

**Expressing the construction of the autobiographical self in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*,
a layering of perspectives.**



By: Christine van der Schoot

Studentnummer: 4176197

Bachelor: Language and Culture studies

Department thesis: Literature

Supervisor: Susanne Knittel

Second reader: Frank Brandsma

Date of submission: 03-04-2018

Table of contents

1. Introduction: The importance of studying the construction of the autobiographical self	1.
2. Discussing <i>Blankets</i>	5.
3. Theoretical framework	10.
4. Short overview of the scenes used for close reading	15.
5. Scene one: Visualization of the character's inner-world	19.
6. Scene two: Using page payout and panel irregularity	27.
7. Scene three: Visual metaphors and the usage of <i>series</i>	35.
8. Conclusion	39.
9. Bibliography	42.

1. Introduction: The importance of studying the construction of the autobiographical self

When I was writing *Blankets*, I was working so hard to relive those experiences and pin them down on paper, and ultimately I think I failed because the book isn't those moments. It's like a paper-and-ink reenactment from watered-down memories. It's not a reproduction. But at the same time, something new is born, something that has its own life (Mosko, Lauren. Question 2, par. 12).

With these words from an interview Craig Thompson, author of the autobiographical comic *Blankets*, describes how it felt to recall, write down and draw his memories of growing up in a Christian community in the United States. From the quote above it becomes clear that Thompson struggles with his wish to reproduce his past properly, a struggle well-known within autobiographical studies. The reason for this is that when memories are being recalled, a new interpretation is created based on the context of the present, inevitably reshaping memories of the past (Smith and Watson). The autobiographical self, the "I" who gives the reader his story, is therefore also composed of different fragmented "selves." Attempting to nonetheless draw and write the story of his life, Thompson has opted for making his reader aware of the struggle of depicting his autobiographical self. Dividing his past and present self in an observed character and an observing narrator, he presents different versions of events and even openly admits his insecurity about being completely truthful to the reader. The way in which comics such as *Blankets* create this layering of perspectives will be central to this thesis.

Paul John Eakin suggests that special attention to the process of autobiographical writing might give a more complete picture of the “self” depicted in autobiography. He suggests paying attention to the narrative *about* the self and not just the self depicted, meaning that in case of a comic, the *way* in which Thompson has depicted and described himself matters as much as who he depicts himself to be. The fact that *Blankets* is a comic and not a book demands a different study of this production process because of a comic’s multimedia narrative.

Hillary Chute, autobiography and comics scholar, points out how a comic autobiography can show the two perspectives (past and present self) simultaneously through the visual and verbal register, because of the opportunity to layer images and words on top of each other in panels.¹ This leads to a co-presence of selves, which allows an open two-way dialogue between past and present. In *Blankets*, Thompson has added moments of reflective metanarrative in this manner, presenting multiple disagreeing perspectives and temporal layers through image and word. This thesis will explore the depiction of these self-aware moments, which show off the complex process of reliving experiences and putting them in an autobiography. Adding to Chute’s theory, Thierry Groensteen’s extensive work on the stylistic devices of comics will be used. Using theory on autobiography and comics theory in combination, this thesis studies the specific techniques that Thompson uses to express to his reader how he interacts with his past, fitting it into a narrative that forms his identity. The following research question will be answered:

¹ Panels are the boxes in which a comic artist draws and writes his story. Panels are combined on a page in what is called a page layout, which is the act of placing panels together on a page in a manner that allows for smooth reading of the comic. More elaborate discussion of panels and their function can be found in Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics*. This e-book does not contain page numbers. The information can be found in the Introduction under header “Introducing Arthrology and the Spatio-Topia”, specifically par. 2, 3 and 4.

How does the interplay between the verbal and visual, as well as the co-presence of the past self and the present self in Blankets illustrate the changing nature of identity?

This question will be answered performing a close reading of three scenes which are thematically connected. Raised in a stern Christian community, religion is a dominant influence on Thompson's childhood and teenage years and a focus of the reflective comments of his present self. Thompson's loss of faith is a development that is discussed by placing specific importance on certain events. Apart from being exceptionally often reflected upon, religion also represents an interesting conflict between Thompson's contradicting wishes to be both an artist and a Christian. Close reading has been chosen over showcasing isolated examples because comics are specifically a medium that needs to be read in a sequence, as otherwise there is no narrative.

Prior to this analysis, an introduction of *Blankets* will be given to discuss the work's place in academics and society. This section will conclude with elaboration on the importance of further research on comic autobiography, providing a counter argument to those who speak against it, represented by Douglas Wolk's critique of Thompson's work. Following this I will discuss the autobiographical self in both literary studies (Eakin, Smith and Watson) as well as comics studies (Garcia, Chute and Groensteen) to set up a theoretical framework to perform the close reading. In this theory discussion, a connection will be made between Eakin, Chute and Groensteen, taking into consideration the work of Merces P. Garcia, who has done previous work on *Blankets* and identity expression.

The theoretical framework will then discuss the usage of the interplay between the visual and verbal register and the use of page layout to layer past and present self. This covers the three main tasks of a comics author: drawing, writing and organizing his multimedia story in panels. Concluding, this thesis will reflect on its close reading to point out how Thompson

has used the comic medium's resources. The choice for close reading has been made based on the fragmented state of the comics narrative. Creating a metafictional moment to stress the interaction between different perspectives unfolds over the course of several pages, making use of breaks in continuity in the sequence of comics. Studying scenes rather than loose examples allows for a focus on the ongoing visualized dialogue of layered perspectives.

2. Discussing *Blankets*

Blankets tells the story of Craig Thompson as he grows up in a rural Christian community in Wisconsin, United States. Through the course of nine chapters Thompson narrates his story with religion, first love, family, and art. We see him grow up from a child into a teen, then a young adult, and finally get glimpses of his adult self, which is where the story ends. Craig and his younger brother Phil grow up isolated, with Christian teachings, which Craig uses to cope with traumatic things that occur in his childhood, such as bullying and sexual abuse. Thinking that a painless eternity in heaven will be his reward after enduring life on earth, Craig struggles with attempting to be a faithful Christian while also experiencing “secular” things such as developing a love for a girl, Raina, and aspiring to be an artist. Major events in the work include Craig’s involvement with church and church camp as a backdrop for his infatuation and disillusionment with religion, meeting and visiting Raina, and finally moving out and renouncing himself as a Christian. Because religion is a red thread that is mentioned and discussed specifically by Thompson time and time again and a recurring theme throughout each chapter, my focus will lie on the reflection that is done on religion and identity. By doing this I hope to be able to show the development of a small part of Thompson’s ever-changing identity, namely him developing from a Christian and into an atheist. Apart from religion being a main theme of *Blankets*, a second reason to discuss this is my observation that study on the expression of the autobiographical self often centers on trauma specifically. Though religion causes Thompson grief and traumatic experiences, I believe it to be more than just that, as religion functions as both a means of alleviating pain by promising heaven as well as causing him fear through the threat of hell.

