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TELLING IMAGES? THE SELF-REFLEXIVE TURN IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN GRAPHIC NOVELS

Abstract: This article proposes to see graphic novel as the epitome of a twofold turn. First, as *the* genre of the pictorial turn, a form that demonstrates the transition from the verbal to the visual. Indeed, the graphic novel can be described as a verbal-visual compound whose power of expression arises from the tension between text and image. The burden of advancing the plot is primarily placed on the visual sequence: images in graphic novels serve to “tell” of the events. With its roots in the popular medium of the comics, the graphic novel embraces unequivocalness of the image as its main principle. This rule, however, is being increasingly violated. This development signals the second turn: the so-called “self-reflexive” turn, where the image is emancipated from the referent. This article examines instances of a play with the image and its representational status. I will analyze selected sequences from contemporary American graphic novels, including David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik’s *City of Glass* (1994), Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000), and Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* (2003), describing the strategies employed to render the narrative less straightforward. Such strategies as the use of color fields, non-standard page layout, or emphasis on the abstract character of the portrayed shapes and forms constitute significant additions to graphic tales. I will demonstrate how this subversive visual language enriches the medium of the graphic novel – a primarily self-reflexive form.

Keywords: pictorial turn, comics, graphic novel, visual narrative, self-reflexive turn.

“A picture (...) is a very peculiar and paradoxical creature, both concrete and abstract, both a specific individual thing and a symbolic form that embraces a totality,”¹ W.J.T. Mitchell aptly observes in his discussion of not only the poetics of images, but also of an entity that came to define the present era.

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 2005, p. XVII.

Indeed, the “pictorial turn,” as Mitchell declares, “is happening.”² The shift is described essentially in terms of a phenomenon-in-the-making, one that is gaining momentum in the present and thus poses specific problems for art history, literary studies and cultural studies – it is “a postlinguistic, post-semiotic, rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.”³ Thus, it is only natural that considerable changes should take place not only in the “theory” of pictures, the way they are studied, analyzed, and read, but also some reflection should be offered as regards the role of the image in contemporary culture. I would like to discuss this question in the context of one of the most interesting genres to emerge at the interface between literature and visual arts, namely the graphic novel.

I propose to see the graphic novel as the epitome of a twofold turn. First, the graphic novel should be considered as *the* genre of the pictorial turn, one that demonstrates the transition from the verbal (the novel) to the visual. Indeed, graphic novels are unique narrative forms: suspended somewhere between word and image, they derive their narrative power from the coexistence of the two, constantly negotiating the relation established between the sayable and the seeable. Naturally, the history of graphic storytelling, or the history of word and image relations in general, extends beyond the existence of the contemporary graphic novel. The form in question is said to be born in the late 1970s,⁴ with such important precedents as the Bayeux Tapestry, the tradition of ekphrasis and the “sisterly arts”, and the works of William Hogarth or William Blake established before, but it is the rise of the graphic novel witnessed especially during the past forty years that calls into question the “linguistic,” heralding the era of the “pictorial.” This is not to say that we are dissociated from language. On the contrary, I believe that the pictorial turn builds up on the linguistic turn the way the Renaissance built up on Antiquity. It is the era of pictures, alas pictures which are “aware” of language and its system, and as such function in the presence of and in reference to their linguistic “other.”

² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1994, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴ “In 1978, veteran cartoonist Will Eisner produced *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, a collection of four interrelated stories about tenement life in the Bronx during the Great Depression. (...) Eisner believed the potential for comics readership was widely untapped. He used the term graphic novel while pitching his manuscript-length comic book to a mainstream publisher (...).” S. Weiner, “How the Graphic Novel Changed American Comics”, in: *The Rise of the American Comics Artists: Creators and Contexts*, ed. P. Williams, J. Lyons, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, p. 6.

It should be pointed out that the visual layer of graphic novels and comics is generally thought to play a more important narrative function than words, the latter being merely a companion to what is essentially a sequential visual work. Indeed, to quote Scott McCloud's classic definition, comics as a genre is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."⁵ This explanation establishes unique focal points for the study of the genre. First, sequentiality is highlighted as the general framework of the graphic novel. It is through the successive presentation of images that the story is conveyed, images alone it should be added, because McCloud does not emphasize the intrinsic character of the word. Thus, in his view, comics thrive to a greater degree on pictures and not on the combination of the verbal and the pictorial per se. In his insistence on the central role of the pictorial sequence, however, McCloud points out that the artist does not want "you to browse the thing, he wants you to *read* it [emphasis original – M.O.]."⁶ Thus, the pictorial, as conceptualized by McCloud, is the pictorial influenced by the linguistic turn, where images are read and not merely seen.⁷

