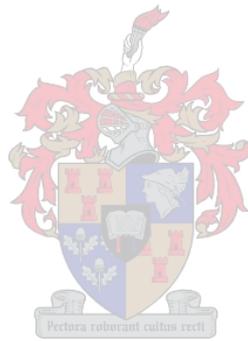


FICTION, FRICTION AND FRACTURE:

Autobiographic Novels as a Site for Changing Discourses around Subjectivity, Truth and Identity

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Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in
Visual Arts (Illustration) at the University of Stellenbosch

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MARCH 2008

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the self or subject is more relevant now than ever, since society's perceptions about selfhood are in the process of changing. Autobiography is an important site for the critical discussion of issues surrounding the subject – such as truth, identity formation and agency – seeing that it is one of the most revealing spaces in which these altering perceptions manifest.

As can be deduced from the title of my thesis, *FICTION, FRICTION AND FRACTURE: Autobiographic Novels as a Site For Changing Discourses Around Subjectivity, Truth and Identity*, I explore what autobiographic novels disclose about the notions truth, self-representation and identity formation that emerge from an investigation of the subject.

Poststructuralism and feminism have been instrumental in destabilizing the notion of a unified subject as well as any concept that makes universal claims. Throughout this thesis I will be applying poststructuralist and feminist theories around subjectivity to my work as well as the work of a selection of autobiographic novelists, namely Robert Crumb, Dan Clowes, Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware.

When referring to autobiographic novels I will be applying Leigh Gilmore's term *autobiographics*. *Autobiographics* introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood. I will be utilizing Gilmore's term since it so neatly encompasses the concepts that I will be investigating.

OPSOMMING

Die konsep van die self of subjek is nou meer as ooit relevant siende dat die samelewing se persepsies omtrent die subjek tans 'n transformasie ondergaan. Outobiografie is 'n belangrike platform vir die kritiese bespreking van idees wat uit besprekings van die subjek vloei – soos waarheid, identiteits konstruksie en agentskap – aangesien die genre 'n duidelike refleksie van die veranderende persepsies lewer.

Soos afgelei kan word uit die titel van my skripsie *FICTION, FRICTION AND FRACTURE: Autobiographic Novels as a Site For Changing Discourses Around Subjectivity, Truth and Identity*, beoog ek om vas te stel wat autobiografiese romans blootlê in terme van konsepte soos waarheid, self-voorstelling en identiteitskonstruksie wat uit die ondersoek rondom die subjek na vore kom. Poststrukuralisme en feminisme speel beide 'n belangrike rol in die destabilisering van die uniformige subjek asook enige ander konsep wat aanspraak tot enige universiële veronderstellings maak. Ek plaas poststrukuralistiese en feministiese teorie rondom subjektiwiteit deurlopend op my werk, asook the werk van die outobiografiese kunstenaars Robert Crumb, Dan Clowes, Art Spiegelman en Chris Ware toe.

Wanneer ek na autobiografiese romans verwys, verwys ek spesifiek na Leigh Gilmore se term *autobiographies*. Gilmore se interpretasie behels 'n begrip van outobiografie wat fokus op die veranderende diskoerse van waarheid en identiteit wat in outobiografiese voorstellings van die self voorkom. Ek beoog om haar term te gebruik aangesien dit die konsepte waarna ek kyk duidelik omvat.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	1
INTRODUCTION	3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	
- Poststructuralism	4
- Feminism	6
DISSECTING AUTOBIOGRAPHY	11
- Autos/Subjectivity	12
- Bios/Context	17
- Graphe/Act of Writing	19
CHAPTER ONE	25
FICTION AND FRACTURE	
- Reinstating Fact through Fiction	27
- Reinstating Fiction through Fact	30
CHAPTER TWO	39
CONCEIT VERSUS CATHARSIS	
Part One - Maintaining a Cold Distance	39
Part Two - Reaching the World	54

- <i>performativity</i>	55
- <i>agency</i>	57
CONCLUSION	65
SOURCES CONSULTED	69
ILLUSTRATIONS	74

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	Page
Fig. 1. Robert Crumb, <i>The Many Faces of R. Crumb</i> . Selection from <i>The Complete Crumb</i> , vol. 9 (1992). Fantagraphics Books: Seattle	28
Fig. 2. Chris Ware, front cover of <i>The Acme Novelty Library</i> (1993), No. 1. Fantagraphics Books: Seattle	33
Fig. 3. Chris Ware, selection from <i>Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth</i> (2000). Pantheon: New York	33
Fig. 4. Chris Ware, selection from <i>Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth</i> (2000). Pantheon: New York	33
Fig. 5. Chris Ware, <i>Rusty Brown</i> (Raeburn 2004:106).	34
Fig. 6. Chris Ware, <i>Quimbies the Mouse</i> (1994). Selection from <i>The Acme Novelty Library</i> , No. 2, p. 7. Fantagraphics Books: Seattle	34
Fig. 7. Chris Ware, selection from <i>Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth</i> (2000). Pantheon: New York	36
Fig. 8. Sunell Lombard, <i>Groepsdrukkewyn in Episode II: Attack of the Gnomes</i> (2005).	37

Fig. 9. Sunell Lombard, <i>Angst</i> (2005).	37
Fig. 10. Sunell Lombard, <i>Haat Jy Partykeer Jouself</i> (2007).	38
Fig. 11. Chris Ware, selection from <i>Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth</i> (1996). (Juno 1997:39).	44
Fig. 12. Sunell Lombard, <i>Untitled</i> . 2007.	47
Fig. 13. Sunell Lombard, <i>Untitled</i> . 2007.	48
Fig. 14. Dan Clowes, <i>Just Another Day</i> , a selection from <i>Twentieth Century Eightball</i> , No. 5 (1993). Pantheon: New York	50
Fig. 15. Art Spiegelman, <i>Maus I</i> (1986:159). Pantheon: New York	61
Fig. 16. Art Spiegelman, <i>Maus II</i> (1991:41). Pantheon: New York	62

INTRODUCTION

The MPhil degree in Visual Arts (Illustration) is a two-year programme that consists of a practical studio component and a theoretical component. During the second year of study, the practical component involves independent studio practice and the theoretical component entails an independent thesis. In accordance with the course outline, I have structured my thesis around the investigation of the concepts subjectivity, self-reflexivity, agency and the fact/fiction distinction that have direct bearing on my practical work.

My thesis, entitled *FICTION, FRICTION AND FRACTURE: Autobiographic Novels as a Site for Changing Discourses around Subjectivity, Truth and Identity* explores the notion of the subject and what it entails in terms of poststructuralism and feminism. The autobiographic novelists who I have selected, namely Robert Crumb, Dan Clowes, Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware have produced a body of work that is self-reflective and engage with subjectivity and identity formation in relation to changing perceptions of 'truth'.

Poststructuralism and feminism have emerged as two of the most important political-cultural currents of the last two decades and have greatly influenced and contributed to the question of the self (subjectivity) and issues that stem from it, like the fact/fiction dichotomy, identity construction and agency. The aim of this introduction is to establish the theoretical frameworks, namely poststructuralism and feminism and to delineate the aspects of these discourses that I am interested in. I will be introducing these aspects, namely subjectivity, identity-formation,

performativity and agency in terms of these two methodologies by dissecting the term 'autobiography'.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Poststructuralism, a movement that began in the 1960's is primarily concerned with the limits of knowledge and examining the notion of difference in all its facets (Lechte 1994:100).

Stuart Sim's (1999:ix) *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* defines poststructuralism as part of postmodernism¹, which he describes as a more general reaction to authoritarian ideologies and political systems.

In *Understanding Poststructuralism* James Williams (2005:1) elaborates that poststructuralism developed as a reaction to structuralism, which "arrive[s] at secure knowledge through the charting

¹ Sarup (1993:131) defines postmodernism as "the name for a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts." Postmodernism probably emerged as a specific reaction against the established forms of high modernism and is concerned with the changes and transformations that take place in contemporary society and culture.

Postmodernism developed through the work of theorists like Jean-François Lyotard who attacked the notion of universal knowledge in famous book *The Postmodern Condition – A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Lyotard rejected the idea that philosophic discourse can develop an official or universal knowledge for humanity and questioned the credibility of the legitimating myths or 'grand narratives' of the modernity. Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy. Instead of the certainty of progress, associated with 'the Enlightenment project' (of which Marxism is part), there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence (Sarup 1993:132).

Sarup (1993:132) identifies some of the features of postmodernism in the arts, namely the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents and frequent references to eclecticism, reflexivity, self-referentiality, quotation, artifice, randomness, anarchy, fragmentation, pastiche and allegory.

of differences within structures". By maintaining that 'truth' can be found within or behind a text², the structuralist project does not acknowledge the limits of traditional or settled forms of knowledge. Poststructuralism fixates on the effects of these limits, or *difference*, in order to destabilize concepts like truth, identity, history and the subject (Williams 2005:3).

Madan Sarup (1993:4), author of *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* focuses on poststructuralism's subversion of the classical Cartesian notion of the unitary subject, in other words, the subject as "originating consciousness, authority for meaning and truth" by arguing that the human subject is structured by language. This does not, however, mean that poststructuralism aims to reject or dissolve the subject; Williams (2005:8) accentuates the fact that poststructuralism encourages a reinterpretation and re-understanding of the subject as something that "...must be seen as taking place in wider historical, linguistic and experiential contexts."

Throughout this thesis I will be referring to the poststructuralists Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva whom all have been instrumental in the deconstruction of the notion of the subject (Poster 1989:3). I will also refer to thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche whose theories have had a significant impact on the poststructuralists mentioned above.

² In the context of this thesis I will be using the word 'text' in the postmodern sense, which refers not only to written materials but to all attempts of representation, whatever form this may take. Sim (1999:370) quotes Jacques Derrida's famous saying 'there is nothing outside the text' to demonstrate the poststructuralist view that the world is constituted by text. According to Sarup (1993:132) this 'textualization' of everything has been extended to various disciplines like history, philosophy, sociology and psychology, to name just a few, that are now seen as 'kinds of writing' or discourses. Textualization, as I will discuss in greater detail later on, has also influenced the concept of the autonomous self as being dissolved into a series of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language.

FEMINISM

Edward Craig's (2005:268) *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines feminism³, one of the most important forces in twentieth-century politics and thought, as being "...grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified".

In *The Kristeva Reader* (1986) Toril Moi (1986:9) comments on Kristeva's ambiguous relationship with feminism. Moi goes further to say that while Kristeva has been known to criticize movements in feminism (for example the French Psych et Po group) that attempts to gain power within the existing framework of

³ Craig identifies three generations within feminism.

The earlier phase of feminism, or 'first wave' (dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s) was largely concerned with social reform; women demanded access to education, work and civil rights – in other words, women aimed for equality with men (Craig, 2005:268).

The second wave can be situated around the 1970s. Craig (2005:268) notes that this timeline needs to be applied with care, since one of the most influential works of modern feminist philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, was published in 1949), can be characterized by feminists becoming increasingly interested in the great variety of social practices (including theoretical ones) through which our understandings of femininity and masculinity are constructed and kept in place (Craig, 2005:271). Political feminists came to the conclusion that the source of women's oppression and subordination did not lie in their lack of political or civic rights, but in their private lives; in their roles as wives and mothers. Craig (2005:273) sees this generation of women who as a result of their personal experiences, decided to fight for the reformulation social and psychological theories around which academic debate revolved.

In his *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2001) David Macey (2001:124) identifies a third wave of feminism that has recently started emerging. While many of the debates from the 1970s are still, to some extent, ongoing, a younger generation of women like Naomi Wolf and Natasha Walter are arguing for a new feminism.

According to Macey (2001:124) Wolf (see *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it Will Change the 21st Century*, 1993) argues that women are moving away from the tendency to portray themselves as helpless victims and instead subscribe to what she calls 'power feminism', which involves women viewing themselves as strong agents of change with many resources at their disposal.

Walter (cited in Macey 2001:124) also argues for a new feminism (see *The New Feminism* (1998), Little, Brown: London) that will promote economic equality with men without creating a 'female-centered' culture. By female-centered culture Walter hopes to promote a society in which female success will be normalized instead of viewed as the exception to the rule.

capitalist society, her work can be seen as supporting feminism (which involves the identification and eradication of all forms of patriarchal or sexist power) since she sets out to challenge and disrupt all historic power structures.

David Macey (2001:122) states that feminism attempts to identify the sources of that inequality and remedy it. He goes further to say that feminism assumes many different forms (for example social feminism, radical feminism and lesbian feminism) depending on the specific source that produces and reproduces inequality.

Many of the philosophical questions and lines of criticism introduced by feminists have been acknowledged by the discipline of philosophy and absorbed into the mainstream.

According to Craig (2005:274-275)

[A]nalysis of the political exclusion of women have been applied in multicultural contexts; moral philosophers are less inclined to think of reason and passion as opposites; and feminist arguments about the social character of power are increasingly reflected in epistemology and philosophy of language. To some extent, then, feminist philosophy is ceasing to occupy the role of the other, and is finding ways to converse on equal terms with advocates of the tradition from which it sprang.

It is evident that post-structuralism and feminism have both tried to develop new paradigms and offer profound and extensive criticisms of philosophy, and of the relation of philosophy to the larger culture. Both theories do, however, have their limitations.