The idea of a religious journey is also mentioned by Stephen E. Tabachnick when he shortly mentions *Blankets* as an “autobiography of discovery”² in his discussion of David B’s autobiographical work *Epileptic* (Tabachnick 102). Stating how Thompson expresses his “difficult personal struggle from rebellion against Christian fundamentalism and a love affair to some reconciliation with Christian principles” (Tabachnick 106). Furthermore, *Blankets* has been listed as a comic focusing on religion in the bibliographic essay “Drawing on God: Theology in graphic novels” by Sarah Stanley³ Religion in combination with eroticism has been discussed by Steven Jungkeit in the chapter “Tell-tale visions: The erotic theology of Craig Thompson’s *Blankets*” in *Religion in Comics and Graphic Novels*.⁴

Though mentioned as a great autobiographical comic, *Blankets* has not been studied using Hillary Chute’s theoretical framework and studies about *Blankets* and identity expression are scarce. Mercedes P. Garcia has done a study on “key conventions and narrative patterns” that many comic autobiographers might use to “articulate their own sense of identity, and deal with issues of truth, ethics, and representation through visual and verbal combination” (Garcia 155). This thesis builds forward on one specific articulation of the identity process mentioned by Garcia, namely metanarrative because of its importance in emphasizing the creation of the comic, and therefore, its process as a narrative of identity. Garcia does mention Eakin’s theory on the question of “expressing the fluidity of self-identity” (Garcia 158), but does not elaborately discuss in which way the comic medium can focus on construction of

² Autobiography of discovery is a term coined by Tabachnick that is referring to categorization of an autobiography as mainly about discovery of the self’s true beliefs. Because such a discussion would demand a much wider discussion and comparison of religious themes rather than a close reading on some of them, I have chosen not to use it in my theoretical framework.

³ Because of the confusion over the proper use of this term, *Blankets* will be considered an autobiographical comic in this thesis, which covers graphic novels as they are mentioned either as a sub-genre or format within the comics’ medium.

⁴ Steve Jungkeit’s work on *Blankets* focuses the connection between loss of faith and loss of love based on Thompson’s discussion of Plato’s allegory of the cave, for a study on the autobiographical self it did not have enough relevance.

autobiography as an identity-process in itself because it prioritizes the issue of authenticity. This thesis will therefore diverge on the *use* of the key conventions that Garcia has categorized. Another difference between this thesis and Garcia's article is the use of the theoretical framework, as Garcia uses Charles Hatfield's (Garcia 162) and this thesis will make use of Hillary Chute's. Though both Hatfield and Chute point out the opportunity to layer perspectives in an autobiographical comic, I have chosen Chute's theory because it offers two researchable elements of expression, the interplay of the visual and verbal and the co-presence of the child and adult narrator. Garcia's brief discussion on metanarrative will be used and expanded on, but because of these reasons his work will not be thoroughly discussed in its entirety.⁵ Another text on *Blankets* is by Darren Fisher, who studies reader engagement in autobiographical comics in his Honors Thesis "Diegesis and Mimesis in Sequential Art". Fisher studies the shifts from diegetic to mimetic narrative in *Blankets*. Because this thesis already works with the co-presence of the past and present self and the interplay between visual-verbal it has, however, proven unnecessarily complicated to apply mimetic and diegetic terms.⁶

Within the comics field, *Blankets* has been received positively. *Blankets* was published in 2003 and received recognition for being an innovative work. It brought Thompson several prizes in 2004 such as the Harvey Award, Ignatz Award, and Eisner Award, as well as Best Artist and Best Graphic Album (Hahn Library). Lauded for being visually strong, well-drawn, and despite its length (582 pages) being captivating and deeply personal, *Blankets* has been featured in many of America's best graphic novels lists. *Time* said *Blankets* "set new bars for

⁵ Because Hatfield's comments on comics and the autobiographical self are similar, a further comparison of differences will be absent because of the space available in this thesis.

⁶ Fisher himself mentions how within comics, because the medium's text and image are both visual, text can be mimetic as well as diegetic, making an absolute separated impossible (Fisher 7). For this reason his research will not be used, but it would prove useful for a study specifically on reader engagement.

the medium not just in length, but breadth” and *Publisher Weekly* stated that “Thompson manages to explore adolescent social yearnings, the power of young love and the complexities of sexual attraction with a rare combination of sincerity, pictorial lyricism and taste” (Publisher Weekly). Academically, *Blankets* is often mentioned in autobiographical studies, together with such more recent American works as *Jimmy Corrigan. The Smartest Kid on Earth* (Chris Ware) and *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel), as a legacy of early autobiographical comics such as *Maus: a Survivor’s Tale* (Art Spiegelman).

Though *Blankets* has been praised, as previously mentioned, the work has also been criticized. In *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What they Mean*, Douglas Wolk speaks out against *Blankets* and similar autobiographical comics by saying that they are influenced by a trope in writing called the “sentimental memoir”. To the “sentimental memoir” belong works that are all about how the author’s “pain and sadness are more sad and painful than yours” (Wolk 203). Looking at *Blankets* specifically, he speaks of Thompson as an irritating narrator, making the world fresh through his interpretation, but depicting the people around him not as people, but as stereotypes that play a role in Thompson’s story (Wolk 208). Wolk goes on to say that *Blankets* retrospectively transforms Thompson’s life into a drama. “He casts himself as a confused young hero, achieving his solipsistic victory by casting off the people and ideology that threaten to bring him down” (Wolk 213). Wolk praises instead Thompson’s more diary-style work *Carnet* where “his (Thompson’s) visions aren’t fogged by after-the-fact self-regard or by the need to spin his experience into a novelistic arc of character growth” (Wolk 213). This thesis attempts to provide a counter argument to the ‘fogged’ vision Wolk speaks of, stating instead that *Blankets* demonstrates a self-awareness of the inevitability of placing oneself in an after-the-fact narrative influenced by the need to form a fitting story around the self. Following Eakin’s theory one might say that if autobiography is a

reflection of how humans create an image of their own identity on a daily basis, rather than Thompson casting himself as a stereotypical hero, *Blankets* isn't dramatic but honest about the instinctual urge of human nature to give our life meaning by placing it in a story with ourselves as the main character. I believe that awareness of this process is important far outside the fields of literature and comics studies. Autobiography communicates about a universal struggle of human existence, searching, accepting, and expressing one's identity. Because of their multimedia nature, comics provide stories about the self that reflect the richness of the life-narrative.

By adding with this thesis to the discussion of *Blankets*, I hope to contribute to and further advance the elaborate study of the medium's many possibilities. Though studies are starting to appear, they are often focused on traumatic memory specifically. Valuable research without a doubt, but rather than immediately connecting the use of autobiographical comics to retelling traumatic autobiographical stories specifically, I believe more close reading and specific research into the comic medium's techniques of expressing the construction of identity themselves might be needed.

3. Theoretical framework

As Thompson says, recalling memories for *Blankets* feels like “paper-and-ink reenactment from watered down memories.” Much of Thompson’s memories are forgotten, and filling in these gaps comes with a process of doubting the self. In their work on the autobiographical self, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state that “remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present” (Smith and Watson 16). They quote L. Schachter saying that memories are replicas of how events were experienced, not the events themselves, and that these experiences change over time (Smith and Watson 16). This would mean that Thompson is incapable of retelling his memories perfectly because the Thompson who is recalling them has changed from the Thompson who originally experienced them. In case of *Blankets*, which tells a story of childhood and adolescence, a certain mature filter will reframe the experiences, whether intentionally or not. The well-known autobiography theorist Philippe Le Jeune echoes the process of our memory affecting autobiographical writing by introducing the term *resemblance*, the authenticity of the depiction of a first-person account, as an important part of the self in autobiography. Because, in reality, we do interpret, beautify, and change memories as we are subjective beings, admitting “distortion, forgetfulness, and even lying” is more authentic, so states Le Jeune as quoted by Garcia (Garcia 159). Smith and Watson word this as an unavoidable tendency to “organize or form fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the stories of our lives” (Smith and Watson 16).

