Between memory & fantasy: Autofiction & worldbuilding in autobiographical comics

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ABSTRACT

This article locates the practice of creating autobiographical comics (autobiocomics) as products of autobiographical fiction (autofiction) and imaginary worlds. Autobiocomics is a comics genre characterised by imaginative and subjective representations of the autobiographical self. Autobiocomic stories attempt to convey an emotional truth by depicting the author's authentic reactions to people, places, or events. With this research, we intend to contribute to the existing autobiocomic scholarship by demonstrating that autofiction and worldbuilding theories can deepen the analysis of specific autobiocomics when instrumentalised in tandem. This provides the opportunity to read autobiocomic texts for their shared characteristics and generate insights on the author's relationship to their representations of self and the textual world wherein the self is revealed. In this article, we review autobiocomics, providing a brief chronological overview and identifying relevant concepts to position the analysis and discussion thereafter. The analysis suggests future research into the implications of the authors' embodiment of their textual avatar and how they inhabit the textual world. Three autobiocomics are read, discussed, and analysed to demonstrate the characteristics of the medium as it pertains to both these theories: *Drieman* (2020) by Wide Vercnocke, *La mer à boire* (2022) by Blutch, and *Fluctuat et Mergitur* (2020) by Conrad Botes.

Keywords: Autobiocomics, autofiction, imaginary world, worldbuilding, autobiographical pact, textual self.

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Introduction

This research emerged with the creation of a series of autobiographical comics drawn in 2019 and 2020. During this process, Octavia Roodt used practice-based research methods to explore how she creates meaningful stories by depicting herself as a character. Through creative practice and systematic reflection, Roodt argued that autobiographical comics allow authors to, through an autobiographical pact, insert their characters in fantasy story worlds. These worlds can be built by the author and were demonstrated to romanticise, mythologise and trivialise the author's lived experiences. Furthermore, fantasy elements were considered for the way they appear to obscure the author's memories while giving an authentic representation of how the author may have felt and understood the world and events. Memories and artistic styles were also discussed to determine how they inform the artist's life (Roodt 2020:30).

Roodt's reflective process revealed that the reconstruction of autobiographical events could represent the author's subjective experience. Figure 1, an excerpt from Roodt's *Die Binnekamer* (2020), illustrates the author's reaction to a remembered event. While the snake encounter in the story is based on an actual event, the egg symbolises various desires from the same period. This approach allowed the author's internal hopes and fears to be depicted as equally significant to external life events.

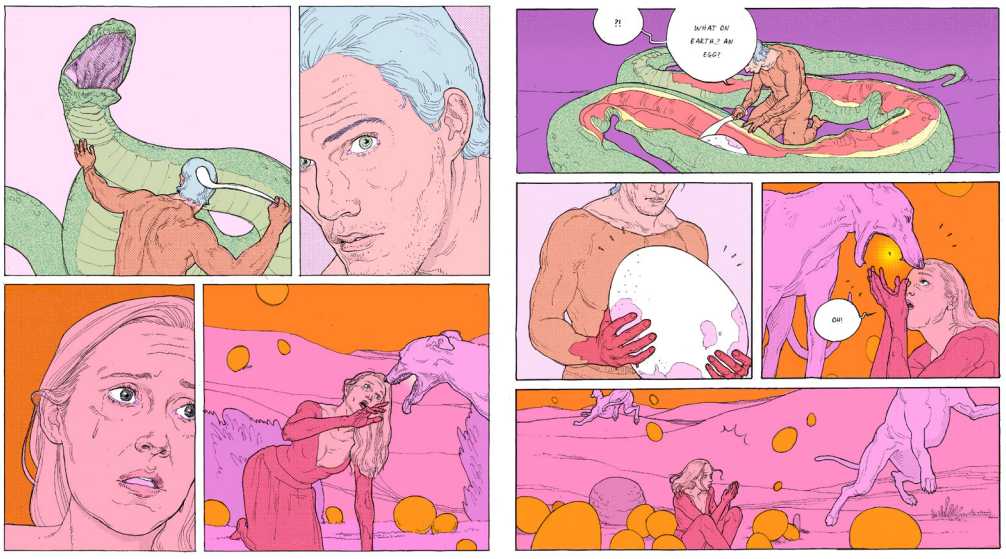

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Octavia Roodt (2020) *Die Binnekamer*, pp.14 & 15. Copyright © 2020 Octavia Roodt; English translation © Octavia Roodt.

State-of-the-art review of autofiction and worldbuilding

This article provides a state-of-the-art review of autofiction and worldbuilding as they pertain to autobiocomics. This type of review uses a different knowledge formation than a systematic literature review as it is directed by other goals. The goals of a start-of-the-art review are '(1) to create a critical summary of contemporary thinking about a topic; (2) to describe historical progressions and patterns in the literature; (3) to discuss how such modern perspectives have evolved over time; and (4) to propose a direction the field could take moving forward' (Barry, Merkebu & Varpio 2022:660).

Autofiction is a literary concept used to describe autobiographies without explicit truth claims, whereas worldbuilding describes systems of creating and understanding the imaginary worlds found in texts. Together, a lexicon emerges that conceptualises the autobiographical protagonist as a textual self, experiencing autobiographical events in a textual world.