The second turn that is taking place within the realm of the graphic novel is a still more complex phenomenon. It has to do with the role and form of the image in the graphic novel. As it is only through a carefully conceptualized succession of images that a story, a narrative, can be developed, images in graphic novels serve to illustrate, show, represent, "tell" of the events, inevitably adopting a realistic, albeit simplified, style in order, as Roger Sabin observes, "to carry the story."⁸ As such, images enable the reader to decode the presented world and to progress through it without confusion. This rule, however, is being increasingly violated as graphic novelists purposefully engage in a play with the representational character of the drawing. Thus, to paraphrase Mitchell, it can be said that we are now experiencing the "self-reflexive" turn in contemporary American graphic novels, where the image is emancipated from the referent. Although the image still functions in a sequence, it very often disrupts the flow of the narrative and instead draws attention to its own artificial status as a vessel of meaning. Thus, it also highlights the unique character of the graphic novel, focusing more on the "graphic" than on the "novel."

5 S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, William Morrow Paperbacks, New York 1993, p. 9.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

7 Further on in his study McCloud in fact talks about "the vocabulary of comics" (i.e. elements conveying meaning in the comic book or graphic novel). *Ibid.*, p. 20.

8 R. Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, Phaidon Press, London 2010, p. 44.

This article critically examines instances of the self-reflexive turn in three contemporary American graphic novels. I will analyze selected sequences from David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik's *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*,⁹ Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*,¹⁰ and Craig Thompson's *Blankets*¹¹ and discuss the adopted subversive strategies of visual narration. Such strategies as the use of color fields, non-standard page layout, enlargement of respective details, or emphasis on the abstract character of shapes and forms portrayed constitute significant additions to graphic tales. All of these devices appear to perform the same function of disrupting the narrative. They do not render it completely unreadable, however, but significantly undermine its structure. As I will try to demonstrate, these strategies cannot be merely disregarded as "producing an aesthetic response in the viewer." On the contrary, they are to be seen as elements expanding and enriching the graphic narrative and as signs of the self-reflexive turn that takes place in the genre.

First, let me briefly comment on the theoretical approaches behind the poetics of graphic novels. The notion of a "realistic" style should also be explained as to avoid any confusion concerning this wide-encompassing term. I adopt the understanding of "realistic" in relation to a meaningful sign. To draw on Will Eisner's definition, "an image is the memory or idea of an object or experience recorded by a narrator (...). In comics, images are generally (...) rendered with economy in order to facilitate their usefulness as language."¹² Thus, connection to the real world is maintained; figurative art prevails. Such images, as Rudolf Arnheim observes, "portray things at a lower level of abstraction than themselves."¹³ In other words, they are mimetic but also allow a certain level of simplification and abstraction which contribute to the universality of imagery. In fact, the very idiom of comics is "the stripped-down intensity of a (...) visual style."¹⁴ Similarly to comics, graphic novels embrace unequivocalness and familiarity of the image as their main principle.

A single image, however, cannot narrate and it is through the postulated sequence of visuals that the narrative potential can be unveiled. It is always in the context of a succession of images that the authors of contemporary graphic novels introduce their subversive strategies. Indeed, as Thierry Groensteen

⁹ D. Mazzucchelli, P. Karasik, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*, Avon Books, New York 1994.

¹⁰ C. Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Jonathan Cape, London 2000.

¹¹ C. Thompson, *Blankets*, Top Shelf Productions, Marietta, Georgia 2003.

¹² W. Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 1996, p. 9.

¹³ R. Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1969, p. 137.

¹⁴ S. McCloud, *Understanding...*, p. 31.

points out, “[c]lassic comics, forced to submit to the imperialism of narration, were confined to explicit images and transitions (even if they did on occasion overuse captions that redundantly reaffirmed the meaning already obvious from the image), and most panels were self-sufficient. In contemporary comics, in contrast, there is an innovative current characterized by a poetics of reticence, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. Some authors prefer to stray off the narrow path of ‘narrative and nothing but.’ They are attracted to gray areas (...).”¹⁵ A linear and logical progression of images is no longer a predestinate model of narration. In fact, a model determined by the notions of clarity, readability and straightforward storytelling has become but one among many different paradigms exploring the potential of the image and relations between images. While tapping into the established notions of visual narration, contemporary graphic novels deliberately challenge the expectations and habits of the readers of traditional comics.