These inner-workings of memory are expressed in autobiography by a split between the self, which is known as distinguishing between the “I”-now and the “I”-then, the narrating “I” who speaks and the narrated “I” who is spoken about (Smith and Watson 71). Smith and Watson state how this distinction does not suffice to encompass the complexity of writing a life narrative:

This differentiation assumes that the “I”-now inhabits a stable present in reading the “I”-then. It also assumes a normative notion of life narrative as a retrospective narrative about a separable and isolatable past that is fully past. But, as our discussion of processes of autobiographical subjectivity revealed, this is too limited an understanding of life narrative (Smith and Watson 71).

Because the autobiographical self is more complex than a clearly defined past and present self, Paul John Eakin calls for attention to the act of life writing itself. Rather than seeing autobiography as a container for one’s past self’s memories, the act of life-writing should be seen as a pivotal part of finding the self in autobiography. It is not just the “I-narrator” and the “I-character” but the identity narrative as a whole, the process of depicting the self as it constructs itself (Eakin 130). Eakin uses the term “I-narrative” to stress the importance of acknowledging the act of writing itself as an identity activity. Creating an autobiography to Eakin is an “allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one’s self” (Eakin 124). Smith and Watson, as well as Eakin, speak against the simplification of the self in a clearly defined “past” and “present”, but comics naturally visualize the separation. Autobiographical comics keep the past and present-I as visually divided, the past often taking the form of a visually shown story and the present-I narrating through captions on the shown past retrospectively. As can be seen in figure 1, the past self in comics is shown through image and dialogue whereas the present self as a narrator comments through captions (text boxes usually found in the top or bottom of a panel).⁷

⁷ There are exceptions to this, having instead the present visualized and the past narrated, such is the case in Phoebe Gloeckner’s *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, but I have not found any other examples. In case of this switch, the same arguments and theory can still apply with a reverse of the connection from visual to present and verbal to past.



Figurer 1 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 58 panel 1.

It would be logical to state that in this case, comics have difficulty displaying the fragmented and complex state of identity, as the split between visual and verbal emphasizes the distance between the present-I and the past-I. Chute objects to this saying that the past-I and present-I can interact constantly due to their *co-presence* in the panels, via visual-verbal *interplay* the different expression of the two selves can be layered and interact with one another (Chute 6). Comic artists can in this way “stage dialogue among the different versions of the self” in “conflicting registers and temporalities” (Chute 5). The past and present narrator will frame the situation in a different light simultaneously. This mobilizes, Chute states, “a tacit conversation across media between different versions of the self” (Chute 5). This will create awareness on the part of the reader that the self is fragmented and not a chronologically fluent developing story. As Chute phrases it, interpretation and recollection are shown as a process of *visual* procedure. This has everything to do with the nature of comics to visually display “time as space” (Chute 7). Chute quotes comics author and theorist Scott McCloud about his experience working with comics’ conception of time. McCloud points out how in contrast with a book or a film, present past and future are all perceivable at the same time in the form of fragmented panels giving the story piece by piece (Chute 4). Rather than being fed the narrative in a certain order and speed, this means that the story has to *actively* be pieced

together by the reader in an order and speed that they prefer. This makes for a great opportunity to make the reader realize the complexity of the story told from multiple perspectives by multiple selves, the dialogue between past and present self that Chute describes. The aspect of placing image and word in a sequence that makes place appear as time, leads to multiple opportunities for comics to emphasize the nature of creating an “I-narrative,” which is a similar activity. Fragmented and scattered memory fragments are assembled in a way that the buildup of a comic mimics (Chute 4).

Though Chute’s theory of the *co-presence* of selves and the *interplay* of visual-verbal doesn’t mention the term “metanarrative,” the awareness of the dialogue between selves does suggest pulling the reader out of the story. In his analysis of *Blankets*, Merces P. Garcia talks about the use of metanarrative by Thompson stating how it “increases the reader’s awareness of the mediating role of the artist by deliberately foregrounding the artificiality of all representation” (Garcia 171). In *Blankets*, the materiality of the work, the “ink and paper reenactment” is an important part of expressing the fragmented self. I believe that by emphasizing the materiality of the visual and verbal register, Thompson’s dialogue between his different selves is expressed in a way only comics can do.

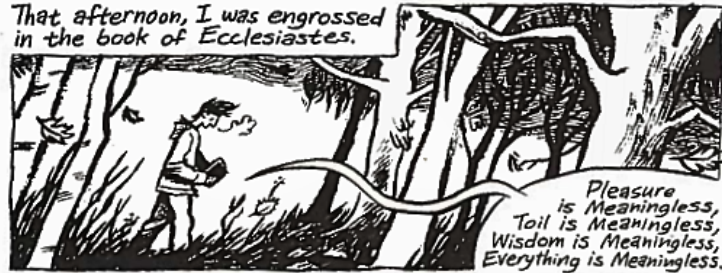
Thierry Groensteen has studied the expression of both the narrator and the character in comics, the past and present self. In case of an autobiography, the term *actorialized* narrator is used by him to indicate a narrator that is the same as the character he narrates about. Though it causes a complication, I would like to use his theory on the visual and verbal register as objective and subjective. Well aware that within autobiography, every form of narration is always subjective, Groensteen’s use of the terms does not refer to factuality but to *realism* of the story that is displayed. Whereas visuals normally function as the register that “reinforces a reality effect, which gives credibility to the story,” interrupting this “code” of information will tell the reader they are looking at drawings and weaken the illusion (Groensteen, 2013, 114).

When these changes are triggered by an autobiographical narrator, I want to argue that they are a sign of the ongoing dialogue between selves Chute describes: the “ongoing, unclosed process of self-representation and self-narration” (Chute 4). By looking at the way the visual register and the verbal register interact with one another through the narrative, I hope to point out a way for comics to express the dialogue between selves in a way which only a comic autobiography can do. Two different ways of visual-verbal interplay will be studied in the first and third scene, namely depiction of character subjectivity and metaphorical visuals, respectively. The second scene will focus on change in the comic’s rhythm and metafictional use of image and word. The techniques that Groensteen describes will be explained in the order in which they will be pointed out in the scenes. Along with specific use of the interplay of image and word combined with the co-presence of selves, it is important to take note of changes in the appearance of the text, image and panels. Through graphic style change, different typography and bold lettering, as well as the appearance of individual panels, elements of a comic page can be enunciated. These changes are used in the three broader techniques that will be discussed.

4. Short overview of the scenes used for close reading

As previously mentioned, throughout *Blankets* Craig reflects on the moments that were pivotal to his journey from a Christian to an atheist. Three of these moments will be analyzed below. The first scene takes place right after Craig has concluded his introduction with the religious concept of hell and heaven in Sunday school class (referred to on page 61, see fig 7). This scene is chosen for its conflict between past and present self which centers around the true motivation behind Craig burning his artwork after reading a Bible verse. The second scene takes place after Craig meets Raina at church camp and centers around a struggle with sexual desire and religion. The third scene takes place at the end of *Blankets* after Craig has told his brother he is no longer a Christian. Addressed to the reader, the narrator gives an analysis of the book of Ecclesiastes (also mentioned in the first scene) and comments on the contradictions between certain Bible verses and how this made him lose his faith. It functions as the conclusion to Thompson's depiction of his religious development and for that reason refers to others scenes thematically, among them the art-burning scene.

