stand for more reality than they can depict" (2015: 144). In the case of emotions, comics artists use conceptual metonymies in the sense that "gestures, postures, and facial expressions associated with an emotion can be used to represent that emotion" (2015: 113). Thus, for every close-up on a character's body – head, hand, leg etc. – we imagine an entire body interacting with the environment and for every facial expression, body posture and gesture we are able to tentatively ascribe an inner life to a character. Pascal Lefèvre describes the principle of cartooning in the following manner:

... efficient handmade pictures will leave out unnecessary details and capture salient characteristics of represented objects in ways that reflect general perceptual mechanisms and processes – e.g., through simplicity of shape, orderly grouping, clear overlapping, distinction between figure and ground, and strategic deformations of objects [...]. Stylized images may be less visually analogous to reality than filmed images, but they can very effectively capture the essence of an object or a person. Each image delivers a specific view on reality, in the process expressing a philosophy or visual ontology ... (2011: 15–16)

Ray Morris argues that this foregrounding is not limited to physical features, but includes the revelation of characters' personalities. Although he refers to political cartoons and caricature, there is a clear connection in terms of underlying principles:

Caricaturists are often representational artists, although only in a broad sense; they do not seek to show politicians literally, as the camera claims to show them. They sometimes claim to substitute inner for outer appearance, revealing by exaggeration and distortion the "true" character of the person portrayed. In doing so, they implicitly claim access to inside knowledge and a position that the person skimming their cartoons in the daily paper lacks. (1993: 196)

This compression, condensation and amplification equally affects the political context, which has to be represented and commented upon in a single image. Cartooning necessitates different types of blending, for which Ernst Gombrich uses two different concepts: 'condensation' and 'combination' (cf. Morris 1993: 200; Gombrich 1963: 130). These are so essential to an understanding of

how blending and cartooning interact that I quote Ray Morris's explanations of the terms at some length.

Gombrich's (1978) study of "The Cartoonist's Armoury" emphasized two key processes that characterized this kind of art. *Condensation* involved the compression of a complex phenomenon into a single image that is purported to capture its essence graphically. Inflation has many aspects and causes; in cartoons it may be condensed into a huge and threatening monster that towers over the President or Prime Minister. [...] Cartoons, thus, condense the complex to the simple, the unique to the archetype, the enduring to the climactic.

*Combination* refers to the blending of elements and ideas from different domains into a new composite that remains clearly identifiable as something that contains each of its constituents. Such a dual, or even multiple, signifier belongs simultaneously to two or more distinct worlds: a particular politician's face grafted onto the body of a pig or a pair of political opponents with their faces inserted onto the bodies of a cat and a mouse. The cartoonist may blend the real with the mythical, material with moral elements, or may associate politics with another field of activity such as war, courtship, sports, or housekeeping. Combination does not simply present another activity as a metaphor for politics, however, by pointing out how the relationship between two politicians parallels that between a cat and a dog. It also adds a strong element of metonymy, identifying each politician with the respective animal beyond that particular relationship and context. (1993: 200)

Condensation stays within the same domain and offers a stereotype that compresses, for example, the public persona of a politician into a single caricature, or employs a symbol that captures the essential qualities of something. Combination, however, sets up different domains as potential input spaces for blending, especially in the form of visual metaphor. Although Morris's explanation is not ideal, he seems to realise that there is more to these blends than a traditional metaphor: the new signifier clearly belongs to two separate worlds, which produces contradictions and inconsistencies, but at the same time the blend generates emergent structures that provide new and startling insights. Otherwise, the cartoon would not work as a powerful commentary on contemporary politics. What Morris describes here are double-scope networks (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 131–5). This is not surprising as the logic of blending and the circumstances of political cartooning cannot produce anything else, provided that Fauconnier and Turner's theory is correct. Based on Erving Goffman's work Morris adds 'domestication' as a third principle: "abstract ideas and distant, unfamiliar persons or events are converted into something close, familiar, and concrete. It translates what is novel and hard to understand into the commonplace by highlighting mutual elements and masking unique ones and by focusing on repetitive patterns to minimize novelty and mental adjustment"

(Morris 1993: 201). By blending Saddam Hussein and Hitler, US propaganda made the political agenda of Iraq's former leader both equally recognizable and horrific (cf. 1993: 201). Fauconnier and Turner's concern is more with human scale (cf. 2003: 322–4) than with domestication, but the same principles are at work in both cases.

The relevance of political cartooning to the study of comics is easily explained: due to a limitation to a single image and the necessity to allude to and comment upon complex political circumstances, cartoonists have to refrain from any pretence to realism. Cartoons transcend time and space, set up complex input spaces and blends (cf. Fludernik 2015) and demand a high degree of active involvement. When Elisabeth El Refaie describes one of the political cartoons she analysed for her study, she realises that there is more involved than a simple visual metaphor, which is the emergent meaning of a blend:

Rather than being produced by a simple replacement of an expected visual element with an unexpected one, the metaphor seems to emerge from the composition of several verbal and visual signs, which, through their particular relation to one another, together produce the idea of Kurdish refugees as a foreign army 'occupying' Europe. (2003: 80)

In another article she describes a depiction of George W. Bush as a toddler with a box of matches as a visual metaphor in which target and source have become fused: "In formal terms, this can be described as a monomodal metaphor of the pictorial variety, or, more specifically, as a *hybrid* [...] or *fusion* [...] metaphor, where the target and the source are visually amalgamated into one spatially bounded object" (2009: 177–8). Visual metaphors of this type are clearly double-scope blends that are ubiquitous in political cartooning, where widely diverging fields of experience are often fused to create startling effects.

Political cartoons rely almost exclusively on caricature, conceptual metonymy, metaphor, symbolism and the conceptual integration of otherwise incompatible domains. They are a test case of how much information can be condensed into a single representation without confusing the average reader. El Refaie conducted a study on cartoon reading amongst teenagers, for which she interviewed "25 young people between the ages of sixteen and nineteen in Bradford, a city with a large British Asian population" (2009: 183). Regarding her test subjects, she comments that "the young people's readings of the cartoons and the multimodal metaphors they contained reflected their very different interests and preoccupations, as well as perhaps a degree of unfamiliarity with cartoon conventions" (2009: 185; see also 192). These readers obviously did not match the usual target group for political cartoons, which have to rely on extensive political knowledge and active participation on the readers' part. You have to be 'in the know' to



recognise the more subtle details. El Refaie comments that “this lack of political background knowledge and familiarity with common cultural symbols did not prevent the vast majority of [...] respondents from understanding that the fork in the road represented a choice of future actions according to the ‘source-path-goal’ schema” (2009: 187). Thus, image schemas based on direct bodily experience of the world are more intuitively accessible than mental models exclusively shaped through education. This returns us to the question of embodied cognition, enactivism and experientiality.

In “How to Do Things with Words and Gestures in Comics” Ofer Fein and Asa Kasher argue that readers not only have a type of ‘folk psychology’ at their disposal, but also something along the lines of a “*folk pragmatics*” (1996: 794), which allows them to handle everyday social encounters, but also to make sense of characters’ interactions in fiction. Since the conventions differ somewhat between narrative media, they prefer the term “*comics pragmatics*” (1996: 794) to capture the complex interplay of visual and verbal clues: “comics most often show a speech act in a relatively rich context of utterance. In the pictures of a comic strip, one sees a character, an utterance, an immediate setting and the broader context of the short story” (1996: 794). In their study Fein and Kasher show interest in how comics allow locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to be performed as a combination of speech and gestures, with a special focus on the potential of gestures to communicate these functions independently. They try to confirm their impression that “in figurative art a gesture that accompanies a speech act is related to the force and not to the propositional content of the speech act” (1996: 796), which means that the dialogue and the context establish the communicative function, but that the gestures modulate the intensity of the proposition. As a first step, they identified the meanings of several recurring gestures and their prototypical realisations by looking at their use in a number of *Asterix* comics. Then they isolated prototypical gestures by taking out the context, the words in the speech balloons and the backgrounds. They also recreated the gestures with actors and then showed a mixture of photos and comics panels to test subjects, who had to write some possible accompanying lines and identify the meaning by picking a word from a list. The results were conclusive:

Most people had no difficulty in interpreting the comics gestures, and their interpretation was close to the original meaning of those gestures, as identified in the first part of this study of examining *Asterix* books. This finding becomes even more impressive when one takes into account the fact that the utterance and the background were erased from the comics drawings, and no contextual information (like the plot, character’s personality, etc.) was given to the subjects. (1996: 806)

This suggests that the postures of comics narration – independent of any other clues – either are close enough to real life to be immediately recognisable or they have reached a level of standardisation that they function as easily identifiable signs. While test subjects proposed a variety of utterances for each example, which can be explained through the absence of context and reflects the ability of gestures to reinforce different speech acts, the level of accuracy was still high. This study suggests that readers do not need elaborate simulations to read the emotions of characters, as the postures and gestures of cartoon characters – even without contextual clues – are sufficient for readers to recognise how they feel. Yet, the controversy within Theory of Mind between theory theory and simulation theory cannot be solved that easily by looking at some *Asterix* albums. We have to extend the exploration of how emotions are depicted in a wider range of comics and ultimately turn to Rodolphe Töpffer’s approach to cartooning for more clarification.

In “The Telling Face in Comic Strip and Graphic Novel” Ed Tan relies on Paul Ekman’s research on basic emotions and the metonymic relation between emotions and facial expressions to begin a discussion of how we determine the inner lives of characters based on their outward appearance (cf. 2001: 32–3). Tan argues that facial expressions tend to be exaggerated and stereotypical in comic strips – he uses Hergé’s *The Calculus Affair* as his prime example – which makes them “relatively clear-cut and straightforward” (2001: 35). He even claims that “comic strip characters look like personifications of the basic emotions, comparable to emblematic personifications of the passions of the soul in seventeenth century literature and art” (2001: 37). Contrary to real life, where we rarely find basic emotions in their purest forms, comic strips operate with prototypical, stereotypical or ‘idealised’ forms, which “condense subjective experience into readily recognisable highlights”:

This exaggeration of feeling, together with a complete absence of awareness and control, also lends a quality of childishness to characters. Emotionality, quick shifts of one emotion to another, e.g. from joy to utter sadness, and a lack of moderation through display rules are characteristic of infants and young children. In addition, readers may associate uncontrolled emotional expression with moral purity. It is the villains that feign emotions that they do not have, or try to transform ones they do have. (2001: 38)

One of the essential questions in this context is what Tan means by ‘basic emotions’ and ‘real life’. He insinuates that the characters have a childlike quality in the sense that small children have not internalised display rules yet and are more prone to express their feelings in an uncontrolled manner as ‘pure emotions’. When Tan speaks of ‘highlights’ he means that what the comics depict

in terms of facial expressions are fleeting, exaggerated forms at the height of emotional impact. In this sense, comic strips rely on the most easily recognisable expressions of emotions in real life, not the most realistic ones. This also has to do with the fact that emotions are processes with distinct phases that are difficult to capture in a single frame. Bart Eerden has shown that the emotions of characters in animated films are easier to read, as filmmakers can work with a gradual development and intensification (cf. 2009: 253). That is why comics artists often choose fleeting moments of intense emotional outbursts as a standard way of metonymically evoking specific feelings in a reliable way. They are also more likely to use coloured backgrounds to signal characters' emotional states (cf. 2009: 259).

Tan goes on to compare his findings to Art Spiegelman's handling of facial expressions in *MAUS*. Following Ekman (cf. 2007: 13), he conceives of emotions as processes, so the interesting question arises which moment the artist chooses to metonymically stand for the feeling. Spiegelman refrains from the pure display of excessive emotion in favour of a more subdued after-effect, e.g. when Vladek gets really angry when Françoise, Art's wife, picks up a hitch hiker: "It is indignation or rather sulking that we witness, instead of anger" (Tan 2001: 39). In *MAUS* Spiegelman's deliberate choice of a "loose drawing style with its coarse lines" leads to an "ambiguity of facial expression" that "invites the readers to use their imagination and delve deeper into the character's appraisal of the situation" (2001: 40). The characters' mask-like faces also prohibit excessive displays of raw emotions, which challenges readers to rely more on contextual clues. Tan's conclusion is the following:

Most importantly for our present concerns, in *Maus* the characters' emotions are not basic emotions in the first place, at least in comparison to the ones in *Tintin*, but perhaps also in a more absolute sense. To be sure, the novel does portray fear, anger, surprise, sadness, and some happiness too. But the emotions that matter most for the theme of the novel Vladek, Anja, Art and others seem to have, may be related to basic emotions, but not as blends [here: combining primary into secondary emotions]. It would be more accurate to say that they are much more specific than basic emotions. There is no ready-made action tendency, an affect program as in a basic emotion. In defeat, we can be numb or apathetic, we may withdraw or deny what happened, and more. Moreover, the appraisal is more spun out, complex, and specific. It seems we face a remarkable paradox: the subjectivity of the characters that the picture lends limited access to is much more profound, intricate and multi-faceted than that of the character who's [*sic*] – emotional – thoughts can be read from the drawn face. (2001: 44)

This takes us back over 150 years to 'the father of modern comics', Rodolphe Töpffer, who forwarded exactly this theory. Ellen P. Wiese credits Töpffer as

the person who began to dramatise visual narratives, which marked “the transition from illustration in the Hogarthian sense to composition of an entire story in pictorial terms” (1965: xvii; see also Gombrich 2014: 284–9; McCloud 1994: 17/3; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 8–10). In defence of Hogarth it has to be said that he turned the gaps in between the pictures of a series into productive sites of inferencing and meaning-making (cf. Kemp 1989: 64), which represents an important step in the development of visual narratives. Still, the images are highly compressed and have to capture whole contexts or stages of a development in just one composition (cf. 1989: 65), which means that the gaps in between the scenes are still substantial. Wolfgang Kemp introduces an important distinction between serial visual narratives that string together highlights or turning points of a narrative (cf. 1989: 66) and those that show the aftermath of dramatic changes that take place in between the panels (cf. 1989: 67, 72–3, 76–7). The second type actively draws attention to the gaps, as the narrative sequence does not work at all without the viewer’s active gestalt-forming. Kemp uses Hogarth’s *Before and After* (cf. 1989: 68–9) to illustrate this point, as the ill-advised sexual encounter takes place ‘off-stage’.

Töpffer referred to his picture-stories as “drama-in-sketches” (1965: 10), which is a significant departure from previous visual narratives, as the scenes had to be ‘acted out’ over several panels instead of condensed into a single image. This decompression of the essence of a scene into an ongoing development in which the turning points become embedded in a continuous narrative is an important step in the evolution of storytelling in pictures. It introduces more context, the mundane and everyday, just like the novel did in its infancy, which makes character development possible and allows for a less teleological drive towards fixed points, maybe even allowing for doubts, failures and alternative routes not taken. The necessity to narrativise his characters’ pedestrian adventures and to make their emotions and experiences visually accessible came with its own challenges. Wiese explains Töpffer’s ambitions as an attempt to develop an “intelligible grammar of physiognomic expression” that managed to “convey precise information to the observer” (1965: xviii). However, Töpffer was not interested in the minute details of facial expressions, but rather in a holistic approach that would manage to capture a whole message in one easily recognisable general impression. Wiese summarises Töpffer’s artistic vision in the following manner:

It is a great waste of time, says Töpffer, to polish up a vocabulary of classic noses, foreheads, and ears, all drawn after the plaster casts on the shelves of art schools. We do not read a set of features by itemizing them: we note the pattern of their relationships. Begin by conceiving a face in its entirety and dash it down as fast as possible; put another

beside it and perhaps a third; then ask yourself which one you would care to invite to dinner. (1965: xviii)

Thus, the essential qualities of characters were to be communicated through configurations of facial features and poses (cf. 1965: 33) that gained their meaning from the contrast with other configurations rather than their intrinsic meaning (cf. 1965: xix-xx). This Saussurean notion *avant la lettre* was necessary to differentiate his own approach from the widespread physiognomic theories that attached precise meanings to specific traits (cf. 1965: xx). Töpffer's signs are not arbitrary, though, because they appear as involuntary "symptoms" or "reflexes" (1965: xxii) on people's faces in concrete situations and tied to specific emotional states. This corresponds to the legibility of basic emotions.

The most important distinction that Töpffer makes, however, is between permanent and non-permanent signs. Since he rejects traditional physiognomy and phrenology (cf. Töpffer 1965: 15–17), he believes that permanent signs, the bodily features of people, do not signify anything. They are just genetic variations without meaning. The non-permanent signs, however, facial expressions and body postures during brief moments of intense emotions, are both systematic and easily recognisable: "Non-permanent signs depict all the soul's evanescent or accidental emotions and anxieties, like laughter, rage, melancholy, scorn, surprise, etc. – all that we include in the general term *feelings*" (1965: 17; see also 22). These have a strong physiological and metonymic tie to the emotions that produce them and are thus reliable signs of the inner lives of humans that would otherwise be very hard to capture in visual terms.

This focus on moments of intense emotions makes Töpffer's sign language melodramatic, but more accessible, as it is based on human experience. He claims that it "possesses extreme clarity" (1965: 3), which allows us to link Töpffer's approach to the concept of embodiment, cartooning and Tan's discussion of *Tintin*. Combined with a specific context – the single sign within a configuration of signs and the entire configuration within a specific situation – Töpffer's visualised body language is intended to be instantly recognisable. Readers do not have to learn this code, as it is a more systematic elaboration of what is already out there in the social sphere. Since certain configurations consistently appear together, the single sign can evoke metonymically both the other signs and the emotional state associated with it. In other words, a particular posture of a character may invite readers to expect a particular facial expression, a certain mood and maybe even a reason for the state the character is in. In contrast to this artful arrangement, we often struggle to read the more subdued signs in everyday social encounters: "every minute of the day we are obliged to correct mistakes in

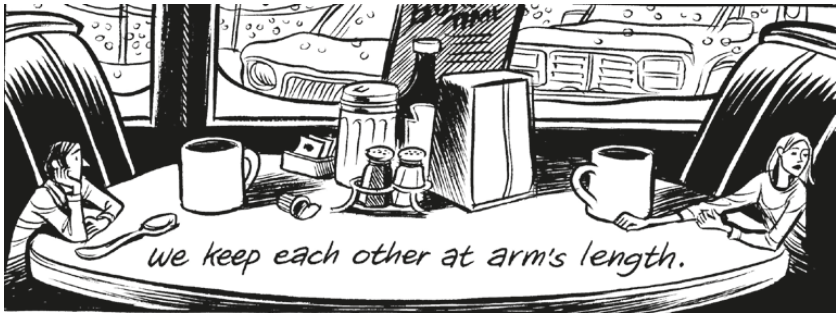
our interpretation of faces, mistakes which result from the unreliable nature of the permanent expressive signs” (1965: 19). It should be apparent how Töpffer’s alternative to the stereotypes of traditional physiognomy runs the risk of turning into a fairly stereotypical and rigid system itself (cf. Wiese 1965: xxvii). Töpffer’s approach invites a direct connection to present-day research in conceptual visual and multimodal metaphors, which raise the question whether stereotypical depictions of emotions are directly grounded in embodied experiences or have become purely symbolic and a rudimentary language on their own (cf. Forceville 2005: 71).

A visual or multimodal metaphor (cf. Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009) often combines target and source within the same frame, in most cases in the form of a blend. In Charles Forceville’s contribution to the volume *Multimodal Metaphor*, entitled “Non-Verbal and Multimodal Metaphor in a Cognitivist Framework: Agendas for Research”, he lists nine basic modes that can be combined in multiple ways: “(1) pictorial signs; (2) written signs; (3) spoken signs; (4) gestures; (5) sounds; (6) music (7) smells; (8) tastes; (9) touch” (2009: 23; see also Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009: 4). This could suggest that we have to interpret these modes independently and then combine them to understand the underlying meaning, but Francisco Yus suggests the exact opposite in his own contribution to the same volume:

In this chapter, on the contrary, it is claimed that the comprehension of verbal, visual and multimodal metaphors involves similar mental procedures. Although the perception of images differs from linguistic decoding, reaching an interpretation of metaphors entails similar adjustments of conceptual information of texts and images and multimodal combinations, regardless of the modal quality of the input. (2009: 147)

In other words, we recognise the conceptual metaphor holistically without analysing the contributing modes and their interrelations in detail. For example, we can rely on the redundancy of the text to grant us access to a metaphor through a single mode or on our familiarity with the metaphor itself to which we have already metonymically attached various entailments in different modes. Our mental network of the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, to which we shall return presently, may already come with representations in different modes.

For an analysis of comics, the most obvious combination is pictorial with written signs, for which Miloš Tasić and Dušan Stamenković propose an equally obvious typology, involving “image-dominant” (2015: 119), “text-dominant” (2015: 120) and “complementary” (2015: 121) combinations. They even present an example from Thompson’s *Blankets* (2007: 360/4 → Fig. 1):



**Fig. 1:** *Blankets* (360/4). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

Here, we find monomodal metaphors for both the verbal and the visual track and then a combination of the two in which the text is integrated in such a way that it becomes spatially meaningful to the multimodal metaphor as a whole.

The depiction of anger often includes literal rendering of the cognitive metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER (cf. Forceville 2005: 71; Kövecses 2010: 123–6). Since specific conceptual metaphors are incapable of covering every aspect of an emotion, there have to be more source domains that allow for very different mappings: fire, insanity, a caged animal, wild animal behaviour, trespassing etc. (cf. Forceville 2005: 72). The more important observation concerning the present circumstances is the metonymic principle that “THE PHYSIOLOGICAL AND EXPRESSIVE RESPONSES OF AN EMOTION STAND FOR THE EMOTION” (2005: 72). What has to be explored is whether these signs form a language that is precise and stereotypical enough to immediately indicate the corresponding emotions.

Charles Forceville analysed the depiction of anger in an *Asterix* album (cf. 2005) to see whether the visual indicators could be grouped and systematically studied as “pertinent signs” (2005: 75) that reliably and directly indicated this particular emotion. This work was continued by Bart Eerden, who offers a comparison between depictions of anger in *Asterix* comics and their animated film adaptations (cf. 2009), and Forceville himself in the more specific context of pictorial runes (cf. 2011). These are indexical signs that point towards an inner state to which they are metonymically linked: “Since anger is an abstract concept, it by definition defies iconic representation, and can hence only be rendered by means of indexical and symbolic signs” (2005: 73). He sets out to demonstrate “that pictorial runes denoting anger in comics are not arbitrary signs, but



signs metonymically motivated by one or more anger ICMs, just as, according to Kövecses, verbal manifestations are motivated by these models” (2005: 74). However, Forceville starts on a much broader scale that includes postures, gestures and facial expressions as pictorial signals. Since anger is conceptualised as hot liquid contained in or coming out of a pressure cooker, closed eyes and mouths, clenched fists or limbs pressed tightly against the body can be read as attempts to contain anger. Bulging eyes, red faces and shaking bodies signal to readers that the character is about to explode. Open mouths plus steam, spit, spirals or elongated droplets emanating from characters’ heads, but also pointing at other characters, signal that the pressure is being forcefully released in a particular direction (cf. 2005: 75–7, 80–2). This is usually accompanied by typographical signs for shouting in speech balloons – large fonts, capital letters, bold face type, exclamation marks – and lightning-like connectors to the characters’ mouths (cf. 2005: 77). Forceville concludes “first of all that the pictorial runes signaling anger appear indeed to be Peircean indexes rather than Peircean symbols, since they are motivated rather than arbitrary signs” (2005: 82). He shows that the entailments or surface realisations of both verbal and visual expressions can be traced back to an underlying conceptual metaphor: ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A (PRESSURISED) CONTAINER. Forceville observes that frequently “panels in this Asterix album depict anger effects *before* and *after* an outburst takes place” (2005: 83). Judging from the evidence he provides, I would argue that most images are easy to read as they capture direct outbursts or moments close to the peak, which is in line with Töpffer’s approach and contrasts with Tan’s observations about alternative comics or art comics that are more subtle in this respect. The only exception is smoke rising from Asterix’s head (cf. 2005: 79), which is indicative of a cooling-off phase rather than heightened emotions. As some of the pictorial signals could easily indicate very different emotions on their own – e.g. a red face as a sign of being in love (cf. 2005: 84) – visual clues usually produce redundancy by appearing in combinations: “It is important to emphasize that no pictorial sign single-handedly cues anger: signs combine to suggest anger, and the more signs are used, the more clear-cut and/or the more intense the anger is” (2005: 84). As a final comment it has to be added that signs that appear completely independent of the expressive powers of the characters’ anatomy – such as background colours, setting or weather (cf. 2005: 86) – are equally capable of signalling characters’ emotions.

In *Blankets* Thompson does not shy away from basic emotions, especially in the sequences depicting his childhood. He raises the bar in later chapters, when the simple love story of two teenagers is complicated by circumstances, such as Raina’s turbulent family life. When we look at various expressions of



Craig's anger (12/4; 21/8; 58/2), they may vary in their expressiveness, but they are equally easy to read. The same applies to the following example (16 → Fig. 2), where we find 'voice-over' narration by the older self and narrating I, combined with a 'perception shot' (cf. Mikkonen 2015: 103), which is a combination of a third-person visual point of view with a metaphorical rendering by Thompson of his brother's thoughts and feelings at the time, in this case horror, which is visualised through spiders, monsters and demons. We see Phil's bulging eyes staring in disbelief at his father's horrendous preparations of the cubby hole as a spare bedroom, bracing himself with arms crossed in front of his slender body. The mattress's teeth are again a simple way of turning an everyday object into a devouring monstrosity. Phil's father puts a lot of effort into expanding the bed and his close-knit eyes capture that strain perfectly. The demons are just outlines whose limbs are literally twisted to illustrate their perverted nature. All of this makes the image more legible by foregrounding the essential elements and leaving out anything else.

It has to be accepted that cartooning as an art form automatically and unavoidably leads to exaggeration and stereotypes (cf. Kukkonen 2013a: 16; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 114). This general deviation from any naturalistic claim is usually exploited to establish a level of metaphoric distortions that would not be possible in other, more realistic or highbrow media. In *Blankets* Craig's cartoon father is disproportionately large, based on the conceptual metaphor that POWER IS SIZE. There are several examples of this to be found in the book (Thompson 2007: 13/4; 203/4; 206/2). Emotions are often represented as so powerful that they distort the established physical features of a character to such an extent that they are hardly recognisable any longer (e.g. 2007: 12/2; 12/4).

Returning to the example (→ Fig. 2), Thompson blends two perspectives into one. This leads to a mismatch, as the standard distance for a reaction shot in film is at least a medium close-up; the horrific scene, however, calls for a wide shot to present the overwhelming horror of the dark hole. Thompson's composition has to accommodate both. A first step is to make the panel larger, so that we can see the details, especially Phil's facial expression. Thompson removed the background, placed the character in the middle and framed him inside the door to draw our attention to him. The white space behind Phil contrasts sharply with the cluttered space of the panel, draws the character closer to the 'camera' and the immanent threats, which is achieved through a lack of depth cues, and reminds readers that Phil's attention is completely focused on the horror in front of his eyes. This compression of depth simulates the effect of a telephoto lens. The world outside the room has ceased to exist, which metaphorically emphasises the claustrophobia and isolation he feels. Mr. Thompson, the monstrous folding bed

*Uninsulated, unlit, and uninhabited - except by spiders and vermin (we heard skittering within the walls at night) and a few dust-filled cardboard boxes,*



*the cubby hole was best  
LEFT forgotten.*

16

**Fig. 2:** *Blankets* (16). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

and the demons are significantly larger than Phil and, thus, threatening, but their marginality keeps readers' attention firmly in the middle. Both the monster's tongue and one of its teeth overlap with Phil's body, signifying imminent danger. Thompson also employs what resembles a 'canted shot' or 'Dutch angle', which is typical of thrillers, and adds distortions to make the scene even more foreboding.

I stop the analysis at this point, although it would be possible to add further details, such as an interpretation of the narrator's verbal framing of the scene. Despite this attempt to clarify how exactly Thompson managed to build redundancy into this image and convey the same idea in a multiplicity of ways, the carefully arranged clues all point in a single direction: that Phil is struck with fear. Cartooning allows Thompson to foreground and amplify what is important to notice: Phil's eyes, light vs. dark, twisted monsters and an overbearing, pitiless father who is about to crush his younger son. All of this is instantly recognisable, whereas a detailed analysis of narration and focalisation would add layers of complexity without contributing anything significant to readers' interpretations of the scene. Surprisingly, this argument comes directly from Mikkonen, a leading comics narratologist, who states "that it may not always matter that much to the reader or viewer of comics who is responsible for the showing or organising of the images, or indeed if 'anyone' is showing or seeing at all. The authority behind particular choices in the images, or their perspective, may remain indeterminate without blocking our understanding of the story" (2017: 136). Thompson can simply rely on readers' embodied cognition, their intuitive understanding of body language and image schemas, but also a whole range of conceptual metaphors that have been derived from them. As Fein and Kasher demonstrate, we could isolate a medium close-up of Phil and show the image to random test subjects without any context and without all the redundancy built into the image. Still, many of them would be able to read Phil's body language, even if they had to construe scenarios that match their interpretations. For a comics "narratology in action" (Benton 1992: 51), such a reading of characters' physical and emotional entanglements in particular scenes has to play a more important role. At the same time, the presented perspectives *do* play a role. How are we supposed to read Phil's emotions in Thompson's autobiographical fiction? No matter if we look at it from the angle of Iser's coordination of perspectives (cf. 1980: 35, 169), Keen's empathy (cf. 2010) or Dancygier's viewpoint compression (cf. 2012: 112), readers have to understand Phil's predicament as part of a larger picture. In the next chapter we look at four basic tensions that readers have to mitigate in their transactions with comics.

## 4.4 An Art of Tensions

I borrow this chapter title from Charles Hatfield (cf. 2005: v), who believes that a comics theory that does not acknowledge “a reader’s active engagement and collaboration in making meaning” (Hatfield 2005: 33) misses the point. Like other proponents of a reader-response approach he embraces potentially diverse readings that comics may prompt: “Comics are challenging (and highly teachable) because they offer a form of reading that resists coherence, a form at once seductively visual and radically fragmented. Comic art is a mixed form, and reading comics a tension-filled experience” (2005: xiii). He resents the fact that they are considered “either useful as stepping-stones” for proper/linguistic literacy or even “worse than useless” as a medium in their own right (2005: 36). The aim of his book is to demonstrate the unique literary qualities of comics that only become apparent when they are read as a medium different from prose.

Accordingly, he introduces his theory as a series of four tensions that readers have to negotiate and bridge to make sense of a comics narrative. Hatfield argues that “the possibility of generating meaning” is predicated on “the manipulation of tensions inherent in the reading experience” (2005: 39). Artists can use these gaps productively, which is also one of Iser’s central tenets. Hatfield classifies the four tensions in the following way: “between *codes* of signification; between the *single image* and the *image-in-series*; between narrative *sequence* and page *surface*; and, more broadly, between reading-as-*experience* and the text as material *object*” (2005: 36). I follow this structure and highlight in each case how a reader-response approach based on cognitive theories can be brought in line with seminal publications in comics studies.

### 4.4.1 Words vs. Images

For many critics “the co-presence and interplay of image and written text” (Hatfield 2005: 36) is a *conditio sine qua non* for their definitions of the medium. Despite Will Eisner’s observation that comics narratives rely on “a visual experience common to both creator and audience” (2006: 7), thus foregrounding the importance of embodied cognition, he also describes them as a “successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose” (2006: 8). As the title of Hatfield’s study *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* reveals, he intends to demonstrate the narrative sophistication of comics and promotes the medium as a suitable art form for longer, more intricate, adult-oriented and literary narratives. Hescher identifies Hatfield’s ‘alternative comics’ of the 1990s as an important phase in the evolution of graphic novels (cf. 2016: 15), while Baetens and Frey take this one step further and declare that “the narrator is much more present, both

verbally and visually, than in the case of a comic book” (2015: 10). Their close association of the graphic novel with documentary genres – and autobiography in particular – draws attention to such concepts as eye-witnessing and testimony. According to this logic, sustained verbal narration has become a much more acceptable and widespread phenomenon in graphic novels, which is arguably true, as long as we look at bestsellers in life writing, such as Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* or Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. This trend has a number of important consequences: prose readers find it easier to transition into comics, literary adaptations become more viable, there seem to be more continuities with the established literary canon and the ‘Guardians of the Gutenberg Galaxy’ are more inclined to embrace genres and formats that sound familiar: autobiography and the novel. While ‘graphic literature’ may represent a successful blend between a popular art form and high culture, underestimating the visual mode may lead to complications.

While Groensteen acknowledges “that comics are essentially a mixture of text and images” (2007: 3), he is eager “to demonstrate the primacy of the image” (2007: 3). Next to the wider acceptance of literary, narration-focused graphic novels, there has always been a strong tendency in comics criticism to foreground commonalities with film rather than with prose. This is not without its own problems (cf. e.g. Mikkonen 2017: 2), but it shifts the focus towards a shared visual language that is explored in transmedial narratology (cf. e.g. Thon 2014; 2015), multimodal analysis (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Machin 2011), the more education-focused concepts of visual literacy, multiliteracies (cf. Serafini 2014; Elsner 2013; Stafford 2011; Hecke & Surkamp 2010; Cazden et al. 1996) and critical media literacy (cf. Janks et al. 2014; Baker 2012; Scheibe & Rogow 2012; Seidl 2007). Kai Mikkonen’s more recent monograph on comics narration explicitly excludes words as essential features:

When the pictorial or the verbal character of comics (or the idea of images in succession) has been deemed to be too prominent, the corrective move has shifted the theoretical perspective in favour of the visual component and graphic art, or vice versa. However, there is just so much variety in comics – that is, in works that are produced, recognised as and called ‘comics’ – in their blendings of images and words, or their emphasis on one or the other, that the interplay between words and images does not provide us with any self-evident starting point for a comprehensive theory of narrative comics. The rich tradition of wordless comics will also always be hard to accommodate within such definitions. (2017: 15)

Mikkonen’s argument is caught in between his acknowledgement of readers’ independent meaning-making processes and his background in narratological theory, which takes the intense study of texts by academic specialists as the

standard way of looking at the material. Transmedial narratology has to overcome the trap of combining classical narratology with film studies and applying these theories to comics. Researchers are primed to look at panels as if they were shots or stills, which are both imperfect analogies at best. From an educational perspective, narratological approaches would have to change in two significant ways to become more widely applicable: a reorientation towards the needs of general readers and their meaning-making processes as well as a sustained attention to scenes instead of hand-picked, highly unusual examples. This mediation between theory and practical application has to come from educators instead.

A simple activity for the classroom is to isolate the verbal track of a comics scene, such as verbal narration or dialogues, and study them first. This provides students with an entry point that they are familiar with, but the real aim is to illustrate the disadvantages of an exclusive focus on the words, which is the most widespread beginner's mistake. I have already highlighted why sustained verbal narration is both a blessing and a curse: it makes comics more accessible to readers of prose, but it takes more effort to wean them away from words. Suitable examples should contain enough information to be decipherable on their own and enable students to arrive at a general understanding. However, since comics dramatise situations and show characters interacting in very specific contexts, we find a plethora of paralinguistic signs that provide important information about the ongoing conversation. As with stage performances or films, all aspects of *mise-en-scène* contribute to a holistic impression in their own unique ways. I have extracted a complete verbal exchange from Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2007: 54–5), which is both a self-contained scene and a turning point in chapter 1 that introduces Craig to the idea of dedicating his life to God in a much more serious fashion:

**Pastor:** Hello, Craig.

**Craig:** Hey, Pastor. Thanks for the sermon.

**Pastor:** School's started up again, isn't it?

**Craig:** Unfortunately.

**Pastor:** Ha ha ha So is this your senior year?

**Craig:** yup

**Pastor:** Well, do you have any plans concerning what you'll do after high school?

**Craig:** You mean like career plans? Uh . . . no . . . um, go with the flow, I guess?

**Pastor:** Have you considered going into the ministry?

**Craig:** uh . . .

I want to do what God wants me to do.

**Pastor:** I think God wants you to go into the ministry.

This exchange sets in motion a complex dynamic of shifting allegiances that have Craig dedicate his life to his faith, his love interest Raina and his art at different stages of his development and often in conflict with each other. A direct consequence of this conversation is a renewed interest in reading the Bible and Craig's need "to burn everything I'd ever drawn" (2007: 57/3). What students take away from this scene during a first reading may be nothing more than Craig's hesitation concerning his future life, which is almost a cliché for older teens during their senior year in secondary school and an experience that is quite relatable. More unusual, however, is the potential career choice of pastor, which illustrates how students identify with characters in degrees rather than in absolute terms.

Since *Blankets* relies almost exclusively on visuals, it was hard to find an 'elaborate' dialogue that contained enough details to make sense on its own. In the present scene, there is no voice-over narration, which is typical of *Blankets* and Thompson's strategy to make past experiences vicariously available to readers as if they were taking place right in front of their eyes, independent of the narrator's framing. The aim of the suggested activity is to intentionally withhold essential information at first, which naturally invites elaboration. What remains is an impoverished, slightly boring verbal exchange. It may be worthwhile to have students read the scene in a dramatic manner – or even act it out – after determining the beats of the exchange and adapting intonation and tone of voice to fit the intentions of the two characters. According to Robert McKee's *Story* (1997), a manual for screenwriting, beat is "the smallest element of structure" within a scene, "an exchange of behavior in action/reaction" (1997: 37). Generally speaking, beats are essential to pacing, rhythm and movement, which are marked by changing speech acts and emotional states (cf. 1997: 258). The suggested activity requires some imagination, as the 'embodied dialogue' has been deliberately removed, but it is still possible to guess the speech acts and potential reactions from the verbal track alone. Consider now how this scene is presented in the book (2007: 54–5 → Fig. 3 & 4):

We find an 'establishing shot' at the beginning (Community Bible Church; 54/1) and a large transitional panel at the end (55/5) that indicates the passing of time, the season of the year, the kind of landscape in which Craig grew up and/or potentially his mood. It is not framed. The second panel on the same page (55/2) also lacks a frame, whereas the last one on the previous page has two (54/6). Seven panels show the Pastor and Craig within the same frame (54/2–5; 55/1, 3–4), but only two Craig on his own (54/6; 55/2), which correspond directly to the one with two borders (54/6) and the one without (55/2). Two panels have a black background (54/4; 55/1), one is grey (54/6) and six are white (54/2–3, 5; 55/2–4). Only one panel (54/3) shows the physical backdrop to the scene and the





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Fig. 3: *Blankets* (54). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.





Fig. 4: *Blankets* (55). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

two characters in context; all the others range from a medium distance to close-ups. Every panel contains very explicit gestures (e.g. a handshake, Craig's left hand scratching his head, the Pastor's hand on Craig's shoulder), body postures (e.g. hunched, hands in trouser pockets, arms crossed in front of chest, arms spread out wide), gazes (e.g. eye contact vs. looking away or towards the floor) and facial expressions (e.g. initial smile, hesitation, slight trepidation). Craig is consistently shown to face left, which is the past in visual design (cf. Machin 2011: 139–41).

As with Mikkonen's discussion of *Saga* (cf. 2017: 92), these visual features are largely meaningless without the dialogue/conversation to which they belong, the specific sequence of the panels in which they appear and the overall context of the scene. Students can easily identify Craig's overall hesitation throughout, which is repeatedly and thus redundantly suggested, both verbally (e.g. 'Uh', 'um', 'I guess?') and visually (e.g. scratching his head, shrugging his shoulders). What they may not sufficiently notice at first is how Craig's various reactions to the Pastor's questions are distinct enough to warrant a closer look. These are the beats that are mostly initiated by the pastor's speech acts and responded to by Craig: greeting, asking for his future plans in the form of three increasingly more specific questions and finally making a suggestion twice – first presented as a question (55/1) and then as God's will (55/4), which offers an answer to Craig's embodied question what he is supposed to do with his life (55/3). There may be an overall strategy on the Pastor's part to corner Craig and influence his career in a specific way, while Craig hesitates and attempts to avoid a conversation about his lack of orientation in life.

It is helpful to contrast and compare the dramatisation in the comic with the students' predictions, their first read-through in pairs or an enactment that, as a learner text, serves the meaning-making process and leads to a further exploration of the comic. Naturally, students compress beats into scenes, but Thompson decided to decompress this memory (assuming that this actually happened) and have it develop over two pages, so there may be more to it than meets the eye during a first reading. The most important realisation has to be that the verbal and visual signs are only meaningful together and that they come in multimodal configurations tied to specific beats in the scene. In literature such moves are carefully orchestrated and designed. I have already suggested that the Pastor may be trying to win Craig over and that the latter is hesitant, but how exactly does this conversation progress?

Comics do not only have panels and pages, but also tiers, which are all the panels in one horizontal line from the left to the right margin of a page. In this scene we almost have a direct correspondence between beats and tiers: greeting

(54/2); asking for Craig's future plans (54/3–6); suggesting service in the ministry (55/1–2); and Craig's 'question' what to do, answered by the Pastor (55/3–4). The 'embodied dialogue' is more nuanced than the verbal exchange and we find significantly different expressions in every panel. These facial expressions and body postures allow us to 'read' Craig's emotional states, which may leave some room for interpretation. In contrast to the ostentatious display of basic emotions that we find in the childhood memories, this scene presents more subdued emotions as processes that develop over several panels. Yet, this dialogue takes place within a contextual frame that we experience as an integrated whole and foregrounds themes that we have encountered before. Apart from the verbal and embodied dialogue we detect additional markers that provide punctuation and emphasis. In my formal analysis above I chose to highlight two strategies – background colours and framing – to move beyond film terminology, which also provides some valuable orientation (e.g. the 'establishing shot' in the first panel; 54/1). Our distance to the characters plays a role, as we notice a 'long shot' (54/3) followed by an extreme 'close-up' (54/4). The final panel on page 54 (54/6) looks like a 'subjective shot' from the Pastor's literal point of view that is also a 'high-angle shot'. However, I want to draw attention to the panels with a black background that mark the two turning points in the conversation: What are your plans for the future? Have you considered going into the ministry? In both cases we find an immediate emotional reaction that is rendered as lines under Craig's eyes (54/4; 55/1). These are diffuse, pre-conscious emotions that are hard to read, but seem to signal general embarrassment (cf. 185/4; 186/2). Thompson adds a panel in each case that allows Craig to rationalise and appraise his emotions and thus provides more subtlety of expression.

In the first case (54/6) we find a panel that is framed twice. In addition to that, a change in orientation from landscape (54/5) to portrait (54/66) signals entrapment. There is not a lot of space left within which Craig could operate – both mentally and physically, which is already anticipated in panels 54/4–5. Frames are often used like this in a metaphorical sense, relying on our embodied experience of how it feels to be trapped. Based on Craig's religious upbringing and the setting of the scene, shame could play a significant role. This is made more explicit in the following sequence (2007: 56–61), where he is overcome with a strong feeling that he has wasted his life with trivial matters – especially in the form of drawing/cartooning. In the second instance (55/1) we see an enormous Pastor hovering above Craig, who seems to feel intimidated. Yet, on second thoughts, the Pastor's suggestion appears to be a way out of his misery (55/2). In contrast to the previous exchange, we now have a panel without any border. While Craig cannot verbalise yet how he feels about the proposal, we can see

some change: from having nowhere to go (54/6) to new possibilities (55/2). There is some 'headspace' now, which was previously taken up by his own confused excuses (54/6). The background has changed accordingly: we find grey for Craig's undecided drifting through life (54/6), black for emotional impact and seriousness (55/1) and then white for a clean slate and new possibilities (55/2). Craig regains some agency – an interpretation that depends on whether one reads this scene as the Pastor's ploy or a real perspective for Craig – and initiates the fourth move in the conversation: Craig's open arms signal an indirect question and an invitation to the Pastor to provide guidance. What does all of this mean for reading and teaching?

First of all, this is my interpretation based on some of the textual clues, but there are many more details to discover: there are two panels in which Craig does not have a mouth (54/4; 55/4), though he utters a 'yup' in the first case; Craig turns away from the Pastor (54/5) to escape questions about his future (54/4–5); the Pastor and Craig hold on to their bibles in a strikingly similar fashion (55/1); the pastor's height and proximity to Craig vary from panel to panel to fit the specific moment; the way the pastor reinforces his declaration of God's will by putting his left hand on Craig's shoulder etc. There is no point in forcing one's own interpretation onto the students, nor does it make sense to engage in a narratological analysis in twelve distinct categories that would dissolve a contextual frame into its constituent parts that tell readers little about the overall meaning. Students should work on their own interpretations by going into some more depth and pick those clues that they find significant. Panels are foregrounded by framing them in numerous ways (e.g. 54/4; 54/6; 55/1; 55/2), so students are likely to find some support for their ideas. There is also no need to over-interpret sequences as long as students signal that they have a more differentiated view than the most blatantly obvious. This can easily be achieved through a stage 5 rereading task.

Projecting page 54 as a starting point for a classroom discussion and asking students what the double frame means in panel 54/6 would be the exact opposite of what I have proposed so far in this thesis: students do not have any time to refamiliarise themselves with the scene; they cannot share and negotiate their own interpretations; only one student gets to speak instead of several at the same time in pair or group work; the person who volunteers feels the pressure to get the answer right in front of the whole group; and it picks out a random visual element without discussing the context first. The question also implies that there is a correct answer and that the teacher knows what it is. Instead, global understanding has to come first, with students working on and comparing their own

readings, so that the interpretation of textual features results from such meaning-making processes in pairs and groups.

Having established the close ties between words and visuals, it has to be stressed that they may be employed to contradict each other strategically and tell very different stories. McCloud introduces seven types of word and picture relations (cf. 1994: 152–5), which have to be seen on scale (cf. 1994: 155). The most important one – and thus a part of many definitions of comics – is interdependence (cf. 1994: 155), which we have just encountered in the conversation about Craig’s future plans. While McCloud offers some unusual choices (e.g. duo-specific, parallel), he forgets about ‘counterpoint’, which is a staple of picture book studies (cf. Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 17–26). In fact, the concept is so central to this field of research that Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott discuss it at great length and introduce eight major subcategories (cf. 2006: 24–6). For the following scene (cf. Thompson 2007: 51–2) “Counterpoint in genre or modality” (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 24) is the most appropriate description: while the verbal track captures Craig’s childhood aspirations, the visuals depict a fall from grace during his teenage years. On pages 51–2 we read: “At that moment [after hearing about eternal life in Sunday School in contrast to the insignificant physical existence on Earth], I knew what I wanted . . . I wanted Heaven. And I grew up STRIVING for that world - - an ETERNAL world - - that would wash away my TEMPORARY misery” (2007: 51–2 → Fig. 5 & 6):

While the narrator keeps talking about his childhood dream of ascending to heaven, we see various incarnations of teenage Craig falling – from heaven – into the dark world of physical existence – all naked, a flesh and blood human being, with his penis visible in two of the panels. Through compression two parallel movements are blended together: while his aspiration takes him upwards, his body in full puberty drags him downwards towards earthly existence. We first see Craig as a child, probing the clouds with his toes to find out whether they would carry him, but then he falls through, his developing body twisting and turning uncontrollably. Every single panel skips a few years and Craig hits the ground as a 17-year-old young man who has no idea how to reconcile the physical and the spiritual. Page 52 is a paradigmatic example of double-scope blending, as it literalises the ‘fall of man’, uses Craig as a stand-in for all mankind, associates it with puberty/sexuality and, more specifically, with Craig’s teenage years, and compresses time and identity into singularity in the blended space. Craig’s fall from grace becomes a single literal fall representing countless real-life events of failing to live up to his aspirations. While Craig’s specific life contributes a concrete example of how the fall of man could be understood in a



**Fig. 5:** *Blankets* (51). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

present-day context, the Biblical story provides a specific framing of Craig's life and dramatises his experiences as going beyond the usual teenage trepidations.

It is an interesting choice on Thompson's part to associate the high ideals with voice-over narration and the logoi, whereas reality – the naked truth – is represented as the visualisation of contorted teenage bodies. Puberty serves as an easily accessible context for this scene, although the religious subtext may be



**Fig. 6:** *Blankets* (52). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.



lost on some readers. At the same time, aspirations in any field and the reality of underachievement can easily substitute for it as an alternative frame for readers' attempts to interpret this sequence. Overall, Thompson refrains from extensive retrospective commentary in captions to let the scenes he unravels in front of our eyes 'speak' for themselves. Yet, presuming we could witness the experiences of the artist's younger selves more directly as compared to the narrator's retrospective commentary is clearly an illusion, as the source of the images is exactly the same as for the verbal text. Still, readers tend to judge the dramatisation of scenes as more immediate and directly accessible, despite the fact that they are reconstructions of real-life events at best, often created many years after they took place. Through its high metaphoricality page 52 serves as an ostentatious reminder that there is a shaping presence that arranges the material, which undermines the illusion of direct access.

Groensteen argues that images create a sense of the "*here and now*" (2013: 87), which is even encoded in English grammar: in contrast to the past tense of verbal narration, speakers describe the scenes that are depicted in images in the present progressive, as if they were happening at this moment in time, right in front of our eyes. Readers are likely to recognise a tension in comics between the 'pastness' of verbal narration and the readers' experience of 'eye-witnessing' the very same events in the present (cf. 2013: 108), which means that creator and recipient operate within different time frames. The autobiographer's outlook is retrospective and follows the logic of the present perfect tense – a series of events that have led to a result in the present – an end point that the narration is supposed to reach in classical autobiography. Readers are experiencing past events as the present in the form of a visual dramatisation and speculate in the future tense about the autobiographer's present that the narrative may eventually reach. This inverse dynamic functions as a guarantee to readers that the depicted events are worthy of their attention, as the author is assumed to have an overall plan for the development of the narrative. This tension and interplay between the verbal and the visual is a key factor in autobiographical comics and essential to an understanding of the genre in this specific medium.

Readers may not consciously notice how they gradually slip into a more dramatised form of presentation when a narrative voice eases them into a story and then gradually fades away, while the actors take over. This is a significant transition in (auto)biographical comics, when the recounting of events is replaced by re-enactment. Authors in their roles as autobiographers and 'puppet masters' in the background take out "the paper marionettes" (Groensteen 2013: 121) and let the show begin. This may seem somewhat cynical, as a trick performed at the expense of readers, but the creative unfolding or decompression of the authors' tightly compressed memories and personal



stories allows for the flavour and qualia of personal experiences that would otherwise be lost. What readers should hope for is a taste of what it felt like to be those individuals many years ago instead of expecting the factual truth about the writers' lives.

A final point that has to be addressed in this context is the artificial separation of visual and verbal tracks in comics. It has already become clear that, most of the time, both contribute to the ongoing narration in equal measure, but they are also much more alike than usually acknowledged. Eisner highlights the fact that the letters of many alphabets – such as Chinese and Japanese – are abstracted pictographs or symbolic signs that developed out of iconic signs via several iterations (cf. 2006: 14–15). Comics are a reminder of the interrelatedness of all signs, for example in the form of lettering and typography. These offer much more flexibility in visually communicating the paraverbal aspects of speech, such as volume, pitch and intonation (cf. Khordoc 2001: 164–5). Typography can even serve the advancement of the narrative. One striking example can be found in chapter VI of *Blankets*, where Craig's confession of love – rendered in personal hand-writing – is answered by Raina in type: "OH CRAIG" (cf. 2007: 346–7). While the words themselves provide some indication, it is their visualisation that reveals to readers that she cannot afford to be the starry-eyed lover that Craig chooses to be.

In comics, the distinction between verbal and visual signs can become blurred, as hand-lettering and conventions allow for a much more fluid interrelation. Some or even all the words in speech balloons can be visually modified or replaced by symbols. These may also serve as conventionalised indicators of the tone of voice in addition to the words. It is not unusual for balloons to contain just punctuation, such as exclamation marks, question marks or a series of full stops, to indicate confusion, surprise or a sudden realisation (cf. Khordoc 2001: 170). The shape, size, colour and outline of captions and balloons (cf. 2001: 163) provide additional information on how the comics narrative appeals to "the mind's ear" (2001: 156) of the reader. As the number of words a single character can use is strictly limited, "the speech balloon is a very dense source of information" (2001: 159). It has to fit the overall visual pattern of balloons, the character's position in the panel, his or her general (vocal) behaviour, a precise point in a conversation and the overall tone of the exchange (cf. Groensteen 2007: 67–85). Due to comics' greater reliance on dramatisation, artists traditionally try to reduce the interference of a narrator by relying on acting and direct speech (cf. Khordoc 2001: 163; Grünewald 2000: 17).

In a "mono-sensory medium" (McCloud 1994: 89/6; see also Smith, Duncan & Levitz 2015: 141–4; Groensteen 2013: 122) comics artists only have visual

signs at their disposal which have to represent any type of experience or perception (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 141–4). To elucidate this point further, I briefly focus on the sound effects of comics, whose realisation across words and visuals is both “complex and sophisticated” (Khordoc 2001: 159). Usually, they are conveyed through onomatopoeic words that both visualise and imitate the sound and its volume or proximity through conceptual metaphor – e.g. LOUDER IS BIGGER, NEARER IS BIGGER. They are integrated into the drawing and have a strong visual component (cf. 2001: 168–9).

On page 12 of *Blankets* (→ Fig. 7), readers find both examples of lettering and sound words that blur the line between the two codes. In the case of ‘snore’, ‘shove’ and ‘gasp’, verbs stand in for actions, movements and sounds that are difficult to draw. There are other ways to visualise snoring (e.g. z z z z z, sawing, cutting logs), but it is often more economical to represent it like this. Capital letters signify shouting and the increasing font size of the three ‘thump’s indicates that their father is coming closer. When Craig drops to the floor, ‘CLUNK’ not only visualises loudness (size) but pain, too (through pointed angles). There is clearly a similarity to picture books and text types that imitate spoken discourse through visual means, such as texting. Hatfield addresses the similarities between verbal and visual signs by observing that the “visual/verbal tension is not necessarily even a matter of playing words against pictures; it may be a matter of playing symbols against other symbols” (2005: 40).

Therefore, a common mistake would be to conceive of the verbal and the visual as completely separate tracks, often accompanied by the misconception that the images are somehow transparent, self-explanatory and secondary to the verbal narration in text boxes (cf. Hatfield 2005: 36). The suggested activity based on Thompson’s *Blankets* was primarily intended to demonstrate that important details are lost when verbal dialogue become isolated and the visuals treated as ancillary. The close association of literature with prose, the widely established notion of words and images as two different modes of expression, the distinct jobs of writer and cartoonist, many readers’ greater familiarity with reading prose narratives etc. all lead to the assumption that the two codes exist independently. However, both rely on signs that have to be interpreted within complex constellations in specific contexts, involving both verbal and visual input in the case of comics (cf. McCloud 1994: 47). There have been many attempts to adapt the classics of literature into comics to support struggling learners in their acquisition of traditional literacy, but the result is often a highly simplified prose summary of the original text, accompanied by uninspiring images that attempt to mirror the written text as much as possible (cf. Oppolzer 2012). This “duo-specific” relationship that is supposed to “send essentially the *same*



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Fig. 7: Blankets (12). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

*message*” (McCloud 1994: 153) is an illusion, as visual and verbal clues cannot be exactly alike. This type of intended redundancy runs the risk of degrading the drawings to mere illustrations and of perpetuating the stereotype that visuals are categorically inferior and subservient to verbal art. Thus, it dissolves the close ties between words and images, but also between panels, which is the topic of the next section.

#### 4.4.2 Image vs. Series/Sequence

Despite the fact that single images in comics can encapsulate ongoing actions, e.g. in the form of splash pages, or even reach the level of complexity associated with the highly compressed blends of political cartoons, they are always parts of and integrated into larger patterns – in most cases narrative sequences. Eisner defines comics as ‘sequential art’ (cf. 2006), which is mirrored in Groensteen’s “juxtaposed frames” (2007: 19) and Kukkonen’s definition that “comics are a medium that communicates through images, words, and sequence” (2013b: 4). For a discussion of the narrative potential of single frames vs. the series, three central questions have to be addressed: to what extent can a single image tell a story? This relates to the speculation whether a single blend – e.g. a painting – can be decompressed into an entire narrative. Secondly, should comics be understood as sequences of narrative images or is narrativity based on juxtaposition in the first place? This relates to the tension between encapsulation (compression) and dramatisation/breakdown (decompression). Thirdly, how do readers respond to these narrative sequences that come with visible gaps in between the panels?

