

**I am not there**

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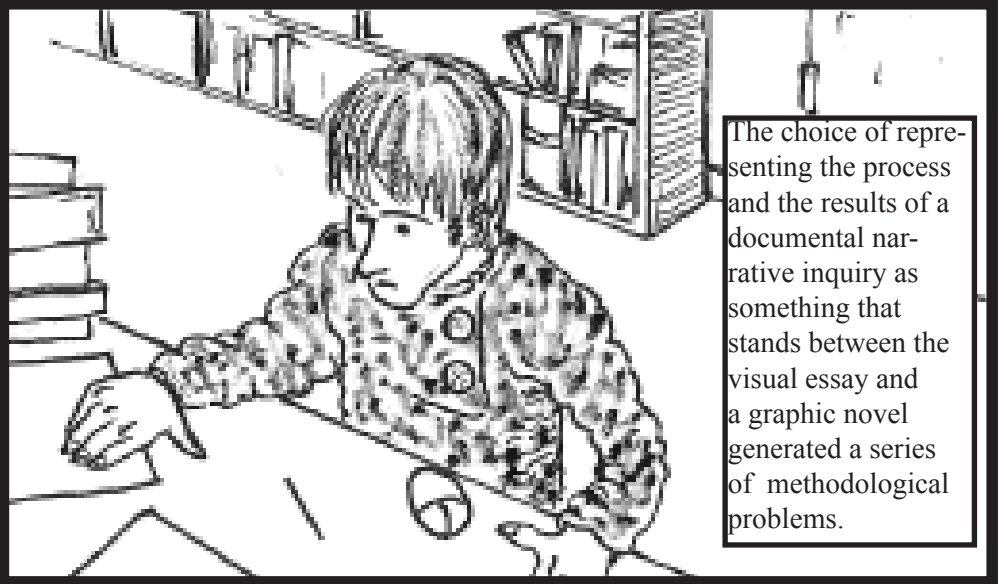
**Resumen/Abstract**

The paper here presented deals with the author's modes of representation in a narrative research where sequential art is used as a complimentary expressive form. My concerns about this specific, artistic aspect began when I had to deal with a series of difficulties, both conceptual and practical, that I had to solve while progressing with my doctoral thesis – a narrative approach to visual culture, developed as a graphic novel(ish) project. Since my methodological decision of making my presence explicit in my research, I had to manage if, when and how to portray visual representations of myself. I soon noticed that – among others – factors such as the level of iconicity of my drawn “persona” and the frequency in which it appeared altered the way I perceived my research position and, possibly, the way the reader will connect with my work. Here, I explore indirectly the many variants of my self-portraits, and I also look for other examples, drawn from other articles from authors who use sequential art as a communicative strategy, and also from graphic novels that deal with social and educative themes. The aim is to define, albeit in a provisional manner, some categories that could help to solve narrative impasses and to better structure modes of representation of the Self in this particular kind of narrative research.

**Key words:** Sequential Art; Self Portrait; Narrative Research; Arts-Based Research.

The article here presented deals with the author's modes of representation in researches that use sequential art as a complementary expressive form.

My concerns about this specific aspects began when I had to deal with a series of difficulties, both conceptual and practical, that I had to solve within the context of a PhD thesis developing as a vastly graphic project that draws inspiration from the language of comics.



The choice of representing the process and the results of a documental narrative inquiry as something that stands between the visual essay and a graphic novel generated a series of methodological problems.

How to translate abstract concepts to images?



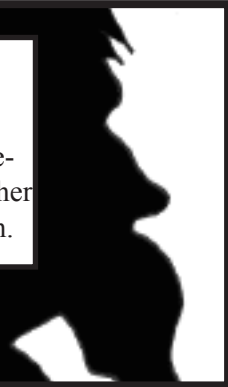
How to keep a good sequentiality in the narrative?



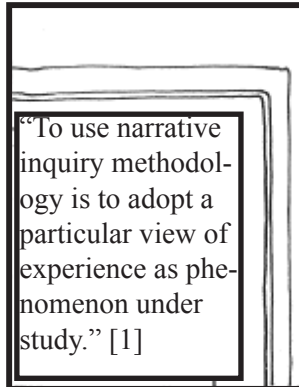
And, how to articulate my own role and appearance in it, so to elaborate the best strategy for my thesis?



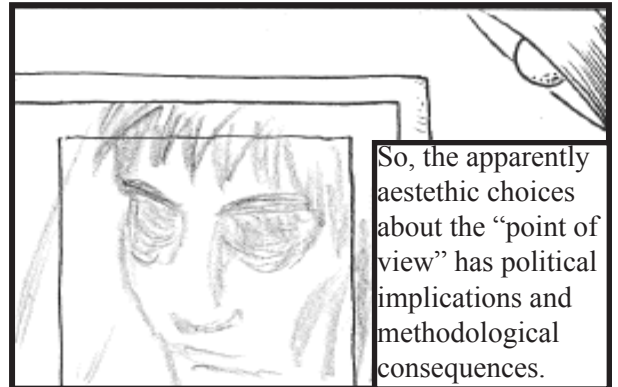
In Narrative Inquiry the voice of the researcher reveals his or her own position.



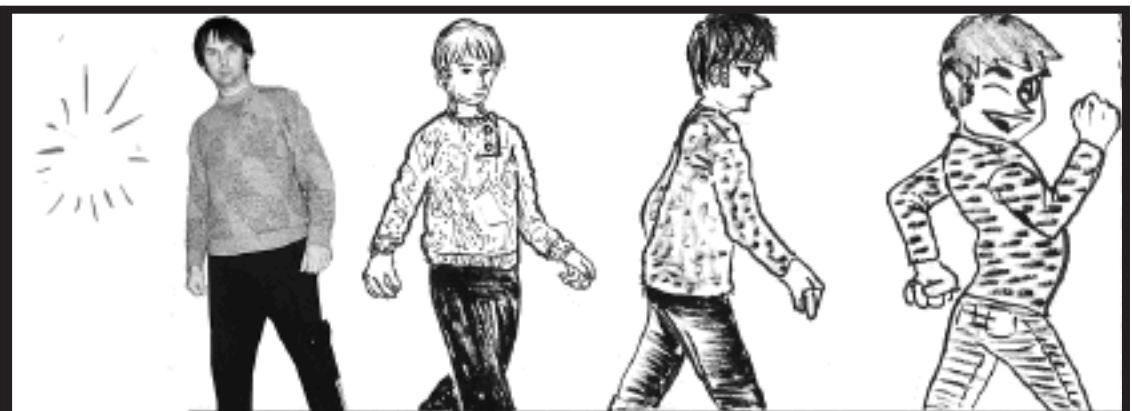
"To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study." [1]



So, the apparently aesthetic choices about the "point of view" has political implications and methodological consequences.



Therefore, decisions such as the iconicity of my image and the frequency of appearance of it alters my research position, the quality of this experience and even, subtly, the implications about information there portrayed.

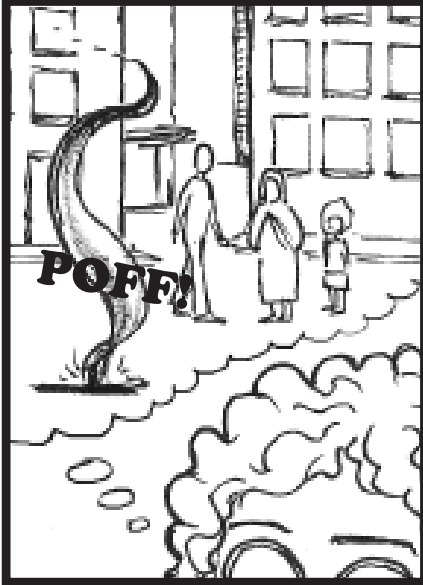


In textual, "written" narrative inquiry one has many options available with regard to the representation of the narrator.

