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Representations and distortions of 'self' in graphic narrative: borders of autography and visual representations of 'I' and 'self'

Abstract:

The 'autographic' is a form of autobiography in which the narrative is constructed through the combination of both word and image. Similar to conventional prose autobiography, the narrative 'I' in an 'autographic' is a construction of self utilised to tell a story. However, 'autographics' are constructed through the combination of prose narrative and the visual representation of author/narrator. In 'Autographics: the seeing "I" of comics' (2006) Gillian Whitlock, states that 'autographics' pertains to 'the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal texts in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics' (2006: 966). These 'conjunctions of visual and verbal texts' will be examined in the work of Art Spiegelman's (1996) *The complete Maus*, Alison Bechdel's (2006) *Fun home*, and Shaun Tan's (2006) *The arrival* in order to ascertain how author/illustrator depictions of self influence the construction of narrative authenticity.

The traditional approach to 'autographics', where images are simplified in order to accommodate a sophisticated written narrative, forms the model from which experimentation into more realistic depictions of 'self' can be explored. For the most part Spiegelman's *The complete Maus* adheres to this model; however, Bechdel and Tan manipulate this balance in their representations of 'self.' *Fun home*'s written narrative is sophisticated with Bechdel rendering herself through both simplified line drawn cartoons and elaborate crosshatched drawn photographic reproductions. These multiple depictions of self allude to a cartoon or 'flawed' self constructed from memory and a 'concrete' or authoritive 'I'. Tan's construction of self in *The arrival* is developed through realistic tonal representational self-portraits and readers are provided no accompanying written text; the 'I' is silent. There is no allusion to the fact that we are reading autobiography in *The arrival*, but there is a conflation between author and narrator, both in name (as this is a wordless text is framed only by the title, dedication, the author's name and artist's notes), and in visual representation. The visual likeness between author and narrator is the primary focus of this paper. This concept will be investigated in order to ascertain how realistic visual depictions of self affect narrative authenticity. The paper will question how reducing the visual representation of self to a caricature or 'cartoon self' affects readings of biographic and historical truth, as opposed to how realistic drawn images of self (the author) influence readings of the narrative 'I'.

Key Words:

Autographic – the self – self-portrait – graphic narrative – narrative authenticity

Realistic visual representations of self are a primary source of identity authentication, and are used daily within various interactions and recallings of life narrative. We carry photographs not only of ourselves in the form of licenses, passports and various other photo-IDs, but also photos of loved ones, husbands, wives, children, to not only remember, but provide evidence of ourselves and our stories. Physical likeness is the major form of identification that we, as a society, interact with on a daily basis and therefore the portrait/self-portrait forms a large part of how we authenticate ideals of self. As a culture we are becoming more infatuated with images of self and more comfortable with exploring borders of 'truth' in relation to how we present ourselves visually, in both the 'real' and 'virtual' world. We are constructing ourselves more subjectively, constructing selves that are more public and ambiguous than they are private and definitive. In this context, texts – primarily graphic novels – that use realistic visual representations of self provide opportunities to investigate ethical implications associated with the construction of narrative authenticity through the use of such imagery.

The 'autographic' explores borders of 'truth'—between fact and fiction, an implicitly ethical concern—and is heavily reliant on visual constructions of self to communicate its auto/biographical content. As Whitlock suggests, the 'autographic' is 'a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood' (2006: 966). Understanding how the 'autographic' constructs narrative authenticity through visual representations of self may provide practitioners and readers new ways to approach graphic narrative from a more ethically considered position, and also influence the way we construct and read visual representations of self. Graphic narrative requires both the author and reader to contribute to the meaning making process and in the case of the 'autographic', this meaning making extends to constructions of self and requires the reader to interpret divisions between author and narrator in order to establish the narrative 'I'.

'Autographics' are sophisticated self-referential author/illustrated autobiographies or life narratives that develop narrative authenticity through the combination of word and image. Authenticity in an 'autographic' can be established via biographically and historically accurate information presented in either word or image form and is, for the most part, heavily dependent upon a reader's acceptance of the visual representation of self developed through these texts—that is, the readers acceptance of visual representations of the author to construct and inform the narrative 'I'. This acceptance and validation is generally established through the word text, rather than the image text. Visual representations of self in 'autographics' can range from the abstract to the representational, with realistic visual representations occurring rarely within the genre. When they do, they are used generally in relation to the photograph and can appear as either reprinted photographs as in Art Spiegelman's (1996) *The complete Maus*, or realistic drawings of photographs as in Alison Bechdel's (2007) *Fun home*. How the reader constructs the narrative 'I' is dependant upon their reading of authorial subjectivity and requires the interpretation of distinctions between self and subject. Such questioning requires the reader to play an active role in the development of the narrative, and also make ethical decisions in relation to

constructions of self being presented in terms of distinctions between author/narrator and fact/fiction.