The first example of such play with conventions is David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik’s *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*.¹⁶ Published in 1994, this adaptation of Paul Auster’s classic, the first novel in his *New York Trilogy*, raises many questions at the very level of its conceptualization. It is after all an adaptation, not an “original” work, and an adaptation, it should be added, of a work that is only superficially a hard-boiled detective story. Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* goes beyond the established conventions of the genre, touching upon such phenomena as metafiction, authorship, intertextuality, interrogation of language, and ironic postmodern pastiche.¹⁷ Adapting such a work is thus understandably difficult and, as Paul Karasik points out, *City of Glass* “appears initially impossible to do because it is so non-visual, because it is largely about the nature of language, because its subject matter is text itself, and the writing supporting that theme is so present and precise.”¹⁸ Thus, the adaptation poses a twofold challenge of how to convey a wealth of meaning contained in the novel and of how to devise a visual language that would be as nuanced and sophisticated as Auster’s prose.

¹⁵ T. Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2013, p. 30.

¹⁶ Script adaptation by David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik. Art by David Mazzucchelli. The graphic novel was published as a part of Neon Lit series, which features graphic novel adaptations of modern and post-modern crime fiction. The books and artists in the series were selected by Bob Callahan and Art Spiegelman who conceived the series as a curious mix of noir and hard-boiled crime novels.

¹⁷ “*City of Glass* is a surprisingly non-visual work at its core, a complex web of words and abstract ideas in playfully shifting narrative styles.” A. Spiegelman, “Picturing a Glassy-Eyed Private I” in: *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*, D. Mazzucchelli and P. Karasik, Picador, New York 2004, p. II.

¹⁸ D. Coughlan, “Paul Auster’s *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*”, *Modern Fiction Studies* 2006, vol. 52, no 4, p. 837.

The postulated intricacy of meaning is rendered through the changes in the drawing style, which vary in their intensity. Generally, the visual layer of *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* is set in a minimalistic black and white heavy-lined style. The pictures are presented in a classic grid layout, with one to nine panels per page. This rigid structure, a framework which anchors the entire narrative, is undermined only towards the end when the protagonist, detective Daniel Quinn, loses himself in the streets of New York, at which point another narrator takes his place to finish the story. Rigid divisions and hard edges then give way to gentler and blurrier images, thus signaling the different narrative voice taking over the graphic novel. Yet, it is only when the reader immerses him- or herself deeper into the graphic narrative, analyzing sequences on a micro level, that he or she fully experiences the complexity of the visual tale.

Although, as Paul Karasik facetiously remarks, Auster gives his characters “things to do,”¹⁹ the graphic novel does not simply depict the characters of Daniel Quinn or Peter Stillman as involved in certain actions or situations. On the contrary, Karasik and Mazzucchelli continuously disrupt straightforward action sequences with abstract imagery, thus pointing to the artificial status of the narrative: the pictorial is emphasized in favor of the linguistic. In Auster’s book, the reader may never relax and comfortably slip into an entertaining detective tale. Similarly here: the reader may never rely on the visual sequence to seamlessly guide him through the story.

The first instance of such a subversive intervention can in fact be found at the very beginning of the graphic novel, when the telephone rings in the middle of the night, pulling Quinn into what would become an inescapable game of identities and interpretations. Indeed, the first page heralds the struggles that await the reader: an ambiguity of the visuals and a sense of suspension between figuration and abstraction, representation and self-reflexivity. The first page consists of only one large panel, a vertical rectangle, which echoes the format of the page. The opening panel is completely black with white letters in the center reading “It was a wrong number that started it...”²⁰ Apart from the initial bafflement – after all one would expect the tale to settle into the fictional (and figurative) world immediately – the first panel offers a variety of readings. To begin with, it is possible to decode the panel relying on the knowledge of Auster’s text. The reader then is aware that the protagonist receives a call in the night and interprets the black field as “night,” instantly imposing an explanatory vision onto what otherwise would be disturbing, abstract, and at odds with their expectations of how a graphic narrative should function. Interestingly enough, in such case the narrative, understood as interrelated

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 837.

²⁰ D. Mazzucchelli, P. Karasik, *City...*, p. 1.

events, *sine qua non* rendered figuratively, seems to prevail over the sovereignty of the visual.

Thus, it would be of great interest to consider a number of autonomous readings. The black page at the beginning may function almost as a “declaration of independence” of the graphic tale, which asserts itself as an entity unsubordinated to the narrative, or an entity weaving its own visual narrative competitive towards the events that should be depicted. In such terms, the black abstract rectangular at the beginning of the graphic novel does not have to “mean” anything. On the contrary, its power lies in its abstract character. It defies the accompanying words with its ambiguity. As David Coughlan observes, such a strategy “is at odds with an understanding of images as communicators of a universal truth, but Karasik and Mazzucchelli provoke these various interpretations, aware that (visual) language does not have to tell the truth to be meaningful.”²¹ It is interesting to see how this concept develops as the story unfolds on the next page.