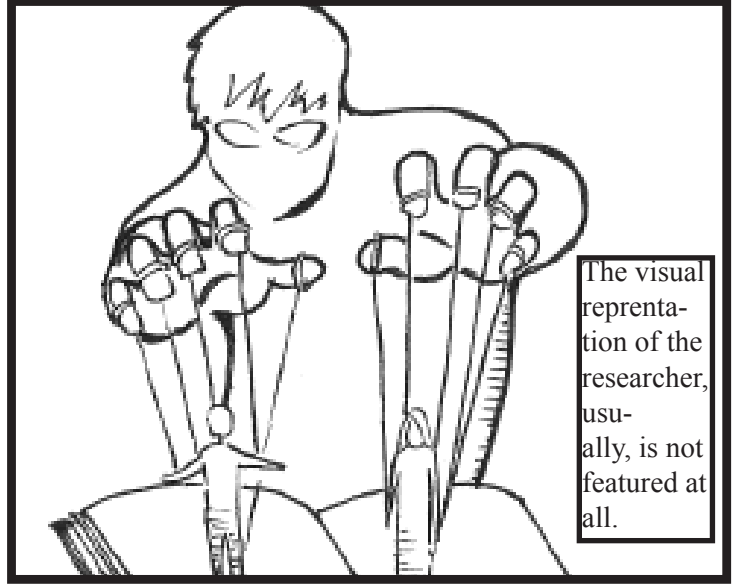
Narrative Inquiry does not necessarily imply the use of a first person narrative, although this seems to be a common choice.

For sequential art, the starting point is about the same: to decide whether to make the researcher's voice/presence implicit or explicit.

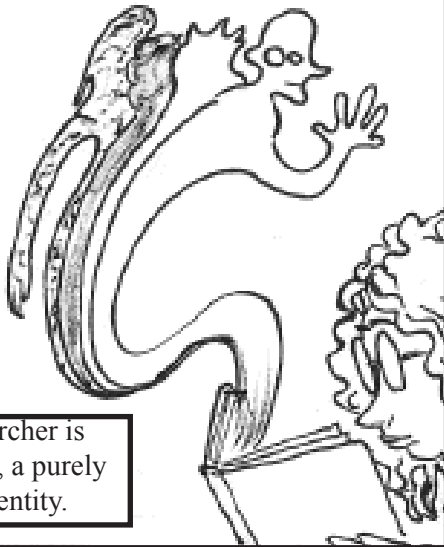
When the researcher opts for an implicit position, he excludes himself from the story.



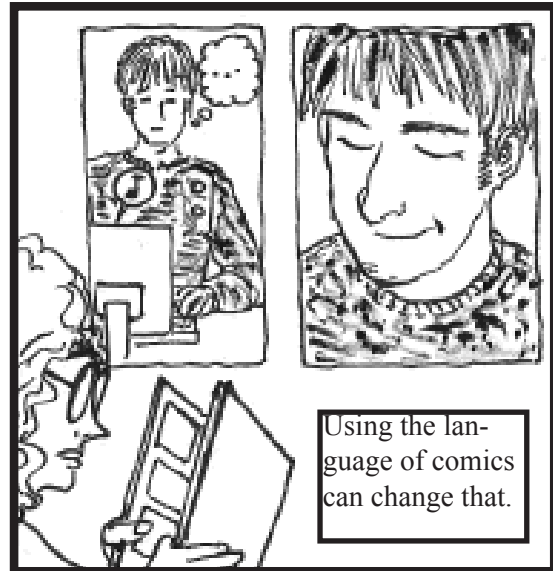
He then becomes a silent, invisible actor, yet he is still in control of the narrative, and has to be responsible for this power.



The reader does not really know who the researcher is, what's his or her age, what he or she looks like.



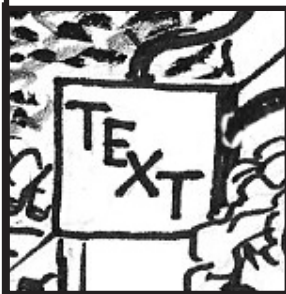
The researcher is body-less, a purely narrative entity.



I don't think that, on a structural level, is any different from what theorized by Stuart Hall [2]

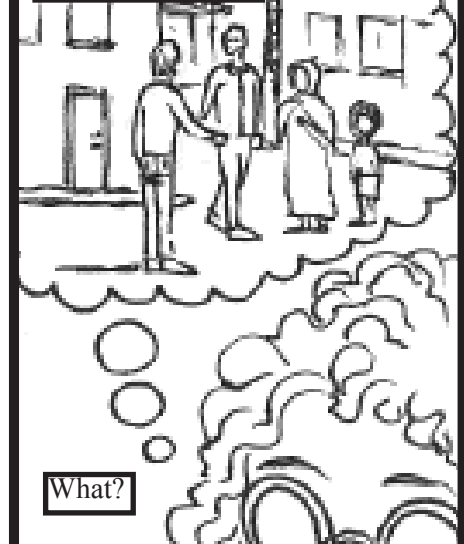


Me and the reader will both negotiate meaning with the text.

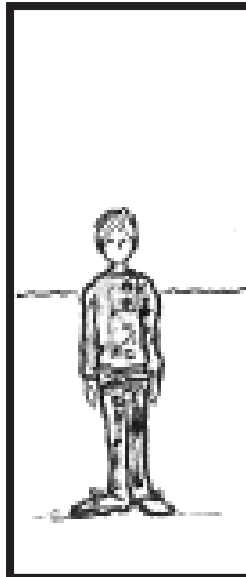
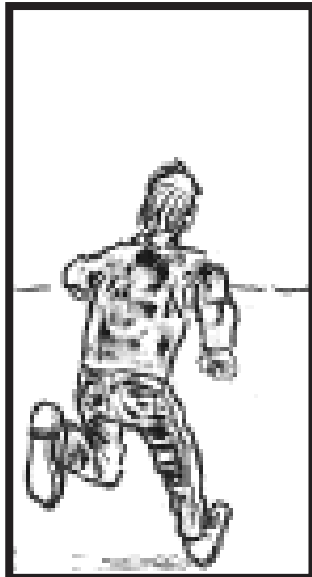
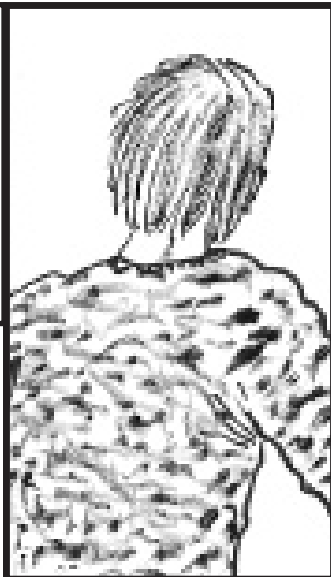


So using sequential art, or my presence in it, does not guarantee that the message will be transmitted and understood as I would like.

But, there is something different.

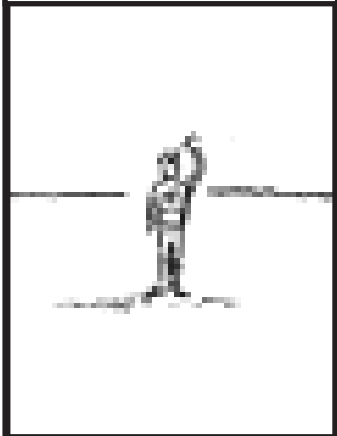


The common conception of what a comic is based on a visual subject in action, who provides a “voice”, a followable link to the reader.

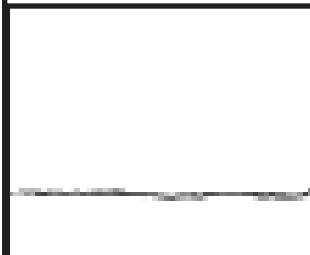


An academic essay is different: there is no need to constantly perceive a recognizable, active subject. But in comics, I need to see “something moving”.

This subject can appear and hide intermittently in the narrative, but if it never appears, we will probably fail in recognizing the text as a graphic novel.



Thus, in a comic, the sequence comes charged with subjectivity (the choice of visual images is not random, nor is the way of drawing them).



As an author, I ask myself: how do shape my drawn “persona” so that the reader can interact with him?

I see it a bit like a pact.



For instance, I could ask the reader to consider all these images as visual resonances of the my discourse which, on the other hand, sounds more like a spoken monologue than a properly academic paper.