The distinction between a single panel and the series may seem as straightforward as the distinction between words and images at first: the frames represent moments of the ongoing action that materialises as a series of snapshots. Relying on familiar scripts, readers automatically complete the action and experience it as continuous across several panels. However, panels may encapsulate much more than a single moment in time and serve widely different functions within the series, not to mention their complex interrelations with other panels and contextual frames across the entire network. This requires different forms of ‘breaking down’ (cf. Eisner 2006: 128; Groensteen 2007: 22; Hatfield 2005: 41) the sequence on the artist’s part, and different forms of closure – or conceptual integration – on the readers’ part. This is how Hatfield explains the interconnections between the two processes:

The reverse process, that of reading through such images and inferring connections between them, has been dubbed (borrowing from gestalt psychology) ‘closure’ by

McCloud, in keeping with the reader-response emphasis of his *Understanding Comics*. In fact 'breakdown' and 'closure' are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between *sequence* and *series*: the author's task is to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series (a breakdown), whereas the reader's task is to translate the given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure. Again, the reader's role is crucial, and requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness. (2005: 41)

Like Louise M. Rosenblatt, Hatfield distinguishes between the text (series) and the poem (sequence). The narrative sequence or continuous storyline is the product of the individual reading process, whereas the series is the string of panels on the page whose meaningful interrelations often depend on conventions rather than on natural patterns. Since most definitions of comics use 'sequence' as a constitutive formal characteristic of the medium instead of 'series' (cf. Kukkonen 2013b; Eisner 2006; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: xiii), I am not going to use Hatfield's terminological distinction. Still, the blueprint on the page and readers' 'evocations' should not be confused.

McCloud's take on conceptual integration – which he calls 'closure' – establishes six types of transitions between panels. I am going to explain later why this classification is not ideally suited as a general theory of blending in comics, but for the moment it is more important to realise that McCloud understands 'closure' in a much broader sense at first. Before he introduces the gutter as a generator of meaning and presents his widely accepted typology (cf. 1994: 66–74), he offers an introduction to 'closure' that resembles Fauconnier and Turner's claim that conceptual integration is a widespread phenomenon and the basis of all cognition (cf. 1994: 63–5). McCloud provides several illustrations of how closure works *within* panels or even concerning single words (cf. 1994: 63–4; 86/4). A good example is his recreation of the iconic outline of Mickey Mouse's head with the help of three coins (1994: 64/2). They evoke a shape that, in global pop-culture, is metonymically associated with Walt Disney, animation and, of course, Mickey Mouse. At the same time, coins are symbolic of capitalism. This creates an interesting blend, as the most iconic cartoon character is literally made out of money in McCloud's example, which may illustrate the shareholder value of intellectual property. The way that comics produce narrative complexity is not through the gold standard of photorealistic representation, in which they can never compete with film, but through the simplicity of signs, whose artful combinations into textual structures invite complex meaning-making processes. It should not be forgotten that Rodolphe Töpffer proposed a theory closely resembling gestalt psychology to explain readers' ability to instantly recognise objects or characters in cartoon drawings with their "really shocking gaps in outline"

(1965: 8). He argues that “the least practiced eye fills in the rest of the image with an ease and, especially, a veracity that work wholly to the draughtsman’s advantage” (1965: 8). Like Iser, Töpffer understands gap-filling as an automated process (System 1): “the viewer sees them [the elliptical forms representing characters] as so many blanks that his imagination can people, fill up, complete automatically, accurately, and without effort” (1965: 8). Duncan, Smith and Levitz describe comics as “reductive in creation and additive in reading” (2015: 112; see also McCloud 1994: 85), which – in a nutshell – encapsulates this idea.

McCloud’s broad understanding of ‘closure’ or ‘gestalt-forming’ progressively narrows down when he chooses to focus on American superhero comics (cf. 1994: 74–5), the narrative progression that is typical of “*mainstream comics*” and, here again, on those that “employ storytelling techniques first introduced by *Jack Kirby*” (1994: 74; original emphasis). While he criticises the confusion of medium and genre earlier in the book (cf. 1994: 6), his theory of closure is mainly based on samples of superhero comics. All deviations from this norm are treated as either experimental or exotic (cf. 1994: 77–85). In traditional superhero comics, characters restlessly pursue goals and solve problems by physically interacting with their environments, which means that the action never stops. McCloud explains this key characteristic of the genre to the United States’ “goal-oriented culture” (1994: 81/3). Accordingly, he deliberately deemphasises the role of the single panel and makes the efficient, straightforward depiction of an action sequence the narrative standard of his theory. Apart from that, it is also a simple question of preference: “Whatever the mysteries *within* each panel, it’s the power of closure *between* panels that I find the most *interesting*” (1994: 88/1).

It has to be added that the superhero genre does occasionally rely on the single panel in isolation for narrative effect. The so-called “splash page” (Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 119) deliberately arrests the development of the story to introduce a setting or character, to capture the timeless essence of a superhero in a striking pose or to represent a fight-scene with the hero’s arch enemy as a world-shattering event. The single image covers a whole page or double spread and, as I would argue, serves to establish qualities of locations, characters and relationships that transcend the immediate context, while still being part of it. In autobiographical comics we may find similar pages that belong to the ongoing narrative, but at the same time capture the essence of what a chapter is about. In Chapter 1 of *Blankets*, page 24 offers a symbolic representation of Craig’s victimisation, pages 42–3 of his imagination, escapism and penchant for daydreaming, and page 60 of his helplessness and frustration. There are very few of them, so they are likely to carry special significance. Notably, the ‘splash pages’ of chapter 1



**Fig. 8:** *Blankets* (172). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

are all framed. When Craig meets Raina, however, these panels lose their frames (2007: 129, 172).

Shedding the frame has a number of important implications that depend on how readers choose to understand the panels. Page 172 (→ Fig. 8) belongs to a



scene that is introduced on the previous page: panel 171/1 provides an overview of the parking space where they meet. Climbing out of their parents' cars they quickly turn to each other, establishing eye-contact. The second panel (171/2) dispenses loses the backdrop, thus foregrounding the two teenagers reaching out to each other. Then page 172 also dispenses with the frame. On the next page this is reiterated three times, representing an embodied dialogue of hugs and gestures, until frames and backgrounds return for the final two panels of page 173. Visually, readers witness all of this from a certain distance. At the same time, it is not hard to read the panel from the teenagers' point of view, as they seem to forget their surroundings and only have eyes for each other. From Craig's specific point of view, it illustrates and anticipates his feeling of being able to break the chains of his childhood through the purity of unconditional love. For Raina, whose parents are going through a divorce (cf. 2007: 158), the matter is much more complicated, as we shall see later in the narrative, but here readers become witness to the next step in their relationship.

Teenage Craig has willingly ignored her troubles, cast aside her complex feelings, reduced her message to clear signs of affection for him and began to imagine a Romeo and Juliet context of young lovers separated by fate (cf. 2007: 159). From the autobiographer's point of view, this page may represent an important, even timeless memory around which the rest of the scene is constructed. On a symbolic level, it shows how love can transcend all boundaries and does not need words, at least in the imagination of a teenage boy. It also has a narrative function of capturing the emotional essence of the whole scene and the stage of their relationship – filtered through Craig's consciousness. This panel is overdetermined in both Iser's and Groensteen's sense. The loss of the frame signals a level of transcendence that makes the image stand out – supposedly disentangled from time, space, narrative progression and the vicissitudes of human life.

This returns the discussion to the question of the narrative potential of single panels. Contrary to McCloud, there are quite a few theorists that are more accepting of this idea, such as Will Eisner, who offers an excellent illustration of how “encapsulation” (2006: 39) works: like Hogarth's paintings, narrative images may contain so many contextual clues that observers can reconstruct the past and predict the future. This idea seems to be conceptually related to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's ‘pregnant moment’, which he proposes in Chapter XVI of *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*:

Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist, are called bodies. Consequently bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting. Objects which



succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other in time, are actions. Consequently actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry. All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present, action. Consequently painting can imitate actions also, but only as they are suggested through forms. Actions, on the other hand, cannot exist independently, but must always be joined to certain agents. In so far as those agents are bodies or are regarded as such, poetry describes also bodies, but only indirectly through actions. Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow. (1874: 90–1)

Comics is both, of course: ‘painting’ *and* ‘poetry’ in Lessing’s sense. It is a tension between panel (painting → bodies) and series (poetry → actions), between encapsulation or compression and dramatisation or decompression. Lessing’s significance for comics studies has been widely acknowledged (cf. e.g. Breithaupt 2002) and has found its way into basic introductions to the medium (cf. Kukkonen 2013b: 13–15) and teaching approaches (cf. Tucker 2009).

In her seminal essay on “Pictorial Narrativity” (2004) Wendy Steiner explores the potential of single images to tell a story. Not only is this a central question in art history, but also in comics scholarship, where it has a bearing on the potential inclusion of single-frame (political) cartoons in the definition of the medium and on the role of the single panel in the series. If we consider comics to be a narrative medium, as I do here for reasons already stated, the narrativity of single images becomes an important issue. Steiner begins diachronically with some of the first, still existing attempts to record events in pictorial form. She strongly relies on an argument put forward by Ann Perkins in “Narration in Babylonian Art” (1957):

From the beginning of Babylonian narrative art two methods of depiction are employed. The most favored one was allusive rather than explicit, employing the culminating scene – one group of figures, one moment of time, at the climax of a series of events – to stand for the entire story. This was undoubtedly intended to arouse in the viewer’s mind recollection of the complete story, and in addition to stand as a symbol of the deeper lying ideas, beliefs, or psychological orientation of the community as in our own society the crucifix is expected to recall the entire Passion story and also the fundamental Christian belief in the redemption of mankind by the sacrifice of Christ. (1957: 55)

Based on Perkins’s observation, Steiner comments that the “pregnant moment or ekphrastic painting [...] is typically construed symbolically rather than as an attempt at storytelling” (Steiner 2004: 156). In other words, Lessing’s ‘pregnant moment’ is less concerned with finding the point in time most suggestive

of the ongoing action, but more so with a symbolic representation that takes some liberties with weaving a dense network of interconnected signs. Like ritual, such a painting is a complex blend of various perspectives and input spaces that transcends their limitations in an imaginary space. Secondly, these complex blends rely on readers' familiarity with the grand narrative from which all the signs ultimately derive their meaning.

Steiner demonstrates the medieval predilection for symbolism over realism in a discussion of Benozzo Gozzoli's *The Feast of Herod and the Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (1461–2) to demonstrate the transition from medieval to Renaissance conventions (cf. 2004: 162–7). While it was common practice in medieval art to depict several scenes from the same story within the same frame, this was later sacrificed in favour of more realistic depictions, especially due to the introduction of perspective. The interesting thing about Gozzoli's painting is that the three scenes conform to the new paradigm of greater realism, but they are also visually interlinked in complex ways, as if they were taking place at the same time. They are indeed arranged in such a way that they provide commentary on each other. Steiner argues that the painting can be understood as a narrative, as it not only shows three distinct scenes from the same story, but repeats the main character, Salome, and adds layers of meaning through their unique composition:

We have seen the cause-and-effect relations created by the directionality of gazes, especially Herodias's, and the implication of the beginning in the end in the echoing of clothes, colors, and Salome's face. As in literary works, these metonymic and metaphoric linkages are crucial to the project of narrative wholeness. (2004: 167)

This seems to suggest that the narrative potential is linked to the sequence of and to the networked connections between individual images, although the three scenes have to be considered as *one* work of art. Some critics, such as Grünewald, defend the narrativity of the single image (cf. 2000: 12), but the “narrative potential is not intrinsic” (2013: 21), as Groensteen argues. It relies heavily on contextual information, which means that “a single image can *evoke* a story, but that [...] does not mean that it *tells* one” (2013: 23). Steiner points out that, for Da Vinci, a ‘narrative painting’ usually meant a “stopped-action historical, biblical, or mythological scene. Everything that he says about such works is predicated, in fact, on the absence of temporal flow” (2004: 158). Such a painting represents an elaborate blend that does not need a temporal dimension, as a devout Christian familiar with the Biblical context can easily unpack its complex meanings (cf. Kemp 1989: 63). In the world of superhero comics, single panels can be successful blends that allow



**Fig. 9:** *Blankets* (246/1). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

for the decompression of images into whole scenes, provided that readers are familiar with the overall mythology of the character, the context of the specific narrative and/or the basic scripts on which the scene relies (cf. Groensteen 2013: 25, 29; Petersen 2011: 12).

Pascal Lefèvre mirrors this discussion by arguing that single panels are clearly narrative as long as they depict sequentiality *within* a single frame: "I certainly will not neglect the fact that, since several events can be represented in one panel, a single image can be narrative according to my definition. In that case the sole panel consists of several virtual panels or frames" (2000: n. p.). In comics, they may be more frequent in certain genres, but *Blankets* contains only a few of them (e.g. 246/1 → Fig. 9):

Instead of three panels that show different stages of falling into the snow, the single frame encapsulates the unity and uniqueness of the experience. Returning to Lefèvre's argument, it remains unclear why this panel should have a higher

narrativity than relying on the ‘pregnant moment’ of having Raina lean backwards, showing the point just before dropping into the snow. In the context of a series, quantifying the relative narrativity of single panels does not make a lot of sense, since they are not intended to tell parts of the story on their own. The compression of three moments into a single panel has more to do with experientiality than narrative progression. This is further visualised through frame-breaking: Raina’s hands, the speech balloon and the sound word exceed the confined space of the panel.

Elisabeth Potsch and Robert F. Williams analyse the depiction of movement within panels, which often contain the starting point of an action, its direction and the end point. They single out “ribbon paths, motion lines, and impact flashes” (2012: 15) for their study, which are typical of superhero comics, but are used more sparingly in autobiographical comics. Of these, ‘ribbon paths’ are the most relevant for the present discussion of narrative progression within a single panel. Here, a character or object is depicted as performing a movement with a path drawn in – often in the form of a line or a ribbon – from the starting point to the present location. Such movements are not hard to read as they correspond directly to our everyday experiences of objects or humans leaving traces along their paths – airplanes in the sky, humans crossing blankets of snow, heavy tyres on the ground etc. Such basic experiences become image schemas or mental representations “of a pattern that people frequently encounter as embodied beings experiencing a physical world” (2012: 16). What follows is a quick reminder of what image schemas are, provided by Beate Hampe:

- Image schemas are *directly meaningful* (“experiential”/“embodied”), *preconceptual* structures, which arise from, or are grounded in, human recurrent bodily movements through space, perceptual interactions, and ways of manipulating objects.
- Image schemas are highly *schematic* gestalts which capture the structural *contours* of sensory-motor experience, integrating information from multiple modalities.
- Image schemas exist as *continuous* and *analogue* patterns *beneath* conscious awareness, prior to and independently of other concepts.
- As gestalts, image schemas are both *internally structured*, i.e., made up of very few related parts, and highly *flexible*. This flexibility becomes manifest in the numerous transformations they undergo in various experiential contexts, all of which are closely related to perceptual (gestalt) principles. (Hampe 2005: 1–2; see also Potsch & Williams 2012: 16)

As Potsch and Williams demonstrate, superhero comics may depict action sequences in a highly stylised manner, using a ribbon band and a tiny speck representing the hero soaring into the sky (cf. 2012: 23), but readers still manage to recognise what is happening. While reading, they never face single panels in isolation, which allows them to build an interpretation from the narrative context, specific expectations based on genre and familiarity with the characters. That Superman may take off any minute and fly away is expected rather than marvelled at as a supernatural occurrence.

Artists have developed various means to compensate for the stillness of images (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 115), of which ‘motion lines’ (cf. McCloud 1994: 109–14) are probably the best known and most widely used in comics, next to postures that signal movement. There is, however, a difference between comics genres, as superhero adventures have different requirements than so-called non-fiction, where the main emphasis is not on iconic confrontations and relentless pursuit. Craig Thompson uses them mostly for his childhood memories (e.g. 2007: 23, 25, 33, 40), which are rendered in a more cartoonish style, while Art Spiegelman employs them only very sparingly in *MAUS*, when he intends to indicate that the wheels of Vladek’s bicycle are spinning (cf. 1997: 14–15, 81) or that body parts are moving (cf. 1997: 22, 29).

The reason why the passing of time within a single panel is considered to be such an important issue in comics studies (cf. e.g. McCloud 1994: 94–117; Hatfield 2005: 52–8) may be due to narratology’s traditional focus on temporal progression, but also the potential of a single panel to contain a blended space “into which moments, hours, even days, are compressed” (Hatfield 2005: 58). Our subjective and relative experience of time is completely ignored in the mechanical precision of our watches, which do not conform to our internal, biological clocks. The obvious clash between the temporal progression of actions and the stillness of the single images, but also the potential mismatch between the breakneck speed of an action sequence and the single reader’s time to process what is happening, contribute to a relativity of time in comics that is incompatible with the desire to measure it accurately. Potsch and Williams argue that it is precisely the readers’ subjective perception of time that artists play with:

In comics, time is elastic: it can be stretched or compressed for dramatic effect in rendering the events of the story. Pacing emerges partly in the reader’s experience of taking in panel after panel, so artists can exert control over pacing through the size and placement of panels on the comics page, affecting how readers shift their gaze from image to image. (2012: 28)

Accordingly, the exact amount of time that passes within and between panels is not important, as long as readers understand the sequence of events (cf. Grünewald 2000: 41), which is necessary for the ascription of cause and effect. Returning to the scene in which the Pastor asks Craig about his future plans, only two things seem relevant: that it takes place at the beginning of Craig's final year in school, which is explicitly foregrounded through dialogue (cf. 2007: 54) and defoliated trees (cf. 2007: 55–6), and that it marks the starting point of a rekindled interest in dedicating his life to God. There is no need to engage in a narratological study of temporal progression and plot structure beyond this point. Lefèvre offers a similar observation:

Though this temporal ambiguity and flexibility seems complex on a theoretical level, in practice readers will seldom linger over such questions about the temporal dimensions of individual panels. As long as the reader has no problem in understanding the temporal order of a series of panels, questions like the ones just raised are not likely to give the reader pause. (2011: 24)

Time and space have no intrinsic meaning except for how they are experienced by the characters and readers. In this sense, time becomes an artistic resource that is rendered meaningful by serving a narrative purpose. When comics creators break down the sequence into panels, the question arises how time can be subjectivised and spatialised to serve the narrative at this point (cf. McCloud 1994: 94–117). Accordingly, time and space have a much more metaphorical, symbolic, thematic and contextual meaning than is usually acknowledged. Quite a few narratives – and especially those of the visual type – heavily rely on seasons or landscapes to express characters' inner states in a metaphorical sense. Reader-response critics, such as Wolfgang Iser, argue that narrative elements are just signs and not representations of reality. They invite meaning-making and empathy, not the reconstruction of timelines and story world – with the exception of detective fiction, perhaps, where such issues may be foregrounded and central to the plot.

Contrary to McCloud, Eisner considers the panel *and* the page as the two organising frames of narration (cf. 2006: 41), which complements the linearity of panel-to-panel transitions with design work on a higher level of organisation. He argues that it is ultimately the sequence and the “grammar” (2006: 39) of combining panels into meaningful narratives that drive comics narration. Duncan, Smith and Levitz also acknowledge that encapsulation (cf. 2015: 108) has to be seen as part of a more general process that has to strike the right balance between the inescapable formal requirements of printed comics (cf. Groensteen 2007: 142) and the general sequencing of the story into narrative units (breakdown). The

two processes “mutually inform each other” (Groensteen 2007: 143), which plays a role in gridding, when the comic is laid out in rough sketches as a ‘dummy book’ (cf. Eisner 2006: 136–8). With the advent of the page as “a commercial unit of narration” (Fresnault-Deruelle 2014: 130), we see a dramatic change in layout and a potential conflict between page design and breakdown: “the movement from the strip to the whole page disrupted the organization of the diegesis: the narrative is challenged as a one-way directional system, once the cartoonist, capitalizing on variable visual elements, breaks up the uniform patterning of the panels” (2014: 133). This creative tension between breakdown and layout can be used strategically to foreground elements in the narration, especially when certain regularities are widely established (extrinsic norms) or the comic itself favours a regular pattern or grid (intrinsic norm) that is then varied to great effect:

Greater or lesser deviations from these norms stand out as prominent. But at the same time, the viewer is alert for any norms set up by the comic itself. The intrinsic norms may coincide with or deviate from the conventions of the extrinsic set. Finally, the reader may encounter foregrounded elements the moment the comic diverges to some degree from intrinsic norms. (Lefèvre 2000: n. p.; see also Bordwell 1985: 150–3)

Apart from the gutter, turning the page creates a gap in the narrative that has to be accounted for and specifically designed. The final panel on the previous page and the first one on the next have privileged positions and are often employed to end a scene and begin a new one, provide a cliffhanger and resolve it or create a tonal shift in how the present scene plays out, just to name three obvious examples.

This draws readers’ attention to the materiality of comics and how the size of the page, which is usually standardised and invariable, affords very different artistic possibilities, e.g. the level of detail in the drawings that is still discernible or the size of the font that readers manage to decipher without a magnifying glass. While a painter can choose a canvas measuring five by ten inches or ten feet square and the prose writer is little concerned with the format during the creation of a text, the comics artist has to be alert to the format that is given. Groensteen argues that the placement of panels on the page, what he calls “spatio-topia” (2007: 21), creates a network of differently sized panels that assigns privileged positions to some of them and breaks the regular flow of the linear progression of the narrative. This is how page design (*mise-en-page*) and breakdown intersect. The result is an effect of foregrounding mostly driven by the size, (relative) position, framing (cf. 2007: 39–57) and visual style of panels.

Through layout comics also acquire a musical quality (cf. Eisner 2006: 28–30) or rhythm (cf. Groensteen 2013: 133–57).

The same logic applies to elements within individual panels, which are foregrounded in varying degrees by the following visual means: size, centrality, colour, brightness, foregrounding (in the foreground; closer to the viewer), shallow focus (in photography; this is roughly the same as removing the background in comics) overlap, symbolism, vectors/lines and/or framing (cf. Machin 2011: 130–8). In multimodal analysis this concept is called ‘salience’ and offers an excellent starting point for a more formal analysis of images, in case teachers want to find evidence with their students why they are drawn to certain elements of a composition first. The idea is not to highlight one privileged element in contrast to the others, but to assign salience in degrees, by which the readers’ attention and conceptual integration can be guided. Teresa Bridgeman argues that – according to the same principle – artists are able to hide clues in plain sight by giving other elements of the composition more prominence (cf. 2004: n. p.). This may be a viable strategy of planting clues in a detective narrative that only become visible during a second reading.

Salience or foregrounding within panels is just the micro-structural equivalent to a figure-ground approach to narration that can be found on all levels of composition. Foregrounding on the level of the sequence or page operates with the same markers as listed above, but adds one important strategy to the mix: repetition. Bridgeman describes basic reading as a “process of scanning for salient features as hooks on which to hang our construction of narrative coherence” (2004: n. p.). Especially in wordless comics we follow around objects and characters (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 90–108) that become narrative anchors in Dancygier’s sense through reappearance. Redundancy as a narrative strategy of comics is also central to McCloud’s typology of panel transitions.

When he published *Understanding Comics* in the early 1990s, his sprawling exploration of the medium was such a revelation and leap forward in scholarship that it is still widely recommended as a manual for new readers, especially in educational settings (cf. e.g. Abel & Klein 2016: 84–7; Bakis 2014: 14–30; Hatfield 2009). In short, this is the lens through which many teachers ask students to look at comics for the first time. I have already raised some concerns about different aspects of the book, but for my cognitive approach to comics it is first necessary to establish to what extent his idea of closure corresponds to reader-response criticism and the theory of conceptual integration I introduced in part 3. The first important observation is that McCloud does not realise that closure is *not* a unique feature of comics: “What happens between these panels is a kind of magic *only* comics can create” (1994: 92/4). What McCloud understands as ‘closure’ for



most of his book is a very specific type of conceptual integration, but clearly not the only one. He first defines ‘closure’ as a “phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*” (1994: 63/1) and “mentally completing that which is *incomplete* based on *past experience*” (1994: 63/2). This sounds like an explanation by Louise M. Rosenblatt showing how gap-filling works in any reading process. She even uses comic strips at one point as an illustration of a general principle:

... essential to “the plot” is the action of the reader in relating one episode or one element or one aspect of the events to the others decoded from the text. A child may look at the separate squares of a comic strip, and see them as separate and distinct. Plot begins to emerge when he sees that the characters and situation of the second square can be related to the first, usually as later in time and as developing from the situation indicated in the first and so on, so that the comic strip becomes a narrative. (1994: 92)

As I explained at the beginning of part 4, this may apply to comic strips in a literal sense, since there are only three or four panels in the series, which readers can see all at once. In the context of longer narratives, however, it has to be understood as a metaphor, since blending has to take place on a number of levels beyond the simplistic integration of the very next panel into what readers already know. McCloud’s complete disregard for the macrostructure of (reading) comics, both on a cognitive and a formal level, is going to be a major concern for the rest of this section, but first we have to look at what he *does* say about closure as the “**grammar**” (1994: 67/3) of comics and the gutter as the site of meaning-making. Without further ado, here are McCloud’s six types of panel transitions (cf. 1994: 70–4): (1) moment-to-moment, 2) action-to-action (depicting the same activity at a later time), (3) subject-to-subject (a shift of visual focus within the same scene while the action continues), (4) scene-to-scene (involving a significant shift in time and/or space), (5) aspect-to-aspect (a shift of visual focus within the same scene while the action pauses) and (6) non-sequitur (a shift in subject matter unrelated to the previous panel).

McCloud is correct in calling his typology “an *inexact science* at *best*” (1994: 74/1). According to his own statistics (cf. 1994: 75) half of his types – (1), (5) and (6) – do not even occur in a typical superhero comic book (*X-Men* 1), Gilbert Hernandez’s *Heartbreak Soup*, Carl Barks’s *Donald Duck*, Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* and Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* – with a negligible number of type (5) transitions in the last two cases. Type (1) is too slow and inefficient, as McCloud demonstrates (cf. 1994: 76/5), Type (5) is only relevant for a comparison with manga (cf. 1994: 77–81) and type (6) should not occur at all, as it puzzles readers and does not contribute to narrative progression at

all (cf. 1994: 77/2). Of the remaining three, type (2) dominates with an average of around 65%, which means that we closely follow a character performing an ongoing action. Type (3) significantly falls behind with 20%, which represents a shift to another subject within the same scene, e.g. showing the actions of the villain for a change, which leaves 15% for a transition to a different scene altogether (cf. 1994: 75/1). In short, readers always follow characters performing actions, with occasional shifts between subjects or scenes.

McCloud's system – especially the difference between action-to-action (2) and scene-to-scene (4) – proves useful when distinguishing different types of visual narratives, sequential art or picture stories. The irony, of course, is that the major examples of McCloud's own history of comics, everything from Egyptian painting (Tomb of Menna) via Trajan's Column and the Bayeux Tapestry to Hogarth's work (cf. 1994: 10–16), only share sequentiality and scene-to-scene transitions with comics, but not action-to-action, which, according to McCloud's own statistics, is the most important characteristic of comics narration by far. Therefore, I agree with Petersen and David Kunzle (cf. 2007) that Rodolph Töpffer is the inventor of comics in the modern sense:

Rather than use the typical visual strategy of employing one picture per scene, he used several images per page set apart by smaller frames. By doing this, he created for the first time a montage, a way of describing a single idea over several closely linked pictures, as if one were seeing the action unfold in a play. Töpffer also utilized for the first time different-sized panels on the page to suggest different kinds of narrative pacing; for example, giving the impression of an action building in intensity or dissipating through meaningless repetition. The novelty of this narrative construction is Töpffer's greatest and lasting achievement, for it introduced a sense of momentum through more specific causal relationships between the pictures. (Petersen 2011: 49)

Returning to Petersen's point about 'causal relationships': with the exception of McCloud's sixth transition, all the other types are mainly related to spatial and temporal orientation rather than to meaningful connections. McCloud's refusal to either fully embrace reader-response criticism or ascribe narrative functions to the transitions he enumerates, leads to a typology that is based on formal changes, but ignores narrative meaning: *why* does the narrative shift attention from one subject to the next? *How* is the next contextual frame related to the previous one? Does it constitute a flashback, a flashforward, a dream, a character's thoughts, the narrator's comments etc.? According to what overall logic are the panels strung together? Despite the limited applicability of film theory to comics narratives (e.g. continuity editing, intercutting, shot-reverse shot patterns etc.), it would have provided at least some orientation.

Since I claim that McCloud's theory of closure is a form of conceptual integration, it should be possible to illuminate his theory by comparing it to Fauconnier and Turner's blending. That both are cognitive approaches should be obvious, which means that we can concentrate on the 'vital relations' (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 93–102, 312–5) they foreground. To make this comparison work, I treat the panels in comics as input spaces and discreet moments, which is a bit of a stretch, as they are mental frames rather than visual representations in conceptual integration theory. Still, this is how McCloud treats the content of panels and this should provide us with some orientation of how he conceptualises narrative integration. Mario Saraceni argues that McCloud's typology is scaled in terms of redundancy and readers' involvement (cf. 2001: 177), which means that moment-to-moment transitions are the easiest to read, as they contain the highest degree of redundancy and require the least amount of readers' involvement. Using McCloud's own examples of type (1) transitions (cf. 1994: 70), we can identify the three vital relations that have to be compressed into singularity: change into ongoing action, discrete moments into continuous time and repetition of character into identity. Place is not an issue in moment-to-moment transitions as it remains the same. In fact, change is so minimal that, based on two panels in isolation, we cannot see yet how this scene is going to develop. This turns cause-effect and intentionality into underspecified relations. Without context, it is impossible to read character motivation into a moment-to-moment transition. This may also explain why this type is so rare in western comics: readers may be too impatient to wait for a scene to develop at such a slow pace. I include character identity as a key vital relation in my discussion of McCloud, as he repeatedly demonstrates its importance in the illustrations, but otherwise privileges action/event over character and intentionality.

Having established the first type, it is now easier to explain the next few transitions as deviations from this model. Type (2) increases the temporal gap between the distinct moments, which means that it provides more evidence for the compression of events into cause-effect. In McCloud's illustrations (cf. 1994: 70) we see how drinking champagne results in a burp or speeding is the direct cause of the car accident. If McCloud's theory of reading works with basic scripts in the generic space, action-to-action sequences are easier to read than moment-to-moment transitions, as they provide more evidence of what is happening. All three of McCloud's examples showcase that character identity is still vital for this type. This changes with subject-to-subject transitions, which abandon a character as a narrative anchor, "while staying within a scene or idea" (1994: 71/1). To make this work, artists have to rely on standard scripts and/or

establish enough context in the previous panels to allow for some orientation. Otherwise, readers would suddenly be confronted with a new subject that might as well belong to the next scene. In the context of Catherine Emmott's theory of contextual frames, I discussed the importance of character configurations and tracing which characters are bound into a frame. Concerning a dialogue scene in a restaurant, readers are not surprised to see a waiter at the table or two patrons alternating in frames as talking heads. Yet, the sudden appearance of a third character who they thought was not present, offers a form of dramatic foregrounding that may require some re-adjustment. Readers suddenly have to make room for a new dynamic and more complex character interactions, recalling previous frames and social relations between characters. All of that is not present in McCloud's theory. His disregard for the macrostructural level denies the importance of contexts, which he seems to take for granted. With type (4) transitions we have a complete shift in contextual frames: McCloud speaks of "*significant distances of time and space*" (1994: 71/2), which may mean different characters, different actions and different character motivations. Without context or some form of redundancy (e.g. the same location or character), type (4) might feel like a type (6) at first.

In conclusion, there are a number of important observations that can be made: redundancy on all levels of narrative mediation is absolutely vital for storytelling. Without the repetition of elements, there is nothing that could be compressed into singularity. While McCloud considers the previous knowledge of readers essential to closure, he disregards contextual frames and macrostructural links, without which reading is impossible. Characters and their motivations play a much larger role than McCloud's focus on ongoing action suggests. Since he only concentrates on the visual track, Hatfield criticises that his classification "neglects just how much the interaction of image and word can inform, indeed enable, the reading of sequences" (2005: 44). He further remarks that 'voice-over' narration can easily bridge the gulf between images whose sequence McCloud would be forced to classify as non-sequitur (cf. 2005: 44–5). While he addresses and foregrounds some of the vital relations that Fauconnier and Turner list (cf. 2003: 93–102, 312–5), there are others that should either play a more prominent role (e.g. cause-effect, intentionality) or be featured at all (e.g. part-whole, analogy).

Even more problematic, and this leads us gradually to Hatfield's third tension, is the idea that the reading of comics proceeds in a strictly linear fashion. McCloud makes this point explicit later in the book: "Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and the '*real time*' of everyday life to expect a very

*linear progression*. Just a *straight line* from *point A* to *point B*. But is that *necessary*? For *now*, these questions are the territory of *games* and *strange little experiments*" (1994: 106/1–2). Considering that the book was written in the early 1990s, this claim was hard to maintain even then. If we take the "three convention-rupturing comics" (Wolk 2007: 8) of the 1980s, *MAUS*, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, we find countless examples that contradict McCloud's questionable generalisation, but the same argument could be made with less prominent examples.

Thierry Groensteen is probably the most prominent critic of McCloud's classification, since his own concepts of iconic solidarity and braiding are predicated on a connection between panels beyond the linearity of the sequence (cf. 2013: 41, 74, 181; Lefèvre 2000). Yet, it was Iser who addressed this point before him, even if he did not refer to comics: "Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole *network of possible connections* which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning" (1980: 196; my emphasis). This is also a given in discourse analysis, for readers understand the meaning of sentences by evaluating the whole situation and not just the sentences in close proximity: "the meaning of an individual sentence or clause is often influenced by the surrounding text" (Emmott 2004: 79). Groensteen rightfully credits Iser with the basic principles of a reader-response theory that is highly applicable to comics and promotes an understanding of the "intericonic gutter" as "polysyntactic" (Groensteen 2007: 114). The individual panel is not only part of a linear sequence, but potentially linked to every other panel in the multiframe. Saraceni distinguishes between coherence and cohesion in this context, of which the first is a cognitive and the second a discourse-analytical term (cf. 2001: 169). Readers have to navigate the textual elements to arrive at a meaning that manages to integrate the suggested ideas into a unified whole. Saraceni calls this principle "*relatedness*" (2001: 169), which underlines both the network character of the text, but more importantly the way textual elements activate cognitive models, as the referents are located there.

Silke Horstkotte is equally vocal about the limitations of McCloud's approach (cf. 2015: 33–40). She uses Charles Burns's *Black Hole* as a typical example of a graphic novel "where many scenes refer forward and backward to each other, panels are frequently repeated with a difference, and episodes that were introduced through flash-forwards or flashbacks get retold from different points of view" (2015: 42). In this sense, the repetition of elements, with or without alterations, becomes a cornerstone of comics narration. While redundancy carries negative connotations in our culture, it is the foundation of storytelling, especially in picture stories. Like many critics, Groensteen observes that "comics are

founded on a dialectic of repetition and difference, each image linked to the preceding one by a partial repetition of its contents” (2007: 115; see also Grünewald 2000: 44–5; Baetens & Frey 2015: 161). More specifically, Wendy Steiner proposes that “the most fundamental feature of all narrative” is the “cohesion and, in particular, the continuity of a repeated subject. In visual narrative the repetition of a subject is the primary means for us to know that we are looking at a narrative at all” (2004: 154; see also Mikkonen 2017: 90–108; Bridgeman 2004: n. p.). In this sense, pattern recognition and blending become the two most basic operations of all reading.

Saraceni identifies three basic types of relatedness, which are repetition, collocation, and closure/inference (cf. 2001: 170–8). ‘Collocation’ is what I have discussed in terms of conceptual metonymy: two things are mentally stored as closely connected to each other, so that a reference to the one activates the other. ‘Inference’ is essentially Iser’s gap-filling, consistency-building and gestalt-forming. The three types have to be understood as dependent on each other: without redundancy narratives cannot establish their constituent parts. These garner additional meaning and complexity by activating concepts associated with them. Finally, closure fills in the missing elements to complete the picture. Coherence as a threshold of readers’ understanding of a text requires a certain amount of connectivity, which is fundamentally built on repetition. In other words, there is no originality, complexity or art without redundancy: “The unoriginal is normally the dominant active matrix in any original achievement. Originality is no more than the exploitation of what is unoriginal. Originality, far from being autonomous, is contingent at every point upon the unoriginal structures that inform it” (Turner 1994: 51). Mark Turner is adamant that genius is closer to the pedestrian than the extraordinary: “The imagination must operate in a known space; it must work with unoriginal structures of invention. These are the conditions that the imagination must meet in order to be intelligible. Originality is just a step away from pedestrian thought, which accounts for most of the invention in any poem” (1994: 52). The best comics, with their relentless repetition of elements across panels, may represent a perfect illustration of Turner’s thesis. For the classroom, these repeated elements can and should be traced across panels and pages. Identifying repetition and salience/foregrounding as narrative strategies is a great starting point for an engagement with the basics of visual design. As with teaching poetry, it helps to work with coloured pens on photocopied pages to mark the elements that signal vital relations across panels.

#### 4.4.3 Sequence vs. Page

The third of Hatfield's tensions is concerned with the linear and the 'tabular' – the sequence of images and the page as a total design. Accordingly, panels contribute to the narrative on different levels of formal organisation:

A single image within such a cluster [panels arranged on a page] typically functions in two ways at once: as a "moment" in an imagined sequence of events, and as a graphic element in an attempted design. [...] the single image functions as both a point on an imagined timeline – a self-contained moment substituting for the moment before it, and anticipating the moment to come – and an element of global page design. (Hatfield 2005: 48)

Through the use of double inverted commas Hatfield signals awareness that panels are blends and not literal moments on a timeline, which he seems to suggest in the second sentence, only to counterbalance that with the notion of global design. In contrast to McCloud, who limits himself to a strict linearity, Will Eisner speaks of two frames that the artist always has to keep in mind: "the total page, on which there are any number of panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds. They are the controlling device in sequential art" (2006: 41). As a strong proponent of encapsulation, Eisner sees the action unfold *within* the panels. Given the choice between the panel and the sequence as a narrative unit, which is Hatfield's second tension, Eisner seems to be in favour of the first. In Franco-Belgian comics theory the creative arrangement of panels on the page to prompt translinear blending is associated with the term 'tabular' (cf. Groensteen 2013: 12) and this is how Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle defines the concept:

It was the impassioned search for a way of making the form of expression coincide with the form of content that gave rise to highly original experiments in layout. The page, a commercial unit of narration, was perceived by some artists as a site for a new way of conceiving its overall design: the images, over and above their role in the narrative, could be part of a structure at another level, at once secondary and aesthetically determining. (2014: 130)

This, of course, dramatically influenced the role of the single panels in relation to the total composition: "the pages are tabular systems in which the panels are not always integrated into a logical continuum, but where certain individual frames, which represent the mental life of the hero, have relations of contiguity that are often complex" (2014: 134). In contrast to film, where shots have to be edited into a specific linear sequence after principal photography is over (cf. Groensteen 2013: 82, 101–2), the panels of comics are made to 'linger'. They come in different sizes, shapes and frames, maybe even different styles and colours. They cluster together or keep their distance. Fresnault-Deruelle even suggests that they may not be part of the ongoing action at all, e.g. by representing a character's thoughts

or the narrator's comment in the form of a visual metaphor. A conceptualisation of the relationships between panels as graphic forms and in terms of a spatial language or visual grammar (cf. Morris 1993: 196) may result in a very different view of layout in contrast to the linearity of the breakdown. In "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences" Pascal Lefèvre equally extends the range of relationships that are conceivable between panels:

From the moment various pictures are grouped together in a series or sequence, the viewer or reader is prompted to look for relations among them. Those relations can be of quite different kinds, including purely formal aspects, such as graphic or abstract qualities pertaining to the form of the pictures, as well as content-related aspects, which can range from how objects are grouped into categories to all kinds of logical, rhetorical, and symbolic relations among the portrayed objects and events. (2011: 26)

None of these relations are coincidental, as comics are heavily designed works of art. In a tabular context iconic solidarity is easy to spot, but these correspondences may extend across pages.

It is important to notice that Scott McCloud does acknowledge comics with very different transitions between panels, such as aspect-to-aspect (type 5), but he associates such phenomena with manga rather than with American comics (cf. 1994: 77–81). They foreground "mood or a sense of place" (1994: 79), which he seems to classify as non-narrative elements, as time and action do not progress. This has more to do with culturally privileging one thing over another and less with the question of narrativity. He even suggests that most mangas are so voluminous that there is less pressure to advance the story (cf. 1994: 80/2–3). Taking the opposite view, Groensteen proposes a specific purpose for this type of storytelling at a higher level of narrative organisation:

... certain *mangas* are signaled by a massive use of panels that are superfluous from a strictly narrative point of view, their precise function is elsewhere: decorative, documentary, rhythmic, or poetic, whatever the case. These panels respect the general principle of co-reference, but their contribution cannot be evaluated in terms of information. More than the panel, it is therefore the page or the sequence that, under this relationship, constitutes a pertinent unit. In reality, there exists a multiplicity of possible correlations between contiguous panels. (2007: 116–17)

McCloud tends to dismiss such experiments as not conducive to narration altogether. He even adds a visual joke (cf. 1994: 81/1) which shows him strolling along a path in a Japanese garden, which takes him from left to right, the usual orientation in western culture, but then downwards and to the left again, practically getting nowhere. In the next panel (81/2) he feigns to have lost his way. He concludes with the generalisation that western art is goal-oriented, like our



culture, whereas eastern art is “cyclical and labyrinthine” (1994: 81). The point is not to make fun of McCloud’s simplistic outlook on art, but to highlight how our ‘universal’ truths and theories are always bound to cultural contexts and even personal experiences. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, who find *Understanding Comics* “seminal for reading the distinctive grammar of the comics” (2008: xii), cannot help but notice that “McCloud has little to say on the textual cultures of the comics – the intricacies of their circulation, reception, and interpretation in different social and cultural contexts” (2008: xii). Apart from that, Groensteen makes an important distinction between narrative elements that advance the plot and those that contribute to readers’ experiences without having informational value in relation to the story world. This corresponds to reader-response critics’ rejection of the idea that narrative texts are containers of information.

Groensteen’s most important contribution to the analysis of narrative organisation in comics is the insight that ‘iconic solidarity’ (cf. 2007: 17–20; see also 2013: 12, 33–5), which is his term for a panel’s relationships to other panels, does not stop at the level of the page:

... one must recognize the relational play of a plurality of independent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics. The relationship established between these images admits several degrees and combines several operations [...]. But their common denominator and, therefore, the central element of comics, the first criteria [*sic*] in the foundational order, is iconic solidarity. (2007: 17–18)

Because of the potential complexity of how panels may relate to each other, Groensteen chooses to distinguish between “three major operations: breakdown, page layout, and braiding” (2013: 3). From an artistic point of view, a comics narrative has to work as a linear sequence of images (breakdown), as pages and double pages forming narrative units (layout/mise-en-page) and as an interconnected network spanning the entire narrative (braiding). Groensteen’s concept of a “plurivectorial narration” (2007: 108) leads him away from linear progression: “every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others. This totality [...] responds to a model of organization that is not that of the strip nor that of the chain, but that of the *network*” (2007: 146). He associates the three operations with the linear, the tabular and the “global” (2013: 13), by which he means the “translinear and distant” (2007: 22) connections beyond the page: “comics should be apprehended as a networked mode that allows each panel to hold privileged relations with any others and at any distance” (2007: 126). As a discourse linguist Catherine Emmott also argues that “it is not simply a question of readers establishing a causal link between two adjacent sentences, but of connecting each new sentence with the ‘global representation’ of the text” (2004: 18).

In this sense, braiding is not a specific feature of comics. What may be unique is the ‘tabular’ as an intermediary level. Within the page frame, the iconic solidarity of panels is translinear, but the links are visible within a reader’s field of vision. The context or background of the scene becomes more important and adds layers of meaning that clearly go beyond the performance of a single action across several panels. This also explains why Franco-Belgian comics theory reveals such a keen interest in the tabular.

One of the more intriguing arguments in this context is Fressnault-Deruelle’s appreciation of the art of Charles M. Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*. When he discusses “repetition and monotony as art form” (2014: 124), he notices how Schulz repeats panels strategically:

... by restoring elements from the first panel to identical positions in the final panel, Schulz indicates that the events taking place are in the realm of the imaginary (reality being immutable), and goes as far as to introduce visual rhyme within the strip. An intra-strip patterning is superimposed on the ‘assonance’ of the daily strip (the pay-off of the gag in the fourth panel): the mirroring of the panels at each end, in keeping with the Schulzian view of life, symbolizes the fact that everything has already been said, and that it is vain to take an alternative pathway or to cut his characters any slack. (2014: 124)

The interesting aspect of this analysis is less the meaning of *Peanuts*, but the realisation that even in the shortest form – the four-panel strip – comics display narrative strategies that go beyond the strict linearity of McCloud’s system.

While the term ‘braiding’ (*tressage*) suggests several, equally important narrative strands that cross each other, Groensteen makes a distinction between the main narrative sequence and other, more loosely connected series of images, whose “aspects or fragments” are “susceptible to being networked with certain aspects or fragments of other panels” (Baetens & Lefèvre qtd. in Groensteen 2007: 146). This particular understanding of braiding devalues his own contribution to comics studies and forces him to downplay the overall importance of braiding as “a supplementary relation that is never indispensable to the conduct and intelligibility of the story” (2007: 146–7). Groensteen seems to reduce the concept to the circumstantial “resurgence of an iconic motif” (2007: 151), such as a visual symbol, or the thematic concerns of authors that occasionally resurface throughout a text. Only when he discusses Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* does he acknowledge that the comic “makes intense use of all the procedures of braiding”, which means that it “becomes an essential dimension of the narrative project, innervating the entirety of the network that, finding itself placed in effervescence, incites translinear and plurivectorial readings” (2007: 155).

Instead of reducing braiding to ephemeral links between panels that do not even contribute to the main narrative, it seems much more reasonable to accept it as an important component of *all* narratives – not just of comics. Following Iser, Emmott and Dancygier, I would argue that every text relies on textual structures that serve as translinear links beyond the context of the present sentence/scene. In fact, any time an element reoccurs that we have encountered before – from narrative strands and contextual frames via characters, settings and objects to more abstract reoccurrences of page layouts and specific colours, just to name a few examples – we have a case of iconic solidarity. These examples may be less exciting than Groensteen’s notion of braiding and the reappearance of visual symbols, thematic concerns or the yellow badge in *Watchmen* (cf. Groensteen 2007: 152), but there is more continuity between the two phenomena than Groensteen is willing to acknowledge.

Without repetition there is no understanding at all. At the most basic level, we have to recognise the protagonist every time he or she reappears (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 90–108). These primitive forms of pattern recognition are automatically handled by System 1, whereas other forms of braiding may be more ostentatious and invite an active translinear analysis that involves leafing through the book to find the previous occurrence of an element (System 2). In autobiographical comics readers often have to trace several incarnations of the self that reappear – sometimes sporadically – throughout the entire narrative. At the same time they find thematic concerns that resurface with each of the incarnations. In other words: braiding can be used by comics creators to add layers of meaning on top of an otherwise straightforward narrative, but more often than not artists are interested in prompting translinear integration by having textual structures evoke previous frames. In any case, readers have to develop a “synthetic global vision” (Groensteen 2007: 19), which Dancygier would describe as ‘viewpoint compression’, that allows for narrative understanding beyond the scene at hand.

There are literally dozens of examples to be found in *Blankets*, some of which I shall address in the next chapter. Here, I focus on four important instances that readers encounter in chapter II. When little Craig goes to church camp in winter, we see him walking into the main building, completely isolated from the other participants (2007: 79/1 → Fig. 10). Nine pages later we recognise teenage Craig in exactly the same spot (88/1 → Fig. 11). Since the correspondences between the images are so strikingly obvious, there is no need to point them out in detail. As if the visual reminder was not enough, the verbal narrator invites a direct comparison: “Church camp in high school became a less lonely experience, as I’d learned to spot the other outsiders” (88/1). While Craig’s life continues to be dominated by routines imposed on him by adults, readers are invited to



**Fig. 10:** *Blankets* (79/1). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

notice a greater amount of agency in contrast to the defeatist attitude that we have come to expect. Since we have already been introduced to the setting and Craig's overwhelming feeling of isolation, braiding helps to foreground significant tonal changes, especially the dramatic shift of having a friend at his side – not to mention a cute girl he clearly adores. While most readers may become preoccupied with the burgeoning love story and forget about the first narrative iteration of Craig's adventures at church camp, Thompson continues to work with the parallelism: He repeats panels 1–3 from page 86 (→ Fig. 12) thirty pages later, replacing his freezing and isolated younger self with a representation of his teenage self and Raina at his side (cf. 116/1–3 → Fig. 13). Panel 116/3 acknowledges the link and invites readers to go back and see for themselves how much has happened since then.

On the next page, Thompson takes us into what seems to be a generic bathroom (117). When Craig looks in the mirror (117/4–5), we are reminded of the bathroom at his old school where he had to wash his bloody nose after an instance of bullying (25/5–7). Here, he brushes his hair back to look more attractive to Raina. When the furnace in the rec room starts to fire at the end of chapter II (127/1), whose title is “Stirring Furnace” (66), Craig finds his desire to

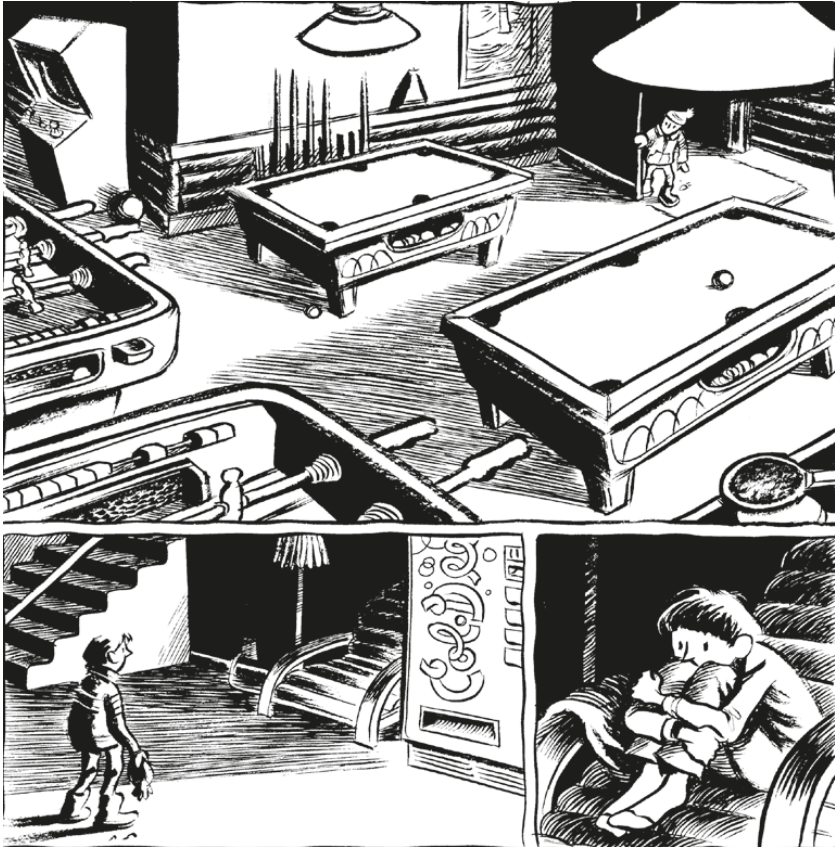


Fig. 11: *Blankets* (88/1). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

touch Raina, who is sleeping right next to him, hard to control (128). At exactly the same point forty pages before that, we witnessed young Craig improvising a tearful prayer to God: “I’m sorry, God, for sneaking out of the cabin and lying and not reading the Bible and not witnessing to people and picking on my little brother and calling someone ‘ASS’ and drawing a lady without any clothes on that one time and disappointing my parents and everything else” (87/2). Groensteen’s qualification that readers are not required to recognise these types of braiding to be able to understand the ongoing narrative may be warranted in this case, but a more rewarding reading of *Blankets* involves tracing Craig’s three major concerns – religion, love/sexuality and art, their impact on his life, how they intersect at crucial points in the narrative and how they blend. It is a deliberate choice on Thompson’s part to foreground Craig’s reorientation in terms of the priorities in his life with the help of braiding.

The importance of iconic solidarity beyond the confines of a double spread is one of the major reasons why students should be encouraged to reread parts of books and compare different scenes in view of their potential relations. This type of pattern recognition in comics should be familiar from reading picture books and corresponds to the idea of students as text detectives. For every task that





**Fig. 12:** *Blankets* (86/1–3). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

encourages students to speculate about how the narrative may progress, there should be another one that invites them to relate the scene under discussion to previous contexts, which may now appear in a very different light or provide a valuable prism to look at present circumstances. Groensteen encourages translinear readings, as the meaning-making process is anything but linear: “If there is a vectorization of reading, there is no unidirectional vectorization in the construction of meaning” (2007: 110). Leaving aside the global perspective of meaning-making, even at the level of reading pages the medium requires a constant going back and forth between linear progression and larger units, as



**Fig. 13:** *Blankets* (116/1–3). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

Karin Kukkonen explains: “As you read a comics page, you move back and forth between background and foreground, between the general and the specific, in your inferences. Both the layout of the entire page and the details of the individual panels feed into a larger whole, a gestalt” (2013b: 18).

Comparing *The System of Comics* (2007) with *Comics and Narration* (2013) it can be observed that Groensteen’s approach has significantly shifted from a semi-otic towards a reader-response orientation: “Once the part played by the reader’s cognitive activity in the construction of meaning is accepted, it follows that what

can be read in the image does not necessarily coincide with what can be seen, and frequently exceeds it” (2013: 36; see also 151). He even introduces his own equivalent of Rosenblatt’s ‘the text’ and ‘the poem.’ He differentiates between *what is shown* in a literal sense (depiction/denotation), how this evokes *what has intervened* (closure/inference) and *what has been signified* beyond the literal (connotation/symbolism/metaphors/metonymy/intertextuality) (cf. 2013: 36–41). Groensteen argues that these strategies dominate in certain comics, such as type three in “modern or poetic comics” (2013: 39), but all of them are present at all times. Thus, the subjectivity of characters (internal focalisation), metaphor, analogy, allegory, symbolism, or aesthetic effects are not the prerogative of Chris Ware or (post)modernism (cf. 2013: 40), but part and parcel of comics narration in general. Groensteen is justified in criticising McCloud for his narrow focus on easily discernible action sequences, ruling out the complexity of comics narration as an odd deviation from a general norm (cf. 2013: 41, 181). However, it would be equally wrong to underestimate McCloud’s contribution to comics studies in general and his cognitive approach (based on gestalt psychology) in particular.

#### 4.4.4 Experience vs. Object

Hatfield’s classification of tensions follows two patterns: he works from the inside out and from the smallest units of storytelling to the most encompassing. Since we have already had a look at words vs. images, image vs. sequence, sequence vs. page and the totality of the network/narrative, there is only one aspect left: the overall design and style of a comic book as a material object of art. Here Hatfield is interested in how the experience of reading the narrative is influenced by the interaction of readers with the physical object (its size, weight, quality of paper etc.) and the artistic style that is usually advertised on the cover (cf. 2005: 58, 60). Comics are designed objects, whose individual parts – including the peritexts – are carefully created to invite a response to their graphic art and to trigger an immediate, overall impression.