Page two is divided into nine panels (also vertical rectangles), arranged in threes in three rows. Three panels arranged in a horizontal sequence at the very top of the page depict respectively: a field of black with rounded white edges around the corners; a white circle on a black background; and white letters, the white circle mentioned, and an unidentified white shape, all against a black background. On the one hand, the reader experiences a sense of continuation of the black abstract panel from page one and, on the other, s/he may observe a gradual concretization of forms. It is only after the reader moves on to the following panels (in the second and third row) that s/he discovers that what initially appeared to be non-representational is in fact an extreme close-up of a black telephone with a white dial plate, slowly emerging from the abstractness of the color fields into the concreteness of identifiable objects.

The first impression, however, is of confusion and bewilderment. The reader is confronted with images s/he is unable to “read.” Indeed, the reader faces images that defy reading and only submit to their role as “vessels of meaning” after an initial struggle. Captions inserted in the boxes above the panels do not aid one in unravelling the mystery either, as the information about “the telephone ringing”²² or “the voice on the other end”²³ do not correspond to the visuals. Only the last caption, “asking for someone he was not,”²⁴ sheds some light on the nature of the narrative, gently mocking the

²¹ D. Coughlan, *Paul Auster's...*, p. 847.

²² D. Mazzucchelli, P. Karasik, *City...*, p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

reader who at this point, at the very beginning of the novel, might be asking for something this story is not. This short abstract introductory sequence in fact manages to achieve three things: warn the reader about the nature of the story, play with the conventions of the detective genre where every detail is of crucial importance, and establish itself as a self-reflexive meta-visual text.

Another instance of the postulated self-reflexive character of the graphic novel can be further observed on page four. Here, a sequence of six panels horizontally arranged in threes in two rows depicts a progression from a realistic referential image of a city skyline into an abstract combination of black lines against a white background. The process of abstracting images is reversed as the reader moves from a concrete representation of New York to a confusing tangle of lines. On the visual level, this sequence perversely combines a logical continuation of rectangular shapes with discontinuity of referents, thus misleading the reader. It is only thanks to word captions that the reader is able to proceed through this sequence. Verbally, this fragment reads as one comprehensive whole, lending the reader some insight into Quinn's mind: the captions accompanying the six panels in question inform the reader that the protagonist loves New York, loves walking in the city and sometimes allows himself to get lost in it – he gives “himself up to the streets,”²⁵ overwhelmed by the city's vastness. Thus, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* both guides and distracts, gives an impression of making progress and reaching a dead end, and, most importantly, it asserts itself as a visual text independent of its verbal sphere.

Karasik and Mazzucchelli's graphic novel certainly contributed to the growing innovation and self-confidence of the genre. Initially regarded as an inferior competitor to the traditional novel, in the era of the pictorial turn the graphic novel is now establishing itself as a form independent of the novel and indeed a form that brings with itself its own modes of reading and visual literacy. Such works as *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* do not perpetuate the clichés of cartoon storytelling,²⁶ but challenge the visual narrative and in doing so also challenge the reader or the reader/viewer. In fact, it was only a matter of time before critics acknowledged this unique status of the graphic novel, claiming that “to talk about adult comics does not only mean

²⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁶ Eisner humorously observes that it actually takes time to separate word and image in graphic storytelling, making the most of the visual sequence: “Let's assume (...) a guy is running down the street and he jumps on a parapet. And the man says – as sometimes happens in much of the comic stuff I see – ‘I am jumping on the parapet.’ And then he hits the villain and says, ‘I am punching you in the nose.’ You look at this and you feel, ‘Well, I can show this visually. I don't need the dialogue.’” W. Eisner, *Shop Talk*, Dark Horse Comics, Milwaukee 2001, p. 33.

to talk about the evolution of language, topics, genres. It means to talk about a proliferation of tendencies and levels on which comics can be spoken of as written literature is spoken of.”²⁷

Indeed, numerous “adult comics” followed, exploring new ways in which visual storytelling can be conceptualized. Chris Ware is one of the authors who greatly influenced the American graphic novel as a genre. His work is avant-garde and experimental as regards the visual sphere, but also nostalgic and deeply emotional in his treatment of the subject matter: urban life, loneliness, and social maladjustment. Ware’s most important and influential work is *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*.²⁸ It is only ostensibly a contemporary story of a middle-aged office worker struggling with extreme shyness. It is also a story dealing with abusive and hurtful parent and child relations, the failure of the American dream, and the dark side of American society.