The act of representing the self through comics is shaped by the inherent unreliability of autobiography and the unique capacities of using comics as a medium to tell life stories. Autobiocomic creators (Roodt included) act as both illustrators and writers when conceptualising, reconstructing and reimagining their autobiographical experiences (Berthou 2011:195; Kunka 2018:60). Because the author is at once the creator, narrator, and character of a text, their subjectivity informs each of these roles (Miller & Pratt 2004). The author's various intersecting roles are described as an autobiographical pact. This pact is formed when the author, narrator, and protagonist of a text share the same name and identity (Lejeune 1975:15). In comics, this means that the author represents themselves as the main character as well as the disembodied captions that comment on the visual events. Autofiction allows for continuity disruption when authors diverge from strict retellings of events and experiment in their roles as narrator and protagonist (Berthou 2011:197; Shen & Xu 2007:47). In autobiocomics, there is a further tendency for these roles to converge and diverge as authors and their characters change over time (Berthou 2011:197).

The concept of autofiction originated in literary scholarship. Serge Doubrovsky, a writer and literary theorist, coined the term in the late 1970s, and it is now increasingly used in visual art as well (De Bloois 2007:2). In the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (2019), literary theorist Lut Missinne (468) explains that autofiction emerged as a critique against the idea of autobiography as an infallible 'truth'.

Instead, authors use the discrepancies between fiction and memory to explore and experiment with their identities.

Comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005:114) argues that, as a medium, autobiocomics further amplifies the 'exaggeration, distortion and omission' that influences all autobiographies. Any retelling from memory is necessarily influenced by the author's interpretation and the development of their own style of storytelling (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019). Part of this storytelling style lies in the author's stylistic approach to drawing, how they frame the story and the entire aesthetic and commercial context in which the author presents the story (Crucifix 2023:28).

Autobiocomics are well-defined as a genre, even if the scholarship thereof is relatively young. Critical comic scholarship began around 50 years ago and was first rooted in Francophone concerns (Forsdick, Grove & McQuillan 2005:13). In *L'autobiographie: Pour une nouvelle bande dessinée?* (2011) (translated as Autobiography: Towards a new comic?), the Francophone theorist Benoit Berthou defined autobiocomics as a contemporary phenomenon distinct from the comic genres that preceded it. Today, however, the theory of autobiocomics straddles various cultures and is a central concern in contemporary comic theories (Kunka 2018:1). Comic theorist Ann Miller has provided various critical analyses of autobiocomics by building upon psychoanalytic, feminist & postcolonial theories (Miller & Beaty 2014; Miller 2008; Miller & Pratt 2004). Hatfield's seminal *Alternative comics* (2005) seems to have formed the basis for Hillary Chute's *Graphic women: life narrative and contemporary comic* (2010) to describe and demonstrate many of autobiocomics' shared features. These works preceded and influenced *Autobiographical comics: life writing in pictures* (2012) by Elisabeth El Refaie, in which she interrogates autobiocomics as a distinct form of autobiographical storytelling through visual metaphors. More recently, Frederik Byrn Køhlert's *Serial selves: identity and representation in autobiographical comics* (2022) has discussed autobiocomics potential to empower authors to tell stories that have been marginalised or excluded. While the abovementioned autobiocomics scholars use different terms, they identify the same key authors and concerns in their consideration of their texts. This is notably the persistent focus on the artistic and real-world implications of inserting the self into the text.[1]

In *Comics as a nexus of cultures* (Berninger, Ecke & Haberkorn 2010), the authors argue for the medium's transcultural appeal, as seen in Japanese, Portuguese, German, Indian and Canadian authorship. However, while contemporary autobiocomics are understood as world literature, texts are often shaped by Eurocentric, imperial histories (McKinney 2021; Hodapp 2022). Scholars of

autobiocomics' lineage largely trace this history through European art movements, developments in Francophone publishing and the American underground (Screech 2005). This lineage sees colonial tropes from classic comics being used in various modern texts to strengthen or subvert the original meanings, such as the recognisable *ligne claire* drawing style (translated as a clear line) most notably developed by Hergé, or Georges Prosper Remi (1907-1983). When using comics to tell stories, authors choose where to include, omit, honour or critique the styles, images and strategies used by the authors that preceded them (Ahmed & Crucifix 2018). Hergé's *Les aventures de Tintin* (1929–1979) (known in English as *The adventures of Tintin*) is one prominent example of the clear line style that has become an important reference point for many postcolonial stories and is visible in many later authors' works (McKinney 2011).

Autobiocomics' confessional nature, adult readership and experimental approach first appeared in two anti-authoritarian sentiments cultivated during the 1960s in Europe and America (El Refaie 2012:31; Hatfield 2005:129). These are the American hippy generations' use of comics as a medium for expressing social-political dissidents and subversion of the mainstream or opposition to censorship (Grove 2010:261) and alternative pamphlets and zines supported by developments in the print industry (Michallat 2018:289; Castaldi 2010:7). The comics that emerged from these shifts experimented with style and content and were aimed at adults (McAllister, Sewell & Gordon 2001:5).