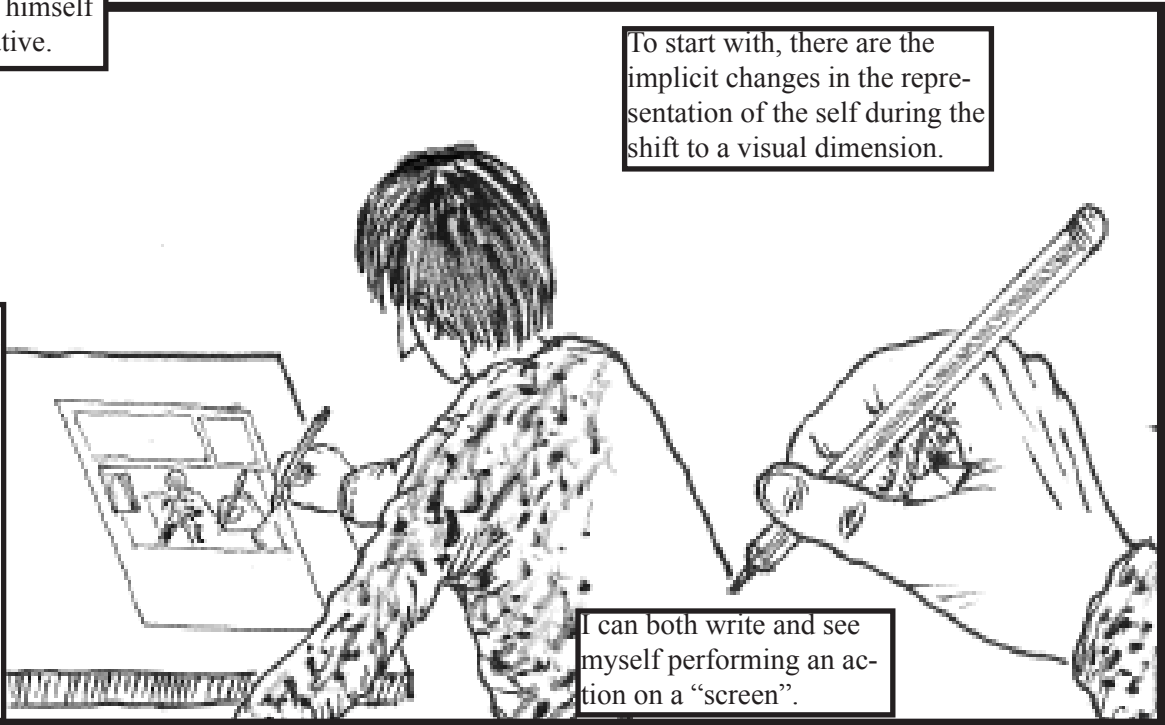
More demanding requests should probably consider whether inform the reader about uncommon reading patterns [3].



It is exactly this “persona” I’m interested in; when the researcher includes himself in the graphic narrative.

To start with, there are the implicit changes in the representation of the self during the shift to a visual dimension.

In this case, as in other cases of graphic representation, the author talks from the self through the verbal text, and at the same time extrudes a visual image of the self.



I can both write and see myself performing an action on a “screen”.

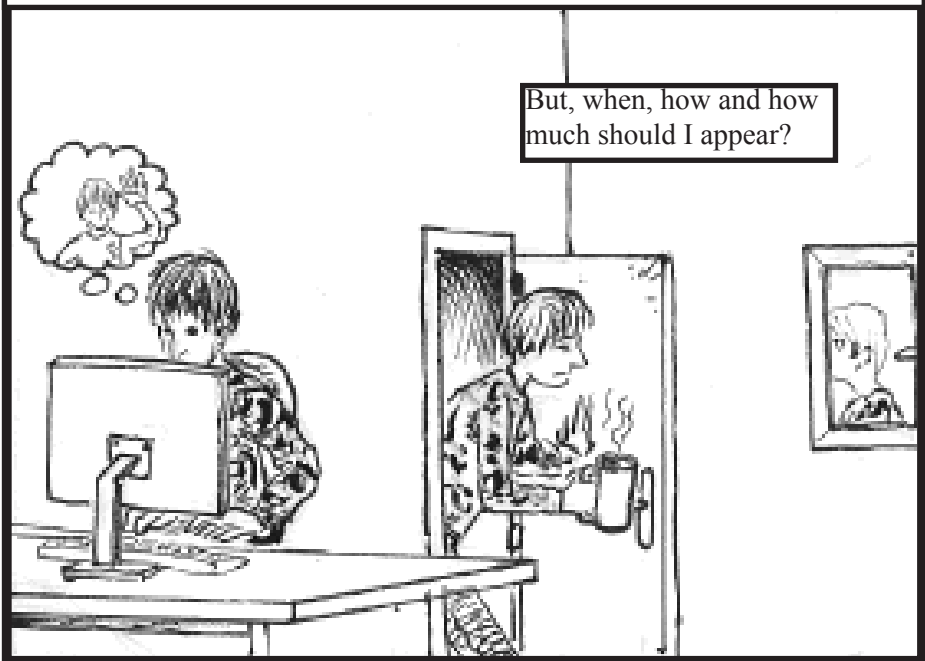
This implies a series of reflections about seeing oneself as “another”, like in a lacanian mirror, and explore this estranged feeling and its methodological resonances.



What are the possible representational choices, and which functions do they serve?



I experimented with my “personas”, with the aim of giving a visual background and conceptual deepness to certain moments or concepts expressed.

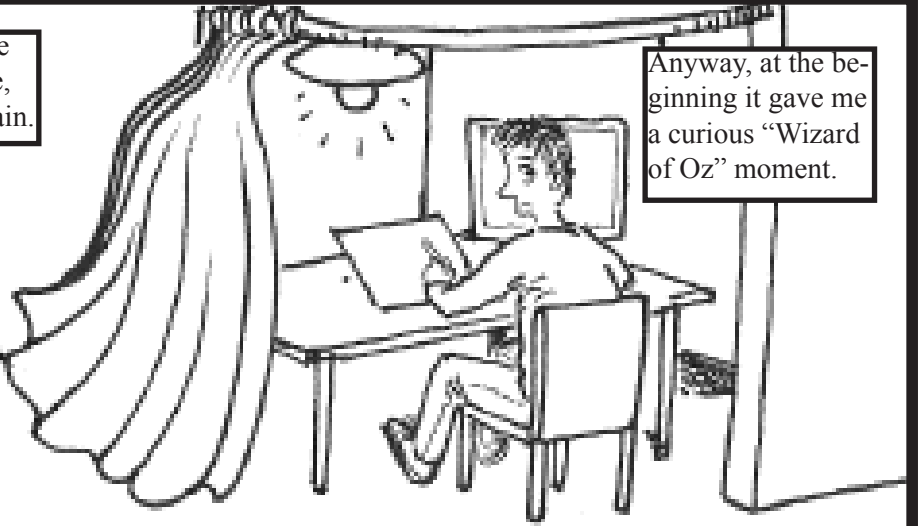


But, when, how and how much should I appear?

The image of me, sitting in front of the computer, or busy at the drawing table, was coming to my mind again and again.