That afternoon, I was engrossed in the book of Ecclesiastes.



Pleasure is Meaningless,
Toil is Meaningless,
Wisdom is Meaningless,
Everything is Meaningless.



I realized I'd only been half-committed to my faith and that something had been distracting me from my Bible studies.

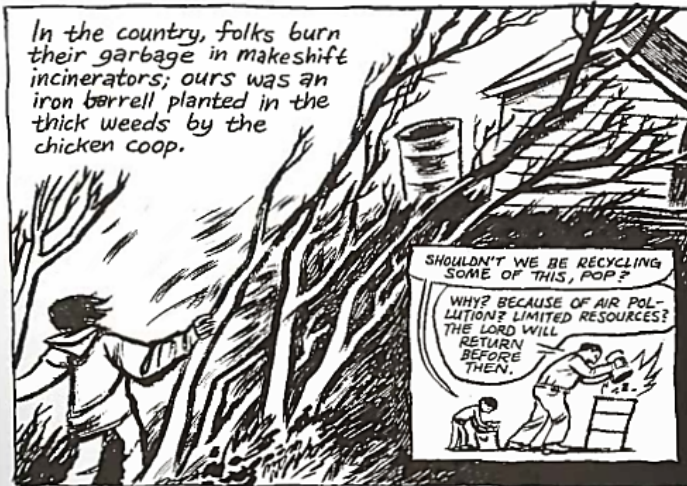


ECCLESIASTES 5:7
A profusion of dreams
and a profusion of
words are futile.
Therefore fear
God.



56

In the country, folks burn their garbage in makeshift incinerators; ours was an iron barrel planted in the thick weeds by the chicken coop.



SHOULDN'T WE BE RECYCLING SOME OF THIS, POP?

WHY? BECAUSE OF AIR POLLUTION? LIMITED RESOURCES? THE LORD WILL RETURN BEFORE THEN.



I wanted to burn everything I'd ever drawn.



57

Figure 2 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 56.

Figure 3 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 57.



Figure 4 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 58.



Figure 5 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 59



Figure 6 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 60.



Figure 7 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 61

5. Scene one: Visualization of the character's inner-world

Visualization of a character's experience can be done in a way that does not follow the narrator, but instead expresses the perception of the character visually on its own. Groensteen gives a poignant example of such a visualization of the "the inner-world":

In the *Polly and her Pals* page dated July 29, 1928 (a wordless strip), Samuel Perkins goes to the dentist, sternly encouraged by his wife and daughter. He is petrified, and Sterrett materializes his terror metaphorically, by drawing him in several panels as he must imagine himself to be, in other words, very small. Once he has received the necessary treatment, and has ascertained that his tooth no longer hurts, he goes home filled with a feeling of triumphant euphoria, whereupon Sterrett draws him as a giant (Groensteen, 2013, 130).

What is visualized is "subjectivity in a wider sense, involving a way of apprehending the world, the power of the imagination, and the credence accorded to psychic representations and projections" (Groensteen, 2013, 130). Even though the shift from the depiction of the "real" world is triggered by the present narrator, I find in pages 59 and 60 an instant of the inner-world, as it transforms the way Craig perceives reality (fig 5 and 6). This because the visualization of the expelled memories isn't metaphorically supporting the text, nor is it a sensory perception. This visualization of the inner-world is stressed as an important change from reality by a change in art style, text, and the enunciation of single panels.

The growing presence of the narrator starts on 56 (fig 2) and a simulation of an actual dialogue starts on page 58 (fig 4). The placement of text balloons and captions almost seems to mimic an actual dialogue, with the narrator being "interrupted" by Craig's dialogue. As Chute says, co-presence in comics is addressed because perspectives can be layered and this

is visible, in this case because of the placement of text. The co-presence of past and present narrator stays apparent until page 59 (fig 5) where Thompson reveals to us why his past self is lying to himself and the reader. As Thompson unleashes the statement that he simply wanted to burn his memories, the usual narration has been separated from the panel of Craig, shown from the back, about to light a match. Followed by the odd sudden separated between visual and verbal, the readers eyes are drawn to panel three. Through its irregular, thick black edges, this panel stands out. This is followed by maybe the oddest panel on the page, where the narration is placed within the panel but the panel is divided into three borderless panels. Contrasting panel three by having a big white edge, panel four is where the change suggested in panel three is taking place. The text in the panel is bold, thick, and bigger than any other text on the two pages, authoritative because of its prominent presence on the page, and again a textual irregularity.

From panel four of page 59 (fig 5) onwards, the visual register starts to deviate from reality and show instead the subjective perception of Craig in the past. Visually, Craig's face is distorted by thick drawn lines, which can be interpreted as either fire or lines of violent movement as he shakes his head. The images halting their regular depiction of reality (as it is suggested within the comic). Taking the reader by surprise, Thompson has taken it upon himself to interfere, using the visual and verbal register to overpower the perspective of his past self. It is as if Thompson's words are shaking his past self, reaching across time and interacting with the past-narrative, enforcing his reinterpretation with knowledge that past-Craig does not have.

The visual irregularity comes to a crescendo on page 60 (fig 6), breaking the normal page layout with one big panel, pulling the focus of the reader to one singular moment. Graphically the environment and Craig's figure are changed, all supporting a suspense of disbelief. Which was previously the drawn reality has been distorted as trees take on sharp,

twisted shapes (fig 6), and the barrel and house take on a stylized form. The memories, white in contrast with the heavily inked background seem to emit light, causing Craig's figure to cast a shadow on the ground. Though this page carries no words it is the Narrator's boldly-lettered statement that has been powerful enough to disrupt past-Craig's truth completely. As soon as the flames take hold of the art, it is not a religious offering but the act of trying to forget which is depicted. The co-presence of past and present narrator stays apparent until page 59 (fig 5) where Thompson reveals to us why his past self is lying to himself and the reader.

Throughout page 59 and 60 (fig 5 and 6), the page layout is altered by means of the changing appearance of panels and of course, page 60 which consists of only one large panel. This large panel contains one big image to visualize a pivotal moment of development as stressed by the present self. This technique to halt the reader with one big panel is used in all three scenes. Thompson makes a complete reinterpretation of the meaning of his past-selves' action based on context and critical distance that he did not have. Though drawing was his escape as a child, it now only reminds his past of the bad memories he tried to flee. But the promise of eternal escape, heaven, makes him replace drawing with religion. Now only a reminder of bad experiences, they serve no function, yet as memories are "expelled" from his mind, the price for salvation is presented: If Craig does not give his heart to Jesus, his punishment will be an eternity of solitary suffering, shown on page 61 (fig 7) through the threatening words of the teacher and the depiction of his brother crying in the cubby hole. As the chapter closes, Thompson has informed the reader of two struggling desires of his former self, art and religion, as well as why religion "wins," if only temporary. By switching from usual narration to metafictional commentary and timing his words with a change in art style and an inner-world perspective of his past self, I'd like to suggest a simulation of memory reinterpretation is given. By virtue of comics relying on a continuity, the discontinuity here

reveals how memories are framed based on a new context, making their interpretation new, as Smith and Watson describe in their work.