The variety of authors divulging their deeply intimate interior reality in autobiocomic stories can partially be understood as a result of alternative publishing. Developments in printing and distribution of stories broke down the barriers to entry into creating autobiocomics (Jacobs 2008:73). A period of national debate on morality and censorship in 1960s France became the catalyst for a stylistic evolution of comics more broadly. Specifically, the influential *Pilote hebdomadaire* magazine (translated as Weekly Pilot) (1959-1989) began to commission and publish stories for teenagers to compete against comics with strong Catholic undertones and American comics. Before the 1960s, comics were seen as children's literature (Grove 2010:117). In seeking to market the magazine to older children, the stories inadvertently provided a template for the images, pamphlets and manifestos of the radical youth movements in 1960s Europe. These movements influenced, and were influenced by, North American comic authors. Following a boom of comics for increasingly older audiences, a wave of comic authors left traditional publishers to pursue their own experimental projects (Michallat 2018:290).

Following the radicalism of the youth movements, the 1970s saw a rise in comics with adult readership interested in adult themes. In the 1980s and 1990s, auto-biographical comics often included self-exposure of psychosexual and scatological details, with American Aline Kominsky-Crumb (1948-2022) as a prominent example. Several independent presses were established around the 1990s to publish the wave of autobiocomic works that followed (Miller 2008:54). In France, notable independent presses *L'Association and Ego comme X* brought previously unexplored spheres of life to the autobiocomic genre, while *Drawn & Quarterly* was simultaneously established in Toronto (Miller & Pratt 2004:2). While the adult themes have remained, Hatfield (2005:112) argues that explicit self-exposure has become 'repetitive' and that authors have begun to develop new strategies to convey authenticity or 'truthfulness'.

The tendency in autobiocomics to combine realistic with referential storytelling and drawing with irrational, psychologically-rich images first appeared as early as the 1930s (Parkinson 2015; Screech 2005). Belgian authors Hergé (1907-1983) and Edgar P. Jacobs (1904-1987) imbued their drawings with irrational and dream-like scenes, similar to surrealist painters such as René Magritte (1898-1967) and Paul Delvaux (1897-1994) (Miller 2008:20). The *nouveau réalisme* (new realism) comic movement in France in the 1950s and 1960s further blurred the boundaries between the drawn self's psychological states and external reality.

André Breton's (1969:273) second Surrealist manifesto describes surrealist values as confronting the 'interior reality' with the 'external reality'. Autobiocomics use of the terms 'surrealism' or '*nouveau réalisme*' can be argued to point to the simultaneous combination of referentiality and imagination in drawing. Scholar Matthew Screech (2005:103) contends that the authors who followed and created the nouveau réalisme movement undermined the rational and chronological stories, heroic characters, and optimism of the mainstream stories of the time. He cites Chantal Montellier (1947-), Jean "Mœbius" Giraud (1938-2012), Jacques Tardi (1946-) and Jean Teulé (1998 -) as Francophone authors who emphasised their characters' irrational mental realities, in direct contrast to mainstream stories.

The confessional aspect of South African autobiocomics can be argued to stem from highly politicised models of authorship, as all texts would have been shaped by the concerns of the apartheid era (Petersen & Matheson 2020; Millan 2012). While international sanctions curbed public access to comics, there is and remains a robust tradition of political satire. Beginning in the colonial period, Andy Mason details this history of what he calls South Africa's 'visual jesters' in *What's so funny? Under the skin of South African cartooning* (2010). Mason dedicates a section to

the *Bitterkomix* collective, headed by Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes. While the collective is lauded for its anti-apartheid activism and continuing role in the broader postcolonial debate (Salmi 2018), *Bitterkomix* remains controversial for using racial stereotypes and blackface as part of its social criticism (Khan 2023).

More recently, the exhibitions *The art of comics: French bandes dessinées and South African comics in conversation* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2019 and the subsequent *Afropolitan comics* in 2020 attempted to establish a link between Francophone comics and contemporary South African authors, with special reference to autobiography (*Le'Afrinique*; 'Africa's comic artists tell powerful stories' 2020). These exhibitions focused more on texts that showcase form, story and style, with minimal focus on sociocultural context.

Embodied drawing of the textual self in textual worlds

The representation of self in autobiocomics can be understood in the form of numerous sequential self-portraits drawn in service of the narrative. The hand-drawn quality of autobiocomics allows authors a uniquely authorial medium to remember, reconstruct and tell their life stories. By designing and drawing sequences of panels with text, the author leads their characters and their readers in a mutual construction of meaning (Grove 2010:45). The story's emotional tone is affected by the framing, colour and tempo of the panels (controlled by the size and frequency of panels per page). The drawing style gives further tone and exaggerates or omits specific qualities of the characters and their world (Kunka 2018:60). The accompanying text is usually written by hand, and all of the drawings contain the author's distinct and often textured line quality.

The various technical aspects of an autobiocomic can, theoretically, be accomplished by a single dedicated author. While drawing ability may be perceived as a limiting factor, the author's artistic strengths and weaknesses also contribute to the idiosyncratic, authorial nature of their work (Roodt 2020:47). Furthermore, authors can further employ symbols and visual metaphors to express their subjective experience of an event. Alongside drawing ability, the visual nature of the medium allows the author the use of photographs, the addition of specific dates and recognisable places to locate their story in a time and place (Groensteen 2013:40). In demonstrating autobiocomics' scalable and low-tech representational power, comics scholar El Refaie has participated in multidisciplinary projects that allow

vulnerable populations to tell their life stories with only simple drawing materials and a set of guidelines for the use of visual metaphors (Gameiro *et al* 2018).

