Visual modality versus authenticity: the example of autobiographical comics

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This article exposes some of the weaknesses of the social semiotic concept of ‘visual modality’ in analysing the perceived truthfulness of images, by contrasting it with the more productive notion of ‘authenticity’. Using three autobiographical comics as examples, I argue that Kress and van Leeuwen’s notion of modality is unable to capture adequately the complex relations that can pertain between images and reality, as it places too much emphasis on picture-immanent stylistic markers and neglects the performed element of truthfulness. In the case of autobiographical comics, ‘producer-oriented’ forms of authenticity seem to play a more important role than stylistic features in determining whether or not visual representations are likely to be seen as truthful.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to use the example of autobiographical comics in order to critically discuss the social semiotic concept of ‘visual modality’ and highlight some of its limitations by confronting it with the more fruitful notion of ‘authenticity’. In social semiotic theory (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2005), modality refers to the degree to which a representation is to be taken as true or real. Social semioticians propose that there are particular stylistic modality markers, such as articulation of background and depth, and colour differentiation and saturation, that have developed out of the central values and social needs of Western culture and which act as relatively reliable guides to the ‘truthfulness’ of images. The dominant standard by which visual modality is judged is, they suggest, naturalism, which means being as close as possible to what can be observed with the naked eye, although three other standards of realism, or ‘coding orientations’, may apply in particular social contexts. The authors maintain that visual modality applies to any kind of visual representation, including photographs, advertisements and works of art.

The concept of authenticity, which has recently been developed and applied to different visual genres by several German media scholars (Knieper and Müller 2003; Wortmann 2003), also addresses visual truthfulness, although it approaches the issue from a different angle. The notion of an authentic image is, by its very nature, highly elusive, but it can be defined very loosely as any visual representation that lays claim to a privileged, transparent relationship to its object of representation (Wortmann 2003, 14). Authenticity can be based on picture-immanent features, but it is more often contextual, drawing its power from the myths surrounding the origins of individual images or types of images. In contrast to visual modality, authenticity is thus not seen to reside primarily in particular stylistic features; rather, it is regarded as deeply embedded in the understanding of the nature of reality and the cultural practices of visual representation.

After briefly outlining and comparing the notions of visual modality and authenticity in Section 1, I will use the rest of the article to explore their respective strengths and weaknesses through the example of three autobiographical comics. The comic medium, which can be described as ‘a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures – usually, but not always, with text’ (Sabin 1993, 5), is generally accepted to have been invented by the Swiss schoolmaster Rodolphe Töpffer in the 1830s, although many of the conventions that have since become familiar in modern comics were invented only gradually (Mainardi 2007). Today, there is hardly any literary genre that has not also been rendered in comic form, and there are marked differences between the forms that have developed in North America, Europe and Japan, for instance (Dittmar 2008, 178).

Since the early 1970s, an ever-increasing number of writers in different parts of the world have been using comics to tell stories from their own lives, thereby subverting expectations regarding the subject-matter and formal features associated with more traditional comics. In order to stress their serious literary intent, such works have often been discussed and marketed under the label of ‘alternative comics’ or ‘graphic novels’ (Sabin 1993; Hatfield 2005). Some autobiographical works are by established comic artists, while other authors come from a background of fine arts, graphic

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design or creative writing. Consequently, the style and quality of the artwork, the degree of self-reflexivity, and the relative weighting of verbal and visual meaning differs greatly across these works.

The choice of my three examples was based on the desire to show the broad spectrum of work that currently exists, in terms of the artistic style, the cultural background of the authors, and the degree to which their stories straddle the boundaries between fact and fiction. Max Cabanes’ Heart Throbs is an unsentimental and, according to the blurb on the book cover, ‘partly autobiographical’ account of a childhood and adolescence spent in the south of France. It is divided into separate sections relating to his sexual experiences at different ages, and the story is rendered in a relatively realistic style that combines line drawings and watercolour painting. Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi, is an extremely successful graphic memoir about growing up in Iran and in exile in Vienna during the 1970s and 1980s, which employs a spare, stripped-down aesthetic of faux-naïve black-and-white ink drawings. In 2007, it was also made into an animation film. Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home, finally, recounts the author’s memories of growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, and her complex yearnings for her father, whose closeted homosexuality and illicit affairs with his young students cast a deep shadow over the whole family. Bechdel uses black-and-white drawings in combination with a light-blue wash. This deceptively simple drawing technique involved the author creating a reference shot of herself with her digital camera by posing for every character in every panel of the book.1