In 'Narrative authenticity' Ochs and Capps (1997) investigate the construction of authenticity in life narratives through subjective recordings of objective events, ideals of authority and memory recall in oral narratives. Although focused on linguistics, the rhetorical devices examined and how they are used to construct narrative authenticity are relevant to the understandings of an ethical authenticity in the 'autographic' as verisimilitude is developed through the combination of word and image. Ochs and Capps suggest that life narrative is dependent on memory and state that:

> [r]emembering, then, is an authenticating act: Rememberers publicly claim to have brought to conscious awareness a state, event, or condition that is real in their eyes; they believe it to be true (Ochs & Capps, 1997: 84).

This statement, while rudimentary, is key to forming an understanding of life narrative, whether written, spoken or image based. The auto/biographic information conveyed by the narrator is remembered and as a result, somewhat unreliable, and therefore must be validated in order to be received as authentic—an issue that becomes decidedly ethical when public/historical events form part of that remembering, as in Spiegelman's text. This authentication generally comes from a secondary source that confirms the claims as true and is generally evident in both the written and the image text.

The complete Maus develops narrative authenticity through the inclusion of historically accurate written information, along with 'comic' renderings of people and places, as well as the inclusion of photographs. *Fun home* also uses the photograph as a means to authenticate the narrative visually, relying on detailed and realistic drawings of family photographs that differ from the more simplistic illustration style evident in the bulk of the narrative. As a result, these images fall somewhere outside the main narrative and allude to an alternate narrative self, a more authoritative narrative self, or narrative 'I'. In essence the photograph, or referenced photograph, becomes a symbol of authentication, due in part, to its nature as a primary form of visual documentation. John Berger (2009) refers to the connection between the photograph and depictions of truth, stating that 'photography[,] because it preserves the appearance of an event or a person, has always been closely associated with the idea of the historical. The ideal of photography ... is to seize an "historic" moment' (2009: 51). By including photography, either directly or indirectly, both Spiegelman and Bechdel imbue their texts with the ideals such imagery embodies and develops not only historical associations, but also narrative authentication through this association. By assuming that the photograph or photo-realistic drawings further narrative authenticity in the autographic in an ethically appropriate way, could a similar approach to illustration style in a fictional graphic narrative result in a similar construction of narrative authenticity? If so, what ethical concerns are raised by the use of such imagery to develop verisimilitude, and also how do conflations between author and narrator in a fictional text affect a reader's construction of narrative authenticity?

In Shaun Tan's (2006) *The arrival* we are provided with such a text, a fictional graphic novel that develops narrative authenticity through realistic visual depictions of self. In *The Arrival*, we are not dealing with the autographic or life writing, for the plot is fictional, but we are presented with self-portraits, that may reveal as much about the author/illustrator as they do the fictional narrator. When recently questioned on his use of visual representations of self, Tan stated:

> [w]hat's interesting is that the decision to use myself as a model, and subsequently produce something like self-portraiture, did cause me to think more about my personal relationship to the story – especially the fact that my father immigrated to Australia from Malaysia at the same age. The book did actually come to feel much more personal, as a result of this practical illustrative solution. It was also a lesson in empathy, of trying to understand my research subjects (various immigrants from different countries and periods) through detailed role-play (Tan, 2011).

The arrival is a wordless text, and as a result, the narrative is constructed primarily through these self-portraits. The images replace any word text and use facial expression, gesture, body language, and symbolism in much the same way as a written text employs adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. As readers, we interpret character and plot through the narrator's body, but at the same time we are reading the gestures and body language of its author to construct the narrative. Tan himself acknowledges this conflation when talking of the use of the self as narrative model stating:

> There is also an honesty and simplicity about this approach, we can be very realistic about a character that we know quite well from the inside: 'in any situation, I would probably look, feel and act like so'. The reader does not need to be aware of any of this[;] all they need to receive is a feeling of authenticity (Tan, 2011).