The materiality of comics has garnered renewed interest with the widespread availability of digital comics, which I have explored in a case study of David Hine’s *Strange Embrace* and its various print and digital editions (cf. 2016). Equally, the advent of graphic novels and the mainstream success of cartoonists has made book design a more viable option. For the present discussion, I limit my focus to graphic style and what is termed ‘graphiation’ (cf. Baetens 2001; Baetens & Frey 2015: 137–8; Mikkonen 2015: 101, 112), the personal self-expression of cartoonists through their art. Since the concept of ‘graphiation’ was specifically developed in contrast to widely available and domineering art styles,



these foils have to be addressed in turn. I end with a brief look at Harvey Pekar's autobiographical work, which involved him as a writer and several cartoonists, who brought their own sensibilities and styles to *American Splendor*. This adds an interesting twist to the concept of graphiation and the foundational principles of autobiography.

In *Comics and Narration* (2013) Groensteen differentiates between 'monstration', which he associates with the subservience of the style to the clarity and transparency of expression, and 'graphiation', which foregrounds the artist's signature style of graphic self-expression (cf. 2013: 85). This distinction was introduced by Philippe Marion in *Traces en cases* (1993) and popularised in English comics criticism by Jan Baetens in his article "Revealing Traces" (2001). It is predicated on a Romantic notion of artistic creation and an intimate relationship between artist and reader. The basic idea is the following: "The visual form of all comic elements is considered a 'trace', that is a reflection, a symptom, an index, of the subjectivity of a narrator; however, this subjectivity is never studied in itself, but in its relationship with the narratee, whose presence is as strongly felt as that of the narrator" (2001: 145). To underline the role of the flesh-and-blood cartoonist as a "graphic artist" and "calligrapher", instead of some anonymous "enunciator" or "abstract agent", Marion proposed a direct form of communication between artists and appreciative readers through an "idiosyncratic gesture" (2001: 147), which preserves its uniqueness throughout the production process. Baetens and Marion want to overcome the cynicism attached to mass-production by stressing readers' felt communion with artists through their personal styles (cf. 2001: 148). Baetens, who essentially translates Marion's arguments from the French, explains that "graphiation is obviously first of all a device of auto-representation" (2001: 149), which suggests that cartoonists are interested in developing a signature style that is immediately recognisable. In film studies this concept is known as auteur theory, which claims that – despite the involvement of dozens or even hundreds of other specialists – it is possible to detect and discuss the style of specific directors (cf. Beaver 2007: 21–2). Naturally, Marion favours the "complete author" (2001: 150), who is the sole creator of a comic, in contrast to the conveyor-belt mentality of having comics mass-produced by highly specialised individuals executing only a single step of the production process according to a predetermined plan. Chris Ware, who is the prime example of an *auteur* in comics, confirms Marion's conceptualisation of style in his introduction to *McSweeney's* Issue 13:

All cartoonists have a signature "style" that exists beyond the look of their art or the quality of their writing – a sense of experience, a feeling of how they see the world – as

expressed in how their characters move, how time is sculpted. Comics are an art of pure composition, carefully constructed like music, but structured into a whole architecture, a page-by-page pattern, brought to life and “performed” by the reader – a colorful piece of sheet music waiting to be read. (2004: 11–12; cf. Beatens & Frey 2015: 135)

Apart from mirroring John Dewey’s and – in consequence – Louise M. Rosenblatt’s view of how humans experience art, Ware alludes to the important realisation that style is a form of focalisation. Through style, artists frame their narratives in a particular manner that expresses their attitude towards the material at hand, in the same sense that a parodic style in prose reveals the writer’s thoughts without having to state them explicitly. In the case of autobiographical texts, readers not only get a sense of how artists experience the world in general terms, as Ware suggests, but specific views – both literally and figuratively – of their lives. Accordingly, questions of overall visual design and the creators’ attitude to the piece have to be clarified – at least to a certain extent – before breakdown (cf. Eisner 2006: 128). Due to this centrality of style, it is not surprising that graphiation has been a major concern of autobiographical comics studies for quite some time now (cf. e.g. Kukkonen 2013b: 56; Chute 2010: 10–11; Versaci 2007: 43–7; Fischer & Hatfield 2011: 74–5).

One of the most interesting discussions of style in (autobiographical) comics can be found in Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield’s article on “Calligraphy, Graphic Focalization, and Narrative Braiding in Eddie Campbell’s *Alec*” (2011). Looking at the almost complete collection of Alec stories in *The Years Have Pants*, the authors characterise Campbell’s work as “black and white, and mostly drawn in the roughhewn, autographic style that has become a Campbell trademark and a reminder of his small-press roots” (2011: 74). Since Fischer and Hatfield introduce important points in each of their three subsections, I follow them in order.

They define calligraphy in this context as “the autographic or doodle-like immediacy of *Alec*’s graphic style, which is typically loose, sketchy, spontaneous-seeming, and akin to handwriting” (2011: 75), which allows for “the comics image” to be “read as text, approaching, thanks to the calligraphic hand of the artist, the vanishing point where illustration, diagram, pictogram, and writing are all so many hand-drawn extensions of a single artistic sensibility” (2011: 75). Thus, Fischer and Hatfield add another dimension to the discussion of style, as they propose shared qualities between verbal and visual expression, conceptualise writing and drawing as extensions of each other and ultimately understand “cartooning as handwriting” (2011: 76). This is nothing new, as Will Eisner included a short chapter on “Letters as Images” in his 1985 book *Comics and Sequential Art* (cf. 2006: 14–16), in which he stresses the pictorial roots of all alphabets. Hand-lettering, which has been largely replaced with digital fonts in

mainstream comics, traditionally involved ‘drawing’ letters, which is even more visible in the design of sound words.

Treating Campbell’s graphic style as focalisation, Fischer and Hatfield come to the conclusion that, apart from the general features listed above, it

... isn’t a single “style” but rather a constantly changing relationship with style, one that leads to continual variations in the comics’ [*sic*] degree of abstractness and in its graphic rendering. Campbell’s artwork isn’t exactly representational in a literal, supposedly objective sense. Rather, it evokes a perspective, a way of seeing that is partial, frankly subjective, and emotionally invested. For something so organically unified, Campbell’s “style” is plural, and all over the place: panel by panel, his drawings modulate to evoke the shifting terms of his attention and emotional entanglement. (2011: 76)

Hatfield is the critic who introduced the concept of “*emotional truths*” (2005: 113) to the study of autobiographical comics, for which he finds a perfect example in Campbell’s Alex stories. More to the point, style varies with every publication, scene or moment in the *Alec* series, even though the artist’s “idiosyncratic gesture” (Baetens 2001: 147) is recognisable in all of these variants. Using Alan Palmer’s term of ‘aspectuality’ to describe a character’s “own way of perceiving the storyworld – through his/her own beliefs, desires, motivations, and biases” (2011: 77), Fischer and Hatfield claim that the variations in style serve to foreground the characters’ unique perspectives on the world. Mikkonen calls the same phenomenon a character’s “mind style” (2015: 114), which he defines as a visual representation of a character’s subjective view (cf. 2015: 114–15).

For Marion, I believe, this would somewhat detract from the core idea of graphiation as artistic self-expression, as style is made to serve a narrative purpose here. In reality, this line is very hard to draw, especially in autobiographical texts, where the aspectuality of every younger self is equally expressive of the artist’s point of view and the overall design of the narrative. Focalisation in comics is a question of layering rather than a straightforward attribution of perspective to a single entity: “the action may be focalized in ways consistent with the character’s emotional state, while still being presented through an ocular perspective external to the character” (Fischer & Hatfield 2011: 78). Accordingly, readers should not confuse a third-person external visual point of view with a neutral perspective. We return to this phenomenon in the next part in the context of narration.

Fischer and Hatfield’s third point is braiding. Style can be an important component of braiding in that it helps to foreground elements of the design that, in turn, remind readers of things they have encountered before: “Campbell knits this memoir together with braided motifs that function simultaneously

to insinuate meaning and, graphically, to complete his pages. Such motifs are often presented slyly, through an ostensible parataxis (literally, a placing side by side) rather than subordinated to an overtly narrated syntax” (2011: 84). Style also plays a role in the artist’s consideration of the “aesthetics of fragmentation” (2011: 85), of how many and which types of gaps the (imaginary) readers can handle. Fantastic scenarios can be grounded through a photorealistic style and the most mundane things can become defamiliarised when treated in a minimalist, fragmentary manner.

Since style permeates everything in comics, these have been just a few notable contexts in which it plays a more prominent role. The most important one is clearly cartooning and how artists choose to work with pre-existing styles and established conventions. Concerning the authenticity or truth value of autobiographical comics, style is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, “cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception” (2007: 21; see also 118–25; Groensteen 2013: 85), as Douglas Wolk explains, “a direct expression of their creators’ idiosyncrasies and work-specific intentions” (2007: 30). According to the logic of graphiation, this would mean that readers gain ‘direct access’ to artists’ unique vision of the world, which would make autobiographical comics exceptionally authentic. On the other hand, readers are constantly reminded of the complete subjectivity of the text, where everything has been “transformed through somebody’s eye and hand” (2007: 118). Since there is no neutral ground or absolute objectivity in cartooning, it seems more pertinent to speak of ‘creative non-fiction’ and treat autobiographical texts as narratives, as I do throughout this thesis. In other genres, the impact of graphic style on aspectuality can complicate the matter even further, “prompting the reader to speculate whether the focus of perception and the cognitive attitude belongs to a character, a narrator, or the author” (Mikkonen 2015: 113). While autographic texts are shaped by a unique vision anyway, the presence of graphiation in purely fictional texts always adds a layer of focalisation that is difficult to bring in line with Genette’s theory (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 154). In classical narratology it may seem like a sacrilege to confuse character, narrator and creator, but the more one ponders focalisation in comics, the more ambiguous the concept becomes under these circumstances. Following Monika Fludernik, Mikkonen even suggests that “it does not always matter who speaks or sees in the narrative [. . .]. What may be much more important is how the reader, or the viewer, gets optimal information about a character’s consciousness: his or her motivations, thoughts, and perceptions” (2017: 153). This is clearly related to Alan Palmer’s argument in favour of aspectuality (cf. 2017: 120), which cuts across key concerns of narratology to arrive at a more integrated understanding of characters in narratives.

Since this section began with the Romantic notion that comics artists communicate directly with their fans through a unique style, graphiation cannot be divorced from the drudgery of comics production, considering that a single person has to render a whole book in a consistent style: “Drawing is an extremely labor-intensive, repetitive, virtually boring, exasperating, and desperately disheartening activity” (Baetens & Frey 2015: 138). When artists have completed a so-called ‘dummy book’, which is a rough mock-up of the finished product, they have to spend years to execute it ‘properly’ for publication (cf. e.g. Thompson in Whybark 2003: transcript 8). There are always purely pragmatic considerations, such as how much work artists can handle next to their day jobs as freelance illustrators or teachers, to what extent prospective publishers or conventions restrain creativity, how accessible texts have to be to reach a broader audience and, finally, how style is determined by the media, by which I mean the physical objects and tools the artists use. In this context Hatfield speaks of style as “the relationship between narrative content and physical medium” (2005: 63).

Another blow to Marion’s ideal of artistic self-expression is the creative necessity to serve a specific work of art, a scene or even a single moment. In their article Fischer and Hatfield demonstrate how Campbell varies his style to accommodate specific narrative purposes. Accordingly, the first foil to pure self-expression has to be “the *rhetorical use*” (Baetens & Frey 2015: 112; see also Groensteen 2013: 46–7; Peeters 2007) of art that subordinates visual design to storytelling, which then requires countless adjustments. Characters, objects and locations have to be recognisable across the narrative, which means that their cartoon representations have to rely on a few defining features that are discernible from different angles, under different ‘lighting’ conditions and in different configurations. Apart from this redundancy, elements of the composition have to be foregrounded all the time (cf. Mikkonen 2015: 115) and the rhythm of the panels has to fit the type of narrative the artist attempts to tell (cf. Baetens & Frey 2015: 132). Changes in modality (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 42) are often communicated with the help of style to mark a transition from one ontological frame to another. Following David Bordwell, Mikkonen lists four pragmatic functions of narrative style: “channel story information (denotative function), convey meanings (thematic function), signal a feelingful quality (expressive function), and exhibit perceptual qualities and patterns (decorative function)” (2015: 111).

David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp* may be the most prominent example of the rhetorical use, as every character is associated with a specific type of speech balloon, font, artistic style and primary colour (cf. Duncan 2012: 48): “By modifying the drawing technique according to the character, the monstrator translates into external terms the way that each of them sees the world, their idiosyncrasies”

(Groensteen 2013: 115). This is a case where aspectuality or mind-style is more important than overall visual consistency, which does not mean that *Asterios Polyp* lacks design. Marion's concept of graphiation reaches its limits where it would mean that artists invariably foreground their signature style independent of genre or specific content. Judging the rhetorical use of style, we are still within the scope of cartoonists making choices that *they* consider advantageous for their works of art. The next two types, classical Franco-Belgian albums and US-American house styles (Marvel & DC), are good examples of externally imposed constraints. In some ways strict limitations may inspire creativity, to which the best newspaper cartoons attest, or they impede artists' self-expression due to their overpowering rigidity. I start with the album and follow with a look at the beginnings of Marvel's house style.

According to Groensteen, the Franco-Belgian tradition of comics was dominated for a very long time by "the ideals of simplicity" (2013: 47; see also Lefèvre 2011: 16), "the dogma of uniformity of style" (2013: 6) and "the sacred imperative of optimum transparency and immediate legibility" (2013: 6; see also 47, 56). At one point Groensteen even complains "how rule-governed the sphere of comics is" (2013: 55), which sounds odd as a generalisation, but his frequent references to the constraints of working within the established rules of the album tradition testify to such a pattern. The standard layout of albums even has a nickname – the "*waffle-iron*" (2013: 44) – which refers to the rigid pattern of panels on a page.

In the Franco-Belgian context one notices an almost revolutionary fervour, or at least a heightened sensitivity when scholars talk about phenomena that transcend the limitations of this prototype. We have already encountered how enthusiastically Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle celebrates the potential of the tabular to introduce layouts that overcome the linear progression of the narrative. Groensteen points out how the so-called French "neo-baroque" style "permanently deploys a whole arsenal of unsystematic effects", which was embraced by "a generation that has turned its back on the ideals of simplicity and transparency that permeated Franco-Belgian comics" (2013: 47). At the level of mise-en-page this question seems to belong to Hatfield's third tension, but Groensteen specifically addresses the cultural context and a general attitude towards comics and storytelling that is mirrored in the style and artistic choices. Style, in this sense, can have a strong primacy effect, as it invites a stance towards the narrative before one even begins to read.

The exact opposite of personal self-expression is the adherence to a so-called 'house style'. Throughout their illustrious history American comics publishers Marvel and DC have worked more or less persistently on a corporate design

that is intended to establish a consistent look across their major lines. Douglas Wolk sees “the rise of ‘house style’ in the ‘70s”, epitomised by “the 1978 publication of *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*”, which created a “generation of cartoonists who learned that there was a right (‘Marvel’) way and wrong way to draw everything (2007: 51). At the time, Neal Adams had set a new and very successful standard of how to draw (Marvel) superhero comics, so the company was eager to establish a best practice model and have young, aspiring artists follow a clearly delineated path. In the industry, ‘artists’ were considered to be mere (wage) labourers for a very long time, who were meant to visually execute stories that were handed to them. However, over a decade before that, it was Jack Kirby who became “the artistic dynamo of the Marvel line” and left his mark on its creative output: “the company’s style was built squarely on Kirby” (Hatfield 2012: 105). In an interview with Gary Groth, the editor of *The Comics Journal*, Gil Kane, who worked as a freelance artist for Marvel in the 1960s, comments on the impact of house styles:

Jack’s point of view and philosophy of drawing became the governing philosophy of the entire publishing company, and beyond the publishing company, of the entire field. [...] In order to broaden the scope of their publishing, what they managed to do was to take Jack and use him as a primer. They would get artists, regardless of whether they had done romance or anything else, and they taught them the ABCs, which amounted to learning Jack Kirby. [...] Jack was used as the yardstick by which they could measure their own progress. Jack was like the Holy Scripture, and they simply had to follow him without deviation. That’s what was told to me, that’s what I had to do. It was how they taught everyone to reconcile all these opposing attitudes to one single master point of view. (Groth 1986: 69–70; cf. Hatfield 2012: 106)

Despite important progress in the acknowledgement of comics artists’ rights and a certain acceptance of unique artistic visions, the house styles are still in place, as recent relaunches of the Marvel or DC lines have shown. This preference for corporate identity over individual style has two unfortunate consequences.

First, by suppressing the artists’ individual sensibilities and forcing them to adopt a pre-determined look, the publishers make it a lot harder for cartoonists to claim authorship (cf. Bredehoft 2011: 106). In a predominantly visual medium it is somewhat absurd to celebrate writers as the sole creators (e.g. Alan Moore), but relegate the contributions of artists to mere execution (e.g. Dave Gibbons, David Lloyd and Eddie Campbell’s work on *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell* respectively). It is not a coincidence that the so-called independent publishers (e.g. Image), attracted talent by promising ownership, creative control and shared profits (cf. Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 69–70). Secondly, formulaic writing usually leads to generic fiction as an endless repetition of the same

patterns and that includes style in the case of comics. For uninitiated readers it is difficult to detect how the most celebrated artists in superhero comics still manage to work around the formula, which is ostentatiously visible in their work. This is not specific to comics, as poets creating Elizabethan sonnet cycles were equally faced with the dilemma of not repeating the formula whilst working within the confinements of the tradition.

These discussions of style may seem very far removed from what is relevant for the classroom, but I would argue that the exact opposite is the case. Styles and established patterns are a phenomenon in every form of human communication, from comics and blockbuster films via dating to academic essays. The 'uniqueness' of great art or genre writing results from one's familiarity with the tradition combined with intriguing variations of the established patterns. I have already quoted Mark Turner's view on this issue (cf. 1994: 51). Like fragmentation and conceptual integration, the tension between repetition and innovation is foundational to the medium itself, especially the strip format. While educational genre writing requires an extended study of how text types work – the *what* of genres – to empower students to reach a higher level of performance through imitation (cf. Hallet 2011), the focus in narrative genre studies has to be set on questions that allow students to explore *how* a text transcends such stereotypes. Formal writing may rely on predetermined styles, layouts, structures and phrases to communicate information effectively, but 'genre fiction' is a derogatory term, because it applies the same principles to literature. From a 'high-brow' point of view, even the term 'genre' on its own usually means horror, science fiction and fantasy or, in a broader sense, all popular genres, which would then include romance, thriller, adventure, suspense, western or mystery. Students largely know the conventions, so the focus has to be on how creators work around the limitations of the form and find new means of expression. Like the unique selling point of films, to name the most simplistic approach to address this question, literary teaching has to keep the variations and deviations in view.

Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* series, for which he collaborated with various artists, most notably Robert Crumb, raises important questions about authorship and graphiation. Therefore, it is ideally suited for a case study to discuss these questions in context. In a fascinating article on this subject matter, Thomas A. Bredehoft claims that, for a more adequate conceptualisation and appreciation of authorship in comics, readers have to realise that the artists' execution of a comic script – no matter how detailed the verbal descriptions may have been – always exceeds the prefiguration through the writer and warrants their recognition as co-authors (cf. 2011: 99–100, 105). He quotes Robert Crumb's



introduction to Ballantine's 2003 anthology of *American Splendor* stories to provide some context for the question to what extent Pekar can be credited as the sole creator of these comics (cf. 2011: 100). I extend the quotation slightly by adding a few more comments from the first page:

... illustrating his stories is not easy. There's so little real comic-book-style action for an artist to sink his teeth into. Mostly it's just people standing around talking, or just Harvey himself addressing the reader for page after page. [...] He writes the stories in a crudely laid-out comic page format using stick figures, with the dialogue over their heads, and some descriptive directions for the artist to work from. The next phase involves calling up various artists and haranging [*sic*] them to take on particular stories. (Crumb 2003: n. p.)

In *American Splendor*, whose first issue was published in 1976, Pekar established a unique style – what Marion would associate with graphiation – through his 'voice'. In his extended study of Pekar's work, Joseph Witek repeatedly stresses the importance of the autobiographer's verbal art, who "brings a musician's ear to the rhythms of daily speech and the nuances of ethnic dialects; many of the short pieces in *American Splendor* are simply celebrations of the way people talk" (1989: 130–2). For a medium that is equally comprised of the verbal and the visual, Witek's remarks on a comic artist's prose style are rather the exception, as the discussion of visual style – e.g. in the form of graphiation – tends to dominate critical debates.

In contrast to the antics of superheroes and underground comix artists, Pekar deliberately foregrounds the most mundane experiences, such as "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines", "How I Quit Collecting Records" or "An Argument at Work" (2003: n. p.). At the same time, Harvey handles his personal struggles, obsessions and little triumphs with such an unflinching 'honesty' and reveals so many character quirks in the process (cf. Witek 1989: 127), that readers are likely to become interested in this filing clerk's "daily grind of working-class life in middle America" (Gardner 2012: 135). As Crumb explains above, these vignettes often take the form of extensive soliloquies (cf. Bredehoft 2011: 103) that rely on Pekar's unique voice for consistency and put artists in the impossible situation of having to create visuals that add to the narrative in a meaningful way. "The Harvey Pekar Name Story" features 48 almost identical panels of Harvey talking directly to the reader, and still Crumb manages to convey many nuances through facial expressions, gestures, eye contact with readers and pauses. Bredehoft is adamant that, even as we accept Pekar as the authority on his own life, the visuals are too important to be ignored:

Pekar is the author if we continue to privilege the linguistic at all costs, but the degree to which he does and does not control the visual aspects of his comics – the images and their relationships – suggests the possibility of slippage or uncertainty in our ability to identify Pekar (as the subject of the comics) with the unique author of the images. (2011: 98)

Pekar chose artists whose styles would fit specific types of stories, which suggests that he exerted creative control over the aesthetics of his comic book to a certain extent (cf. Bredehoft 2011: 101–2). Bredehoft quotes Pekar declaring that he was able to find the most suitable collaborator for each assignment, “like a casting director assigns roles” (Pekar qtd. in Bredehoft 2011: 101; see also Witek 1989: 137). Although Pekar’s reference to acting is appropriate, considering comics’ general reliance on dramatisation and his collaborators’ practical involvement in staging scenes, I see more parallels to an executive producer (‘showrunner’) of a TV series finding the most suitable directors for tonally different episodes. The cartoonist’s responsibility clearly exceeds casting/acting and encompasses overall visual design and composition. Returning to the concept of style as focalisation, I agree with Bredehoft that the artists engaged in biographical work (cf. 2011: 99–100) and significantly shaped the stories. Bredehoft applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s term *heteroglossia* to *American Splendor* (cf. 2011: 99), since he considers the styles (‘voices’) of the cartoonists equally constitutive of the readers’ experiences of the character(s). Despite the fact that the production of collaborative comics progresses from writing to drawing, readers’ first impressions are undeniably visual, which gives the artists a lot of influence over how readers perceive Harvey. While some of them (e.g. Gerry Shamray) chose to take “hundreds of photos of Pekar, his wife, his apartment, the streets of his neighbourhood, and so on” (Crumb 2003: n. p.), presumably to match reality as closely as possible, Crumb’s Harvey can be unflatteringly hunched, hairy and cartoonish – not to mention irascible and obnoxious (e.g. in “A Fantasy”; Pekar 2003: n. p.). This leads Bredehoft to the following conclusion: “Pekar’s ‘voice’ and Crumb’s visual style each constitute a distinct and separate ‘stylistic coherence’ in such a fashion that both figures must be identified as partaking of the work’s author function” (2011: 104). Looking at the overall visual presentation of *American Splendor*, which offers “seemingly irreconcilable variations of depictions of Pekar himself” (2011: 98), the autobiographical self becomes visibly fragmented: While Pekar’s unique voice provides cohesion across all stories, every artist had to invent his or her own Harvey. As if that was not enough, Pekar experimented with thinly disguised pseudonyms (e.g. Herbie, Marvin) that appear in their own stories next to the ‘adventures’

of the 'Harvey' character (cf. Witek 1989: 123; Gardner 2012: 136). He also foregrounded different character traits in these pieces, to the point that readers were challenged to reconcile the "aggressive manipulator" with the "passive depressive, a street hustler" and "a social outcast" (Gardner 2012: 136). The most widely discussed story in the context of *American Splendor's* heteroglossia is "A Marriage Album" (Issue 10; 1985; cf. Bredehoft 2011: 98), co-written by Pekar and his wife Joyce Brabner, for which Val Mayerik provided the art. For a scene that shows Joyce visiting Harvey for the first time, Mayerik had to recreate various renderings of Pekar's cartoon selves, as Brabner imagines what he may look like based on the comic.

At this point in their relationship Brabner had been in contact with Pekar for some time, through letters and on the phone, but Harvey's 'physical presence', his behaviour in social situations, the embodiment of his emotions and reactions to everyday experiences, were mostly known to her through visual representations by various artists. The irony, of course, is that Joyce meets Harvey three panels later, which signals an important step in Brabner and Pekar's personal lives, but readers progress from one representation to another (cf. Witek 1989: 139). Benjamin Stevens calls this transformation of different modalities into the same representational code "*ontological ambiguity*" (2010: paragraph 14), as everything becomes equally real: two-dimensional, hand-drawn and monochromatic. Readers know from experience (embodied cognition, basic scripts), the narrative context of the scene and the characters' warm embrace that, emotionally, this meeting has to be a major event, but for readers there is no shift in modality: Mayerik's Harvey is as 'real' to us as Crumb's. However, the ambiguity of authorship and authenticity is not limited to this one panel that confronts us with eight cartoon renderings of Harvey, but extends to the whole story and beyond. Leaving aside Mayerik's substantial contribution to this story, of which the many wordless panels he had to create for this narrative are just one obvious indicator, it was also written by two people and features ambiguous shifts in perspective. We see Harvey on his couch ruminating about the early days of his relationship with Joyce, of which we are reminded intermittently throughout the next two pages. At the end of this sequence we find Joyce telling her friend Maxine the very same story in the car, obviously from her perspective. Since we are presented with scenes that only Joyce witnessed, she has to be the source of this information. Harvey may have heard about the details in a letter or during a telephone conversation before their marriage, or later when they moved in together. The scenes are clearly framed as Harvey's memories at first, but drawn, of course, by Mayerik. This is a typical example of the polyphony that Bredehoft associates with *American Splendor* and an illustration of why Mikkonen finds the

application of traditional narratological concepts to comics quite challenging. Since we revisit the fragmentation of the autobiographical self in the next part, for the present discussion of style and its impact on comics narration it seems appropriate to look at the other end of the spectrum – an overabundance of verbal narration. This also returns us to Hatfield’s first tension between words and images.

A surprising number of Pekar’s short stories rely on what Bredehoft calls “an extended Pekar soliloquy” (2011: 103), which results in an unusual and overbearing amount of continuous verbal narration in captions and/or thought balloons. This leaves very little room for visual narration and threatens to degrade the images to the level of illustration. In the Ballantine collection of *American Splendor*, “American Splendor Assaults the Media”, “An Everyday Horror Story”, “I’ll Be Forty-Three on Friday” or “Violence” (Pekar 2003: n. p.) are just the tip of the iceberg in this respect. Where “A Marriage Album” leaves plenty of room for Mayerik to re-create the couple’s early history, with Harvey’s verbal contributions restricted to a few speech balloons, “Violence”, also drawn by Mayerik, is incredibly text-heavy. It was published in the same tenth issue of *American Splendor* and, on the surface, offers an ongoing piece of prose, which Mayerik had to illustrate with a few suitable images. On a spectrum between prose narrative and pure visual storytelling, “Violence” and “A Marriage Album” are closer to the extreme poles than to each other. Still, Mayerik’s contribution to “Violence” should not be underestimated. Bredehoft sees a deliberate choice of artist, who is known for his work in superhero comics and who finally got a chance to capitalise on that set of skills for *American Splendor* (c.f. 2011: 101–2). Looking at the entire span of his lifetime, Pekar hones in on a few dramatic scenes of violence, which Mayerik had to capture within single dramatic panels or two consecutive frames at best. While some of the captions are oppressively verbose for a comic, especially on the final page, the cartoonist’s style is neither secondary nor coincidental.

A last word on style takes us to the groundbreaking film adaptation of *American Splendor* (2003) by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, which combines comics aesthetics with feature film narration, archival footage, interviews, making-of sequences and other documentary formats to create a generic hybrid that perfectly mirrors the kaleidoscopic approach that the comic takes. In recreated scenes actor Paul Giamatti portrays Harvey Pekar, who provides the voice-over narration *and* appears as himself in the film, in an actual recording of *Late Night with David Letterman* and even alongside Giamatti on the set at one point. Instead of promoting a mimetic illusion or a coherent master narrative of Pekar’s life, viewers are constantly reminded of the film’s ostentatious

arrangements. Jason Sperb (2006) uses Gilles Deleuze's concept of simulacrum to approach what seems to be a postmodern deconstruction of the (auto/biographical) self in the film. The opening sequence alone introduces us to a child actor playing young Harvey, who is quickly replaced with Giamatti as the older version of the same character, Pekar as the voice-over narrator referring to Giamatti as himself, Crumb's cartoon Harvey pointing at Giamatti and stating that he (Giamatti) is playing 'him' now. This leads Sperb to the following important questions:

Does the real Harvey Pekar become *more real* because he is surrounded by cartoon Harveys, and by the photographically – but not historically or biographically – real 'Harvey' (Giamatti)? Or as I am inclined to suggest, does the performance of these other Harveys heighten our awareness of the real Harvey as himself in a state of performance? (2006: 136)

The performance aspect is foregrounded in Pekar's various appearances on the Letterman show, where the supposedly 'real' Pekar plays an erratic version of himself, which is intended to camouflage his own nervousness and amuse the audience with unexpected quips (cf. Witek 1989: 143–6). We are reminded, as Sperb correctly observes, that Pekar playing himself is as much a performance as Crumb's or Giamatti's Harveys. This leads him to the following conclusion:

This film attempts to document his life, and Harvey plays an active role by narrating and commenting on events. Yet the deconstructive nature of the narrative, and Harvey's own attempts to resist a definitive representation of his life story, provide instead a text in which postmodernism and the simulacrum serve as the primary, antithetical act of documentation. (2006: 124)

It has to be said that the resistance to a definite representation of Pekar's life is very evident in the comic series and perfectly mirrored in the film's style and generic hybridity. There is neither an essence of character nor a sense of truth-telling that is often ascribed to documentary filmmaking. Sperb makes an important distinction between the postmodernity of Pekar's presence and the inappropriateness of a postmodern reading of the film (cf. 2006: 125). *American Splendor* does not eschew the serious attempt to capture Pekar's real-life experiences, but it is very honest about its limitations: even having the 'real' Pekar collaborating on the film does not make it more authentic. At one point, Sperb is willing to abandon postmodernist film theory and accepts *American Splendor* for what it is: "It is a film about painful life experiences, and about the impossibility of representing those experiences" (2006: 128). Still, he feels haunted by the "crisis of unrepresentable experience and suffering [. . . in] postmodern film and film studies" (2006: 128). Despite Sperb's realisation that *American Splendor* is

able to convey Pekar's "painful life experiences", he is not willing to abandon his postmodernist stance. Yet, it is precisely the externalisation, dramatisation and fictionalisation of Pekar's experiences that make them accessible in terms of emotional truth.

The style of the film – the postmodern foregrounding of its own status as a work of art – is central to the approach that the writers and directors took. It mirrors and further elaborates on the visual and generic hybridity of Pekar's own comic books. Far from an ancillary effect, the overall design, I would argue, is as essential to this transmedial narrative project as Marion's graphiation is to the personal expression of the artist: it cannot be separated from content or meaning, as these are largely determined by the way the narrative presents itself. Pekar's voice(s) and the artists' styles become two sides of the same coin. Many critics have become fascinated with these questions, as the visual design of comics is not decorative, but constitutive. Both Bredehoft and Sperb take the lack of Pekar's presence in and control over these autobiographical texts as their starting points for a discussion of authorship and authenticity respectively. Marion's concept of graphiation is predicated on the idea that Walter Benjamin's 'aura' of the original work of art miraculously survives mechanical reproduction (cf. Gardner 2012: 146–7) through the artist's graphic style. Would Pekar's comics be more authentic, truthful and imbued with his personality if he had been gifted with exceptional drawing skills? Is it more important for readers that artists' styles match the narrative or foreground their unique sensibilities? I am sceptical of the notion of authenticity and the illusion of direct communion between writer and reader. Having said that, I find Jared Gardner's approach to the 'aura' of autobiographical comics more convincing:

... the auratic nature of autobiographical truth is worth defending – indeed it *must* be defended – even as the fictional mediations of that truth must be simultaneously acknowledged – not as a fall from grace but as a paradoxical but equally valid "truth." It is the graphic memoir that best allows for this simultaneous claim of autobiography and fiction, and for the simultaneous demand on the reader for both distance and identification. (2012: 147)

There is no escape from representation, which turns the personal style of the artist into another available resource; nothing more. Berman and Pulcini's *American Splendor* as an auto/biography of Harvey Pekar completely demolishes the borderline between biography and autobiography, between artistic self-expression and collaborative effort, between truth and fiction. And yet, having convincingly demonstrated that nothing is real in this film, Sperb succumbs to its emotional truth: "*American Splendor* is not just a light-hearted play of surfaces,

it is also a story of *trauma* – of the very real pain of cancer treatment and survival” (2006: 127). It is important to notice that Gardner shifts the focus from the codes – which are only means of artistic expression – to the experiences of the readers, who have to discover for themselves what they are willing to embrace as an emotionally resonant ‘truth’ about another person’s life. They are well aware – or should be – that “fictional mediations” (2012: 147) cannot lead to a revelation of essences and eternal truths, but that the power of art can transform a feeling of what it means to be a particular person under specific circumstances into a worthwhile experience for readers and viewers.

#### 4.5 A Cognitive Reading of Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* (Chapter I)

A reading of Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* might as well begin with the cover and other peritexts, which offer excellent starting points for speculations and first impressions. Assuming that the book is discussed in the context of autobiographical comics, the subtitle “an illustrated novel” (2007) may surprise a few readers. On the one hand, it offers a variation on the more familiar term ‘graphic novel’, which begs the question whether there are differences between the two formats. On the other hand, critical readers may object to the idea of reading a novel in the context of ‘non-fiction’, which is a widespread association with the genre of autobiography. However, *Blankets* and its paratexts (cf. e.g. Whybark 2003) provide readers with contradictory evidence concerning the authenticity or truth-value of the narrative. A naïve understanding of autobiography usually involves two basic misconceptions: confusing a literary genre (art) with sworn testimony (law) and mistaking someone’s memories (mental networks) for what happened (reality). I am going to address these two points in the next part, but for the moment it suffices to recognise that there is a legal reason for labelling *Blankets* an ‘illustrated novel’, precisely because readers have such expectations. On the copyright page Thompson states: “This graphic novel is based on personal experiences, though the names have been changed, and certain characters, places, and incidents have been modified in the service of the story” (2007: 4). To avoid a potential libel charge and to retain creative control over a work of art, especially when auto/biographical facts are in the way, may be two unusual points to raise in this context, but they reflect the reality of working in this genre and medium. Students may not even notice the label or fail to ascribe particular importance to it without explicit prompting. This might result from a blind trust in a teacher’s classification of the narrative – despite potential evidence to the contrary – or from a general habit of starting to read on page 1, where prose

narratives usually begin. This is why framing a reading sequence plays such an important role in educational settings, especially when it involves a reorientation in terms of new genres or (narrative) media.

Picture books and graphic novels are usually designed in their entirety by the creator(s), which endows their peritexts – and especially the cover – with more importance and ‘weight’ than those of prose narratives. Hatfield dedicates one of his four tensions to “text as experience vs. text as object” (2005: 58) to highlight the impact of design on all levels of the creative process. Since both art forms share these qualities, it helps to approach comics through picturebook studies, where the materiality of the book, the centrality of paratexts and the importance of style have always been key research areas (cf. e.g. Nodelman 1988: 40–100; Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 241–57).

One striking characteristic of my paperback edition of *Blankets* is the use of colours for the cover, which are set off against the black and white of the main body of the text. Thompson picked blue for the outside and a desaturated orange for the inside cover. Assuming that he had a free choice, blue is quite unusual for a love story. Before the text is announced and speculations on the cover start, it may be an interesting activity to let students collect iconic representations of love online, discuss the iconicity of love in class and then compare their findings with the cover illustration. Like film posters, picturebook and comics creators utilise covers to promote their content, appeal to genre expectations, introduce characters, settings and themes, express their attitude towards the narrative through stylistic choices and convey a certain mood. On the back cover of *Blankets* readers find an endorsement by journalist and now TV critic for *The New York Times* James Poniewozik, writing for *TIME* magazine in 2003. He considers Thompson’s graphic novel “a rarity: a first-love story so well remembered and honest that it reminds you what falling in love feels like”. This may serve as a second interesting contrast to the cover illustration, where the two lovers awkwardly embrace each other. We find them off centre (towards the right) at an unusually great distance, as if we chanced upon them. Due to the thick black outlines, the characters are foregrounded against a barely three-dimensional environment that seems both harsh and unforgiving to me: The lovers stand ankle-deep in a blanket of snow and behind them we discern a ghostly forest fence of dead trees. It could be interesting to have students rate how romantic the image is. This encounter with the protagonist is continued on the spine, where a medium close-up shows the couple from a shorter distance. The characters look sad, frightened, out of touch with the world, like an endangered species, or maybe caught in the act – surprised that someone else is there. One could even argue that readers have moved closer, which has alerted Craig and Raina to their presence. All of this is purely speculative and provides more potential for classroom discussions.



The inside cover is orange and shows what readers later learn to be Raina's quilt, a personal art object she made for Craig as a gift and which is the only remaining thing he did not burn after the relationship had ended (cf. 2007: 525–8). This introduces another blanket and more symbolism to the cover – next to the trees and the footsteps: figuratively speaking, the book is wrapped in Raina's blanket.

The title presents more clues. I have already drawn attention to the blankets of snow and Raina's quilt, but there are more blankets to discover. Raina and Craig's footprints leave tentative marks in the snow, which is another ongoing theme in the novel. As an artist Craig/Thompson is confronted with blank pages (cf. 2007: 141, 147–8) and the question what marks he would like to leave. As a devout Christian, he is looking for something permanent and meaningful, but finds his initial 'output' sinful and of little value. At the same time, readers are aware of the massive and highly regarded graphic novel in their hands, which represents an interesting case of dramatic irony. Most of these observations are impossible to make without any knowledge of the text, so the benefits of rereading equally apply to the cover. As students should find their own way into the narrative, they only require a few hints in the form of questions rather than a specific analytical framework. As we shall see, the narrative offers many opportunities to connect with the protagonist and gradually introduces the book's central themes. This allows for greater flexibility when framing the narrative.

Since Chapter I, "The Cubby Hole" (2007: 8–65), contains 58 pages and 250 panels, I cannot discuss all of them in detail, but I consider it important to demonstrate how the points I have raised in isolation throughout this thesis interrelate. I want to start with the idea that narratives consist of scenes and, more specifically, of what Catherine Emmott calls 'contextual frames' and Barbara Dancygier 'narrative spaces'. I have already discussed one personal encounter from the first chapter (cf. 2007: 54–5) – Craig's conversation with the Pastor – in terms of beats or conversational moves to illustrate how the visual and verbal signs are bound to particular stages of a dialogue and interconnect to form carefully designed patterns. Since readers are likely to memorise only a general impression of a scene, it is necessary to return to some of them during rereading activities. What I have not explained in sufficient detail yet is how Dancygier's "viewpoint compression" (cf. 2012: 112) works, how compression and decompression are both creative and receptive processes and how (translinear) blending as a reading process is guided by what Iser calls 'textual structures', Dancygier 'narrative anchors', Emmott 'long-distance links' and Groensteen 'iconic solidarity'. What all these variations of narrative prompts have in common is the basic idea that meaning is contextual and that it relies on mappings between mental frames, which illuminate certain structures in the input spaces and obscure others.

Global insight is based on having at least two mental spaces active in working memory and integrating them on a higher level of meaning, which corresponds to Iser's gestalt-forming. According to Dancygier, "viewpoint compression is a blending mechanism which attempts to account for the fact that zillions of low-level facts, observations, or thoughts are compressed into more manageable viewpoint spaces and used in the processing of the narrative as a whole" (2012: 112). Following this logic, and very much in line with Iser's coordination of perspectives (cf. 1980: 35, 169), readers as 'text detectives' engage in an activity that social scientists would call 'triangulation.' Thus, meaning-making becomes a process and an ongoing dialogue that involves the integration of diverse and ever-changing perspectives into an increasingly consistent 'overview,' based on 'synopsis.' These in-sights – on all levels of integration and complexity – are both gestalten, which means more than the sum of their parts, and blends, successful mappings between input spaces. What I want to focus on in this chapter is how the prompts of the 'blueprint' – in this case Chapter I of *Blankets* – function as response-inviting structures that facilitate viewpoint compression.

Thompson starts with a single panel that shows two boys in a large white bed placed in a dark room (2007: 9/1). The verbal narrator, who is going to be absent for most of the book, has a specific role in the first chapter: he is our tour guide and provides consistency. His comment reads: "When we were young, my little brother Phil and I shared the same bed" (9). Superficially, this may seem redundant, but the narrator performs a remarkable feat here: through the use of personal pronouns he invites readers to treat the name on the cover, his 'voice' in the form of sentences written outside and inside of panels *and* a cartoon drawing of a little boy, whom we cannot even see properly, as the same subject. Viewpoint compression in autobiography often involves readers' attempts to conceptually integrate their experiences of various selves into a coherent image of a subject. The next panel (10/1) repeats the first one from a closer and slightly higher angle and even adds labels – 'Phil' and 'me' – to indicate who is who. Visually, there is a stronger emphasis on the room as a 'prison cell,' with the incoming light producing a pattern of iron bars across their blanket. This may seem far-fetched, but the narrator's second sentence reads: "'SHARED' is the sugar-coated way of saying we were TRAPPED in the same bed, as we were children and had no say in the matter" (10). The parallelism between 'we were trapped' and 'we were children' strongly suggests an interpretative frame for the entire first chapter: as we shall see, Craig's childhood is presented as a nightmare, which leads to an almost complete lack of agency on the protagonist's part. This theme is introduced here, both verbally and visually, but then repeated throughout chapter I. I find Groensteen's metaphor of 'braiding' very useful to talk about literature

and comics in particular, as this thread is going to resurface again and again. On a fundamental level, comics narratives foreground elements and prompt conceptual integration through repetition.

The boys begin to quarrel until their father intervenes in the most dramatic fashion (cf. 12/6). I discussed page 12 in the context of sound effects and typography. The emotions and attitudes of characters are very easy to understand here, as Thompson relies both on standard situations (children who argue and refuse to sleep) and cartoonish facial expressions that change dramatically from one panel to the next to “condense subjective experience into readily recognisable highlights. This exaggeration of feeling, together with a complete absence of awareness and control, also lends a quality of childishness to characters” (Tan 2001: 38). Tan talks about Hergé’s *The Calculus Affair*, but Thompson relies on the same principle of maximum transparency. Craig’s emotions go from amusement (12/1) to fear of falling (12/2) to rage (12/4) to seriousness (12/5) within seconds. These four states are presented in the most hyperbolic way possible to be instantly recognisable.

Their father’s appearance marks a major shift in character configuration and power relations. He has been announced both verbally and through an ominous thumping sound drawing nearer (cf. 12/5). When he gets his grand entrance (cf. 12/6; 13/2; 13/4), Thompson uses a brush instead of a pen to foreground panels 12/6 and 13/4 with thick, black borders. While their father’s question “WHAT’S GOING ON UP HERE?!” is presented in capital letters, but still contained within a speech balloon (cf. 12/6), his admonition “**DON’T QUESTION YOUR PARENT’S AUTHORITY!**” (13/4 → Fig. 14) knows no constraints. While panel 12/6 still follows the regular layout of the page, 13/4 extends to twice the size and demonstrates Thompson’s willingness to sacrifice any sense of realism in favour of pure symbolic expression. The previous (13/3) and the following panel (13/5) contain Craig’s complaints, but they are visually, verbally and symbolically ‘crushed’ by the exercise of parental power.

In *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* Rocco Versaci stresses how “wildly interpretative and impressionistic” (2007: 64) autographic texts can be and foregrounds *Blankets*’ status as a work of art instead of a piece of documentary evidence:

To read such a work is to understand at a fundamental level that the “truth” of memoir is something that cannot be tied simplistically to the facts; the power of Thompson’s memoir lies primarily in its telling, which is subjectively arranged and presented. As Thompson shows, comics are clearly artistic, and in them we see not the world but a representation of it. (2007: 64)



**Fig. 14:** *Blankets* (13/4). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

The boys' father is presented as a towering giant who is hovering above their bed and trapping the boys in the bottom right corner. In its melodramatic hyperbole it is both easy to read and encapsulates a fundamental experience that transcends the specific context. Like comics in general and *Blankets* in particular, this panel heavily relies on embodied cognition, image schemas and conceptual metaphors. While size and centrality are the two most obvious factors that illustrate Mr. Thompson's overbearing presence, there is also the image schema of VERTICALITY (UP-DOWN) that is central to depictions of power and related conceptual metaphors (cf. Hanić 2013: 132). Jasmina Hanić convincingly argues that the visualisation of social structures usually involves hierarchies and a pyramid that positions people as topdogs or underdogs. This is then metaphorically extended to moving up and down the social ladder (cf. 2013: 133–4). Accordingly, Hanić defines "CONTROL IS UP" as the "primary metaphor used to understand the concept of power" (2013: 135). The preposition 'over' dominates verbal entailments in such metaphors and can mean a state/status, e.g. "to be over him" and 'overshadow', or a movement, as in 'overthrow', 'overpower' and 'overcome'. This extends to the notion that we can be overcome with emotions (cf. 2013: 143–4). Panel 13/4 is a reminder of how the image schema VERTICALITY (UP-DOWN) dominates the first chapter of *Blankets*. Another striking and

highly symbolic manifestation of the same idea is the bullies' triumph over Craig (24) – a panel to which Thompson dedicates a whole page.

Panel 13/4 is clearly foregrounded as the most salient one on this double-page spread (cf. 2007: 12–13) by being twice as large as any other and framed with a thick black border. Through iconic solidarity it is closely related to panel 12/6, but also to 13/2, maybe to a lesser extent. It establishes an embodied configuration of power, dominance and victimisation that readers are going to encounter throughout the chapter. *Tom and Jerry* (cf. 38/1), for example, is not simply a cartoon that Phil happens to watch on television: it is a reminder that physical abuse is ubiquitous for these children. In the current scene, their father's presence has an immediate impact. The boys are separated (14), which is visualised by a move from 'two-shots' (cf. 14/1, 3) to singles (cf. 14/4). Following a trend of foregrounding panels through variations in framing, Thompson shows Phil's horror in a frameless panel (14/4) and isolates him visually by setting the image of Phil inside the 'prison cell' apart from the regular arrangement of panels at the top of that page (cf. 17/5).

While readers have witnessed a continuous scene up to this point (9–17), page 18 introduces the idea that the episodes are not chronological, but closely related to each other in the autobiographer's mind through powerful feelings, predominantly guilt and shame. On page 18 the narrator states across three panels: "I should have been the one who was locked in the cubby hole that night because I was a pathetic older brother. I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations" (18/1–3). This last thought triggers a memory of passively watching the babysitter take Phil to the next room (cf. 18/3). These episodic memories are linked for a reason, so that their spatial contiguity on the page encourages readers to discover how they are related. Viewpoint compression in autobiographical narratives always involves an awareness of what the presented scenes reveal about the intentions and the global vision of the implied author. While readers may wonder whether Craig and Phil were really sexually abused by their babysitter, which is a valid first reaction to the narrative, Thompson encourages his readership to view these scenes in a larger context of abuse (cf. 29–32).

Craig's self-reproach continues with two highly symbolic images of abandoning Phil when his brother requires a sympathetic companion the most (cf. 19/1–2). The sequence ends with two panels that show Craig towering over Phil and frightening him with the prospect of constant physical abuse in school (cf. 19/3–4). Thompson ingeniously repeats the pattern of body codes which he established with their father's intervention (cf. 13/4) in 19/4 (→ Fig. 15), putting



**Fig. 15:** *Blankets* (19/4). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

Craig in the position of topdog, and mirrors that again in 20/1 (→ Fig. 16), where bullies threaten Craig at school and he finds himself in Phil's place.

Through braiding, Thompson insinuates a history of violence, which affects society at large, but also his family in particular. The transition from 19/4 to 20/1 represents another abrupt shift in contextual frames, which only makes sense in view of the narrator's associations. Visually, this scene (20–5) continues with the





**Fig. 16:** *Blankets* (20/1). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

image schema VERTICALITY (UP-DOWN) as a basic conceptual metaphor for the abuse of power, which finds a paradigmatic expression on page 24. When Craig looks in the mirror at the end of the scene (25), alone in the school bathroom, he feels exactly like Phil in the cubby hole (cf. 17/5), which is emphasised by reproducing the scratch marks on the wooden door as blood-smeared fingerprints on the mirror (cf. 25/7). These translinear links are at least as important as the content of the scenes themselves. Finding the same patterns repeated across different frames, readers begin to conceptually integrate scenes into larger gestalten. Craig/Thompson feels shame for repeating the pattern himself by victimising his younger brother, although he should know best how this feels at the receiving

end. Craig's revenge fantasies involve his oppressors eating excrements (cf. 29/3). We learn that he has (ab)used his creative writing assignment to indulge in such fantasies, which leads to a severe reprimand by his teacher (cf. 28). Triggered by this revenge fantasy, the narrator returns to a memory of the babysitter taking advantage of himself and then of Phil (cf. 31/1). When we return to the classroom on page 32, the "merging of two different moments in time through the association of the intense feeling of shame common to both is conveyed by placing representations of both scenes into the same narrative space of the classroom and onto the same page of the book" (El Refaie 2012: 93). This observation by Elisabeth El Refaie highlights the fact that the medium affords comics creators with a montage technique that places references to various contextual frames side by side and invites readers to draw conclusions.

Narratologically speaking, this memory can be attributed to Craig as internal focalisation, whereas the first time we saw the babysitter it was the narrator who took us there (cf. 18/3). Both transitions prompt a comparison of Craig's experiences across different social settings, which supports Mikkonen's claim that "it does not always matter who speaks or sees in the narrative" (2017: 153). It would be another case entirely if the differences between narrating and experiencing I were foregrounded, but Thompson seems to be more interested in providing readers with a strong impression of how he felt about his childhood many years later. At the same time, chapter I has to be seen in the context of the primacy effect (cf. Sternberg 1978: 94): it serves as an experiential backdrop to the main narrative threads and hints at those thematic concerns that readers should look out for.

What is striking about "The Cubby Hole" is that many scenes have a symbolic and exemplary function, in the sense that depicted events are presented as symptomatic of many other incidences. They seem to be blends rather than based on episodic memories. Following Martin Conway and David Rubin's categorisation of autobiographical memories (cf. 1993), Daniel L. Schacter postulates three levels of compression: event-specific knowledge, which is supposed to retain the level of details and qualia typical of a single event; general events, which are blends of several occurrences into a single memory; and lifetime periods, which are general observations or blended feelings based on years of experience (cf. 1996: 89–90). I would argue that most of the scenes in chapter I are general events for which there are several indications: Thompson compresses the first seventeen years of his life into 58 pages. In comparison, the two weeks at Raina's home span more than 300 pages (2007: 171–482). Secondly, instead of pinpointing exact dates and locations, the verbal narrator introduces many of these scenes in the broadest of terms. The very first sentence reads: "When we



were young, my little brother Phil and I shared the same bed” (2007: 9). When he describes his relationship to Phil it reads like a summary: “I was a pathetic older brother. I neglected my protective role in dangerous situations” (18/2–3). His dreams of escaping are introduced with: “Every night I would scheme of running away” (39/1). These introductory sentences suggest that either the scenes we witness have an exemplary status by capturing key experiences of Thompson’s childhood or they blend several incidences into one hyperreal, compressed representation that manages to convey basic convictions and feelings in a (melo) dramatic form.

Commenting on a scene in Isabel Allende’s *Paula* Schacter observes that the author “is not remembering a specific episode in a particular time and place; she is extracting features and themes that are common to many episodes” (1996: 90). I would argue that Thompson blends, condenses and dramatises recurring events by presenting them as a single experience to foreground essential and symptomatic features of his social encounters in childhood and during his teenage years. This is not to say that they are misrepresentations, as general events “capture a good deal of the distinctive flavour of our pasts, and are readily accessible because they have been strengthened through repetition” (1996: 91). In contrast to event-specific knowledge, which is about singular occurrences, general events are related to the grammatical forms “I used to . . .” or “I would . . .”, as in “I would constantly threaten him with my discouraging discoveries of the ‘real world’, as if my three years of seniority made me an expert” (19/2). While these input spaces tend to be generic, the complex links between them are not.

There are about fifteen contextual frames in the first chapter, which are presented in the following sequence: (1) Craig and Phil in bed and their father’s intervention (9–17; 41; 61–5); (2/3) two scenes of Craig and Phil out in the country (18–19; 45–7); (4) a generic abuse scene that involves the babysitter (18; 29–32); (5/6) two generic scenes of bullies physically abusing Craig in school (20–5; 33–4); (7) a typical lesson in school (26–32); (8) Craig coming home from school (35–8) and (9) dreaming about escaping (39–44); (10) a lesson in Sunday school (48–51; 61–3); (11) Craig’s fall from grace and into puberty (51–2); (12/13) two one-panel scenes of teenage Craig being ridiculed by bullies and warned by a teacher, while telling himself that none of that matters (53); (14) the Pastor’s proposal (54–5) and (15) the destruction of all his graphic art (56–61). There are a number of things to notice here: the first scene provides a frame for the entire chapter. The contextual frames are mostly organised according to emotional resonance and metonymy, not following a linear, temporal or causal structure. For the most part, they are blends that present symptomatic and endemic structures of basic social relationships. They are interrelated through braiding and thematic



Fig. 17: *Blankets* (53/2). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

concerns, often using layout to foreground emotional contiguity. The most obvious example of braiding is a pattern of body codes repeated throughout the chapter (e.g. 53/2; 55/1 → Fig. 17 & 18). I would argue that the conversation with the pastor belongs to the same group. There is again this overpowering presence of an adult who strongly suggests a particular path to pursue. Suddenly realising that he wants to be guided by God, it is Craig who initiates the final move, but the Pastor's affirmation, "I think God wants you to go into the ministry" (55/4), seems to push the teenager in a very specific direction.

In this last section I want to concentrate on the final ten pages, which set up a new dynamic. Independent of how readers choose to interpret the conversation with the Pastor in church, it marks a first turning point, as Craig suddenly becomes active. We also find more precise time indications in this part of chapter I, which may suggest that the narrative is finally gaining some momentum. The very next scene begins with "That afternoon, I was engrossed in the book



**Fig. 18:** *Blankets* (55/1). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

of Ecclesiastes” (56/1), which is a second indication that the narrative finally adopts chronological time. It may seem that *Blankets* is an extreme example in this regard, but that is not the case. Elisabeth El Refaie, for example, describes *Persepolis* as a “fascinating portrayal of the workings of memory not as a filing-cabinet of separate ‘incidents,’ but as fragments of experiences, thoughts, and emotions that may run in parallel, feed into each other, or occasionally even merge completely” (2012: 129). Earlier in her study on autobiographical comics she considers this to be a general trait of the genre: “It is this idiosyncratic experience of subjective time, with its irregularities, circularities, overlaps, and gaps, which graphic memoirists typically want to ‘commemorate,’ or share with their readers” (2012: 94). Even within *Blankets* itself braiding continues to be a major concern. Chapter II is based on the contrast between Craig’s childhood experiences at church camp and his first meeting with Raina, which I discussed in section 4.4.3.