The genre of autobiographical comics is, I suggest, uniquely suited to the task of exploring the relationship between images and perceptions of truthfulness and authenticity. On the one hand, comics are still commonly associated with talking animals, superheroes and other fantastical scenarios, which means that readers tend – consciously or unconsciously – to accept in comics the subjective, mediated nature of reality more readily than they would in another medium (Versaci 2007, 74). On the other hand, the labelling of something as ‘autobiographical’ is likely to raise expectations in the reader of a privileged relationship between the representation and its object of representation, in this case the life of the author/narrator. Although most critics now recognise that recollections of the past ‘cannot escape the historicity of our gaze and our interests’ (Kerby 1991, 31), and that, consequently, ‘truth’ in autobiographical narratives ‘becomes more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning of the past than of a historically correct representation or verisimilitude’ (ibid., 7), there are still powerful cultural and institutional conventions surrounding works that lay claim to being true to the author’s real-life experiences.2

My discussion of the perceived truthfulness of the images in autobiographical comics is split into two parts. Section 2 focuses on the concept of stylistic naturalism. I concede that the markers that Kress and van Leeuwen identify are, to some degree, able to capture what makes an image look more or less like what people would expect to see with their own eyes. However, the authors are not sensitive enough to the fact that seeing is itself a highly cultural practice, which is closely tied to the expectations surrounding particular genres. How visual naturalism is perceived and what it means will thus vary depending on the type of image being dealt with and the socio-cultural practices associated with its production and consumption. This idea is captured more adequately by the notion of authenticity than it is by visual modality.

The third section deals with social semioticians’ claim that the relationship between visual style and perceptions of truthfulness can be described in terms of four different coding orientations. I will try to demonstrate that this theory does not offer a satisfactory account of truthfulness in autobiographical comics, where the performed integrity of the comic artist seems to play a much more central role than any particular stylistic markers in generating a sense of authenticity.

1. TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO VISUAL ‘TRUTHFULNESS’

Social semiotic theory is based on the application of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 1994) to non-linguistic semiotic modes, including the aural and the visual (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 1999, 2005). The central argument is that these modes are able to fulfil the same three ‘metafunctions’ as language, but in their own distinctive forms. The ‘ideational’ metafunction accounts for the ways in which sign-makers can express their experiences of events and states and the entities involved in them, the ‘interpersonal’ metafunction deals with the relations between sign-producers and their audiences, and the ‘textual’ metafunction pertains to the options available for creating a recognisable kind of text out of individual parts.

Halliday (1994, 75–91) used the term ‘modality’ to describe the interpersonal function whereby a speaker expresses his or her judgement of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he or she is saying. In language there are many different ways of expressing certainty, including modal auxiliaries (may, must) and
related nouns (possibility, probability), adjectives (certain, likely) and adverbs (surely, possibly), and mental process verbs (think, know). Projecting clauses (e.g. I know that Mary is here) make a judgement of probability more explicit (ibid., 355), while, paradoxically, just stating something as a fact represents the highest degree of modality (Mary is here) (ibid., 362).

When Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) adapted the concept of modality to the visual mode, they seem to have expanded its original sense to encompass a slightly broader, more philosophical meaning. In their definition, visual modality relates to the degree to which a representation is to be taken as true or real. It is concerned not with the absolute truth but with the truth as image producers see it, ‘and with the semiotic resources they use to express it’ (van Leeuwen 2005, 160). There are, they suggest, particular historically evolved visual conventions, or ‘markers’, for expressing a distinction between fact and fiction, real and fake, reality and fantasy, which, at least within particular social contexts, act as reasonably reliable guides to the truth of visual messages. The following modality markers represent scales going from minimal to maximal articulation:

