

## 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.