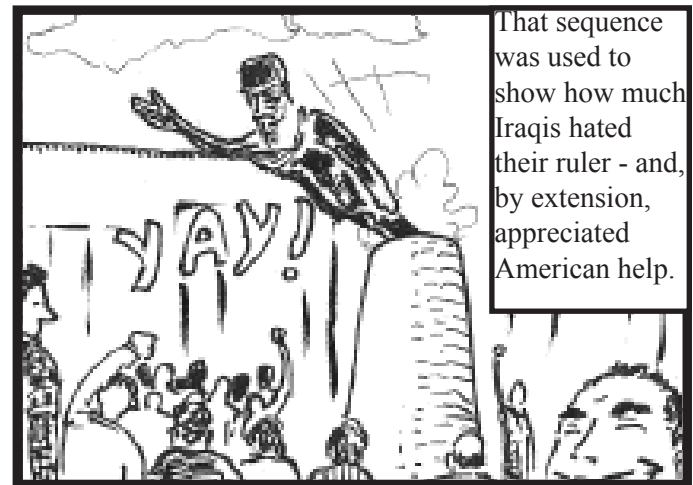
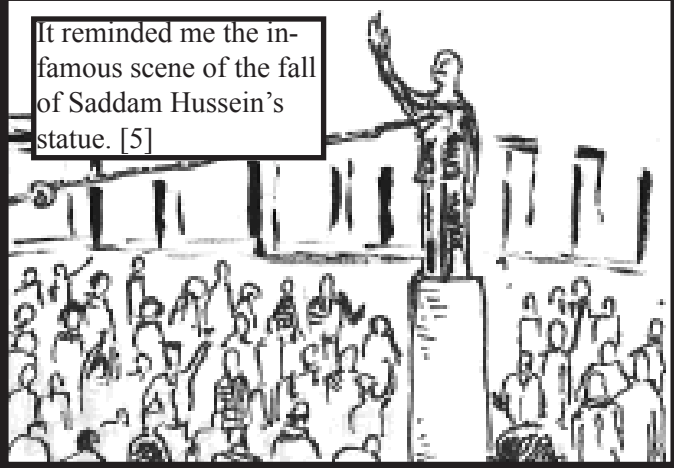
I realized very soon that this strategy had to be used with parsimony, otherwise it could become redundant and pointless.

Even good graphic novels are full of “talking heads” [4], so maybe it’s not an issue. But I don’t know.



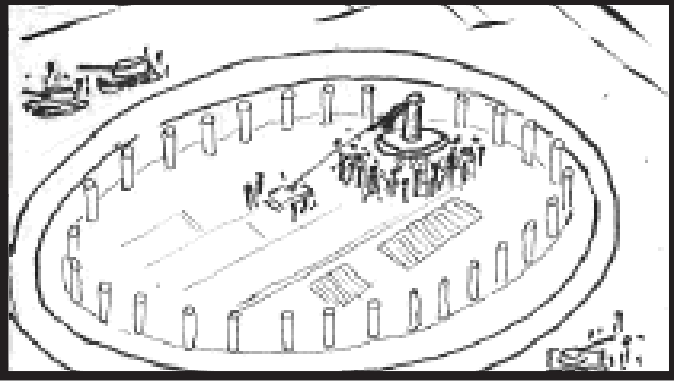
Anyway, at the beginning it gave me a curious “Wizard of Oz” moment.

It reminded me the infamous scene of the fall of Saddam Hussein’s statue. [5]

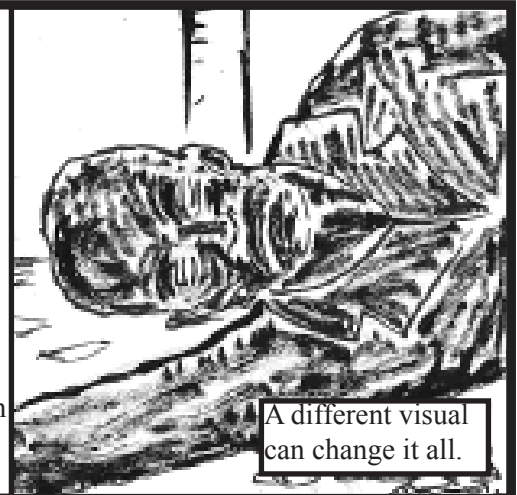


That sequence was used to show how much Iraqis hated their ruler - and, by extension, appreciated American help.

Another picture, taken from a distance, portrayed a different situation: very few people, all in all, and monitored by American armed forces. [6]



The analogy is that, by showing myself in the research, I can give the reader an even better glimpse of how fragmented, fragile and human the research process is.



A different visual can change it all.

So, I can give visual expression for the author I quote, draw references for the material I have read and for the places I have traveled to.

I can challenge the sense of absolute control that, sometimes, the monotone flow of computer fonts expresses.

And yet, most of the time. I’m just a guy sitting at the computer, working on a doctoral thesis research - and it shows!



Other researchers have made the use of the image of themselves to add nuances to their work.



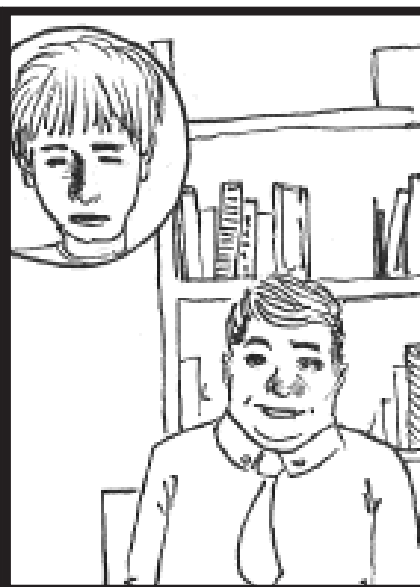
Rachel Marie Crane-Williams, for instance, represents herself in a series of “vignettes”. [7]



She explores possibilities and problems of using comics as a way of visually representing her research activities.



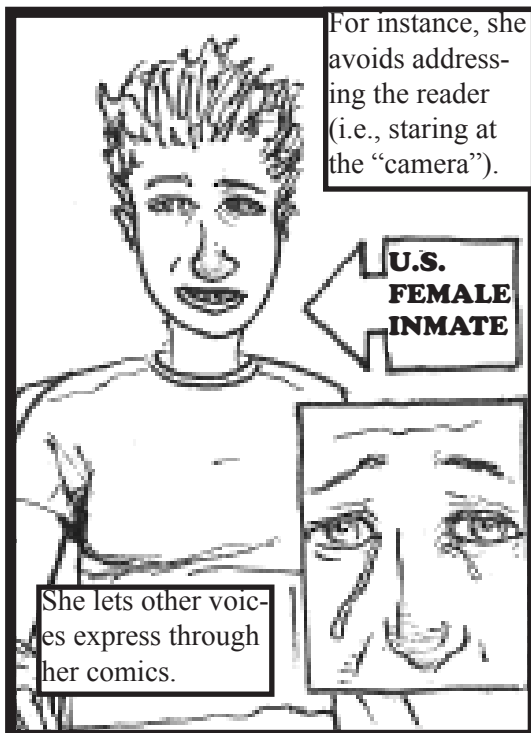
Her “avatar” is the true focus of the article, and the places she draws herself in, the posture, the gestures, the expression allow me to get a more complete glimpse of her persona and work, and even allows for a bit of humour to get in.



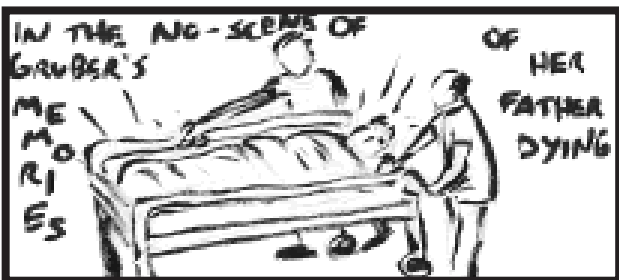
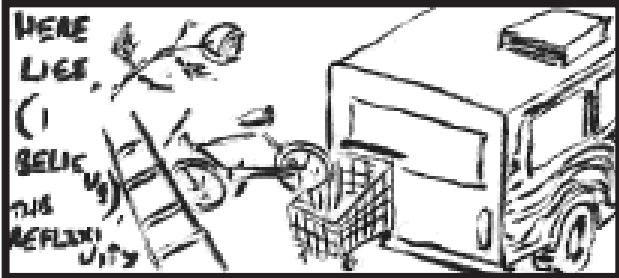
She positions herself as someone who is participating in her research and avoid protagonism.



For instance, she avoids addressing the reader (i.e., staring at the “camera”).