1. Contextualisation: ranging from the absence of background, over sketched-in or out-of-focus backgrounds, to maximally sharp and detailed backgrounds
2. Depth: ranging from no representation of depth at all, over simple overlapping, to maximally deep perspective
3. Colour differentiation: ranging from monochrome to the use of a full palette of colours
4. Colour saturation: ranging from the absence of saturation, over various shades of grey, to maximally saturated colours
5. Colour modulation: ranging from flat, unmodulated colour to the representation of all the fine nuances of a given colour
6. Illumination: ranging from zero to the maximum number of degrees of light and shade, with options such as simple hatching in-between
7. Brightness: ranging from just two shades of one colour to maximal tonal gradation
8. Representation: ranging from maximum abstraction to maximum representation of detail

(Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 160–2; see also van Leeuwen 2005, 167)

All these modality markers can be increased or reduced independently of each other, resulting in a vast number of possible ‘modality configurations’ both within and across particular visual genres (van Leeuwen 2005, 167). For example, many magazine advertisements consist of two photographs, one representing an idealised image of all the benefits the acquisition of a product promises, and the other showing the product that you can actually buy. The image representing what ‘might be’ tends to be lower than the other in terms of visual modality, displaying, for instance, a reduction in detail and background articulation and more-than-real colour saturation.

Social semioticians emphasise that there are no fixed correspondences between points on these scales and modality judgements. Instead, the truth value of a given configuration depends on how reality is defined by the social group for which a representation is intended. At the moment, the dominant standard by which visual modality is judged in Western societies is, according to these scholars, a form of naturalism that assesses reality on the basis of how much an image corresponds with what one would see with the naked eye. In naturalistic modality, images are most ‘truthful’ when they are about two-thirds up on all the eight scales outlined above. This conception of reality is also bound up with technologies of representation and reproduction and attitudes towards them. Thus, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue, Western viewers still define naturalistic modality on the basis of the standard 35-mm colour photograph, although this perception is currently being challenged both by technological advances and more general changes in ways of thinking about the relationship between seeing and knowledge.

The authors identify three further ‘coding orientations’ that operate in particular social contexts: the ‘scientific/technological’, the ‘sensory’, and the ‘abstract’. In the case of technological modality, visual truth is based on the usefulness of a visual representation as a blueprint or aid for action. Abstract modality operates in the fields of science and abstract art, where naturalism is often mistrusted and the criteria of realism are linked to the search for a deeper truth behind appearances (Kress et al. 2001; Jewitt and Oyama 2001). Sensory modality, finally, is based on the ability of images to evoke pleasure or displeasure. The more a representation is able to create the illusion of touch, taste, or smell, by amplifying the degree of articulation of one or several markers beyond the point of naturalism, the higher its sensory truth value.
The concept of authenticity offers an alternative approach to the relationship between images and truthfulness. Wortmann (2003) suggests that there is a fundamental human longing for images that are able to convey reality in a completely reliable way, despite, or indeed because of, the awareness that mediation can never be absolutely transparent. The search for such authentic images can be traced back at least to antiquity, and it assumed particular significance during the Enlightenment, when scientific advances encouraged the belief in the possibility of representing reality ‘as it is’ by technological means. Apart from promising viewers a pure, unadulterated experience of reality, the authentic image can also fulfil certain emotional needs, for instance by facilitating identification with depicted people and enhancing the pleasurable feelings of fear, excitement and happiness that can result (Schierl 2003).

The authentic image can thus be seen as a chimera – albeit a useful one – which is always being formulated anew in response to representational practices that threaten to disrupt the status quo. Thus, the current anxieties surrounding the development of digital photography and the increased awareness of the enhanced possibilities of manipulation have led to more, rather than fewer, calls for authenticity in news photographs (Ritchin 1990; Wells 2000). However, as authenticity relates to the specific narratives surrounding the origins of images, it is not bound to particular technologies (Wortmann 2003). Authentic images are typically claimed to have emerged without corrupting human intervention, either by miraculous means (as in the case of the Byzantine Acheiropoietos), or else by means of a supposedly transparent medium (such as the camera). It is thus not iconic resemblance but indexicality that lies at the heart of the fiction of authenticity, although sometimes the myths surrounding the origins of an image are translated into a particular visual form.

From the 1970s onwards, ‘producer-oriented’ forms of authenticity have assumed particular significance (Schierl 2003). In this case, the authenticity of an image is linked not so much to a privileged relationship with reality, but rather to the claimed integrity of the image producer, who is very aware of and makes no attempt to hide the fact that all representation necessarily involves selection, perspective and interpretation.