The most fascinating thing about *Blankets* is that Craig discovers three potential answers to his search for meaning in life: art, religion and love/sexuality. Just a few pages before the scene in Sunday school (cf. 47–50) Thompson reminds us of his childhood passion: “An ENTIRE DAY would be consumed by drawing, interspersed with fits of running around outside expending our energy. These were the only WAKEFUL moments of my childhood that I can recall feeling life was sacred or worthwhile” (44/4). Drawing (cf. 44), dreaming (cf. 41–3) and playing (cf. 46) are closely related and spiritual activities to him. Throughout *Blankets* readers are reminded that Thompson thinks about art and love in religious terms. When he receives Raina’s quilt as a gift, he comments that “It’s SACRED” (184/1). Neither do I think that this is a coincidence, nor that Thompson uses religious words lightly. The blanket is Raina’s successful attempt to weave together the two things in her life that are dearest to her: her art and her long-distance relationship with Craig that is about to become a more direct experience. Craig struggles with his exploration of these different paths – art, love/sexuality and Christianity, which leads to a crisis of faith. As a reader of his own life Craig has a hard time seeing the larger pattern.

This is the context in which the last few pages of Chapter I may become more relatable. After realising that he wants to dedicate his life to God (cf. 55/3), he spends the afternoon reading his Bible outside. There he begins to associate the dead leaves falling from the trees with his childish drawings. As so often in comics the metaphor is visualised and becomes readily accessible (cf. 56/6). In a fit of religious fervour he scours his room for drawings (cf. 57/3–58/3) and sets out to burn them as an offering to God (cf. 58/4–59/3). The “new spiritual pact” (59/1) is based on what looks like a book-burning. Thompson wants to start his new life with a clean slate and therefore he has to purge everything that does not fit the new world order: “I wanted to burn my memories” (59/4). Here, the metaphorical process is reversed: the physical drawings are associated with Craig’s memories, the creative potential that is inside of him and his identity as an artist. When they go up in flames, this is mirrored in what looks like an exorcism, driving cartoon characters out of his body (cf. 60). The ‘heretic’ parts of his identity get burned on the stake. Craig seems to be suffering more than ever in his life, so this visual metaphor can also be read as a comment on the horrible decision he has made and the horrid acts that religious fervour can lead to. Depending on how readers have understood the narrative up to this point, the interpretations are likely to be very diverse, which makes this page an excellent choice for in-class activities.

Both his pain and the purging flames remind him of his former Sunday school teacher, who appears superimposed over the act, preaching the faith: “But if you

don't ask Jesus in your heart, you'll spend eternity in HELL" (61/1). Her stories of hell and eternal suffering (cf. 61/1–4) remind him of Phil in the cubby hole, which returns us full circle to the beginning. Thompson lets the teacher continue with her preaching and adds images of Phil being locked up by their father (cf. 61–3). From Craig's point of view, he has condemned Phil to the hellish cubby hole and, while he can hear him sobbing through the wall, there is nothing he can do but despair (cf. 64–5). Again, Thompson demonstrates that everything is connected. This is an ambiguous ending in which religious fundamentalism seems to triumph over art and family relations. Yet, the book readers hold in their hands – *Blankets* – is a triumphant celebration of cartooning and a victory – as it were – of artistic self-expression and self-determination over any doctrine. In this sense, the physical presence of the book promises a perspective that the narrative has not reached yet.

Thompson disentangles and decompresses his complex, emotionally charged memories of his childhood to let readers draw their own conclusions. The verbal narrator's interventions are reduced to a minimum and – for the most part – refrain from explaining what there is to see and understand. Thus, readers are invited to take in the pieces of the puzzle and see the larger picture, as a sum total exceeding the individual parts, which is the key idea of gestalt psychology. Through selection, foregrounding and mise-en-page, this process is guided by textual structures. Instead of relying on a chronological presentation, memories are organised according to their interconnectedness in the autobiographer's mind. The meaning of this first chapter can be found in the complex relations between these fragments, which are artfully arranged to produce visible patterns and suggest correspondences. In this case, many of them rely on the image schema VERTICALITY (UP-DOWN) and conceptual metaphors, such as CONTROL IS UP. All the social relations seem to be informed by a topdog-underdog mentality. That is why most adults preach and never listen. Raina is the first who becomes genuinely interested in him as a person, which he, ironically and sadly, cannot fully reciprocate. From his point of view, she is so perfect that he persistently fails to recognise her as a real person. His juvenile infatuation is understandable, but it also blinds him from the truth (cf. Thompson 2007: 337). While the facts about his life provide the most basic orientation, Thompson is not interested in a traditional autobiography at all. Readers' tentative blends at the end of chapter I may be varied, as the autobiographer sets the stage for multiple directions. Despite the fact that there is this shaping presence, the absence of a verbal narrator during key sequences and the dramatisation of Craig's worst experiences creates a tension between the particularities of his early life and the promise of any autobiography that LIFE IS A JOURNEY and has to lead somewhere (cf. Kövecses 2010: 4, 71). In the fifth and final chapter these questions take centre stage.



## 5 Autobiographical Comics

### 5.1 The Conceptual Ambiguity of Autobiography

#### 5.1.1 A Struggle with Definitions

In their widely acknowledged introduction to the study of life writing, *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson associate the term ‘autobiography’ with the “Enlightenment subject” and the “master narrative of ‘the sovereign self’ as an institution of literature and culture” (2010: 3). This usually meant eminent white males looking back at a lifetime of achievement in the public sphere, a concept that was “vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques” (2010: 3). Accordingly, Smith and Watson treat autobiography as a specific type of “*life writing*” (2010: 4), which is their preferred term for a more inclusive practice that “takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject” and may as well be “biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (2010: 4). Alternatively, they speak of “*life narrative*” as “a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (2010: 4; see also 95–6). According to this logic, autobiographical comics are life narratives, as they do not exclusively rely on the written word.

While this classification promotes an openness towards other media, it also introduces categories that combine codes and (sub)genres in extreme ways: ‘life writing’ is limited to a single code – the written word, but can be anything from historical novel to biography. ‘Life narrative’, however, can take any (multimodal) form, but has to be autobiographical. These definitions are quickly abandoned on the following page, when Smith and Watson speak of “life writing and biography” (2010: 5) as two distinct practices. There they argue that in “life writing, subjects write about their own lives predominantly”, whereas in “biography, scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject” (2010: 5). The term ‘scholars’ implies that biography is a more academic, evidence-based endeavour that is closer to historical research (cf. 2010: 14), whereas autobiographies can be written by anyone relying on memories alone (cf. 2010: 13). It is a central aim of this introductory part to demonstrate that the neat separation between biographical and autobiographical writing remains questionable. Therefore, I prefer Smith and Watson’s more

inclusive first definition of 'life writing', which I discuss in the context of Liz Stanley's notion of 'auto/biography'.

Not surprisingly, Smith and Watson find their neat generic distinctions challenged by "texts that combine biographical and autobiographical modes of narration" (2010: 7), as "contemporary practices increasingly blend them into a hybrid, suggesting that life narrative indeed is a moving target and an ever-changing practice without absolute rules" (2010: 8). They make a last attempt at clear demarcations in the context of readers' responses, where they associate "a different set of expectations" (2010: 14) with autobiography, in contrast to biography and especially the novel. Michael A. Chaney believes that "the question of whether any given narrative belongs to fiction or autobiography is ultimately one that readers must negotiate" (2011: 4), which implies that the trustworthiness of the auto/biographical text is established in the telling and is not determined by paratextual genre labels. In chapter 3 I am going to introduce Elisabeth El Refaie's 'strategies of authentication' (cf. 2012: 135–78), which foreground the idea that truth is a performance that is negotiated with readers during the transaction with the text. Smith and Watson claim that autobiography predominantly foregrounds "rhetorical acts" that engage readers in a more direct intersubjective communication with the writers, who are "justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures, among others" (2010: 13). This is an interesting observation, as it brings the written genre of autobiography more in line with the oral tradition of spontaneous storytelling, Fludernik's 'natural' narratology (cf. 2005) and what Michael Bamberg calls 'small stories' (cf. Bamberg 2007) in narrative psychology. Moreover, Smith and Watson acknowledge a wide range of potential motivations for life writing, which means that 'truth-telling' is not an end in itself, but serves a higher purpose. As El Refaie argues, there is always a "persuasive purpose" for which the auto/biographers have to "draw in" readers (2012: 179). They have to win their trust and entangle them in the negotiations of lives and histories that auto/biographies pursue.

As we have seen with *Blankets*, it already starts with the genre label – 'an illustrated novel' – on the cover and extends to all areas of the front matter. On the credits page Thompson states: "This graphic novel is based on personal experiences, though the names have been changed, and certain characters, places, and incidents have been modified in the service of the story" (2007: n. p.). Here, the line between fact and fiction is hard to draw and ultimately pointless. Following Gérard Genette (1997), Smith and Watson argue that the "peritexts and epitexts" of an auto/biography "comprise a threshold that can dramatically



affect its interpretation and reception by variously situated reading communities” (2010: 100). The cultural mediators and gatekeepers, such as teachers, provide a lens through which the narrative is to be viewed. Smith and Watson use James Frey’s ‘autobiography’ as an example of ‘reframing’, as his “editor persuaded him to recast *A Million Little Pieces* as a memoir rather than a novel” (2010: 101). This caused an outrage when it was first endorsed by Oprah Winfrey and her book club as a paragon of a redemption narrative, only to be reviled later on when it was discovered that Frey invented parts of it (cf. Versaci 2007: 34–6; Miller 2007: 538). As artefacts and handcrafted objects, autobiographical comics are less likely to trick readers into confusing cartoon drawings with a mimetic representation of reality.

Despite the ubiquitous mantra in autobiographical research that this genre operates with constructed realities (cf. e.g. El Refaie 2012: 7; Whitlock & Poletti 2008: xv), a lot of academic discourse is still dedicated to the truth value of these texts, presumably because general readers tend to take Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact very seriously. He argues that, “for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical”, which, of course, immediately “raises a number of problems” (1989: 5). Lejeune is quick to point out the shortcomings of his own proposal: “is it really the same person, the baby who is born in such and such a clinic, in an era of which I have no memory whatsoever – and me?” (1989: 9). While autobiography’s “aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth” (1989: 22), authors are said to metaphorically sign a contract with their readers by putting their proper names on the covers, which guarantees an honest attempt to tell the truth to the best of their abilities. Nancy Miller speaks of “the pleasure that comes from genre satisfaction” (2007: 541), which implies that many readers approach a text with clear expectations – in this case disclosures about an actual life – and appreciate it when writers keep their end of the bargain. Yet, appealing to potential readers involves more than telling ‘the truth’ and authors’ agendas are more complex and varied than stating what ‘really’ happened.

Marjane Satrapi’s decision to begin *Persepolis* with “The Veil” (2007: 3–9) is a personal, political and feminist statement, but it also provides an access point for westerners, who comprise her main readership (cf. Whitlock 2006: 972). The first moral dilemma she offers is a simple decision between black and white, the veil and Marji’s face, fundamentalism and freedom. Satrapi actively promotes empathy for or even identification with her younger self (cf. El Refaie 2012: 188), which is important for the readers’ acceptance of an otherwise highly unusual or even unorthodox life. At the time of publication France was considering to

ban all religious symbols from public life, especially headscarves (cf. Whitlock 2006: 974), which made the text topical, more easily relatable and more likely to be noticed by the press. The book became a phenomenon and “sold a record three hundred thousand copies in France” (Chute 2010: 136) alone, which indicates that the cartoonist managed to attract a broad mainstream readership. However, it seems that the “apparent visual simplicity” (2010: 137) of her graphic style and the alleged universal appeal of the child protagonist, which Satrapi clearly encourages, led to a somewhat superficial reading of the narrative (cf. Chute 2010: 138). While the first three pages present a simplistic black and white scenario (cf. 2007: 3–5), both literally (cf. 2007: 5) and figuratively, the first panel of page 6 shows Marji caught between the two cultures, as she is said to be “very religious” (2007: 6/1). Her parents put her in an impossible position by being leftist, liberal, westernised and upper-class (cf. Chute 2010: 143), so that the two identities do not blend easily. Thus, her transcultural identity becomes a manifestation of larger conflicts, which makes her personal life political. In an article for *The Guardian* from December 2003 Satrapi called the French government’s plan to ban the veil “every bit as repressive” as the Iranian regime’s law that all women had to wear one in public (Satrapi 2003: n. p.; see also Chute 2010: 137). In both cases young women are treated as if they could not decide for themselves and needed the authorities to determine for them what to think and what to do. Satrapi won over western audiences as a seemingly staunch defender of ‘our’ liberal ideals and women’s rights, a freedom fighter and member of the resistance, but the matter may be slightly more complicated than that. In the introduction to *Persepolis* Satrapi announces that her major motivation to create the comic was a more differentiated view of Iran (cf. 2007: n. p.), using her own family history as an illustration of diverging beliefs and ideologies. Writers – like readers – are all entangled in specific private, social and historical contexts that shape the subject. This aspect of *Persepolis* tends to be overlooked when teenage girls in the west can easily identify with Marji and her problems. That is why Smith and Watson state that every autobiography has an ‘ideological I’ (cf. 2010: 76–8) next to the identities that readers usually distinguish. There is a tendency to discredit political views as ‘ideological’ when they do not correspond to one’s own convictions, but the entanglement of human beings in a cultural web of ideas and practices makes every point of view partial and historically determined. The ideological content of a text may become simplified or downplayed through paratexts (cf. 2010: 100), reviews and educational framings, in case they provide a single prism through which readers are encouraged to perceive a book.

In her article on graphic novels as a teaching tool in high schools and teacher training courses Carola Hecke discusses a project at the Georg-August-Universität

Göttingen in some detail which involved reading Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Jessica Abel's semi-autobiographical *La Perdida* with a group of pre-service teachers (2008/09; 2009/10). They developed teaching concepts and materials based on these books and then tested them with a group of students from a local secondary school who came to university especially for these lessons (cf. Hecke 2011: 660). In a footnote Hecke warns that "graphic novels, like all other types of literature and cultural representations, never simply show a real world, but always a more or less fictionalized as well as complexly mediated version of this world" (2011: 663). As the following statement implies, additional texts were used to offer more information and different perspectives on the narrative (cf. Vanderbeke 2006: 374):

... the students' comments suggested that due to their greater knowledge concerning the graphic novels' cultural contexts (history, traditions, and social conditions), they may be better equipped to achieve cultural understanding in a real-life situation if they were to meet a member of one of the cultures that appeared in the graphic novels and which they researched in the course. The new insights led to a different attitude toward other cultures in general and to a more differentiated view of Mexican and Iranian people in particular, and they allowed students to identify and overcome some of their prejudices and cultural biases. (2011: 661)

Considering the length and sequential nature of the project, it would have been interesting to know how the reading progressed, which types of activities were used for each stage, which learner texts were created and how the tasks were interlinked. Hecke addresses the importance of enactment, that "students should put themselves, to the greatest extent possible, in a given character's place" (2011: 665), which involves 'perspective-taking', 'aesthetic projection' and 'role-taking' (cf. 2011: 662; Batson 2009: 6–7). This was intended to "allow a closer look seemingly from within" (2011: 665). In view of the procedural nature of reading, the multiplicity of selves in autobiographical texts and the inevitable process of viewpoint compression, it would have been interesting to know whose point of view students reconstructed, based on which particular scene and with what kind of background knowledge (e.g. reading vs. 'having read'). In other words: do these performances serve as learner texts (while reading) that feed into other activities or are they intended as post-reading tasks that retrospectively highlight turning points in the narrative?

I have already indicated the centrality of dramatisation to comics narration, so acting/embodiment is a very helpful way to engage with the medium. Jutta Rymarczyk offers an interesting approach to Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* via pantomime and tableaux vivants, which are intended to bridge the gulf between reception and text production (cf. 2011: 17–19). Students embody the characters

to experience what it feels like to be in these situations and then decide which words and phrases they already know or still need to be able to talk about the context. This is vastly different from traditional reading comprehension tasks and more in line with an embodied approach. Although I would read *The Arrival* in parts, this is a great illustration of using drama techniques during a particular stage of the reading process with a particular purpose and a perspective of how the learner text contributes to an ongoing engagement with the narrative. I am sure that Hecke's enactments, which she calls "a welcome variation from the oral or written analysis and interpretation routine" (2011: 662), equally served a particular purpose in the sequence, but the article condenses a lot of information into just five pages dedicated to the project (cf. 2011: 660–5). Since the present discussion is about 'drawing in' (cf. El Refaie 2012: 179) readers, who are asked to role-play characters from a comics narrative, Iser's coordination of perspectives becomes relevant again. Whose experiences and point of view do students believe that they understand better, based on what inputs and insights?

Hecke's students related their increased intercultural communicative competence as much to their own research of the cultural background as to the engagement with the graphic novels. The author states that the overall aim was to obtain a more differentiated view of present-day Mexicans and Iranians (cf. 2011: 661, 663), not of Abel's or Satrapi's unusual life stories. This raises the question what exactly the role of literature – and comics in particular – is in this context. Hecke names "visual literacy" (2011: 653, 657) or "comics literacy" (2011: 659) as a second major concern, without explicitly stating how this influenced lesson planning or whether students had any prior knowledge of or experience with such texts. The project highlights the difficulties of teaching intercultural communicative competence through literature while addressing the specific medium in more detail *and* the literary genre of autobiography, although it does not become clear whether that was an issue at all. Another challenge for teachers is to strike the right balance between aesthetic reading/projection and "analytical tasks" (2011: 663), which require the exact opposite – a critical distance to characters and a certain suspicion towards their beliefs and attitudes.

In *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives* (2012), an edited volume on the use of comics in university classrooms, one finds two articles that warn against the single-text approach (cf. Delanoy 2015: 24), for example by using *Persepolis* to inform undergraduate students about Iran. Adrielle Mitchell is especially critical of such a procedure:

It probably helps that Satrapi's censorious take on the post-1979 regime change accords with many of our own biases, and further, that she takes pains to Westernize

her self-depiction such that European and American young people can exclaim over and over again that ‘Marji’ seems like everyone they grew up with, and like themselves. The highly problematic nature of this facile identification aside, this empathic response (carefully fostered, I believe, by Satrapi) has ensured that thousands of students [...] have ‘learned about Iran’ through this accessible, just-serious-enough-without-being-depressing, memoir. The real question raised by examples like *Persepolis*, then, is not why they are so popular, but how to responsibly consume their didactic material. (2012: 205)

Opposing the educational value of ‘transportation’ (cf. Green 2004; 2008), Mitchell suggests that *Persepolis* would be an ideal text to develop critical thinking: “Graphic memoirs like *Persepolis* work well in pedagogical situations designed to push students to move beyond superficial understandings (of life-story, of comics, and of places like Iran) into more considered, textually responsive interpretations” (2012: 208). This is seconded by Jonathan D’Amore in “Serial Self-Portraits: Framing Student Conversations About Graphic Memoir”, who stresses the importance of genre competence in engaging with autobiographical texts: “Graphic memoirs provide a unique pedagogical tool for illustrating to students the rather complicated interplay of identity, authorship, and creativity in autobiography” (2012: 210). Hecke privileges intercultural communicative competence and visual literacy (cf. Hecke 2011: 653, 660), which are both relevant, but Mitchell and D’Amore also raise an important point in tying autobiographical work in the classroom to critical media literacy and genre awareness. This is perfectly illustrated in *Autobiographies: Presenting the Self* (cf. Hallet 2015a), which offers very useful ideas for autobiographical storytelling in educational settings (e.g. using material anchors, childhood photos, smartphone videos or comic strips), even though genre competence and critical media literacy are not directly addressed in this context (cf. Hallet 2015a: 7). This part sets out to foreground the major links between key concerns in autobiographical studies and critical media literacy and to demonstrate what role autobiographical comics can play in such a context due to their specific mediality. I intend to return to the articles in *Autobiographies: Presenting the Self* whenever possible to highlight how these tasks can serve as practical examples of the points I am going to raise on a more theoretical level. As a starting point, we look at two popular terms that provide a general orientation of how critics conceive of autobiography in the medium of comics.

In her article “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of the Comics” (2006:) Gillian Whitlock shortens Leigh Gilmore’s term ‘autobiographics’ to ‘autographics’ (cf. Whitlock 2006: 966), which has become a widely used term for the genre (e.g. Smith & Watson 2010: 168). Two years later Whitlock – together with Anna

Poletti – offers a somewhat tongue-in-cheek ‘dictionary entry’ for her own neologism:

*Autographics, n. Áwtográfíks. 2007: Life narrative fabricated in and through drawing and design using various technologies, modes, and materials. A practice of reading the signs, symbols and techniques of visual arts in life narrative. See also autobiography, biography, testimony, autobiographics, comics, self-portrait, avatar. . . .* (Whitlock & Poletti 2008: v)

Whitlock claims that comics are especially well suited to address difficult, traumatic memories, as they allow the unspeakable to be represented solely through visuals or even left out altogether, only to be recovered by readers in the form of closure/conceptual integration. Comics also make certain real-life contexts more approachable and relatable, precisely because artists often eschew photorealism and build bridges through the mediating power of cartooning. By abstracting characters, actions and locations from their highly specific contexts, comics allow for greater empathy and readers’ engagement, of which *Persepolis* is a good example. Due to the artistic stylisation of otherwise horrendous acts of cruelty (cf. e.g. Satrapi 2007: 52/1; 102/1), Satrapi’s family history can be made accessible to (younger) readers, who would be greatly disturbed by the same scenes rendered in photorealistic images. The same logic applies to the aforementioned identification with the protagonist. The price of cartooning, however, is a substantial artistic intervention that is more visible and transparent in this medium than in prose.

The term ‘*autographics*’ also stresses an artist’s idiosyncratic way of ‘perfinking’ (cf. Bruner 1986: 69): perceiving, feeling and thinking. I have already discussed ‘graphiation’ in the context of style and overall design as a unique vision that transcends technical reproduction for the mass market. Whitlock and Poletti argue that “graphic life narrative resists reduction to summary or translation into a single medium [prose], and requires that we pause and explore the sight, the sounds, the sensational feel of autobiographical representations” (2008: v). From this perspective, *autographics* is more experiential and completely dependent on visual representation, which poses problems to literary critics who “are now called upon to develop more advanced visual and cultural literacies to interpret the intersections of various modes and media and the complex embodiments of avatar, autobiographer, and reader/viewer gathered under the sign of *autographics*” (2008: vi; see also Whitlock 2006: 968). The various manifestations of the autobiographical selves in the text are a major concern of this part, as they are more varied and more visible in this medium than in prose (cf. Versaci 2007: 36, 38).

‘Graphics’ as an established technical term, e.g. in ‘computer graphics’, is very inclusive and could be associated with various forms of visualisation. Yet, Whitlock and Poletti are quick to point out that the term ‘graphic’ – in the sense of ‘explicit’ – *does* derive from drawing and visual representation. Due to their heritage, autobiographical comics are prone to show “bodies in pleasure and pain” (2008: vii). This is important because of “the ways that embodiment and subjectivity emerge in strikingly different terms in visual and performance media than in written narratives” (2008: viii). Therefore, comics should be more frequently approached through the dramatic arts, as their close association with prose narratives is usually indebted to critics’ academic background. Using photos as a visual medium for autobiographical work in the classroom (cf. Henseler & Schäfers 2015) automatically foregrounds (social) performance (cf. Goffman 1959) and the necessity of critical media literacy.

Another frequently used term for the genre is (graphic) memoir, e.g. in Smith and Watson’s book (cf. 2010: 168–73), but especially in the second edition of Duncan, Smith and Levitz’s *The Power of Comics*, which extends the original two pages of the first edition (2009) to 34 pages (cf. 2015: 229–62) – a clear indication of how important this genre has become. The authors dedicate a whole chapter to the ‘memoir’, a term which they explicitly prefer over ‘autobiography’:

In an autobiography there is an emphasis on documenting one’s life, providing facts about events, whereas the writer of a memoir is often more concerned with conveying her or his feelings about events. [...] An autobiography usually spans all of the person’s life up to the point of the writing. A memoir usually covers a much shorter span of time, and often focuses on particular life-changing incidents and their consequences. (2015: 230)

This is in line with US-American reservations about the term ‘autobiography’, which seems to be less problematic in a European context. The authors make the important observation that many autobiographical comics take a slice-of-life approach, e.g. in the case of diary comics (cf. Cates 2011) and serialised publications (cf. Pekar 2003), which may put traditional concepts to the test that have been derived from autobiographical studies. In educational settings, there is a tendency to prefer graphic novel memoirs over shorter forms, precisely because they are closer to the literary genre of autobiography and prose fiction in general. I return to this question at the very end of this part, but first I present my preferred term ‘auto/biography’ for the genre in a general sense, which I use alongside the medium-specific terms ‘autographics’ or simply ‘autobiographical comics’.

Liz Stanley, Professor of Sociology at Edinburgh University, offers a unique view on auto/biography in her 1992 study *The Auto/Biographical I*. She uses the term “to encompass all these ways of writing a life and also the ontological and epistemological links between them” (1992: 3). As a lesbian feminist with a working-class background, a sociologist and a practising biographer, she brings a unique perspective to the discussion of life writing, especially in the form of an ideological and material reading (cf. 1992: 2–3, 92–3). She rigorously opposes what she calls the “realist fallacy” (1992: 8) of modern biography, which attempts “the reconstruction on paper of the essential fundamental person” (1992: 7). Stanley argues that the auto/biographical subject never existed as a person in exactly the form presented in the text, which means that what we encounter in the narrative is one possible way to construct a believable subject that is worth reading about:

Biographers just like autobiographers are writers, albeit writers bound by a perceived duty to produce some kind of factually-located account. They too select, omit, invent a narrative form, direct the reader’s interpretation of the subject, interpret, conclude. Biography is not the representation but the re-making, not the reconstruction but the construction, in written form of a life. (1992: 135; see also Halpern 1978: 1, 4; Eakin 1999: 107)

Inescapably, she argues, the biographer is “a socially-located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged, to mention no more, and is so every bit as much as an autobiographer is” (1992: 7). The same socio-historical entanglement applies to the reader: “‘Reading’ is a contingent activity deeply rooted in our autobiographies and the tools, means and knowledges these provide” (1992: 84). Accordingly, the auto/biographer offers one particular angle among a whole range of possibilities: “The past, like the present, is the result of competing negotiated *versions* of what happened, why it happened, with what consequence” (1992: 7). Wildly different auto/biographies have been written over the years by or about the same person, which attests to the dependence of life writing on particular approaches and specific viewpoints. In the case of Harvey Pekar and Dean Haspiel’s *Quitter* or Liz Prince’s *Tomboy*, the titles encapsulate the stances the adult autobiographers take towards their own lives. This is viewpoint compression in the purest form, reducing the meaning of a text to a single word. In both cases the narrators appear ‘in person’ as characters in the narratives and pursue specific agendas that they ostentatiously announce on the cover and systematically maintain throughout. In these cases the lenses through which they view their own lives determine both the foregrounding of specific incidents and their contextualisation in the form of ‘grand narratives’ that speak of shattered dreams,



on the one hand, and a life-long fight against gender stereotyping, on the other. Obviously, readers are strongly encouraged to adopt the narrators' viewpoints and accept the titles as facts. Here it makes sense to encourage students to unpack the simplistic one-word summaries and look at the decompressed life narratives with a critical eye.

One of Stanley's major arguments concerns the social isolation and foregrounding of individual lives, which Paul John Eakin associates with "the myth of autonomous individualism" (1999: 51). According to this logic, the self-made (business) *man* overcomes all obstacles, thwarts his opponents and climbs the social ladder – fuelled by his ambition, driven by an iron will and always prepared to make sacrifices for the ultimate triumph. Yet, even more unassuming texts tend to foreground a life severed from all social bonds: "Both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, yet both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product, for no life is lived quite so much under a single spotlight as the conventional form of written auto/biographies suggests" (Stanley 1992: 3–4). The hero either becomes a giant among wo/men and/or a socially awkward loner, while the secondary characters are frequently reduced to mere functions in the text. Stanley claims that the very form of the genre invites such a distorted presentation of a life: "Following the biographical subject in a linear and chronological way effectively trains a spotlight on them and them alone. The effect is that everyone else this person knew is thereby made to have only shadowy existence. Thus is the contemporary role of the biographical subject among their peers misrepresented, for we are shown them as a Gulliver among Lilliputians" (1992: 9; see also 131). The ideal of "Enlightenment individualism" (Eakin 1999: 47) can lead to an "ego-focussed" (Stanley 1992: 132) portrayal that downplays family ties, the role of mentors and forerunners in the field, professional support and cooperation, as much as social relationships in general (cf. Smith & Watson 2010: 86–8). Nancy Miller defines the "model of a relational self at the heart of the autobiographical project" (2007: 544) as essential to feminist approaches, but I believe that it is necessary to accept what Eric Neisser calls the "the interpersonal self" (cf. 1988: 36) as a general fact: "in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves" (Miller 2007: 544). In the same way that the self is hard to disentangle from its social ties, 'autobiography' proves problematic to sever from its transgeneric affiliations.

As a biographer, Stanley is concerned with the 'genius' of famous people, which is partly created through biographies that have too much in common with legends and myths. Eakin also notes a cultural difference between the Enlightenment subject as a role model of independence in western cultures and

other traditions that idealise strong ties to the local communities and even the environment. Instead of the myth of self-realisation, we find anthropological accounts of how the individual fits into the larger picture of tribal life and the narratives told by cultures about themselves (cf. Eakin 1999: 68–85). Stanley's theatrical metaphors of staging and spotlighting are very appropriate. While superhero comics are often ostentatiously melodramatic, which is highlighted, or maybe even parodied in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, autobiographical comics, I would argue, also have a tendency to borrow theatrical tropes. While Spiegelman's masked performers and re-enactments of the past helped to raise the bar of autobiographical work in the medium, the autobiographical self as a tragic hero, having to overcome social isolation and insurmountable odds, is a tightrope walk between narrativising a life and borrowing too liberally from (Gothic) melodrama: trapped hero(in)es, absent mothers, despotic fathers, terrible secrets, mental illness, a breakdown of communication etc. This raises the question of accountability and truth-telling or to what extent readers are willing to accept deviations from facts in the service of storytelling and personal myths.

Smith and Watson counter the potential allegation of deception by "asking what we expect life narrators to tell the truth about. Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself?" (2010: 15). Since the biographer "constructs the biographical subject" (Stanley 1992: 9), Stanley asks for an 'accountable biography', for which "biographers should not only make available to readers as much of the evidence, and of different kinds, that they work from as possible, but also an account of what facts, opinions and interpretations they find preferable and why" (1992: 9–10). This, of course, implies a more active and discerning role for readers, who become the co-creators of the auto/biographical text (cf. 1992: 124). Stanley's feminist and clearly political approach demands "a rebellion of the active reader, a common reader who disputes academic insistence upon how texts 'ought' to be read and interpreted, instead trusting their own interpretative powers in the face of theoretical vanguards" (1992: 91; see also 131). This defiant refusal to succumb to any doctrines has to be seen in the context of postmodernist theories dominating the 1990s, on the one hand, and the danger of grand narratives perpetuated in the texts themselves, on the other.

Stanley's notion of a critical edition of life-writing poses the question what kind of genre auto/biography can or rather should be. She clearly wants to see an end to myth-making and an honest approach to historiography. One of the central issues of this part is to explore the reliability and authenticity of life-writing,

which cannot be separated from the media in which these auto/biographical acts are performed. As in documentary film-making, the fragmentation and *heteroglossia* of comics autobiographies should make them less likely to be mistaken for 'the truth'. For prose, Stanley sees a particular problem in the stance that biographers take, who "play God, or the great leveller, and reduce such complexity [she means the life of Virginia Woolf] to one omnipotent view" (1992: 11). She is worried that the "conventional power relations existing between authors and readers are among the last to be questioned and convincingly challenged" (1992: 17). Were it for Stanley, the writers of auto/biography should be obliged to "locate themselves as a character within the text", positioning themselves in relation to the sources and the "*processes*, rather than the *product*" of auto/biographical writing (1992: 136). Nancy Pedri argues that autobiographical comics are more likely to succeed in this endeavour: "graphic memoir reminds readers that what they are reading is a very human story, one in which the narrator is not a super, all-knowing being, but rather an ordinary person telling his life in his own terms as best he can" (2015: 136). Yet, this is not good enough. The friendly person next door is not automatically more reliable or trustworthy. One advantage that comics have is that their layout encourages closure and allows artists to enlist readers as fellow detectives instead of presenting streamlined narratives. Past and present, narrating and experiencing I, the autobiographical act and the product, the evidence and the conclusion can all co-exist on the page in a much more fragmentary manner, which is especially true of the most recognised books in the field.

Despite the fact that Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* repeatedly "points to the circumstances of its own making" (Hatfield 2005: 140), the cartoonist felt the need to share his sources and the creative process with the reading public in *METAMAUS* (2011). Spiegelman seems to encourage a comparison between the original recordings/transcripts of his interviews with his father and their transformation into an auto/biography in *MAUS*. In other words: instead of presenting a 'mega-blend' or 'grand narrative', the foregrounded fragmentation of the source material allows readers to make sense of this life and become active contributors to the process of negotiating the meaning of lived experiences and life-writing under specific social circumstances. It is important to note that *MAUS* itself – even without the extra volume of paratexts – effectively uses the visual fragmentation of the medium to foreground tensions and contradictions that cannot easily be resolved.

In this sense, *MAUS* is a perfect illustration of Stanley's two key arguments: it is impossible to separate biography from autobiography as human beings are naturally tied to social environments and maintain important relationships with

their significant others. Secondly, both Spiegelman's *MAUS* and *METAMAUS* represent the kind of critical edition or 'making-of' that she finds more honest and helpful. Commenting on the CD-ROM edition of *MAUS* (1994), a precursor to this volume of paratexts, Eakin finds that this "story of the story", another frame narrative if we count the one included in the book itself, "is much more complete and complex" (2011: 15). This is a fascinating observation, considering that the archival material Spiegelman presents here is in a far greater state of fragmentation. It is less complete in terms of a narrative, but more encompassing and impressive in sheer scope, a testament to "the depth of Spiegelman's commitment to documentary truth" (2011: 14), as Eakin puts it. This highlights the fact that, for readers, the accessibility of archival material increases dramatically with its transformation into a narrative, but usually at the cost of leaving sizeable chunks of a life aside that do not easily blend into the one chosen for publication. This illustrates the necessity of looking behind the curtains of auto/biographical performances and of extending the range of texts to compensate for the myopic view that a single narrative may convey. This is especially necessary in the context of critical media literacy (cf. Stanley 1992: 91, 95). Stanley argues that the "narrative form is highly seductive" (1992: 120), which means that educators should invite "reading against the grain" (1992: 95). Autobiographical comics are an ideal genre to explore the construction and seduction of narratives in various rereading activities. Artists are always forced to compromise or may decide to sacrifice what seem to be essential elements of their lives in favour of a more coherent vision for their books. In an interview with Mike Whybark, for example, Craig Thompson acknowledges that he excluded his sister from *Blankets*, as her presence would have been counterproductive to the type of narrative he wanted to tell (cf. Whybark 2003: transcript 6). This is one of the reasons why the book is called a 'novel' and not a straightforward autobiography, but this is precisely the point: the line is hard to draw.

Stanley highlights the importance of *Bildungsroman* or fictional autobiography as an early success in the novel form and a key factor in the development of auto/biography (cf. 1992: 11–12; 59–60; Smith & Watson 2010: 10, 91). This generic forerunner provided narrative conventions and promoted the idea of a life script that should be followed, which can seem ideological when taken as prescriptive and worth emulating without critical scrutiny (cf. Stanley 1992: 12). Stanley argues that "written lives have an essentially intertextual character" (1992: 14), which is obvious in their complex referentiality to real people, but which is less obvious in their symbiotic relations to medialised, narrativised and fictional(ised) lives, to social expectations and culturally available life course models, or to generic conventions and the institutionalised dissemination of life

narratives. These models are going to play a role in the next chapter on blending, where they represent important (generic) input spaces for the construction of life narratives. One important cultural intertext that is frequently overlooked is the genre's own history.

### 5.1.2 A Brief History of Autographics

There is widespread consensus that the roots of present-day autobiographical comics reach back to the underground comix movement of the 1960s and 70s (cf. e.g. Witek 2004: paragraph 2; Jacobs 2008: 61–2; Chute 2010: 14; El Refaie 2012: 31), which was closely tied to San Francisco counterculture and the larger social issues of the time. El Refaie is quick to point out the subversive streak of early autobiographical comics: “What these underground-inspired works have in common is the apparent desire of their creators to use brutally honest – even exhibitionist – accounts of personal experiences as a way of challenging puritanical American society and its concept of the ‘normal’” (2012: 38; see also Chute 2010: 15). Technological advances in off-set printing made it feasible to self-publish comics and sell them in head shops and ‘boutiques’, which circumvented the Comics Code, an instrument of self-censorship in mainstream comics, and opened the door for adult content (cf. Chute 2010: 15; Gardner 2012: 120). Gradually, the underground built its own ecosystem and a growing number of artists found a new readership that was willing to embrace the outrageous offerings of uncensored comics. Since art was conceived of as political at the time and tied to a social movement, there was a need to document and report on American ways of life that did not fit the national narrative: “The underground press made its own news; those reporting on the news were not objective journalists but participants of the very protests and rallies being covered, and what they reported often bled, either inevitably or deliberately, into autobiography” (Gardner 2012: 118).

Jared Gardner associates “the official beginnings of the underground comix movement” (cf. 2012: 119; see also Chute 2010: 16) with *Zap Comix* (1968–2014), which increasingly became Robert Crumb's vehicle or “tool for personal and unfettered expression” (2012: 120). Since then, many feminists have come to object to the chauvinistic, self-indulgent, “unflinching, and often disturbing honesty” (Chute 2010: 16) of these strips. In response to “misogynist and racist fantasies” (Gardner 2012: 125), female artists started their own comic books, such as *Wimmen's Comix* (cf. Witek 2004: paragraphs 25–38), to present a very different view on contemporary life. Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* begins with the controversial figure of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, whose marriage to

Robert Crumb made her a *persona non grata* among feminists, whom she rejected herself on grounds of their simplistic perpetrator-victim-logic (cf. Chute 2010: 37). For understandable reasons, the canon of autobiographical texts for the classroom is heavily selective, and one of the reasons is a long tradition of self-deprecating and sexually explicit writing for an adult audience (cf. e.g. Jacobs 2008). While Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (2007) is a coming-of-age story that is highly appropriate for the classroom (cf. Hallet 2012b), *Paying For It* (2011) is Brown's paean to prostitution and the great experiences he has had since he gave up on romantic love. Jeffrey Brown's strips are great, but his early work is too explicit for students, judging from the 'parental advisory' warning on the cover of *Clumsy* (2006). I return to the question of canon in the final chapter, where I argue in favour of extending the range of comics that are read in school beyond *MAUS*, *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*.

Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets The Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) started a trend of very personal and confessional autobiographies in the medium of comics that has never subsided since then (cf. Gardner 2008: 1; El Refaie 2012: 37–8). Gardner argues that 1972 can be seen as the major turning point in the genre's history: "it was as if someone suddenly turned on the tap, releasing a torrent of autobiographical memoirs within the comics form, to the extent that today one can identify subgenres and historical movements within autobiographical comics" (2012: 141; see also Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 232–3). In his "Introduction" to *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* Art Spiegelman acknowledges Green's vital role in establishing autographics as a serious form of self-reflection: "Justin turned comic book boxes into intimate, secular confession booths and thereby profoundly changed the history of comics. [...] I readily confess that without his work there could have been no *MAUS*" (Spiegelman 2009: n. p.). Since Green had left the Catholic Church many years before, his confession took the form of an autobiographical text. Howard Sklar's understanding of empathy turns readers into jury members when transacting with texts, which means that they have to decide which pieces of evidence to accept, which perspective to take and when to oppose a dubious statement (cf. 2013: 55–6). Combined with Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which invokes the idea of swearing on the Bible to say the truth and nothing but the truth (cf. 1989: 22), the confessional self-revelation of autobiographical comics takes on the aura of a ritual. Jacobs comments that "for writers and readers of autobiography, the idea of truth telling as a central feature of the genre remains, and in this way shares a central feature of the genres of both legal and spiritual confession" (2008: 81), from which the literary genre may partly derive. "In such a relationship of confession, the writer becomes both penitent and lawbreaker, while the reader becomes both confessor and judge"

(2008: 82). In the courtroom, an eye-witness report counts as a form of evidence and the person may even be under oath, but there is no guarantee that what we read in an auto/biography is 'the truth.' As jury members readers have to stay alert and pay attention. If we accept Sklar's conceptual metaphor that READING IS JURY DUTY, that some of us are willing to believe the witness, while others are not, role-playing a courtroom scenario, for a change, would shift the focus from 'becoming' characters to performing identities in public *and* critically judging public performances and potential motivations.

When Spiegelman's *MAUS* crossed over from the sub-culture of comics into the literary world, one way for journalists, booksellers, librarians, teachers and publishers to embrace the comic was to emphasise its discontinuity with tradition. In his excellent article "Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw Comics" Joseph Witek addresses early reviews that attributed the invention of a completely new way of telling serious narratives through pictorial means to Spiegelman's genius:

The proposition that *Maus* is an utterly unprecedented work created in a form of Art Spiegelman's own invention is particularly puzzling because even the slightest acquaintance with Spiegelman's artistic career reveals his long and central role in the artistic movement from which not only *Maus* but also a wide array of contemporary comics derive their heritage: the underground comix. (2004: paragraph 2)

Witek suspects a mixture of snobbery and an unwillingness to dive deeper into a suspicious pop-cultural phenomenon that kept critics from recognising Spiegelman's deep entanglement with the comics scene.

For the guardians of elite taste, to acknowledge the forebears of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is to blur the crucial ideological distinction between high and low art. Far simpler to designate *Maus* as unique and self-engendered while still maintaining that "comics are for kids" than to find a way to discriminate among the huge and bewildering array of comics that exist in the world. (2004: paragraph 5)

Like Spiegelman, Crumb and his fellow underground artists did not appear out of nowhere. They were graphic artists who designed posters and record covers or even worked for one of the humour magazines like Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad* (cf. Witek 2004: paragraphs 16, 23). The magazine's irreverence and satire of mainstream culture was revolutionary in 1950s America and set a precedence for the countercultural output of later decades. Gardner stresses the central importance of Kurtzman (cf. 2012: 114) and his short-lived *Help!* satire magazine (1960–5). Since he could not afford to pay for a whole magazine's worth of content, he introduced "Help's Public Gallery" to reduce the costs and give underground artists a chance to submit their work. So even Crumb went to New York to meet Kurtzman in person and solicit a job (cf. Gardner 2012: 115–6). It was the unique



cultural dynamic of the late 1960s and 70s with the attendant promises of sex, drugs (LSD) and revolutionary, avant-garde art that side-tracked commercial illustrators and contributors to humour magazines to try their hand at personal obsessions for a change (cf. Witek 2004: paragraph 24).

Comics artists are usually in touch with previous and future generations of their craft. Spiegelman's *RAW* magazine, which he edited together with his wife Françoise Mouly, saw the publication of *MAUS* in instalments and gave young artists like Charles Burns, Kim Deitch, Ben Katchor or Richard McGuire a forum to experiment with the medium. We can easily detect the origins of Burns's *Black Hole* (2005) and McGuire's *Here* (2014) in "Teen Plague" (Spiegelman & Mouly 1989: 5–25) and "Here" (Spiegelman & Mouly 1989: 669–74). Comics have a history (cf. Oppolzer 2016), often in serialisation, that is sometimes wilfully ignored to emphasise the artistic integrity and unity of their re-packaged identities as 'graphic novels.' Therefore, I agree with Witek "that the brilliance of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* stems not from the artist's transcendence of the comics medium but from a deep understanding of comics traditions and conventions and a fearless reimagining of the medium's possibilities" (2004: paragraph 40).

Spiegelman, in turn, served as a model for many contemporary auto(bio)-graphers in the medium. This is little surprising as he won a Pulitzer Prize Special Award for his work, received global recognition and demonstrated how a 'lowly' medium would allow for a complex and serious topic to be portrayed in both an engaging and dignified way. Generally speaking, the 1980s demonstrated a heightened awareness of the medium's potential that came from within the industry/sub-culture and manifested both in production (e.g. *MAUS*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*) and in terms of theory. Instead of quoting Spiegelman or Eisner, I turn to Allen Moore, who penned a manual in 1985, entitled *Writing for Comics*, which was republished in 2007. Therein he states the following: "Comics have a capacity for effect that they haven't begun to take advantage of, and are held back by narrow and increasingly obsolete notions of what constitutes a comic story. In order for comics to move forward as a medium, these notions must change" (2007: 6). Thirty years later we are blessed with a wide range of texts that have turned this promise into a reality, but the history of comics reaches back for over one and a half centuries, which is sometimes forgotten when exclusively looking at graphic novels.

Since I introduced Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* in the previous part, there is no need to revisit it here at length. However, a history of autographics would be incomplete without him. While graphic novelists like Alison Bechdel or Marjane Satrapi are always compared to Spiegelman – in the eyes of many the shining beacon of comics auto/biographers – Pekar focused on slice-of-life



narratives that paved the way for John Porcellino's *King-Kat Comics* (cf. 2005; 2007), James Kochalka's *American Elf* (cf. e.g. 2012) and countless other diary and web comic strips afterwards. In his history of autographics, entitled "First-Person Graphic, 1959–2010", Gardner acknowledges Pekar's central role, who became active as an auto/biographer when he met Crumb in Cleveland in 1972 and the two decided to collaborate on some stories. While the first issue of *American Splendor* (1976) still tried to propagate a macho attitude and foregrounded sexual encounters (e.g. "101 Ways To Pick Up Girls . . ."; "How I Spent My Summer Vacation: 1972"; "Love Story"), this quickly was replaced by "the daily grind of working-class life in middle America" (Gardner 2012: 135). Thus, Pekar established a "tradition of the quotidian" (2012: 137) that turned the ephemera or qualia of daily life into the very substance of autobiographical writing/drawing.

Charles Hatfield's monograph *Alternative Comics* (2005) carries a genre label as its title that he retrospectively applies to the 'art comics' of the 1980s and 90s. These terminological attempts to emphasise continuity within the medium have all been superseded by the marketing term 'graphic novel'. Hatfield specifically lists "Spiegelman, Harvey Pekar, Gilbert Hernandez, Jaime Hernandez, Lynda Barry, Chester Brown, Dan Clowes, Joe Sacco, and Chris Ware" (2005: xv) as the main representatives. Quite a few names are missing (e.g. Seth) and there are no British artists included (e.g. Al Davidson, Eddie Campbell). What is interesting about this group is their ambivalent relationship to graphic novels as they all started out with the serialised format, even Joe Sacco (*Yahoo* 1–6). While their work has been reprinted as graphic novels, most of it first appeared piecemeal in various forms. Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), first serialised on Salon.com, has become one of the most quoted and discussed autobiographical texts. On the copyright page and under the table of contents she uses the term "autobifictionalography" (Barry 2002: n. p.) to stress the problem with authenticity in autographics, and her introduction famously begins with: "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true?/Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (Barry 2002: n. p.).

I discussed my problems with the term 'graphic novel' in the previous part, so I limit my observations to its impact on comics history. There have been a few attempts to isolate 'graphic novels' as a new art form, often by disentangling them from their artistic ties (cf. Baetens & Frey 2015; Hescher 2016), but that would be a misrepresentation of the medium's history. As Joseph Witek demonstrates in his article on *MAUS*, similar attempts were made when the second part of the autobiography won the special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (cf. 2004: paragraph 1). Despite the brevity of this overview, I have tried to establish that comics do not exist in a vacuum. I am aware of the necessity to occasionally isolate books for

the classroom and use them for whatever purposes, but most of the competences that are supposed to be trained in school (e.g. visual literacy, critical media literacy, genre competence, a coordination of different perspectives) require a wider spectrum of texts and some awareness of their (intertextual) entanglements.

### 5.1.3 Autographical Challenges to Autobiographical Genre Theory

In their introduction to the special issue of *Biography* exclusively dedicated to autographics (31:1; Winter 2008), Whitlock and Poletti observe that “comics are at the leading edge in shaping the autographical turn in criticism to date” (2008: viii). Without context, this may sound like an exaggeration or a blatant case of self-promotion, but the previous three years had seen an unprecedented outpour of highly acclaimed autobiographical comics, such as *Fun Home* in 2006 or Satrapi’s bestselling *The Complete Persepolis* (2007) in the wake of the film adaptation. The same can be said about dedicated comics scholarship, such as Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics* (2005), Rocco Versaci’s *Comics as Literature* (2007), or Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven’s guest-edited issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on graphic narrative (52:4; Winter 2006), which contained some excellent work on autographics. Whitlock’s essay (cf. 2006: 965–79) introduced the term ‘autographics’, Chute’s interview with Alison Bechdel uncovered a lot of details concerning the production of *Fun Home* and two essays highlighted the works of Lynda Barry/Marjane Satrapi and Art Spiegelman. What all of these texts have in common is the conviction that autobiographical comics are different. In “Multimodal Constructions of the Self” Dale Jacobs raises six key questions for the study of autographics that all centre on the impact of multimodality on an established prose genre (cf. 2008: 60). He even references the New London Group’s essay on multiliteracies (cf. 2008: 64; Cazden et al. 1996) as a general framework, but this provides only the broadest possible form of orientation: “the other design elements are just as important as the linguistic” (Jacobs 2008: 64). Comics as a medium is a very specific configuration of modes and codes with a long history that requires as much “comics literacy”, as Carola Hecke correctly observes (2011: 659), as the broader frames of visual literacy or multiliteracies. While all narrative media use foregrounding as an essential strategy, cartooning and mise-en-page are unique ways of achieving such effects in comics. Jacobs’s title suggests that even that is not enough, as autobiography as a genre interacts with the medium in unique ways. Therefore, he is interested in “how representations of self and issues of autobiographical meaning-making are constituted in autobiographical comics” (2008: 64). Before we explore Jacob’s characteristics in greater detail, we have to look at the broader claims first to get

a sense of why artists working in the medium can be said to produce different auto/biographies.

One major argument has already been introduced, which is that the roots of autographics can be traced back to underground comix, which established a new standard of experimentation, irreverence, subversion, tragicomedy, exaggeration and parody (cf. Whitlock & Poletti 2008: ix). By isolating *MAUS*, *Fun Home* or *Persepolis* as graphic-novel masterpieces without a past, critics are prone to underestimate the impact of earlier models. Whitlock and Poletti, for example, point out that readers should not forget about “the epitexts and peritexts that carry the traces of complex textual histories” (2008: x). Like all framing devices, paratexts of this kind point outwards to intertexts, precursors and specific communities, but also inwards, guiding readers through genre labels, endorsements by other artists, cover design, or length – just to name a few factors. Looking at the peritexts of graphic-novel memoirs, it is interesting to see how the artists themselves credit and endorse each other, while the marketing departments of the big publishing houses prefer to see the enthusiastic review of *The New York Times* on the back cover. In Craig Thompson’s case, several artists are credited in the ‘acknowledgements section’ of *Blankets* (cf. 2007: 588), some of which return the favour and praise the book on the front flap (Jules Feiffer, Neil Gaiman, Brian Michael Bendis), while the back cover is dominated by review snippets from *TIME* magazine, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly* and *Entertainment Weekly*. This is a clear indication that there are two different audiences out there, which necessitates two sets of endorsements.

The second characteristic of autographics is related to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact and to what extent readers can trust the auto/biographer that author, narrator and protagonist are indeed the same person. Gardner argues that the constant repetition of the magical word ‘I’ in prose memoirs helps to maintain the illusion of perfect consistency (cf. 2012: 131), which turns this pronoun both into a narrative anchor and the ultimate blend in autobiographical writing. It is a strong reassurance that the vastly different experiences of all those younger selves can be claimed by a single autobiographical subject. Prose memoirs often start with an excess of ‘I’s and ‘my’s to make readers forget how bold some of these claims are. Frank McCourt, for example, begins *Angela’s Ashes* in the following way:

**M**y father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where **I** was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when **I** was four, **my** brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and **my** sister, Margaret, dead and gone. When **I** look back on **my** childhood **I** wonder how **I** survived at all. (McCourt 1999: 9; my emphasis)

There are at least four 'I's in this short passage: the narrator, the baby at birth, the four-year-old boy, and the child Frank. In the last line we have two 'I's: the 66-year-old narrator (taking McCourt's actual age at the time of publication as an indication, which is speculative) and the child Frank, who could be any age from a few days to twelve years. The close proximity between the two 'I's naturalises identity construction, as readers are likely to take the repetition of the same pronoun as referring to the same person. Despite the fact that we cannot determine how old the two 'I's really are – a newly retired man and a young child – at least we can be sure that it was not McCourt, the narrator, who survived childhood, but Frank. McCourt seems genuinely surprised how 'he' – the boy – managed to survive at all, considering that his – the narrator's – childhood was a constant health hazard.

I started calling the narrator 'Mccourt' at the end of the previous paragraph, which should alarm readers – considering what I have already said and what is still to come. However, most readers will not even notice this conflation of (implied) author and narrator, as the appeal of the genre is largely built on this confusion in the first place. Readers want to learn more about the real person, whose name and photo are on the cover. If we ignore the 'implied author' for a moment, to keep it nice and simple, we still have to decide whom the narrator means when he says "When I look back . . .". Does the 'I' always see the same things when the auto/biographer probes his memory? Did McCourt understand his childhood in exactly the same way as a teenager, young man, middle-aged teacher and retired auto/biographer? The use of present tense seems to suggest that. Would it be more honest to say "When I looked back at my childhood in preparation for this book"? Since McCourt died in 2009, the sentence cannot be literally true for the author at present, but probably was at the time of writing, which returns us to the question of the implied author, whom I have called 'auto/biographer' throughout. If we accept him as another 'I' in this game of identities, our count goes up to six and reaches a nice balance between three childhood and three adult 'I's that we can discern in these three sentences. However, this narratological complication and multiplication of identities do not bother readers at all, as they effortlessly blend the adults into a narrating I and the children into an experiencing I and gradually all of them into a single 'I', as soon as they understand who Frank McCourt 'really' is, which is the point of reading autobiographies in the first place. Admittedly, this last sentence has an ironic undertone, but it illustrates an important fact: even the most basic distinctions are not clear at all. This is neither the writer's nor the readers' fault. The former cannot be blamed for the fact that our grammar does not distinguish between diachronically different identities of the same individual. The latter cannot be blamed

for the ease of reading, when they effortlessly blend this montage of autobiographical facts into a tentative meaning. If anyone is to blame, it is McCourt's parents and their horrible Irishness. This is the next thing readers should be wary of: auto/biographers are always biographers, who present their family, relatives and friends from one point of view and in accordance with the chosen themes of the narratives.

Since emotional truths are central to the study of autobiography, the question arises whose feelings are presented in these first few lines. The narrator says that his sister Margaret was "dead and gone", which is odd, as his twin brothers Oliver and Eugene also died as children. Here, they are still alive and return to Ireland with the four-year-old Frank after having lost their sister Margaret only recently. The experience of a four-year-old boy at the death of his baby sister has to be different from the narrator's retrospective acknowledgement of the fact. When the narrator says "my sister", this is factually true in the sense of genealogy and family trees, but raises questions in every other respect. To what extent can the narrator reclaim her and the loss of her life forty years after the fact? Or maybe "my sister" refers back to the 'I' in "when I was four" and we have a case of internal focalisation from young Frank's point of view or, alternatively, it includes all the boys' reactions. I am still convinced that the three sentences above are easy to understand and that they establish a certain stance of the auto/biographer towards his own life. They may pose a challenge to narratological analysis all the same.