Sarup (1993:156) mentions that, while postmodernists offer sophisticated criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, their conceptions of social criticism tend to be dull and uninteresting. Eric Berlatsky⁴ adds to this criticism when he mentions that even though postmodernism is instrumental in identifying dominant ideologies and subverting racialized and gendered oppression, it is also problematic in that it does not offer concrete and stable counter discourses that do not themselves participate in oppression and does not contextualize its own position.

Feminists like Nancy Miller (cited in Anderson 2001:88) is of the opinion that post-structuralists are inclined to “universalize” and “fetishize” difference. She believes that, instead of vacating the role formally occupied by the unitary subject of humanist ideology, Roland Barthes’ ‘dead author⁵’ is still a powerfully gendered presence, inhibiting the recognition of its others⁶.

⁴ See Eric Berlatsky’s article ‘The Limits of Postmodern Memory’ (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/pdfs/BERLAT1.PDF).

⁵ See Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image, Music, Text* (1978) tr. Stephen Heath. Noonday: New York. Allen Graham’s reader *Roland Barthes* describes Barthes’ 1968 essay ‘The Death of the Author’ as a summary of his developing post-structuralist approach to the issues of reading, writing, the relationship between texts and the signs that they consist of.

⁶ Miller’s opposition is grounded on the idea that the concept of the author was always shaped by a history, a history that has been notably different for women than for men. She (cited in Anderson 2001:88) states that

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not ... necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not ... (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cognito, etc.

A similar point is raised by Nicole Ward Jouve (cited in Anderson 2001:88) when she suggested that it is too early to deconstruct women as subjects they have not yet been permitted to establish themselves.

While feminist theory presents strong social criticism, it has been criticized by poststructuralists for exhibiting some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives that they labour to uncover, in that they do not always pay attention to historical and cultural diversity, and that they falsely universalize features of the theorist's own time, society, culture, class, 'race' or gender (Sarup 1993:157).

Craig (2005:275) points out that feminism is continuing to develop internally, and has recently turned its own critical techniques on its old tendency to speak on behalf of 'women'. These allegedly universal pronouncements that fail to take the differences between women of diverse races, sexual orientations, nationalities or classes into account, have, in my opinion, been negated by Julia Kristeva.

As both a poststructuralist and a feminist⁷, Kristeva is aware of these generalizing tendencies associated with feminism and has been known to criticize⁸ and identify problems within the movement.

⁸ McAfee (2004:98) states that, where the first generation spurned the activity of mothering, which had historically relegated women to the household, in favor of becoming active participants in the public sphere, the second generation has re-embraced mothering. Kristeva is of the opinion that second wave's rejection of the established order is understandable, but could be dangerous and potentially lethal.

According to McAfee (2004:99), Kristeva sees the extent to which the second generation embraces the role of motherhood, at risk of becoming another religion: "Instead of God, it has 'Woman' and 'Her Power'". Kristeva (cited in McAfee 2004:99-100) notes the ways in which various feminist currents reject the powers that be and turns the female sex into a *countersociety*, which she defines as

"[a] sort of alter ego of official society that hopes for pleasure. This female society can be opposed to the sacrificial and frustrating sociosymbolic contract: a counter society imagined to be harmonious, permissive, free, and blissful."

This imagined countersociety is maintained through the rejection of what it perceives to be responsible for evil. It views itself as containing some inherent 'goodness' that it opposes to a "guilty party." This scapegoat

Toril Moi (1986:10) identifies Kristeva's apprehension about feminism as stemming from her fear that any political language, whether it is liberal, socialist or feminist, will come forward as yet another grand narrative⁹. This concern, which was triggered by a visit to China¹⁰ in 1974, steered Kristeva's interest away from the political to a more localized interest in the subject.

As this discussion around the shortcomings and problems within poststructuralism and feminism have shown, these disciplines can function to identify the limitations of the other. It is for this reason that I chose these two discourses, since they can both work to supplement and remedy the deficiencies within another. As will become evident through the course of my thesis, I will be referring to both sexes (for instance him or her) instead of opting for one. Since personal experience varies greatly depending on a subject's gender (among a great variety of other factors) I want to acknowledge this difference by referring to both genders in order to avoid privilege or exclusion on either front.

could be "the foreigner, money, another religion, or the other sex" (McAfee 2004:100). Kristeva cautions that this kind of logic can lead to a kind of reverse sexism by stating that, sometimes, "by fighting against evil, we reproduce it, this time at the core of the social bond – the bond between men and women" (cited in McAfee 2004:99).

⁹ Macey (2001:167) explains Lyotard's term grandnarratives as the discourses that "make forms of knowledge legitimate by supplying them with a validating philosophy or history".

¹⁰ See Kristeva's *Des Chinoises* (1974). Moi (1986:6-7) describes this book (that was translated in 1977 as *About Chinese Women*) as a psychoanalytical investigation of the problems of femininity and motherhood and sees it as the beginning of this shift from the political towards the local in Kristeva's work.

DISSECTING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Considering how central the idea of the self is to every aspect of our lives, it is obviously an event of enormous historical importance when a society's fundamental idea of self changes dramatically. And that is happening now. The ground is shifting beneath us all.

Anderson (1997:xiii)

Autobiography is seen as a site for negotiating and challenging the different ways meaning is given to the self.

Anderson (2001:16)

As I have mentioned earlier, I will now discuss autobiography in relation to poststructuralist and feminist theory by deconstructing the term autobiography.

The word autobiography consists of three parts, namely "auto-", "bio-", and "graphy." "Auto" (derived from the Latin term *autos*), refers to the self, "bio" (*bios*) means life and "graphy" (*graphie*) refers to writing. I will now be looking at these three aspects of the word autobiography in terms of poststructuralist and feminist arguments around

- subjectivity
- context, and

- the act of writing.

Autos/Subjectivity

Sarup (1993:1) states that 'the critique of the human subject' is one of the central concerns of feminism and post-structuralism. Both these discourses are suspicious of the modern self-concept of the *individual*. This term, derived from the Latin *idens* - meaning the same - entails an individual with a distinct and stable identity that remains the same wherever one goes (Anderson 1997:xiii).

Dating from the Renaissance, *identity* implies a liberated, intellectual agent whose thinking processes are not influenced by historical or cultural circumstances. According to Sarup (1993:1), this view of Reason is articulated in Descartes's philosophical work. In his well-known phrase 'I think, therefore I am.' Descartes's 'I' implies a fully conscious, coherent, and hence self-knowable individual. This self-conception negates the possibility of another psychic territory like the unconscious. Descartes suggests a narrator who imagines that he speaks without simultaneously being spoken.

Charles Guignon, author of *On Being Authentic* (2004:108) states that thinking of the self as a *subject* has been central to modern thought:

To be human, according to the modern way of thinking, is to be a subject, a sphere of subjectivity containing its own experiences, opinions, feelings and desires, where this sphere of inner life is only contingently related to anything outside itself.

Autobiography is often associated with this concept of the subject. For Roy Porter (1997:1), editor of *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, notions of the self as a unified, unique, unmediated and capable of 'self-realization', along with the belief in a 'universal' human nature, are still operating today and are vital to many of the discourses that govern our society. He states that these ideas hold great appeal, especially in the West, since it is often associated with values like democracy, equality and freedom of speech.

This modern conception of an insulated self characterizes the subject as, what Joseph Dunne (cited in Guignon 2004:109) calls, a "sovereign self" – in other words a unified, *centered* agent capable of self-reflection, self-realization, objectivity and rational reflection – has come under sustained attack in the last half century from a variety of movements of which the Structuralists, like Claude Lévi-Strauss, were among the first. Lévi-Strauss argued that man should no longer be constituted by the human sciences, but rather be dissolved by them (Sarup 1993:1).

This *decentring* of the subject – in other words the removal of the traditional subject as the apparent source or focus of subjectivity and meaning – resulted from specific key events.

According to Macey (2001:85) Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*¹¹ (1916-17) identify the Copernican revolution¹², the Darwinian revolution and the rise of psychoanalysis as the

¹¹ In his 'Two Encyclopedia Articles', *Standard Edition XVIII; Penguin Freud Library XV* (1922) Freud (cited in Sim 1999:314), the founder of psychoanalysis, defines it as: a discipline based on a method for the examination of mental processes that are normally difficult to access because they are unconscious; a therapeutic procedure for curing neuroses; and a collection of psychological records developing into a new scientific discipline.

¹² Sim (1999:73) states that the Copernican revolution is based on Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the revolutions of heavenly spheres, 1543) which proves that the sun is the centre of the solar system, not the earth. Sim goes on to say that the 'Copernican revolution' has come to present the standard term for describing a 'scientific revolution' or 'epistemological break'.

'three major blows to the self-love of man'. Copernicus' revelation that the earth was not the centre of the universe, Darwin's theory of evolution which removed man from his privileged place in creation, coupled with psychoanalysis' discovery of the unconscious (which reveals that the seeming unity of the ego is an illusion), present pivotal moments that forced the acknowledgement of the influence that external and internal forces have on the construction of the subject (Macey 2001:85).

In *Écritis* (1966) Lacan (cited in Sim 1999:73) credits Freud's 'Copernican revolution' with calling the entire humanist tradition into question. Freud's emphasis on the fact that people are governed not by their conscious thoughts, but by unconscious forces and drives has dismantled the idea of the subject being capable of conscious self-control.

This 'decentering' the notions through which we have so far comprehended the human is evident in the poststructuralist definition of the word subject. According to Sarup (1993:2), the term 'subject', in a postmodern context, "...helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. The category of the subject calls into question the notion of the self synonymous with consciousness; it 'decenters' consciousness".

Julia Kristeva presents the term *subjectivity* as an alternative to the conventional understanding of the "self" or subject (McAfee 2004:1). Feminists who utilize this term believe that the Western philosophic tradition is deeply mistaken about how human beings come to be who they are. Like the poststructuralists, feminists argue that people are subject to a variety of experiences – take for

instance culture, history, context, relationships, and language – and that these phenomena, some of which they are not even aware, profoundly influence how people are shaped.

As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is especially interested the phenomena which subjects are not fully aware of, specifically the unconscious¹³. Consequently, the experience of subjectivity is not that of coming to awareness as a “self,” but of having an identity fashioned in ways often without the subject him or herself knowing.

Another aspect of Kristeva’s understanding of *subjectivity* involves people’s relationship to language. Her interpretation of *subjectivity* equates it with an awareness of language’s capacity for producing subjects, instead of seeing language merely as a tool that can be used (McAfee 2004:2). This revolutionary approach that suggests that language is not as purely transparent as previously thought was instigated by the poststructuralist Roland Barthes (1915-80). His insistence that the author is not to be regarded as the final arbiter of a text’s meaning has led to a shift in focus from the author to the reader. In his book *Untying the Text: a Poststructuralist Reader* (1981) Young (1981:31) states that Barthes interprets reading as a

¹³ McAfee (2004:2) defines the unconscious as the realm of desires, tensions, energy, and repressions – in other words any component of mental activity – that is not present in the conscious mind at a given moment.

Freud (see his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900), who is often credited with the discovery of the unconscious, based his early descriptions of the unconscious on his analysis of dreams. According to Macey (2001:386) Freud views dreams “...as the road to the unconscious because they represent the fulfillment of unconscious wishes that are inadmissible to the preconscious-conscious system, usually because of their sexual nature.” Macey points out that the existence unconscious does not only come out through dreams, but also through every day phenomena like “slips of the tongue, bungled actions, lapses of memory and the inability to recall names” (2001:386).

transgressive activity which disperses the author as the centre, limit and guarantor of truth, voice and pre-given meaning. Instead it produces a performative writing, which fissures the sign and ceaselessly posits meaning endlessly to evaporate it.

Rather than understanding reading as merely "passive consumption", poststructuralists focus on the interaction between the reader and the text as a "productivity"; reading becomes a performance (Sarup 1993:4).

Like Barthes, Kristeva rejects the scientific models of language - in other words the conception that language is merely a straightforward method of communicating ideas, where words simply function as isolated symbols that represent distinct concepts – and instead views it as a mobile, fluid process as opposed to a static and closed system of signs¹⁴ (Craig 2005:533).

This manner in which language operates outside the subject's control as well as the manner in which every text resonates, alludes to, and is eventually composed by other preceding texts, is addressed by Kristeva's term *intertextuality*¹⁵ (Hartland 1999:249).

¹⁴ What sets Kristeva apart is that she has come up with very powerful tools for understanding how language produces speaking beings that emerge from the fold between language and culture. In combining this linguistic approach with psychoanalytic inquiry Kristeva identifies two separate yet interconnected aspects of the signifying process, namely the semiotic and the symbolic. Craig (2005:533) describes Kristeva's 'symbolic' facet of language as social, cultural, and regulated and the semiotic facet of language is vocal, pre-verbal, rhythmic, kinetic and bodily:

Focusing on the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic, Kristeva is able to analyse literary and historical texts, works of art and cultural phenomena in a way that thematizes the complex relationship between materiality and representation.

¹⁵ Richard Hartland (1999:249), author of *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes: An Introductory History*, describes Kristeva's *intertextuality* as stemming the "citational nature of language in general" rather than out of the author's intention or sources of inspiration. Kristeva's (cited in Sim 1999:285) claim that "every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts" implies that words gain their meaning not by referring to some object present to the mind of the language user but from the never-ending play of signification.

Noëlle McAfee (2004:2) summarizes Kristeva's contribution neatly when she states that she "...offers a sustained and nuanced understanding of how subjectivity is produced; ... [and] how language actually operates when people speak, write, and create."