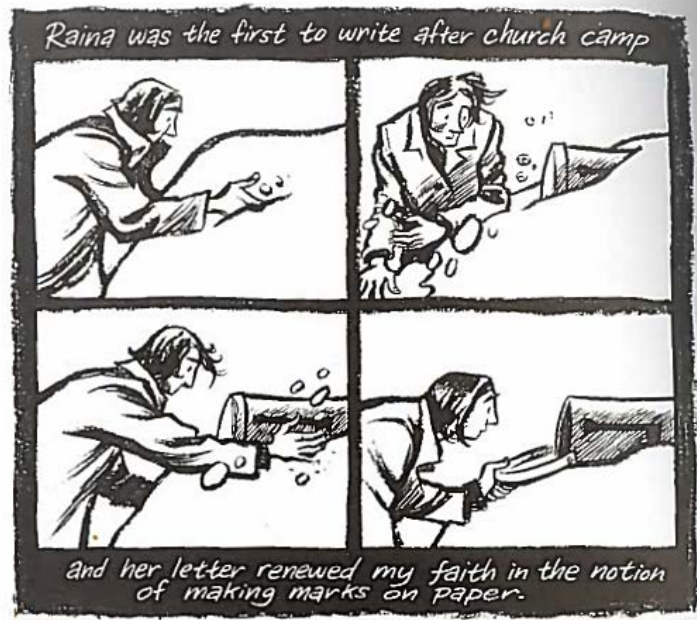


Figure 8 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 142.

Figure 9 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 143



Figure 10 Thompson, Craig. *Blankets*. 2012. p 144.



Figure 11 Thompson, Craig. *Blankets*. 2012. p 145.

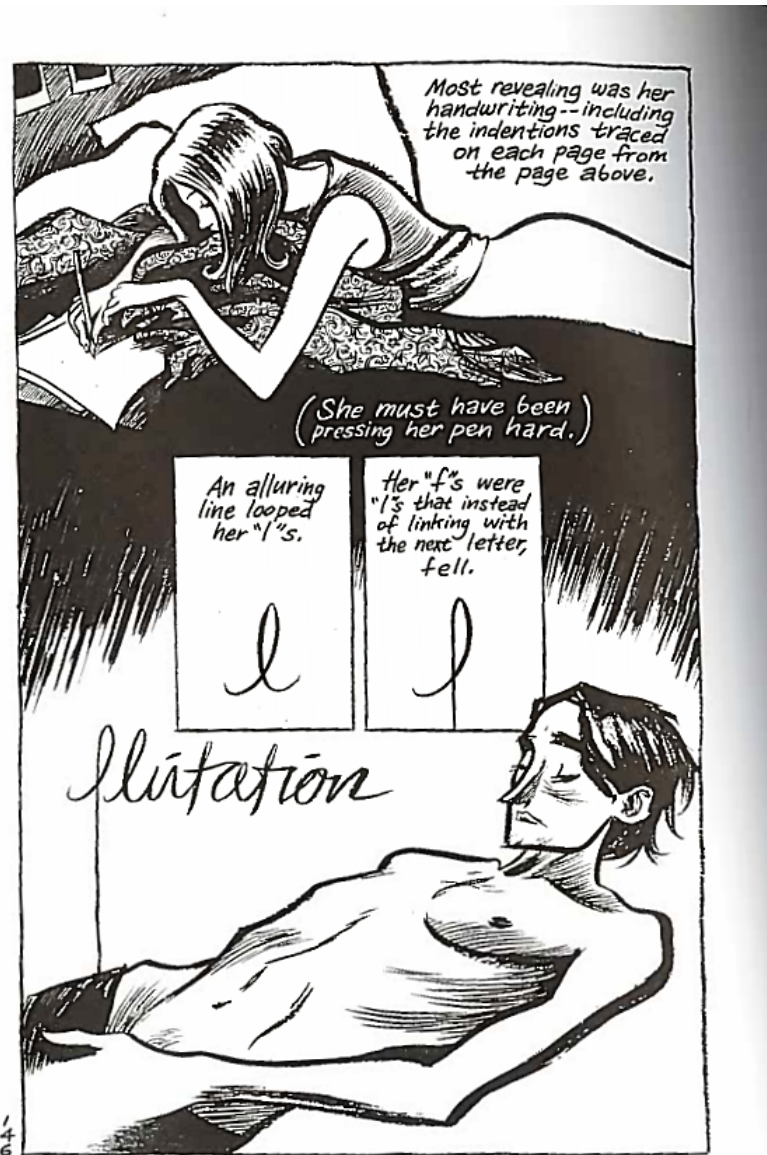
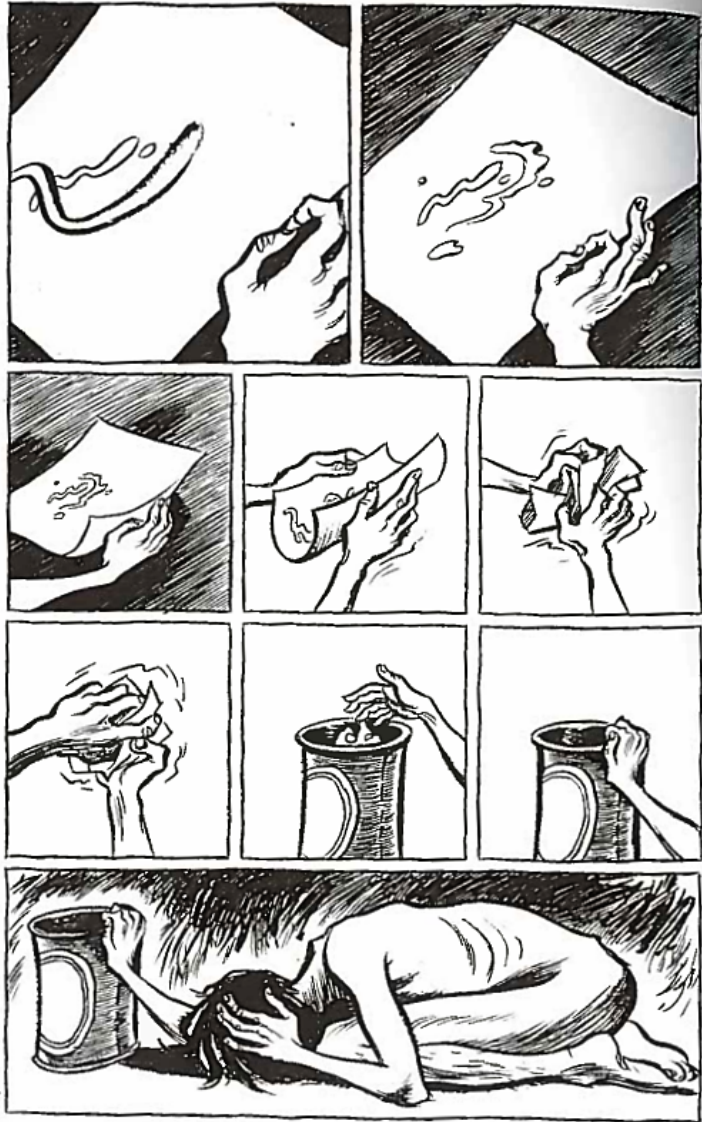


Figure 12 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 146.



Figure 13 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 147.