Upon its release in 2000, *Jimmy Corrigan* won great critical acclaim, with one of the critics calling it a “Great American Novel,” “a canonical book condensing the tensions, experiences, hopes, tragedies, and triumphs of the American republic and its peoples.”²⁹ Indeed, the story can be read as a post-modern deconstruction of the American superhero, as well as an innovative work of graphic fiction, “creating”, as Gene Kannenberg Jr. observes, “complimentary, co-existing narratives.”³⁰ The reader is confronted with three storylines – that of young Jimmy, middle-aged Jimmy, and Jimmy’s grandfather as a young boy – and faces the challenge of organizing them as they interweave throughout nearly four hundred unmarked pages. The narrative was designed as a complex maze of interdependent storylines and its graphic realization adds still more depth to the novel, utilizing unique visual experiments and establishing itself as a self-reflexive text.

The most direct and disruptive interventions in the narrative are the so-called “cut-out pages.” They come with instructions on the side and, as the name suggests, can be cut out to build, for example, the farm on which Jimmy’s grandfather lived as a child or a cylinder with a series of images on the inside (visible from the outside through vertical slits) that create a moving picture

²⁷ U. Eco, *Quattro Modi di Parlare di Fumetti*, *Fucine Mute* 1999. (www.fucine.com/archivio/fm09/eco.htm; accessed 30 June 2015).

²⁸ *Jimmy Corrigan* was published in 2000 as a single volume. The story had been previously serialized in a Chicago newspaper.

²⁹ P. Williams, “A Purely American Tale: The Tragedy of Racism and ‘Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth’ as Great American Novel” in: *The Rise of the American Comics Artists: Creators and Contexts*, ed. P. Williams, J. Lyons, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, p. 196-197.

³⁰ G. Kannenberg Jr., “The Comics of Chris Ware” in: *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. J. Heer, K. Worcester, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2009, p. 313.

when the cylinder spins. It should be emphasized that such pages do not separate individual storylines but are always inserted as an element distracting the reader from the plot he or she is currently following. Of course, these pages can be disregarded as merely a joke or a childish play on behalf of the author, yet such a reading would ignore what in my view constitutes the essence of Ware's work: the acknowledgment of the reader as a co-author and a co-builder of the story.³¹

In her discussion of the modes of visual reading, Mieke Bal emphasizes the role of continuity in the reader's understanding of the plot. The reader, Bal writes, "makes [images] into a whole that is comprehensible because it is continuous. Having a certain continuity in one's thought depends, at a level that is more subliminal than conscious, on having a certain continuity in one's images."³² By consciously playing with this most basic rule of visual narration, Ware both challenges the reader in the quest for making sense and simultaneously strengthens the reader's role as an active agent. Indeed, while the cut-out pages break the continuity of the narrative, at the same time they signal to the reader that it is he or she who must carefully put all the pieces together. The physical act of building a cut-out model becomes a metaphor for constructing a comprehensible story. These graphic elements are a sign that the graphic novel is aware of its status as a story-in-the-making, but they also actively oppose this status, inasmuch as they disrupt the narrative.

The three diagrams inserted in *Jimmy Corrigan* are elements that play a similar role: they reinforce the reader's active role in building the story and intersect the storyline. Formally speaking, they include panels, but their organization differs greatly from a rigorous geometric grid adopted on other pages. Particular scenes, episodes, or meaningful objects are depicted in individual panels which are not positioned next to each other, i.e. in a sequence. They are distributed on the page in various configurations, requiring different directions of reading: horizontal, vertical, diagonal, right-to-left, and left-to-right. In some cases, small arrows help the readers in establishing connections between the images, but in general interpretative choices are left entirely to them. Although such a conceptualization of the page may, in theory, seem like a game the author plays with the readers, teasing them to think outside the "panel," the actual informational value of such a diagram is not to be underestimated.

³¹ Chris Ware writes in one of the instructions accompanying a cut-out page that "[i]t is, needless to say, not entirely necessary to complete these tasks to fully appreciate the story in question, though those who do attempt the feat will find themselves more acquainted with the rivulets and tributaries of its grander scope." C. Ware, *Jimmy*..., n. p.

³² M. Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1997, p. 5.