Linda Anderson (2001:6) states that poststructuralism's removal of the subject or author from his or her central position as the source of meaning by situating language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, has had a significant impact on autobiographical theory.

Bios/Context

According to Anderson (2001:60) poststructuralist theory is not only vital to the denaturalization of the unitary subject, but also to seeing it as a historical and ideological construct. The notion of the unified subject has been central to theories of knowledge; political, economical, psychological and cultural ideologies (to name but a few) influence and control the way we act and also the way we relate ourselves as well as others.

This section, entitled *bios* or life, will focus on how the genre of autobiography offers insight into what these forces are that shapes and molds the subject.

In the process of decentering the subject, poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault concentrates on the way a variety of external forces – that we are often unaware of – condition or shape how we

think and act. According to Guignon (2004:113), Foucault uses social constructionism¹⁶ as a basis for questioning the entire notion of the *subject*. In being aware of the influence that society has in the construction of our self-understanding, Foucault rejects the idea of the subject as being the center of experience and action. By looking at the term from a different perspective, he implies that, in the contemporary world, we are subjects in another sense, a sense that relies on the idea of subjection to something. In short, Foucault primarily focuses on the manner in which modern ideas produce forms of power that dominate and oppress us (Guignon 2004:117).

Kristeva also sees the social and historical determination of individuals is essential to understanding the subject. She expands this range of influences which shape the subject by also taking the internal forces, namely the subject's psychological state and unconscious into consideration when examining the external elements that influence him or her (Sarup 1993:122).

Autobiographical theorists like James Olney (1980:13) argue that autobiography "offers a privileged access to an experience that no other variety of writing can offer". In this sense autobiographies reveal very specific experiences, since it allows us to see what life is like for a subject of a specific nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation and historical background, who is situated within a specific culture and social context.

¹⁶ Constructionism centers around the idea that when we become initiated into a specific community there is an implicit understanding of reality built into the social practices and language we absorb. This understanding is believed to not only influence but "construct" how interpret and comprehend all aspects of our lives, including our own identities. The influence of society in constructing our Guignon (2004:114) states that "...this self-understanding is evident when we look at the way a child growing up into a particular social context comes to internalize the standardized interpretations deposited in the linguistic categories and norm-governed practices of its community".

In *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*, Walter Truett Anderson (1997:57) states that we are all "selves in relation" when he discusses the various circumstances and contexts that influence us. He goes further to say that the context in which we find ourselves today is becoming much larger and more confusing since we are increasingly coming into contact with not only our own community, but a variety of communities. "It's the world, and it's where we all live now", asserts Anderson (1997:57): "[I]t contains many communities, and most of us live in lots of them". Whether we are aware of it or not, the effect of globalization¹⁷, in other words coming into contact with different communities (the other), complicates and adds to the many aspects that influence the subject's life.

Graphe/Act of Writing

I will be examining how 'the act of writing' an autobiography can, according to feminism, assist the subject in coming to terms with the various and complex circumstances that influence his or her psyche. I will also investigate how creating a text can be an empowering act that gives the subject a sense of *agency*.

Feminists, among others, are critical of the way postmodernism treats the subject as nothing more than, as Guignon (2004:120) phrases it, "...a pawn in games that are being played out at the social

¹⁷ In *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (2006), globalization is described as the systematic development of the world into a single space. Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2006:167) state that globalization is associated with "the rapid growth in the interrelatedness of cultures, commodities, information and peoples across time and space; the expanding capacity of information technologies and systems to compress time and space...; [and] the emergence of systems to promote, control, oversee or reject globalization".

In this specific context that I have used the concept of globalization, I am not referring to its relation to the homogenization of cultures, but rather to the technological advancements that accompany globalization, for example the ability to communicate globally and gain access to a great variety of cultures.

level". What is lost here, it is said, is any sense of the self as agent playing a part in its own life. This has not, however, stopped feminists from employing postmodern strategies to remedy this.

Linda Anderson (2001:103) mentions that deconstruction¹⁸ has made a significant impact on autobiography. By deconstructing autobiography as a genre that privileged a white, masculine subject, feminists like Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith unlocks its potential for being used as a political strategy by the marginalized subject. Julia Swindells (cited in Anderson 2001:103) elaborates that "[a]utobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people working-class people – have begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself."

It should be noted, however, that even though this politicization of the subject addresses the problem of 'difference', it does not solve it. As I have mentioned earlier, any attempt to speak for others is always problematic, since association on one level, for example race may exclude other differences like gender, sexuality or class. Anderson (2001:104) also cautions that the marginalized subject cannot simply escape the impact of the discourses that constructs him or her.

¹⁸ Macey (2001:85) refers to *deconstruction* as a form of textual analysis associated mainly with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the American critic Paul de Man. Jonathan Culler (1994:85), author of *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1994) describes deconstruction as a strategy within philosophy as well as a mode of reading. Culler's (1994:85) explanation of the practice of deconstruction "...as a strategy within philosophy and a strategy for dealing with philosophy" implies that deconstruction aims to be both an argument within philosophy and to challenge any philosophical tendencies toward mastery.

Despite these facts autobiography can still function as a platform to those who formerly had no voice in western patriarchal or male-dominated society. Autobiography can also provide insight into the specific context and emotive experiences of a person, regardless of the author's intentions to portray him or herself in a certain manner.

As a psychotherapist, Kristeva points to a different dimension of writing when she mentions that literature can not only display psychological issues, but also help the author and the reader to deal with psychological problems. McAfee (2004:50) states that dealing with afflictions such as trauma, neurosis and depression involves working through these problems so that the subject is not destined to act them out. In this sense writing and reading can be cathartic¹⁹.

As I have stated previously, the aim of this thesis is to address some of the questions and concerns that I have encountered since I have intentionally started to work autobiographically. Throughout the thesis I will be discussing post-structural and feminist theories in relation to my own work as well as the work of autobiographic novelists like Robert Crumb, Chris Ware, Dan Clowes and Art Spiegelman. The artists that I have selected all consciously work with self-representation and they all reflect a definite awareness and sensitivity to the concepts subjectivity, truth and identity-formation. They also depict the multifaceted and fragmented nature of the postmodern subject and the way they draw attention to the extent to which circumstances and experiences influence them. While I might not have drawn from these artists technically, they have definitely opened my eyes to the autobiographic novel's potential for exploring our emotional and psychological state.

¹⁹ The word catharsis, derived from the Greek verb meaning 'to clean' or 'to purify', describes the purification or purgation of emotions by engaging with the representation of events that inspire feelings of fear and pity (Macey 2001:57-58).

The specific examples of my own work that I have selected to discuss throughout my thesis range from pieces that I made during the final year studying fine art to pieces that I made throughout this year. The reason why I have decided to include the older pieces alongside the more recent ones is because I wanted to contextualize my work and trace the thematic and shifts that have occurred.

While reading autobiographic novels and working on my own pieces, I have come to question the 'truth' or honesty that is often associated with autobiography. Is 'truth' essential to autobiography, and if my account deviates from the 'real' events as they occurred, does the work still qualify as autobiographical? Poststructuralists question the assumption that the subject can represent the 'real' or 'the truth' by revealing these concepts to be constructs. Does this assessment, by dismantling the self and truth, dismantle the genre of autobiography as well? Can autobiography be distinguished from fiction and is it ultimately important to do so?

In my first chapter, FICTION AND FRACTURE, I will be examining how the deconstruction of the traditional concept of the author – and consequently Western society's attempt to present itself in possession of a singular, unified and indisputable meaning or Truth – is negotiated in the work of postmodern artists Robert Crumb and Chris Ware. FICTION AND FRACTURE is made up of two subdivisions, namely

- 'Reinstating Fact through Fiction' and
- 'Reinstating Fiction through Fact'.

In 'Reinstating Fact through Fiction' I will be examining how autobiographic novelist Robert Crumb undermines the notion of a 'unified' subject and how he negotiates, deconstructs, and attempts to reconstruct autobiography's intrinsic connotation with 'truth'.

In 'Reinstating Fiction through Fact' I also discuss my work and Chris Ware's in relation to the notion of a fragmented, multifaceted subject and consequently also the fact/fiction dichotomy. This part does, however, differ fundamentally from 'Reinstating Fact through Fiction' in that it is not so much concerned with reinstating truth, as it is in maintaining fictions. I see the fictions that we construct for ourselves (whether knowingly or not) as capable of revealing a great deal more about the external and internal forces that forms and molds the subject.

In the duration of this year I have become increasingly interested in the depiction of the unconscious or dream world. While engaged with the translation of the unconscious into images, I have started to focus on what these depictions reveal about me and how other people relate to it. Thus, the aim of my research is not to define or demystify the unconscious, but rather to investigate how internal and external factors influence people, and how autobiographic novels reflect and express this influence.

The second chapter of my thesis entitled CONCEIT VERSUS CATHARSIS consists of two parts, namely MAINTAINING A COLD DISTANCE and REACHING THE WORLD.

The first part of this chapter, MAINTAINING A COLD DISTANCE, concerns the increasingly psychologically orientated nature of society and self-perception, which I believe my interest in the unconscious is symptomatic of. I will argue that the growing amount of autobiographic novels that focus on psychological issues demonstrate this inclination towards catharsis. In this section I will

discuss Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* as an example of autobiographic novels that reflect this tendency²⁰, but I will also introduce artists like Dan Clowes who questions the motivation behind this 'therapeutic sensibility'. This section will also include a discussion of my work in relation to the development of this psychological discourse.

The second part, REACHING THE WORLD is a response to the first, in that it will counter its cynical conclusion by stating that the interest in the personal is more than just a result of a self-absorbed culture. In REACHING THE WORLD I will also be looking in greater depth at

- the poststructuralist concept of *performativity* and
- the feminist concept of *agency*.

Under these two headings I will argue that: i) the significance that the text has for the reader is of greater importance than the author's intention; ii) autobiographic novels have the potential to deliver insight into the specific political and social context in which it was created; iii) and that it can empower minority groups by giving a voice to 'the other'. I will be looking at my own work as well as Art Spiegelman's autobiographic novel *Maus* in terms of *performance* (which implies a shift in focus from the reader to the writer) as well as this sense of *agency* that feminism lends to autobiography.

²⁰ I am specifically inspired by Chris Ware's tentative and intelligent depictions of his psyche. I find his depictions of psychoanalytic issues fascinating, especially in the way he intermingles reality and imagination in order to articulate the way the two aspects influence each other.

CHAPTER ONE

FICTION AND FRACTURE

As I have mentioned, this chapter will involve a more thorough investigation of the concerns that I have raised in my introduction under the sections titled 'autos' and 'bios'. I hope to demonstrate how post-structuralist and feminist conceptions have influenced the truth-status and referentiality of autobiography in relation to the fact-fiction dichotomy; how autobiography can be instrumental in providing insights into a subject's specific context; and how my work and that of autobiographic novelists Robert Crumb and Chris Ware negotiate postmodernism's ideologically and textually constructed, fragmented/fictitious subject.

According to Marcus (1994:229) any discussions of the genre of autobiography in relation to its inherent association with truth or honesty is inseparable from debates about authorial intention and reference. Despite the shift from humanism²¹, current conceptions around the relation between autobiography and the autonomous individual (in other words, someone within whom meaning exists and who is not influenced or produced by external factors) are still largely intact (Smith 1995:5). Linda Anderson (2001:2) states that 'intention' has played a significant role in establishing the author as being behind the text and being able to control its meaning:

²¹ Humanism centers on the Cartesian notion of the subject (Sarup 1993:76). If we look at Descartes' (cited in Sarup 1993:76) famous statement, "I think, therefore I am", it describes an individual with intention, purpose and goals; an 'I' that is the exclusive driving force behind the individual's achievements. Humanism occasionally involves the belief that social relations in a socialist society will be transparent. Anti-humanists like Foucault and Althusser argue that unconditional liberation is impossible and can be dangerous. Sarup (1993:76) raises attention to the irony that, to an extent, we are all humanists since "[W]e experience the world as humanists, but this is not necessarily the way we theorize."

[T]he author becomes the guarantor of the 'intentional' meaning or truth of the text, and reading a text therefore leads back to the author as origin. Thus, autobiographies are seen as giving validity to the author who has 'authority' over writing and that these writings can provide 'direct access' to the author himself.

This statement implies that intention brings about a kind of 'honesty' in that it asserts the 'truth' of the text, and that there is 'a truth' that 'everyone' can comprehend. According to James Olney (cited in Anderson 2001:1), this view depicts the individual as transcending both social and historical difference.

Barthes in particular has played a notable part in destabilizing the author's role as the final arbiter of a text's meaning. Barthes' (1977:148) claim that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (more precisely, the death of a certain conception of the author, the author as authority figure²²), served to alter the perception that reading only involves passive consumption and encouraged a new interpretation of reading as an active, productive process. By liberating the reader from his or her prior inferiority, Barthes discredits the author's established role as authority

²² According to Barthes (cited in Allen 2003:73), the author has been positioned as the center of the literary work and the origin of all the work's meaning. In his notorious essay *The Death of the Author* (1968) Barthes elaborates that the "*explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his "confidences".

The figure of the author, who traditionally, is seen as standing behind work and as giving stability and order to the work, join modern Western society's attempt to present itself in possession of a singular, unified and indisputable meaning or Truth. Barthes' critique of the traditional notion of the author introduces a radically new take on the relationship between reader, text and meaning.

figure, which in turn placed the reader in an inferior position (Sim 1999:221). This stripping of the writer's authorial control over what a text means declares the author's 'intentions' void.