Figuur 14 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p

6. Scene two: Using page payout and panel irregularity

The style in which the page layout of this scene is presented qualifies as “neo-baroque,” a style that breaks with the usual regularity of a comic’s rhythm. In contrast with more original style, the number of strips (ribbons of vertical panels) and the number of panels isn’t consistently the same. Groensteen mentions how in case of an irregular overall rhythm, it is difficult to use rhythm for enunciation of a single moment. In case of an irregular rhythm, regularity therefore becomes enunciated:

When irregularity becomes the rule, it is localized incidences of regularity that stand out. The reader notices immediately if a series of three or four consecutive panels have identically shaped frames in common, particularly if the shape is unusual, either longer or wider than the norm for the other images. These panels work together: they constitute a stanza (Groensteen, 2013, 148).

Thompson makes use of regularity within the organic irregular pages of this scene. Apart from this irregularity, there is also the landscape page which should be mentioned here. A page with one panel. Landscape panels are a repeating phenomenon in *Blankets* metafictional reflections, seen on page 61 (fig 7) of the first scene and page 550 (fig 19) of the third scene. As with the other one-panel pages, the visual register becomes irregular. In contrast with the first and the third scene however, this is done not by a graphic style change but by omitting the usual background to contextualize Craig in his environment. Craig is depicted in a void of sorts, surrounded by correspondence (images) and narration (white text). The loss of background is a loss of the regularly shown environment that situates the character in his world.

Another irregularity is the lack of captions for the narration. On the first page, text is scattered throughout the panel as narration not separated by any borders. This is a trend that continues on page 146 and 147 (12 and 13). Thompson uses this irregular placement of narration on many different occasions in *Blankets*. Yet the way text becomes dominantly present in this scene is still unique. It is almost as if Thompson is making comments “on top of” his past, stressing the material dimension of this comic. A collage is made of text and visuals, image overlapping with text and vice versa. The scene itself is, because of its irregularity, a constant reminder of Thompson’s presence as a comic’s author, writing and drawing this scene on paper.

Irregularity increases on page 146 and 147 (fig 12 and 13), as panels lose their rectangular form and become more fluid, if not borderless and almost non-existent. This can be seen on page 147, where the border between the upper and lower image is absent, and page 146, where the panel “separation” is made by a color difference between black and white, but cannot be identified as a border. Narration is scattered throughout these organically divided images. A good example of this is the caption on page 146, whose border is formed by the Raina’s back and pillow. This trend continues with narration written under Raina’s figure, and around Craig’s form on page 147.

A stanza appears in the form of panel two and three, which are rectangular in contrast with the rest of the page. This effect repeats itself on the next page, with four more rectangular panels, three of which are the same size as the stanza found on page 146. These panels are almost all filled with text. Groensteen mentions how these moments make the textual register take over for the visual register in a way, as a block of text here becomes “intercalated between two images,” the visual register retreats to the background to let the narrative unfold purely textual (Groensteen 2013, 92). These panels are overlapping with Craig’s head on the bottom of page 147. Even more emphasis on the materiality of the page is

given as the word “flirtation,” in Raina’s handwriting, is connected to Craig’s form, stressing how drawing and text are made with the same ink. The word is bolded and placed centrally in the page, reminiscent of the bolded statement Thompson makes on panel four of page 59 (fig 5) in the first scene. Symbolizing in a sense that it shows the effect of her letters on Craig, who is starting to touch himself, text and word are strongly supporting each other's narrative. This page is strongly metafictional, layering word and image, past and present, in a manner that seems almost like a collage.

Thompson is not done, however, using the literary aspect of metafiction as well, addressing the reader directly with a question. Moments like this in *Blankets* are rare. I have been able to find only one other literary technique, namely the switch from past to present tense. This comment is separated by Craig’s depicted body after which it continues in yet another panel containing only words. Visually we are shown Craig in a very vulnerable and intimate scene, yet the narration stays distance, contrasting the personal and vulnerable act of masturbation with commentary that emphasizes the observation and distance, made in rectangular panels forming the second stanza. These panels are also chromatically different from the rest of the page, white in contrast with black. All this emphasis on the narrator forces the reader out of the story and to think about what Thompson says.

The end of Thompson’s commentary in panel four is followed by a white panel. This is a phenomenon described by Groensteen as an absence of the visual register, a “blind image” (Groensteen, 2013, 92). Though in his example a blind image means loss of consciousness, in *Blankets* it replaces the depiction of orgasm. This, I’d like to suggest, almost functions as a form of censoring. The white panel is followed by a third almost completely white panel, confirming that behind the silence of the visual register Craig reaches orgasm. Along with the strong presence of the narrator and absence of the visuals, the page

lay-out returns to its regular pace, displaying rectangular panels. This is continued on the next page, forming a bridge of sorts back to the past (fig 14 and 15).

Not only does the page lay-out return to rectangular, it contains yet another stanza, the six same sized panels amidst the larger and thinner panels above and below. The unity of the repeating subject of a close up on Craig's hands. The effect of a static shot on a certain subject gives off the effect of repetition: "by repeating the same framing over and over again, the artist emphasizes a key moment within the narrative and prolongs it not on the mode of 'and then' but rather of 'and still . . . and still . . .'" (Groensteen, 2013, 148). What is shown happens in quick succession, the moment fragmented and showing each part of the bigger action. That is until the last panel, which stretches out, almost as if to suggest the reader should linger. It is in this one panel that the anguish and fear Craig feels is revealed. Purely an artistic accomplishment of depicting emotion, we are shown through body language how heavy the weight of faith burdens him. In contrast with the last page, the hands suggest a close-up view of Craig's vision, increasing the closeness between reader and character again and ending the rude awakening caused by the metanarrative. Suddenly the comment on the previous page carries with it a bitter connotation: it is Craig's fear of sin and condemnation that keeps him from satisfying any sexual desire. Thompson has lied to his reader, purposefully contrasting the positive connotation and the negative connotation, showing the hidden irony of a faith that was supposed to spare Craig from suffering. This ironic message is brought across by the juxtaposition of scenes, the page lay-out here as the main carrier of the dialogue between the two perspectives. Through the application of regular rhythm in an irregular page layout, Thompson creates an effect of metafiction, emphasizing the materiality of his comic's pages. Layering text and image and enclosing his text in panels, emphasis is laid on the narrator's commentary. As if making comments on top of his visualized past, Thompson showcases here again the reinterpretation of memory, albeit differently, showing

here a layering of perspectives instead of one perspective “overwriting” the other as such is the case in the first scene.

In a concordance, I discovered that passages had been added to ECCLESIASTES to leaven the pessimistic tone.



5:15 Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.



5:19 Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, to accept his lot and be happy in his work - this is a gift of God.

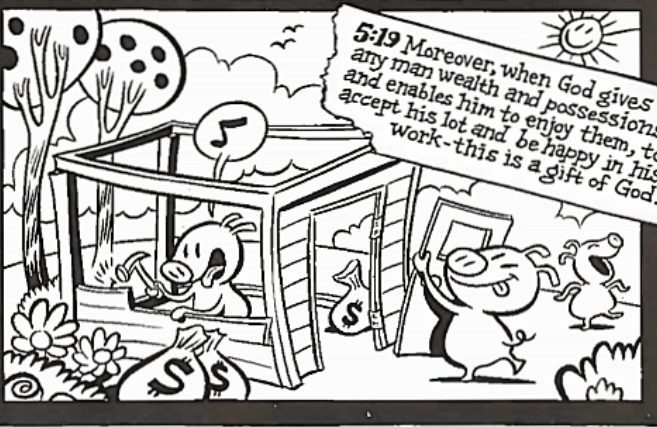
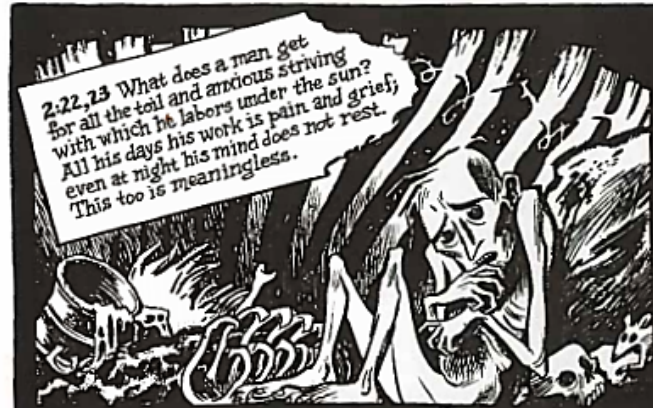


Figure 15 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 546.