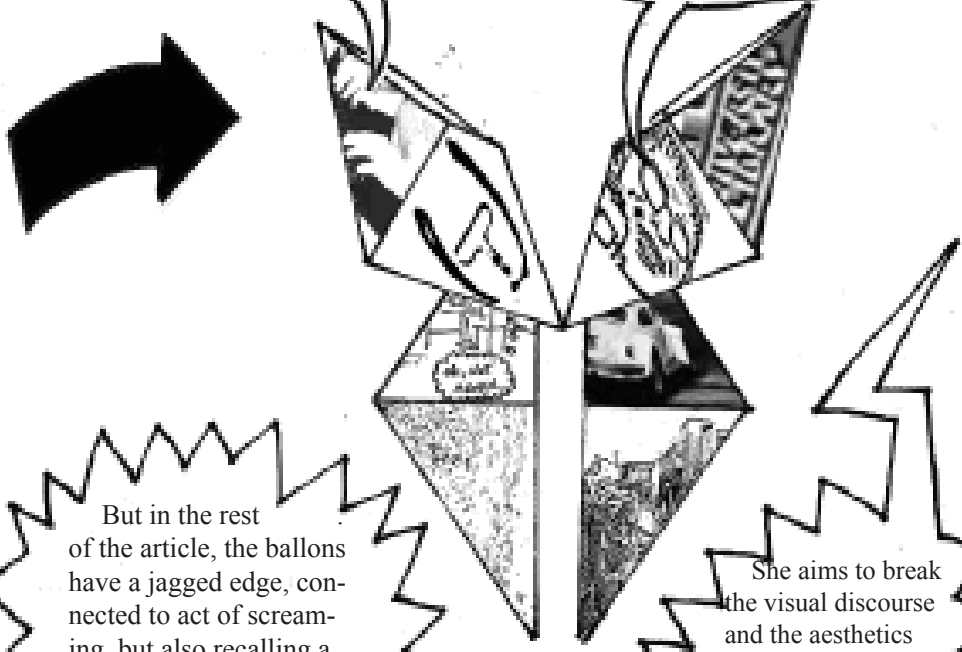
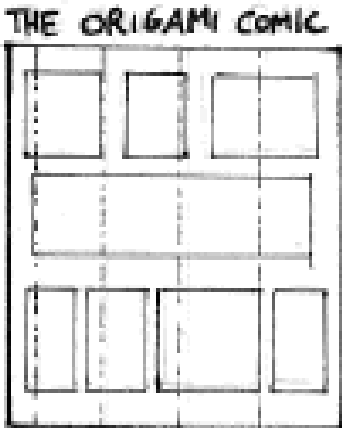
She lets other voices express through her comics.



Maria Robinson-Czeke plays instead with the almost complete absence of a narrator.

The visual presence of her "self" is minimal, and subordinate to the purpose of the graphic narrative.

In this context, her avatar appears in just a few panels, barely visible. In these panels, the balloons have the usual rounded shape, a semi-otic sign of human speech.

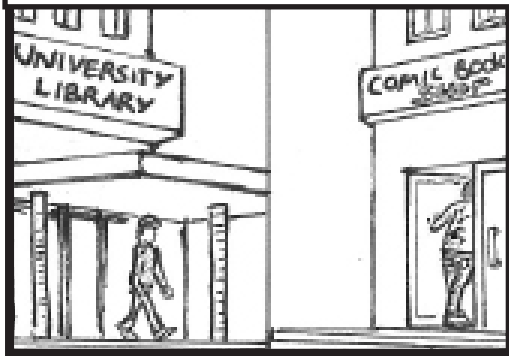


But in the rest of the article, the balloons have a jagged edge, connected to act of screaming, but also recalling a metallic, artificial, inhuman voice - a filter that displaces the voice of the author

She aims to break the visual discourse and the aesthetics of the graphic novel and, thus, provide a visual resonance to her discourse about the political role of the art. [9]



Since not many researches show a proper (or any at all) use of sequential art as a representational strategy, I had to look at graphic novels and visual essays where the authors wanted to portray overtly political themes or visually represent abstract concepts.



I have found the so called graphic journalism and the essays in graphic novel form to be of great analytic interest.



Joe Sacco is probably the better known name in this recent field of comic making. [10]



As a journalist, he appears to be very conscious about the role that comics can have in portraying what he defines subjective truths, and shows a strong sense of ethics.



He appears in his own comics, but he often disappears for many panels, to let the voices of each interviewee freely tell his story and point of view.



The drawing style, while evidently coming from caricaturistic underground comics, has evolved toward very detailed naturalistic strokes, aimed to reinforce a sense of documenting the reality. [11]



This use of the author's "avatar" is different from Guy Delisle's - an author of many graphic novels that stand between graphic journalism and travelogue. [12]



The most striking is, possibly, *Pyongyang: A Journey in North-Korea*.



It's an unique document, an occidental look at north-Korean society and culture.



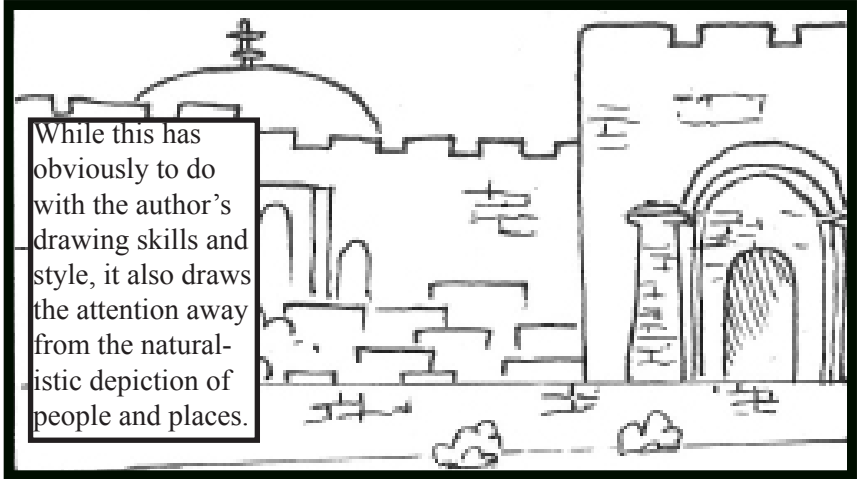
It is even more valuable given the strict regime of censorship and control, which limits the free circulation of information and images outside the country.



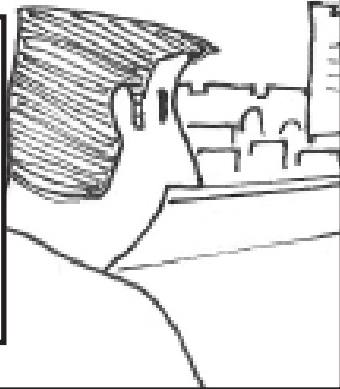
Delisle's drawing style can be defined as "cartoonish".



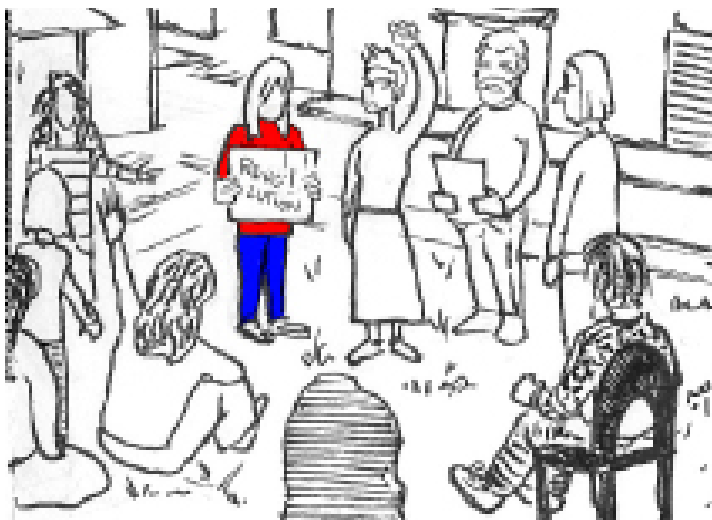
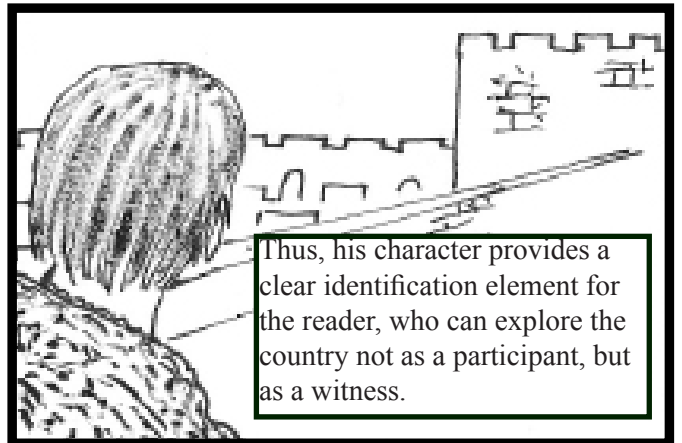
While this has obviously to do with the author's drawing skills and style, it also draws the attention away from the naturalistic depiction of people and places.