To return to the initial argument: in prose memoirs personal pronouns obscure the heterogeneity of identities and experiences by facilitating blending. To get a different perspective on this matter, let us consider this extract:

I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two, I'm three. We're on the seesaw.  
Up, down, up, down.  
Malachy goes up.  
I get off.  
Malachy goes down. Seesaw hits the ground. He screams. His hand is on his mouth and there's blood.  
Oh, God. Blood is bad. My mother will kill me. (Mccourt 1999: 19)

Here the narrator playfully pretends to be three again, a case of aesthetic projection. Stylistically, this passage draws attention to itself and represents a case of strategic foregrounding. While readers blindly accepted the beginning of the memoir as a natural way of talking about oneself, McCourt's James Joyce routine startles them and highlights the presence of very different 'I's in the narrative. As much as the beginning of the chapter foregrounds the narrator

as a focaliser, here it is the three-year-old Frankie. However, what exactly did McCourt remember? Apart from the street name, which provides the illusion of context, this is a fairly generic children-at-the-playground-script. Children get hurt all the time, as their siblings cannot objectively judge the consequences of their actions. They know that they are going to be blamed anyway and that mothers always overreact – according to the generic script. So what does this scene mean? Does it add flavour? Should readers feel sorry for the boy? Is it an illustration of his mother's failure to care for them? Does it add to Frankie's sense of guilt for all that is happening around him? Who is the experiencing I here? Or in other words: why is the scene important to the narrator? Or should I say auto/biographer? The sustained presence of internal focalisation may obscure the fact that it is still the narrator/auto/biographer who believes that its inclusion reveals something essential about the way he interprets and feels about what happened to him as a child. Despite this seemingly clear-cut case of internal focalisation, there are two related points I would like to raise: there may be more layering of focalisation in prose auto/biography than is usually acknowledged and Barbara Dancygier's concept of viewpoint compression is relevant here. The question is not so much how this scene works technically, but how to relate the experiences to the various selves in the narrative.

In comics, the narrating and the experiencing selves are not only encoded differently – verbally and visually – but also spatially segregated in many cases in the form of captions and drawings. In addition, the younger selves are usually cartoons, whose bodies often serve the expression of emotional states rather than the authentic depiction of physiognomy. This is a point that Michael Chaney addresses in his introduction to *Graphic Subjects*: “When the ‘I’ of autobiography is explicitly stylized as a kind of cartoon, the result is a brazen departure from the ‘seemingly substantial’ effects of realism that traditional autobiographies presume” (2011: 7). There are, in short, several reasons why comics foreground the fragmentation of the autobiographical self and are less likely to be blamed for a violation of veracity (cf. Jacobs 2008: 77). The scene in the playground above establishes the three-year-old Frankie as a distinct character and identity, which has been strategically separated from the domineering ‘I’ of the narrator. This move is rather unusual, precisely because of its artificiality, and McCourt often uses it for comic relief, e.g. when Frankie, the child, describes heaven as the place “where they have plenty of fish and chips and toffee and no aunts to bother you” (1999: 110). In comics, the split of the autobiographical self into several different characters and ‘voices’ is unavoidable: “the comics form not only invites the consideration of the fragmented and discontinuous nature of self, but demands we take note of it” (Jacobs 2008: 78–80). This leads Gardner to the following

clarification of how autographics relates to testimony, eye-witness report and confession:

The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence – to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art. The kinds of truth claims that are fought over in the courts of law and public opinion with text-based autobiography are never exactly at issue in graphic autobiography. The losses and glosses of memory and subjectivity are foregrounded in graphic memoir in a way they never can be in traditional autobiography. (2008: 6; see also 12; Versaci 2007: 6, 102)

Implicitly, this statement addresses the centrality, or rather the illusion of voice in prose auto/biography. The concept of graphiation suggests that the personality and character of an artist are manifest in his or her unique visual style, so that the handwriting of the creator communicates directly to the ‘reader’. As a cartoonist, Craig Thompson seems to be particularly susceptible to this type of intimate self-revelation. He has Craig respond to Raina’s handwriting as an intense form of flirtation. While he dismisses parts of the content of the box he receives from Raina as “high school nothings” (2007: 145), it is her style that speaks to him: “Most revealing was her handwriting – including the indentions traced on each page from the page above./(She must have been pressing her pen hard.)/An alluring line looped her ‘Ts./Her ‘f’s were ‘Ts that instead of linking with the next letter, fell” (2007: 146). This sets up an intriguing comparison between means of self-expression in the two codes that comics as a medium relies on. For prose autobiography, Smith and Watson use the term ‘voice’ to capture all those aspects of language that reveal the personality of the writer:

When we read autobiographical texts, they often seem to be “speaking” to us. We “hear” a narrative voice distinctive in its emphasis and tone, its rhythms and syntax, its lexicon and affect. [. . .] Although life writing is published as words on a page, readers experience those words as the narrator talking to them, to persuade or demand, to confess or confide, to mourn or celebrate. [. . .] In those “sounds” we have an impression of a subject’s interiority, its intimacy and rhythm of self-reflexivity. Voice as an attribute of the narrating “I,” then, is a metaphor for the reader’s felt experience of the narrator’s personhood, and a marker of the relationship between a narrating “I” and his or her history. [. . .] In life writing, as opposed to the novel, readers may uncritically ascribe the voice of the narrative to the author. (2010: 79)

From daily practice alone, we are much more attuned to the interpretation of ‘voices’ than of personal drawing styles or handwriting, which are gone from daily communication, together with handwritten letters. In prose autobiography, the ‘voice’ of the narrator is all there is, so that a consistent tone together with

the intimate setting and the overall confidential nature of the content can produce the illusion of a ‘real’ person honestly ‘talking’ about his or her life. Taking Fludernik’s ‘natural’ narratology (cf. 2005) as a point of comparison, the voice of the auto/biographical narrator is closer to the model of natural speech than in most other literary genres. This may facilitate the ‘naturalisation’ of words on a page as if they provided a shared intimacy with a human being who is willing to grant readers access to the backstage areas of a life in performance.

However, as with graphiation/style in comics, ‘voice’ may explicitly serve a narrative purpose in a particular scene, such as young Frankie’s stream of consciousness at the playground. If we associate verbal styles with the voices of particular characters, it may be fruitful to look at the range or “ensemble of voices” (Smith & Watson 2010: 80) and how they express different points of view through style. In the way that readers take a stance towards the narrative in Rosenblatt’s sense, so the writer may choose a particular approach, which is evident in Frank McCourt’s persistent use of irony or even sarcasm. In a much broader sense, we may find quotations from literature, TV shows, song lyrics or other cultural products that either comment on life in general, the life narrative of the auto/biographer or the younger selves at specific points in time, or directly influence the course of events. When John Lewis hears Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak on the radio for the first time (cf. Lewis, Aydin & Powell 2013: 55–6), it changes his life in the sense of how to have and be a voice that is relevant in the here and now. In this sense, some auto/biographical texts could also be seen as the history of finding a voice or “coming to voice” (Smith & Watson 2010: 84; see also El Refaie 2012: 15), which is especially important for groups that are underrepresented and are not usually heard. One interesting aspect of *Blankets* is that Craig does not talk much and feels awkward expressing himself in words. Especially in the first chapter, we find many adults talking *at* him as the voices of authority that represent specific discourses. He ultimately finds his own ‘voice’ in drawing. Other comics auto/biographers have a very distinct voice from the very beginning, such as Harvey Pekar or Alison Bechdel, that unifies the narrative to a large extent.

Having said that, style is usually one important element of a complex interplay of codes and layers of focalisation. Gardner argues that the inability to establish something like Smith and Watson’s ‘voice’ in autographics may be a motivation to turn to the medium in the first place:

The split between autographer and subject is etched on every page, the handcrafted nature of the images and the “autobifictional” (to borrow the term from Lynda Barry) nature of the narrative is undeniable. It is important that this split is not a casualty



or regrettable *cost* of the autobiographer's chosen form, but is instead precisely what motivates the drive to tell the self in comics form. (2012: 131)

The fragmented page, the layering of temporalities, identities, voices and styles (cf. Chute 2010: 5), the 'bifictionality' of prose and images are all consequences of some auto/biographers' strategy of laying out voices, perspectives, remediated photos and other memorabilia, doubts and speculations for the readers to study individually, but then to blend them into a narrative. Since these artists cannot exclusively rely on the magical power of the pronoun 'I' to provide unity across heterogeneous matter, comics resemble reader-response criticism's idea of the score or blueprint much more closely. They deliver building blocks, but not the finished building. Despite their status as works, as objects that have been completed, they foreground the autobiographical act as a life in the making. This is reinforced by the necessity of a dual mode of reading, going back and forth between a view of the whole page and the single panels in linear progression, which makes reading a comic recursive (cf. Chute 2010: 8). Hillary Chute argues that comics as a medium, despite its widespread use for escapist adventure fiction, offers "a representational mode capable of taking up complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness" (2010: 9). As in a police procedural, comics put up leads on the board and recruit readers as fellow detectives to scrutinise the evidence alongside the artists. Where this conceptual metaphor ceases to be helpful is the expectation of a neat resolution for the case. Chute describes this formal aspect of comics in the context of *Fun Home*:

At the level of form *Fun Home* stages its own central preoccupation with the nature of revisiting the past, embodying through its word and image composition the fissures and contradictions that are the focus of its plotline. In its comics form we see the *materialization* of epistemological problems. The book does not seek to preserve the past as it was, as its archival obsession might suggest, but rather to circulate ideas about the past with gaps fully intact. (2010: 180; see also 181–2)

The deliberate arrangement of memories and memorabilia as a spatial layout can be compared to Jennifer A. González's concept of 'autotopography' (cf. 1995; Smith & Watson 2010: 44–5). González discusses the role of physical objects, such as souvenirs, trophies, photos, memorabilia, mementos or gifts, as material anchors (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 195–216; Hutchins 2005), especially the way they can help to retrieve memories and narrate lives: "These personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity – what I call an *autotopography*" (González 1995: 133). She compares these objects to physical extensions of the body, such as clothes,

tools or glasses: “Used initially as prostheses (to cover and protect, to extend and support the body), such objects often become, after years of use, integrated so inextricably with one’s *psychic body* that they cannot be replaced or removed without a subversion of the physical body itself. The same holds true for objects that function as prostheses of the mind” (1995: 133). Objects of this type cease to be mere tools and become essential parts of our interactions with the world: “It is only because of our own bodily existence, and our relation to the materiality of this body that we are able to become emotionally invested in external objects that represent an important aspect of identity” (1995: 141). They are capable of evoking experiences and memories through metonymic links (cf. 1995: 134), which – in turn – feed into the larger narrative that is suggested by their spatial arrangement. González treats these layouts as autobiographical texts: “Whether consciously or unconsciously, the creation of an autotopography is, in each case, a form of self-representation. Just as a written autobiography is a series of narrated events, fantasies, and identifications, so too an autotopography forms a spatial representation of important relations, emotional ties, and past events” (1995: 134). For people who have been severed from their cultural roots this can become a vital link to the past and their heritage:

... the autotopographies of immigrants, exiles, and minorities often form strong testimony, at the local or even personal level, of an ambivalent representation of identity in crisis. Objects that symbolically or indexically represent a “homeland,” whether actual or ideological, in this case serve to support a communal notion of “self.” Memories are made manifest in a material form. They obey the logic of decay but also are carefully preserved and located in a semiotic system of placement and display. In this context one could say that memories *take place* in a way that history does not. (1995: 138)

This creates an interesting case of co-dependence between people’s minds, bodies, memories, life narratives and personal objects. While the things and their arrangement are essential prostheses to call forth autobiographical narratives, they are equally dependent on the story and its teller to gain importance beyond their worn and tattered materiality. Without that care, they are just debris that washes up at flea markets. Accordingly, people tend to live in ‘museums’ of their own making. Based on Susan Stewart’s book *On Longing* (1984) González describes the homes of marginalised cultures in West Virginia in the following terms:

The interiors of the houses [...] are crowded with signs of the past. Rooms are filled to overflowing with “whatnots,” and every inch of the walls is covered with nostalgic pictures of the dead and souvenirs of lost moments. The inhabitants seek a continuity in life by always piecing together what is always falling apart. Women piece together quilts from scraps of clothing, and in every scrap exists a memory and so a story. (1995: 138)

Humans depend on the narratives they weave between themselves and their objects for comfort and stability. These are important entanglements and life links, next to daily routines and physical interactions with a familiar environment. Since the mind reaches outward, its sphere of operation includes lived-in and social spaces. Humans constantly arrange physical objects to suit their sense of order and reflect their mental processes. According to the same logic autotopographies collect ‘pieces of evidence’, but these objects are then artfully arranged and deliberately framed: “Autobiography thus becomes an act of collection, arrangement, and authentication of objects as much as the construction of narrative that accompanies these activities. In this case, there is an equally strong demand upon an object to both provide historical ‘proof’ of a particular occurrence and to allow for an imaginary development of narrative” (1995: 142). Thus, the transaction between human minds and autotopographies opens up a space in which human creativity wins over fragmentation and the deterioration of mind and matter:

... an autotopography is a combination of “fictional” memory and “actual” history embedded in a material object. But more important, it is the representation of an identity that is also between fiction and history and between past and present that makes the autotopography a powerful tool of ‘evidence’ – linking time, space, and event in a material manifestation of “self.” (1995: 147)

It should not surprise, then, that artists find this spectrum of readings – from meaningless junk to tightly arranged auto/biographical texts – and the creative potential of autotopographies for the exploration of subjectivity inspirational.

Mieke Bal offers a fascinating reading of Louise Bourgeois’s installation *Spider*, which transforms the auto/biographical text into a literal space that can be physically explored (cf. 2002). Returning to comics for a moment, the spatial arrangement of panels on the page – the medium’s architectural dimension – resembles this idea of autotopography to a certain extent. This becomes apparent when Bal defines ‘exteriorisation’ as a key feature of installation art: “Unlike traditional psychoanalytical metaphors of depth, this is instead an exteriorization, for which the term ‘autotopography’ is more suitable than ‘autobiography.’ This movement outwards makes the subject’s thought yield available to the work’s viewers” (2002: 187). This literalisation of mind-maps, of showing cognitive links through the contiguity of images on the page, is evident in most graphic memoirs and I have already demonstrated how this works in *Blankets*. Bal’s observation can also be brought in line with Hatfield’s claim that “cartooning ostensibly works *from the outside in*” (2005: 115), by which he means that the inner lives of characters have to be externalised and dramatised, so that readers

can draw conclusions about the complexities of a person's inner life through the metaphoric devices of comics. Bal distinguishes between autobiography and autotopography, but it could be argued that comics meld the two together. As in Dewey's example of the cathedral (cf. 2005: 229) two ways of reading are possible: we can take in first impressions all at once and/or follow a more linear path in our experience and reading of the intricate details. It makes sense to understand the Catholic cathedral or other places of worship, such as churches and temples, as autotopographies of these religions. The display of 'personal objects' from the Church's history, from artworks to relics, embedded in meaningful spatial arrangements may make more sense from this point of view.

*Blankets* contains an interesting example of literal autotopography in the form of Raina's quilt that becomes a metaphor for how comics can be read in a similar way. Using the medium of fabrics, she 'inscribes' Craig into her life by combining textures that have a personal meaning – such as her "spit-stained baby blanket" (Thompson 2007: 183 → Fig. 19) with fabrics that remind her of Craig. By stitching them together, she materialises and externalises in the form of art what only exists as a growing awareness in her mind – that these patterns are all related. Since she presents it as a gift to him, it becomes a material anchor of their relationship and a narrative anchor in the production of the auto/biography. For Thompson the object has a metonymic relation to past events (cf. Bal 2002: 192): it works like a key that grants access to past memories. Through the quilt Thompson discovers a similarity to his own art as a comics creator and auto/biographer (cf. 2007: 565–7; Stevens 2010: paragraph 52). He includes a blend in which Raina 'walks him through' her memories and hopes for the future in the form of a topographical exploration of the quilt. Thus, Raina literally and figuratively shares her memories with him. The act of stitching such patches together into a meaningful text that bridges past and present as a basis for a potential (shared) future clearly resembles autobiographical projects in general. The topographical logic of contiguity that breaks with linear patterns (cf. Bal 2002: 190) is typical of Raina's quilt, autotopography and graphic memoir, where weaving/braiding constitutes a narrative logic that can be more important than a chronological arrangement of events.

This explains Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle's fascination with 'the tabular' (cf. 2014) and Thierry Groensteen's emphasis on 'iconic solidarity' (cf. 2007: 17–20) and 'braiding' (cf. 2007: 145–9, 158). Despite the absence of physical objects, which have to be remediated in autographics to allow for their inclusion, the topography of the double page spread allows for spatial arrangements and the contiguity of seemingly unrelated matter that is similar to material autotopographies, but more difficult to achieve in prose. Together with embodiment/dramatisation,



Fig. 19: Blankets (183). © 2003 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

this represents a second important narrative resource in comics and autographics in particular, next to the more prose-related notions of emplotment and verbal narration.

In the classroom, this can have a number of practical consequences for autobiographical work in general and approaches to autographics in particular. While it is unlikely that all students can draw autobiographical comic strips that live up to their own expectations, they can work with material objects – such as photographs or personal things – and create autotopographies in the form of (digital) collages or ‘museums in a shoebox’ (cf. Zack 1995: 115–9). The same applies to the design of a personal tattoo, a (family) coat of arms, or of real or simulated social media profiles, which present multimodal self-representations in the form of a spatial arrangement. As learner texts, they can serve as material anchors for oral storytelling and life narratives (cf. Georgakopoulou 2007; Bamberg 2007), but also as mysteries for other students who attempt to guess what these arrangements mean. This can be extended to biographical work, in the most primitive form based on interviews in class and involving the presentation of another student, which automatically raises awareness of imperfections in human communication and the necessity of interpretation.

These activities contribute to and raise awareness of a number of important things that have been addressed throughout this study: that auto/biographical texts require selection, foregrounding and active construction; that modality, mediality and materiality play a central role by imposing limitations, but also allowing for unique forms of self-expression; that these narratives always depend on the translation and externalisation of inner thoughts, feelings and convictions; that auto/biographies do not tell ‘the truth’, but rely on a certain perspective – literally and figuratively, but also on foregrounding to convey ‘a truth’ etc. This is why I find the contributions in *Autobiographies: Presenting the Self* (cf. Hallet 2015a) so helpful, as they link autobiographical work to critical media literacy, but they also foreground the close ties between memories and personal objects.

## 5.2 Life Writing & Blending

### 5.2.1 The Autobiographical Act as Blending

In his essay “Narrative and Self-Concept” (1991) Donald Polkinghorne uses Paul Ricoeur’s ‘emplotment’ as a starting point to explore the ways people make sense of their lives. As a psychologist he was directly confronted with his patients’ problems to integrate troubling or even traumatic episodes into their self-concepts (cf. 1991: 136). Talking about them and assigning them a meaningful



place in one's personal (hi)story can mark a significant step in regaining control over what seem to be random acts of cruelty. Like all narrative psychologists, Polkinghorne embraces the restorative power of storytelling: "Narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot" (1991: 136). This raises the question where the plots come from.

According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A STORY is "rooted deep in our culture. It is assumed that everyone's life is structured like a story, and the entire biographical and autobiographical tradition is based on this assumption" (2003: 172). They use the word 'assumption' wisely, as the source domain (story) only highlights certain aspects of the target domain (life) and obscures others. 'Story' makes us think of protagonists and antagonists, turning points, character development, the restoration of equilibrium and a happy ending – just to name a few potential associations. Zoltán Kövecses discusses the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor as a potential alternative (cf. 2010: 4, 71), which turns the protagonist into a traveller or even adventurer, maybe on a quest, who has a clear goal or destination in mind which, despite detours and obstacles, he or she intends to reach. Metaphors help to reduce the complexity of actual circumstances, for "thinking about the abstract concept of life is facilitated by the more concrete concept of journey" (2010: 4). Yet, if we believe that "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 2.7.140–1), then we conceive of people's lives again in very different terms (cf. Kövecses 2010: 85). Lakoff and Johnson observe that, "when we construct life stories, we leave out many extremely important experiences for the sake of finding coherence" (2003: 175), which, in turn, is determined by the metaphor we choose. Stanley argues that "the use of tropes is important in the structuring and impact of auto/biography" and a single "metaphor can drive an entire factual narrative" (1992: 129). Eakin goes one step further and proposes that "autobiography not only delivers metaphors of self, it is a metaphor of self" (2008: 78; see also 121). If we accept LIFE IS A STORY or LIFE IS A JOURNEY as a meaningful way to make sense of one's experiences, then all autobiographical narratives work according to the same logic: the configurations of signs and symbols are a blueprint that scaffolds the evocation of a human life, but cannot be that life itself. Emplotment, narration, embodiment/dramatisation, layout/tabularisation, iconic solidarity and metaphors are all important strategies of foregrounding in autographics that reduce the complexity of real life and facilitate blending and viewpoint compression. Metaphors can operate on all levels of autobiographical writing/drawing, from the minute details of specific events to the entire structure of the narrative, which becomes evident in the conceptual metaphors discussed above. They also dominate myths of all kinds

(cf. Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 185–6), which are highly metaphorical stories that “provide ways of comprehending experience” (2003: 185) by tying human lives to the major conceptual metaphors of a culture. They seem inherently objective and true, as they directly mirror cultural ways of thinking. This suggests that basic plots and ways of understanding are provided by our social environments.

In “Life as Narrative” Jerome Bruner takes a clear position on the spectrum between cultural determinism and free forms of self-expression: “The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (2004: 694). Despite Polkinghorne’s approval of plotting and temporal structuring, he treats the process of autobiographical reasoning like any type of reading – as a dialogue: “emplotment is not the imposition of a ready-made plot structure on an independent set of events; instead, it is a dialectical process that takes place between the events themselves and a theme that discloses their significance and allows them to be grasped together as parts of one story” (1991: 142). Under the influence of gestalt psychology (cf. 1991: 136–7) he acknowledges that there are other ways to conceive of one’s life than linear progression: “Although emplotment can consist of a single thread that serves to draw elements together, it often consists of multiple threads of subplots woven together into a complex and layered whole” (1991: 141). This process of synthesis breaks with a simplistic temporal sequence and organises experiences according to themes and/or feelings. Polkinghorne also observes that, if readers replace the narrative pattern in the generic space of their cognitive network, they get a different blend based on the same input spaces: “More than one plot can provide a meaningful constellation and integration for the same set of events, and different plot organisations change the meaning of the individual events as their roles are reinterpreted according to their functions in a particular plot” (1991: 142). Applying this logic to auto/biography he comes to the following conclusion: “Plot lines used in the construction of self-narratives are not usually created from scratch. Most often they are adaptations of plots from the literary and oral stories produced by one’s culture” (1991: 147). The concept of ‘adaptation’ that Polkinghorne ascribes to autobiographical reasoning acknowledges the appropriation of existing patterns, but it also stresses a certain amount of creative freedom and independent thinking.

The introduction of new structures to reconfigure a reading of one’s own life is the ultimate aim of any therapy based on self-narration: “Therapists working with clients as they reconstruct their self-concept through ‘re-emplotment’ must



understand the operation and power of narrative configuration in the creation of stories of self-identification” (1991: 136). Based on a strictly narratological understanding of ‘plot’, the meaning of a narrative would be “an interpretation of the causal relations among a chronologically ordered sequence of events” (Kafalenos 2006: 25). I would argue that this applies to certain types of narratives at best and auto/biography may not be one of them. The point of a cancer memoir is not to find causal relations between events in a temporal sequence. That may be the story the doctors are interested in, e.g. how chemotherapy halts the cancerous growth, but then turns out to be ineffective as metastases begin to develop in other organs etc. Cancer patients, however, have to make sense of their new situation. They review their entire lives and all their social relationships from the perspective of impending death, often as outsiders caught in a liminal sphere (e.g. hospitals). In such cases, autobiographical reasoning and writing is likely to deviate from established patterns.

Returning to Fauconnier and Turner’s vital relations (cf. 2003: 93–102, 312–5), time and cause-effect are obviously central to blending, but so are change, identity, space, part-whole, representation, role, (dis)analogy, property, similarity, category, intentionality and uniqueness. Maybe a few examples can help to clarify the limitations of the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A STORY. The central challenge of autobiographical reasoning is to compress the identities of the younger selves into uniqueness in the blend. Fauconnier and Turner use auto/biography to explain what that means:

... identity is taken for granted as primitive, but it is a feat of the imagination, something the imagination must build or disassemble. We connect the mental spaces that have the baby, the child, the adolescent, and the adult with relations of personal identity, despite the manifest differences, and we relate these identity connections to other vital relations, of Change, Time, and Cause-Effect” (2003: 95).

For a more specific example of how analogy, intentionality and part-whole become compressed, we can turn to Liz Prince’s *Tomboy*. The book starts *in medias res* with a young Liz screaming blue murder, as she refuses to wear the pretty dress that she received from Grandma (cf. Prince 2014: 9–11). Then we are presented with an idealised self-portrait as a four-year-old with trousers, baseball cap, a blazer and sneakers (cf. 2014: 11/3). Finally, the narrator appears, labelled “Liz Prince, Tomboy, Age 31” (2014: 12), and shares her family photo album with the readers (cf. 2014: 13–14).

Looking at various pictures she observes: “The bulk of my dress-wearing took place before the age of two, when even if I had wanted to complain, I didn’t have the capacity to” (2014: 13/4) and explains two pages later: “Once I was old enough

to object, dresses became a thing of the past” (2014: 15/1). A number of interesting things can be observed here: Prince reads a power struggle between herself and her parents over the appropriate dress code into different contexts and situations, represented by the photographs she includes as remediated drawings. This allows her to compress analogy (similar situations) and intentionality (a refusal to wear dresses) into uniqueness in the blend (tomboyish nature), which is expressed in the statements quoted above. Prince rejects, selects and blends experiences depending on how well they fit into her attempt to naturalise her quirky, tomboyish nature by finding evidence in the past for her retrospective reading. According to the logic of autotopography, she selects and arranges these photos in such a way that they provide both material anchors for and powerful evidence of the life narrative she has chosen to tell.

Page 14 (cf. 2014: 14) includes such an arrangement in the autographical text, for which Prince drew the photos as cartoon representations to make them stylistically blend in. However, this obscures their higher modality and powerful reality effect by bringing them in line with re-invented hand-drawn scenes from her past. Readers cannot tell any longer which is which. The three ‘photos’ are not arranged as equally important, as they overlap and foreground the one on top. The lowest in the stack shows young Liz crying ‘like a girl’. The next one depicts her as “the flower girl” at her aunt’s wedding and “[l]ooks okay in picture form” (2014: 14). The last is the most interesting, as it represents a clear progression towards tomboyish self-assertion and agency. Prince comments: “But the story my parents tell involves me removing the dress the minute the wedding ended, then dancing onstage at the reception in my footy pajamas” (2014: 14). Why does she not refer to the actual photo for evidence? Is the third picture just an illustration of the story she has heard from her parents? Does it matter? Prince ostentatiously announces on the title page that this is not an auto/biographical text in a traditional sense, but the story of how she has come to realise that she is a tomboy and has learned to identify as such.

In a defiant act of self-invention, throwing all pretence of verisimilitude overboard, Prince shows her own birth and has the doctor say “CONGRATULATIONS! IT’S A GIRL!”, to which newly-born Liz replies in a thought balloon and with a disgruntled face: “That’s what you think” (2014: 13/1). Despite the fact that the narrative roughly follows a chronological order, the scenes are selected to invite a specific reading in terms of gender studies and role expectations. Time is a loose framework in the text that allows for a coming-of-age story that highlights challenges and obstacles to her self-determined lifestyle. What seems more pressing than a re-creation of what happened in the past is the discovery of vital relations between past and present and especially between the younger selves

and the narrator. Prince's direct address to the readers creates the impression of oral storytelling and an informal communicative act in the here and now. There is a narrative purpose that transcends a straightforward recount of Prince's childhood and teenage years, which is even stronger in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, where the appropriation of her father's life as an evolutionary first step in an alternative/queer family history, culminating in her own openly lesbian lifestyle, drives most of the narrative.

Referring to Marcel Proust's *Time Regained* Daniel L. Schacter comments that a successful "synthesis of past and present [...] heightens his [Proust's] appreciation of his own identity" (1996: 28). Schacter's adoption of Proust's optical analogy leads him directly to a theory of autobiographical blending: "a feeling of remembering emerges from the comparison of two images: one in the present and one in the past. Just as visual perception of the three-dimensional world depends on combining information from the two eyes, perception in time – remembering – depends on combining information from the present and the past" (1996: 28). Memories are not simply retrieved and placed in a timeline, but they enter a dialogue with the present concerns of the auto/biographer. Therefore, Eakin argues that "memories are perceptions newly occurring in the present rather than images fixed and stored in the past and somehow mysteriously recalled to present consciousness" (1999: 19). In this sense, remembering is always a form of 're-membering', allowing for a re-shaping of identity during auto/biographical work.

Before I address the important question of how autobiographical reasoning becomes a central issue during everyone's teenage years and early adulthood, I want to comment on the Galen Strawson controversy. This academic dispute involved basic questions about the when, why and how of autobiographical work. In his article "Against Narrativity", Strawson finds fault with narrative psychology's endorsement of storytelling as a universal instrument of meaning-making, self-discovery and moral accountability. To understand his concerns, I quote from an article by Tilmann Habermas, which summarises this widespread doctrine:

I believe that it is not only a dearly held conviction of psychoanalysts, but also a fundamental belief of many educated people, which is deeply rooted in European and American intellectual and cultural tradition, that trying to understand yourself and your life is both morally required and good for yourself and others. (2011: 14)

Strawson opposes two related components of such claims: (1) the idea that we need a life story that rationalises all our actions and makes sense to our social circle as a complete and readily available narrative; and (2) that it is our ethical

duty as citizens to be accountable in this way. Strawson's counterargument, which introduces "Diachronics" and "Episodics" (2004: 431) as two basic, essentialist types of how humans experience their lives, is hard to defend, but he is adamant that the Episodics' "happy-go lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound" (2004: 449). In a nutshell, Strawson finds the idea offensive that human beings have to verbalise and rationalise their lives all the time, not only regarding recent decisions, but across the entire lifespan: "The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some – for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful – but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous" (2004: 447).

For obvious reasons, this triggered a substantial debate, which I do not want to reproduce and comment upon at this point. What seems important, however, are three distinctions that put these claims in perspective. First of all, narrative identity and self are not the same thing. When Smith and Watson argue that "identities are provisional" (2010: 38), or that they "are constructed" (2010: 39), they explicitly refer to the stories we tell about our lives. This becomes obvious when they add more characteristics: "They are in language. They are discursive. They are not essential – born, inherited, or natural" (2010: 39). Accordingly, we produce narrative identities in particular contexts for specific purposes (e.g. a job application), but these forms are selective in terms of what they reveal about our selves. In "Theoretical Foundations of Identity" Phillip L. Hammack makes a clear distinction between identity and self: "Identity is thus concerned with sameness and difference at the level of social categorization, group affiliation, and intergroup relations, as well as at the level of individual consciousness or subjectivity" (2015: 12). In contrast to that, self "deals chiefly with the interior world and one's perception of it" (2015: 12). I find this distinction very helpful, as small children clearly have a self, despite the fact that they have not worked on their social/narrative identities yet.

To better understand this distinction between selves and narrative identities I turn to Ulric Neisser's "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge" (1988), where he tentatively distinguishes between five selves: the ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self, and the conceptual self (cf. 1988: 36; Eakin 1999: 22–5, 102; 2008: xii–xiii, 65–6). Narrative identity is a verbalisation of the conceptual self (cf. Eakin 2008: xiv), which is itself a rationalisation of the other four forms of self-knowledge. The first two, the ecological and interpersonal selves, provide a sense of being in the world and interacting with other living things. They are present and active from birth and "arise out of the immediacy of present experience, the encounter between the infant and the objects or persons of its physical environment" (Eakin 1999: 23). They correspond to

core consciousness and core self in Antonio Damasio's theory (cf. 2000: 168–94; Eakin 2008: 69–71) and represent the foundations of the enactivist approach to cognition. The self emerges through “‘bottom-up’ phenomena” (Eakin 1999: 30) and direct interaction with the environment:

Important as it is, optical flow is by no means the only determinant of the ecological self. The self is an embodied actor as well as an observer; it initiates movements, perceives their consequences, and takes pleasure in its own effectivity. [...] Many theorists have noted the importance of agency in establishing a sense of self. I can cause changes in the immediately perceptible environment, and those objects whose movements and changes I can inevitably and consistently control are parts of *me*. This kind of self-perception is precisely time-dependent and richly intermodal. I can see and feel what I do . . . (Neisser 1988: 39)

Despite the fact that comics do not represent the world in a mimetic fashion, they *do* foreground the centrality of the embodied/ecological self. Through dramatisation, they also highlight intersubjectivity, the basis of the interpersonal self. *Blankets* contains a lot of non-verbal, embodied dialogue between characters that shows them in literal relation to each other. Eakin has a whole chapter on “Relational Selves, Relational Lives” (cf. 1999: 43–98) to counteract the myth of autonomy, with a focus on the self embedded in social networks at all times. He chooses *MAUS* as his prime example of intertwined lives (cf. 1999: 59–60, 86), which set a precedent for many relational comics auto/biographies to come. Susan Andersen and Serena Chen propose an interesting theory that conceptualises one's interpersonal self as the foundation of all auto/biographical work. They argue “that the self is relational – or even entangled – with significant others and that this has implications for self-definition, self-evaluation, self-regulation, and, most broadly, for personality functioning, expressed in relation to others” (2002: 619).

Damasio conflates the next three selves into only one, the autobiographical self (2000: 174), but I find Neisser's further distinctions very productive. All three are based on ‘extended consciousness’ that “goes beyond the here and now of core consciousness, both backward and forward” (2000: 195). The extended self is based on an awareness that we exist in time and have a history. Being able to store, retrieve and rely on episodic memories to make sense of present circumstances is the prerequisite for all ongoing social relations (cf. Neisser 1988: 48) and the starting point of autobiographical reasoning. Private selves are what most people consider to be their ‘true selves’, covering all the aspects of ‘who they really are inside’, such as hopes, dreams and fears. As Damasio emphasises, we reach out into the past and project into the future to explore how our self-image relates to where we come from and where we are going. The private

self is based on the realisation that our experiences are not shared with everyone else, that there are parts of our personalities that are not (meant to be) public or that require extensive mediation and negotiation to become known to others. The conceptual self is the result of these private and intersubjective explorations and identity-formations: “the life story represents an evolving personal narrative concerned with the reconstructed past and anticipated future” (Hammack 2015: 21). People engage in “narrative identity development” (2015: 21), which, as the term ‘conceptual self’ reveals, is a theory of who we are, based on evidence, but also on conjecture. Above all, it is a ‘megablend’ of our experiences as different selves, which requires some creative effort when translating this tentative identity into a code. A life narrative, which is a partial narrativisation and explanation of the conceptual self, should not be confused with the life of that person, as it is created under specific circumstances and for a particular purpose and target group. Eakin argues that “there are many modes of self and self-experience [. . .], more than any autobiography could relate” (2008: 3). Finally returning to Strawson’s objection, there is indeed a tendency in narrative psychology to produce sweeping claims, which tend to obscure the important details, such as who is sharing what type of autobiographical text with whom under what circumstances and for what purpose.

After this crucial distinction between self and identity, the motivation behind autobiographical reasoning is the next relevant point: is it required in the service of social accountability, do people see a practical benefit in autobiographical work or does it become an absolute necessity as a coping strategy during a time of distress? Teenagers often feel trapped by the increasing and often relentless demand for autobiographical self-management, while still in the process of finding out for themselves who they are and what they want, which puts them in a particularly vulnerable position. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman has a whole chapter on “The Arts of Impression Management” (cf. 1959: 208–37) which particularly applies to social media profiles. Social accountability always involves the judgement of autobiographical reasoning based on “available cultural models of identity” (Eakin 1999: 4; see also 24, 127; 2008: 22, 97, 104, 108–9; Smith & Watson 2010: 39). Eakin argues that “we are embedded in a narrative identity system whether we like it or not” (2008: 16; see also 60–1) and that “the language we use when we present ourselves and our stories to others is a rule-governed discourse” (2008: 17). A quotation from Bruner’s “Life as Narrative” has already illustrated the impact of cultural norms on individual lives. Eakin is equally pessimistic about the chance to break free from the identity models available in any society: “when we talk about ourselves, in however fragmentary, spontaneous, and casual a fashion, we are also operating

under the discipline of a rule-grounded identity regime” (2008: 17). This, he argues, becomes second nature to us, as “after years of practice, we operate on automatic pilot; we know the identity protocols by heart” (2008: 23). Here we cross a line from voluntary self-representation and public identification into a normative concept of filling predetermined roles and living up to society’s expectations. The more insidious component, as Bruner and Eakin imply, is not even the struggle over who gets to define one’s public identity and social roles, but that the thinking in social classifications and permanent accountability starts so early, that the “rule-governed identity regime” (Eakin 2008: 17) is taken for granted.

Robyn Fivush and her colleagues are less deterministic and even see auto/biography as a prime site for cultural negotiation and change: “These relations are, at all points, dialectical, such that individual autobiographical narratives reflect back to cultural forms in an evolving spiral; cultures inform individual narrative identities and individual narrative identities inform cultural forms. In a very real sense, autobiographical narratives are the point at which the individual and culture intersect” (2011: 323). This ongoing dialogue between cultural norms and individual responses and identities sounds more promising for educational settings, as it then makes sense for students to actively question existing social roles, experiment with alternatives and negotiate their own positions. Yet, there is no denying the fact that cultures play a central role. Stanley is more pragmatic and accepts that “the apparently referential and unique selves that auto/biographical accounts invoke are actually invocations of a cultural representation of what selves should be: these are shared ideas, conventions, about a cultural form: not descriptions of actual lives but interpretations within the convention” (1992: 62). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, autographics developed out of underground and alternative comics, which often deliberately foregrounded so-called failed lives – and still do to a certain extent. However, the rebellious refusal to fall in line and embrace the established patterns is a viable narrative strategy precisely because social pressure is so strong in the first place.

A completely different context is the therapeutic application of storytelling as “a powerful tool for identity exploration and stabilization. Autobiographical reasoning especially helps explicitly bridge biographical disruptions by spelling out transformations and their motives” (Habermas & Köber 2015: 149). Here, Habermas and Köber argue that autobiographical reasoning can become a coping strategy that “is especially relevant in times of biographical upheaval and change. Once a change of identity is reflectively and explicitly integrated into the life story, simpler mechanisms of securing a sense of personal continuity will again do most of the work” (2015: 149; see also 150, 155–6, 159–61). This is an important qualification and allows for a co-existence of ‘diachronic’ and

‘episodic’ approaches to autobiographical reasoning within the same person. During a time of crisis or upheaval, people are more likely to engage in an extensive narrative (re)construction of their lives, but in this case the motivation is intrinsic.

My third point in the context of the Strawson controversy is the increasing criticism of ‘big stories’ within narrative psychology itself. Michael Bamberg (2007) and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) are leading scholars who favour so-called ‘small stories’ in their research, especially in the context of teenagers engaging in spontaneous autobiographical chatting/reasoning in intimate settings and within peer groups. Georgakopoulou criticises that

... narrative remains an elusive, contested and indeterminate concept, variously used as an epistemology, a methodological perspective, an antidote to positivist research, a communication mode, a supra-genre, a text-type. More generally as a way of making sense of the world, at times equated with experience, time, history and life itself; more modestly, as a specific kind of discourse with conventionalised textual features. (2007: 145).

This mirrors Strawson’s or Lakoff and Johnson’s objection to the LIFE IS A STORY metaphor. Georgakopoulou objects that, despite the wide-reaching application of the term to various contexts, research has been limited to full-blown life narratives (cf. 2007: 146). Instead of listening to how teenagers actually talk about their lives, their performance as auto/biographers is usually measured against an ideal of producing life stories as “grand narratives” (2007: 146). However, these ‘big stories’ rely on countless smaller stories in more intimate settings that are tentative and allow for a negotiation of experiences within groups. Georgakopoulou argues that “it is in the details of talk (including storytelling) that identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked” (2007: 149). Like learner texts (cf. Legutke 1996), they are important in-between steps towards producing more formal and systematic accounts. Bamberg believes that “to start with the assumption that narrative and the interpretation of selves (and others) are *based* on internal (psychological) constructs would seriously underestimate the dialogical/discursive origins of our interiors” (2007: 170). I return to the autographics equivalent of small stories in the final section of this part, as there is also a tendency in educational settings to focus on complex graphic novels and forget about the smaller texts. In her own research Georgakopoulou discovered that these social interactions among teenagers are equally about imagining the future as they are about making sense of what has (just) happened (cf. 2007: 150). She makes a strong case in favour of “narrative research beyond the reductive confines of a single type of narrative” (2007: 151), which offers “a unified, coherent, autonomous, reflected upon and



rehearsed self” (2007: 152). In the following section I address the importance of autobiographical reasoning for teenagers and young adults in a more systematic fashion.

### 5.2.2 Developing Autobiographical Reasoning

In a study on autobiographical texts in the classroom it is necessary to focus on the kind of autobiographical work that teenagers and young adults engage in. In terms of personal development this represents a crucial “life phase – maybe together with very old age – in which individuals change the most and in which it is therefore most difficult to maintain a sense of personal continuity” (Habermas & Köber 2015: 155). Habermas and Bluck provide a wide range of evidence for these changes, from suicide rates via a sudden interest in keeping diaries or similar records to the collection of keepsakes and souvenirs (cf. 2000: 754). There are also more occasions to think about identity – new social environments, career coaching, job applications, holidays, a year abroad etc. Increasingly, teenagers “move in and out of multiple social contexts”, within which “they need to present themselves in terms of their biography” (Fivush et al. 2011: 330). Habermas and Bluck summarise these changes in the following manner:

The motivation for reflective autobiographical self-definition is typical for adolescence and results from an interaction of cultural and societal demands and both maturational and psychological age-specific requirements. The major adolescent developmental task [...] is to form a mature psychosocial identity [...]. This includes the development of a mature gender identity and sexual orientation and of commitments to significant others, to educational and vocational pursuits, and to basic values. (2000: 753)

Research shows that only young adults (18-19-year-olds) are fully capable of understanding the complexities of autobiographical reasoning (AR) (cf. 2000: 756–60), “which emerges in middle to late adolescence” (Habermas & Köber 2015: 160). Younger, especially prepubescent teens do not benefit from autobiographical reasoning to the same extent. This also explains why “only in adolescence are children’s prereflective identifications with parental values potentially questioned, critically reflected, refuted, or consciously reaffirmed” (2015: 151). Autobiographical memory “begins to develop in childhood [...], but life-story construction requires particular cognitive and social skills not present until adolescence in most societies” (Hammack 2015: 22). Kate C. McLean and Cade D. Mansfield support this view that age is crucial: “Early adolescents [...] have difficulty integrating concepts, particularly contradictory concepts, such as self-perceptions across time and situation” (2012: 438; see also 443). To investigate autobiographical reasoning in younger teens, they focused on two

“aspects of narrative processing that are theoretically related to developing a healthy life story: (1) the ability to reflect on and learn from past events to better understand the current self – termed meaning-making; and (2) the ability to express, as well as manage, negative emotion – termed vulnerability and resolution” (2012: 437). With the help of parents’ scaffolding (cf. Vygotsky 1966: 103; Hammack 2015: 12; Habermas & Bluck 2000: 749; Fivush et al. 2011: 322–3) teenagers get better at the co-construction of auto/biographical meaning. “Basic narrative ability is acquired in memory talk with adults who help young children structure their memories by heavy scaffolding” (Habermas 2011: 9; see also Eakin 1999: 109–16; 2008: 25–6). Generally speaking, “spontaneous talk about the shared past is quite frequent in families” (Habermas 2011: 9), which may include elaborate “*family stories*” (2011: 9; see also Fivush et al. 2011: 337–9) that become an important influence on the interpretation of teenagers’ own lives and their place in society.

One detects a clear gender bias in this research on two levels: methodologically, the studies excluded fathers without even addressing this imbalance at first (e.g. McLean & Mansfield 2012: 437). In the case of McLean and Mansfield, the section on “Limitations and Conclusions” at the end of the article briefly comments on that fact: “we note that this study looked exclusively at the mother’s role in conversational processes, and we expect that fathers play a role in this process as well, though it may be different than mother’s roles” (2012: 445). As I noted previously, psychological studies are often limited in fundamental ways. McLean and Mansfield admit that, without a longitudinal study, their observations are only glimpses at more complex phenomena. All their test subjects were Caucasians because the local community was exclusively white. The conversations were artificially triggered and not naturally occurring and, due to the coding, it was not always clear whether the participating teenagers’ autobiographical reasoning was initiated by their mothers’ questions, occurred later in the conversation as a response to a previous point or surfaced as a new insight without direct scaffolding (cf. 2012: 444–5).

The other type of gender bias occurs through the kind of scaffolding that is provided for boys and girls (cf. Fivush et al. 2011: 327–8, 338). Fivush et al. observe “that from a very young age, Euro-American girls and boys are socialized to attend to and discuss their emotions differently in the context of different types of activities” (2011: 327). Over half of the conversations with girls focus on social events and parents tend to elaborate on emotional responses and social interactions with their daughters. This drops to a third with boys, while the focus shifts to more autonomous activities (cf. 2011: 327). One thing that all research reports seem to support is the social nature of auto/biographical acts. It may

be true that life writing itself is a solitary act, but the raw materials – the tentative blends – are frequently products of social interactions (cf. Eakin 1999: 63–4; 2008: 25).

Fivush et al. argue that teenagers produce an “emerging identity” (2011: 321) by “extracting continuities across change” (Habermas 2011: 4). This reminds me of Fauconnier and Turner’s ‘emergent structure’ in the blend (cf. 2003: 42–4). Since “the links to the inputs are constantly maintained” (2003: 44), global insight illuminates all the involved input spaces. Thematic blending, e.g. “by reference to a central metaphor of oneself” (Habermas & Bluck 2000: 751), is important, as it transcends the linearity of time and cause-effect chains and implies viewpoint compression as a central mechanism to make sense of one’s life:

Thematic coherence is constructed hierarchically, by creating a higher level category that integrates more specific categories or instances. A major device in autobiographical narrations is *exemplification*. It mainly serves the rhetorical function of persuading the listener of a general claim by providing specific instances . . . (Habermas & Köber 2015: 157)

Liz Prince’s realisation that she is a tomboy had to emerge at a certain point in time, which made it then possible to explain events in view of a higher-level category and to use specific incidences as illustrations of this claim. There are a handful of autobiographical comics that carry the suggested thematic coherence in the title. Apart from Prince’s *Tomboy* or Harvey Pekar and Dean Haspiel’s *The Quitter*, which I have already named as obvious examples, there are also Jeffrey Brown’s *Clumsy* or Lucy Knisley’s *Displacement* and *Relish*. Here readers are presented with an identity label or central idea and, thus, a ‘reading instruction’ on the cover. Accordingly, the readers’ focus changes to questions of how the writers came to accept or choose this label, whether the term is appropriate, and if there is more to this life than a single-minded pursuit or overall feeling. In all these cases the autobiographical text is an extreme example of decompression. As readers, we start with the most condensed form of autobiography possible – a single word – and work our way backwards through narrative decompression to single incidences of episodic memory. We are provided with a lens and the ‘evidence’ that has been pre-selected for us, but this cannot keep readers from re-assembling and reblending what they discover in the individual scenes. They want to find out for themselves whether the pieces of evidence ‘add up’ to what has been suggested as the preferred reading.

While these are playful, or at least artful attempts of self-identification, narrative psychologists tend to equate narrative competence with autobiographical reasoning and treat both as a set of skills that has to be systematically

developed and perfected throughout puberty, as the “ability to create coherence and continuity in one’s life story is normatively expected from adult members of Western cultures and contributes to a mature and healthy psycho-social identity” (Habermas 2011: 10). Habermas and his various collaborators distinguish between autobiographical reasoning, which is “*the activity of creating relations between different parts of one’s past, present, and future life and one’s personality and development*” or, more simply, “explicating the biographical relevance of memories” (Habermas 2011: 3), and the product, which is a “*culturally, temporally, causally, and thematically coherent life story*” (2011: 1; see also Habermas & Bluck 2000: 749). In contrast to more tentative or improvised approaches to identity-construction, autobiographical reasoning is often treated as serious business: “identity development is chiefly concerned with the integration of interior and exterior meaning through intentional autobiographical work” (Hammack 2015: 22). In addition, it is determined by “the normative cultural notion of the facts and events that should be included in life narratives” (Habermas & Bluck 2000: 750), which are derived from “the culturally available temporal and evaluative frameworks for interpreting a life, including culturally canonical biographies, life scripts and master narratives” (Fivush et al. 2011: 328; see also 334–6). These do not only provide guidelines for *what* people should do with their lives, but also *when* exactly they should hit all the milestones:

Life scripts not only define the typical age that one graduates school, gets married, has children, etc., but provide culturally shared information about when one should engage in these events. Indeed, if one’s own life deviates in significant ways from the prescribed cultural script, one is often compelled to provide an explanatory narrative (why I did not go to college; why I did not get married) although one is almost never called upon to provide an explanatory narrative for expected events (why I moved away from my parents’ home; why I had children). (Fivush et al. 2011: 332)

This last statement may contain a hint of criticism regarding the arbitrary nature of these social expectations, yet, more often than not, they are treated as simply given. Even if we acknowledge that life course models and social identities play a role in auto/biographical writing, there are many other potential sources or input spaces: episodic memory, photo albums, family stories, other people’s memories, historical documents, memorabilia & keepsakes, diaries, generic models etc. Habermas backpedals on the strictly formal requirements at one point:

Rather, autobiographical reasoning might be beneficial if it fulfills a criterion that transcends the formal definition adopted here, that is, if it follows communicative norms to adhere to common sense so that listeners may find it plausible and reasonable. [. . .] Our conception of memory starts with everyday remembering that is both

linguistic and meaningful, embedded in dialogue and relationships, and influenced by wishes and their biographical roots. (2011: 12)

This dialogic principle is far more useful for the classroom than working with normative expectations. It also implicitly acknowledges that wishes, dreams, hopes and intuitions may play a role, which runs counter to the argument that autobiographical reasoning is an exclusive System 2 operation with “its appeal to reason and logic” (2011: 3). This returns us to Strawson again: people may be perfectly happy and feel that they are doing the right thing without a need to rationalise how they ended up in this place, why exactly this is the right occupation or relationship, how they could optimise their lives and which alternative paths they should consider. With certain people, ‘common sense’ could even mean that decisions are ‘plausible and reasonable’ precisely because they defy conventional reason and rely on feelings and intuitions. Instead of normative prescriptions, students need a cultural studies approach that looks at the available life-course models in a critical manner, not as an undisputed model to be emulated at all costs. Since western societies demand self-optimisation in all aspects of life, especially in the areas of occupation, beauty and health, the models themselves have to be turned into topics for the classroom. Such questions are all related to identity and self-representation, which makes critical media literacy central to autobiographical work in the classroom. While this may sound like a new concept, Kaspar H. Spinner made self-implication and identity formation the central elements of literary teaching a long time ago (cf. Spinner 2013; 2015).

Another important issue in this context is genre competence. There are three types of genre competence that have to be kept apart: (1) an understanding of auto/biography as a literary genre; (2) a critical understanding of what is involved in autobiographical work; and (3) familiarity with formalised genres of life writing, such as a CV. When Eakin states that by “the time we reach adulthood we know how to deliver a suitably edited version of our stories as the occasion requires” (2008: 28), there are two observations to make: the first is that the occasion has a significant influence on the type of story we are going to tell; and, secondly, Eakin tends to think about life in terms of “social accountability” (1999: 68; see also 2008: 24–5, 44, 49–50, 96, 152–3), as if we were constantly on trial: “To be accepted as responsible individuals by listeners, narrators are obliged to either endorse their past outlook or justify why they have changed their mind” (Habermas & Köber 2015: 158; see also 162; Fivush et al. 2011: 328). Fivush et al. take the conceptual metaphor LIFE WRITING IS TESTIMONY in a literal sense: “A mature autobiography normatively requires more than an assembly of unrelated memories. When reading autobiographies or listening to life narratives we

expect a more or less coherent account of how individuals understand their own development and of how they have tried to lead a meaningful life” (2011: 324). This would mean that the most boring texts are the greatest autobiographies. Especially in the context of life narratives and celebrities in the media the most interesting stories are those that deviate from established patterns, preferably in the area of moral ambiguity. Even in the case of a redemption arc that reestablishes equilibrium at the end, the primary interest of readers seems to be in the struggle to overcome self-inflicted obstacles in life. More to the point of this argument is the problematic tendency to talk about a genre that is incredibly broad in its scope as if other readers would automatically conceive of it in the same narrowly defined terms, which are neither explained nor questioned. It may be unfair to associate these studies with a law and order attitude, but the kind of autobiographical work that is suggested in some of these articles seems to have more to do with social engineering than with the creative exploration of identities and the critical discussion of life course models.

The much more pressing moral question in the context of auto/biography is the inseparability of the two genres, which means that auto/biographers of all ages implicate parents, siblings, relatives, (former) classmates, friends, other peers and acquaintances in their stories (cf. Eakin 1999: 157). In the case of social media, for example, this adds another layer to the already questionable practice of instantaneous self-publishing. In a less dramatic fashion, the same issues apply to published auto/biographies. Using Spiegelman’s *MAUS* as his major example, Eakin foregrounds the unavoidable hybrid nature of life writing: “Because identity is conceived as relational in these instances, such narratives defy the distinctions we try to establish between genres, for they are autobiographies that offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other” (1999: 176). This level of added responsibility is directly addressed in chapter 2 of the second volume, when Artie shows himself having scruples over becoming famous by exploiting his family history (cf. Spiegelman 1997: 201–2).

Even in the most respected autobiographical comics, we find cases of exploiting family members or friends for specific narrative purposes without even asking them for permission. Therefore, Eakin asks whether “there [is] a sense in which life writers themselves can be said to be abusive” (1999: 156). In an interview with Hillary Chute Alison Bechdel discusses the problem of making confidential information public:

I didn’t tell my mother I was writing this book until I had worked on it for a year. I wanted to get a purchase on the material before I had to grapple with her feelings about

it. I felt like I could very easily be dissuaded from the whole project. Her initial reaction, I think, was to laugh. She just thought it was absurd. She didn't ask me not to do it, which I was really grateful for. At some point, though, she told me she was going to have to cut me off from any further information about my father. She felt betrayed – quite justifiably so – that I was using things she'd told me in confidence about my father. So she wasn't going to tell me anything else. (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1006)

At a later point in the same interview Bechdel acknowledges the moral implications of her act: “But since the book came out, she hasn't said anything about the content of the book itself. But you know, how could she? This memoir is in many ways a huge violation of my family. I can't expect them to give me strokes on my style, you know?” (2006: 1009). *Blankets* is an even more radical case. Craig Thompson published his ‘novel’ without the permission of either Raina or his parents. The latter learned about the book on its release and were shocked by their portrayal, especially his father. In an interview with Mike Whybark Thompson comments on their initial reaction:

They were incredibly upset at first. I had to share a six-hour car drive with them from Minneapolis to Milwaukee and they just tore into me. And, uh, some of the first issues they brought up were um that they thought that they were depicted like monsters. And they wondered what right I had to take our private life and make it public – but then beyond that, and on a much larger level, “Spiritually awful” they called it, um. They said that it “*bore witness for the devil.*” (2003: transcript 6)

Because of this tendency to use relatives strategically for narrative purposes, they are often reduced to roles in a personal drama that has to keep readers' attention on the protagonist(s). This peripheral existence and one-dimensionality invite a stereotypical reading. Therefore, it may be necessary to draw attention to such characters and counterbalance the dominant reading with a change of perspective that acknowledges other ways of interpreting the action.