2:22,23 What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.



2:24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.



(Perhaps the amendments were meant to assuage the masses?)

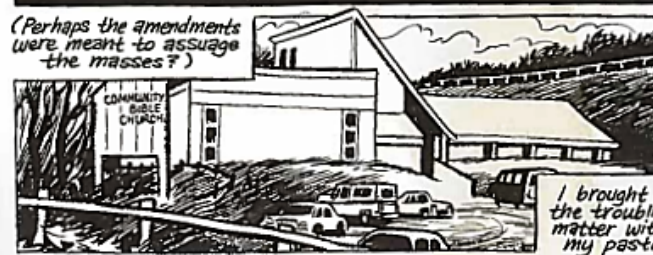


Figure 16 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 547.

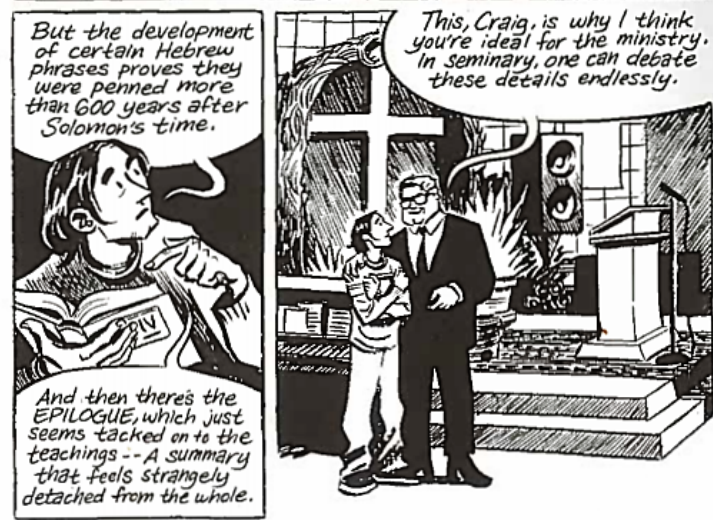
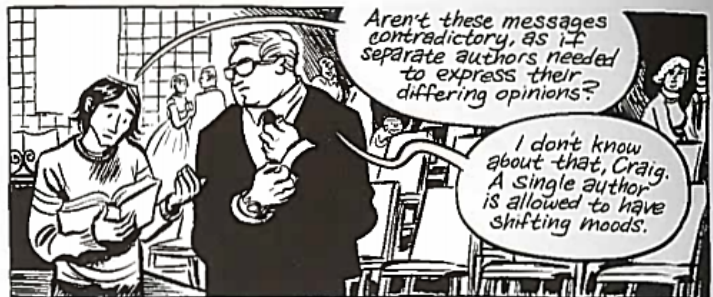


Figure 17 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 548.

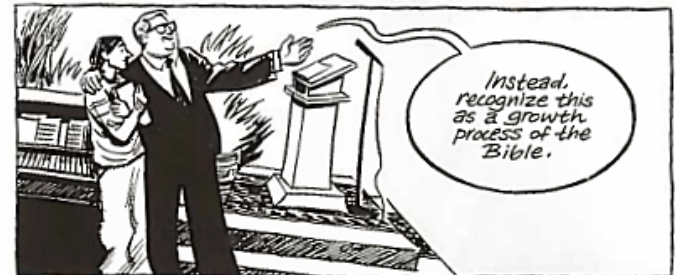


Figure 14 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 549.



Figure 19 Thompson, Craig. Blankets. 2012. p 550.

7. Scene three: Visual metaphors and the usage of *series*

The third scene focuses on the use of metaphorical visuals. The visual-verbal interplay is very strong as in this case the image supports to narration, expands on it, or explains it. Without the image, the verbal message wouldn't be understood. What is translated through these visual metaphors are thoughts or feelings, and in case of this scene, concepts of the Bible as contradictory. Not only is there use of metaphor, however, metaphoric imagery is also used to lay semiotic connections across pages and even chapters. Groensteen has described a form of connecting iconic images such as metaphors between panels throughout the comic as a whole:

A series is a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences [...]. A sequence is a succession of images where the syntagmic linking is determined by a narrative project (Groensteen, 2007, chapter 3:2 par. 4).

I will also pointed out series as they appear. For the third scene we are fast-forwarding to the last chapter of *Blankets*, which contains an elaborate reasoning behind Craig's break with religion. A dialogue between Craig and his brother Phil in the previous chapter already tells us that although Craig still believes in God and the teachings of Jesus, he has lost faith in the Bible, church, and the dogma that come with Christianity (Thompson 533). Seeing as Craig has kept his Bible with him throughout *Blankets* and the present narrator tells us that he read from it every night (Thompson 198), it is quite a big step for him to reject the Bible altogether. It is in the last chapter, "Footnotes", that this is explained.

The first panel of the first page shows Craig in the past reading while the narration provides context as to what is being read (fig15). After stating his younger self's doubts,

Thompson addresses the reader, offering to aid their understanding by using examples (fig 15). Emphasizing the metafictionality of the scene, the captions are layered on top of the images as if they are pieces of ripped paper, and the Bible's text on them is a different typography from the normal lettering (fig 15 and 16). Without the context of the illustrations that the narrator provides, the context of mockery of the contradiction is lost. With the dramatically despairing hollow-eyed figures and the cartoon-like pigs in the third panel, a different kind of idea is conveyed.

The strong contradiction between the happy and tragic verses is enforced by the page lay-out and chromatic resemblance, their contrast stressed as a sign that their message is too contradictory. Just like in the first scene, dark edges appear around panels to accentuate them, creating a sense of connection between the panels through page lay-out alone (fig 15 and 16). This is strengthened by the contrast between white and black and the content of the images. On the scale of page-comparison, page 546 and 547 are mirrored stanza's, creating even more of a connection, utilizing the "natural solidarity" between the left and right page (Groensteen, 2007, 1.6, par. 3). The size and shape of the third panel of page 547 and the first panel on page 546 maintain the sense of symmetry these mirrored pages evoke (fig 15 and 16).

After this short analysis of the verses, the perspective shifts back to Craig in the past on page 548 (fig 17). The narrator falls silent as the conversation between Craig and his pastor takes place. Thompson appears again on the next page to comment on the pastor's words by repeating them and questioning their validity. As their conversation comes to an end however, the narrator appears again, responding directly to what the pastor said (fig 18). Metaphorical thorns grow around the captions in panel four, overlapping the first caption of the panel and surrounding Craig's figure like an environment. Apart from a clear visual metaphor, the thorns also lay a connection with the previous pages as the thorn design is the same as the illustrations on panel 2 of page 546 (fig 15). This is a connection made across

pages, a purposefully chosen metaphor to connect the negative Bible verse to the loss of faith. Meanwhile, past-Craig is shown staring at his Bible with a thoughtful expression as he walks out of the panel, his foot and head sticking out. All in all, this panel calls attention to the reader that a connection is made by Thompson.