It would be impossible to briefly summarize *Jimmy Corrigan*, as the complexity of the story extends beyond the mere “first this happened and then that,” but in order to fully comprehend the role played by the diagrams, some context is required. The two most elaborate structures appear towards the very end of the novel. The middle-aged Jimmy Corrigan left Chicago to meet his father for the first time (the father left when Jimmy was a baby) only to learn that his dad re-married and adopted a child, an African American girl. At the time she and Jimmy meet, Amy is a grown woman with a strong and loving bond to her father. Jimmy is taken aback for two reasons. First, he never expected his father to be a loving parent and never expected a member of his family to have a different skin color. Ware skillfully but also mercilessly exposes the racism underlying American society, at the same time presenting the reader with a purely personal side of Jimmy’s discovery that he does, in fact, have a family.

The diagrams in question inserted into the sequential graphic narrative serve to acquaint the reader with Amy’s ancestry. The first diagram presents the history behind the girl’s birth and adoption. A sequence of five square panels arranged horizontally at the bottom of the page depicts respectively: a young African American couple walking and holding hands in a high school corridor; the same couple in the same place, but in changed circumstances, with the girl pregnant and the boy walking away with a different love interest; the pregnant girl giving birth in a hospital; the girl, still in a hospital bed, signing some documents; and, finally, a close-up view of the adoption papers. The panels do not use any words and yet it is clear that Amy was born out of wedlock to a teenage and immature mother who had no choice but to give her up for adoption.

The story of Amy’s birth composed of five panels is a foundation for other stories. A short sequence arranged vertically on the right hand side of the page originates from the panel depicting the adoption papers. The close-up view of the documents gives way to a more distanced one in the next panel. The third and final panel is another close-up, but this time the papers are in the pocket of a yellow jacket. This vertical sequence then changes direction one more time as a small arrow guides the reader to a bigger panel, a horizontal rectangle located at the top of the page, which depicts the building of Oswaga County adoption services and a woman in the yellow jacket leaving the building with an African American girl. Then, another arrow advises the reader to move from right to left and see another “panel” or in fact a photograph of Jimmy’s father with his new wife and daughter. The ingenuity of such a visual solution lies in the balance between complexity and clarity. While the reader’s eye wanders across the page trying to find the ways to correctly read the diagram, struggling between the totality of the page and the individual sequences and

possible directions of reading, all of the respective stories eventually fall into place, deriving meaning from other elements of the diagram. The direction proposed above is only one of many different possibilities. The readers may start with the photograph and work their way down or begin with the adoption papers and choose whether they wish to proceed up or down the page. Regardless of the direction, the final understanding of Amy's origin is bound to be similar.

If the cut out pages can be described as interventions in the narrative, the diagrams should be classified as re-conceptualizations of sequential art. In fact, as Ware himself points out, "You can look at a comic as you would look at a structure that you could turn around in your mind and see all sides of at once."³³ Such an approach understandably influences the manner in which Ware treats images and their functions. Here, instead of devoting a separate section to Amy, Ware provides the reader with her background on one page (the diagram on the opposite page presents the story of Amy's mother and grandparents). The diagram's form evidences Amy's role in the graphic novel (she is a surprising addition to what is essentially Jimmy's story), but it also visually presents the complexity of Amy's family situation. Finally, the diagram redefines the page. Indeed, as observed by Isaac Cates, the diagrams in Ware's comics are a testament to the comics' complicated visual language. They both highlight the language aspect of the comics (by presenting "the grammar of the image") but they are also essentially non-literary.³⁴ As can be seen, Ware takes the visual language of the graphic novel a step further. Not only does he experiment with visual narration on the level of a single panel or sequence, but he also goes beyond these two basic units which define the genre in order to explore the possibilities offered by an entire page. Karasik and Mazzucchelli challenged the reader with abstract imagery. In Ware's case, abstraction functions on a different conceptual level. It is not confined to a single image, or a series of images, but controls the very idea of how a graphic novel should function in contact with the reader. In a sense, "[t]he art becomes the story."³⁵

Craig Thompson's illustrated novel *Blankets* (2003) is closer in its premise to *City of Glass*, inasmuch as it experiments more with abstraction confined to panels and sequences. In what is essentially a graphic *Künst-*

³³ D. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2004, p. 25.

³⁴ I. Cates, "Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams" in: *Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, ed. D. Ball, M. Kuhlman, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, p. 92-94.

³⁵ W. Eisner, *Graphic...*, p. 22.