We propose the terms "extratextual self" and "textual self" to aid a discussion of the authors and their autobiographical protagonists, respectively. This builds on Miller's (2007:216) use of the term "extratextual model" for the drawn character. These terms imply a divergence in identity between the author and their representation of themselves in a text, an idea echoed by other autobiocomic theorists (Klepper 2019:442). Furthermore, this divergence is crucial in autobiography studies as any analysis involves both textual and extratextual worlds (Shen & Xu 2007:46; Takakura 2023:35).

A variety of terms are used for the author's drawn version. Frederik Byrn Køhlert's *Serial selves: Identity and representation in autobiographical comics* (2019:1) uses terms that focus on the process of drawing the self in multiple panels, referring to 'serial selves' and 'drawn lives'. In the *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction* (2019), Martin Klepper (2019:442) refers to the autobiocomic author's visual 'I-con' as representing their 'avatar' in the story. In Hatfield's (2005:114) terminology, this is the 'cartoon self'. We argue that Miller's terminology of 'the extratextual model' (2011:244) successfully draws attention to how the textual reality is modelled on, yet distinct from, the author's reality.

The autobiocomics *Drieman* (2020) by Wide Vercnocke, *Fluctuat et Mergitur* (2020) by Conrad Botes, and *La mer à boire* (2022) by Blutch all demonstrate how autobiocomic authors rely on autofiction and worldbuilding to attempt authentic representations of remembered events. These transnational texts were chosen as case studies for this article based on their shared characteristics, such as their adult themes, confessional nature, and especially the fantastical, dream-like scenes in which the authors poignantly express a tacit aspect of their remembered experience that pure truth statements could not as easily express.



FIGURE **Nº 2**

Wide Vercnocke (2020) *Drieman*, p.75 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Wide Vercnocke & Bries.



FIGURE **Nº 3**

Conrad Botes (2020) *Fluctuat et Mergitur*, p.3 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Conrad Botes & Soutie Press.



FIGURE **Nº 4**

Blutch (2022) *La mer à boire,* p.1 (excerpt). Copyright © 2022 Blutch & Éditions 2024.

Vercnocke (born 1985), Botes (born 1969) and Blutch (born Christian Hincker in 1967) have all represented themselves in numerous other stories and illustrations (Bastijns 2017; Paques 2008; von Veh 2013). Similar to the authors' other autofictive works, the textual selves in Figures 2, 3 and 4 are immediately recognisable by the character's features. They are drawn to be distinguishable from the other characters in elements such as clothing and the shape of the nose, chin, and frame. The same sense of line, colour and proportion carry through to their story world, as seen in Figures 5, 6 and 7, where the textual selves are characterised as inhabitants of their word.

The author, both their textual and extratextual selves, stretches through all media surrounding the text. The text can, therefore, be read in the context of the comic's cover, blurb and foreword *autour du texte* (around the text) (Genette 1997:4). According to Lejeune (1975:15), the autobiographical pact spills out of the comic itself and into the paratext and metatextual commentary. The author's presence is further announced through a display of facticity in the story, or what El Refaie



FIGURE **Nº 5**

Wide Vercnocke (2020) *Drieman*, p.33 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Wide Vercnocke & Bries.



FIGURE **Nº 6**

Conrad Botes (2020) *Fluctuat et Mergitur*, p.3 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Conrad Botes & Soutie Press.



FIGURE **Nº 7**

Blutch (2022) *La mer à boire*, p.115 (excerpt). Copyright © 2022 Blutch & Éditions 2024. Dutch translation © Concerto Books.

describes as 'performing authenticity' (2018:178). She argues that by directing the reader's attention to the artistic and discerning role of the author, stories are often perceived as more authentic, as opposed to less (2018:166).

The autobiographical pact of our three case studies includes the books themselves and any other ways the autobiographical aspect is signalled to the reader. The covers of the respective texts, seen in Figures 8, 9 and 10, immediately introduce a sense of the surreal. While the reader may have been tipped off to the stories' autofictive tilt by the context of a library classification, a book review, or a community of readers, nothing of the three covers immediately attest to the pact between author, narrator, and protagonist.

In Vercnocke's *Drieman* (2020), ghostly blue fingers protrude from a fleshy pink hand. This introduces the narrative in which Vercnocke's textual self has versions of his father and grandfather materialise from (and disappear back into) his body. The author represents the three men in conversation as they discuss Vercnocke's grandfather's role in the German Occupation of Belgium during World War II. At the end of the book, Vercnocke has drawn three formal portraits with a short biography

to accompany them. The textual son and father discuss photographs of their grandfather in settings with Nazi's. These seemingly "factual" portraits and Vercnocke's drawings of the archives all perform authenticity to the reader. The memory of the archive is combined with the artifice of Vercnocke's depressive blue tones, angular and irregular shape language, as well as the "*Drieman*" (three man) metaphor of the son, father, and ghostly grandfather all cohabiting in one body.