The focus, here, is the author and his impressions about the country, the emotional and affective aspects. This is also reinforced by the fact that he is, quite often, the focal character in the panel sequences.



Thus, his character provides a clear identification element for the reader, who can explore the country not as a participant, but as a witness.



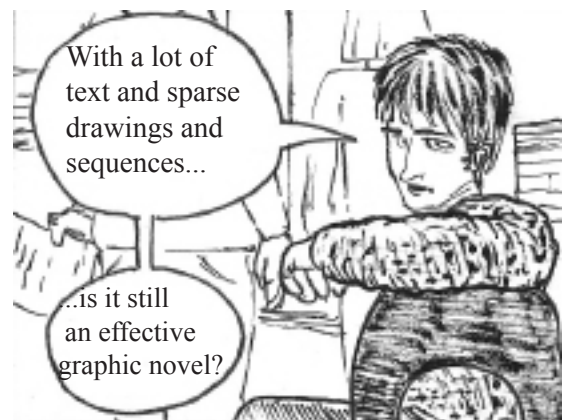
Moving to other categories of sequential works, I propose the work of Stephanie McMillan, *The Beginning of the American Fall*, as a bridge between visual essay and graphic journalism [13]

It is a graphic diary, documenting his experience as a political activist within the Occupy movement - and a strong, heartfelt support to anticapitalist protest movements.

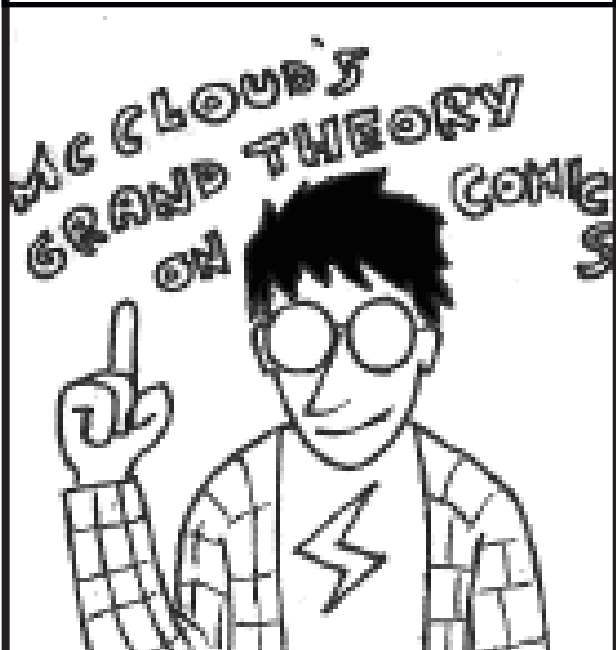
McMillan represent herself involved in discussions, protest acts, and reflexive moments. She purposely chooses to give a fixed appearance (blue jeans and red shirt) to her comics "persona".

Again, this artistic license from the conventions of realism is a strategy to allow the reader to have an identifiable "guide" through the narrative.

Yet, in her case, I found that her drawing style and skills were a bit plain and did not add much to the story told.

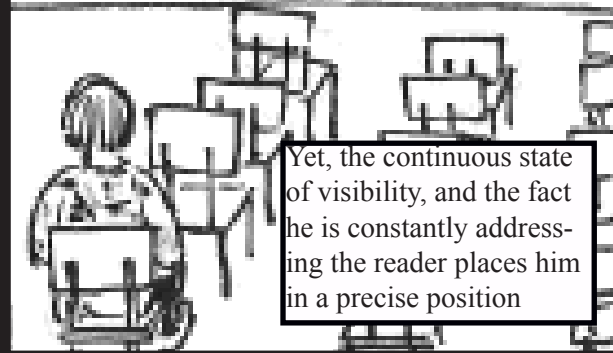
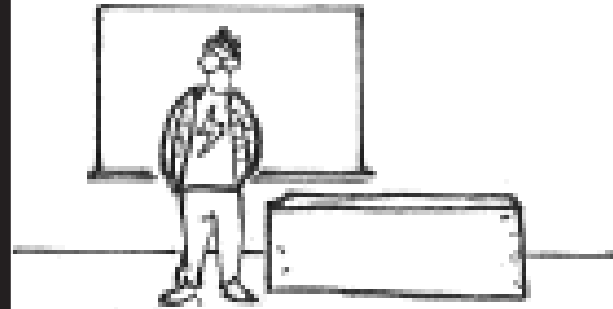


Lastly, I would mention Scott McCloud, who has written fairly relevant, if discussed, meta-reflexive books about sequential art. [14]

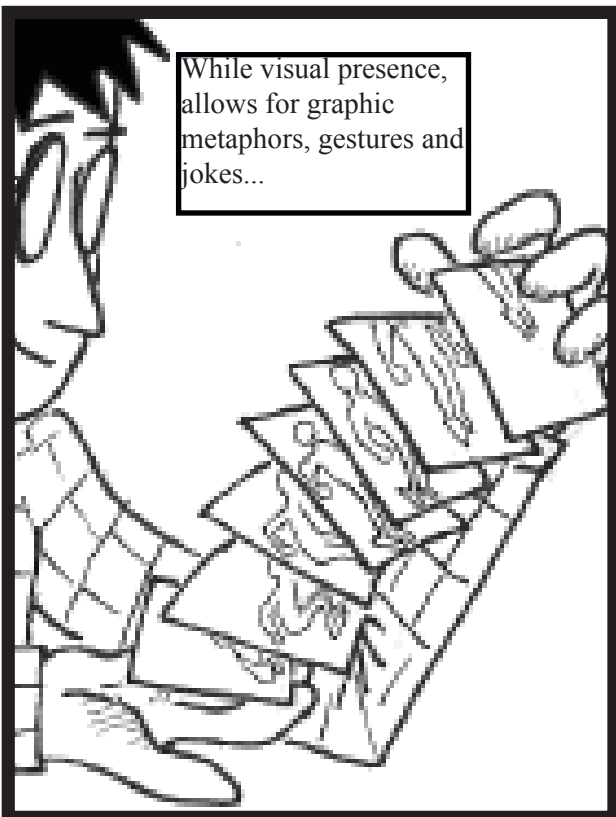


McCloud uses a graphically unvaried avatar of himself to guide the reader through the reading process

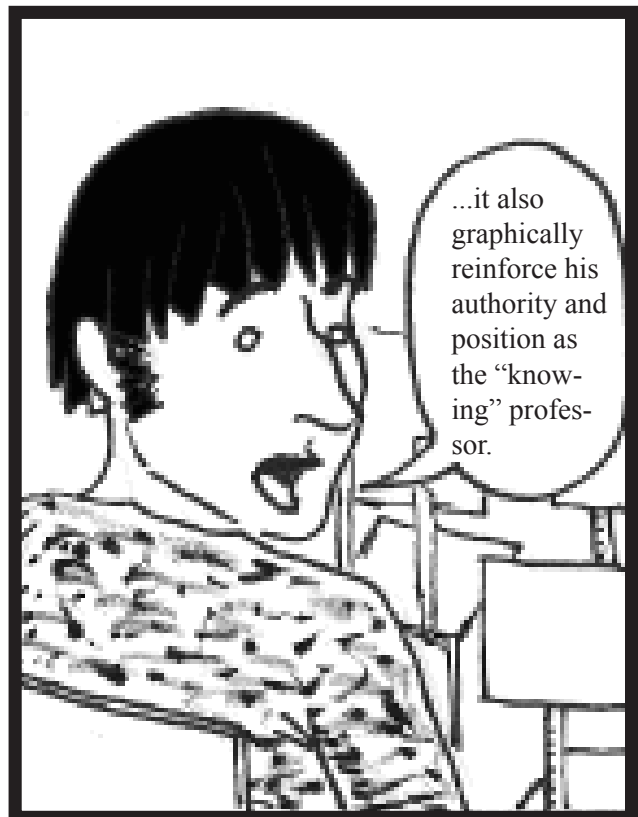
This repetition integrates the author in the story and, in a way, it makes him invisible.