Of significance is not that the author draws on their knowledge of self to influence character, but rather that this knowledge is evident in the images and can be conveyed to the reader to develop verisimilitude. How Tan chooses to represent his narrator through self-portraiture influences constructions of narrative authenticity and also brings into question the ethical implications of such an approach upon both author and reader in relation to borders between author/narrator and fact/fiction. This conflation highlights the subjective nature of the self in such texts and further necessitates a reader capable of interpreting these representations within what is, regardless of its auto/biographical information, a fictional text.

Using personal experience to convey a sense of authenticity is not a new concept; prose writers have been doing the same for some time; however, what is unique in *The arrival* is that narrative authenticity is developed through images only, with realistic visual representations of self accounting for much of the image text. The self-portrait forms the majority of the narrative and constructs the 'I' through visual representations of self that are authenticated by their photo-realistic handling and likeness to the author. Whether the reader knows these are self-portraits or not does not negate the reading of the images as genuine in some way, due to their realistic illustrative style and mimicry of photography. As a result, there is a conflation of author/narrator that operates in a similar way to that of the autographic and is

developed through the readers acceptance of realistic visual depictions of self as a visual signifier of authenticity.

In most graphic narratives 'cartoon' or 'comic' versions of self are used to develop what is referred to as 'universality'. In *Understanding comics* McCloud (1993) discusses the use of iconic imagery in 'comics' as a way to develop 'universality' in relation to imagery of the face, stating 'the more cartoony a face, the more people it could be said to describe' (31). He comments that as people 'we see ourselves in everything' and therefore associate personally with 'cartoony' representations of self more easily, because of their iconic, universal nature (33). McCloud theorises that the more abstracted a visual depiction of self becomes, the more easily a reader can associate with that character. While accurate, this statement refers to conventional approaches to graphic narrative in which simplistic imagery is accompanied by a sophisticated and detailed word text, with the written text developing much of the narrative authenticity. *The arrival* does not follow this traditional approach to graphic narrative and, instead, inverts the relationship between word and image, resulting in a dominant and therefore, authoritative image text. The authority of the image is further established through its realistic handling and allusions to photography in both style and format (referencing a traditional photo album in both size and layout). *The arrival* is a wordless narrative and relies on images to construct not only the narrative, but more importantly narrative authenticity. Tan (2006) uses realistic visual representations of self to construct his narrator and, similarly to *Maus* and *Fun home,* uses the photograph and a photo-realistic illustration style to develop and extend narrative authenticity.

In Bechdel's (2006) *Fun home*, multiple selves are evident: *Alison* the character, *Alison* the narrator, and *Alison* the author. Bechdel renders herself through both simplified line drawn cartoons and elaborate cross-hatched, drawn photographic reproductions, combined with a sophisticated written text to develop verisimilitude. These multiple depictions of self allude to a cartoon or 'flawed' self constructed from memory and a 'concrete' or authoritive 'I'. Similarly, *The arrival* (Tan, 2006) has a strong sense of narrative 'I', developed through the repetitive use of the self-portrait, and while autobiographic validity is not evident, the realistic visual representations of self are what build narrative authenticity. In *Fun home* Bechdel's use of realistic visual depictions of self are incorporated systematically and used in order to cement the text as autobiographical, and real, by further conflating author and narrator through image. This visual conflation not only links the authoritative and cartooned selves of Bechdel, but also confuses the construction of the narrative 'I' further blurring distinctions between fact and fiction.

It is through realistic visual self-representation that *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) is able to justify a fictional narrative existing in a fantastic and surreal setting. Similarly to *Fun home* (Bechdel, 2006), it is the representation of self in which the success of the text is dependant. Though both approach this representation differently, accurate and authenticated information, present in word and/or image text, is how verisimilitude is established. This correlation is somewhat problematic; however, it does provide a platform from which to question borders of the 'autographic' and the role of realistic visual representations of self in the construction of narrative authenticity. *The arrival*

uses realistic visual representations of self, historically accurate source materials and reinterpretations of iconic imagery to develop verisimilitude, but the construction of narrative authenticity is greatly dependant upon the readers' acceptance of the texts author to physically personify its narrator as a fictional character.

Art Spiegelman's (1996) *The complete Maus* is a seminal example of an autographic using a sophisticated written text with a more simplified, linear, black-and-white image text. Throughout, Spiegelman depicts himself as an anthropomorphised mouse bearing little actual resemblance to his physical self. However, in the early pages of the second book, he incorporates imagery that better illustrates how representations of self operate within the autographic by presenting himself in human form wearing a mouse mask. Here we see evidence of the nature of representations of self within the autographic, which in many ways reflect the approach taken by Tan (2006) in *The arrival*, that of the visual representation of self being a character or narrative model through which to convey the auto/biographical or fictional narrative.