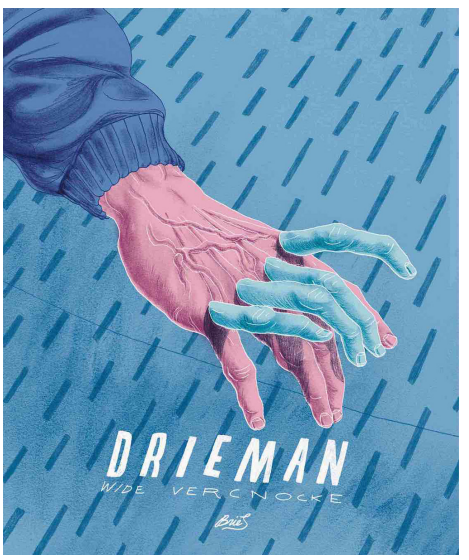

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Wide Vercnocke (2020) *Drieman* (cover). Copyright © 2020 Wide Vercnocke & Bries.

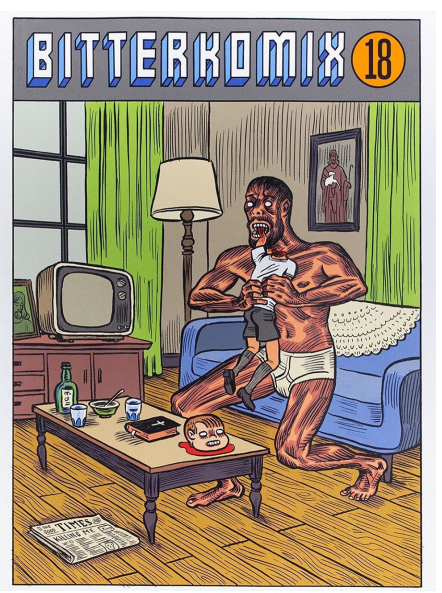

FIGURE **Nº 9**

Conrad Botes (2020) *Bitterkomix 18* (cover). Copyright © 2020 Conrad Botes & Soutie Press.

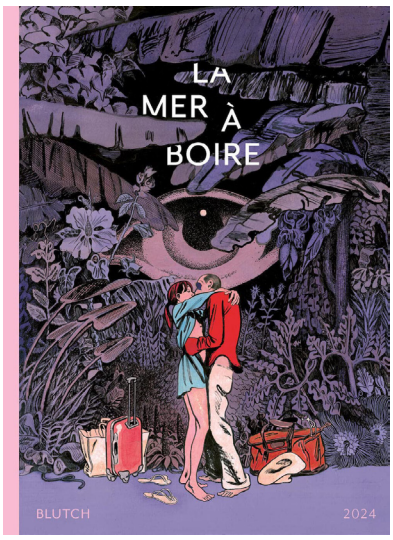

FIGURE Nº 10

Blutch (2022) *La mer à boire* (cover). Copyright © 2022 Blutch & Éditions 2024.

Fluctuat et Mergitur (2020) is a short story that appeared in the large 18th edition of *Bitterkomix*. On its cover, Botes has set Francisco Goya's *Saturn devouring his son* (c. 1822) in a living room. The predominantly Afrikaans readership of the *Bitterkomix* series would recognise Afrikaans signifiers, including the doily hanging over the back of the couch. The title of the short story refers to Paris' motto and is set in and around the Seine. In the story (and in reality), President Jacques Chirac has promised and failed to rehabilitate the dangerously polluted river. To save his wife's scarf, Botes' textual self heroically jumps in and discovers the president under the water, living as a fish. Upon returning to Cape Town, Botes turns into a fish himself. The story is believable until the protagonist encounters the fishy Chirac. Alongside Chirac's unfulfilled promises, the context of a family trip to Paris and the specificity of furniture and monuments seems to be taken from the extratextual world. The transformation of Botes' textual self into an "*Afrikaner Sequanus Parisiensis*" playfully suggests a muddied identity between Afrikaner and Parisien.

The cover of *La mer à boire* (2022) literally translates as "The sea to drink" and shows a giant eye looking out from behind a scene of plants at two lovers in a standing embrace. '*Un romance*' is written at the back of the book, promising a romance or love story. There is little to denote autofiction, unless readers guess at the resemblance between the author and the protagonist. The narrative itself has a dream-like quality, with the scenarios and dialogue seeming to diverge at points. The lovers are referred to as 'A' and 'B' and are shown in both their youth and

adulthood. Throughout the story, various forces attempt to keep the two lovers apart. Eventually, the story shifts from anxious and idiosyncratic to intimate and visually pleasing when they find one another. The story is filled with numerous recurring symbols, such as birds in flight and yonic flowers. The author has included several tender and sexually explicit scenes, including one in which he treats his own textual body as an object of desire. These scenes give the impression that the author and the textual self are partially motivated by the sensual desire to look at bodies.

When the author "transcends" into the story as their textual avatar, the avatar is governed by a new set of world rules (Klepper 2019:442). Transformation of the textual self can be deeply meaningful, as Eszter Szép's *Drawing and the body* (2020) makes a case for the author's embodiment of their avatar when drawing. She posits that because drawing comics is an embodied practice, the transformation of the textual self affects the author's sense of embodiment. From this perspective, Blutch's adoration of textual bodies – his own and his textual love interest – inevitably affects the extratextual body during the scene's planning, drawing, and reading.