If students are to develop a critical understanding of auto/biographical work and the effects of implicating family members, friends and classmates in self-representations that are meant to be made public or even published (online), they need to study existing life writing – from auto/biographies to social media profiles – and face the challenges of practically going through the process of publication themselves – step by step. It is more feasible to start with ‘small stories’ first and explore how they work as auto/biographical texts, such as bringing photos and favourite objects (cf. Kieweg 2015) into the classroom for short oral narratives. Thus, they are made public and presented in front of an audience with the safety net still intact. This can be extended to collages later on, mini exhibitions and in-class presentations with media support. A final step would then be to start a blog or create a website. Autobiographical writing is

a dialogic process and should be open to feedback and scrutiny. Since social media dominate students' lives and their online activities are auto/biographical in the broadest sense, an ongoing engagement with identity and life writing should be a central issue throughout the years. Such a syllabus is directly related to key concerns in cultural studies, gender studies or postcolonial studies, which have to be addressed anyway. Comics autobiographies are only one piece of the puzzle, but they foreground important questions concerning autobiographical work that may be less transparent in other media.

Unavoidably, the production and reception of life writing involves blending: looking at the larger picture means bringing a past and present self in line, a single event and a larger narrative, a life script and personal experiences, the recollections of parents and friends, official documents and emotional truths. In each case the blend has a potential to illuminate the network and the interconnected spaces. Since autobiographical comics are also autotopographical and sometimes deliberately unfinished, readers are invited to draw their own conclusions, assisted by iconic solidarity and braiding. Readers synthesise the fragments and perspectives into a holistic view or gestalt that transcends the linearity of presentation. Up to this point, we have had a look at different sources and several material anchors that allow us to reconstruct the past. The next section returns to the prime repository of autobiographical narratives – a person's long-term memory. While the retrieval of information from memory constituted an important focus of part 3, it is necessary to look at these mechanisms again in the context of auto/biography.

### 5.2.3 Autobiographical Memory

In 1972 Endel Tulving introduced a distinction between semantic and episodic memory as two largely independent systems. The latter was a new concept and Tulving described it like this:

Episodic memory receives and stores information about temporally dated episodes or events, and temporal-spatial relations among these events. A perceptual event can be stored in the episodic system solely in terms of its perceptible properties or attributes, and it is always stored in terms of its autobiographical reference to the already existing contents of the episodic memory store. The act of retrieval of information from the episodic memory store, in addition to making the retrieved contents accessible to inspection, also serves as a special type of input into episodic memory and thus changes the contents of the episodic memory store. The system is probably quite susceptible to transformation and loss of information. (1972: 385–6)



Two things are interesting here: first, episodic memory depends on autobiographical significance, as people only encode and retrieve information that they find relevant and emotionally engaging. Secondly, since episodic memory is a tool that helps us cope with the present, e.g. recognise people and remember our relations to them, these memories can be transformed through new developments and insights. In contrast to semantic or procedural memory, which provide basic orientation, episodic memory is holistic and triggered by present concerns: “More than simple episodic recall, autobiographical memory is rich with thoughts, emotions, and evaluations about what happened, and provides explanatory frameworks replete with human intentions and motivations” (Fivush et al. 2011: 322). Daniel L. Schacter adds that “we do not store judgment-free snapshots of our past experiences but rather hold on to the meaning, sense, and emotions these experiences provided us” (1996: 5). He explains “memory’s imperfections” (1996: 3; see also 16) by stressing “that our memories are not just bits of data that we coldly store and retrieve, computerlike” (1996: 3), but lasting impressions that are strongly coloured by emotional responses. We can, of course, “operate on automatic pilot” and “not reflect on our environment and our experiences”, but then “we may pay a price by retaining only sketchy memories of where we have been and what we have done” (1996: 46). The autopilot, which I have referred to as ‘System 1’ throughout, operates swiftly and is highly efficient at executing familiar tasks, for which we do not have to be consciously engaged. Active encoding and retrieval have are based on curiosity and personal relevance. Whenever we recall memories to become input spaces in our short-term memory, they become susceptible to manipulation, cross-space mapping and blending:

... there has been a great deal of research recently concerning the phenomenon of *reconsolidation*, where reactivated memories enter a transient state of instability in which they are prone to disruption or change. Reconsolidation is an extension of the well established phenomenon of memory consolidation (i.e., processes that render a memory resistant to forgetting): when a memory is retrieved or reactivated it needs to be consolidated anew, raising the possibility that the reconsolidated memory may include new information not present in the original ... (Schacter 2013: 56)

A reinterpretation of the past in view of new insight is nothing unusual. Alison Bechdel reveals that “the whole story [*Fun Home*] was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts” (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1005). This photo began to interact with her memories and other autobiographical materials in a most productive way – providing a new perspective on and attitude towards what Bechdel thought she knew about

her father. Because of this obvious malleability, Schacter is eager “to demolish another long-standing myth: that memories are passive or literal recordings of reality” (1996: 5). Leaving aside the problem of reconsolidation, our experiences “are encoded by brain networks whose connections have already been shaped by previous encounters with the world” (1996: 6), which means that, at best, we can retrieve an accurate memory of a subjective experience. Antonio Damasio makes a similar point: “It is easy to imagine, given that memories are not stored in facsimile fashion and must undergo a complex process of reconstruction during retrieval, that the memories of some autobiographical events may not be fully reconstructed, may be reconstructed in ways that differ from the original, or may never again see the light of consciousness” (2000: 227).

Why, then, can we rely on our memories at all? There are three reasons why some of them are surprisingly accurate (cf. Schacter 1996: 94). The first has to do with events that are so integral to someone’s life – either through direct experience or retrospective ascription – that they become permanent points of orientation:

Self-defining memories are typically unique, onetime events, which become personally significant and integral to individuals’ understanding of who they are. Self-defining memories are often high points (stories about particularly positive experiences), low points (stories about particularly negative experiences), or turning points (experiences that set in motion a new direction for the self). (Fivush et al. 2011: 333)

These may become modified and recontextualised like all episodic memories, but they tend to be more stable. Habermas and Köber use the same term to refer to a type of memory that is even more resistant to change:

The conceptual self is linked to self-defining memories [...] of situations that are typical of the central concerns and conflicts of the individual. These memories condense a variety of past events into one prototypical representation [...]. They represent the highly stable core emotional and relationship patterns of an individual [...]. They remain rather insensitive to situational requirements and new life experiences. (2015: 153)

Narrating these memories, every sentence could potentially begin with: “When I was young, I/we used to . . .” or “I always . . .” These are experiences that people have made again and again over long stretches of time and that have become memorised as blends. Schacter differentiates between three tiers of autobiographical memories, which represent different states of conceptual integration: event-specific knowledge, general events and lifetime periods (1996: 89–90). Habermas and Köber’s ‘self-defining memories’ are general events, which “capture a good deal of the distinctive flavour of our pasts, and are readily accessible because

they have been strengthened through repetition” (Schacter 1996: 91). Schacter observes that autobiographical narration predominantly relies on this middle tier (cf. 1996: 90), which I demonstrated in part 4, using chapter I of *Blankets* as an example. There are several reasons why auto/biographers rely on this type: while event-specific knowledge may be too particular, memory of lifetime periods is too broad. As prototypical experiences general events are both more reliable and more relatable for a broader group of people.

Using *Tomboy* as an example, this process can be easily observed in practice: Liz Prince starts with a very general observation, which is that, even as a young girl, she was already a tomboy. This reminds her of general events, such as refusing to wear trousers on a number of occasions from the age of three onwards, which in turn leads her to event-specific memories of single incidents. Autographers tend to dramatise general events, which means that the scenes we witness can be more or less generic, depending on how much the artists remember, feel comfortable to reveal or consider necessary for an understanding of the narrative. I discussed the scenes at the beginning of *Blankets* as hybrids between event-specific knowledge and general events. While the first assault of the bullies (cf. 2007: 20–25) seems generic in the sense of representing many incidents of the same type, Thomson added enough details to make the action appear specific: Craig is called “SKINNY”, “ETHIOPIAN” (2007: 20/1) and ‘baby’ (cf. 2007: 22–3), while his father is insulted as being “poor” and “MEXICAN” (2007: 21/2). I believe that Thompson blended several memories/scenes into just one and retained details from several of them to keep the specific flavour. Since *Blankets* is a work of art with a specific vision/perspective, it is impossible to tell how much the artist changed or added to suit this creative purpose, independent of how precisely he could remember his childhood in terms of event-specific knowledge, general events and lifetime periods. As readers, we cognitively reverse the process and reassemble and blend together what has been laid out for us. Schacter argues that all three tiers together constitute autobiographical memory (cf. 1996: 93). Since general events tend to be reliable, based on repeated experiences of a similar kind, “the broad contours of our lives are fundamentally accurate” (1996: 94).

One interesting phenomenon in this context is the shift from field (first-person) to observer (third-person) memories (cf. 1996: 21; Habermas & Köber 2015: 155). The older, more compressed and recontextualised a memory is, the more likely it is remembered from an external point of view. Also the necessities of the present situation play a role: “an important part of your recollective experience – whether or not you see yourself as a participant in a remembered event – is, to a large extent, constructed or invented at the time of attempted

recall. The way you remember an event depends on your purposes and goals at the time that you attempt to recall it” (Schacter 1996: 21–2; see also 66). In consequence, “memories emerge from comparing and combining a present sensation with a past one, much as stereoscopic vision emerges from combining information from the two eyes” (1996: 70). Thus, remembering itself is already a form of conceptual integration.

### 5.2.4 Photographic Evidence

In all forms of autobiographical work photographs play a central role as material anchors. In some cases, such as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, they even trigger an intense engagement with the past and the creation of an entire graphic novel. One aspect that has not been sufficiently explored yet is their status as (judicial/historical) evidence and their impact as reproduced or remediated images on the visual modality of comics, which is the indicator of “how real, or not, a representation claims to be” (Machin 2011: xvi). This concept is closely related to linguistic modality and modal auxiliaries as grammatical modifiers of the truth value of sentences, which can be low, median or high (cf. van Leeuwen 2005: 162). In social semiotics and multimodal analysis, modality is one of the key areas of interest and most introductory handbooks contain an entire chapter on this concept (cf. van Leeuwen 2005: 160–77; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 154–74; Machin 2011: 45–61). Significantly, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen relate ‘modality’ to a social “theory of the real” (2006: 154), as the legitimacy of photographic evidence depends on cultural practices and negotiation rather than on the inherent quality of objects. We bear witness to the whole spectrum of possibilities every day, from compelling documentary evidence to ‘photoshopped’ models on magazine covers. This provides a rich source of texts for the classroom, as modality and its truth claims are a communicative resource that photographers, artists and cartoonists employ to create specific effects. From an educational point of view, this requires the development of critical media literacy (cf. Serafini 2014; Scheibe & Rogow 2012; Baker 2012) or visual literacy in the way Monika Seidl uses the term (cf. 2007). Since autobiographical comics include photographs and deliberately blur the line between fact (documentation) and fiction (art), it is necessary to study visual modality and its effects more closely.

Elisabeth El Refaie discusses their inclusion as a distinct strategy of authentication (cf. 2012: 138, 158–65), alongside “a realistic quasi-photographic style” (2012: 150) of hand-drawn images that may equally connote higher modality. She explicitly relies on visual modality as a theoretical approach (cf. 2012: 152–8)

and discusses the implications for autographics. There are essentially three ways to include photographs in comics: Prince renders them in exactly the same cartoonish style as her other panels (cf. 2014: 14), which blurs the line between photographic ‘evidence’, scenes drawn from memory and meta-narrative panels that show ‘her’ talking directly to the reader. A second widely established approach is to render them as photo-realistically as possible, but within the overall style of the book, which we find in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (cf. 2007). Although it is quite time-consuming to remediate photos in such a way, it preserves the visual integrity of the narrative, presents photos in the artist’s ‘handwriting’, which signals an intimate relationship through graphiation, and retains the higher modality that is associated with photorealism. Layering all of these modes of expression within a single image draws attention to its status as a work of art and functions as a metaphor for what autographics is and does. The third option is to reproduce photos as they are, which provokes a clash of modalities. Art Spiegelman decided to make use of that potential for *MAUS* and strategically placed three of them throughout the narrative. Before we look at these possibilities in greater detail, it has to be stressed that modality plays a central role in several contexts beyond the inclusion of photos. When I discussed Harvey Pekar’s “A Marriage Album” (cf. 2003, n. p.) in part 4, I argued that the couple’s first meeting constitutes a dramatic shift in their relationship and its modality, but readers continue to see cartoon renderings of characters. They often have to compensate for such a low modality of drawings by infusing the scenes with their own emotions, ideas and interpretations to turn the blueprint into a fully-fledged narrative. As a second observation I want to add Kai Mikkonen’s criticism of Scott McCloud’s typology of panel transitions, which “does not take the context into consideration” and describes “panel relations at varying levels of organisation and meaning-making” (2017: 41).

One rather common type of transition is the change of truth-value (modality in the linguistic sense) with regard to the image content in the panels. The modality-to-modality transition, involving a transition in the truth-value or credibility of what is seen, for instance, in a dream, fantasy, hallucination, or memory sequence, is regularly accompanied by stylistic markers, such as changes in the graphic line, lettering, and colour, or alterations in verbal narration, layout, and perspective. (2017: 42)

This also explains why I discuss modality as a means of foregrounding in the context of blending: readers are challenged to bridge the gap between two ontologically different frames. Mikkonen differentiates between formal stylistic markers, e.g. a change in colour, and the meaning of such a highlighted panel, e.g. a dream sequence. A distinction between sign and meaning may not always

be as clear-cut as in this case, but modality often draws attention to panels that require conscious blending.

In autographics, material anchors often become narrative anchors, which is another way of theorising the integration of photos. Since material anchors as mnemonic devices are ubiquitous in all cultures, Smith and Watson observe that “communities are aided in their acts of remembering by different technologies”, which, in turn, “shape the memories conveyed and the selves those memories construct” (2010: 25). They see a wide spectrum of possibilities to work with material anchors, but their integration also depends on the type of narrative and the target audience:

Frequently, life narrators incorporate multiple modes and archives of remembering in their narratives. Some of these sources are personal (dreams, family albums, photos, objects, family stories, genealogy). Some are public (documents, historical events, collective rituals). One way of accessing memory may dominate because it is critical to a narrator’s project, his sense of the audience for the narrative, or her purpose for making the story public. (2010: 25)

If artists were to take Liz Stanley’s concept of the ‘accountable biography’ (cf. 1992: 9–10) seriously, the reproduction or remediation of sources would not be enough: the crucial point is the auto/biographer’s interaction with and interpretation of them. Stanley reminds us that the inclusion of photographs has been a widespread practice for a long time and is not exclusive to visual narrative media. Despite the fact that prose auto/biographies are often multimodal texts in this sense, there is usually a lack of contextualisation and narrative integration. Photos appear as a special section, often in the middle of the book, “surrounded by an ocean of words” (1992: 20). Presumably, the selection and arrangement of these images is deliberate, but the rationale remains a mystery. This leads to one of the central paradoxes that the inclusion of photos produces: “Photographs of auto/biographic subjects and our readings of them are importantly involved in constructing characters and biographies, lives-with-meaning” (1992: 20). At the same time, without the necessary contextualisation, they remain unrelated oddities in a very different modality. Captions cannot compensate for their isolation in the middle of the book or their relegation to the appendix. Stanley suggests that they have to be frequently revisited, as the narrative presents new insights all the time: “the linear sequencing of biography does not operate in a forward mode only. From ‘the end’ – a death or some major rite of passage in a life – we can read images and other biographical information backwards through time, to impose ‘real meaning, with hindsight’: an account of ‘what it all meant’ that eluded us at the time but was supposedly ‘really’ always there” (1992: 21). While

this “retroactive effect” (Iser 1980: 111) is not unusual, it raises the questions when, why and how frequently these photos should be (re)visited. Do they represent their own story that just happens to come packaged with a different narrative? What is their ontological status outside and inside of the auto/biography?

In “Dr Liz and the tardis” (cf. 1992: 45–51) Stanley uses her own photo album and three images in particular (cf. 1992: 46, 49) to demonstrate how her adult sensibilities dominate her perception of the past. About “Author seated in frock” she says:

This photographed child has all the hall-marks of 1940s and 1950s high street dominant cultural convention that one could hope to find; so clean, so posed, so careful. The photograph is a monument to ‘the child’ as she ought to be. The child is me – or so she is said to be, so I am told. But I do not *know* her. My memory cannot reach this child: she sits alone looking out and I look back into her eyes and see and feel nothing. (1992: 45)

This is fascinating, as the photo as a material anchor is supposed to provide access to the past, but here it alienates Stanley from her own younger self, exactly the same way that Liz Prince disowns her dress-wearing alter ego. In both cases the photos are debunked as false representations, arranged by adults who were driven by projecting a certain look instead of trying to capture the ‘real’ nature of the child. Roswitha Henseler and Monika Schäfers’s idea of studying and recreating childhood photos is an excellent application of these processes to the classroom (cf. 2015). Stanley’s reading of the second image, subtitled “Author with football”, could not be more different:

Consider this second child, the footballing girl, also me. Here, like Athene from the head of Zeus, I, a conscious subject, spring into life. Here I am four in Johnny Davies’s grandparents’ back garden. Here memory reaches, and reaches beyond. In the ‘moment’ of this photograph is collected a perpetual transformation of clothes – what I was supposed to wear and what I wanted to wear. It also encompasses all the forbidden activities: streams and newts and dirt and forbidden building sites and, more concretely, scrumping apples, for in this child’s shirt there is literally stolen fruit. And beyond the photograph, in its subsequent ‘moment’, lies a round of battles over what kind of a child I was to be, mine or my parents’; a round of partial losses and later gains. And there is more here, for I can connect this child to the ‘me’ I know now. (1992: 47)

This is a prime example of how blending works. In part 3 I introduced Don Kuiken, David S. Miall and Shelley Sikora’s “Forms of Self-Implication in Literary Reading” (2004), which is based on Ted Cohen’s article “Identifying with Metaphor” (1999). It may seem odd at this point to refer to a theory of how readers identify with characters in fiction, but I would argue that auto/biographers have to become readers of their own lives first and identify with their former selves as characters. Stanley’s reading of “Author with football” signals

a high degree of self-implication that produces connections – what cognitive linguists would call mappings. Stanley is aware of the fact that she constructs a past identity for herself:

Both of these moments collect in what is of course not literal *memory*, in the sense of recollection which has a direct and unproblematic link with past ‘facts’; it is rather a *post hoc* construction of the past based on the understandings, assessments, conclusions and conjectures of ‘now’. ‘Now’ is a prism through which both ‘moments’, and also the pivot of the photograph to which they connect, are refracted. (1992: 47)

However, the autobiographical reading of the photo also constitutes her identity in the present. The past is as much a prism as the ‘now’. The ‘understandings, assessments, conclusions and conjectures’ are triggered, we have to assume, by such a confrontation with the past, which means that there is a chance of self-modification. Cohen describes the tentative identification with a literary character as a form of “metaphorical understanding”, which involves “a blending of oneself with another, and here one must add to and subtract from oneself” (1999: 407). This “blend of what I know of you and what I know of me” (1999: 402) is only metaphorical. It takes a leap of the imagination to look at a piece of paper and identify with it.

Stanley’s discussion of her childhood photos has shown that their supposedly self-explanatory power is a myth. As autobiographical anchors they trigger memories and play a crucial part in the reconstruction of the past, but they are meaningless without the subject that grants them this extraordinary power. At the same time, her comments seem to suggest that the first image is staged, whereas the second appears to be true to her nature and transparent in the sense of revealing her true self. Stanley captures this ambivalent role in the following statement: “Photographic images are powerful. They are not, however, all-powerful. Photographs do not speak for themselves: they require interpretation and this interpretation may be mediated by words which surround, literally, particular photographs, or from ‘texts’ which readers of photographs import from their general knowledge” (1992: 25). In “The Photographic Message” (1978: 15–31) Roland Barthes discusses the significance of a press photograph in relation to the title of the newspaper article it has been attached to, the caption that anchors its meaning and the full body of the text. Barthes is fascinated by the paradox (cf. 1978: 16–20) that the photo is intended to bridge the gulf between the written report and what happened, in the sense of a literal, unfiltered and mimetic representation of reality, while in truth it is as constructed and deserving of a critical reading as the words: “the press photograph is an object that has been worked



on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms” (1978: 19).

Again, there is a direct link between critical media literacy and autobiographical work in the classroom, as the playful and creative engagement with mixed-media messages and one’s own photos can raise awareness of what Barthes calls ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’. The seductive power of ‘photorealism’ makes it possible to “pass off as merely denoted a message which is in reality heavily connoted” (1978: 21; see also 26). Stanley chooses to read the two photographs as an illustration of an ongoing battle between her parents and herself over who is entitled to define her looks and personality. While the first conforms to expectations, stereotypes and cultural norms – serving an ideal rather than the unique character traits of an individual – the footballing girl becomes a subversive antidote to this image of perfection. It challenges a socially and historically situated observer to question his or her views and classifications (cf. Barthes 1978: 28–9).

In “Rhetoric of the Image” (1978: 32–51) Barthes introduces the terms “anchorage and *relay*” (Barthes 1978: 38) to specify two types of relations between words and images. He says that all images are “polysemous”, as they “generate a floating chain of signifieds” (1978: 39), so the meaning needs to be fixed or anchored. The text as an anchor provides a metaphorical lens or filter that helps readers to focus the image in a particular way. Barthes states that “anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility” (1978: 40), for framing texts in a particular way has a powerful effect on readers’ reception. Paratexts, such as genre labels, often function as such lenses. In contrast, *relay* describes a “complementary relationship” (1978: 41) which can often be found “in cartoons and comic strips” (1978: 41). Here, “the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level” (1978: 41). This is Barthes’s version of blending, but this phenomenon applies to anchorage in equal measure, as readers still have to relate the caption to the image.

There is a great variety of activities for the classroom that require students to (re)combine words and images: finding titles/captions for images, matching pictures and their descriptions, writing new captions for press photos, adding speech and thought balloons to comics etc. (cf. Cary 2004: 72–4, 78–88). These are usually considered to be creative or fun activities that train language skills, but they also highlight conceptual integration, anchorage and connotation. In other words: they teach Barthes to students in an engaging and explorative manner.

Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (2008) shifts the focus from reception to production. Instead of looking at how text anchors images, she is concerned

with how photography anchors reality: “Photography inevitably entails a certain patronizing of reality. From being ‘out there,’ the world comes to be ‘inside’ photographs” (2008b: 80). This is how Stanley feels about her parents’ attempt to fix reality. People regain control over a chaotic environment by making it accessible on their own terms. Photography puts “oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power” (2008a: 4). This is clearly at odds with the general misconception that photos “furnish evidence” (2008a: 5) and preserve reality in a transparent, documentary manner: “What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are hand-made visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (2008a: 4). Inadvertently, Sontag addresses a key concern of comics studies, which is the assumed difference in modality between drawing and photography. Bechdel’s discovery of a snapshot of their former babysitter “lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts” (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1005), raises a number of questions, not least of which about the significance of the image. Sontag ascribes our fascination with photographs to the mystery of their ontological status:

Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information. (Sontag 2008b: 69)

As Stanley’s “Author seated in frock” demonstrates, “photographers are always imposing standards” (2008a: 6). Sontag sees a moral issue in the appropriation of people for personal interests: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (2008a: 14). Professional photographers working for charities retake pictures until the poor and destitute look properly poor, but also aesthetically appealing in their misery and deserving of our pity and generosity.

Since photography is a form of art, we find the exact same phenomena as in literature, such as foregrounding, overdetermination, dramatisation and hyper-reality, which Sontag calls ‘surrealism’: “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision” (2008b: 52). Like comics panels, photographs are staged for additional metaphorical meaning and emotional impact. However, it is a thoroughly democratic art form in which everyone can participate: “Through photographs, each

family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself” (2008a: 8). Since cameras became widely available in the first half of the twentieth century, there has been a shift from documenting the reality of family life in the form of a diary to staging shared experiences for their audio-visual recording. This returns us to the question whether photographs can provide documentary evidence at all. Like Kress and van Leeuwen (cf. 2006: 163–6), Sontag considers different ‘coding orientations’ of what constitutes ‘the real’ in various cultural settings and what role photos are to play in these contexts: “To spies, meteorologists, coroners, archaeologists, and other information professionals, their value is inestimable. But in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value as information is of the same order as fiction” (2008a: 22). This statement may polarise, as the truth can be found somewhere in between. There is always the temptation of blissfully confusing the secondary world of photos, TV shows and films with ‘the real’, but critical media literacy enables students to balance entertainment with scrutiny: “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks” (2008a: 23). The “photographic stylisations” that Stanley associates with the “high street photographer’s depictions of ‘ourselves’ as children, as brides, mothers” (1992: 29) have become incredibly widespread with the advent of digital technology and allow for the self-stylisation and self-presentation on social media platforms. Therefore, the photo as an autobiographical text and anchor provides a rich resource for students’ practical, creative and critical engagement with the medium. After this lengthy preamble, let us consider two comics that have attracted the most attention in terms of their strategic use of photographs.

In both volumes of *MAUS* there are only three pictures in total that are exact photographic reproductions and not hand-drawn and fully integrated images (cf. e.g. Spiegelman 1997: 274–6). Since *MAUS* is a special case, this also means that they depict real people instead of mice. The first one shows Art as a young boy with his mother Anja in the inserted “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” comic, the second one his dead brother Richieu at the beginning of Volume II and, finally, his father Vladek in a KZ uniform towards the end of the book (cf. Spiegelman 1997: 102, 165, 294). In each case the photo draws attention to itself, but it is more interesting to discuss what the photos *do* in the context of the narrative rather than what they depict. In “Mourning and Postmemory” Marianne Hirsch explores the role of these photographs in the context of ‘postmemory’, which is a heightened awareness of historical events, especially regarding the Holocaust, by the survivors’ children, who did not experience them in person.

Hirsch chooses to focus on the clash of modalities as her starting point: “The truly shocking and disturbing breaks in the visual narrative – the points that fail to blend in – occur in the section called ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’ in *MAUS* in which an actual photograph appears and in the two photos in *MAUS II*. These three moments protrude from the narrative like unassimilated and inassimilable memories” (2011: 29). Despite the photos’ ostentatious foregrounding, they remain irreconcilable at first glance with Spiegelman’s otherwise consistent cartoon style. The medium allows for this strategic use of mise-en-page or montage to invite some form of integration and reconciliation without providing the necessary clues how readers are meant to solve the puzzle. Nancy Pedri addresses a similar point about autographics when she observes that “photographic images can serve not to confirm that what is being related – identity, self, personal experience – is real or factual or accurately portrayed” (2015: 137). Photos may score higher on a modality scale, as readers tend to associate photorealism and higher resolution with ‘the truth,’ but through their ambiguous contextualisation they appear equally representational (cf. 2015: 138). This leads Pedri to the conclusion that the “union of photography and cartooning in *MAUS* (and in other graphic memoirs) exposes the historical experience supposedly captured in the photographic image as always actualized by its narrative presentation” (2015: 139). As with Stanley’s examples, the meaning of photographs completely depends on their context and reception. Sontag observes that a “photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)” (2008b: 71). Like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, photos become unstuck in time and require (narrative) mooring.

One potential approach would be to put them right next to each other and arrange them in the form of an autotopography: “Taken together, the three photographs in *MAUS I* and *II* reassemble a family violently fractured and destroyed by the Shoah: they include, at different times, in different places, and in different guises, all the Spiegelmans – Art and his mother, Art’s brother Richieu, and the father, Vladek” (Hirsch 2011: 31). However, this family reunion would send the wrong signal. Artie discusses his “ghost-brother” (1997: 175) and the various readings of his portrait, which hung in his parents’ bedroom. As material anchors, photos have histories of their own and become loaded with meaning – either through years of witnessing/storytelling or their quiet, haunting presence. Like exhibits in museums, they are in need of anchorage. This generates a close symbiotic co-dependence between autotopographies, the auto/biographers who rely on them and the narratives that are based on this transaction.

Spiegelman takes another approach and foregrounds his struggle to find a meaningful spot for them in his version of the family history. While they retain their precious and unique status through foregrounding, they also resist any straightforward attempt to blend them with the ongoing narrative. Spiegelman's postmemory permanently intrudes upon the present (cf. 1997: 176) and haunts him. He uses the ghostlike presence of his fragmented family in the liminal spaces of the text as a metaphor for Jewish lives after the Second World War in general and his own experiences in particular. This is a point that Hirsch makes in relation to all documentary evidence, which tends to become elusive and liminal over time: "Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, because they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting" (2011: 22). For Hirsch, Spiegelman's mother is the most strongly felt absence in the text: "Through her picture and her missing voice Anja haunts the story told in both volumes, a ghostly presence shaping familial interaction – the personal and the collective story of death and survival" (2011: 34). While Vladek gets a voice and is allowed to speak for himself to a certain extent, "Anja is recollected by others; she remains a visual and not an aural presence. She speaks in sentences imagined by her son or recollected by her husband. In their memory she is mystified, objectified, shaped to the needs and desires of the one who remembers – whether it be Vladek or Art" (2011: 34).

For the purposes of a conclusion I want to focus on the third photograph (cf. 1997: 294), which Hirsch finds "particularly disturbing in that it *stages, performs* the identity of the camp inmate. Vladek wears a uniform in a souvenir shop in front of what looks like a stage curtain; he is no longer in the camp but he reenacts his inmate self even as he is trying to prove – through his ability to pose – that he survived the inmate's usual fate" (2011: 39). Spiegelman chose this uncomfortable picture, which proved Vladek's survival to his wife Anja, to mirror the complicated relation between reality and the medium of comics: Spiegelman also tells true stories through fake images. While the medium of comics is often compared to film or prose, the truth claims of autographics can be efficiently explored through a study of photography, which is often the first step in autobiographical work anyway.

Contrary to the widespread belief that autobiographers just write what they know, whereas biographers engage in meticulous research (cf. Smith & Watson 2010: 6–7), Bechdel compiled a massive archive and "did some standard detective work", such as looking up her "Dad's police record and his college transcript" (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1006). To accomplish these tasks, she had to occupy several roles: autobiographer and biographer, writer and researcher, daughter and

detective. Her research was motivated by a desire, bordering on obsession, to find “evidence of her father’s secret life that was hidden in their everyday interactions and rereading family photographs for evidence of his covert homosexuality” (Watson 2011: 138). Bechdel appropriates these images in service of a specific family genealogy, recovering a direct link between herself and her father, which she actively constructs, for example by putting two photos next to each other to suggest similarities (cf. Bechdel 2007: 120). Watson is intrigued by “Bechdel’s ‘interested’ act of looking at a resemblance that viewers may find less evident” (2011: 144). Her best piece of circumstantial evidence and the starting point of the entire project is presented as the centrefold of the comic (cf. 2007: 100–1). Bechdel’s single-minded pursuit and specific point of view are not unusual for auto/biographies at all; they are only more visible in *Fun Home*. Nancy Pedri observes that Bechdel’s work “exposes her awareness that the ‘facts’ about her life are merely what she perceives to be true, that her narrative and the past experiences that give rise to it are relentlessly framed by her own aspectuality” (2015: 130). Instead of hiding this fact, she ostentatiously signals her presence in the text through incessant verbal narration. Like Harvey’s ‘voice’ in *American Splendor*, Bechdel’s prose is quite unique. In contrast to Pekar’s efforts to make his soliloquies sound like the spontaneous ruminations of a disgruntled, middle-aged everyman, Bechdel’s verbal style foregrounds how carefully edited, aloof and stilted it is – or seems. The very first sentence reads: “Like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of ‘Airplane’” (2007: 3/1). This unusual formal register adds a level of mystery, otherworldliness and drama that would be lost when using more contemporary prose. It demonstrates that the verbal texts of comics are as carefully arranged as the visual signs. It also serves as a connective tissue to the countless intertextual references to world literature.

Bechdel integrates her remediated photographs in two distinct ways: as thematic anchors on the title pages of the seven chapters and as ‘evidence’ throughout the narrative. Bechdel shares her motivation to integrate the former in an interview with Hillary Chute:

These are photos that feel particularly mythic to me, that carry a lot of meaning. They felt like a natural part of the story, somehow. At some point I just realized they’d work really nicely as chapter heads. I also like the way they anchor the story in real life – the book is drawn in my regular cartoony style, but the photos are drawn very realistically. It’s a way to keep reminding readers, these are real people. This stuff really happened. (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1009)

## CHAPTER 1



## OLD FATHER, OLD ARTIFICER

**Fig. 20:** *Fun Home* (1). © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.

In this passage, Bechdel reveals how she understands and feels about the photos in, and their importance to *Fun Home* as its author/protagonist. To readers, the same textual elements may appear in a different light.

When readers encounter Bruce Bechdel on page 1 of the book (2007: 1 → Fig. 20), the image is neither mythic nor a ‘natural part of the story’. Despite Bechdel’s effort to add photo corners (cf. Chute 2010: 179), readers may not immediately understand the status of this drawing. They are more likely to interpret the chapter title “Old Father, Old Artificer” as a caption and maybe an ironic comment on the picture, provided that they are related. Without anchorage, this “photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading”, as Sontag observes about homeless pictures in general (2008b: 71). Even if we naïvely accepted this reproduction of a scanned page of an original drawing of



a photo of a man (who might be the eponymous father) as the real thing (cf. McCloud 1994: 24–5), the way that Bechdel approaches the narrative is so obviously artistic and constructivist in intent that the reason for its inclusion cannot be documentary evidence. As Watson correctly observes, she is interested in her father's new role in a queer family history, in which he represents a first, but ultimately failed step in a direction that Bechdel herself was willing to take. Chute argues that "*Fun Home* is about the procedure of close reading and close looking. The narration of the book is rooted in *acts of looking at archives*" (2010: 182), but it has to be said that Bechdel is highly selective, "reading photos for their transgressive content" (Watson 2011: 135). At one point Chute implies that the material did not remain untouched when Bechdel "re-created absolutely everything in the book, reinhabiting the elements of her past to re-present them – and to preserve them, to publically rearchive them" (2010: 185–6). Such a process naturally involves selection, blending and rearrangement. Bruce Bechdel's 'mythic' presence on page one only makes sense in retrospect.

While the title pages remediate isolated photos as material anchors, supporting the auto/biographer's meaning-making rather than the readers', the chapters feature contextualised photos that are more directly intended to "anchor the story in real life" (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1009). Since Bechdel attempts to rewrite her family history as a queer genealogy, the photographic evidence she offers to readers has to ground the newly-discovered similarities between Alison and Bruce in reality. While she tells her own coming-of-age story in a largely chronological manner, the chapters represent tentative approaches to her father's personality, a shared homosexuality and his potential suicide. The text obsessively returns to these concerns and each chapter either begins or ends with one of them. Bruce Bechdel dies and reappears again and again. This also highlights the curious temporality of auto/biographies, where key events that have already happened, are going to happen and will do so forever, in the eternal presence of the scenes we read.

Since Bechdel's mappings between the two lives are not materially manifest, but very real to the auto/biographer, she seeks to recreate her own process of discovery by inviting the same blends that have already led to global insight in her own case. An obvious example is the arrangement of two remediated photos next to each other (cf. 2007: 120/2) that depict Bruce and Alison in what she considers to be almost the same situation during a previous stage of their lives. However, I would like to discuss a panel in which she equally attempts to decrease the distance between the two, but through very different means (cf. 2007: 150/3 → Fig. 21). The third panel of this page is low on the modality scale, which creates an effect of amplification through simplification: through the use





Fig. 21: *Fun Home* (150). © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.

of silhouettes, Alison can become a smaller version of her dad. Significantly, it is she who leans over and desires to be closer to him. This conceptual metaphor of SPIRITUAL COMMUNION IS BEING PHYSICALLY CLOSE plays a role throughout the book (cf. 2007: 3–4, 22, 54, 86, 120, 124, 150, 189, 218–21, 225, 230–2). It reveals Bechdel's attempt to rewrite history by selecting, reworking and adding scenes that suggest Bruce Bechdel's homosexuality and a much stronger bond with her father. The mass of meticulously reproduced evidence appears next to such imagined scenes, which raises the question of how the two modalities blend together. Watson explains the co-presence of such heterogeneous elements in the following way:

I think about autographical practice as a visual and comparative act: by contrasting Bechdel's drawings of photographs (no actual photos are reproduced) as archival documents with the cartooned story of a remembered – and fantasized – past, we can observe how she reinterprets the authority that photos as “official histories” seem to hold, and opens them to subjective reinterpretation. In her focus on varying visual versions of her father and her wildly changing impressions of him (recorded in her diary) at different moments, Bechdel composes a textured autobiographical reflection that moves by an ongoing process of her own recursive reading. (2011: 133)

Watson's description of autobiographical work “as a visual and comparative act” (2011: 133) is very astute, as subjects contemplate different aspects of their lives together – literally, in the form of photographs and documents, or figuratively, as mental spaces in their working memory. She also discusses modality in the context of blending, which becomes relevant both during production and reception. The building blocks of auto/biography are usually of various modalities, from hard facts via speculations to wishes and desires. Instead of solving the ‘puzzle’ beforehand, autographers can use the double page of comics to lay out tentative blends or just the various input spaces to involve readers in the process of meaning-making. There are three basic ways in which cartoonists can suggest specific readings: the selection of elements (Iser's repertoire), layout and foregrounding, but also adjustments to modality. By lowering the modality of the evidence through hand-drawn reproduction, Bechdel not only makes the facts personal (graphiation), but she also facilitates blending. Her uniform style integrates heterogeneous matter into what looks like a seamless presentation – despite extensive quilting. This humanises and subjectivises the facts, but it also glosses over the more speculative aspects of the narrative. *Fun Home* is a prime example of ‘emotional truth’: throughout, readers acquire a profound understanding of how Bechdel feels about her past and the awkward relationship with her father, but it is by no means a documentary of what really happened. The mixed modalities of *Fun Home* remind readers of the ambiguity that is inherent

in all life narratives and the necessity to make facts serve a narrative purpose. Liz Stanley argues that the “‘truth’ about the totality of a life all depends on the viewpoint from which it is examined” (1992: 6), which serves as a meaningful transition to the next topic.

### 5.3 Authenticity & Emotional Truth

In her article “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” (2007) Nancy K. Miller uses Stephen Colbert’s neologism “truthiness” (2007: 538) to refer to a tendency in recent life writing to take some liberties with the concept of authenticity. The American Dialect Society, which voted ‘truthiness’ the 2005 Word of the Year, defines the winner as “the quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true” (Metcalf 2006: 1). This is a widespread phenomenon on social media, where people seek confirmation of their beliefs rather than an open-minded exchange of ideas. If we accept Charles Hatfield’s conceptualisation of autographics as being mainly concerned with “*emotional truths*” (2005: 113; see also Miller 2007: 543), then the allegation of ‘truthiness’ may not be far-fetched. However, Miller’s ultimate point is not to criticise auto/biography for failing to provide documentary evidence, but to encourage literary critics, journalists and common readers to develop a more realistic and differentiated understanding of what autobiographies can and should be (cf. 2007: 545). This is reflected in an ongoing “expansion of autobiography studies” that now “includes dramatic developments in the equally rich and interdisciplinary domains of memory studies, trauma and testimony, law and ethics, illness and disability, ethnography, performance, and visual culture” (2007: 545). Despite this impressive list of academic fields and potential approaches, Hatfield’s simple observation provides a much appreciated first orientation when facing autobiographical comics. In *El Deafo*, which deals with Cece Bell’s loss of hearing at the age of four, the artist describes the veracity of her account in the following way:

*El Deafo* is based on my childhood (and on the secret nickname I really did give myself back then). It is in no way a representation of what all deaf people might experience. It’s also important to note that while I was writing and drawing the book, I was more interested in capturing the specific feelings I had as a kid with hearing loss than in being 100 percent accurate with the details. Some of the characters in the book are exactly how I remember them; others are composites of more than one person. Some of the events in the book are in the right order; others got mixed up a bit. Some of the conversations are real; others, well, ain’t. But the way I *felt* as a kid – that feeling is all true. (2014: 236)

There are two basic insights to take away from this: truth is always mediated and the power of narrative is not the accurate representation of facts and figures, but a notion of what it feels like to be another person under very different circumstances. Referring to the centrality of the father-daughter relationship in Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Miller comments that "in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose" (2007: 544). No other medium foregrounds its artistic transformation of reality to the same extent that comics does.

Practically all theorists of autographics have broached the issue of authenticity and dedicated whole chapters to the idea (cf. e.g. Hatfield 2005: 108–27; Versaci 2007: 34–80; El Refaie 2012: 135–78). Here is Duncan, Smith and Levitz's summary of the major arguments:

A comic is not a recording of what happened: it is a drawing of what the cartoonist remembers doing and feeling. [...] A memoirist's experiences are always mediated through memory and the motives of self-presentation, but in a comics memoir the presentation of those experiences is also shaped by the encapsulation, layout, and composition choices demanded by the comics form. (2015: 243)

This logic applies to all examples, no matter how truthful and authentic the protagonists appear to be, as the material has to be shaped in one way or another to become a work of art. Narrativisation is not a flaw or defect, but a creative step that makes the experientiality of other people's lives accessible in the first place. John Dewey conceptualises the relationship between experiences and art in exactly the same manner: "The subject-matter of experiences of childhood and youth is nevertheless a subconscious background of much great art. But to be the substance of art, it must be made into a new object by means of the medium employed, not merely suggested in a reminiscent way" (2005: 118). Based on gestalt psychology, reader-response critics consider selection and foregrounding as two key mechanisms of turning reality into art. Duncan, Smith and Levitz apply a similar logic to the creation of autobiographical comics:

The act of molding experience into a coherent narrative requires a selective and distorted presentation of an already imperfectly remembered reality. Even Harvey Pekar, who felt his *American Splendor* stories presented an accurate and honest account of the mundane events of his life, could not show every moment of even a minor incident. He always had to make decisions about which moments of his real life experience to emphasize (and perhaps enhance) and which moments to totally omit. [...] The memoirist has to shape incidents into a narrative and that often requires creating connections between incidents that did not exist in real life. (2015: 244)

Since autographers are likely to understand their craft and are painfully aware of the slow process of translating personal experiences into drawn images, the question arises how cartoonists approach ‘truth-telling’ in their work, conscious of the fact that it is not possible in a naïve sense. With *Fun Home* we have seen a hybrid approach that combines the meticulous recreation of documentary evidence with the imaginative exploration of a queer family history centred around a close father-daughter relationship. In the following I focus on the extreme poles of this spectrum by looking at “strategies of authentication” (El Refaie 2012: 138; see also 143–72; Pedri 2015: 128; Stanley 1992: 110, 128), which cartoonists more or less consciously employ to convince readers of the veracity of their narratives, and strategies that subvert authenticity by foregrounding the metaphorical nature of all auto/biographical writing.

Autobiographers, who have spent a lifetime blending heterogeneous experiences of various younger selves into *one* potential narrative, have to decide whether to stay true to the facts or the tellability of *this* story, true to the mess that comes with multiple social entanglements (cf. Miller 2007: 544) or to the clarity of a neat sequence of events that inevitably leads to a predetermined conclusion. Spiegelman’s decision to foreground the father-son relationship as the centre of *MAUS*, against the backdrop of his family’s tragic history, forced him to pay less attention to other social relations, such as his roles as husband, father and (step-)son, which automatically diminishes the role of women in the book (cf. Hirsch 2011: 35–6). Accordingly, they are “made to have only shadowy existence” (Stanley 1992: 9), which seems appropriate for his dead mother, but clearly less so for his wife, daughter and stepmother. Deliberately, the narrative is not about them, despite the fact that, at the start of his exploration of their shared family history, he had rarely maintained any contact to his father for at least two years and did not know him very well (cf. Spiegelman 1997: 13/1). This has important repercussions on the narrative, as Art approaches the project with some critical distance, almost like a journalist, tape-recording interviews and documenting his research, while at the same time being directly affected by the tale as Vladek’s son. Thus, the truthfulness of the tale becomes explicitly tied to his father’s ability to remember his life ‘correctly’ and Art’s skills as a cartoonist to render it in a medium that was still associated with escapist fiction and childish entertainment. The practices of truth-telling and questioning the reliability of both memory and representation are bound to the specific content, the relationship between the two characters and the narrative medium. Spiegelman’s strategies of underlining and undermining are also tied to the generic hybridity of the text – both autobiography and biography – and his dual role as journalist and son – both observer and subject of the family history, a genetic piece of

evidence. Spiegelman's metanarrative passages, but especially *METAMAUS*, provide a counterbalance to these ambiguities and difficult decisions by opening the archive to the general public and commenting on the process of creation.

El Refaie dedicates a whole chapter of her book to the idea of "Performing Authenticity" (2012: 135–78), which she understands as an ongoing negotiation between auto/biographer and reader, concerning the framing of the narrative and its truth claims: "being authentic is not about being as true as possible to a coherent and stable inner self; rather, it is something that is performed more or less convincingly and either accepted or rejected by an audience" (2012: 138). These 'performances' are not exclusively paratextual or metanarrative, but constitutive elements of the auto/biographical text itself. There is a wide spectrum of what readers may understand as 'authentic,' which has to do with the word's several contradictory meanings: it usually refers to the real and original, in the sense of not being a copy. However, it may also be used for faithful reproductions, such as authentic Mexican cuisine in other countries. A third possibility is the idea of an authentic self, in the sense of 'staying true to oneself'. All of them rely on an essentialist notion of identity or quality. For El Refaie, these definitions are unsuitable for a discussion of auto/biographical writing, for which she replaces the notion of essence with performance (cf. 2012: 138). According to this logic, self-presentation is successful when it is convincingly performed (cf. 2012: 141) and readers feel that they can trust the auto/biographer. El Refaie names a dozen strategies that are meant to signal to readers that what they are holding in their hands may not be an exact replication of what happened to a particular person, but that it is sincere and trustworthy enough to warrant their sustained interest. Hatfield argues that critical readers are unlikely to confuse hand-drawn images with reality anyway, as "first-person prose invites complicity", but "cartooning invites scrutiny" (2005: 117). In a more ironic tone he adds that "what passes for frankness in comics must be a matter of both subjective vision and graphic artifice, a shotgun wedding of the untrustworthy and the unreal" (2005: 118). In the following, I discuss some of the major strategies that cartoonists may employ to enter a negotiation with readers concerning the veracity of their narratives.

The most obvious strategy of authentication is to classify a book as an autobiography and/or non-fiction on the cover. In *The New York Times Book Review* pages of 8 December 1991 the second part of *MAUS* was listed as fiction, as some journalists could not conceive of a comic with mouse characters in it as anything else. Spiegelman wrote a letter to the editor in which he thanks "The Times for its recognition and support", but complains about "seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the

death camps classified as fiction” (cf. 1991: n. p.). The *New York Times* online archive also provides the editor’s response to Spiegelman:

The publisher of “Maus II,” Pantheon Books, lists it as “history; memoir.” The Library of Congress also places it in the nonfiction category: “1. Spiegelman, Vladek -- Comic books, strips, etc. 2. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945) -- Poland -- Biography. . . . 3. Holocaust survivors -- United States -- Biography. . . .” Accordingly, this week we have moved “Maus II” to the hard-cover nonfiction list, where it is No. 13. (1991: n. p.)

This illustrates that the negotiation of what counts as fact or fiction is not limited to the personal communication between author and reader, but affects cultural and commercial practices. It is one thing for a publisher to promote a comic book as ‘memoir’ and ‘history’ (cf. Spiegelman 1997), but quite another for the *New York Times* and the Library of Congress to confirm these genre labels. This put booksellers in the awkward position of having to decide where to place copies of *MAUS* in the shops. In the ‘history’ section they would still cause outrage, but they were equally out of place among novels or children’s books. Today, *MAUS* is grouped together with all other comics in the newly introduced ‘graphic novels’ section of bookshops, which privileges medium over content and still evokes the wrong associations. Auto/biographical comics can contribute to important debates about the artificial fiction/non-fiction divide and genre labels in general. There are legitimate concerns that ‘truthiness’ and ‘fake news’ obliterate the border between fact and fiction, which may lead to attempts to present them as diametrically opposed, but students have to become critical readers of *all* texts and this negotiation has to take place in the classroom.

Most autobiographical texts are classified as ‘memoirs’ (cf. *MAUS*, *Fun Home*, *Tomboy*), which is an ambiguous term itself, if we follow Duncan, Smith and Levitz’s definition:

In an autobiography there is an emphasis on documenting one’s life, providing facts about events, whereas the writer of a memoir is often more concerned with conveying her or his feelings about events. [. . .] An autobiography usually spans all of the person’s life up to the point of the writing. A memoir usually covers a much shorter span of time, and often focuses on particular life-changing incidents and their consequences. (2015: 230)

This distinction may be misleading as it attaches truth value to (historical) text types instead of considering authenticity as a stance and performance, whose veracity has to be negotiated between readers. Since paratexts are likely to present authors’ preferred labels, the publishers’ marketing terms and/or critics’ classifications, it may be worth studying them comparatively.

*Blankets* is introduced as “an illustrated novel” on the cover, which is in line with the key words ‘graphic novels’, ‘cartoons’ and ‘fiction’ that the publisher chose for its categorisation. The critics, however, who are quoted on the back cover, understand it as an autobiography and a very personal story. The truth is that the line between fact and fiction is hard to draw in this case and calling *Blankets* a novel solved a number of practical problems that may have arisen were it promoted as ‘the truth’ about his family. Thompson did not ask any of the represented people for permission, including Raina, so for legal reasons alone it made sense to call it a work of fiction. In the interview with Michael Whybark Thompson admits that it was “creepy enough that [he] made this book without her permission” (cf. 2003: transcript 7). He also removed his sister for conceptual reasons, ignored the fact that he did not even attend school in his final year before graduating from high school (cf. 2003: transcript 6) and even used his girlfriend at the time of writing to sit for him and portray the character of Raina. Thompson even had to redraw a number of pages from the early chapters to make Raina’s look more consistent across the narrative, as she began to look more like Thompson’s new love interest (cf. 2003: transcript 7). What may sound counterintuitive was motivated by a desire to (re)capture his original infatuation by tapping into his feelings for his new girlfriend. He felt that the narrative would become more authentic and truthful that way. My point is not to discredit Thompson, but to illustrate the complex processes of turning personal experiences into a work of art and then having to maintain the integrity of the narrative. There are no easy answers and the meaning of the text cannot be fixed through labels.

Another obvious way to convince readers of the truthfulness of the narrative is to have the narrator declare that all of what they are about to read really happened (cf. El Refaie 2012: 145). Authenticity as a gamble is prominent in postmodern autobiographies, such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which begins with the lines: “All of this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (1991: 1). In J.M. DeMatteis and Glenn Barr’s *Brooklyn Dreams* the narrator starts with a similar declaration:

This is the story of what happened to me during my senior year in high school. Now, everything I’m about to tell you is true, I swear it. But the problem is – I don’t really believe that there’s any such thing as a ‘true story.’ Perception is limited. Memory is faulty. I think the moment the words come out of our mouths, we create something wholly different from the truth we’re trying to communicate. A shadow-show of reality. A waking dream, if you will. (2003: n. p. [p. 1])



Two pages later the narrator walks onto a stage, ready to draw the curtain and reveal his childhood, when he remembers a book he once read in which an old man commented on his autobiographical tales in the following manner: “Call this memoir fact, fairy tale, or whatever else may give you comfort, [. . .] but know that there are moments that remain true under any classification” (2003: n. p. [p. 3]). Together with the theatre metaphor of *LIFE IS A STAGE* there may not be a better introduction to a comics autobiography than this one. While it is almost expected to start a postmodern text with metanarrative commentary, most memoirs just begin somewhere. Since comics do not depend on a verbal narrator, captions may indicate times and places without providing any commentary for several pages (cf. Liz Prince’s *Tomboy*, Raina Telgemeier’s *Smile*). An explicit declaration of veracity may even have the opposite effect of raising doubts.

A third possibility is to be disarmingly, painfully and/or brutally honest about your life. While this cannot grant autobiographers privileged access to what happened, readers may find this kind of confessional writing and drawing more believable as the artists are willing to reveal the unpleasant or shameful aspects of their lives. Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* perfected such an approach early on, which started a long tradition of “self-portraits in autographics” that “are deliberately ironic and self-deprecatory” (El Refaie 2012: 148). A more widespread practice is to depict autobiographical reasoning itself – the act instead of the product – which allows autobiographers to include doubts, false starts or blends that are tentative at best. Nancy Pedri is convinced that this strategy dominates in Bechdel’s *Fun Home*: “the narrator builds credibility by questioning her writing while she writes, by recognizing that the very act of making sense of her self and her history is part of the problem” (2015: 133). Instead of undermining her authority, Pedri argues, Bechdel strengthens her position: “Authority and doubt thus unite to ensure credibility” (2015: 134).

Another simple strategy is to use the name of the autobiographer for the narrator and the protagonist. In *Tomboy*, both the cartoonist’s younger self and the narrator are explicitly labelled “LIZ PRINCE” and referred to as “I” (cf. 2014: 11–12). This may seem almost too obvious to include, but my reading of *Angela’s Ashes* has shown that the use of the personal pronoun camouflages the heterogeneity of identities and represents a narrative strategy that encourages blending and viewpoint compression. In *Blankets*, which is marketed as a novel, the protagonist is still called Craig. This suggests that authenticity, like salience or modality, is a scale and that different textual elements may invite different readings. The exact opposite is also possible: a book can be marketed



**Fig. 22:** *Stop Forgetting to Remember* (back flap). © 2007 by Peter Kuper. Reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

as an autobiography, but the protagonist has a different name. This applies, for example, to Eddie Campbell's *Alec* books (cf. 2009):

... for years Eddie Campbell shared incidents and insights from his own life using the “character” Alec MacGarry. An avatar with a different name might be used because the author wants to maintain some emotional distance from the protagonist or wants to emphasize that while the story is representative of their experiences it is not an absolutely factual account. (Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2015: 239)

Another example is Peter Kuper's *Stop Forgetting to Remember* (2007), in which he uses ‘Walter Kurtz’ as his alter ego. Both strategies are clear reminders that readers should not take the narrative as factually true in every respect.

Apart from the name, a visual resemblance between cartoon selves and artists is an obvious indicator of authenticity. Kuper includes a split-portrait of himself on the back flap of the cover that combines a hand-drawn self-representation as Kurtz with a photo of himself, which serves as a playful reminder that his disguise is intentionally thin (cf. 2007: back flap → Fig. 22). At the same time, it offers an incredible liberty, as writers do not have to pretend that they are producing a history book.

A visual correspondence between real-life author and protagonist may seem to constitute a basic requirement for any autobiographical comic to be believable at all, but we have already encountered the most important exception to

the rule: *MAUS*. However, there are more exceptions to the rule than one may think. James Kochalka's highly influential diary comic *American Elf* (1999–2012) features the main characters as elves, in Cece Bell's *El Deafo* (2014) all characters are anthropomorphic rabbits and Malik Sajad's *Munnu* (2015) depicts the citizens of Kashmir, including Sajad's own family, as endangered deer.

Comics may be the only mass medium that allows for such a wide range of metaphoric expression. Rocco Versaci adds that, traditionally, we “associate comics with talking animals or superheroes”, which means that “we come to the medium with certain assumptions about the form. Specifically, we see comics as a metaphoric interpretation of reality and are therefore accepting – whether we are aware of it or not – of the subjective nature of ‘truth’ in comics” (2007: 74). This is just one of the reasons why I am reluctant to separate ‘graphic novels’ from comics, as many phenomena only make sense with some understanding of the form's history.