Jerroman, Thompson depicts his childhood in Wisconsin, influenced by strict religious upbringing, and his transition to adulthood through the story of his first love. The graphic novel adopts a more or less unified realistic style, which changes to more surrealist and grotesque one in Craig's dreams and religious visions. The panels also differ depending on the situation portrayed. They range from standard rectangles with clearly defined frames arranged in a rigid grid layout, through sketchy frameless visions, to images extending over an entire page. Thompson uses only black and white on a page, yet manages to convey every nuance of not so much the plot, that is the events that constitute his life, but the emotions he experiences. Indeed, *Blankets* achieves its expressive potential from skillfully balancing between the quiet down-to-earthiness of its storyline and the unconventional visual means. Among Thompson's numerous innovative graphic solutions, two are of special interest to me: an excessive use of white, sometimes filling an entire panel or page, and frequent use of abstract ornamentation.

The mechanics of inserting white panels into a narrative (and figurative) sequence present in *Blankets* resembles the strategy encountered in *City of Glass*. Such interventions in the narrative disrupt it, breaking the reader's rhythm of following the story. Thompson in fact ironically starts the third chapter entitled *Blank Sheet* with a single white panel, which is gently outlined in a thin black line on an otherwise completely white page.³⁶ From the semantic point of view, the reader almost automatically reads white as "empty." The panel is classified as blank and devoid of meaning, thus constituting an obstacle in the narrative. The author, however, aids the reader in understanding this fragment with verbal clues. The title of the chapter, *Blank Sheet*, introduces an element of postmodern irony to the story, while the words in the left top corner of the white panel re-anchor the reader in its reality and materiality. The caption reads: "There was a certain challenge Phil [Craig's younger brother – M.O.] and I would undertake each winter".³⁷ and it is through these words that one begins to interpret the otherwise semantically empty white panel.

For one, in allusion to the self-reflexive character of the story introduced by the title of the chapter, the panel can be interpreted as a work-in-progress, the first stages of drawing a story which starts with tracing a panel frame on an empty page. For a brief moment, the reader may assume the role of the author, facing a blank sheet that is to become a fragment of the visual story. This first reading, however, is skillfully challenged by another one as the reader turns the page only to see a panel depicting Craig and his brother in

³⁶ C. Thompson, *Blankets*, p. 131.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

a winter landscape, trying to walk “ATOP the snow, rather than THROUGH it.”³⁸ The white of this panel and the white of the previous panel reinforce one another in acquiring a concrete meaning, that of snow, and challenge one another, inasmuch as they can be simultaneously read as abstract (empty) and concrete. To some extent, these two conflicting readings echo the test Craig and Phil were facing: how far can one go without concretizing the meaning in a visual form, verging on abstraction, as if one were walking atop the snow, before the story eventually collapses in on itself.

Empty white panels, which acquire concrete meaning only in the context of subsequent images, are in a fact a recurring theme in the story. They represent the isolation and loneliness of the main character, but also his struggles in creating a visual narrative, balancing between the visual self-consciousness and sovereignty of abstraction, realized as a field of white, and the requirements and restrictions of graphic storytelling that must advance the story. The French semiotician Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle claimed that the graphic narrative is a medium that exposes its artificiality in the process of its unfolding and as such is essentially self-reflexive.³⁹ Thompson’s white panels, simultaneously abstract and concrete, seem to confirm this argument.

Snow also takes on another meaning and visual form as the story develops. From the moment Craig falls in love with Raina, his first ever love interest, snow begins to be represented in a more abstract form, as dots and dashes, which eventually turn into completely abstract ornamental signs, signaling a romantic relationship between the young lovers. Such a striking visual transformation of the way snow is depicted takes place at the end of Chapter Four. Craig, who lives with his family on a remote farm in Wisconsin, travels to Michigan to spend two weeks at Raina’s home. One afternoon the couple decides to take a long walk in the woods. Overwhelmed by the beauty of nature and their romantic feelings for one another, they lie down in the snow and watch snowflakes fall. The story is beautifully rendered in black and white, with realistic portrayal of the protagonists and winter landscape, only to take a more abstract turn on the two final pages of the chapter.⁴⁰ The reader is then confronted with four panels filled with a mesmerizing pattern of black and white dots and dashes. The penultimate page consists of three panels. One dominant square panel at the top and two smaller rectangular ones arranged next to each other at the bottom of the page. Although they are grouped in a sequence, all of the panels are non-representational. It is only the density of the abstract pattern that successively changes from white dots on a black

³⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

³⁹ P. Fresnault-Deruelle, *La Bande Dessinée*, Armand Colin, Paris 2009, p. 25-27.

⁴⁰ C. Thompson, *Blankets*, p. 260-261.

background in the first panel to a condensed field of black dashes on a white background in the third panel. The overall effect is of deepening and intensifying blackness which, nevertheless, does not consume the entire third panel but allows some glimpses of white to show through. The penultimate page, filled with panels, is then confronted with the final page that is almost entirely white with only one centrally located panel which echoes in its shape, size, and form the last panel on the previous page.