Yet, the continuous state of visibility, and the fact he is constantly addressing the reader places him in a precise position



While visual presence, allows for graphic metaphors, gestures and jokes...



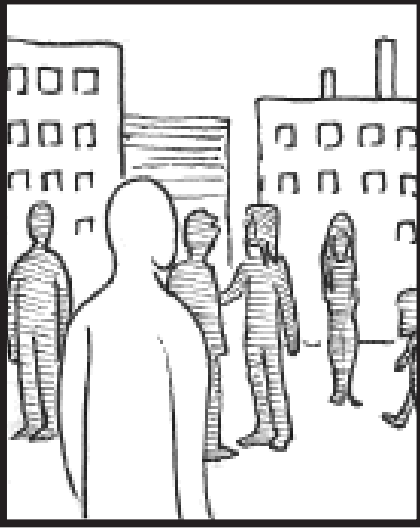
...it also graphically reinforce his authority and position as the "knowing" professor.

From these examples, representing the most common narrator representation in this kind of comic narrative, I will extrapolate some tentative categories.

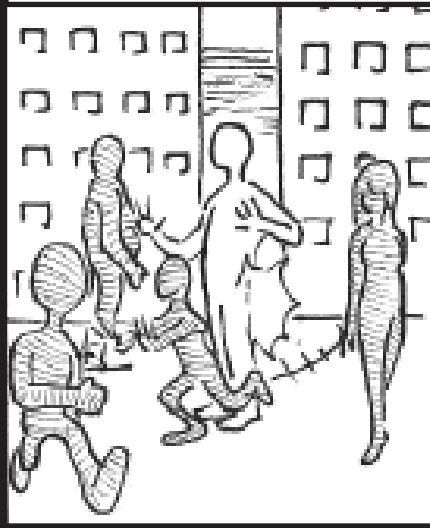
For what concerns the categories, of course, there are no precise boundaries, and the author may intentionally shift from one mode to another within the same narrative.

The first three categories represent the function of the narrator appearing in these kind of semi-essayistic narrative.

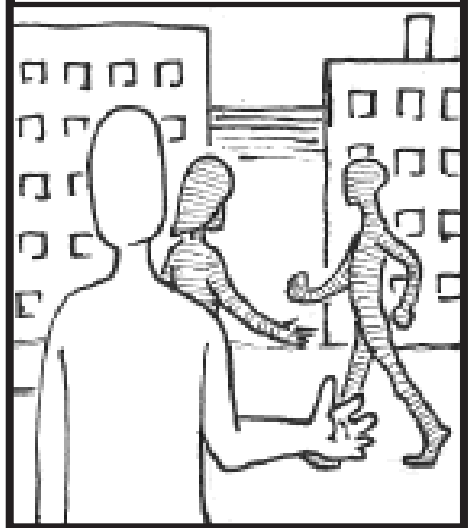
The witness: the narrator's avatar witnesses the facts or concepts presented, and his presence reinforces author's point of view.



Participant: the avatar participates to the scene rather than just describe or tell it, and thus leaves space for other voices to emerge.

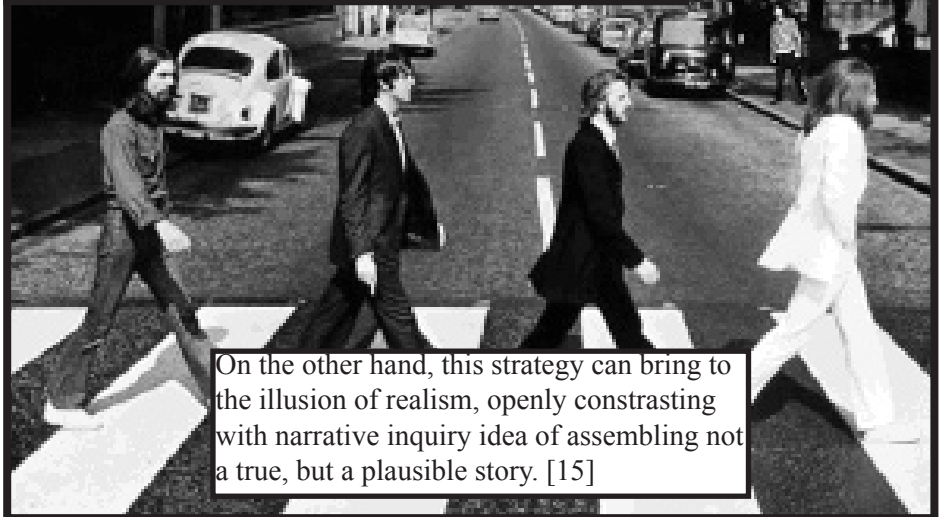


Authority: the narrator positions himself as someone who "knows" and his avatar graphically reinforces the active persuasive function of his discourse.



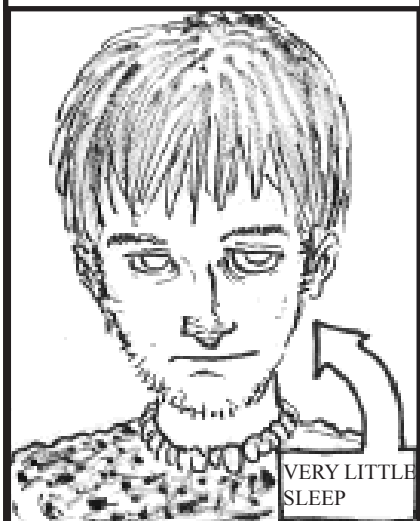
Then, for what concerns stylistic mode there seem to be four aesthetic varieties toward which the narrator's "persona" tends when represented (or represents him/her)self in graphic novels.

The first is the hyperrealistic portrait (such as the photograph). It suggests an element of presence and factuality.



On the other hand, this strategy can bring to the illusion of realism, openly contrasting with narrative inquiry idea of assembling not a true, but a plausible story. [15]

Then, there is the realistic portrait. In this case, the reader clearly perceives a mediation between "reality", where details still matter, and author's subjective intervention.



Semi-realistic styles (such as caricature) may distance themselves from naturalistic pretensions, and shift even more the focus on author's explicit or implicit values and political position.



Finally, there are other image-making strategies, where the image of the researcher intersects with narrative intentions in ways that decrease the presential importance of author's image and makes it more a kind of rhetorical device.



There is, of course, a last mode of presence which has to do with author's absence in the narrative text. I have elaborated three "modes of absence".

First, there is the visible absence: absence from the sequence, and from the reader's visual field. The author thus focuses on other actors, or on other concepts. So, even if he can mark his off panel presence using written text (such as voice overs or thought captions), the visual absence of the main narrative voice in a preeminently graphic narration must pose some question about its meaning.

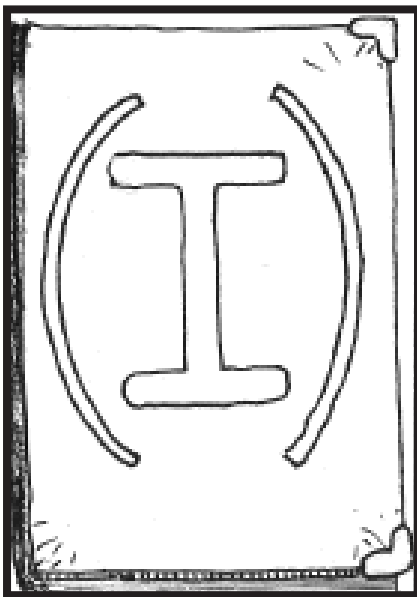
As a consequence, the shift from sequential art to pure, written text - an always available option, of which this page is an example - is another level of author's absence. As such, it may have a rhetorical scope. For instance, it may serve to break the pleasurable illusion provided by well executed drawings, and bring the reader's attention back to the fact that he or she is reading a research work. That's what I am doing in this page.