By using the term "embodiment", Szép (2020:115) argues that the autobiocomic artist cognitively and symbolically "impersonates" their character in a complex process by which the artist poses, emotes, stylises and identifies with the character they are drawing. This line of reasoning builds on Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as the primary site of knowing the world (Engman 2019). During Roodt's (2020:42) practice-based research, she noticed how emotionally charged she became when drawing her textual self in physical pain. From this first insight, she became increasingly sensitive to other instances when the autobiocomic author "maps" an inner experience onto their textual avatar and vice versa. The aforementioned example of the textual self in distress can be seen in Figure 11.

In *Drieman* (2020), Vercnocke's textual self visits a barber at the beginning of the book and uses a photograph of his grandfather as a reference for his hairstyle. After a visit to his father, in which they go through his grandfather's archives together, the textual self is horrified by the discovery of his family's involvement with the Nazis and shaves his head in a kind of disavowal of identity. Vercnocke ends his story by merging his textual self with his reflection and climbing through the mirror. This scene seems to speak of the textual self's integration and acceptance of his family's past, as it echoes how his grandfather and father manifest from his textual body, as seen in Figure 12. Seen as textual embodiment, this scene could both speak to the author's desire to integrate his family history or the eventual fulfilment of that desire. The drawing process itself may even become a kind of ritual of confession and acceptance, as Roodt has found in her own practice.

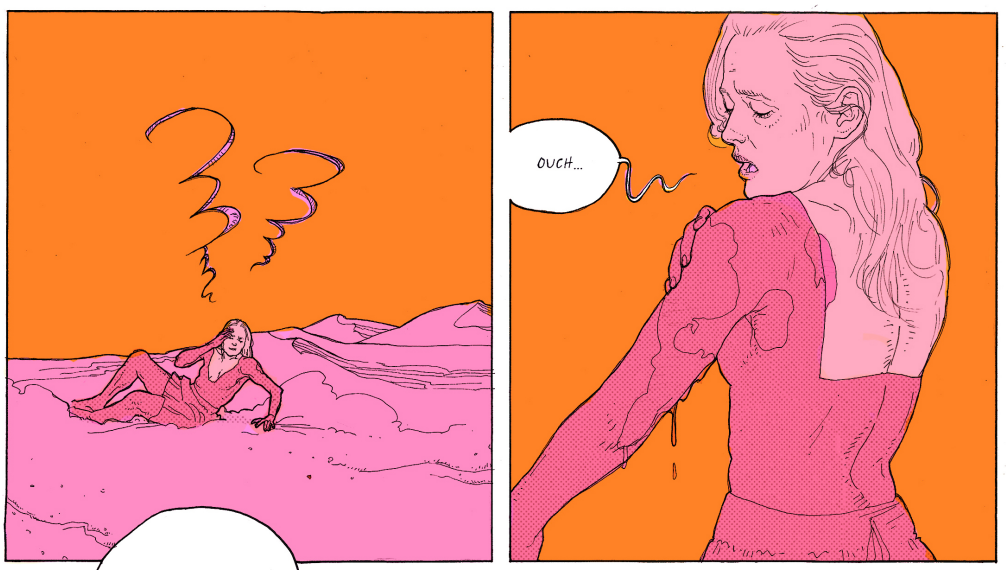

FIGURE **Nº 11**

Octavia Roodt (2020) *Die Binnekamer*, p.7 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Octavia Roodt; English translation © Octavia Roodt.



FIGURE **Nº 12**

Wide Vercnocke (2020) *Drieman*, p.69 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Wide Vercnocke & Bries.

In *Fluctuat et Mergitur* (2020), Botes' textual self transforms into a giant fish a few days after returning to South Africa from France. It seems the polluted Seine water is to blame. He becomes increasingly uncomfortable and scratches himself, revealing fish scales. Between the last two panels in Figure 13, two weeks pass. Botes' textual self is clearly upset by his transformation. This is indicated simply in the emotive lines around the textual self. The textual self's desperation is arguably represented by the meticulously controlled ink line as much as the character's

expression. Szép (2020:120) describes a similar use of hatching line in another text as evidence of the care with which the author engages in telling the story. While his emotional reaction is evident in the drawing, the narrator's voice is less so. The narrator diverges from the textual self when the text professes relief that his wife has accepted the transformation, even as she hungrily pursues him with a knife and fork. Botes' textual self must flee from his textual wife and eventually jumps into the sea. He is later caught by fishermen and taxidermied for a museum.



FIGURE **Nº 13**

Conrad Botes (2020) *Fluctuat et Mergitur*, p.5 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Conrad Botes & Soutie Press.

In contrast to Vercnocke and Botes's bodily transformations in Figures 12 & 13, Blutch's textual self remains intact and recognisable throughout *La mer à boire* (2022). He leads his textual self through surreal sequences, once showing himself as a younger man in the act of drawing comics. In Figure 14, he has just arrived in a version of Brussels and is surrounded by Native Americans. Blutch has his textual self wield a pistol and fails to outrun the warriors. In this panel, he swears that he has not been naughty when the warrior asks if he has been a good boy. Throughout this scene, Blutch's sense of memory seems not to anchor him in autobiographical realities, but in the nostalgia for cowboy comic tropes.