The next strategy is to recreate scenes with such a level of detail that readers begin to understand them as faithful representations of what transpired. While it is quite impossible to accurately remember long stretches of dialogue, dramatisation can trick readers into believing that entire scenes naturally play out in front of their eyes. Based on Amy Spaulding's *The Page as a Stage Set* (1995) I have argued that comics largely rely on externalisation, embodiment and performance. This form of decompression creates the illusion of time-travelling and directly bearing witness to events as they are unfolding. Yet, to get at the emotional core of scenes, cartoonists have to use their art. This dilemma is perfectly expressed in El Refaie's notion of authenticity as performance. Readers are willing to believe things as long as they are successfully staged/presented.

A photorealistic style could signal that what readers are witnessing is real, as images with a high modality are understood as iconic and as references to a reality outside of the book, whereas Spiegelman's mice, for example, suggest a metaphorical or symbolic approach (cf. El Refaie 2012: 152). From a practical point of view, Bechdel's meticulous recreations of photos and other pieces of evidence are tedious to execute, so the norm is rather cartooning and amplification through simplification. John Porcellino's work may seem overtly child-like (cf. 2005: n. p. → Fig. 23), not to say primitive, at a first glance, but his minimalist style is very precise and representative of cartooning in general.

As a strategy, the idea is that ‘graphiation’ conveys more of the creator's personality and attitude through style than an orientation towards photorealism ever could. Hillary Chute avoids the term and rather speaks of “*handwriting*”, but the effect is described in very similar terms: “That the same hand is both writing and drawing the narrative in comics leads to a sense of the form as diaristic; there



**Fig. 23:** *Perfect Example* (n. p.). © 2005 by John Porcellino. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page, an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting ‘private’ images” (2010: 10; see also Chute & DeKoven 2006: 767). This personal touch and “subjective mark of the body”, Chute argues, “is rendered directly onto the page” and thus “underscores the subjective positionality of the author” (2010: 11). I have already discussed this point in the previous part. While it is true that graphic styles communicate a lot more than the monotony of standard fonts in prose fiction, I am more inclined to follow El Refaie and treat them as a resource or strategy that can be used in various contexts and for different purposes. Craig Thompson’s travel diary *Carnet de Voyage* (2006), for example, contains a plethora of more realistic drawings, as he was collecting material for his new book *Habibi* at the time. Since cartoonists are usually excellent draftspersons and their styles deliberate choices, Thompson’s sketches look different from the cute cartoon style he prefers for most of his narrative work, but which we also find interspersed throughout *Carnet*. In the following panel, Thompson uses a clash of styles to contrast his lowly upbringing with the glamorous photo-shoot in Paris that produces images hardly reconcilable with his self-image. Both poses are exaggerations and thus stereotypes (cf. Mitchell 2010: 263): the celebrated graphic novelist and the “country bumpkin” (2006: 22/2 → Fig. 24). Adrielle Mitchell describes the image in the following terms:

Thompson presents us with [an] unambiguous representation of split identity. The juxtaposition [...] is terrific: the more faintly drawn tractorriding double rests his bare feet on ‘Craig’s’ suited shoulders. What an apt illustration of double consciousness made more interesting by what the graphic medium allows. Drawing permits Thompson to personify a psychological state and insert the figure into the representation of a realistic scene. Thus can a panel, too, carry double identity, setting two scenes simultaneously: an objective one based on memory, and a subjective one based on a state of mind. (2010: 263–5)

Mitchell’s description is very accurate, but if we acknowledge the panel as a tentative blend, there has to be emergent structure. Fauconnier and Turner name three processes that facilitate “the creation of new meaning in the blend” (2003: 20): they are composition, completion and elaboration (cf. 2003: 42–4; Evans & Green 2006: 409–10). Composition refers to the phenomenon that structures from the input spaces have already been projected, which places them in a direct relation to each other. Craig’s alter ego – the country bumpkin – does not appear in a thought balloon, which would have kept the two modalities and forms of focalisation (visual & mental) neatly apart. He does more than rest his feet on Craig’s shoulders: he weighs him down. It is the happy-go-lucky Midwestern farm lad that is having a good time, completely oblivious to what is



Fig. 24: *Carnet de Voyage* (22/2). © 2004 by Craig Thompson. Reprinted by permission of Drawn & Quarterly. All rights reserved.

going on in the wider world. Craig, however, seems downcast, feeling the pressure of handling social encounters and contractual obligations for which his upbringing did not prepare him. It has become a burden that he cannot easily shake off. Completion can be achieved by adding additional cognitive frames and input spaces that may provide further structure and background knowledge and thus stabilise the blend. For readers of *Blankets*, the country bumpkin is incompatible with the way Thompson presents himself in his other autobiographical comic – an artist among a Christian farming community. Mitchell is right in

observing that Craig feels “ill at ease and awkward in Europe” and that he “seems to be nationally self-conscious” (2010: 263). In Europe, the auto-stereotype of being an American redneck seems to come first. While the verbal narrator identifies with the lad on the tractor, cartoon Craig is haunted by what seems to represent his upbringing and background. In *Blankets*, Thompson often feels out of place and ashamed of his own inadequacy, which is mirrored in some of these experiences abroad. Maybe the two modalities also express a tension relating to his status as an artist. They are representative of comics, in which stereotypical characters do not even speak proper languages and lead solipsistic lives, and ‘real’ art that has immediacy and transacts with the world, where people speak French and lead exciting lives.

Elaboration is the third process that is involved in ‘running the blend’. New meanings may emerge by thinking further along the lines that have been established. Thompson’s pose is awkward. He keeps his hands in his trouser pockets, forgets to look at the camera and the right leg in front of his body causes an imbalance. What does the photographer see? Why is the pose “parfait”? The photographer looks equally ridiculous in his attempt to get the best ‘glamour shot’. Craig looks like his teenage self to me, still awkwardly out of touch, introverted and slightly out of his league. I called Thompson’s panel a tentative blend, as it compresses and condenses information, but leaves room for interpretation. It requires more cognitive effort and study than expected. The verbal text suggests a simplistic reading, but there is more going on. Looking at the image from the point of view of autobiography, both versions of Craig are wrong. It is the image of the rockstar graphic novelist that Casterman, his French publisher, tries to push that leads to self-deprecation and shame. In *Carnet de Voyage* Craig’s identities are free-floating. While the more realistic style that he uses for portraits of friends, street scenes and other impressions ground the book in reality, his cartoons (e.g. 2006: 40, 86–7, 118–9, 139) provide a look inside of Craig’s mind.

Moving away from style, the next strategy of authentication is to reproduce photos or other documents that may serve as evidence. I have already discussed their narrative functions and forms of integration in section 5.2.4. El Refaie suggests that artists draw “on the mythical status of photography as a particularly authentic medium” (2012: 138), but the higher modality that photos provide is just one more resource, not a pocket of truth in a cartoon narrative. She argues that the exact opposite may have the same effect: by “adopting an ostentatiously naïve cartoonish drawing style or by employing deliberately incongruous elements” (2012: 138) cartoonists foreground the impossibility of recovering the past, which “may come across to the reader as a particularly sincere form of authenticity” (2012: 138–9). To some readers, a deliberately naïve or amateurish style



may have the same effect as a metanarrative comment on the impossibility of remembering one's entire life in accurate detail: a welcome recognition of human limitations.

A similar sign of honesty is to open the archive to the public and let the readers see for themselves. This corresponds to Stanley's argument in favour of more critical editions and Spiegelman's decision to publish *METAMAUS*. Readers get to see the backstage area, where autobiographical acts are rehearsed and tested. They see the contradictions and the doubts, the limitations of memory and the unavoidable choices that have to be made when personal experiences have to serve the requirements of a compelling story. This openness signals honesty and reliability. Autobiographers could take this approach one step further and actively undermine any claim to veracity through irony and blatant exaggeration (cf. El Refaie 2012: 167). In chapter 19 of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, entitled "The Illusion of Understanding", Daniel Kahneman offers a devastating view of human understanding, which suggests that irony is indeed the only way to approach one's memories:

You cannot help dealing with the limited information you have as if it were all there is to know. You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it. Paradoxically, it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle. Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance. (2012: 201)

A postmodern or ironic approach to auto/biography is incompatible with Liz Stanley's feminist view on authorship and experience, but she cannot deny the facts: "if memory is necessarily limited, and fictive devices are always necessary in producing accounts of our selves, then all selves invoked in spoken and written autobiographies are by definition non-referential even though the ideology of the genre is a realist one" (1992: 62). She also acknowledges the constructivist nature of the autobiographical act: "Memory's lane is a narrow, twisting and discontinuous route back through the broad plains of the past, leading to a self that by definition we can never remember but only construct through the limited and partial evidence available to us – half-hints of memory, photographs, memorabilia, other people's remembrances. Autobiography and biography are as one here" (1992: 62; see also 99). And, yet, from an enactivist point of view this cannot be entirely true. There have to be experiences that shape humans, their bodies and minds, in such dramatic and/or permanent ways that the embodied nature of the experience exceeds the question of how



accurately autobiographers can remember details of their past. Stanley extends this logic to the basic experiences of everyday lives:

However, ordinary social life and interaction takes it as axiomatic that these accounts or versions are contingent upon real events: births and deaths, shopping and childcare, loving and hating, work and holidays, rapes and assaults, elections and wars, and all the other material events that are lived (and died) by people. What those feminist theorists influenced by postmodernist and deconstructionist thinking seem decidedly in danger of forgetting or even denying is that this ordinary and extraordinary material world exists and is prime – not the world of texts. (1992: 93–4; see also 109)

For Stanley, who is aware of the problems of mediation, embodied experience is central and worth reporting: “Autobiographical textuality is neither deterministic of a life nor (usually) a complete invention: in autobiography graph is predicated upon bio, writing upon life, and not the other way about” (1992: 110). Stanley urges readers to consider “what the denial of authorship actually *does*” (1992: 16), as it silences a lot of voices that have not been heard in the first place and devalues what they might have to say. For “a few white middle class male first world elite self-styled ‘intellectuals’”, she argues, the death of the author is indeed a “very convenient death” (1992: 17).

## 5.4 Autobiographical Selves

Paul John Eakin observes 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: 101). Therefore, the starting point for any autobiographical project is not a fragmented assortment of random pieces of evidence, but a “megablend”, which “is giving the best global insight into the entire network” (Fauconnier and Turner 2003: 151). Autographers start with a hypothesis, in the purest form just a label like *Tomboy* or *The Quitter*, which they explore through elaborate ‘backward projection’ (cf. 2003: 44; Evans & Green 2006: 410). Barbara Dancygier provides an excellent illustration of how autobiographers can work through their memories and past lives by decompressing their sense of a unified self into various personalities and identities in the narrative:

While any person normally conceptualizes herself or himself as one entity, whose physique, mental ability, style of clothing, et cetera are blended into one unique whole, there are situations when we see various aspects of our identity as independent. [. . .] One’s sense of uniqueness is a result of a highly compressed blend but it is natural to decompress that whole when need arises, if only to be able to recognize the changes that inevitably occur. Decompression is thus the flip side of compression in that our need to

achieve a holistic understanding of complex phenomena has sometimes to give in to the need to appreciate their inner complexity. (2012: 100)

Backward projection means that official documents, other people's narratives, material anchors and memories are scrutinised in view of the blend, which may have an impact on the perceived value of clues. For a convincing narrative, most of them have to point in a particular direction. This entails a return to former stages of one's life, which automatically requires an engagement with one's previous social identities and roles. Sometimes a new piece of evidence, a crisis situation and/or a serious threat to one's life may question the current understanding/blend and require a lot of autobiographical work leading up to a reconstitution of the self. In both cases, the process may lead to a reconfiguration: the viewpoint of the investigator drives the collection and integration of suitable material, whereas surprise discoveries or new leads may inevitably require reblending. In any case, autobiographers have to lay out the evidence in front of the readers' eyes in various degrees of compression or dramatisation. Since all narratives are unavoidably perspectival, the question arises who presents whose experiences for what purpose.

In my brief discussion of the first few sentences of Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, I made a point of the multiplicity of 'I's in autobiographical narratives, which Smith and Watson discuss at some length (cf. 2010: 71–9). While most readers do not require more than a simple distinction between narrating I (now) and experiencing I (then), a narratological analysis can become quite complicated in prose fiction and almost impossible in autobiographical comics, where focalisation is always layered instead of clearly attributable. For the moment, I would like to discuss Smith and Watson's basic classification to arrive at a better understanding of what is involved. Instead of the two 'I's presented above, they extend the list to four: the historical I, the narrating I, the narrated I and the ideological I (cf. 2010: 72). Commenting on the flesh-and-blood author of a life narrative they observe that he or she is "unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the 'I' that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative" (2010: 72). Autobiographers always write/draw during a particular stage of their lives and with a particular goal in mind, which has to have an influence on their work. At the same time, a few hundred pages of content only allow for one consistent narrative, not for a detailed portrayal of an entire life. As we have seen with Spiegelman's *MAUS*, the chosen path has long-lasting effects on the selection and presentation of the available material.

In contrast, the 'narrating I' is the person who tells the story. They explain that "the narrating 'I' calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to

the story he is telling” (2010: 72). In prose autobiographies it may be possible to equate the verbal narrator with the “implied author”, which El Refaie defines as “the reader’s mental image of the person responsible for the selection and combination of events in a work” (2012: 57). I have referred to this autobiographical I as the ‘autobiographer’, who is the person engaged in extensive autobiographical work in preparation for the book, who creates the layout, determines a style, selects the episodes, the modality, the red threads etc. This is not the real-life author, but only the person working on the book. This becomes evident when reading or viewing conversations with autographers. In the interview with Craig Thompson Mike Whybark asks: “*Uh – to what extent did you like, consciously shape and re-form your autobio? How great a degree of difference is there between the character of Craig in BLANKETS and the artist that invented that character?*” (2003: transcript 6). Like most general readers, Whybark is interested in the narrating I versus the experiencing I, but Thompson’s answer reveals an added layer of complexity: “That’s another good question. And important to add to it – the character of Craig in the book is Craig in 1994, versus Craig ten years later. [. . .] They’re definitely different characters” (Thompson qtd. in Whybark 2003: transcript 6). Thompson’s use of ‘character’ may be ambiguous here, but I am convinced that he refers to the narrator. While the role of verbal narration is strongly diminished in a book like *Blankets*, *American Splendor*, *Tomboy* and *Fun Home* feature highly intrusive narrators that even appear as characters in the text in the first two cases. However, if we treat the narrator as another character, who produced the pages of the book?

In *Author and Narrator: Transdisciplinary Contributions to a Narratological Debate* (2015) Dorothee Birke and Tilmann Köppe collect a number of interesting articles that address the question whether there always has to be a narrator present in fiction – no matter which medium – or whether he or she is optional. The first approach is called “pan-narrator thesis (PN)” and the second “optional-narrator thesis (ON)” (Köppe & Stühling 2015: 13). In the same volume, readers find an article by Frank Zipfel, “Narratorless Narration? Some Reflections on the Arguments For and Against the Ubiquity of Narrators in Fictional Narration”, that provides some basic orientation. Zipfel presents a broad and a narrow view of narration (cf. Zipfel 2015: 49–50): since narratives are always mediated, there is automatically narration. This is the broad view. If narratologists insist on a person, whose presence has to be detectable in the text, we have a narrow view. A third option would be no-narrator theories (NN) (cf. 2015: 46), which claim that film without voice-over, for example, does not have a narrator at all. Zipfel is not interested in the question whether there is a narrator in a text or not, but more so in how that could be proven. What he really wants to know is whether it

is “legitimate, advisable or helpful to *assume* a fictional narrator or a narratorial instance” (2015: 47). He discusses five candidates for the role of narrator: (1) the author; (2) the implied author; (3) a mediating narrative instance; (4) a verbal narrator; (5) no one. I have already ruled out the first option (cf. 2015: 52–6), so the implied author is the next possibility. Zipfel’s ‘argument’ is so unusual, that I quote the whole passage:

According to this assumption, the act of narration (be it homodiegetic or heterodiegetic) is attributed neither to the author nor to the narrator but to this third instance called the implied author. But as the implied author is a very controversial concept and as the function it is supposed to fulfil in the present context, i.e. to serve as a communicative agent, is one of the most contested ones in the debate, I do not see any point in discussing this possibility. (2015: 56–7)

I am fully aware of the debates, which Zipfel lists as references in footnote 41 (cf. 2015: 57), but the point of this thesis is to find a meaningful reader-response approach to autobiographical comics and in this context the implied author makes more sense than in classical narratology. I return to this argument after the overview.

The third option is related to the pan-narrator (PN) thesis. Köppe and Stühling provide several arguments why readers may assume that there is some form of a shaping agent, even if readers cannot link that to a particular voice in the text (cf. 2015: 13–16). If, for pragmatic reasons, readers assume that there is some form of narrator, who should not be called the (implied) author and cannot be called the narrator, as it does not have a voice, the solution is to refer to it as a non-anthropomorphic ‘mediating narrative instance’. Based on film narratology, Markus Kuhn and Andreas Veits argue in favour of such an approach in the case of comics narration (cf. 2015: 240), for which they have to split the concept into verbal and visual narrative instances, of which only the latter is constitutive (cf. 2015: 237). Here is their definition:

In this context, the term ‘visual narrative instance’ (hereafter ‘visual NI’) neither refers to an anthropomorphized narrator concept nor an (audio)visual narrative instance realized through camera and post-production technology. Rather, it refers to an abstract concept which serves to describe the diverse narrative functions of visual acts of representation in comics. (2015: 240)

I do not see the advantage of divesting textual structures of human intentions, only because they cannot be attributed to a verbal narrator and the implied author is out of the question for unspecified reasons. When Nancy Pedri argues that “a diegetic self, and not a real self, is the focal point and the filtering mind of graphic memoir” (2015: 145), whom could she mean if not he-who-must-not-be-named?

The fourth possibility is the optional-narrator (ON) thesis, which Köppe & Stühling explain in the following manner: “There is a fictional narrator if, and only if in the fiction there is someone who tells the story that the reader reads” (2015: 13; cf. Zipfel 2015: 46). For comics, this would mean that the presence of a narrator depended on the inclusion of ‘voice-over’ narration in text boxes, which would be absurd, as verbal and visual signs are inseparable. The final option is the no-narrator (NN) thesis (cf. Zipfel 2015: 46), which simply claims that if there is no verbal narrator in the story, then there is none. This is an option for film scholars who consider the pan-narrative approach, involving a mediating narrative instance, of little use.

El Refaie’s solution for comics is the entangled writer/cartoonist, the implied author, whom I call ‘autobiographer’. In Franco-Belgian comics studies this entity is often referred to as the ‘meganarrator’, whose duties encompass both telling/narrating (*recitant*) and showing/visualising (*monstrator*) (cf. El Refaie 2012: 57; Groensteen 2013: 84–6, 88–90). Calling the implied author ‘meganarrator’ may bring the concept in line with narratology, but it does not solve the problem that a real author sits down and creates a text with a clear artistic vision in mind and a communicative purpose. Whether this is compatible with the belief system of some narratologists or not should not be a reason for dismissing the obvious. In “Who’s Telling the Tale? Authors and Narrators in Graphic Narrative” Jan-Noël Thon comes to the same conclusion, which is that “the verbal-pictorial representation of a graphic narrative can usually be attributed not to a (fictional) narrator, but to the author or author collective of the graphic narrative in question” (2015: 87). I would like to add that Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* contains photographic evidence (cf. 2002: 218, 224) that Lynda Barry produced the artwork at a certain point in her life and not the meganarrator or the NI. The biggest problem of narratology is the exclusion of real authors (and readers) from any theoretical consideration which forces scholars to attribute everything to either the narrator or the text, which is not compatible with comics studies. Concerning autobiographical narratives that have a writer and several artists attached to it, such as Harvey Pekar (writer), Dean Haspiel (artist), Lee Loughridge (grey tones) and Pat Brosseau’s (letters) *The Quitter*, it is obvious that Pekar provided the verbal narration and an outline for the book, but that Haspiel’s responsibility was to create the visuals. Thus, a split into different responsibilities, such as *recitant* and *monstrator* makes sense, as they are perceived as such by the creators. Yet, these are artists in real life, not types of narrators.

I use the surnames of writers/cartoonists to refer to their roles as implied authors or autobiographers. Verbal narration, embodied or disembodied, is a narrative resource that they can work with or not. This may seem like a dramatic

departure from prose autobiographies, where nothing exists outside of first-person verbal narration, but I am not even sure about that. Generally speaking, auto/biographers make use of all the narrative resources that the media they work in afford. These could be paint on canvas, words on pages or cartoon drawings in sequence. Prose autobiographers also select a narrative path, a stance/attitude and a prose style (cf. Sontag 2009b), decide what to leave out and what to include, determine where and when to start, choose photos for reproduction etc.

If we recall Wolfgang Iser's view on perspectives, he treats the narrator as just one resource that should not be confused with the meaning of the narrative:

As a rule there are four main perspectives: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text. What they do is provide guidelines originating from different starting points (narrator, characters, etc.), continually shading into each other and devised in such a way that they all converge on a general meeting place. We call this meeting place the meaning of the text, which can only be brought into focus if it is visualized from a standpoint. Thus, standpoint and convergence of textual perspectives are closely interrelated, although neither of them is actually represented in the text, let alone set out in words. Rather they emerge during the reading process, in the course of which the reader's role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern. (1980: 35; see also 21, 47, 96)

The emergent meaning in the blend, he explains, transcends any of the input spaces, including the narrator. This way, Iser's approach treats narration on the same level as characters or themes. They are all narrative resources, which means that the adjective 'narrative' becomes detached from the narrator. In service of a compelling story, prose autobiographers heavily rely on the narrator, of course, but this does not mean that no other perspectives or points of view can exist.

Smith and Watson complicate the identity of the narrator further by arguing that "the narrating 'I' is an effect composed of multiple voices, a heteroglossia attached to multiple and mobile subject positions, because the narrating 'I' is neither unified nor stable. It is split, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the process of coming together and of dispersing" (2010: 74). In consequence, "the narrating 'I' is a composite of speaking voices" (2010: 74). It would be more accurate to say that the 'I' of autobiography is fragmented, not the narrator. In life writing, autobiographers present themselves as a variety of identities and voices, usually in the form of narrators and characters/younger selves. Since these identities are not random and writers have an overall plan, textual structures invite a certain reading of the text. James Phelan criticised the

first edition of *Reading Autobiography* for leaving out the concept of the implied author in the typology of autobiographical 'I's:

If we accept the claims that the historical I is unknown and inaccessible, and that the narrating I may adopt multiple voices, we also must recognize that there is another, knowable agent involved: the one who determines which voices the narrator adopts on which occasions – and the one who also provides some guidance about how we should respond to those voices. That agent, as I argued in the previous chapter, is the implied author. (2005: 68–9)

In the second edition of their book Smith and Watson respond to Phelan's suggestion, but their defence is incomprehensible to me (cf. 2010: 76), so I attempt to clarify the problem using Barbara Dancygier's terms. The fragmentation of the self into various identities and voices is an expected result of decompression. To make one's experiences vicariously accessible to the reading public, autobiographers have to arrange the material and dramatise scenes. They make use of all the narrative resources that media provide to set up an experience for the readers and guide them in their construction of a consistent narrative. Since readers cannot keep track of more than a few perspectives at the same time, they begin to compress the viewpoints into tentative gestalten, first for single narrative spaces and, progressively, for the entire text. Since narrative art is a guided experience, it is likely that readers arrive at a general understanding of the text that resembles the autobiographer's initial intentions, but other aspects of a reading remain idiosyncratic experiences with the text.

Versaci argues that "comics are capable of demonstrating a broader and more flexible range of first-person narration than is possible in prose" (2007: 36; see also 38–44), for which Duncan, Smith and Levitz provide an overview of possibilities:

The Narrating I tells the story to the reader. This is most often achieved through "voice-over" narration that appears in captions. (However, as noted above, captions are not always synonymous with a narrator.) Sometimes, the Narrating I addresses the reader through word balloons emanating from an avatar that steps in and out of the diegesis (the world of the story), sometimes representing the protagonist of the story and sometimes representing the narrator of the story [...]. In other instances the narration in word balloons is spoken by a separate avatar (distinct from the protagonist avatar). This avatar is usually drawn to look like the memoirist looks at the time of the creation of the memoir ... (2015: 239)

To illustrate how this diversity manifests in autobiographical texts, I discuss some sequences from Harvey Pekar and Dean Haspiel's *The Quitter*. The very first page suggests a chance encounter with the 'real' Harvey Pekar, who somewhat reluctantly turns to the readers and begins his narration in speech balloons

(cf. 2005: n. p. [p. 1]). The fourth panel also introduces a frame *behind* Harvey that works as a metaphor on a number of levels. It marks an important step in Harvey's transformation from a real person into the narrating 'voice' of this comic book – despite the fact that, ontologically, there is no difference between the four panels. Readers can see that the lower part of his body is still there, but outside the frame, which demonstrates how narratives rely on selection (repertoire) and foregrounding. His stance, verbal behaviour and eye-contact with readers signal his willingness to take on the role of narrator – after some hesitation in the third panel, which is still unframed. From the next page onwards, verbal narration moves to captions, until Harvey reappears and comments on the events in person. These metanarrative passages show an intrusive narrator whose appearance and form of address remind readers of who he is, which creates a translinear series (braiding). However, these panels do not only provide verbal commentary, but interact visually with neighbouring panels that belong to the ongoing narrative (cf. 2005: n. p. [47/4–6]). One double page shows the narrator looking backwards – literally – as a metaphor for remembering past events, which appear as unframed panels inside a black space that represents the canvas of memories inside of Harvey's head (cf. 2005: n. p. [p. 36]). It is important to distinguish between Pekar and Haspiel as the auto/biographers (implied authors), the older Harvey as the (intrusive) verbal narrator and various younger Harveys as the experiencing 'I's.

Since I consider the ideological 'I' (cf. Smith & Watson 2010: 76–8) to be part of the implied author, the last autobiographical 'I' is the "narrated 'I'", which is "the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (2010: 73). Smith and Watson insist that – in the case of young Frankie in *Angela's Ashes* (cf. McCourt 1999: 19), for example – the "child narrating 'I' of the storytelling is an 'I' constructed by the experienced narrating 'I' to represent the meaning of that narrated child's experience" (2010: 75). In other words, the younger selves are *personae* in the original Latin sense of the word (*personare* – to sound through): characters in a stage play through which the implied author can speak. The same applies to the verbal narrator, of course. In Pekar and Haspiel's *The Quitter*, the older Harvey is still just a character that has been created by the auto/biographers for specific narrative purposes. The narrated I, the protagonist, is not a single entity, but a whole series of younger selves with their own experiences and points of view (cf. Hatfield 2005: 126). Rocco Versaci identifies "five versions of Art" in *MAUS* (cf. 2007: 87) and Mitchell "three figurations" (2010: 263) of Craig in *Carnet de Voyage*. Both scholars use viewpoint compression to explain how readers arrive at an understanding of the autobiographical I. Versaci proposes that we "assimilate



these different images insofar as we recognize that they are versions of the same person" (2007: 87) and Mitchell argues that "we simultaneously follow the progress of each figuration, *and* conjoin all representations into a composite, layered version of Thompson's self" (2010: 263).

These characters are "enactors" (Emmott 2004: 182) that autobiographers employ to perform particular roles in the staged recreations of their lives: "As a narrative progresses, time is always moving onwards and new events are occurring, so the character representation is constantly changing, with new past 'personalities' being constantly added" (2004: 181). Duncan, Smith and Levitz equally define the function of characters as actors in a play: "The Experiencing I is the protagonist of the narrative. In comics, the Experiencing I is represented by an autobiographical avatar, a performance of an earlier self enacted by dialogue, thoughts, attitude, and, in comics, an image that appears on the page or screen" (2015: 238). However, it would be a misconception to associate these scenes with naturalism. They are highly metaphorical and condensed, with enactors/avatars frequently communicating and emphasising key themes through body codes. Cartoonists tend to embrace "a less literal, more expressionistic, presentation of one's past self" (2015: 239; see also 256–7) to facilitate legibility. This is going to be a major focus of the next chapter, so I turn my attention to the question whether readers experience these younger selves as separate entities, which takes us to the importance of focalisation in comics – for the last time.

In contrast to prose fiction, focalisation in comics is always multi-layered and overlapping (cf. Mikkonen 2008: 312; 2012: 71; 2017: 154). This has to do with the interplay of verbal and visual signs, but also with the question of what critics consider to be relevant forms of (subjective) perception: do they limit it to a literal point of view or perspective, which is called 'ocularisation' (cf. Jost 2006; Mikkonen 2017: 157–60) or "optical perspectivation" (Horstkotte & Petri 2011: 331), or should other sense impressions, emotional responses, cognition, ideological orientation and value judgements be included as equally relevant? (cf. 2011: 331) To what extent is ocularisation related to and representative of subjectivity? As we have seen, Alan Palmer uses the term "aspectuality" (2004: 52) to cut across narratological categorisations and to foreground the perspectives of characters as unified wholes that find expression across the whole spectrum of verbal and visual signs in comics, often in combination.

The problem with a traditional narratological approach to focalisation is perfectly captured by Horstkotte and Pedri: "Indeed, for signals of focalization to be registered by readers, there has to exist an aspectuality-neutral background against which the subjective inflection is introduced" (2011: 335). They associate the neutral or impersonal background with the narrator, which does not make

sense in the context of autobiography, as the verbal narrator is neither neutral nor the only channel through which the story is conveyed. James Phelan's argument in favour of acknowledging an implied author in Frank McCourt's *Angela Ashes* addresses the problem that the narrator is as unreliable as the protagonist (cf. 2005: 67), which makes it impossible to define a neutral ground. As soon as Horstkotte and Pedri present their first case study, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, they run into the same problems:

The protagonist's confusions, interpretive difficulties, and mental turmoil are signaled both verbally and visually throughout the graphic narrative. Although undoubtedly indicating focalization, it is not always immediately obvious whether the mental processing originates within the experiencing or the narrating-I, whether it constitutes a character-bound or a narratorial focalization. At least in part, this ambiguity results from its non-realist, cartoony style that largely eschews perspectival construction in favor of two-dimensional surface impressions, thereby challenging assumptions about the primacy of optical perspectivation in visual focalization. Rather than relying on the perspectival construction of panels to individuate sources of focalization, Satrapi often uses visual metaphor and symbolism to indicate an aspectuality that is not always easily attributable to a specific character. (2011: 337)

I find Horstkotte and Pedri's failure to apply narratological concepts to autographics illuminating, as they manage to demonstrate that comics is a different medium altogether, that there is no neutral ground and that in many cases it is not even possible to ascribe focalisation to a single agent. Subjectivity, like salience or modality, is a scale and not a dichotomy between subjective and objective. It is interesting that the title of their essay is "Focalization in Graphic Narrative", but that their first two examples are *Persepolis* and *MAUS*, which represent a genre rather than a form. They struggle with the fact that Art Spiegelman appears on all levels of narrative transmission, but they do not keep the various roles sufficiently apart: "While Vladek functions as the intradiegetic verbal narrator, Artie is both the extradiegetic verbal narrator (in text boxes) of the 1980s storyline and the visual narrator – i.e., drawer – of the extra- and intradiegetic narratives" (2011: 339). If author, narrator and character are identical, as they suggest, and Spiegelman mediates his father's narration of what he had experienced, then the "familiar problem of distinguishing between character-bound and narratorial focalization in graphic narrative (or, in the case of graphic memoir, between the focalization of an experiencing-I and that of a narrating-I) reaches a new level of complexity" (2011: 340). Spiegelman is the auto/biographer who created and published *MAUS* in the 1980s and early 90s. Artie is both a verbal narrator and a character in the narrative, just like his father Vladek. In their roles as narrators and characters they are Spiegelman's

creations and *personae*. Everything we read is filtered through Spiegelman's consciousness at that point in his life, even his father's narration, which is based on audio recordings. The 'meganarrator' who produced both words and visuals can be reconstructed based on the traces he left in the book, including his choice of style and depicting Jews as mice, but he is not a definable entity in the book, despite the fact that his impact on focalisation is huge. The implied author is the only way to acknowledge this presence, but also readers' individual constructions of it.

Cartooning grants a lot more flexibility, especially in terms of experimentation and exaggeration, of which auto/biographers make ample use. In visual terms there is no objective world against which the subjectivity of the characters can be foregrounded, as the externalisation of emotions, thoughts and attitudes is seamlessly integrated into the overall design. In *Blankets*, bullies push Craig down a steep slope – head first – until he hits the ground about two to three meters below them (cf. 2007: 23–4). Instead of dying or becoming quadriplegic, he has a nose-bleed. His father does not literally grow to three times his usual size when he gets angry (cf. 2007: 13) and Craig does not shrink when he feels ashamed (cf. 2007: 202–7). There are no monsters in the cubby hole (cf. 2007: 16), Craig's head does not dissolve when he has an identity crisis (cf. 2007: 59), and there are no sharks coming out of his mouth (cf. 2007: 60). All of these scenes are part of the main 'objective' narrative and not marked as a dream sequence or altered state. The subjectivity of experience that critics would like to ascribe to a character is as much a narrative strategy of autobiographers who metaphorically express how they think they felt at the time. To cut a long argument short: comics persistently sacrifice objectivity in favour of emotional truth. Image schemas and conceptual metaphors play a central role in externalising inner states. Readers simply accept the fact that the characters in Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* have animal faces or that half of the time we see characters against a blank background. Foregrounded subjectivity is an auto/biographer's acknowledgement of specific sources or a deliberate attribution of consciousness. When Artie confronts his father Vladek with doubts about what he is narrating (cf. e.g. 1997: 210, 228), readers are presented with two clearly marked subjective views, but this neither clarifies the truth-value of Vladek's statement, nor does it prove the objectivity of everything else they have witnessed. In the end, markers of subjectivity belong to the larger operation of building a relationship with the readers and gaining their trust over time.

Another attempt to grasp focalisation in comics is Mikkonen's exclusive focus on ocularisation, to make a finer-grained analysis possible and "to contribute to a more rigorous visual narratology" (2012: 72). At first, Mikkonen states that he intends to "discuss these aspects in relation to storytelling in a holistic sense,

as part of the interplay between different visual and verbal semiotic resources contributing to the narrative” (2012: 72). This is immediately followed by a qualification: “However, I must make one further note: In what follows, I will be operating with a consciously limited notion of focalisation, restricted to questions of access to perception in strict sensory bounds” (2012: 72). Mikkonen is aware of the fact that an aesthetic reading is incompatible with the kind of analysis he pursues, which is one of the key arguments I have been making throughout. Gérard Genette was one of the first who proposed that narration should be distinguished from focalisation (cf. 1983: 186), to “avoid the too specifically visual connotations of the terms *vision*, *field*, and *point of view*” (1983: 189). Therefore, he describes ‘internal focalisation’ as “*Internal analysis of events*” early in the chapter on perspective, to counteract any wrong associations with the question “*who sees?*” (1983: 186). Later he declares that internal focalisation is only fully realised in interior monologue (cf. 1983: 193), which is a rendering of characters’ thoughts and feelings rather than of their vision. It is often claimed that Genette later “redefined” (Mikkonen 2012: 73) the concept, but I believe that he only specified what he had meant in the first place. Following Mikkonen, focalisation is reduced to a simple relation in the following paragraphs: types of shots and subjectivity.

Mikkonen argues that “graphic storytelling, when it comes to the visual perspective of the narrative, uses an extremely rich and complex scale of potential intermediate positions between the subjective or internal focalization on the one hand, and clearly non-character bound perspective or external focalization on the other hand” (2012: 83). He takes a list of shot types that are familiar from film studies and looks at their use in comics, together with their potential to express subjectivity. He starts with what seems to be a safe bet, that “the point of view shot (POV) is the most internal and subjective perspective in film narratives. It assumes the viewer’s position; the image frame functions as the representation of someone’s gaze and a field of vision” (2012: 84). Interestingly, the transmedial narratologist Jan-Noël Thon argues that the POV shot “still represents an intersubjectively valid version of the storyworld, albeit from the specific spatial position and resulting ‘visual perspective’ of a particular character. Hence, [. . . it] may be considered the least subjective of the pictorial strategies of subjective representation” (2014: 73; see also Wilson 2006: 84–5). Thon believes that subjectivity is tied to “the consciousness of the characters” (2014: 67), which explains why the POV shot has little to offer: Viewers do not learn anything about characters’ thoughts and feelings when they are looking away from them. This can be remedied with the help of a “perception shot” (Mikkonen 2012: 86), which is a specific type of POV shot that also “reveals the mental condition of

someone looking at something” (2012: 86). Then follows George Wilson who states that “subjective enhancements and distortions of the character’s field of vision” (2006: 85) can turn a point-of-view shot into a subjective shot, which means that it visualises *how* the world is perceived in addition to *what* a character sees. In other words, it combines internal ocularisation with internal cognitive focalisation.

Next in line is “the gaze shot” (Mikkonen 2012: 84), which shows a character looking at something. This is the exact opposite of the POV shot: we now have access to characters’ faces and may even discern a reaction, but we have no idea what they are looking at. The “eyeline shot/match cut” (2012: 84) – a combination of the first two – provides the only meaningful way of employing these shots, as viewers need to see who looks at what and how they react to it. In this sense the ‘gaze shot’ should better be a close-up or medium shot combined with a “reaction shot” (2012: 85) to grant the audience access to the characters’ facial expressions and feelings. The “over-the-shoulder shot” (2012: 84) places viewers somewhere near the character, so that they get to see parts of the character’s body and what he or she is looking at. Depending on the utilisation of body codes, which may be discernible from behind a character’s back, this might reveal more about a character’s interaction with the environment than a POV shot.

The most complicated of these shots is what Wilson calls an ‘impersonal subjectively inflected shot’ (cf. 2006: 87) which combines a perception shot with external ocularisation focusing on the character who is experiencing the situation. While we look directly at a character, his or her subjective experience of the scene is visualised, so that we find a combination of external ocularisation with internal focalisation. Jan-Noël Thon calls such a “subjective representation, in which the pictorial representation simulates (quasi-)perceptual aspects of a character’s consciousness without also simulating his or her spatial position, ‘(quasi-)perceptual overlay’” (2014: 75). When we see Craig Thompson’s brother Phil staring in utter horror into the cubby hole (cf. 2007: 16), and having his fears represented as monsters at the same time, we get a perfect example of ‘(quasi-)perceptual overlay’. Again, what is easy to read, is hard to describe in technical terms. While the layering of focalisation is treated as a rare exception in narratology, it is a widespread phenomenon in comics.

There is an obvious mismatch between how (transmedial) narratology approaches comics and how readers understand them. This is perfectly encapsulated in the following statement by Horstkotte and Pedri: “if readers fail to ask who focalizes each of the repetitions [of the initial murder scene in *Watchmen*], then a crucial dimension of the story is lost on them. Focalization is the narrative tool that makes it possible for readers to experience what the storyworld is

and feels like, thus ensuring their engagement with it” (2011: 349). First of all, they confuse aesthetic and efferent reading or, more specifically, transaction and narratological analysis. Then they wrongly assume that narratological analysis has to come first for readers to enjoy a narrative and have any experience at all. Tied to that is the implicit assumption that only an elaborate study of the text can guarantee a ‘proper’ understanding, which propagates a deficit model of reading. In this sense, common readers always fail to live up to the expectations of narratologists. However, it is a perfectly acceptable reading in the case of *Watchmen* that we first do not know who killed the Comedian and later on we do, because the murderer confesses his deed (cf. Moore & Gibbons 2005: chapter xi, 24–6). My criticism is not directed against narratology itself, to be perfectly clear, but against the idea that it is closely tied to reading and dominates readers’ experiences of texts.

Returning to my example from *Blankets*, even a small child can understand this situation of being afraid of sleeping in a dark room in which monsters may hide under the bed. This feeling is instantly relatable and accessible through personal experience or countless narratives that foreground how young children are afraid of the dark. If critics apply theories of focalisation to comics, it is important not to lose track of the larger picture, as an analysis of single panels and their visuals can become very elaborate without much added benefit. Mikkonen’s list of shots demonstrates that most of them only make sense in combination and that the context clarifies many issues that seem unnecessarily complex in isolation. He ultimately concedes that the study of particulars does not lead to the expected results:

In comics, therefore, the processing of narrative information involves paying attention not just to the distinction between *Who perceives?* and *Who narrates?* but to the interplay between a narrative voice, a verbal focaliser, a centre of visual perception (the visual focaliser), a centre of attention (the visual focalized), and the image field seen in the picture frame. We have to take into consideration the multiple ways in which the textual element (by which I mean written and drawn language) and visual focalisation interpenetrate each other and thus allow a multiplication of perspectives by way of typography, page and panel setup, and other means. (2017: 154)

Despite this intricate layering, Mikkonen believes that we get “a sense of the prevailing frame of perception” by assuming a “global frame of narration that enables us to estimate the meaning and importance of the alternating perspectives at the micro-level of the narrative” (2012: 71). In other words, unless a specific point-of-view is explicitly foregrounded, we do not even notice the layers of aspectuality as separate, but ‘estimate the meaning’ by blending them into a single perspective, a process that Dancygier calls ‘viewpoint compression’. In contrast to the

auto/biographer who engages in an act of self-exploration and decompression, readers have to synthesise a viewpoint that allows them to make sense of individual scenes by compressing the aspectualities of different characters and scenes into a superordinate viewpoint. Following Palmer I would argue that characters, most obviously in auto/biography, play a central role in narratives and that Iser's gestalt-forming involves a synthesis of aspectualities.

Mikkonen is clearly torn between aesthetic and efferent reading: as an avid reader of comics he experiences flow and the ease of reading, while he finds mind-boggling complexities as an analytical narratologist. At one point he asks: "when or why do we stop worrying about who sees and perceives, meaning worrying about the identity of the see-er, since the question is not relevant for understanding the story?" (2012: 71). Building on Fludernik's 'natural' narratology, Mikkonen suggests that the source of the information may be less significant than what we learn about a character: "What may be much more important is how the reader, or the viewer of visual narratives, gets optimal information about a character's consciousness, his or her motivations, thoughts and perceptions" (2012: 74; see also 2017: 153). As I tried to illustrate with a reading of Phil's emotional state in part 4, there is an enormous gap between an understanding of what is happening in a scene as compared to an analysis of how this is technically encoded. In educational settings, narratology ceases to be helpful as a practical tool in support of readers' transactions with a text, when it invites a classification of visible phenomena that runs counter to a holistic understanding. At the same time, it *is* a valid task to hand out comics pages and have students highlight perspectives and selves in different colours to illustrate the fact that we experience them as separate entities and 'voices', and that there may be a tension between some of these elements. In most cases, basic thoughts, emotions and attitudes should be easily recognisable from body codes, situational contexts and direct speech.

## 5.5 Embodiment & Enaction

In the second chapter of *Reading Autobiography*, entitled "Autobiographical Subjects", Smith and Watson define six "concepts helpful for understanding the sources and dynamic processes of autobiographical subjectivity" (2010: 21), which are memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment and agency (cf. 2010: 21–2). Out of these, embodiment seems to be a natural choice for a discussion of autographics. Confirming this prioritisation, El Refaie dedicates a long chapter to "Picturing Embodied Selves" (cf. 2010: 49–92), as readers of autobiographical comics cannot escape the necessity to read bodies as major carriers of

literal and metaphorical meaning. Smith and Watson address the misconception that “subjectivity and life writing have little to do with the material body”; on the contrary, “life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge” and “autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects” (2010: 49). Smith and Watson’s other five categories are completely dependent on the physical existence of an autobiographical subject in the world. The body constitutes an archive of memories and experiences, retained in multiple ways, a source and contested site of identity, and the instrument of agency in one’s social and physical environment. In this chapter I am especially interested in three particular contexts: the communicative potential of bodies in graphic memoirs; a fresh look at dramatisation and acting out scenes from the past; and the special case of illness and disability. Before I engage with these more comics-related issues, it is necessary to briefly contextualise my reading of characters in a broader (cognitive) context.

In their introduction to *Characters in Fictional Worlds*, Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider provide a helpful overview of how characters and their (re)presentations have been conceptualised in various narrative media (cf. 2010). They define four basic approaches – hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist/semiotic and cognitive, but the overall aim of this collection is to bridge the gulf between the four and work towards a more integrated approach (cf. 2010: 5). All three scholars underline the centrality of characters in contrast to fictional worlds theories, in which they are just “component parts” of story worlds (2010: 7), and to plot-oriented approaches, where characters are reduced to mere functions (cf. 2010: 21–3). They also stress thematic concerns over action/plot: “In many artworks and media products, it is not action that is the organizing principle, but a theme or an idea, and the characters in these texts are determined by that theme or idea” (2010: 46). This is especially important in the context of autobiography, as we have seen.

Eder, Jannidis and Schneider also embrace Catherine Emmott’s theory of contextual frames (cf. 2010: 28–9), which is a pleasant surprise, as it requires a departure from more traditional narratological approaches. It means that readers learn about characters through their entanglements and social interactions. This is clearly motivated by the broader scope of the book, which includes visual narrative media. Accordingly, they have to work with an understanding of ‘characterisation’ that relies on various means of (re)presentation (cf. 2010: 30–4). They even argue that it should be “re-conceptualised as a process to which both the text and the recipient contribute” (2010: 34). This combination of a semiotic and a cognitive approach is very welcome. They are more reluctant, however, to support the hermeneutic approach, which propagates a reading of characters as if



they were real people. Eder, Jannidis and Schneider find the confusion of reality and art suspicious (cf. 2010: 11, 16), which they express in the following passage:

The differences between characters and real persons come to the fore if we systematically consider the ways we understand and talk about them. Theories of reception stress the fact that we understand characters on several levels: Viewers, readers, listeners or users do not only grasp a character's corporeality, mind, and sociality in the (fictional) world. They are building on those processes to understand the character's meanings as sign or symbol, and to reflect on the character's connections to its creators, textual structures, ludic functions, etc. (2010: 15)

While the overdetermination and artful arrangement of textual elements is undeniable, I would still argue that readers understand social encounters in narrative fiction by relying on the skills they have acquired in real-life situations, which includes body codes that are highly relevant in comics. I fully agree with the observation that symbolism and metaphor build on these basic processes and image schemas.

In his article "Encountering People through Literature" (2008) Herbert Grabes makes a valid point that most of what he said about the experience of literary characters in 1978 under the influence of reader-response criticism is now presented as brand-new insights under the label of cognitive literary studies (cf. 2008: 126, 131, 133). Grabes promotes a concept of art as experience that corresponds to John Dewey's notion that art and life should not exist in separate spheres (cf. 1978: 407). Contrary to most narratologists, he cherishes literary critics' and general readers' ability to experience characters on stage or in films without analysing what they see. In other words, he defends aesthetic reading against narratological approaches that treat works of art as sources of information (cf. 2008: 137). Instead of slotting new data into mental models (cf. Schneider 2001: 620; Eder, Jannidis & Schneider 2010: 35), Grabes conceives of the reading process as a form of synthesis (cf. 1978: 420–1), which is another word for gestalt-forming or blending. Grabes is unique in this way as he witnessed the heyday of reader-response criticism in his own academic career and later on read all the major works of cognitive literary studies (cf. 2008: 138–9). It is not surprising that he finds many parallels.

Commenting on Palmer's fictional minds, he regrets the fact that "the bodies of literary characters [...] are practically absent in all the studies of literary character based on the cognitive-science paradigm" (2008: 136). Grabes makes a strong argument in favour of embodiment, as "it must not be forgotten that in the life-world we depend absolutely on what we get via the senses and that our cognitive strategies have been developed accordingly" (2008: 136). Since he

draws close parallels between people and literary characters, he claims the same level of embodiment for the latter: “Like people in the life-world they normally have both body and mind, an outer and an inner life, and literary texts provide information about the one or the other or usually both” (2008: 125). This returns us full circle to the question of embodiment in graphic memoirs.

Elisabeth El Refaie observes that “the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one’s self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity” (2012: 4). The body becomes a complex sign system that can be flexibly used for various purposes. The most mundane and obvious one is a resemblance to the author, which El Refaie lists as one of many strategies of authentication (cf. 2012: 147). Secondly, for the “Character as a Means of Narrative Continuity” (cf. Mikkonen 2017: 90–108) and Thierry Groensteen’s ‘iconic solidarity’ (cf. 2007: 17–20; 2013: 12, 33–5), they have to look sufficiently similar in adjacent panels, but also across the entire network. At the same time, we have already seen anthropomorphic animals standing in for auto/biographical selves or Thompson’s willingness to sacrifice verisimilitude in favour of pure emotional expression. Charles Hatfield recognises this disparity between authentication and exaggeration:

Despite the implied claim to truth that anchors the genre, the autobiographer’s craft necessarily includes exaggeration, distortion, and omission. Such tendencies become doubly obvious in the cartoon world of comics, in which the intimacy of an articulated first-person narrative may mix with the alienating graphic excess of caricature. One may fairly ask how a cartoonist can use these disparate tools without seeming to falsify his or her experience. If autobiography promiscuously blends fact and fiction, memory and artifice, how can comics creators uphold Pekar’s ethic of authenticity? How can they achieve the *effect* of “truthfulness?” (2005: 114)

What Hatfield is interested in is how the interiority of characters, which is crucial to the genre, can be expressed through the exteriority of cartoon drawings that are far from realistic. Hatfield’s phrasing is interesting in this context: “We see how the cartoonist envisions him or herself; the inward vision takes on an outward form” (2005: 114). The metaphor of the self-image becomes literal in comics. What readers observe in autobiographical comics is not what happened, but how the autographer understands his or her younger self at a particular point in time. Instead of a photorealistic representation we are confronted with a visual externalisation of how the autographer – at the time of writing/drawing – feels about a situation in the past. This complicated ontological status of the images is not automatically transparent to readers, despite the fact that the panels cannot be documentary in any straightforward sense. Since the style – of which cartooning is a major aspect – expresses the attitude and the feelings of the autographer

towards the past, more than the attempt to present ‘the truth’ (cf. Etter 2017), readers are not meant to understand visualisation at face value: it is all expression, concept & design. This includes the self-image of the cartoonist, which can turn into “self-caricature” and “parody” (Hatfield 2005: 114), a strategy to distance oneself from the younger self or to allow for greater openness or a confessional style (e.g. Justin Green’s *Binky Brown*) through exaggeration.

The worldview of the autobiographical subject, often a confused young naïf, contrasts with the more mature and comprehensive, or simply more jaded, view of the author. In comics, this sense of *otherness* may be enacted by the tension between representational codes: the abstract or discursive (the Word) versus the concrete or visual (the Picture). Such verbal-visual tension opens up a space of opportunity, one in which pictorial metaphors can multiply promiscuously, offering a surreal or wildly subjective vision to counterbalance the truth claims that certify the text as autobiographical. Thus bizarre, “unrealistic,” and expressionistic images may coexist with a scrupulously factual account of one’s life. The resultant ironies confer an authenticity that is emotional rather than literal: that of the present talking to the past. (2005: 128)

In most cases, however, the bodies of the younger selves become highly expressive signs, “a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity” (2005: 115). Hatfield’s persistent use of the present tense reminds us of the slippage of tenses in autographics: readers are witnessing how the autographer felt about what had happened to his or her younger selves. Comics is a perfect medium to foreground these slippages of autobiography and turn them into advantages rather than problems. While prose autobiography may belie the heterogeneity of autobiographical writing through the all-encompassing ‘I’, Hatfield chooses to stress the fault lines of autographics:

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. [...] to tell a story of yourself in comics is *to seek expression through outward impressions*, because comics tend to present rather than narrate – or, at times, alternately present *and* narrate. Comic art’s presentational (as opposed to discursive) mode appears to problematize, or at least add a new wrinkle to, the ex/impression dichotomy. (2005: 115)

The inner lives of characters have to be externalised and dramatised, so that readers can draw conclusions about the complexities of a person’s life through the metaphoric devices of comics.

Concerning emotions, we had a look at Ed Tan's distinction between basic emotions (cf. Ekman 2007) which are "relatively clear-cut and straightforward" (2001: 35) and Art Spiegelman's work in *MAUS* that allows for an "ambiguity of facial expression" that "invites the readers to use their imagination and delve deeper into the character's appraisal of the situation" (2001: 40). In his "Essay on Physiognomy" Rodolphe Töpffer speaks of "non-permanent signs" that "are always fixed and reliable indicators of any given expression – laughter, tears, fright, or whatever" (1965: 17), in contrast to the faithful rendering of people's physical features which may be deceiving (cf. 1965: 19, 30). Töpffer was interested in a science of physiognomy and a language of body codes (cf. 1965: 16). In Chapter 2 of *Making Comics*, "Stories for Humans" (cf. 2006: 58–127), Scott McCloud comes very close to providing such a vocabulary and grammar of drawn facial expressions. He starts with six paradigmatic emotions (cf. 2006: 83), demonstrates how their intensity can be visually increased, for example ranging from concern via the intermediary steps anxiety and fear to the highest intensity of terror (cf. 2006: 84), until he combines these primary into secondary emotions, such as joy and surprise into amazement (cf. 2006: 85). McCloud discusses their potential to become a language (cf. 2006: 88), but he concludes that they only make sense in the context of specific scenes and as idiosyncratic expressions of individuals (cf. 2006: 89).

In *AS Film Studies: The Essential Introduction* (2008) Casey Benyahia, Freddie Gaffney and John White provide a list of important body codes that is simple enough for the classroom, but names specific aspects that students can concentrate on when discussing the entanglement of characters in particular scenes:

#### **The range of body codes**

Actors are able to generate audience response to their performance in a whole range of subtle ways. A range of ten body codes have been identified:

- direct bodily contact;
- the proximity of one character to another (or proxemics);
- the orientation of one to another (i.e. the extent to which characters stand with their bodies turned towards or away from each other);
- general appearance of individuals (e.g. tall and thin, or short and fat);
- head movements (e.g. nodding or shaking of the head);
- facial expressions;
- gestures (or kinesics);
- body posture;
- eye movement or contact;
- aspects of speech, such as pitch, stress, tone, volume, accent, speech errors (all of which are termed paralinguistic codes). (2008: 26)

This may not be spectacular, systematic or very precise, but a good enough starting point for a discussion of acting and the details of scenes in films and comics. These body codes are a semiotic resource that can take on the full range of signs from indexical via iconic to symbolic (cf. Klar 2011). Many of the body codes listed by Benyahia, Gaffney and White have a metaphorical or symbolic function, such as great distance for estrangement, avoiding eye contact for shame or shyness etc.

Another way of looking at bodies in comics is their correspondence to or subversion of cultural stereotypes. So far, we have discussed depictions of bodies as strategies of authentication, in service of narrative continuity, or as externalisations of inner states, but they can also be read in the context of identity concepts, self-representation and judging people based on first impressions. El Refaie highlights this cultural dimension, especially concerning dress codes, and begins her discussion of embodiment with a scene from Bechdel's *Fun Home*, in which young Alison sees the first woman in her life in men's clothes and with a short haircut (cf. 2012: 49–50; Bechdel 2007: 117–19). Liz Prince turns “clothing choices” (cf. 2014: 43) into a central element of *Tomboy*, from her refusal to wear dresses in the very first scene of the comic to the epilogue, where she is addressed by a paperboy as “sir” (2014: 254/3). While she is taken aback at first, her reaction changes in the very last panel of the book: “I’ve still got it” (2014: 255/3). In these two examples, personal identity is inseparable from socio-political concerns, which can be interpreted as ideological from a more conservative point of view. Instead of claiming these identities in a swift act of appropriation, readers witness their gradual development as an ongoing process of negotiation with parents, peers and strangers. The narrative format of autographics makes alternative lifestyles accessible and worth debating in class, as the conflicts and arguments for and against are directly addressed.