Finally, on a deeper level, there is the overall absence of the author, as the use of the sign (written or graphic) indicates. The sign, in many senses, is "presence in absence". Even if I use a first person narrative, I am not there, where the reader reads my words - if not in spirit. In graphic narrative, while the reader is still aware of this tension, the different modes of representation influence the way he perceives it and the forms he articulates its meaning. In many sense, the simple visual presence of the researcher makes impossible to ignore him. It's a veil on the absence, yet this veil must mean something, and the researcher has to think about what does he want it to mean.

The tension between presence and absence is thus particularly relevant in narrative inquiry, which emphasize the role of the actors within the narrative, the subjective position of the researcher, looking for a particular effect on the reader.

This discussion about how the modes of representation affect the reading experience is also related to the idea (which I mentioned earlier) of making a pact with the reader. If the researcher is personally involved in the construction of the narrative, then a pact that Philippe Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact" [16] must be sealed between the author and the reader, who is basically asked to believe - at least at a certain level, in what he is being told. If he believes, he reads the narrative from a different position, with, maybe, a greater degree of involvement and resonance with his own life experiences. In this narrative scenario, there is an autobiographical visual pact, as the researcher puts his (elaborated) image, his "persona" in front of the reader. This can contribute to make a more complex use of the above mentioned tension between presence and absence. Visually placing the researcher in the research scenario, giving a face to the person who interprets data, associating an emotional gesture to a textual statement can greatly strengthen the "pact" and increase the chance that the reader will relate to the research narrative. Even little touches can be enough: in Marta Manrique's research about a group of women telling their experiences as reader of graphic novels created by other women, the researcher and all the participants are portrayed in a relatively small number of panels, in some cases there is just a panel that sets up the scene, much like a small "establishment shot", where the rest of the page is written text. [17] The same technique is used by Stephanie McMillan in her already mentioned visual essay - but, as I noted, for some reason the graphic style and choices seem to work better in the former case than in the latter.

This brings to other important reflections about what could be considered the aesthetics of the portrait and its importance in narrative, comics-based research. It is a broad theme that I will address only superficially here, nonetheless, together with the functional categories that I have sketched before, it is an aspect that has to be deepened because it is directly connected both with the qualitative evaluation of the research and its effects in terms of reflexivity.



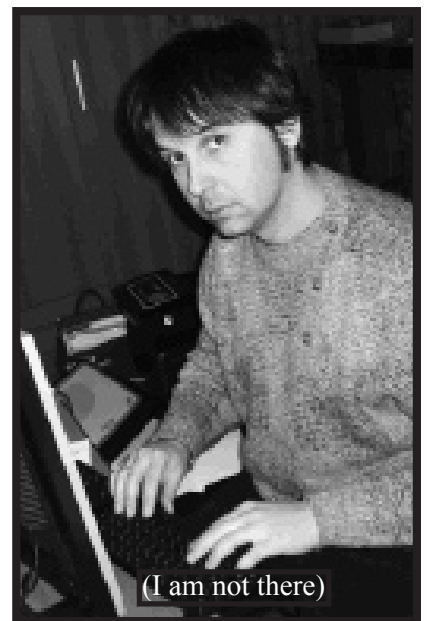
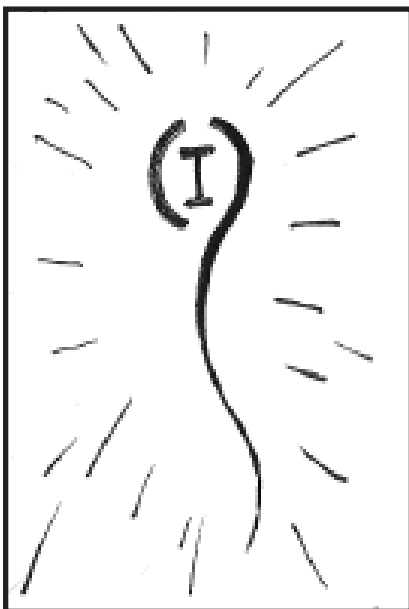
In this visual paper, I have stressed a specific methodological aspect that I, as researcher in a narrative comics-based research, had to solve in order to progress.

Even so, many aspects related to the presence and position of the researcher in a graphic novel inspired research paper are left open to further and deeper analysis - the most important being the image of the researcher, its role and communicative effects..

As Hernández refers, the use of artistic strategies in research is always tied to research purposes [18] How does these values translate to the representation of the researcher in a Comics-Based Research? An answer may come from Williams [19], who suggests that a special care should be put in drawing those moments, gestures, and facial expressions, so to generate a greater degree of empathy and emotional involvement. The implicit, anyway, is that the researcher's artistic skills should be good enough to effectively portray those scenes.

Yet, setting standars about artistic quality in comics-based research is a troublesome aspect, and one that requires, generally speaking, more exploration. For instance, when approaching this aspect, the impression is that acadamy is generally wary of excessive display of virtuosity and disapproves spectacularization. But, visual pleasure is also part of the reading experience. The examples quoted and performed in this paper relied on artistic abilities to make the researcher more human, even including humouristic aspects - here, I did some attempt with caricatures, for instance. On the opposite side, should we avoid evaluating displays of limited artistic ability just because the political and conceptual aspect is compelling? I am conscious that some pretty subjective judgement slipped in here, but this is reflexive of the intrinsic problem of evaluating artistic quality in this kind of context.

In any case, the visual presence of the researcher's "persona" can, at least, be thought as a rhetoric device that makes up, through a surrogate image, for the author's physical absence. While this is implicit in other signs, such as written words, with drawings it is visible, implicit and explicit at the same time.



(I am not there)



**Note:** Given the particular format of this essay I have opted for using endnotes instead of the usual, in-text notes.

## Endnotes

- [1] Connelly & Clandinin, 2006: 375.
- [2] Hall, 1980: 128-129
- [3] See, for instance, Wallis, 2012: 35 and 42.
- [4] An informal expression that indicates comics that mainly show people talking, so that the drawings focus most of the time on head and torso – not so hard to draw, and quite static.
- [5] Maas, P. (2011). The Toppling. How the Media inflated a minor moment in a long war. *New Yorker.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/01/10/110110fa\\_fact\\_maass](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/01/10/110110fa_fact_maass) (Last visited on 2014, January 14).
- [6] Author unknown. Youtube.com. Images of statue's toppling retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Snyz8sn2-z4> (Last visited on 2014, January 14).
- [7] All the images in this sequence are inspired by the works of Rachel Marie Crane-Williams (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [8] All the images in this sequence are inspired by the works of Vicky Grube (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [9] All the images in this sequence are inspired by the works of Maria Robinson-Czeke (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [10] All the images in this sequence (first half of the page) are inspired by the works of Joe Sacco (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [11] Not a drawing but an edited picture of Hatem, O. (2008). Retrieved from <http://apjp.org/gaza-massacres-27-december-200/> (Last visited on 2014, January 14).
- [12] All the images in this sequence (last line of this page and first half of next page) are inspired by the works of Guy Delisle (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [12] All the images in this sequence (last line of this page and first half of next page) are inspired by the works of Guy Delisle (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [13] All the images in this sequence (last line of this page and first half of next page) are inspired by the works of Stephanie McMillan (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [14] All the images in this sequence are inspired by the works of Scott McCloud (quoted in bibliography), with the declarate intent of reproducing his drawing style exclusively for research purposes.
- [15] Edited sleeve image from Beatles. *Abbey Road* [LP]. Abbey Road London: Apple Records.
- [16] LeJeune, 1991: 53-55.
- [17] Manrique, 2012: 104-105.
- [18] Hernandez, 2008: 94-95.
- [19] Crane-Williams, 2012: 92-93.

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