From these three texts, the textual self appears to be a dynamic site of the author's embodiment. Through authorial choices, the creators perform varying degrees of authenticity. The self can be experienced as part of the autobiographical pact, through remembering the past and as a drawn and serialised avatar. The reader responds to the extratextual model whilst slipping between the various texts that



FIGURE **Nº 14**

Blutch (2022) *La mer à boire*, p.115 (excerpt). Copyright © 2022 Blutch & Éditions 2024. Dutch translation © Concerto Books.

make up the autobiographical space. The authors' bodies seem to be always central to the stories, as they both influence the narrative and are influenced by the act of story-making itself (Szép 2020).

Worldbuilding and the textual world

Textual experiences are inherently dependent on, and relational to, extratextual experiences. Relative to autobiocomics, this means that the textual world has a set of important and telling relationships to the world that the author experiences. As seminal worldbuilding theorist, Marie-Laure Ryan (1991:48) explains: 'The pragmatic purpose of counterfactuals is not to create alternate possible worlds for their own sake, but to make a point about [the actual world]'.

When building worlds, the author imagines an environment with coherent qualities that may affect anything from that world's geography, its gravitational pull or its fauna and flora (Cook 2012:13). Often, an imaginary world becomes a character in its own right, and as the protagonist reacts to the world, the author develops both the character and the world simultaneously. When successful, these worlds "feel natural" and logical, meaning their many facets are in harmony with one another (Hergenrader 2019:10). In the *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction*, Bode (2019:364) proposes that all autobiography and autofiction alternate between extratextual reference and textual worldbuilding. Autobiocomics thereby inherently work with

two sets of world "rules": firstly with the inherent rules of the extratextual world and, secondly with the constructed rules of the textual world (Miller 2004:3).

Whilst worldbuilding is associated with literary theory, the logic of worldbuilding theory is applied to a wide range of subdisciplines (Gavins & Lahey 2016:2). The first worldbuilding texts, led by J.R.R. Tolkien's *On fairy-stories* (1947), eventually developed into a "how-to" guide for creative writers (Wolf 2012:6). Text world theory, a branch of worldbuilding theory, further acknowledges that language, and therefore a textual world, is fundamentally constructed through socio-cultural context (Gavins & Lahey 2016:3). The reader, therefore, must access their socio-cultural knowledge to interpret the textual world, which immediately helps to complete that world.

Vercnocke's textual world in *Drieman* (2020) worldbuilds a Flemish community. We see the train stations, train cars and neighbourhood streets. All these scenes are washed out, with the same pencil-like line quality. In Figure 15, for example, a typical train station is represented. The book's inciting incident and climatic conversation between son, father and grandfather both happen on a highly recognisable Belgian train, complete with the distinct patterns on the seats. While detail is given to the train or the texture of the brick walls and the stairs seen in Figure 15, no recognisable shapes emerge from the advertisements against the walls. Other characters are similarly given little visual attention and detail, or are omitted entirely. This world's rules make Vercnocke's textual self seem alone and lonely in public spaces. The textual self moves through recognisable environments as if through his inner world. The transport system only serves to take the textual self to the discovery of the archives and his disavowal and eventual integration of the family history.

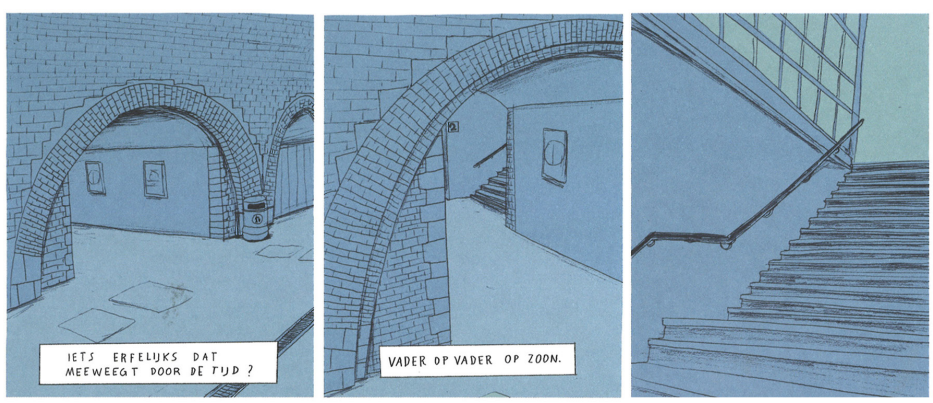

FIGURE **Nº 15**

Wide Vercnocke (2020) *Drieman*, p.7 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Wide Vercnocke & Bries.

Fluctuat et Mergitur (2020) represents Paris as a rude, polluted city (Figure 16), while the disembodied narrator describes how Africans think of it as "the city of light" and the mecca of arts and culture. Even without colour, the shapes, scale and textures all add to the atmosphere of the textual city, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. The author chooses where to spend his time in the practice of representation. Spots of thicker lines emphasise the aggression of the inhabitants. On the following pages, the visual style of the world similarly echoes the rules of a mean-spirited and crude Parisien society. When Botes' textual self returns to Cape Town, the specificity of the world suddenly shrinks away, and the focus shifts to his fishy body.