Through this dissolution of the writer's authority, Barthes and other poststructuralists dismantle the notion of 'a' universal, transcendental and totalizing truth by revealing it to be a textual and ideological construction. Instead they underscore the multiplicity of truth in which the play of diverse meanings results in a continual process of reinterpretation (Poster, 1989:15).

The influence of poststructuralism is evident in autobiographic theorist Paul Jay's assertion that autobiography is no more privileged or "truthful" than fiction-making. In his book *Being In the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*, Jay (1984:18) contends that "the attempt to differentiate between autobiography and fictional autobiography is finally pointless, for if by 'fictional we imply 'made up,' 'created,' or 'imagined – in other words something literary and not 'real' – then we have merely defined the ontological status of any text, autobiographical or not".

Reinstating Fact through Fiction

Some scholars of autobiography such as Paul John Eakin and Phillippe Lejeune resist the post-structuralist inclination to picture autobiography and the self as merely a play of signifiers. Phillippe Lejeune attempts a solution with his "autobiographical pact," in which autobiography is defined by a kind of contract established between reader and writer (Rugg 1997:9). This 'contract' trusts that the autobiographer will attempt to tell the truth as she or he experiences it and that the autobiographer's tale will to some extent have relevance as well as referentiality in the reader's

own life. Lejeune shifts the emphasis from the writer's relation to his or her work to the reader's relation to the autobiographical text.

Linda Haverty Rugg (1997:5), author of *Picturing Ourselves* comments that academics like Lejeune who argue for autobiographical referentiality, for a self creating text, are not necessarily naive and that they are aware of the questions that post-structuralists raise. They do, however, want to maintain referentiality and the boundary between autobiography and fiction "despite [this] knowledge," as Paul John Eakin (cited in Rugg 1997:10) writes, "that this distinction – or at any rate, its basis – may well partake more of fiction than fact".

Charles Hatfield (2005:124), author of *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* is of the opinion that the disavowal of objective truth may ironically serve to support the genre's claims to truthfulness:

[I]ndeed, grappling with such skepticism would seem prerequisite to recognizing and fully exploiting the genre's potential for truth-telling. Only by exploring such doubts can the emotional "honesty" of autobiography be recovered.

Hatfield sees the reclaiming of the genre's claims to truth as important since autobiographic novels have the potential to offer radical cultural argument.

Autobiographic novelist Robert Crumb (1992:21) destabilizes the concept of a unified self in *The Many Faces of R. Crumb* (fig. 1) by presenting almost twenty distinct and seemingly irreconcilable personalities like, "the long-suffering patient artist-saint," "the cruel, calculating, cold-hearted fascist

creep," or "the misanthropic, reclusive crank." Titled simply as "an inside look at the complex personality" of the artist, the piece displays no apparent basis or justification until the end, when he raises the question: "Who is this Crumb?"

Hatfield (2005:120) states that "...if none of these images are adequate to unlock the "real" Crumb, then all are nonetheless part of the way he sees himself". By parading the falseness and fragmented nature of his personality and the constructed nature of his work – which he does by constantly revealing his hand in the making of the piece – Crumb reconfirms the power of autobiographic novels to convey something like truth; in other words, he affirms truthfulness through falsity.

Crumb's autobiographic novel verifies Paul John Eakin's (cited in Hatfield 2005:124) observation that "[a]utobiographers themselves constitute a principal source of doubt about the validity of [their] art". Crumb's self-questioning and exposure of the text's creation and artifice, reinforces rather than collapses the seeming authenticity of autobiography.

If Crumb's work represents a space where contrasting factors like imagination and claims to truth coexist, it demands and plays on the reader's trust. This relates to Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact', which implies a contract between the author and the reader. By revealing himself as fragmented and constructed, Crumb takes the question of trustworthiness to a new level by simultaneously upholding and abusing this agreement.

This manner in which the artist reveals the multiple facets of his personality invokes the problem of authenticity. Crumb, who consciously subverts autobiography's claims to objectivity, participate in

what Hatfield (2005:125) labels as 'ironic authentication'. This strategy reinforces authenticity by employing artifice; in other words, autobiography's claims to truth are strengthened through their overt rejection.

Hatfield (2005:125) states that "...ironic authentication makes a show of honesty by denying the very possibility of being honest." He observes that Crumb ironically glorifies the self through a form of self-denial (in other words, through the very denial of a unified identity that cannot be falsified through artistic representation). So, despite the seemingly naïve nature of many autobiographic novels, Hatfield believes that ironic authentication informs many of the keystone works in the genre. By continually renegotiating the contract between author and audience, the genre's truth claims are reinstated through blatant falseness.

Reinstating Fiction through Fact

In his essay 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography', Michael Sprinker (cited in Olney 1980:333) discusses Frederick Nietzsche's²³ suspicions about self-reflection as well as the subject's ability to directly question him or herself about themselves. He states that it could be important and in the subject's best interest to interpret him or herself falsely. Thus, even though Crumb displays the multiplicity and fractured nature of his identity, it should be taken into

²³ In his book *The Wake of the Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* Richard Kearney (1994:212) discusses existentialist Frederick Nietzsche's dismantling of the notion of 'absolute truth' by identifying and advocating the multiple and constantly shifting 'truths' of the imagination. According to Kearney (1994:124) Nietzsche believes that there are as many truths as there are interpretations of truth:

At best, existence is revealed as a palimpsest of fictions which the human imagination invents for itself in order to experience an endless multiplicity of meanings.

consideration that his interpretation of himself could be inaccurate, whether it was done deliberately or not.

According to Marcus (1994:201) psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud has greatly contributed to the complexity of autobiographical 'truth' through his observations about his patients telling lies. He sees the fictions that we invent as the only way to observe and access the workings of the unconscious. Linda Anderson (2001:132) elaborates on this concept of how the fictions we create reflect the unconscious when she states that "individual pathology" can reveal a great deal "...about pathology of history whose traumatic effects spread uncontrollably and implicate us in ways we do not as yet understand."

It seems to me that the fictions of autobiography are becoming more significant than its supposed 'claims to truth'. Unlike Hatfield and Lejeune, I am not so interested in reinstating truth, but rather in examining the fictions that emerge through autobiography, since these fictions not only reveal the complexity of identity construction, but also the broader cultural or social climate which influences this process.

Poster (1989:60) reiterates that these external circumstances and conditions have been methodically investigated by post-structuralist Michel Foucault who sees the constitution of the self as occurring within these discourses. By shifting the focus from subject to structure, in other words from linguistic determination to the social-historical, Foucault began to view power as the basis of social reality and people as being shaped by power relations (Sarup 1993:73).

Foucault argues that different complex power relations extend to every aspect of our social, cultural and political lives, and that we adhere to these discourses, not so much because of the threat of

punitive sanctions, but by persuading us to internalize the norms and values that are dominant within the social order. Sarup (1993:132) elaborates that Foucault's insights allows us to understand the notion of the subject as "...the knowing, willing, autonomous, self-critical or 'transcendental'" is part of a modernist discourse which is central to many grand narratives that persist today.

Lyotard defines societies that anchor the discourses of truth and justice in the great historical and scientific narratives as 'modern'. As part of their critique of modernity, postmodernists raise suspicions about any master narrative, or what Sarup (1993:145) calls "narratives of mastery". He goes further to say that "[t]he advent of postmodernity signals a crisis in a narrative's legitimizing function, its ability to compel consensus." raise

So, due to their assertion that narratives are "bad" when their values and ideals become normalized or historicized, post-structuralists such as Lyotard have adopted a small/grand narrative criterion instead of a truth/falsity distinction. He associates grand narratives with a political agenda and views small narratives as outlets of "localized creativity" (Sarup, 1993:145).

I find autobiographic novelist Chris Ware's work of particular relevance since he consciously depicts smaller narratives, like the social context in which he is situated and shaped by, and by doing so comments on larger narratives that dominate his circumstances and self-perception. Ware illustrates the postmodern fractured subject as well as the effects that master narratives has on his psyche by not drawing any clear distinctions between 'reality' and his imagination.

In his autobiographic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*²⁴ (fig. 2) – a story based on the author's relationship with his estranged father, who, after thirty years, contacted Ware for the first time hoping to reconcile – the fluctuation between 'fact' and 'fiction' occur frequently. This constant shifting from 'reality' into a dream world often occurs without prior notice, as can be seen in fig. 3, where Jimmy and his father meet at a bar. Ware's imagination transports them from the bar and into his parents' bedroom, in which Jimmy's daydream about murdering his father merge with fragments of the pair's real conversation in the bar. Daniel Raeburn (2004:70), who has written extensively about Ware's work, describes this shift as part of the artists' method to express the emotional impact of the meeting and also to depict his semi-autobiographic character Jimmy's subjective state of mind more clearly. I see this blurring between the boundaries of fact and fiction as part of Ware's attempt to portray the subjectivity of experience. We all experience reality in different ways, depending on the various internal and external forces that affect on us.

In *Jimmy Corrigan* Ware not only draws attention to the subjectivity of experience, but also to the fallibility of first-person memories. In fig. 4 the artist depicts his father as a child at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. In this scene Ware appears to share Freud's interest in the fictions we create for ourselves; James' character not only comments on the fact that his memories of the event might be somewhat unreliable, but Ware also portrays him as a small child dressed in a white night shirt. This dreamlike portrayal serves to enhance the idea that what he remembers might not be real and that his memories may have been affected and altered by his imagination or his unconscious (Raeburn, 2004:74).

²⁴ *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (1992) originally appeared as part of his ACME Novelty Library's Book of Jokes, of which fig. 2 is an example.

Like Robert Crumb, Ware dispels the notion of a unified subject by depicting himself as having many personalities. In his extensive body of work, Ware has appeared in various shapes and guises, ranging from the lonely and alienated Jimmy Corrigan, a pretentious high-school art teacher in *Rusty Brown* (fig. 5), and a more universally relatable and archetypal character of a mouse named Quimbies (fig. 6).

Raeburn (2004:13) describes the character 'Jimmy Corrigan' as "...a cipher that is meant to fit any of his own many moods. In one strip he made Jimmy into an old grouch; in the next, an irrepressible gee-whiz kid." Ware's depiction of himself as having multiple personas links to Nietzsche's understanding of the subject that involves someone who is constantly changing and who contains many identities within him or herself. Nietzsche (cited in Guignon 2004:112) states that we display these various 'selves' or characters to greater or lesser degrees in the public arena, depending on what the context demands.

Guignon (2004:123) cautions that this postmodern fragmentation and multiplicity of the self who, "like a chameleon changing colors to blend into its current surroundings", can undermine our sense of being as an agent. More politically oriented poststructuralists like Michel Foucault (Anderson 1997:43) who views the subject as a fiction imposed upon us by external power agendas, have been criticized for not conceptualizing the subject as someone who plays an active part in the world.

Laura Marcus (1994:7) author of *Auto/biographical Discourses* sees autobiography as a microcosmic version of many challenging topics surrounding the subject like alienation, reification, the decline of community, and the rise of mass society. Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* embodies

these assertions since his work is renowned for criticizing the complex forms of social alienation that are synonymous with capitalism. The lonely and isolated Jimmy frequently comes across as a victim of circumstance, unable to assert much control over the various factors that influence his life.

The intellectual Guy Debord (cited in McAfee, 2004:108) is of the opinion that every aspect of modern societies has become a vast array of 'spectacles'. Debord's 'society of the spectacle' involves the "concrete inversion of life", meaning that everything around us is turning into representations.

The 'spectacle', which manifests in many forms like advertising, information, propaganda, and entertainment, are all materializations of the underlying economic and productive order.

Modern capitalist society or 'the society of the spectacle' has created a world in which what we buy, wear, and consume defines us. McAfee (2004:109) summarizes Debord's concept neatly:

[I]n the society of the spectacle, people are tools of the economy; their desires are not their own; desires are manufactured as surely as are the commodities meant to fulfill them. We consume to meet our needs, unaware that what we take to be a "need" has been artificially produced.

Julia Kristeva elaborates on Debord's society of the spectacle by focusing on the way it inverts reality; instead of experiencing the shallowness and meaninglessness of capitalist society, subjects begin to experience these images as real. Unlike Debord who primarily focuses on the way this phenomenon transforms objective reality, Kristeva is more concerned with how it alters subjective space (McAfee 2004:109).

The manner in which a society that makes commodity king influences people psychologically is a prominent theme in Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, in which the main character often seeks solace in consuming products. According to Nigel Watson's (cited in Sim 1999:55) essay 'Postmodern Lifestyles (or: You Are What You Buy)' our consumer oriented culture plays an important part in the construction of identity. Consumerism offers us the opportunity to 'buy' the lifestyle we desire by providing shopping opportunities, or what Watson calls "opportunities for self-expression and display" around every corner.

Ware's autobiographic novel does not merely critique modern capitalist society, but also emphasizes the effects that these historical structures have in defining his character's mentality. Fig. 7 can be seen as an example of the effects that consumerism has on Jimmy's state of mind.

Kristeva (cited in McAfee 2004:12) states that in the society of the spectacle, people's desires are, ultimately, aimed at oblivion: "We consume, and therefore we need not have any real aspirations of our own." This lack of ambition is evident in Ware's depiction of Jimmy Corrigan, who, though he dreams of a happy and fulfilled life, seems to have no idea how to attain it. When he fails to realize his dreams, Jimmy finds comfort in this consumer culture that not only informs him what his desires are, but also how to achieve them. Unfortunately, as other pieces that he has produced on the topic also demonstrates, the moment of euphoria is short lived and Jimmy soon realizes that he can only fulfill these insatiable and constructed desires by consuming more and more.