To further the self-referential aspects of the autographic, Spiegelman (1996) incorporates a short movement in which he includes a previous work, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* This sub-text is framed through the narrator (Spiegelman in mouse form) reading the text as he holds it in his hands. The conflation of author/narrator in such imagery is evident and he develops this further by incorporating photographic imagery to extend narrative authenticity. In *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, an image the reader can assume to be young Spiegelman and his mother, given the context of the written text, is used in the opening panel. Photography is used on two other occasions in *Maus* (1996): a small portrait that forms part of a dedication and the portrait of a man (Vladek: Spiegelman's father), in a camp uniform occurring in the closing pages. These images, while not of the self, do build narrative authenticity by firstly drawing on connotations of truth embodied in the black-and-white (pre-digital) photograph and secondly by dismissing any difference between the photograph and the comic image, both being presented with the same authority. The accompanying text extends this notion and further conflates the narrator/author relationship. When Spiegelman's narrator states 'I need that photo in my book', he is referring to a real photograph, not a hand drawn replication as is the case in *Fun home* (Bechdel, 2006)*, and therefore draws our attention to the fact that there is little distinction between the two (Spiegelman, 1996: 294). Spiegelman furthers already established narrative authenticity through this approach, at once negating any difference between photographic and comic imagery, and also imbuing a subjective narrative 'I' with historic authenticity through the documentation of collected personal items. He presents a subjective 'truth' delivered through an 'I' dependant upon the narrative conventions of fiction, and it is within these overlaps between fact and fiction that ethical considerations to the visual representation of self become apparent.

Within *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1996) and *Fun home* (Bechdel, 2006) the photograph, whether directly reproduced or re-drawn in realistic detail, becomes a signifier of truth, used to further the construction of narrative authenticity by reiterating the accuracy of the biographic and historical information. Therefore, within graphic narrative, especially the autographic, the photographic or realistic visual depiction of self can be seen to denote notions of truth and can be used to further narrative

authenticity. In both texts the photographic image is used sporadically in order to alert the reader to the autographic and authentic context without acknowledging the difference between the photograph and the illustrative style. In *The arrival* (Tan, 2006) however, the illustrative style is consistent and uses a more realistic approach to image, providing a more succinct representation of narrative authenticity through visual representations of self. Similarly to Bechdel (2006) and Spiegelman (1996), Tan (2006) incorporates the photograph, but re-renders it in the same style of the image text with no distinction in the handling of the two. He also references the photograph in his images as source material, utilising iconic imagery and reinterpreting it in order to incorporate the authentic context of the image in much the same way Spiegelman and Bechdel use the photograph. This results in drawings capable of conveying narrative authenticity through an association to the historic nature of photography. In a way, this is how Tan approaches his realistic images of self and by referencing the photograph in illustration style and narrative content (rendering images of photographs, photo identification etc), he is able to imbue a sense of 'truth' within the images that is transferred to the fictional text, resulting in the development of verisimilitude.

We live in a time in which the photograph, while still a signifier of 'truth', is easily manipulated and can be digitally altered to reconstruct what it purportedly presents. Technical advancements and contemporary culture's fascination with the internet and social networking have helped create a world in which boundaries between public/private and fact/fiction are becoming harder to delineate. In this context, conflations between author and narrator are amplified in texts using realistic visual depictions of self; therefore, practitioners and readers need to make ethical decisions in relation to the role that such imagery plays in the construction of narrative authenticity. How this imagery is read in terms of narrative construction may require a reader to not only interpret its role in relation to word and image, but also to reassess their assumptions of the historic or authentic nature of the photographic image. Ethical approaches to the construction (by author and reader) of the narrative 'I' within graphic narratives require interpretation of multiple narrative and meta-narrative elements that may extend or contradict what each present, and as such conflate notions of fact/fiction, self/subject, and public/private. Within these overlapping dichotomies the 'autographic' resides as a narrative genre reliant upon these conflations in its construction and requires a reader capable of navigating these shifting borders. It is imperative that as readers, and as authors, we negotiate and define these borders in ways that are mutually beneficial and ethically sound, and take into consideration the ramifications of using self-representation as a means to construct narrative authenticity. How ideals and definitions of the historic and the fictional affect visual constructions of self may prove to be less binary in nature, and, as in the autographic, may be defined through interpretation rather than acceptance of that which is presented as authentic.

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