FIGURE **Nº 16**

Conrad Botes (2020) *Fluctuat et Mergitur*, p.1 (excerpt). Copyright © 2020 Conrad Botes & Soutie Press.

While the world in *La mer à boire* (2022) (Figure 17) is the most visually developed and detailed of the chosen texts, the environment is described as Brussels while bearing absolutely no resemblance to it. Rather, it is a dreamy collage of impressions wherein the textual self must face several obstacles to find his love. Holiday resorts, hotel rooms and casinos give the sense of a tropical city from the New World (or at least something far more to the South of Europe than Brussels). Brussels' recognisable landmarks do not appear in the public spaces, in contrast to Vercnocke's architectural accuracy or Botes' reference to Paris' *Maison de Verre* in Figure 16. The world stretches across locations and times, including many scenes set in what appears to be the mythical American West. If the impetus behind worldbuilding is to make a point around the extra textual world, formal objectives

such as line, colour, and style stand in service of finding the 'emotional truth' instead. For example, the fleshy pink tones and washed-out blues could be argued to decrease the sense of urgency in the world, adding a sense of drama and romance to the climactic scenes of the textual relationship.

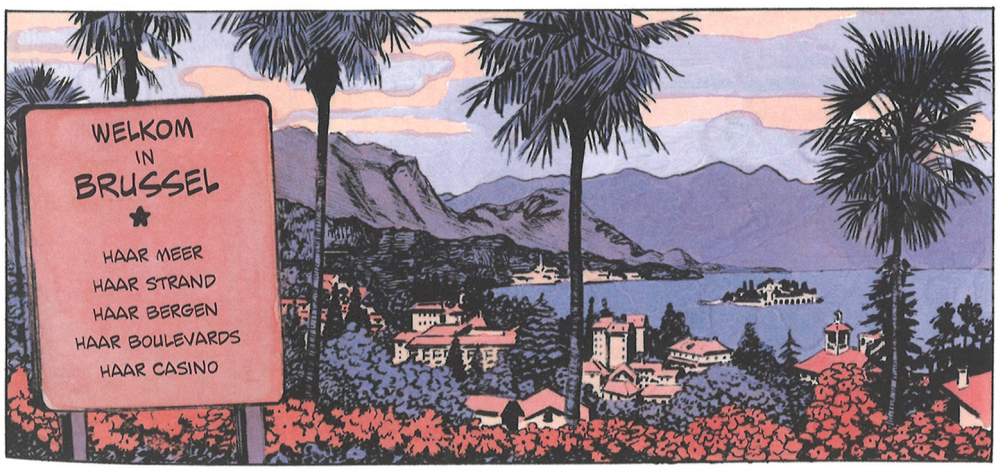

FIGURE **Nº 17**

Blutch (2022) *La mer à boire*, p.1 (excerpt). Copyright © 2022 Blutch & Éditions 2024. Dutch translation © Concerto Books.

From these examples, the authors' relationships to their textual reality can be seen as a subjective and carefully created sandbox in which they let their textual avatars play out experiences. Furthermore, the rules of their respective worlds seem to be entangled in the authors' construction of meaning around their life stories: Vercnocke's textual self is carried on his solitary journey by a sombre, lonely city; the pollution of the Seine corrupts Botes' textual self, and a nostalgic and surreal Brussels challenges Blutch's textual self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of autobiocomics delves into the intricate relationship between the author's textual self and their embodied experiences. Drawing upon concepts from autofiction and worldbuilding theory, the textual self emerges as a distinct entity within the narrative landscape that allows authors to reinterpret, reimagine, and reconstruct their lived experiences. Authors like Wide Vercnocke, Conrad Botes and Blutch engage in a process of storytelling that fluctuates between remembering situations, places and people, and constructing rich story worlds

with style, symbol and metaphor. By moving between the extratextual reality of memories and the textual reality of fantasies, in other words, autobiocomic authors navigate a nuanced terrain where authenticity and artistic expression intersect. The chosen examples offer a glimpse into the intricate representational practice of lived experiences.

The process of worldbuilding in autobiocomics extends beyond visual representation to encompass the creation of immersive environments. These worlds resonate with emotional and psychological depth, carrying the character of the environment in its formalistic sense of line, colour and framing, as well as its emotive and psychological resonance. Throughout the analyses of the texts, Vercnocke, Botes and Blutch's textual selves are affected by, and in relationship with, their worlds.

We suggest future research be conducted on the role of the author's embodiment as it pertains to autofictional worldbuilding. Just as the author's body is how they experience their world, the notion of embodiment of the textual self may be an important aspect of any comics practice, whether autobiographical or fictional (Szèp 2020). In the context of this article, texts are created in the context of how the author's body experienced their world (memory) and the act of constructing the textual self by drawing (fantasy). The author's embodiment of their textual avatar may develop into a framework with which to understand the effects of an autobiocomic practice on its author.

Notes

1. These theorists identify authors such as Harvey Pekar (1939-2010), Edmond Baudoin (1942-), Robert Crumb (1943-), Aline Kominsky-Crumb (1948-2022), Justin Green (1945-), Art Spiegelman (1948-), David B (1959-), Lewis Trondheim (1964-), Julie Doucet (1965-), Marjane Satrapi (1969-), and Fabrice Neaud (1986-) as seminal authors of the genre.

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