An image-producer may also deliberately draw attention to the circumstances of production in order to authenticate material that, having supposedly emerged unintentionally and without human interference, is presented as lying beyond the realms of explicit self-presentation. Wortmann (2003) refers to this strategy, ‘whereby the apparently style-less representational format draws its authenticity from the deliberately created oppositional structure of (constructed) text and (subversive) non-text’ (217, my translation), as ‘reflexive authentication’.4

Comparing the concepts of visual modality and authenticity, there seem to be two fundamental differences between them: firstly, social semioticians regard the truth value of images as a function of historically evolved stylistic markers, from which image producers can choose in order to create a representation that best reflects the truth as they see it. In the case of the culturally dominant naturalistic coding orientation, modality is seen to depend upon the degree to which an image resembles what would ordinarily be seen by the eyes. Wortmann (2003) and the authors in Knieper and Müller (2003) place much more emphasis on the contextual strategies of authenticating a visual representation than on picture-immanent features. In their view, authenticity is always performed; it is thus highly dependent upon the conventions and myths surrounding the production and consumption of images, as well as on the individual viewer’s willingness to accept the conditions of a supposedly authentic representation.

The second difference between the two concepts under consideration regards the range of possible relationships that can pertain between a visual image and its object of representation. By describing four distinct coding orientations, social semioticians suggest that there is a limit to the number of ways in which an image can relate to the truth. The notion of authenticity, by contrast, describes a relationship between visual representations and reality that is by its very nature impossible to pin down and categorise, since cultural conventions are so obviously fluid and subject to historical change. The following two sections will explore these differences further, using the autobiographical comic genre as an example.

2. STYLISTIC NATURALISM IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS

In this section, I focus on Kress and van Leeuwen’s notion of visual naturalism, defined as being as close as possible to what one would see with the naked eye, by comparing one panel each from Max Cabanes’ Heart Throbs and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis. For the
moment, I will refrain from commenting on the relationship between naturalism and truthfulness and try to avoid talking about ‘modality’ markers, as this presupposes that the two are linked in a particular way. The following two panels were chosen because they are quite representative of the overall style of each book and they depict a similar scene, namely the first-person narrator as an adolescent in the company of his or her group of friends.

It is immediately obvious that the two artists employ very different visual styles. Using the markers identified by Kress and van Leeuwen and referring to their notion of naturalism, it should be possible to describe these differences in a fairly rigorous and systematic way. However, one thing to notice immediately is that judgements of where to place a particular instance on each of the scales are to some extent subjective and intuitive. Since the concept of a ‘scale’ suggests the possibility of a mathematically accurate measurement, it seems advisable to avoid this term and use the concept of ‘dimensions’ instead.

In terms of dimensions 1–7, Cabanes’ drawing (Figure 1) depicts depth and background to a degree that is only a little less articulated than would be expected if looking at the scene with one’s own eyes. The artist has used an almost full palette of quite finely nuanced and medium-saturated colours and reasonably naturalistic-looking degrees of articulation of tone and light and shadow. Satrapi’s drawing (Figure 2), by contrast, is clearly much lower on all these dimensions than Cabanes’ artwork. There is no background at all, and the drawing is also not very highly articulated in terms of depth, as the third dimension is suggested simply through the overlap and the placing of some of the figures higher up on the picture plane, not through any sense of volume or linear perspective. It is a black-and-white drawing, which uses no shades of grey at all, and only an indication of light and shadow in the dark marks under the chin and along one side of the neck of some of the figures.

The eighth marker, ‘representation’, is more difficult to apply to the examples, since it seems to conflate two slightly different visual strategies, namely reduction of detail and abstraction:

An image may show every detail of the represented participants: the individual strands of hair, the pores in the skin, the creases in the clothes, the individual leaves of the tree, and so on, or it may abstract from detail to a greater or lesser degree. . . . In artwork a variety of techniques could be ranked on a scale from maximum to minimum detail. Texture can become stylised, rendered by lines which trace the folds in the clothes, for example, and these lines may be many and fine, as in detailed engravings, or few and coarse, as in quick and ready styles of drawing. . . . Beyond this, the contour may be simplified to different degrees: a head may become a circle, the eyes two dots, the mouth a short, straight line. Diagrams and geometrical art take abstraction even further and reduce the shape of things to a small vocabulary of abstract forms, as in the paintings of Mondrian. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 161–2)
In order to capture adequately the characteristic drawing style of comics, I believe it is useful to make a clear distinction between articulation of detail and abstraction. The latter term, I suggest, should be reserved for cases that involve a visual distillation, exaggeration, distortion, or complete replacement of the represented object. It is perfectly possible to leave out unnecessary detail, while still preserving a sense of visual resemblance to the original object. Conversely, abstraction need not involve any reduction in detail at all. Some comics’ drawings are extremely detailed, while still introducing a degree of abstraction for instance by distorting the shape and proportions of a person’s body (Dittmar 2008, 155), or by using the ‘universally accepted scribbles that stand in for what mouths and noses and motion and sweat look like’ (Wolk 2007, 120). When visual artists need to represent concepts that have no visible presence at all, such as mental states and emotions, they have no choice but to use abstract symbols or metaphors (El Refaie 2003; Forceville 2005; Saraceni 2003, 21).

The distinction between articulation of detail and abstraction makes it easier to capture the most striking differences between Figures 1 and 2. Cabanes’ artistic style is fairly detailed and relies quite heavily on literal
resemblance, although there are a few abstract elements. For instance, the facial proportions of the (semi-)autobiographical protagonist in the bottom left-hand corner are slightly distorted and exaggerated. The speech balloon represents an even more abstract intrusion into an otherwise quite naturalistic image, since it translates speech or thought into a visible form: ‘Set within the picture space, the words are not elements in it; we would not see them if we could stand there in the picture’ (Carrier 2000, 36). In Satrapi’s drawing, details are limited almost to the bare minimum, and her style tends more clearly towards abstraction than Cabanes’. The plain shapes, dots and lines used to represent the faces, expressions, hairstyles, clothes and jewellery, distil, distort and exaggerate the original objects, rather than literally resembling them as closely as possible. The relative sizes of the facial features, for instance, clearly do not correspond to realistic proportions.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen’s criteria, Satrapi’s style is thus much less visually naturalistic than Cabanes’ in the sense of being less like ordinary visual perceptions. The problem with this account is that the common-sense notion of what would be seen with the naked eye is actually far from straightforward. As art historians are fond of pointing out, the what and how of seeing is always socially and culturally constructed (Berger 1972; Staniszewski 1995). Across different cultures and historical periods, people have developed completely different standards as to what constitutes a realistic rendition of the world, which means that there are no necessary or sufficient rules of correspondence between pictures and their real-world referents (Gombrich 1977). Even the most faithful painting or photograph is two-dimensional and will generally not be life-sized, thus requiring some familiarity with the relevant conventions (Le Poidevin 2007, 135).

When Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) say that Western conceptions of reality are bound up with attitudes towards particular technologies of representation, and that Western viewers still define naturalistic modality on the basis of the standard 35-mm colour photograph, they seem to acknowledge the cultural and historical situatedness of visual perception. It is important to remember, however, that the medium of photography is used for many different purposes, and that the different photographic genres have developed their own, often quite unique conventions.6 Grittmann (2003), for instance, has examined the formal professional norms that seem to underlie the practices of German press photographers. In this case, the aim to create the illusion of naturalism involves trying to make the photographer’s own practices as invisible as possible. Accordingly, press photographs appear naturalistic to the extent that the depicted people are presented at eye level and from an average distance, and that they are not looking at the camera. Special effects such as blurring are generally avoided, as they would draw too much attention to the mediating influence of the photographer. And black-and-white images tend to be perceived as more rather than less authentic, since they are still associated with serious documentary photography.

The markers of naturalism in press photography described by Grittmann (2003) are thus quite different from those identified by Kress and van Leeuwen. Her findings indicate that the myth of photographic truth is based not so much on its ability to produce particularly ‘lifelike’ images, but rather on its apparent indexical referentiality (see also Barthes 1981; Frosh 2003, 150 ff; Sontag 1978). In fact, technical and aesthetic shortcomings such as graininess or lack of focus can act as indexes of spontaneity and make a documentary photograph appear more authentic, despite sometimes changing the appearance of an object even to the point of no longer being recognisable (Wortmann 2003, 219). As Scott points out, visual naturalism ‘is something our perceptual culture has educated, or persuaded, us into. But the cultural fact remains that photographs are believed to have evidential force and the ability to authenticate real events’ (1999, 9).