When I became interested in graphic novels during my final year studying fine arts, I was specifically interested in social commentary and in reflecting the effects that dominant ideologies can have on people. My repertoire of penguin and crocodile-like characters functioned as receptacles for my opinions and thoughts on a variety of topics, ranging from social issues

emanating from my specific context in Stellenbosch, to more obscure pieces that centers around the psychological fallout that these conditions have. One of my first efforts (fig. 8) involved a penguin-like character named *Groepsdrukewyn* whose involvement with an overzealous religious movement had dire consequences. Another piece from my fourth year, entitled *Angst*, (fig. 9) was one of my first attempts at exploring the mental and emotional fragility that results from the hectic pace of modern lifestyle.

In *Angst* the 'penguin' manages to remove physical manifestation of his anxiety from his body, and in doing so, frees himself from its effects. After a short period of carefree bliss, the creature becomes bored with the peace and decides to devour the freshly exhumed anxiety. Moments after he has consumed the 'angst', the penguin starts feeling its effects and immediately feels regret. This piece can be seen as an expression of my conflicted relationship with a stressful lifestyle; one side of me struggles because of the constant pressure, but the other side of me thrives on it and has become somewhat addicted to it.

Though I might not have done so as deliberately as the artists that I have mentioned up to this point, I believe that my work has been influenced by the postmodern notion that the subject is a fictitious and fragmented construct. My array of penguin-like characters – Skrikkewyn, Pikkeman and Groepsdrukewyn – each embodies certain facets of my personality. Even though these personas are mostly fictional, they still reveal the various and often contradictory aspects of my identity as well as the external circumstances that determine or play a part in my self-construction.

In the duration of this year the focus of my work has shifted away from such direct social commentary as can be seen in the *Groepsdrukewyn* series, which was primarily involved with

scrutinizing or investigating the external factors that influence identity formation. Recently I have become more interested in how external forces manifest internally. Psychological symptoms like anxiety, insecurity, neurosis and trauma, which I first experimented with in *Angst* (fig. 9), have become prominent in some of my latest pieces, like *Haat Jy Partykeer Jouself?* (fig. 10).

This piece, as part of a series of scraperboard sketches that reflect internal conflict, can probably be seen as a transition from my fine arts work to the projects that I am currently working on. In *Haat Jy Partykeer Jouself*, which I think contains the same kind of dark humour as my earlier work, my favourite penguin *Skrikkewyn* still makes an appearance as the materialization of the darker aspect of my psyche. I have, however, started phasing out my penguin alter-egos completely since I have begun to integrate my own image into my art. These intermediate pieces where I appear alongside my characters have been instrumental in a shift towards a more direct investigation of my unconscious, which I will elaborate on in the following chapter.

As I have mentioned, I find the fictions that slip through in autobiography more important and engaging than the truths that it allegedly conveys. In terms of my own work, the stories or lies I tell myself as well as the specific manner in which I interpret and reconstruct 'reality' is more important than attempting to convey a truthful and straightforward summary of my personality and life.

Up to this point I have focused on how autobiography can be instrumental in revealing how we as subjects are constructed as well as the external elements that influence us. The following chapter CONCEIT VS CATHARSIS I will be looking at how we as a society are becoming more aware of ourselves as psychological beings and how this awareness has influenced my work as well as the work of other autobiographic novelists.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEIT VERSUS CATHARSIS

PART ONE

MAINTAINING A COLD DISTANCE

This chapter, CONCEIT VS CATHARSIS consists of two parts. The first part, MAINTAINING A COLD DISTANCE, investigates how our current conceptions of ourselves are influenced through psychological discourse, and how our growing psychologically orientated self-perception is reflected, negotiated and even ridiculed in autobiographic novels.

Nicholas Rose (cited in Porter 1997:224), a professor of sociology, comments on the emergence of what he refers to as new 'experts of experience'. He states that these specialists of the "psy" (for example psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychiatric social workers, market researchers, and counselors) have "...enmeshed themselves inextricably with our experience of ourselves".

If we look at how we relate to ourselves (in other words how we describe and understand ourselves), the extent to which psychological disciplines influence our vocabularies becomes evident. Rose (cited in Porter 1997:224) goes further to say that psychology also shapes the vocabularies and activities of authorities that seek to control human behavior. Judges, doctors, policemen, politicians, economists, talk-show hosts and even soap-opera script writers have come to speak in psychological dialects.

According to Rose (Porter 1997: 224) this emerging psychological discourse, with its authoritative, clinical vocabulary and claims to 'truth' has an undeniable influence on our construction and understanding of the self. In his opinion, we, as modern human beings (in different ways for women and for men, for the young and the old, for the rich and the poor) we have become psychological selves.

Rose (cited in Porter 1997: 246) takes this point further when he mentions that:

Perhaps the most fundamental to the contemporary politics of our relation to ourselves is the way in which psychological modes of explanation, claims to truth and systems of authority have participated in the elaboration of ethical regimes that stress an ideal of responsible autonomy and have become allied with programmes for regulating individuals in the name of autonomous responsibility.

These new ethical structures have become central to the government of human conduct in advanced liberal democracies. The implication is that our cherished individuality is manipulated through these 'psy sciences' and that it can be a tool of social control (Porter 1997: 11).

It should be noted, however, that our notions of selfhood are influenced and constructed by a variety of discourses, and that this psychological model is by no means the most dominant. But I do feel that Rose's (cited in Porter 1997: 245) attempt to create an awareness of how our modern selves are presupposed, assimilated and administered through a particular psychological discourse is worth taking into consideration.

According to Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs (2003:8), editors of *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to Now*, catharsis has been evident in autobiographic novels since the 'confessionals' of Robert Crumb. This focus on the personal, ranging from depictions of the mundane to the shocking, has become the theme of the majority of graphic novels produced today. With all this said, the growing amount of autobiographic novels that are being made and their fixation on psychological issues and traumatic experiences can definitely be seen as symptomatic of an increasingly psychologically demarcated society.

But, just as important as this bearing that psychoanalysis has on autobiographic novels is the relevance that autobiography has for psychoanalytic theory. Autobiographical theorist Lynda Marcus (1994:214) states that psychoanalysis and autobiography have a great deal in common²⁵ since they each rely extensively on narrative:

Both...paradigmatically involve the reconstruction of a life in narrative and the shaping of events into meaningful framework. Autobiographies in the modern period tend to make childhood memories a significant part of the narrative: psychoanalysis sees childhood as formative. Narrative, in the sense of the recounting of stories and the drive to narrate, is an important dimension of both spheres, but so is the charge attached to images and memories, which stand out against the backdrop of the past.

²⁵ Marcus (1994:214) does mention, however, that while they do share characteristics these semblances are not enough to create symmetry between the two practices, since psychoanalysis and autobiography and their accompanying theories did not develop proportionately to each other.

Similar to autobiography, psychoanalysis often sees the fictions as more significant and revealing than the facts, and both disciplines view the disclosure of the past as a multifaceted and complicated process. Another factor that has played an important part in the formation of both these fields is the development of confessional writing. From its Augustinian roots, confessional autobiographical texts have centered on the individual subject, and focus and examination of subject in turn set the stage for the emergence of psychology.

According to Kristeva (cited in McAfee 2004:106) the “micropolitics” that autobiographic narratives reveal does not only give insight into the formation of a subject’s identity as well as his or her psychological state, but it also allows a glimpse into the “macropolitics”, in other words what which occurs within the public sphere.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Chris Ware is very much concerned with the extent to which modernist culture has infected the values of everyday life and how these forces influence our self-construction and self-experience. In his article ‘Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’²⁶, Brad Prager (2003:195) states that like many autobiographic novelists, Ware’s work is crammed with psychoanalytic themes, but what makes his depiction unique is the way that he places “psychic subjection” in relation to its exact twentieth-century context. Ware’s autobiographic novel *Jimmy Corrigan* is also particularly aimed at addressing the consequences that the period of modernism has had on the subject. In this section I will be examining how Ware’s work depicts the psychological consequences that alienation, childhood trauma and repression have on the subject.

²⁶ Brad Prager’s article was published in the *International Journal of Comic Art*, volume 5, No. 1, Spring 2003.

The autobiographic novel *Jimmy Corrigan* revolves around a thirty-six year old man from Chicago who grew up without having any contact with his father and who has to take care of his elderly mother. The lonely and isolated Jimmy regularly fantasizes about a life with normal social interaction, something that he is unable to attain due to the crippling effect that an overly strict and unhappy childhood has had on him psychologically. According to Prager (2003:198), Ware's autobiographic novel's title *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (fig. 2) is meant ironically: "[I]t refers to the illusion that ingenuity –smartness – could help Ware's protagonist transcend the strictures of his crippling psychic development. Simultaneously, it calls attention to the fact that however old Jimmy may get, he is perpetually an emotionally stultified 'kid'."

This continuous centering on Jimmy's overwrought unconscious, which becomes the main theme that persists throughout the autobiographic novel, can be seen as a reflection of the extent to which we rationalize and examine ourselves in terms of psychoanalytic concepts.

Marcus (1994:214) maintains that if psychoanalysis is a theory concerning the construction of an individual – a gendered individual in particular – then autobiography is a privileged site for representing this process. She elaborates that Freud's notion of the *family romance*²⁷ is often fundamental to autobiography.

²⁷ Macey (2001:121) reiterates Freud's concept of the *family romance* (see 'Family Romances', 1909) as a fantasy that involves a child imagining that he or she is not being raised by his or her real parents and that the supposed 'true' parents are of noble origin. Macey notes that in some instances only one parent is involved in the fantasy.

The family romance has been described as a way of dealing with sibling rivalry and as a way to manage or counter incestuous fantasies and desires linked to the *Oedipus complex* (Macey, 2001:212).

In my opinion Chris Ware's work often comes across as text-book illustrations of some of Freud's psychoanalytic theories like *the family romance* and the *Oedipal complex*²⁸. One of Ware's most obvious references to Freud's family romance is evident in his inclusion of a "pot-bellied Captain Marvel" who, according to Ware (cited in Juno 1997:39), frequently appears as part of Jimmy's fantasies about his estranged father (fig. 11). This reference to the superhero genre reveals Jimmy's hopes and dreams about how he wishes his absent father would be. Such daydreams about having a heroic father are, however, constantly interrupted by disturbing visions of his father as an overweight sadist. Prager (2003:202) states that in this piece, Ware intentionally alludes to superhero comic books as a form of escapism, only to reveal that there can be no escape from mental anguish.

It has probably become clear at this point that the entire plot of *Jimmy Corrigan* is structured around the presence and absence of his father. His non-existent relationship with his father and his complicated feelings toward his mother sets the stage perfectly for numerous Oedipal crises. In fig. 3, a piece that I have discussed earlier, Jimmy daydreams about murdering his father while meeting up with him at a bar. In his imagination their location shifts from the bar to his parent's bedroom while the unremarkable conversation that they are having in the bar floats above the violent scene that is playing out. This slippage between Jimmy's fantasies and waking life not only emphasizes the influence that his unconscious exerts over how he experiences reality, but it also provides a privileged look at how Freud's theory about the Oedipal drama plays out in Jimmy's head. Contradictory emotions like longing and hatred that he feels for his father comes through

²⁸ The idea of the *Oedipus complex* originated from the Greek myth about Oedipus who blinded himself after learning that he had unknowingly married his mother Jocasta and murdered his father Laius. The Oedipus complex, which Macey (2001:280) identifies as a fundamental part of psychoanalytic theory, explains a child's sexual attraction towards the parent of the opposite sex and jealousy of the parent of the same sex. For example, a boy may perceive his mother as a sexual object and view his father as a rival.

strongly in this specific image. Jimmy obviously longs to spend time with his father whom he hardly knows, but at the same time his intense dislike of his father is evident in his graphic daydream.

This extreme loathing might not only stem from Jimmy's anger against his father for abandoning him when he was little; the fact that his imagination transports Jimmy and his father back to his mother's bedroom indicates that Jimmy's affection for his mother might lie at the root of this hatred. Ware's protagonist Jimmy is constantly tormented by the fear and desire that accompany his thoughts about his mother. This inappropriateness that the character feels toward his mother could be linked to the fact that, while Jimmy's father appears frequently throughout Ware's autobiographic novel, his mother remains largely unseen. Even though supporting characters in Ware's autobiographic novels are often obscured, his mother's face is always hidden, whether by her hair, an object or the angle that she is positioned in. In fig. 3 Jimmy's mother makes a rare appearance in the top-right frame, but as can be expected, a blanket obscures her face. Prager (2003:201) comments that

Ware leaves his mother in particular behind a curtain of sorts in order to emphasize what is at stake in seeing from Jimmy's point of view. The ban on representing her stems from an acknowledgment of Jimmy's repression of his incestuous desires. Any depiction of her is taken to be profane, because it calls attention to the fact that she is indeed an object of desire.

Thus, Jimmy cannot look directly at his mother's face since it would force him to confront his Oedipal desires.

This thematization of sexual anxiety along with Ware's focus on the fine line that divides dreams from reality testifies of the artist's preoccupation with psychoanalysis and therefore also catharsis. In the postscript to *Jimmy Corrigan* Ware (cited in Prager 2003:199) confirms that his autobiographic novel is an attempt to work through the details of his own past:

I had spent my entire life avoiding contact with my own father, and I guess I thought that once this story was finished, I would somehow have 'prepared' myself to meet the real man, and then be able to get on with my life. Of course, real life is much more badly plotted than that.