The present self takes over both visual and verbal register completely on the next page, Craig completely absent (fig 19). Thompson announces the irregularity of this moment through previously seen altering in page layout and graphic style, as well as the return of the same paper-scrap like captions on the previous pages. This particular moment distinguishes itself because it lays many connections with other pages throughout *Blankets*. The piglets and the house are one and the same as the ones used to illustrate the Bible verse earlier (fig 15 and 16), this page almost like a continuation as the familiar Big Bad Wolf arrives, just as in the story of the three little piglets. Not only that, the illustration of the wolf and the wind that comes from his mouth are shaped much like the artistic creations shown to be expelled from Craig's mouth in the first scene (fig 6). I'd like to suggest that this constitutes a series within *Blankets* as the alternative graphic art style and the iconic similarity between the creatures from the first scene, laying yet another connection here.

By doing this Thompson manages to remind the reader of those previously narrated and shown events, making it possible to unfold a bigger message than what is said outright. Laying yet another connection here, Thompson expresses through mirroring of pages how what is happening is a reverse of page 60. The same drawings that were burned, banishing drawing from his life, are now overruling his faith which Craig held in such high regard. This in itself is a message from Thompson to his reader, a way to close the saga of his struggle with religion and art, letting his reader know that by proof of his creation *Blankets*. The same Bible book that spurred him to burn his artwork is now scrutinized using *cartoon-esque* illustrations. The scene shows what Thompson became, a comics book artist no longer riddled

by guilt because of his gift for art. Creating here a series and connecting metaphors across pages, not only reminds reader to leaf back through the comic and realize its construction process, but might even be reminiscent of the framework that connects fragmented memories together around a theme, such as is in human nature to do automatically, forming in this way a story of our identity.

8. Conclusion

Just like memory, comics are fragmented and through their fragmentation this close reading has shown how the fragmented self can be expressed. Through two different uses of the visual-verbal interplay and through the use of page layout, the co-present past and present self, Thompson visualized the process of reinterpretation of his memories, creating something new and giving insight in the working of both memory and identity creation. Techniques which can be found in all three scenes, and many more throughout the comic, are causing a break in the regular appearance of image, text, or page layout. Specific patterns can be found for such as using different art styles to convey importance and create associations throughout the comic. Text-wise, Thompson uses irregular placement of text outside of captions and changes typography or the boldness of certain words and phrases to stress their importance. Visually, Thompson also makes frequent use of landscape pages when an important moment of reflection is taking place (also found in the pages 239 and 567-571) and points out the importance of a certain panel or caption by use thicker black edges. Furthermore, as shown in the analysis of scene one and three, connections can be made across *Blankets* through series, mostly through resembling art style and returning icons (such as the monsters seen in scene one, page 60, and scene three, page 550).

There are more instances where the materiality of *Blankets* is addressed. Irregular page layout can be found in pages 228 and 229, where the narration tells how Craig is disoriented and his memory fragmented, which is accompanied by a checkerboard type page layout with snapshots of images from the previous pages. There is one more instant of metaphorical use of visual and verbal register where the narrator compares the growing distance between himself and Raina with metaphors such as “keeping at arm’s length” being drawn as well as a visualization of drowning. Apart from this, *Blankets* makes use of angel and demon

iconography to silently associate good and bad aspects of the story with holiness and damnation, much like using images to illustrate the concept of religion as an influence. Examples of this are the visual metaphor of hellish and heavenly creatures (Thompson 306), when talking about transplanting the soul from a pure child body into a sinful adolescent one as well as depicting Raina as angelic while Craig recites a psalm. In this case as well, the return of this religious iconography could to pull the reader out of the story temporarily because of association with other pages.

There are many instances of visualization of the inner-world, but I found none as strikingly reminiscent of the reframing of the memory as the studied scene. Even so, many instances of a childlike depiction of the world can be found in *Blankets*' childhood tales. Here the narrator's mature retelling is accompanied by transformation of the world such as during play (Blanket 46) and fear distorting the cubby hole in as layer of monsters (Thompson 15).

The above mentioned use of iconography, attention for the inner-world of Craig's childhood are two subjects which could use more research when looking at the way they convey the dialogue between the different selves, though not as clearly metafictional layering of perspectives is very present in these cases as well.

Other comics such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* also make use of the comics medium in the same way as analyzed in the scenes above. Autobiographical comics are a popular genre within comics, gaining acknowledgement in both press and the comic world. Though authors such as Douglas Wolk might call this an unnecessarily sentimental manner of writing, the question of expressing the autobiographical self is answered by comics in a way that no written autobiography can. Through the specific layering of image and word which, as shown in this thesis, mimics the processes of memory and identity construction in its built up, the comic's autobiographer can emphasize the fragmented state of their very own life narrative as

no other. By expanding on the theory on the autobiographical self in comics, more can be learned about the effect on readers and authors alike by experiencing active participation in a story so much like their own. Many autobiographical comics concern such subjects as personal trauma and the struggle of mental illness as well as subjects that address war, politics, oppressed sexual identities, or national trauma. By combining such subjects with a personal history and showing the power and danger of reframing, important lessons can be learned about our own personal truths as well as those held high by society itself. Both end as fragmented and as subjective as what Thompson has described in *Blankets*: ever-changing and fragmented yet universal to us all.

9. Bibliography

- Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Eakin, Paul John. "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, pp. 121–132. *Jstor*.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107337?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- García, Mercedes peñalba. "Writing the Self, Drawing the Self: Identity and Self-Reflexivity in Craig Thompson's Graphic Memoir *Blankets*." *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación/Culture, Language and representation*, vol. 14, 2015, pp. 155-180.
<http://www.e-revistas.uji.es/index.php/clr/article/view/1792>
- Groensteen, Thierry. *Comics and Narration*. UP of Mississippi, 2013.
- Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. UP of Mississippi, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/reader.action?docID=619195&query=>.
Accessed
- Fisher, Darren. *Diegesis and Mimesis in Sequential Art*. Honors Thesis, Griffith University, 2017.
http://www.academia.edu/11602569/Diegesis_and_Mimesis_in_Sequential_Art
- Hahn, Joel. *Hahn Library, 2006-2007*, <http://www.hahnlibrary.net>
- Jungkeit, Steve. "Tell-tale Visions: The Erotic Theology of Craig Thompson's *Blankets*". *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books & Graphic Novels*. Ed. A. David Lewis, Christine Hoff Kraemer. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010, pp. 323-345.
- Mosko, Lauren. "Throwback Thursday: Craig Thompson Q&A Interview." *The Artist's Market Online Blog*, 21 May 2014,

<http://blog.artistsmarketonline.com/uncategorized/throwback-thursday-craig-thompson-qa-interview>.

- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Tabachnick, E. Stephen. "Autobiography as Discovery in Epileptic". *Graphical Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography*. Ed. Michael A. Chaney. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp 101-116.
- Thompson, Craig. *Blankets: A Graphic Novel*. Top Shelf Productions, 2012.
- Stanley, Sarah. "Drawing on God: Theology in Graphic Novels" *Theological Librarianship*, vol. 2, no.1, 2009, pp 83-88.
- Le Jeune, Philippe. *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 1975 pp. 135-146.