Returning to the example of autobiographical comics, I would argue that in order to describe the degree of naturalism of an artist’s style, one needs to be very clear about the practices and conventions surrounding the production and consumption of this particular genre (Forceville 1999, 172). In other words, one must acknowledge that the viewing of comics is partly shaped by previous experiences and expectations of how the world will be presented in this genre. For instance, speech balloons and motion lines are such an established feature of comics that their inclusion in a particular work is unlikely to cause readers to view an artist’s style as non-naturalistic, even though they diverge so fundamentally from ordinary perceptions.

If the drawings in a comic book remind readers of photographic images, then some of the authenticity still commonly associated with photography’s status as ‘a message without a code’ (Barthes 1977, 17) may well attach itself to the comics’ illustrations. However, stylistic naturalism is not, in and of itself, particularly significant in terms of the ‘truth value’ of a graphic
Kress and van Leeuwen’s classification system means that it is not clear whether it is ever possible to have low modality, since a drop on a particular dimension could simply imply an automatic switch to another coding orientation: ‘[a]t what point would the viewer move from thinking “this is real” to “this might be real” rather than thinking that this was in fact a case of “this is real” in a different coding orientation?’ (181). In order to explore these ideas further, I would like to introduce a third example, which is taken from Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir.

This example can serve as a reminder that an artist may employ different stylistic features across a work, on a page, or even within one panel. The first panel of the page reproduced in Figure 3 represents an image from a book of Addams Family cartoons, which the young protagonist reads as a reflection of her own family life. In fact, even the adult narrator notes an ‘eerie resemblance’ between the little girl in the Addams cartoon and her own childhood self. The drawing in this panel shows a slightly higher articulation of detail, background, depth, and tone than all the other panels on the page, and much higher articulation of light and shadow. The figure of the Addams girl is more abstract than the drawings of Alison herself, in the sense that the proportions of the former are more obviously distorted and exaggerated. This panel also has a more pronounced bluish hue than the others on the page.

Comparing the panel in the top right-hand corner and the four panels in rows two and three, the main difference consists in the fact that the former represents a drawn version of a school photograph and is both slightly more detailed and less abstract than the more cartoonish images below. It is also more articulated in terms of light and shadow and thus feels a little more three-dimensional than the other images, even though the background just consists of horizontal lines indicating, no doubt, the plain backdrop of a photo booth or studio.

One can see how difficult it would be to apply Kress and van Leeuwen’s concepts to this page. Does the fact that the shadows in the first panel are so pronounced and that the drawing of the little girl is quite abstract make the viewer assume that this ‘might be real’, or that it is ‘probably not real’? Or should it be said, instead, that this panel mixes the naturalistic, the sensory, and the abstract, and is thus to be considered very real, but according to different criteria for each dimension?

While it is possible for an artist to draw panels in distinct visual styles in order to indicate the different perspectives or states of mind of a narrator, for instance by rendering a
A worried girl had a string running from her mouth to a trap door.
The lamp next to her looked just like my lamp. In fact, the girl looked just like me.
The resemblance in my first-grade school photo is eerie.
My mother, with her luxuriant black hair and pale skin, bore a more than passing likeness to Morticia.
And on warm summer nights, it was not unusual for a bat to swoop through our living room.
Mom, how come you never go outside?
I told you, I'm a vampire.
But what gave the comparison real weight was the family business...
...And the cavalier attitude which, inevitably, we came to take toward it.
Can I get in?


dream sequence in sepia colours, this does not seem to be the case in this example. Instead, the technique has apparently been used primarily to indicate the insertion of various extraneous textual artefacts, which, although reinterpreted by the artist’s hand, are nevertheless meant to be recognisable as belonging to different genres or specific texts (Wolk 2007, 363). The first panel recreates an image from a cartoon the narrator remembers reading as a child, while the one in the top right-hand corner is clearly intended to index key qualities of a school photograph.

I would like to propose an uncoupling of the concept of visual style from perceptions of truthfulness. As the discussion in Section 2 showed, a viewer’s willingness to see an image as authentic seems to be much more closely associated with the narratives surrounding the circumstances of its production than they are with its
visual style, except to the extent that the latter can sometimes appear to provide material evidence for the supposedly authentic production process. The crucial difference between analogue photography and all forms of mark-making, be they by pencil, pen, paintbrush or using computer-based graphic design application, is that the former lays claim to indexicality, whereas the latter involve adding to the likeness an explicit element of transformation.