Like Chris Ware, my work and self-perception has also been influenced significantly by psychological discourse since I tend to analyze others, myself, and by extension my work, in terms of the models that have emerged from psychoanalysis. Even though I definitely take the external facets that influence self-construction into account, my art is not, like Ware's so directly and consciously aimed at exposing these ideologies. I am currently more drawn to the workings of the unconscious and more specifically how underlying or repressed anxieties, emotions and neuroses come to the fore through our dreams.

I am aware that depicting the dream-world is hardly a unique trend in the world of autobiographic novels, since prominent artists like Julie Doucet (*My Most Secret Desires*) and David B (*The Pale Horse*) have already worked in this field extensively. My intention is not to imitate or recreate what has been done, but to develop my own language and methods for reinterpreting my psychic life into visual texts.

Unlike Ware whose work constantly fluctuates between his imagination and the factual, I have recently begun to avoid making a distinction between these spheres altogether.

Poststructuralism maintains that it has become hard, if not impossible, to separate concepts like fact and fiction, or reality and the unconscious. Since I relate to poststructuralist arguments about the fact/fiction dichotomy as well as the influence that my specific context and psychological background has on how I experience reality, I have decided against drawing a definitive line between reality and the unconscious in my work, seeing that the two realms can no longer be seen as existing in isolation from each other.

This approach, which circumvents any detour through reality, is evident in Fig. 12 where I attempted to translate one of my dreams in a relatively straightforward manner. This piece is executed in a more or less as traditional, third person narrative that positions the reader outside the events that occur within the story. Though I am not going to elaborate on the dream's content, which I would prefer to leave open to interpretation, I will discuss what it reveals about my emotional or mental state.

I believe that the unconscious does not merely reveal our psychological condition, but that it is a coping mechanism that digests and works through the anxieties and traumas that we face on a daily basis. While I do believe that the unconscious facilitates catharsis, I tend to agree with Art Spiegelman (cited in Juno 1997:10) who mentions that the intensity of the labour involved in making an artwork neutralizes any possibility of 'healing' or coming to grips with traumatic events²⁹.

²⁹ Autobiographic novelist Art Spiegelman is apprehensive about the possibility of catharsis. While working on "The Prisoner of Hell Planet" – which deals with his mother committing suicide – mentioned that, at that

I am inclined to believe that these dreams – or rather nightmares – become really significant when the people who see my work relate to these subconscious experiences.

The next piece (fig.13) is more experimental and engaging in that it positions the reader as if it is he or she that is undergoing this experience. This dream, which attempts to convey a common nightmare about the loss of teeth, is an attempt to reiterate the distorted and fragmented reality of dreams. Fig. 13 requires more work on the part of the viewer, since it develops from hazy abstraction to a more concrete shape that systematically reveals the setting as the inside of a person's mouth. As was the case in the previous example, this piece also expresses underlying anxieties and fears and does not revolve around my own emancipation, but rather around what it might mean to whoever views it.

Charles Guignon (2004:x), author of *On Being Authentic*, comments that self-improvement projects and self-help programs have gained a reputation for leading to excessive self-absorption.

In *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*³⁰ (1987),

particular time in his life, he believed it helpful to lay out particular events in order to try to understand them. He does, however, go on to say that this process was not accompanied with what he calls a "rush of liberation", which he associates with catharsis (cited in Juno 1007:12):

I associate "catharsis" with coming or blowing your nose. It's a clearing out. I don't think I've ever had that sensation from doing comics. It's just too labor intensive and slow. Instead, there's a useful accretion of thought, but it's not the same as having a good cry. Because it's a synthetic medium – you have to draw and write and put those two forms together in a fairly organized way – it doesn't provide the rush of energy that abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock might experience.

³⁰ Lasch's (cited in Hatfield, 2005:129) study extends from the clinical literature regarding narcissism (Freud, Kernberg, Klein, etc.) to an all-round critique of various cultural forms and institutions, and, ultimately, to an attack on post-industrial capitalism. From this point of view, the upwelling of new forms of personal narrative (in comics and in literature more generally) appears merely a symptom of collapse, or retreat, into a pathological me-first-ism that logically fulfills rather than resists the cultural crisis of late capitalism (Hatfield 2005:129). Thus, the resistance to commercialization by focusing on the personal rather

Christopher Lasch (cited in Hatfield, 2005:129), presents a radical critique of this so-called “Me Generation” and the rise of a “therapeutic sensibility” that centers everything on the self.

Lasch anticipates some of the usual criticisms raised about autobiographic novels by criticizing this “confessional mode” for presenting personal experience without reflection and also for reverting to sensationalism rather than achieving insight and understanding.

I will now be focusing on how autobiographic novelist, Dan Clowes, who, in my opinion, qualifies as one of his genre’s biggest critics, challenges this shift towards self-help, or (in some cases) self-glorification. His slogan, “Maintaining an icy distance between reader and audience since 1989” is well deserved since his work is renowned for eradicating any hint of sentiment (Juno 1997: 5).

Dan Clowes is, however, not only known for attempting to sabotage any connection between the author and those who view the work and with denying any possibility of catharsis, but also for destabilizing the notion of a unified or ‘authentic’ self.

In *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*, – which he refers to as a “multiple-self-help book” – author Walter Truett Anderson (1997:xii) accentuates the fact that the “ideal” of the self is central to psychology and psychotherapy, which in turn are institutionalized methods for maintaining and comprehending the “modern self”. This statement implies that self-help culture is very much linked to the concept of becoming a unified “authentic” self. Guignon (2004:5) sees this hankering back to the Enlightenment’s centered objective individual as central to the ideologies of

than subscribing to the more popular branch of superhero comics, for example, are seen as but another form of commercial ‘come-on’.

Everybody wants to be an individual; everybody wants to “fight the power”.

self-help gurus like Oprah Winfrey and 'Dr.' Phil McGraw offer "action plans" to help people move from being a "fictional self" to being an "authentic self." Guignon (2004:6) states that

[T]he basic assumption built into the ideal of authenticity is that, lying within each individual, there is a deep, "true self" – the "Real Me" – in distinction from all that is not really me. The assumption is that it is only by expressing our true selves that we can achieve self-realization and self-fulfillment as authentic human beings.

From this quote it is evident that becoming "authentic" is of exceptional importance to these self-help movements. Guignon warns against this project of authenticity, since, instead of being an escape from the problems prevalent to modern society, this ideal has been exposed as cause of many of these troubles we face.

Poststructuralism has been instrumental in exposing the notion of a unique, unmediated individual as a fiction, a product of political agendas and social and historical conditions. Dan Clowes not only acknowledges this critique of a unified, 'authentic self, but also deconstructs the subject in *Just Another Day* (fig. 14). In this satire, Clowes reinvents his visual image from panel to panel, revealing "Dan Clowes" himself to be as constructed and imaginary as any other character. Like Crumb, Clowes presents a variety of stereotypic versions or caricatures of himself, ranging from the average guy, to the 'big shot' producer to the sensitive artiste.

In *Just Another Day* Clowes does not stop with illustrating the multiplicity of personas that he is made up of. By gradually sifting through each of these aspects of his character – which each claims to be the "real Clowes" – he demonstrates that once one falsehood is stripped away it only

reveals another, ad infinitum. Thus, one can never reach the 'true' or 'authentic' self since it does not exist. Clowes' destabilization of the unified subject can be seen as an attack of the self-help movements – which it is so central to – as well as any effort that relies on confession to achieve disclosure.

The fact that Clowes finds the very idea of closure as well as the prospect of confessional comics absurd is obvious from the first page where we find a drowsy Clowes in the bathroom busy waking up. The second page, however, reveals the first three frames to be a Hollywood movie set, in which the so-called "real" Clowes, acts as director as well as cartoonist. Clowes-the-director turns to the readers and presents a frank version of the underlying principle of autobiographic novels:

"If I show the minutae [sic] of my daily life truthfully, no matter how embarrassing or painful, maybe you'll respond to that truth and realize that we perhaps share the same unspoken human traits and you and I will have a beautiful artist/reader experience. Dig?"

By making autobiography's intent explicit, Clowes mocks the commitment by many autobiographic novelists to representing the self and everyday life.

In the next sequence, the 'actor' Clowes sniffs his dirty socks, imitating the graphic intimacy depicted by autobiographic novelists like Crumb, Julie Doucet and Joe Matt (to name a few). In one of the following frames the 'director' Clowes announces: "I made the whole thing up! I've never done anything like that in my life!!" According to Hatfield (2005:118) Clowes deflates the claim that embarrassing details like these are representative rather than just plain weird, and implies that the reader who identifies with such scenes must be a "fucking sicko!!"

While staring into the mirror at one point, the “Clowes” character comments that “it’s weird trying to do comics about yourself....It’s almost impossible to be objective.” Hatfield (2005:118) suggests that the reason for this difficulty lies in the artist’s own ever-changing self-image, as well as the idea that even if full disclosure is reached it will be received as mere rhetorical pretentiousness. According to Hatfield (2005:118) Clowes’ that “[I]f you are willing to embarrass yourself you have to make sure it’s not just to show what a cool, honest guy you are...”, implies that even complete “honesty,” serves some self-inflating purpose. By ridiculing the relationship of ‘trust’ that exists between reader and author, Clowes labels autobiography as an essentially selfish and narcissistic project, incapable of ‘reaching’ or ‘touching’ the world.

So, are the autobiographic novels that can be classified as ‘confessional’ merely symptomatic of the influence that these psychological discourses have on our contemporary experience of ourselves? And are autobiographic novels doomed to self-absorption without the possibility of resolution or relating to the reader?

The next section, entitled REACHING THE WORLD will attempt to address these questions by extending on the notion of the ‘act of writing’ (*graphie*) as catharsis, and will be focusing on autobiographic novels’ potential to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances and experiences that shape the subject. I will also be focusing in greater depth on

- the poststructuralist concept of *performativity* (the performative aspect of which shifts the focus from to the author to the reader) and

- the feminist concept of *agency* (the perception that the act of writing an autobiography can be a method of resistance and intervention since it can give a voice to the marginalized subject).

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEIT VS CATHARSIS

PART TWO

REACHING THE WORLD

In this part, entitled 'REACHING THE WORLD', I want to counter the line of reasoning that I have touched upon in the first section MAINTAINING A COLD DISTANCE, by arguing that autobiography is not always and inevitably a genre for the self-absorbed, or the strutting "individualist". Lasch raises an important issue when he discredits autobiographical intent on account of the great deal of autobiographic novelists out there whose work tends toward vanity and self-importance. I would argue, however that his statement is oversimplified since there are many autobiographic novels that deal with personal issues without becoming narcissistic or wallowing in self-pity and that these novels reveal a great deal about the subject and his or her context.

Julia Kristeva (cited in McAfee 2004:106) has mentioned that by examining "micropolitics", in other words how the subject's identity is shaped, you can gain insight wider social issues and even affect change on a "macropolitical" level. By focusing on the everyday, the personal and the emotional, autobiographic novels have the potential to shed light on, and even alter matters of real political and cultural heft. Autobiographic novels, then, can be empowering seeing that they can provide a platform for minority groups who might otherwise not have had the opportunity to speak out.

Autobiographic novels also function on another level. Since poststructuralism diverted the focus from the writer to the reader, the performative aspect of these texts – in other words, the meaning that these texts hold for the reader and the part that it plays in his or her life – has become more

important than the author's intention.

The two following categories elaborate on these empowering and performative facets of autobiography.

Performativity

Poststructuralism stresses the interaction of reader and text as a productivity. In other words, reading has lost its status as passive consumption of a product to become performance (Sarup, 1993:4). Deconstructionist and critic Paul de Man (1919-83) has contributed to the shift from the author to the reader with his term *aporia*, which literally means 'lack of means'. According to De Man (cited in Sim 1999:225) language lacks the means to say anything univocally since a text will always confer other unintended meanings that results in conflicting or contradictory readings. Marcus (1994:204) states that de Man's reference to the multiplicity of interpretations that emerge in the process of reading leads to a different understanding of the reading process in autobiography: "De Man's emphasis, here and elsewhere, on the *performative* moment of the text includes the idea that reading performs that which in the text always escapes us".

This performative aspect that focuses on the reader's part in the construction of meaning in any autobiographical text, involves the reader projecting his or her specific framework onto the text in order for it to become meaningful.

As I have pointed out earlier on, my latest work reflects an interest in this performative aspect of reading a text. The MPhil course in Illustration has provided ample opportunity to present and

discuss my work with others. Through this process I have increasingly become aware of how whoever interprets a text inserts their meaning into it.

Acknowledging the reader has influenced both the formal and conceptual elements of my work.

In fig. 13 I definitely took the perspective from which I would be working from into consideration. In not giving the piece a title and by executing the piece in a rather abstract manner, I tried to leave it as open to interpretation as possible.

In terms of content, fig. 13 attempts to illustrate a very common dream about the loss of teeth. As I have mentioned, this piece experiments with the representation a relatively abstract and unconscious expression of anxiety. I attempted to depict the dream more or less as I experienced it; in other words, not as something that you see happening from outside, but as something that you experience personally. By formally placing the reader in a first-person space, the piece allows him or her to relate more directly to the experience.