What surprises the reader about these two final pages of Chapter Four is the abrupt transition from figuration to abstraction. On a purely visual level, some continuity is maintained because of the consistent page layout (panel arrangement) and a high contrast of black and white. As far as the story is concerned, however, the inclusion of the abstract sequence conveys a sense of disruption as if a breakdown in communication has just taken place. The story refuses to take the reader forward; time is suspended. In his analysis of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*, an American comic book about a red demon who becomes a superhero, Scott Bukatman comes up with the definition of the so-called "pillow panels," that is panels which "contribute nothing to the action or forward movement of the narrative. (...) The stasis they present within the narrative, then is literally a moment of suspense."⁴¹ One may thus consider Thompson's sequence in this framework: as an interval in the narrative that offers the reader an opportunity to reflect on the events.

And in fact, as much as Thompson delights in wandering off the straightforward path of the narrative, he always leaves clues for the reader to follow. The first panel on the penultimate page of Chapter Four is accompanied by a caption which reads: "And then the sense of space, of depth, is lost as the snowflakes fall into a pattern."⁴² The words establish a link between the abstract panels, the characters' state of mind (who realize the significance of their love), and the reader's experience who is able to see a connection between the figurative narrative and panels filled with dots and dashes. Most importantly, however, the self-reflexivity of these abstract panels is a testament to the sovereignty of graphic storytelling: a development fostered by the pictorial turn.

It can be seen that all of the above graphic novels challenge the reader's deeply held belief that semantic and narrative coherence are to be taken for granted. They possess, to quote Groensteen, "the particular virtue of proving that the play of abstract forms should not be taken automatically to imply

⁴¹ S. Bukatman, "Sculpture, Stasis, the Comics, and Hellboy". *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no 3, p. 111.

⁴² C. Thompson, *Blankets*, p. 260.

an absence of meaning.”⁴³ Abstract is understood here as an anti-thesis of realistic, as an image that does not represent the outside world, but points to itself instead, demanding of the reader to acknowledge its self-reflexive status. The ultimate result, however, is not the collapse of the narrative, but its enrichment. A play with the image that is both productive and exciting. Examined in the framework of a twofold change, the pictorial and the self-reflexive turn, the graphic novel is a form that develops on a continuum of the verbal – the referential visual – the self-reflexive visual. The graphic novel reinvents not only the form of the novel, but also visual storytelling. It is, to paraphrase Mitchell, concrete and abstract, specific and symbolic, postlinguistic and post-semiotic.

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WYMOWNE OBRAZY? ZWROT AUTOTEMATYCZNY WE WSPÓŁCZESNYCH AMERYKAŃSKICH POWIEŚCIACH GRAFICZNYCH (streszczenie)

Artykuł rozpatruje powieść graficzną w kontekście dwojakiego zwrotu. Po pierwsze, powieść graficzna to gatunek, którego narodziny i rozwój są ściśle związane ze zwrotem obrazowym, demonstrując przejście od opowiadania do obrazowania. Powieść graficzną można zdefiniować jako zespolenie słowa i obrazu: jej siła wyrazu leży w napięciu pomiędzy sferą werbalną a wizualną. Akcję „prowadzi” jednak głównie sekwencja wizualna; obrazy w powieści graficznej mają „opowiedzieć” o wydarzeniach. Czerpiąc z tradycji obrazowania komiksowego, powieść graficzna opiera się na obrazach figuralnych i jednoznacznych w odczytaniu. Jednak coraz więcej autorów powieści graficznych świadomie porzuca jednoznaczność i czytelność narracji wizualnej na rzecz eksperymentów w tej sferze. Jest to sygnał dokonującego się drugiego zwrotu

– tzw. zwrotu „autotematycznego” – w ramach którego obraz oddziela się od referenta. Artykuł opisuje gry z obrazem i jego reprezentacyjnym charakterem we współczesnych amerykańskich powieściach graficznych: *City of Glass* (1994) D. Mazzucchelli’ego i P. Karasika, *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) C. Ware’a, oraz *Blankets* (2003) C. Thompsona. Analizie zostają poddane wybrane sekwencje poszczególnych powieści, ukazując jakie strategie graficzne czynią narrację wizualną formą opierającą się jednoznacznemu odczytaniu. Płaszczyzny koloru, niestandardowy układ strony oraz abstrakcyjne obrazowanie wzbogacają język powieści graficznych – medium w swojej istocie autotematyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: zwrot obrazowy, komiks, powieść graficzna, narracja wizualna, zwrot autotematyczny.