Autobiographical comics, for instance, never claim to offer a direct, mimetic representation of the world, but rather an interpretation of events as they are experienced by the artist, with aspects that are quite obviously and deliberately exaggerated, adapted or invented. Many of the experiences conveyed in graphic memoirs, such as thoughts, dreams and emotions, are in any case not visible and can only be communicated indirectly through facial expressions and gesture or the use of abstract symbolism. As several comics scholars have pointed out, this means that ‘cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception’ (Wolk 2007, 21; see also Miller 2003, 49; Versaci 2007, 64).

In the stylistic features of comics – including images, captions and other marks like the form of speech balloons or of panel frames – the reader can discover the traces of ‘graphiation’, the idiosyncratic gesture that produced a particular work (Marion 1993, discussed in Baetens 2001). The reader of autobiographical comics will thus always be aware of the artist as a mediating instance between a representation and the objects it depicts, although the visual style can be more or less ‘ostentatious’ (Groensteen 2007, 97), drawing attention to itself and thus to the presence of the artist-as-mediator to differing degrees. Ostentation depends not so much on how much a style diverges from normal perceptions, but rather on the degree to which it deviates from conventions associated with the genre.

Consequently, the reference point for the judgement of truthfulness in graphic memoirs is not reality ‘as it is’, but reality as it is subjectively perceived by the individual artist. Autobiographical comics are an excellent example of a genre that relies primarily on producer-oriented forms of authenticity (Schierl 2003), where the claimed special relationship between the representation and reality is linked to the performed integrity of the comic artist. The judgement of a work’s authenticity is thus likely to be strongly influenced by the claims that are made both in the book itself and in related discourses about the ontological status of the account, what is known about the producer’s life, and the extent to which readers feel able to trust him or her as a narrator.

Viewed from this perspective, the fact that Cabanes’ style (Figure 1) corresponds more closely to ordinary perceptions than Satrapi’s (Figure 2) and Bechdel’s (Figure 3) is completely irrelevant to the issue of how authentic readers judge the respective accounts to be. In fact, paradoxically, a style that draws more attention to itself may actually strike the reader as more rather than less authentic. This is because ostentation can be used to create a new sense of truthfulness by deliberately foregrounding and calling attention to the artificiality of all representation, as Wortmann’s (2003) concept of ‘reflexive authentication’ suggests.

Hatfield’s (2005, 125) term ‘ironic authentication’, which the latter defines as ‘the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection’, seems to describe a very similar strategy. Truth in autobiographic comics, he believes, is a matter ‘not of verifiability but of trustworthiness’ (150), which has to be earned in a process of constant renegotiation between artist, materials and audience. The effect of ‘ironic authentication’ can be produced, Hatfield suggests, by openly dispensing with visual naturalism or deliberately counterpointing words and visuals.8

Bechdel’s technique can certainly be described in these terms. Readers are very aware of the fact that everything on the page, including the extraneous textual artefacts of the school photograph and the Addams Family cartoon, is filtered through the author/narrator’s unique vision, and it is this very artificiality that seems to make them more prepared to accept as authentic the account of young Alison’s obsession with the Addams Family and her perception that the lives portrayed there so closely resembled her own.

**CONCLUSION**

Most people now probably accept that ‘there is no such thing as a “uniquely” true, correct, or even faithful autobiography’ (Bruner 1993, 39). The powerful cultural conventions governing the construction and interpretation of works that are labelled as autobiographical are nevertheless likely to lead readers to expect some kind of privileged relationship between a narrative and the life it claims to represent. In the case of autobiographical comics, these expectations will probably also have an influence on how they approach the visual representations of people and events.

The aim of this article was to examine the usefulness of Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) concept of visual
modality in trying to understand why the images in graphic memoirs might strike the viewer as more or less truthful. Although their approach seemed to offer an elegant and precise account of visual truthfulness, on closer inspection it turned out to be flawed in several respects. Most importantly, the definition of naturalistic modality in terms of being as close as possible to what can be observed with the naked eye was shown to be problematic, as it ignores the cultural and historical situatedness of vision. Moreover, although naturalism and perceptions of veracity are apparently sometimes linked, the nature and direction of this association is likely to vary greatly depending on the content of a visual representation, its pragmatic function and uses, and the historically developed conventions and technologies of (re-)production associated with a particular genre.