The same cultural reading can be applied to the gaze in autographics (cf. El Refaie 2012: 73–84): how does the autobiographer view/depict other characters? In my discussion of *Blankets* in part 4 I pointed out that the male gaze is very evident throughout the comic. This can be ‘naturalised’ as a male teenager’s point of view and an infatuation with his first love, an impression that Thompson wanted to recreate, but it is still a highly foregrounded aspect of the comic. Although Raina’s perspective and family situation can be reconstructed from the middle chapters of the book, this takes much more effort than following Craig’s perspective. Since Thompson did not ask for the woman’s permission to ‘use’ her like this in his thinly disguised ‘novel’, the problem of objectification may be even more pressing.

El Refaie discusses two autobiographical books that promote beauty ideals and specific body images that some readers may find problematic. In *The Big Skinny: How I Changed My Fattitude* Carol Lay foregrounds the “beautiful, healthy body [. . .] as a sign of a person’s discipline and self-control” (2012: 84–5) and Marisa Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* treats cancer as a threat to the author’s beauty ideals and life-style, rather than to her life (cf. 2012: 85–9). In both cases, what should be concerns about health turn into concerns over attractiveness. On the cover, Lay portrays herself in a tight red evening gown in a triumphant posture to celebrate her self-control and beauty. In the book she explains that “at age 50, after being at least 30 pounds too heavy for most of my life, I realized that to manage my weight I needed to budget my calories and walk or work out every day” (2008: 5/1). Considering that the book was published in 2008, when she was 56, her cartoon self shows an unnaturally thin woman in her late 20s or early 30s (cf. 2008: 3/1, 5/1, 6/5, 14/5–6, 33/6, 34/5, 38/4–5 etc.). The comic documents a life-long obsession with food, overweight, shame and diets, which I find important as a counter-reading to the foregrounded triumphs of *The Big Skinny*, and Lay’s self-stylisation only makes sense against such a background. Thus, autobiographical writing/drawing is not just a personal act, but “a profoundly social and political activity” (El Refaie 2012: 73). In a medium that asks for perpetual self-representation, cartoonists have to navigate and reconcile social stereotypes, self-image, metaphors, strategies of authentication and the necessary legibility of bodies in transaction with their environments.

Based on Amy Spaulding’s differentiation between picture books and comics in *The Page as a Stage Set* (cf. 1995), I have repeatedly argued that comics show a certain affinity to the dramatic arts. This may seem more obvious in the case of superheroes and film, but I would argue that alternative and autobiographical comics reveal a comparable level of theatricality, e.g. through a frequent minimalism of scenes and pure ‘acting’. Thus, characters’ voices, stances and points of view become embodied, a concept I have traced from enactivism and cognitive linguistics via comics studies to autographics. Relying on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, a seminal study in enactivism, Horstkotte and Pedri propose an interrelated web of human minds and material anchors that generate life narratives through direct transactions:

This tangling of subjective experience within the material world of objects enabling that experience, within an intersubjective context, and within the physical, perceptual, and cognitive conditions set by the human body is foregrounded in graphic memoir, both because graphic memoir often explicitly works against a mind-body split, and because the medium-specific pictoriality of graphic memoir highlights the physicality of bodies and objects. (2017: 81)

They speak of “entangled bodies”, which emphasises “the view of selfhood as existing in and being shaped through its relationship with others” (2017: 85), but also as developing within specific contextual frames. Experiences are embodied and not simply memory traces, which means that a return to scenes of the past requires an embodied approach, albeit as an artistic re-creation. Paul John Eakin argues “that ‘self’ is not only reported but performed, certainly by the autobiographer as she [Mary Karr] writes and perhaps to a surprising degree by the reader as he reads. [. . .] ‘Doing consciousness’ – this emphasis on autobiography as performance, as action, will be my theme in the rest of this book” (Eakin 2008: 84–5). As I stated above, the lives of many auto(bio)graphers are not reshaped and streamlined to follow a clear teleological path, one of the major points of criticism against traditional auto/biography, but writers/cartoonists ‘do consciousness’ in the form of autobiographical work, finding out how they understand themselves. In this sense, the comics autobiography is often a documentation of the process – a making-of – rather than the end result. Autobiographers present themselves as readers of their own lives, which means that readers are invited to look *with* them as much as they get a chance to look *at* them.

One of the more surprising aspects of Bechdel’s work on *Fun Home* is that she literally enacted the entire graphic novel. This is how Hillary Chute comments on this process:

If we see a kind of compulsive reproduction of particular textual objects like letters and photos – a going back into the past to *re-mark* archival documents with her own body – we can also note a literal reenactment in production. Bechdel did five or six successive sketches for each panel in the book. In addition, for every pose of every panel in the entire book – which comes out to roughly one thousand panels – Bechdel [. . .] created a reference shot by posing herself for each person in the frame with her digital camera [. . .]. In the cases where she already had a photographic reference shot from her parents’ collection, she yet posed herself in a new photo. In one panel, say, depicting a classroom of children sitting at desks, Bechdel posed for every child. In this way, Bechdel created for *Fun Home* a shadow archive of the archive of photographs and other documents at the book’s center.” (2010: 200)

This may seem like a monumental task, but in the interview with Chute Bechdel comments: “It didn’t take as long as you would think. In fact, it expedited matters, because I could draw more quickly, once I had these images” (Chute & Bechdel 2006: 1010). Through embodiment, Bechdel made sense of the scenes she had envisioned and thus found it easier to draw them. “Bechdel repeats her parents’ role, both at a figurative level and at a literal visual level – a physical level in space. And in her re-creation, her body is never separate from their bodies: she performs their postures, remakes the marks they made” (Chute 2010: 200). Cognition and

embodiment are not two separate things in this process, but an integrated procedure. Building scenes and (re)creating reference material by having family members and friends pose as actors is not unusual (cf. e.g. McCloud 2006: 94). In the case of autobiographical comics, a memory is a starting point at best, not an entire scene. Schacter argues that we may use our memories of a 'lifetime period' to gain access to more details: "Lifetime periods help us to find general-event knowledge and event-specific knowledge; they provide the skeletal structure of our autobiographical memories" (1996: 91). If episodic memories are not readily available, the meat on the bones has to come from creative choices.

In a narrative, scenes also have to work as scenes, not as subjective impressions of ominous emotions. They need a dramatic structure, character conflicts and foregrounding. In this context, Lisa Zunshine discusses the unique situation of 'mind-reading' in the theatre:

Theatrical performance, after all, engages our Theory of Mind in ways markedly different from those practiced by the novel, for it offers no "going behind," in [Henry] James's parlance, that is, no voiceover explaining the protagonists' states of mind (though in some plays the function of such a voiceover is assumed, to a limited degree, by a Chorus or a narrator figure). Instead, we have to construct those mental states from the observable actions and from what the protagonists choose to report to us [. . .]. Moreover, in the case of the live performance – as opposed, that is, to simply reading the text of the play – this exercise of our mind-reading capacity is crucially mediated by the physical presence of actors and thus the wealth of embodied information (or misinformation) about their characters' hidden thoughts and feelings. (2006: 23)

To a certain extent, cartoonists may rely on 'voiceover', which Bechdel does a lot, but otherwise the scenes have to be rehearsed enough to communicate directly to the audience. In "Theater and the Emotions" Noël Carroll observes that, in real life, we have to understand what the emotions that we are experiencing mean. They have to become feelings first, meaningful under the present circumstances, and through appraisals we can judge their importance in relation to our personal affairs. In the theatre, these processes are heavily guided. In absence of a narrator, actors have to rehearse scenes with great care to communicate central ideas and emotions in a readily accessible manner:

. . . in the theater, the playwright, the director, the actors, and so on have already done a great deal of the selection necessary in order to sculpt the scenes before us emotionally. Much of the selection that the emotions do for us in daily life has been done by the dramatist and the production team. That is, they have criterially *prefocused* the fictional events before us in such a way that the emotions the scene calls for – the emotions the creators of the play desire – emerge smoothly and reliably, at least in the ideal case. One might think of the criterial prefocusing here as a matter of jump-starting the audience's



emotions. The playmaking team has already foregrounded the kinds of considerations that shift us into and encourage us to enlarge the relevant emotional states.” (2015: 322)

Alan Palmer argues that the “attribution to the character by the narrator of motives, dispositions, and states of mind is at the center of the process of constructing fictional minds and is central to the reader process of comprehending texts” (2004: 137). In other words, even the most renowned writers, like Jane Austen, are very explicit about the emotional lives of their characters: “A large number of Emma’s feelings are explicitly labeled: sorrow, anger, mortification, concern, self-reproach, vexation, agitation, grief, and depression. Several conclusions can be drawn from the passage: The emotions are reported in the mode of thought report because this is the mode best suited for the presentation of emotion” (2004: 113). Palmer continues with more subtle forms of presenting social minds and emotions, but the dramatic arts not only have to externalise these processes, but make them legible through characters’ interactions with each other. In an enactivist paradigm, thoughts, intentions and feelings are closely tied and only make sense in specific contexts and transactions with the (social) environment.

At the end of this chapter, I would like to comment on the depiction of (physical/mental) illness and disability in autobiographical comics for three reasons: first, a surprising number of these books focus on impairments; secondly, embodiment becomes an important factor in these contexts; and, thirdly, to work against the cultural ostracism of the ill and the frail, it may be beneficial to confront students with the reality of lives that may be very different from their own. Following Drew Leder, El Refaie observes that “it is only in times of dysfunction, when we are ill, in pain, or experiencing the physical changes associated with puberty, disability, or old age, that the body forces itself into our consciousness” (2012: 61). Antonio Damasio argues that our mind is usually directed outwards, in support of our interactions with the world (cf. 2000: 28–9), and only begins to turn inwards or look for bodily signs when something is out of order. This could be understood in a literal sense, as when the body/mind fails to perform in the expected way, and/or in a metaphorical sense, when the body/mind fails to live up to the norms of social performance, regarding beauty ideals, social presence and a charming personality. Usually, the second case is not considered a (physical) disability in its own right, but it represents a social disability and leads to self-consciousness in much the same way. What unifies the two is a culturally determined concept of the body that influences our judgement of its (in)adequacy and performance: “our bodies do not constitute a pre-discursive, material reality; rather, they are constructed on the basis of social and cultural assumptions about class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, age, health, and beauty” (El

Refaie 2012: 72), often in an intersectional manner. While it would be absurd to claim that our bodies do not exist before we begin to think about them, for the purposes of autobiographical reasoning they are always already embedded in discourses. While El Refaie associates 'the gaze' with gendered bodies and beauty ideals (cf. 2012: 73–84), it plays an equally important role in all of these contexts. People begin to pay attention by looking at their own or other bodies and by commenting on their normalcy and performance, often based on standards set by the media. Eating disorders as life-threatening illnesses often start as observations about the social inadequacy of bodies. The reason why El Refaie considers *The Big Skinny* as a controversial text is the idea of pathologising bodies as abnormal and in need of attention that may be perfectly all right under different social norms. Admittedly, it is difficult to draw a clear line between beauty ideals and health risks. Since the body *and* the body image of a cancer patient dramatically change through chemotherapy, for example, the obstacles to a person's physical and/or social performances turn out to be the same thing.

Realising how many autobiographical comics focus on mental or physical illness (cf. Squier 2007; Williams 2012; Brunner 2012; Czerwicz et al. 2015; Foss et al. 2016), the question arises why such a serious topic has found a perfect match in a pop-cultural medium. Leaving aside the influence of institutions for a moment, there are three answers that have to do with the narrative potential of comics. This chapter has already demonstrated that comics grant cartoonists a great flexibility in the visualisation of physical and mental conditions that range from attempts at photorealism to pure expression in the form of symbols and visual metaphors. While medical terminology, lab reports, scans and screenings (e.g. X-rays) dominate the discourse about illness in hospitals and surgeries, the medium offers a whole range of possibilities to approach illness from very different perspectives. In contrast to the language of science, comics may deal in wishes and dreams, hopes and fears, quiet moments and emotional outbursts etc. Conceptual metaphors play an important role in getting to grips with illness and cancer in particular, which is often envisaged as a foreign invader that has to be fought back. *ILLNESS IS WAR* (cf. El Refaie 2012: 88–9) may be the most basic of these metaphors, but artists find many more ways to illustrate patients' and their relatives' changing views of the affliction.

A second reason is the medium's foregrounding of embodiment, performance and social entanglements. Patients find themselves either trapped in hospitals or returning to their former lives, facing the practical consequences of the new situation. Those who cherished their independence and carefree existence suddenly depend on the support of medical professionals, family members and friends. In *Seeds*, Ross Mackintosh illustrates this sudden intimacy very well (cf. 2011: 34



Fig. 25: *Seeds* (34). © 2011 by Ross Mackintosh. Reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

→ Fig. 25). At the same time, patients are confronted with several, often contradictory views on how they are supposed to lead their lives now. Readers bear witness to the daily challenges that living and coping with such a condition have to offer. The third reason is comics' reputation as a popular and 'fun' medium. The lives of patients are serious enough, the medical side of things is incomprehensible to lay persons and no one dares to laugh in their presence any more. The ridiculousness of cartooning may be a welcome departure for patients themselves and a more accessible medium for relatives who have to find out what their role is, how they are supposed to react and how others have dealt with a similar situation before (cf. 2011: 28 → Fig. 26).

This leads me to the institutional context. Especially in the United States, humanities departments have become attached to medical faculties to confront future doctors with alternative ways of looking at illness and disability. This is how Susan M. Squier defines their role:

Given the scale of its ambitions, perhaps it is understandable that biomedicine often seems to lose sight of the individual – not only the patient, but also the health care worker. This is where the medical humanities have played a crucial role. By introducing into the curriculum of medical schools the kinds of knowledge that cannot be reduced to scientific or quantitative terms, they have reclaimed the personal, even spiritual, aspects of illness. By reading stories, plays, and poems about medicine, medical students, physicians, and other health workers can learn new and productive perspectives on medicine. They can engage in ethical explorations of trust, responsibility, and choice; psychological explorations of the relationship between the physician or nurse and the patient or patient's family; and rhetorical analyses of the case history or patient chart revealing how important facts are obscured in the process of marking others. These new perspectives redefine what constitutes medically significant knowledge, adding to evidence-based medicine and bringing welcome attention to the personal, anecdotal, and spiritual of illness and medicine. (2007: 335)

A very popular field within the medical humanities is 'graphic medicine' (cf. Williams 2012; Czerwiec et al. 2015), which has its own websites (e.g. <https://www.graphicmedicine.org>), conferences, podcasts, book series and institutional support from a number of universities (e.g. <http://med.psu.edu/humanities>).

In educational settings, it seems highly appropriate to confront teenagers and young adults with views on human life, health and beauty that counteract dominant discourses of normativity. While some of the most interesting titles may not be the easiest to deal with in class, such as Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner's *Our Cancer Year* (cf. Squier 2007: 342–5; Hatfield 2005: 108–10), Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage* (cf. Versaci 2007: 54–7; Oppolzer 2011) or Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen's *It's a Bird*. . . (cf. Oppolzer 2013; Crilley 2016), an increasing



**Fig. 26:** *Seeds* (28). © 2011 by Ross Mackintosh. Reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

number of comics introduces such ideas to middle-school readers in the United States. Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* (2010) is essentially a book about missing front teeth, dental surgery and braces. As a sixth grader Raina shows more concern about her nickname "Vampire-Girl" (2010: 53), having to wear headgear (cf. 2010: 55) and kissing boys (cf. 2010: 132, 160–2). This may sound childish, but *Smile* highlights all the issues discussed so far and makes them vicariously accessible to younger readers: the sudden self-consciousness after an accident (cf. 2010: 6–9); being exposed to treatments she does not really understand (cf. 2010: 33–5); facing social encounters in which her physical blemish plays an increasingly important role (e.g. she cannot smile without revealing her dental gap, her braces/retainer or her vampire teeth); but also basic things, such as encountering problems when eating solid food (cf. 2010: 46–7, 107, 116). Cece Bell's *El Deafo* (2014), which depicts the main characters as anthropomorphic rabbits, is a narrative about losing most of her hearing at the age of four due to meningitis. When she starts school, she has to wear a Phonic Ear (cf. 2014: 38–9) as a front pack, which is an enormous apparatus and becomes a visible sign of her disability. Teachers have to wear a microphone around their necks, which allows Cece's Phonic Ear to amplify their speech. However, when they forget to remove it, Cece can hear everything they do while out of class (cf. 2014: 41–3, 216), which provides her with special powers that raise the other children's curiosity and turn her into a superhero (cf. 2014: 217–21). Embodiment and enaction play central roles in these texts, as the protagonists find out about their new conditions by interacting with their social environments and learning how to adapt. These scenes are clearly re-imagined, dramatised and artfully arranged, but they also become more accessible that way.

## 5.6 Types of Autobiographical Comics

In this final chapter I briefly address the educational relevance of different themes, forms and subgenres of autographics. While Elisabeth El Refaie's *Autobiographical Comics* (2012) still represents a milestone in comics scholarship, Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010) or her more recent *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016) have demonstrated that particular approaches to and modes of life writing warrant their own studies. The field diversifies and even within autographics it is becoming harder to keep track of all new developments. With prose autobiographies, it is already impossible. Smith and Watson list sixty subtypes of life writing (2010: 253–86) that usually appear in combinations. I have privileged autographics (cf. 2010: 260) and a/b or auto/biography (cf. 2010: 256) throughout, which are listed as two of the

sixty. Taking a closer look at the list, they represent quite a heterogeneous assortment of labels: some of them reference the medium (e.g. autographics, digital & social media, oral history) or text type (e.g. case study, diary, essay, journal, letters), some foreground the (social) environment or location (e.g. academia, captivity narrative, ecobiography, ethnic life writing, prison, slave narrative, travel narrative, war or front experiences), quite a few highlight a condition, an affliction or life-changing circumstances (e.g. addiction, autism, blindness, illness, losing a child, migration, trauma), a handful focus on the phases of life (e.g. coming-of-age, old age), passions (e.g. art, music, sports) or attitude/intention (e.g. autohagiography, apology, confession). It is important to look at the ways in which these choices intersect, as they represent major concerns and themes of the narrative and are likely to relate to the major representatives of that subgenre.

*Blankets* is as much a coming-of-age narrative as it is a portrait of the artist as a young man, which both become thematic concerns in the text. In *Fun Home*, Watson argues, “Bechdel brilliantly deploys a wealth of autobiographical genres juxtaposed as alternative life possibilities. But the use of such templates also poses questions about life narrative in this autographic moment. How is the story of coming of age linked to or rewritten in the coming-out story [. . .]?” (2011: 132) This is a crucial point: if genres are largely determined by their content and themes, then a proliferation of identities and life models inescapably leads to genre hybridity. Cece Bell’s *El Deafo* is a simple narrative, but it operates with a whole spectrum of identities – from a scared little girl noticing that she is ‘disabled’ for life (cf. 2014: 12/4) to ‘El Deafo’, her superhero identity (cf. 2014: 45/1; 221/4). We find the same range in Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen’s *It’s a Bird . . .*, but this time for an adult audience. The comic juxtaposes the Seagle family, which is afflicted with incurable Huntington’s disease, and Superman, whose invulnerability can only be overcome with Kryptonite. When Seagle is asked by DC to work on the new run of Superman comics, the two worlds begin to collide. Not only do we get one of the best autobiographical comics, but also a meditation on and deconstruction of the Man of Steel (cf. Oppolzer 2013).

In *Framing Fear: The Gothic Mode in Graphic Literature* Christian W. Schneider discusses *Fun Home* in terms of Gothic tropes (cf. 2014: 220–39). While I do not believe that Bruce Bechdel is “portrayed as *Fun Home*’s villain figure” and “tyrannical patriarch” (2014: 222), or that “*Fun Home* can be largely read in the light of trauma theory” (2014: 225), Schneider makes some pertinent points about the “limits of representation” (2014: 229), the potential unreliability of the narrative (cf. 2014: 230), the “Gothic doubling” (2014: 230) of father and daughter and the centrality of artifice in both of their lives (cf. 2014: 230). Another important link is the Gothic’s theatricality, which is very strong in *Fun Home* on all levels – from



Alison Bechdel's role-playing her parents to produce reference photos to Bruce Bechdel's aesthetics. I may not agree with all of the details of Schneider's analysis, but the idea of reading autobiographical comics as genre hybrids is highly relevant and not sufficiently researched. *El Deafo* and *It's a Bird . . .* invite a comparison between the fragility of human life and superheroic strength directly, which allows for a meaningful integration of superhero narratives in teaching. Sometimes, the same character can be read in a number of ways, depending on which genre one picks as an interpretative frame.

On a broader scale, the unavoidable mixture of autobiography and biography (a/b), which Smith and Watson describe as "different, even opposed, forms" (2010: 256), seems important to me, as it raises students' awareness of implicating others in their own production of autobiographical texts. Two of the most celebrated books, *Blankets* and *Fun Home*, were created without the consent and/or support of family members. The concept of personality rights may be very abstract to students, but cyber bullying has a lot to do with the misrepresentation of peers on social media. Since the coordination of perspectives is a central concern of Wolfgang Iser's theory (cf. 1980: 169) and the teaching of literature in general (cf. Schinschke 1995; Nünning 1997; 2007; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 32), a discussion of how secondary characters are portrayed in autobiographies is an important concern. Unavoidably, this requires reading against the grain, or what Delanoy calls "resisting" (*Widerstehen*) (2002: 103). Eakin warns against the "illusion of disarming simplicity" (1999: ix), as the power of narration can be very deceptive. As a reminder, here are the second and third paragraph of McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (1999: 9)

Discounting the narrator's self-conscious and highly ironic play with readers' expectations, his statements are horrific when taken at face value. Not only does he invoke the worst stereotypes about the Irish imaginable, but he actively invites readers to understand his own childhood in exactly these terms. He brags about his horrible past, denounces everyone else as whiny, and implies that the worst lives make the best autobiographies. Then he reduces parents (alcoholic father; defeated mother), whole professions (pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters)



and nations (the terrible English) to a single characteristic. In short, the narrator is either highly unreliable (cf. Phelan 2005: 67) or playing a game with his readers, which is my take on this passage. McCourt frequently shifts genres and introduces his father's backstory as the stuff of legends: "My father, Malachy McCourt, was born on a farm in Toome, County Antrim. Like his father before, he grew up wild, in trouble with the English, or the Irish, or both. He fought with the Old IRA and for some desperate act he wound up a fugitive with a price on his head" (1999: 10). What should we make of this melodramatic portrayal of his father? While *Angela's Ashes* may be an extreme case, all autobiographies require some critical distance, even when an identification with the narrator and/or protagonist helps at first to find a way into the world of the story.

*MAUS* combines an autobiography by Spiegelman, a biography of his father and an autobiography by Vladek. This multiplicity of (sub)genres and perspectives also plays a role when a team of artists is involved. As Bredehoft convincingly argues, the contributions of Harvey Pekar's collaborators have to be seen as biographical work within an autographical text (cf. 2011). The same applies to the even more complex case of John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell's auto/biography *March*, which represents Lewis's life as written by Aydin and drawn by Powell. Aydin, in turn, based his comic script on Lewis and Michael D'Orso's prose memoir *Walking with the Wind* (cf. Oppolzer 2017a: 231–2), which makes the question of authorship and generic classification slightly more complicated. Aydin comments on this question in the following way: "I think we're all struggling to understand this project because it's never been done like this. There's never been a primary figure in history who's taken the time to work on a graphic novel like this" (Aydin qtd. in Heaney 2013). Still, Aydin promotes the idea that they were "pushing it [the autobiography] closer towards primary source material. I think there's going to be a debate over where that line is [between history writing and auto/biography]. I know we worked really hard to make sure that every detail was as accurate as possible" (Aydin qtd. in Heaney 2013). Powell offers a more pragmatic view of his work:

With a book like this there's this line between accuracy and leaving enough room for gesture and iconographic representation to breathe life into something without it being dry. I feel like there's a point where I have to stop trying to nail everything one hundred percent because you're going to wind up with a boring history comic that looks dry because you're so concerned about sticking it in a certain place and time. (Powell qtd. in Heaney 2013)

For obvious reasons, even an auto/biography like this requires some creative freedom to make it work as a narrative. There have always been ghost writers

and collaborators in the field of autobiography, as in D'Orso's case, but the impact of visuals (style, layout etc.) on comics narratives is undeniably considerable.

My final point concerns the three major form(at)s in which comics are usually published: strips, books, and graphic novels (cf. Fingeroth 2008: 4). I have followed the general trend and used many examples from longer narratives in book form, with Harvey Pekar's short stories being a notable exception. In the following, I would like to stress the importance of diary and web comics, which are often listed under "slice-of-life", a category that Duncan, Smith & Levitz closely associate with Pekar's influential work (cf. 2015: 252–3). They list Thompson's *Carnet de Voyage* and Josh Neufeld's *A Few Perfect Hours* as typical examples, which they characterise as "travelogue diaries that present no grand adventures, just a series of incidents and impressions" (2015: 253). Isaac Cates's article on diary comics (cf. 2011) is still the only one I am aware of that offers a systematic overview of the form, so I refer to it for a general orientation.

James Kochalka's *American Elf* plays a "seminal role in the diary comics phenomenon" (Cates 2011: 209), as it ran for a little longer than fourteen years (26 October 1998 – 31 December 2012) and inspired many young cartoonists to follow in his steps. In the "Introduction" to *The Everyday*, a collection of some 200 diary strips, British cartoonist Adam Cadwell describes his approach in the following way: "When I drew my first autobiographical comic strip in late August 2006 it was an experiment. I was trying to recreate the day to day observations of Harvey Pekar's American Splendor stories in the 3 or 4 panel format of James Kochalka's diary comic American Elf" (2012: n. p.; see also 60). This model is very appealing to young, aspiring graphic artists: there are just four panels to draw and the topic can be any experience of a particular day. However, the strip format is hard to master:

The four-panel comic strip has a number of built-in structural characteristics – what most cartoonists refer to as the strip's "rhythm" but what we might also think of as its rhetoric. Typically, the first three panels set up a fourth-panel punch line or a revelation; alternately, the punch line comes in panel three, followed by a panel of reaction. These structures are familiar from daily *Peanuts* or *Doonesbury* comic strips, and this rhythm has been so thoroughly explored by Charles Schulz, Garry Trudeau, and others that it has become part of our national culture of humor. [...] But the adoption of any fixed size or format limits the scale of the diary entry, restricting most diary cartoonists to a handful of brief moments, one sustained reflection, or a single event or anecdote. Unlike the typical prose diary, a diary comic cannot expand to contain more information on more eventful days, imposing constraints on the diary cartoonist in how much experience he or she can represent. This formal limitation requires a degree of self-consciousness about storytelling technique for the diarist, a constant sense of economy and of the chosen form's structure, as every image or word crowds out other representational

possibilities – as if a diarist chose to write the events of his or her life in sonnets or daily haiku. (Cates 2011: 217–8)

Kochalka did not simply work within this tight framework, he shaped its aesthetics and turned it into an art form. This may sound like a bold claim considering the banality of most of the vignettes, but there is more to discover than meets the eye.

Cates argues that “the notion for the diary comic was originally a reaction against the fashioned closure of the memoir, the narrative structural devices that such writing borrows from fiction” (2011: 210). However, there are also practical considerations. Kochalka’s four-panel strips, Pekar’s short stories and Thompson’s *Blankets* represent decidedly different ways of ‘doing’ consciousness (cf. Eakin 2008: 85), autobiography and storytelling. What is recorded in each case serves a different purpose, for which Cates chooses to find an ideological explanation: “if life is a network or tangle of threads, or if it consists more of gradual change and repetition than the closed structures of narrative, then other modes of writing might better capture both the experience and the meaning of everyday life” (2011: 211). The diary comic works against the notion of autobiographical reasoning, social accountability, the teleology of a meaningful life, traditional narrative closure or any other attempt to make human experiences fit neat structural patterns. What the diary comic perfectly illustrates is Monika Fludernik’s ‘natural’ narratology and her re-definition of narrativity:

Actants in my model are not defined, primarily, by their involvement in a plot but, simply, by their fictional *existence* (their status as *existents*). Since they are prototypically human, existents can perform acts of physical movement, speech acts, and thought acts, and their acting necessarily revolves around their consciousness, their mental centre of self-awareness, intellection, perception and emotionality. (2005: 26)

For casual readers, the daily strips represent nothing more than weird and seemingly random glimpses at a person’s consciousness and life at first. Kochalka repeatedly demonstrates that his consciousness is embodied and geared towards interactions with the environment. As in Strawson’s criticism of narrativity (cf. 2004), we witness a life as lived rather than as narrated. “Kochalka establishes the tension between ‘story’ – the narrative structures familiar from fiction and anecdote – and ‘the story of my life,’ which consists of cycles, repetitions, processes without closure, and moments of indeterminate or undetermined significance” (Cates 2011: 211). Keeping a diary of this kind means autobiographical work without much retrospection: “Diary strips cannot know the future of the ‘story’ in which they participate” (2011: 211). Cates insists on a programmatic stance against narrativity that transcends the unavoidable restrictions of this form: “By

privileging the brief and only potentially meaningful events of daily life, rather than the larger arcs and major events that appear prominent in retrospect, the diary strip pushes against the narrative expectations of the autobiographical genre” (2011: 213–4).

While the interlocutors of ‘small stories’ (cf. Bamberg 2007; Georgakopoulou 2007) are familiar with the contexts and details of spontaneous autobiographical chit-chat, readers of diary comics only have the text as a source. Apart from a reliance on general frames, reading diary comics is largely a bottom-up process:

The experience of reading *American Elf* is inevitably a process of inference and imaginative construction, extrapolating from each individual strip to the other events of that day, or to the connections between these events and other ones: the reader wonders whether the Kochalkas’ drug-dealing neighbor will cause trouble, tracks Eli’s linguistic and social development, and waits for Kochalka to spin into another temper tantrum. This process of extrapolation is motivated as much by the strip’s serialization (the knowledge that tomorrow’s installment is yet to be written) as by its lyric mode and attendant lack of narrative closure. (Cates 2011: 223)

Obviously, Cates had followed Kochalka’s antics for several years and had clear reader expectations based on his previous experiences with the series. For a new reader, the only type of continuity and vital relation is the ‘identity’ of the protagonist – the American Elf. Why would readers be interested in such a heavily fragmented life narrative that requires constant adjustments based on little concrete information? Cates offers a tentative answer:

If memoir is, as Jerome Bruner implies, literature’s best approximation of the way we remember and understand our lives, a diary comic like Kochalka’s might still be a better representation of the way we *live* those lives. The continually advancing present, always contingent in its meaning and uncertain in its value, nevertheless swarms with noteworthy, moving, humorous, or beautiful moments that might never need to appear in the so-called story of a life; Kochalka strives to record and honor these moments as they pass, even if their significance is fleeting. (2011: 223–4)

In “Narrative Worldmaking in Graphic Life Writing” David Herman looks at Jeffrey Brown’s slice-of-life books *Clumsy* (2002) and *Unlikely* (2003) that loosely tell the story of two failed relationships. What is fascinating about this article is the clash between classical narratology and the alternative aesthetics these comics rely on. Brown undermines all of Herman’s expectations: there is no older, narrating I; no traditional temporal order; no chapters, but much smaller units (strips); no clear causal connections; no explicit autobiographical reasoning; no clear teleological orientation and no ‘worldmaking’ in Herman’s sense. Readers gradually build an understanding of what is going on, based on observations,

conversations and intuitions, not on the processing of information provided by the text. How does Herman respond to this challenge?

At one point he observes that “Brown’s narratives focus more microanalytically on the events associated with two failed relationships” (2011: 235). However, Brown does not analyse or rationalise these events in any way. He adjusts the lens on the microscope, if you will, and lets us see for ourselves. There is selection and foregrounding, as in all works of art, but in terms of a plot-orientation these vignettes show an extreme level of decompression, to the point of becoming confusing. Some may expect the story beats of Hollywood cinema, but these characters – like Kochalka’s American Elf – are socially entangled in weird ways. Readers may be tempted to go back and forth between different microscope slides and look again and again or skip a few pages to find out when the artist finally delivers the next milestone. The scenes do not line up in an orderly fashion; in the case of *Clumsy* they are even deliberately jumbled. We often become drawn into situations that almost feel too real and uncomfortable to be suitable for a narrative, such as “Waiting for her to call” (cf. 2006: 8–9). Some vignettes may provide fascinating details, but do not contribute to our understanding of this relationship – at first, or never – whereas others become retrospectively illuminated by events that we read later, but may have happened earlier. Herman seems to acknowledge this approach by stating that “the self figured in Brown’s serially linked microsequences is always emergent, a fragile, vulnerable achievement, with the incremental method of emplotment suggesting the need to reevaluate this precarious accomplishment on almost a moment-by-moment basis” (2011: 236). Herman’s analysis is brilliant, but he cannot let go of ‘emplotment’ and ‘(re)evaluation’. As in Tilmann Habermas’s work (cf. 2011), there is always the implied notion that lives are supposed to conform to standardised models. Herman’s observations are astute, especially when he describes the generally low level of compression in these texts. However, his evaluation oscillates between the idea that Brown delivers an unfinished autobiographical work and that he deliberately involves the readers in the process of looking at his life:

... rather than using an older narrating self to provide explicit assessments of the meaning or impact of events encountered by the younger experiencing self, and thereby distancing the world of the telling from the world of the told, Brown’s texts can be viewed as a tentative, provisional, still-unfinished attempt to come to terms with the events they portray. These narratives are less an encapsulation of the past than a lived engagement with its ongoing legacy. The lack of an overarching narrational layer in the verbal track (e.g., in the form of text boxes) suggests how past events resist distillation in the form of retrospective assessments, which would literally preside over and frame the contents of individual panels. By the same token, the absence of commentary by an overt narrating

I requires readers to draw their own conclusions about exactly how the teller's current understanding (and evaluation) of his earlier experiences may have shaped his presentation of events in the storyworld. (2011: 240)

Herman solves the mystery by choosing key constituents of the ongoing story and reading them as recognisable patterns of behaviour:

The result is a highly detailed method of presentation in which brief vignettes are used to outline atomic constituents of an ongoing story – the first feelings of romantic attraction, a phone call expected but never received, a hurtful or troubling remark, the last night a couple ever spent together. In this way Brown's narratives can explore, in a fine-grained manner, patterns of behavior that the texts diagnose as fatally destructive for the two relationships whose trajectory they record. (2011: 235)

It is fascinating to witness how Herman struggles with these comics and constructs a purpose for them, ascribing a diagnostic interest in Brown's own 'fatally destructive' behaviour. Towards the end of the essay, Herman addresses the elusive temporal sequence of *Clumsy*. Although the back cover contains a map on the inside that presents the major events in chronological order, it is still impossible to determine when exactly the scenes took place. *Clumsy* starts with the first night Jeff spends with Theresa (cf. 2006: 1–2), which is immediately followed by the last night with his previous girlfriend Kristyn (3). "My day at the beach" (4–6) with Theresa seems to represent a particularly pleasant memory. Then "I draw her naked" (7) is contrasted with the uncomfortable "Waiting for her to call" (8–9). Finally, on page 23, we reach "The very first time I saw Theresa", where he observes that she "looks kind of like a dirty hippy" (23/6 → Fig. 27).

So, even if we could recreate a perfect timeline, how would that help? Herman's conclusion remains somewhat ambiguous, but he seems to suggest that, despite Brown's effort, he just could not make sense of his relationships:

In Brown's narratives, by contrast, the sparseness of the visual and verbal tracks, coupled with the scenic mode of narration, suggests that even when microanalyzed, the past cannot be fully understood from the vantage point of the present. Some past events remain, by their nature, unfinished business; they continue to resist assimilation into a larger life story, despite the present self's best efforts to make sense of them in those terms. (2011: 241–2)

It is possible that Brown is a failed autobiographer who could not make sense of his own life, no matter how hard he tried, and had no other choice but to offer the unassimilated fragments of two doomed relationships to the reading public. However, this reading precludes the possibility that Brown deliberately left the relationships as messy and life-like as they had been, despite the fact that he could have streamlined, rationalised and sanitised them to fit the established

THE VERY FIRST TIME I SAW THERESA



Fig. 27: *Clumsy* (23). © 2006 by Jeffrey Brown. Reprinted by permission of Top Shelf Productions. All rights reserved.

patterns. We have to keep Kochalka's aesthetics in mind and how *American Elf* deliberately subverted the grand narratives of social accountability and endless self-improvement. Herman's article sets up a theoretical framework that begins with Gérard Genette (cf. 2011: 231) and Philippe Lejeune (cf. 2011: 232), which signals a willingness to remain within clearly delineated parameters. Herman reads *Clumsy* as a deviation from established patterns, which it is, but he seems to have difficulties appreciating it on its own terms. He even quotes Kochalka's endorsement of *Clumsy*, which attests to a perfect match between Brown's style and the content of the narrative (cf. Herman 2011: 242 fn. 6). In turn, Brown thanks Kochalka for his support in the credits/copyright section of the book, but Herman does not connect the dots. It is ironic that both Herman's and Cates's articles were published in *Graphic Subjects* (2011), but they are vastly different in their approaches. I have already ruled out *Clumsy* for underage students due to the publisher's explicit "parental advisory" warning, so what does this mean for the classroom?

First of all, diary comics or slice-of-life comic strips are a genuine format and thus authentic texts. They are widely available for free, especially in the form of web comics. A good starting point are Comic Rocket's autobio page (<https://www.comic-rocket.com/genre/autobio>), which also contains material for mature readers, Adam Cadwell's *The Everyday*, which has been published as a book (cf. 2012), but is still available online (<http://www.adamcadwell.com/portfolio/the-everyday>), or Joe Decie's website (<http://www.joedecie.com>), which offers his own diary comic. As a short form, diary comics can be easily read in class. They are self-contained, provide a template for creative work, serve as prompts for writing, but also as building blocks for larger narratives, as certain characters, hobbies, obsessions, types of behaviour etc. reappear. They are compatible with the activities suggested by Stephen Cary (2004: 70–156) and belong to the same format as well-known comic strips, such as *Peanuts* or *Calvin & Hobbes*, which have been suggested as suitable texts for lower-secondary English classes (cf. Gubesch & Schüwer 2005; Rumlich 2013; Heim 2013). As a form of comics, they contain all the elements typical of the medium, which means that they prepare students for the reading of longer texts. I end this chapter with the centre piece of Cadwell's *The Everyday* to demonstrate that comic strips warrant a closer look.

In his introduction to the book Cadwell explains that he was "particularly proud" of his one-hundredth strip, which may have to do with his belief that "the strongest comics have no words" (2012: n. p.). Surprisingly, there are no references to where he is or what has happened. Strip 99 is dated "24th May 2008" and shows Adam in a bar with 'Liz', while the next one (101) suddenly takes readers to New York's Central Park. Since *The Everyday* first saw publication as a



weekly strip, this very personal event seems to take place outside of regular time and outside of ordinary life: a family member or close friend in the emergency unit does not blend in with the light-hearted, whimsical blunders of Adam's regular life. Apart from the very first strip, this is the only one without a date and one of the few that extends over two pages. There is curious tension between this doubling of narrative space and the title "The Wait", which is confirmed by the fact that Adam spends ten out of the twelve panels passing the better part of a day inside a hospital ward. The strip is not entirely wordless: a sign above the entrance reads "PATIENTS" (100/1), a door is labelled "family room" (100/2; 100/4) and there is another partly visible sign indicating the "emergency unit" (100/4). Cadwell makes sure that the building cannot be mistaken for anything else. While the previous strip ends with laughter (cf. 2012: 99/3), I interpret Adam's look in 100/2 as a worried face.

Despite its publication both online and in book form, this is still Cadwell's diary: "Through these strips I can recall the colours and the heat of New York in June, the evening light on the water in Stockholm and the sounds and the energy of the Glastonbury Festival" (2012: n. p.). Judging from this comment, he recorded specific holistic experiences, involving all the senses and strong emotions, which are exceptionally hard to capture in the form of black and white strips. These are intended to function as material anchors that trigger vivid memories, but cannot represent in any mimetic sense the complex interplay of sense impressions, emotions and actions. How are readers supposed to relate to these glimpses into Cadwell's life without having been there with him? If we do not know who the person in the recovery room is, why should readers care? He addresses this question in the last paragraph of his introduction: "I hope that you see a part of your life in *The Everyday* and see more of the everyday in your life" (2012: n. p.).

If there is no story, what can we relate to and why is it relevant? The feeling of waiting long hours, for example in an airport terminal, "Waiting for her to call" (cf. Brown 2006: 8–9), maybe even for a patient to become conscious again after an operation, belongs to every human's repertoire of experiences. Judging from the second panel, Adam assumes it is going to be a short wait; otherwise he would not sit on the floor. In 100/5 he has moved to a designated waiting area and we find him sitting on a chair. In 100/8 he has lunch, which may suggest that he arrived in the morning and is still there. In 100/10 it has become dark outside. Then a nurse asks him in (100/11) and in the final panel we see him kissing a woman on the forehead. Since there is no verbal narration, everything is told through pantomime, if you will. Adam's body language communicates more than just boredom: hospitals, like all public buildings, are not places to be comfortable

in. The strip builds a whole repertoire of bodily (in)activity and sensations: sitting, walking, pushing buttons, drinking, gazing, watching the rain fall outside the window, waiting, listening to the air conditioner, tapping one's feet, beating a rhythm on one's knee, eating a sandwich dripping with sauce, reading, restlessly shifting, sleeping, listening to the voice of the nurse and kissing the woman with the tube up her nose. The final panel is without a frame, which is the most important signal that the kiss breaks an established pattern. It is the culmination of a strip that has been extended over two pages and represents a form of release after an endless period of waiting. It is a whole day 'wasted' in the hospital that makes this sign of affection and support so endearing. While Adam's mouth is foregrounded, the woman does not have one. She may still be incapacitated. The strip builds towards this one brief moment of physical contact that stands out from a day of complete inaction and isolation. Cadwell is right: it may be enough to get a feeling of what happened, to experience the boredom of endlessly waiting and making it all count as a gesture of selflessness.

## Conclusion

Instead of treating autographics as another type of literature for the classroom and relying on existing approaches as tried, tested and true, my general aim was to (re)build solid foundations for the three elements of the title: aesthetic reading as a transaction with literary texts, the unique affordances of comics as a narrative medium and the generic specificity of auto/biography. In the first case, this required a re-affirmation of reader-response criticism, a translation of its basic principles into a more structured approach to teaching literature in the classroom and its contextualisation in terms of cognitive theories, especially in the area of linguistics. By aligning Wolfgang Iser's model of reading with Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's conceptual integration theory as well as Barbara Dancygier's application of blending to reading literature, I confirmed Herbert Grabes's observation that reader-response criticism anticipated many of the basic principles that have become associated with cognitive approaches to literature (cf. 2008: 126, 131, 133). Fleshing out Iser's model of gestalt-forming with concepts adopted from blending theory (e.g. vital relations, de/compression, narrative anchors) produced a more intricate framework that could be applied to the production and reception of autobiographical comics. In the following, I foreground central arguments that have been worked into the fabric of this thesis as threads that have resurfaced throughout in various contexts.

The first major concern was a distinction between aesthetic reading, retrieving information from literary texts (so-called 'reading comprehension') and narratological analysis. While aesthetic responses constitute the default way general readers engage with literature, the second rests on the misconception that narrative texts are 'containers' from which readers have to extract information about the story constituents. By reducing art to the level of content, this approach negates the fundamental principles that John Dewey's *Art as Experience* is built on. In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* Susan Sonntag directly addresses this problem: "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article of use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (2009a: 10). This is why I argued against the highly popular task of having students write factual summaries of literary texts, as it forces them to reduce the work of art to its repertoire – the raw material drawn from real life – without acknowledging how readers are invited to encounter these issues in the form of a guided experience.

Many scholars confuse the complexity of their theories, classifications and terminologies with the challenges the studied objects and phenomena pose to the general public. Approaching human perception and cognition through A.I. research, conceptualising reading with the help of David Herman's story logic, understanding the relationships of characters through Alan Palmer's social minds or equating narrative meaning-making with a narratological analysis is a *choice* and not a necessity. There is an important difference between the claim that students need to learn how to coordinate the perspectives of a literary text (cf. Iser 1980: 35, 169; Schinschke 1995; Nünning 1997; 2007; Nünning & Surkamp 2010: 32) and the idea that readers cannot understand a text properly without a theory of focalisation (cf. Horstkotte & Pedri 2011: 349). It would be equally unwarranted to insist that students have to master conceptual integration theory first before they can start to read their first comic, but pattern recognition and blending do play an important role and should be trained in rereading activities. At the same time, students are perfectly capable of making sense of narratives without constant analysis. Michael Benton suggests that classrooms require a "narratology in action" (Benton 1992: 51), which guides and reassures readers, instead of working with a deficit model that treats them as inept narratologists. For this kind of holistic experience to take place, students need basic orientation through careful framing and a working theory that allows them to relate their discoveries to a conceptual framework. Gestalt psychology propagates a theory of perception according to which the sum total is more than the individual parts. According to this logic, insight requires synopsis, which is the contemplation of several elements at once, in view of potential relations.

Several studies suggest that minimal conscious processing is the foundation of reading (cf. McKoon & Ratcliff 1992), as a lot of consistency-building is performed by System 1 (cf. Kahneman 2012). Based on years of practice and conscious noticing, mastery represents the highly intuitive, seemingly miraculous and almost instantaneous solution of complex problems. Since there is no mastery without effort and attention to details, I have emphasised the necessity to return to the literary text and have students actively look for evidence that supports their readings. According to Frank Smith, "*Children learn to read by reading*" (2004: 169), which changes the roles of teachers to those of facilitators who actively guide the process through a selection of texts and tasks in a deliberate sequence. Such reading sequences need thematic and structural coherence to facilitate a successful transaction with the text. Instead of thinking about comics literacy in purely formalist terms, an ongoing engagement with identities and autobiographical work could offer such a thematic framework that allows for the integration of diverse media and literary texts.

While students are working on their own interpretations, teachers always have the opportunity to scaffold the process through a specific selection and strategic placement of tasks to build a foundation for later activities. I used the term ‘having read’ to illustrate the fact that students are often supposed to arrive at an understanding of a text without much support or feedback. The same logic used to apply to writing, when students were asked to hand in completed essays without any intermediate work on the drafts. In modern language teaching the significance of a “process approach to teaching writing” (Grimm, Meyer, Volkmann 2015: 128) has become widely accepted. Maybe it helps to consider the interpretation of a text that students bring to class as a first draft that has to be revised with the help of feedback loops and discussions. With the help of learner texts (cf. Legutke 1996) they can negotiate their findings and co-create meaning in different social settings.

A second important concern was a more experiential and embodied approach to comics, which is partly realised in Karin Kukkonen’s *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. Despite such artistic strategies as selection (e.g. repertoire, theme-horizon), foregrounding (e.g. salience, cartooning, overdetermination), defamiliarisation, concentration (cf. Dewey 2005: 204, 207) or redundancy, which all serve to guide readers’ attention and gestalt-forming, scenes heavily rely on image schemas, conceptual metaphors and readers’ embodied cognition. There are frequent references to the theatre in this book, from Amy Spaulding’s *The Page as a Stage Set* via Ted Cohen’s ‘metaphor of personal identification’ (cf. 1999) to Barbara Dancygier’s chapter on drama (cf. 2012: 139–70). Cartoonists decompress and thus dramatise scenes, readers are said to act them out in their heads, according to simulation theory, and students may take on the roles of characters and perform them in class.

There is a temptation to reduce the expressions of the cartoon body to an independent sign system and develop a narratology of body codes, which Rodolphe Töpffer clearly attempted to do (cf. 1965). Leaving aside the canonisation of certain gestures and facial expressions as a cartoon short-hand, the experientiality of narratives invites readers to make sense of scenes as well as characters’ emotions and intentions based on the daily practise of reading human interactions. Due to the artistic strategies listed above, characters’ bodies and minds are easier to read than real people. In the case of visual narratives, embodiment draws attention to the materiality of existence and characters’ physical interactions with the world. Therefore, illness and disability narratives in the comics medium allow for a sustained engagement with and visualisation of the impact of these afflictions on the performance and the appearance of human bodies. Relying on image schemas and conceptual metaphors, comics artists can use the full spectrum, ranging

from seemingly photorealistic depictions via highly metaphorical bodies to animal characters standing in for humans.

I used the first chapter of Craig Thompson's *Blankets* to highlight the importance of body language, especially in the context of iconic solidarity and translinear blending. There is a lot of potential in exploring the meaning of scenes through performance, as Jutta Rymarczyk shows with Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (cf. 2011). This may not seem new to certain teachers, neither to those who lead drama groups and regularly rehearse plays with students nor to educators in primary schools who act out scenes from picture books with their pupils, but in the context of comics in the classroom this might be an approach worth considering. There are two different trajectories along which to explore such connections between comics and plays: a comparative look at stage performances and comics narration may reveal that the theatre is an equally relevant point of reference (cf. e.g. Grünewald 2000: 17–27). The other lies in a development of Rymarczyk's concept of acting out picture books and comics, especially during the early stages of engagement. Performing characters in role plays is directly linked to questions of empathy, perspective-taking and identification, which dominated the first half of this book, but especially part 3. Ultimately, reading has to lead to a coordination of perspectives, which is central to Iser's model, reader-response criticism in general and especially cultural studies. To make these processes of identification and detachment more visible, it helps to interrupt the reading process at certain "response points" (Benton & Fox 1985: 6; see also Dodge 2005: 34, 41–2) to reflect on how characters have changed, but also on how readers have repositioned themselves in relation to the social dynamics suggested in the narrative text. Due to plot developments and character arcs, it is more advisable to judge a protagonist's behaviour and situation in life based on entanglements in very specific social circumstances rather than on general qualities. Characters come alive through what they do, rather than through what they are (cf. Palmer 2004: 245). Therefore, students are more likely to respond to the social reverberations of characters' behaviour than to the gradual revelation of characters' essentialist traits. Catherine Emmott argues that it is the contextual frames that readers remember and operate with, rather than isolated story constituents (cf. 1998: 191). These scenes come alive by fleshing out the fragmented comics narration with insights gained through embodied cognition.

A reorientation of comics studies for the classroom was the third major concern of this book. It would require a focus on embodied cognition, image schemas, conceptual metaphors and blending, rather than on classical narratology, whose priorities and compartmentalisation of elements that naturally belong together

(e.g. characterisation, narration, focalisation or the representation of speech and thought) are not conducive to a holistic experience. This mirrors Alan Palmer's major point of criticism concerning narratology (cf. 2004: 2). Benton believes in the transformative power of directly interacting with texts: "Using writing to think with in the form of jottings helps extend the time we give, it helps to keep the aesthetic experience central and enables meanings to be evoked, and it helps us to take possession of the works of art and make them our own" (1992: 118). A similar claim can be made about the importance of handing out photocopied pages from picture books and comics and have students directly interact with them in the most basic way at first: setting/context, foregrounded elements (points of interest), correspondences and differences and relations/entanglements between characters and objects. For more advanced students image schemas, conceptual metaphors, symbols, body codes and Hatfield's tensions (e.g. words vs. images) may be added to such inquiries.

Another important step would be to treat McCloud's classification of panel transitions as "an *inexact science at best*" (1994: 74/1). To distinguish comics from other types of graphic narratives (cf. Petersen 2011) or picture stories (cf. Grünewald 2000: 13–14), the contrast between scene-to-scene vs. action-to-action transitions is vital. It should not be forgotten that McCloud arrived at this system based on a comparison of US superhero comics with Japanese manga. However, his six types are only poorly suited to explain meaning-making in the comics medium, for which several other publications are the better choice (cf. e.g. Kukkonen 2013b; Hatfield 2005). While McCloud operates with a tiny fraction of vital relations (e.g. time, place, cause-effect), Fauconnier and Turner list about fifteen, with 'identity' being the most basic and important one (cf. 2003: 95). Mikkonen's third chapter, "Character as a Means of Narrative Continuity" (cf. 2017: 90–108), is a first acknowledgement of this phenomenon, but it does not go far enough. There is, for example, a fundamental difference between McCloud's 'action' and the vital relation 'change' (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003: 93–4). The first is associated with human agency, the second could refer to a growing tree. In other words: 'Action' is an interpretation of change as human agency, which Fauconnier and Turner call 'intentionality' (cf. 2003: 100–1). In my analysis of Craig's discussion of his future plans with the Pastor (cf. Thompson 2007: 54–5), I read every story beat as a deliberate action. In diary comics or manga, however, change is a vital relation that cannot always be tied to human deliberation. This is not to deny the importance of action, time or causality, but the "radical elimination of plot" (2005: 13) in Monika Fludernik's 'natural' narratology would seem less outrageous if critics were willing to approach diary comics through conceptual integration theory. There is clearly narrativity and a lot of experientiality in

these autobiographical texts, but not enough action (human agency) and plot (cause-effect chains) to satisfy a classical narratologist.

I dedicated the final part of this study to the fourth major argument, which is the necessity to understand what genres *do* rather than what they are. This is relevant in the context of framing, such as labels on book covers, or teachers' introductions to literary texts during stage 1 of the reading process, but especially in relation to the narrative media in which they materialise. Using the representation of multiple selves in prose and comics autobiographies as my main example, I demonstrated the impact of the personal pronoun 'I' on viewpoint compression in contrast to the visible fragmentation of identity in autographics. The creation and reception of autobiographical texts have to be seen as complementary processes. Autobiographers offer their lives at different levels of compression, in the most extreme cases as single words (e.g. *Tomboy, Quitter*) or, at the other end of the spectrum, as moment-to-moment transitions in recreated scenes from the past. Their current identities are 'mega-blends', based on a wide range of sources and a perpetual process of reblending and reinvention. To make their lives vicariously accessible to readers, their life stories have to be decompressed and dramatised, in other words, 'acted out' with the veneer of as much authenticity as they can muster. This performance of crucial scenes from the past is made authentic via specific strategies (cf. El Refaie 2012: 135–78), which readers have to embrace as genuine attempts to be as truthful as possible. While authors may lay out their arranged lives in the form of autotopographies, often in much more fragmented ways than would be conceivable in other media, readers have to reassemble the pieces into a consistent narrative. This involves what Dancygier calls "viewpoint compression" (Dancygier 2012: 97; see also 112, 141): Readers cannot remember the intricacies that Alan Palmer (cf. 2004) and Lisa Zunshine (cf. 2006) prefer to analyse, but successfully compress their first impressions of various details and points of view into a holistic experience of a scene. Artists play with different modalities as markers of authenticity, often via the inclusion of photographs as evidence that the depicted scenes occurred in real life. Such objects play a significant role in autobiographical reasoning and work: they may be part of physical autotopographies and serve as material anchors, but they can also be woven into the fabric of a narrative at different levels of modality and become narrative anchors within the text. While the absence or presence of physical evidence may leave a strong impression on certain readers whether autobiographical narratives are reliable or not, the whole genre has to be taken with a grain of salt. There is no objective reality in life or within the narratives against which departures from a strict factual account can be identified and verified. As narrative works of art, they are removed from reality on



several levels, mostly due to selection and foregrounding: what autobiographers can remember in contrast to what happened; what artists select to fit a consistent narrative, which theme(s) becomes foregrounded etc. Like salience or modality, authenticity is a scale and based on readers' transactions with the text.

The last part of the thesis was also concerned with the extent and form of autobiographical work. There is an obvious correspondence between Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou's 'small stories' (cf. 2007) and Isaac Cates's article on diary comics (cf. 2011). In both approaches we find a strong resistance to traditional autobiography as a retrospective justification of a life well lived, following the principle of moral accountability. Teenagers are still in the process of developing their autobiographical reasoning, which only becomes fully developed when they reach legal maturity. They may be more prone to experiment with different identities and looks, especially in view of how others react to these self-stylisations. Shorter and more tentative genres of life writing are much more suitable in this context than the traditional autobiography. Most importantly, students' interest in social media establishes a connection between autobiographical work and critical media literacy. I frequently referred to suggestions in *Autobiographies: Presenting the Self* (2015a), edited by Wolfgang Hallet, where such considerations play an important role. Apart from authenticity and reliability, ethical concerns of life writing have to play a bigger role, as family and friends become implicated in the stories we tell about ourselves.



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