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 ot 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 short-hand 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.