To come back to Rose's statement, which implies that our self-perception has become psychologically orientated and managed by the 'truth' that 'experts of experience' advocate, is important and should be taken note of. But an awareness of this influence does not make the effect of psychological issues and traumatic events any less real to those who experience them. Walter Truett Anderson (1997:45) has criticized poststructuralists for their enthusiastic proclamation of the 'death of the self', since "...they reveal a singular lack of compassion for real people who feel that their selves are dying and who don't like it a damn bit."

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen (cited in Anderson 1997:47) insists that this deconstruction of the subject is a necessary one, since it makes us aware of the broader cultural historical contexts

within we function. An awareness of the fact that there is no such thing as one universal truth and one set of ethics, but that there are multiple truths and many beliefs that are all important, might result in a different understanding of the world and could result in a more tolerant society.

Although I agree with Gergen's (cited in Anderson, 1997:48) assessments – that people are becoming aware of having multiple facets and of the constantly changing nature of self-perception, and that this awareness may transform society – I feel that this awareness does not offer a solution for or lessen the psychological effects that this crossover from a modern self to the postmodern subject has on people.

Agency

Anderson (1997:56) is of the opinion that post-structuralism's reverence to the subject as a textual construct can be turned to the subject's advantage. He states that psychoanalysts and therapists are increasingly seeing consciousness as a descriptive process and that the key to experiencing life in satisfactory ways is directly related to telling richer and more spacious stories about it.

According to Anderson (1997:56) the narrative element, which is central to most psychological discourses, encourages people to tell their stories and also helps them deconstruct and then reconstruct those stories in a way that empowers them.

Though post-structuralism holds that selves are being replaced by stories, Anderson uses this very element that dislodged the subject to anchor it:

Selves are always an abstraction, but the stories we tell ourselves and others, the epics and comedies and tragedies we create to make sense of the moment – these we can feel.

Even though we have been exposed as narrative constructs we can use our own narratives or stories to work through psychological or traumatic experiences, to express ourselves, and maybe reach others by presenting the great variety of stories – which in turn reflect the great variety of people – out there.

Hatfield (2005:129) believes that the reason why autobiography has gained so much interest is because of the level of social insight that the genre is capable of: “Autobiographical comics in particular often treat the author’s visible persona as an interlocutor and storytelling device, a means for getting at, and shaping, the stories of *other people’s* lives”. I agree with Hatfield that autobiographic novels can impact other people’s lives, seeing that people not only relate to the work but also interpret these pieces in a manner that reflect something about them and means something to them.

Since personal issues invariably reflect larger political, social and psychological concerns, I want to argue that autobiographic novels can also be empowering in that they have, as Anderson (2001:4) succinctly describes, the “potential for political intervention”.

As I have mentioned in the first chapter, poststructuralists such as Foucault and Lyotard identified and criticized master narratives as abridged and simplistic, but their fear of operating within any such narrative prohibits them from identifying with or situating themselves within any culture or generation³¹. Sarup (1993:155) argues that this fear has caused some post-structuralists to offer

³¹ Sarup (1993:154) criticizes Foucault and Lyotard’s shift in focus towards smaller narratives as the substitution of one grand narrative by another:

us no theoretical reason to move in one social direction rather than another, and that Lyotard's philosophical position has resulted in his distancing himself from any "metanarrative of emancipation".

In his article 'The Limits of Postmodern Memory' Eric Berlatsky's (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/pdfs/BERLAT1.PDF) extends this criticism of post-structuralism by stating that its conception of the "real" and the "truth" as inaccessible has political and social consequences in the "politics of memory." He states that this postmodern emphasis on the "real" as inseparable from the "constructed" and the "textual" has influenced historical fiction because the historical "real" is a site of political dispute. Both Berlatsky and Dominick LaCapra (cited in Berlatsky, http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/pdfs/BERLAT1.PDF) are suspicious of poststructuralism due to its supposed incapacity to acknowledge the "real" historical events (like for instance the Holocaust) as "real," or existing beyond mere arbitrary textual "construction", since these events are so vital to shaping identity and resisting oppressive ideologies.

In essence I agree with critics like Berlatsky that autobiography can reflect something like "truth" or "reality". I do, however, feel that poststructuralism's reference to the constructed nature of these

"But surely the concept of postmodernism presupposes a master narrative, a totalizing perspective? While Lyotard resists grand narratives, it is impossible to discern how one can have a theory of postmodernism without one."

Richard Rorty (cited in Sarup 1993:154) elaborates on this critique when he states that:

"There is no 'we' to be found in Foucault's writing, nor in those of many of his French contemporaries...It is as if thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard are so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of 'the subject' that they cannot bring themselves to say 'we' long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong."

concepts is vital to reinstating not one universal and overreaching "truth" or "reality", but multiple, diverging truths and realities which reveals the subjectivity of experience.

Feminists like Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith (cited in Anderson 2001:4) believe that autobiography can affect "real" social and political change through the depiction of a person's specific, localized context. They argue that autobiography is of particular significance in that it can give a voice to 'the other' that has so often been silenced by 'master narratives'.

Anderson (2001:4) states that "...the idea that autobiography can become 'the text of the oppressed', articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one." Autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.

This impact that the poststructuralist and feminist theory has had on concepts stemming from in investigation of the subject, like *performativity* and *agency* is reflected on and negotiated in Art Spiegelman's autobiographic novel *Maus*, which consists of two volumes, published consecutively in 1986 and 1991. I will be discussing this multifaceted autobiographic novel as an integration and culmination of all the theoretical aspects that I have mentioned up to this point: Firstly, the novel demonstrates an awareness of its own subjectivity; secondly, it reveals the internal and external factors involved in identity-formation; and thirdly, it accentuates autobiography's potential to facilitate agency through the deconstruction of 'grand narratives' without reverting to transcendental or universal claims.

Maus functions on more than one level since it not only serves as a history and biography of

Spiegelman's father Vladek, a Polish Jew and survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, and as a memoir of the Jewish Holocaust and its psychological fallout; but also as an autobiography about the present-day life of the author and his relationship with his father.

I want to begin this analysis by returning to Lasch's critique mentioned at the onset of this chapter, which entails that the genre of autobiographic novels is self-absorbed and incapable of any real assertions, or of involving the reader.

Art Spiegelman's narrative strategy has been criticized by Robert Harvey (1996:243), author of *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*, as dangerously self-involved:

[W]hat Spiegelman ultimately shows us...is not the relationship between son and father but the relationship between artist and subject...[*Maus*] is not so much about the experience of the Auschwitz survivor as it is about the obsessions of the artistic temperament.

Spiegelman's constant self-reference – in other words his reference to himself as the artist behind the making of the novel – as well as his exposure of his occasional insensitivity towards his father (of which an example can be seen in fig. 15) may serve to support, rather than destabilize *Maus*' as an attempt at an honest portrayal of the Holocaust. By showing that *Maus* was a conscious undertaking in that it involves a specific person recounting his actual and emotional experiences, Spiegelman's emphasis on subjectivity enables him to deliver one of the many 'truths' that constitute the reality of the Holocaust.

The subjectivity of Spiegelman's project is evident in fig. 16 where the artist portrays himself researching and working on *Maus*. In this selection from volume 2, Spiegelman reveals his own hand in the making of the piece by depicting himself in front of his drawing board. Hatfield (2005:139) extends Spiegelman's conscious reference to the artificiality of his work to the artist's use of anthropomorphic characters. He states that by representing different nationalities as different animals, for instance his portrayal of Jews as mice and Nazi's as cats, Spiegelman does not only reflect the stereotypes that dangerous ideologies like Nazism advocate, but it also makes an effort to call attention to the inadequacy of the metaphor. Hatfield (2005:139) comments that "... [t]he fallacy of representing cultural differences by outward traits (for example, Jewishness through mouseness) is repeatedly thrust in the reader's face as a problem."

While fig. 16 points to the physical circumstances of the novel's making, it also depicts the inescapable emotional or psychological consequences that external forces, like the Nazi genocide exerts, not only on the survivors, but also on the survivor's children.

The graphic intrusion of the past on the present is disturbingly clear in this image where Spiegelman depicts himself as sitting on top of a pile of corpses while commenting on the ramifications that the success of *Maus I* has had on his mental state.

Ole Frahm's (cited in Baetens 2001:86) article "'These Papers Had Too Many *Memories*. So I Burned Them": Genealogical Remembrance in Art Spiegelman's *Maus. A Survivor's Tale*' comments on how this image vividly relays Spiegelman's guilt about the success that he, here literally, built on the deaths of six million Jews. Frahm (cited in Baetens 2001:87) goes further to

say that this image symbolizes Spiegelman's identification with the past, but also the realization that time and circumstance have changed him – and the word – as well.

According to Berlatsky (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/pdfs/BERLAT1.PDF), our ability to “re”-present history is a political opportunity to topple, destroy, and provisionally replace master narratives, such as patriarchy, bourgeois liberalism, and whiteness”. In this sense autobiography can be empowering in that it allows minority groups to react against these ‘master narratives’ by “re”-writing their own stories. Smith (1995:61) sees these personal stories as a site of intervention that resists official prevailing narratives or ideologies.

Spiegelman's attempt to ‘re’-write his story as a Jew who has been irreparably influenced by these master narratives succeeds due to the fact that he grounds the story in his specific family life, and by repeatedly reminding the reader that this is but one partial, inevitably distorted account of the Holocaust, dependent on his tangled and ambivalent relationship with his father.

Spiegelman continuously presents his father as a racist and a miser, someone who neither he nor his wife Françoise can stand. By depicting his father in this rather unflattering way, he avoids presenting Vladek, and the Jewish people in general, as “victims” who remain innocent. Strategies like these separate his work from a univocal survivor's testimony or a historical document.

Throughout *Maus* Spiegelman constantly fluctuates between the past and the present, between his father's memories and his present interpretation of what his father recalls. While the artist relies on his father's memories and historical accounts in order to construct his story, he simultaneously

deconstructs concepts like memory and history by referring to the fallibility of Vladek's memory and his own hand in this 'reconstruction' of history.

The extent to which Spiegelman does not rely solely on Vladek's presentation of events is evident in fig. 13, where Art's research and Vladek's own story differ. The issue of contention is whether or not there was a camp orchestra that played as prisoners were marched through the gates of Auschwitz. Vladek remembers none, but Art insists that "it is very well documented" (Hatfield 2005:141). Spiegelman's demonstrates the subjectivity of memory as well as our experience of history through this father-son collaboration, which allows the artist to distance his Holocaust narrative from any claim to actual "truth", since *Maus* involves the negotiation and reconciliation of different 'truths' and different 'realities'.

Maus thus dismantles history and memory's authority by acknowledging the ways in which they both become deeply textual "stories" without direct access to "truth". At the same time, however, he configures a specific and contextualized "reality" as a method to establish identity and fight power without submitting it as an absolute "truth" that excludes and abuses.

CONCLUSION

As I have mentioned during the introduction, changing conceptions about the subject has considerably impacted the way we perceive and portray ourselves. I hope that the extent to which this shift from the modern centered, unified, transcendental individual to the postmodern fractured, multifaceted and constructed subject has influenced my work as well as that of other autobiographic novelists has become clear.

I have demonstrated that the decentering of the subject has had a major influence on concepts like "truth", identity and memory, which, through this process, have been revealed as ideological constructs. This disclosure in turn demonstrates the extent to which our self-perception and reality is shaped and controlled by master narratives.

A growing awareness of the influence that external factors like a person's social context, historical background, nationality and religious conviction has on internal forces, like our psychological status and unconscious, has led to an understanding of the many levels on which self-construction occur. I have attempted to draw attention to the extent to which our circumstances as well as psychoanalytic factors influence self-expression in autobiographic novels, especially the incidents in which certain fictions that we make up and the lies we tell ourselves come forth. I find that these fictions become more interesting than the truths that some autobiographic novels attempt to portray.

As I have mentioned, poststructuralists have been criticized for proclaiming the death of the self without any consideration for the real emotional or psychological effects that this theoretical shift has had on people.

Jane Flax (cited in Guignon 2004:124), a professor of political science and practicing psychotherapist, works with patients suffering from borderline syndrome³² – an illness which leaves the self in painful and disabling fragments – is suspicious of the postmodern de-centering of the self:

Those who celebrate or call for a 'decentered' self seem self-deceptively naïve and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis.

Flax's (cited in Guignon 2004:124) statement implies that the theoretical 'death of the self' can have very real and even dangerous consequences in the lives of people.

Walter Truett Anderson (1997:56) counters this line of reasoning by stating that people are increasingly rejecting the notion that they should be unified, integrated selves. He states that modernism's preoccupation with individualism has led to the breakdown of communities and of people being forced to live lost, fragmented, alienated lives.

³² Borderline patients lack a core self without which the understanding others, the outer world, and themselves are impossible.

Though the dangers of a decentered, constructed self should be taken into consideration, I am more inclined to agree with Anderson, since the modernism's centered, rational individual has also caused many, if not more, serious problems, especially in terms of 'the other'.

I have argued that autobiographic novels can be empowering since they provide minority groups who have previously been excluded and repressed by modernist discourse with an opportunity to speak out. As a Jew, autobiographic novelist Art Spiegelman is a prime example of a member of a minority group who has deconstructed and eventually reconstructed his story outside persisting official ideologies.

According to Nancy Miller (1991:1) we should be careful about attempting to speak for others, since whoever is recounting the story may resonate with a specific group on one level, for example gender, there might be other aspects, for instance class or race, on which they may not connect. In my opinion Spiegelman and all the other autobiographic novelists that I have discussed have circumvented this problem by calling attention to their subjectivity and specific context.