Comic artists can use more or less visually naturalistic styles for many different purposes. Marjane Satrapi, for instance, employs a deliberately simple, abstract style in order to present a unique perspective on her own life and the geopolitical events that shaped it, while Alison Bechdel employs variations in visual style across a page to flag up the insertion of extraneous textual artefacts and/or genres. It is thus not possible to say that truthfulness in autobiographical comics increases or decreases with levels of stylistic naturalism, nor is it helpful to describe variations in visual style in terms of a switch to a different coding orientation.

The complex relationships that can pertain between visual style in graphic memoirs and notions of truthfulness are, I have argued, better captured by the concept of authenticity (Knieper and Müller 2003; Wortmann 2003) than by Kress and van Leeuwen’s notion of visual modality. In autobiographical comics, the mediating role of the artist will always be foregrounded, which means that such works are never regarded as completely ‘faithful’, unmediated renditions of reality in the way that newspaper photographs still sometimes claim to be. Instead, their authenticity is likely to be derived from the author/artist’s performed integrity. Although readers are on one level acutely aware that graphic memoirs are always about personal interpretation, not historical facts, there can be something uniquely ‘real’ about such an openly subjective worldview, particularly when it is presented within a coherent narrative: ‘The cartoonist’s image-world is a metaphorical representation of our own . . . and it can be mapped onto ours. It can even be more meaningful in some ways than an accurate depiction of our image world – the same sort of relationship that prose fiction has to reportage’ (Wolk 2007, 134).

There is clearly still a lot of important work waiting be done in this area. In particular, it would be worthwhile to explore the concept of authenticity with regard to more traditional types of comics, or with related genres such as children’s picture books. Any further studies of the relationship between representations and reality in verbovisual narratives must also carefully consider the role of verbal-text and text-image combinations in creating, challenging and maintaining a sense of truthfulness and authenticity (see El Refaie, forthcoming). Finally, the fascinating concept of reflexive (Wortmann 2003) or ironic (Hatfield 2005) authentication needs further exploration. If it is the case that truthfulness is not simply inherent in the properties of a text, but that it emerges in a process of constant negotiation between author, text and reader, then much more emphasis needs to be placed on empirical studies of the reading experience.

NOTES

[1] In an interview with Hillary Chute (2006), Bechdel admits that this painstaking method may reflect her slightly obsessive character and a lingering sense that she cannot quite trust her own perceptions. I am grateful to Thierry Groensteen for drawing my attention to this article.

[2] The increasing awareness of the blurred boundaries between autobiography and fiction are reflected in the terms that are now commonly used to refer to the genre, with scholars often preferring to talk about ‘life writing’ (e.g. Adams 2000) or ‘autofiction’ (e.g. Masschelein 2008).

[3] O’Toole (1994, 188) defines visual modality as the ‘degrees of verisimilitude or lifelikeness, ranging through authentic/ironic/fantastic’. His suggestion that modality can be systematised as ‘life-like’, ‘exaggerated’, ‘attenuated’ and ‘abstract’ (37) appears to be somewhat similar to Kress and van Leeuwen’s distinction between four coding orientations, although he does not elaborate on this.


[5] In van Leeuwen (2005, 167), the dimension of ‘representation’ is referred to as ‘articulation of detail’.


[7] In an interview about the film version of Persepolis, Satrapi explicitly refers to her aim of reflecting her own perceptions: ‘I’m just talking about what I’ve seen with my own eyes’ (Bochenski 2008, 37).
A similar strategy of authentication's has been discussed in relation to Art Spiegelman's comic-book rendering of his parents' experience of surviving the Holocaust, Maus: A Survivor's Tale, which casts all the characters as animal figures (Cioffi 2001; Kannenberg 2001): 'Art Spiegelman is a cartoonist and his father is a Holocaust survivor, but neither is a mouse made of ink, even though Maus asks us to believe that they are, and the book succeeds when we acquiesce. 'Realism' thus becomes a conspiracy between writer and reader, not an essential relation between certain texts and the world of experience' (Witek 1989, 115–6).

REFERENCES