Furthermore, the poststructuralist notion of performativity, which involves the reader inserting his or her own meaning into a text, depending on his or her experiences, has taken the onus off the author. By freeing the reader from a previously assumed passive position, the notion of performativity posits the reader as an agent, capable of a specific personal interpretation of any text. The reader should be credited with being capable of understanding and identifying the various discourses that underlie and influence texts.

Theorist Julia Kristeva is optimistic about the potential of autobiography and believes that by focusing on 'micropolitics' (in other words the specific internal and external circumstances of a

person) we can reveal and even change 'macropolitical' issues. She (cited in McAfee 2004:122) clarifies that

my goal is to inscribe difference at the heart of the universal and to contribute to what is much more difficult than war: the possibility, with a little bit of luck, that men and women, two human species with sometimes conflicting desires, will find a way to understand each other.

If we become more aware and open to the differences of which our world consists, our society might become more tolerant and receptive to the diversity it entails.

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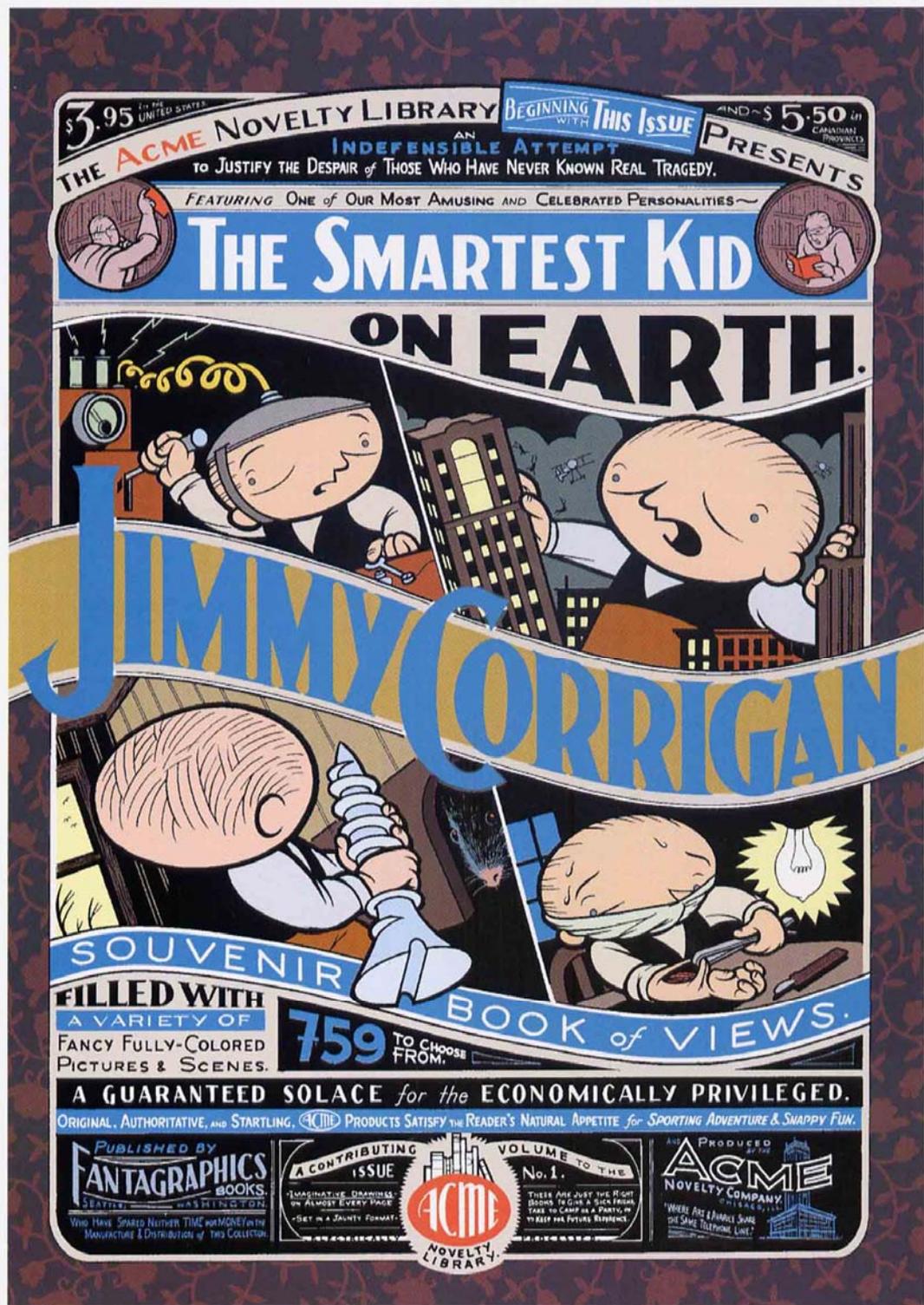


Fig. 2. Chris Ware, front cover (1993) of *The Acme Novelty Library*, No. 1. (Raeburn, 2004:54)

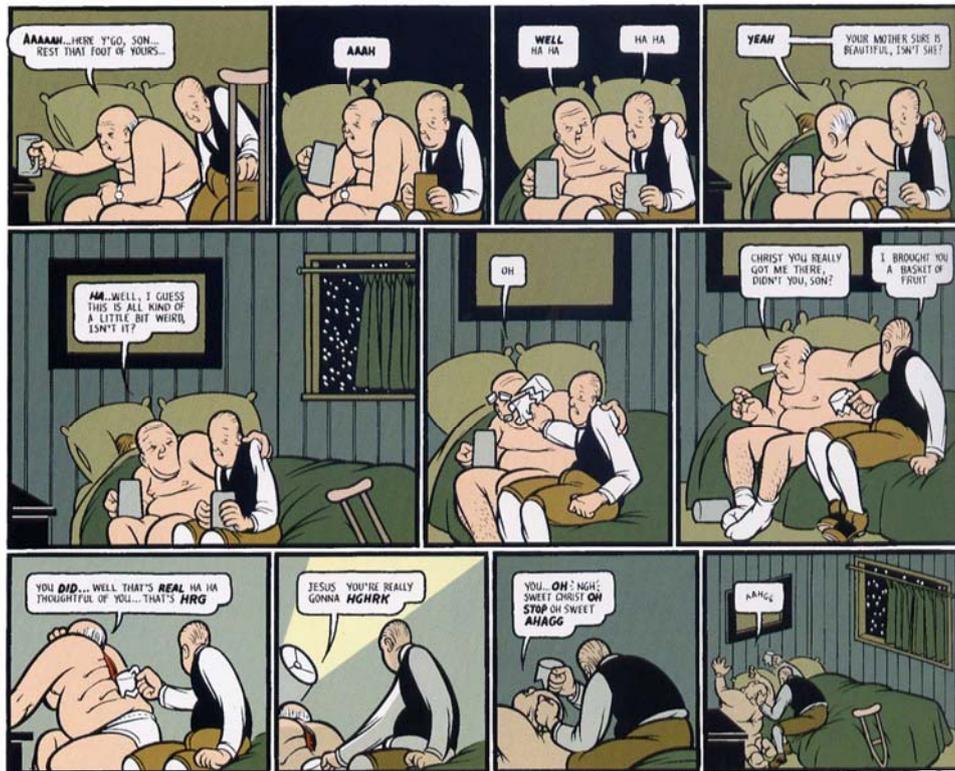
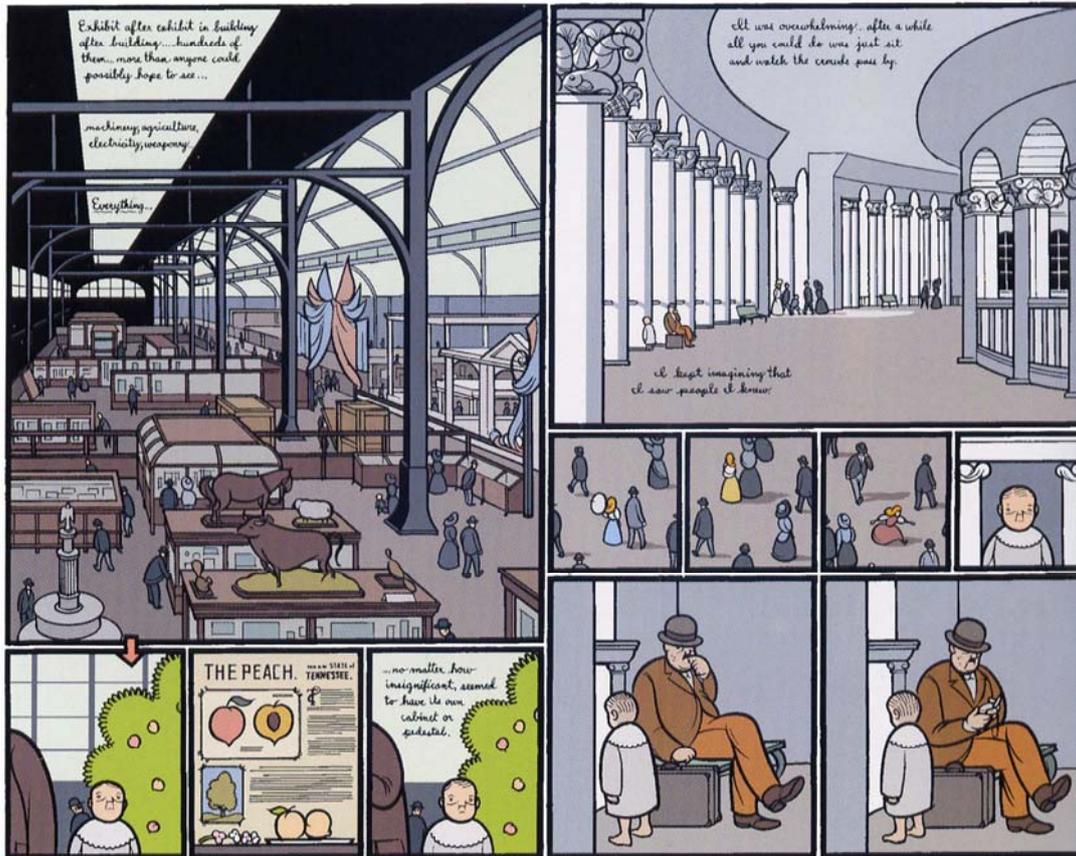


Fig. 3. Chris Ware, selection from *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). (Raeburn, 2004:70)



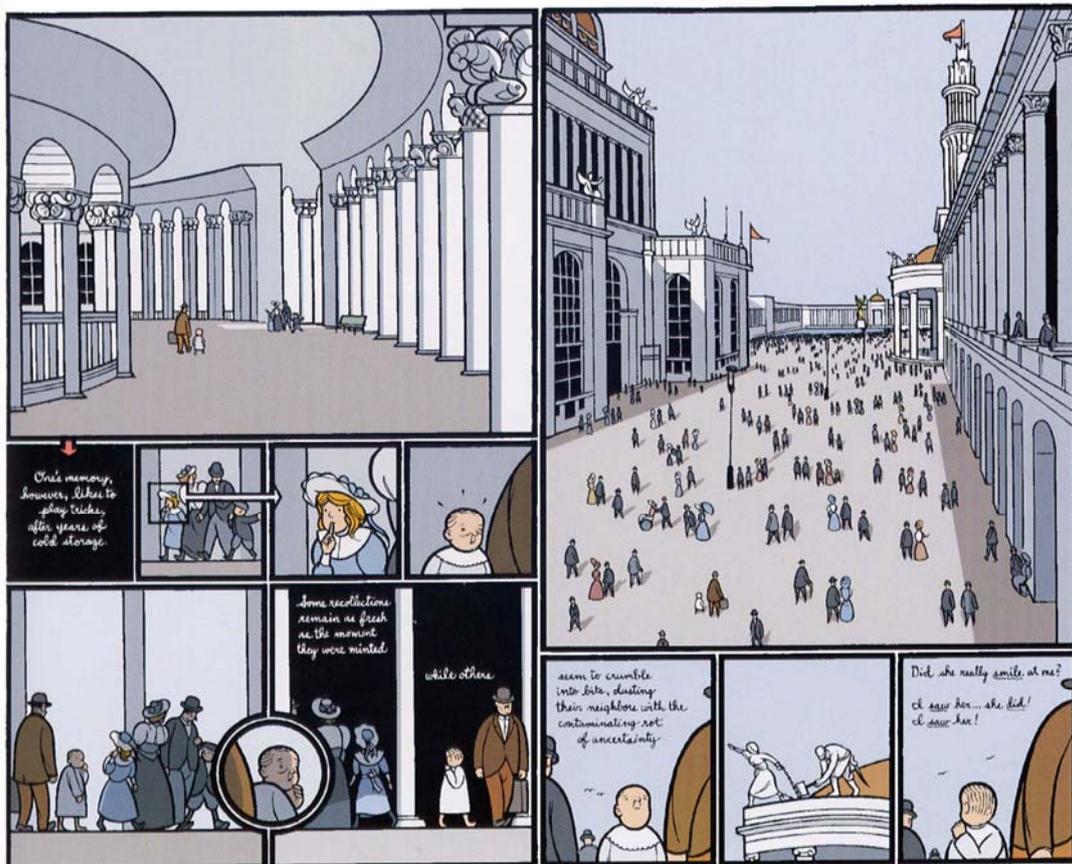


Fig. 4. Chris Ware, selection from *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). (Raeburn, 2004:74-75)

Rusty Brown

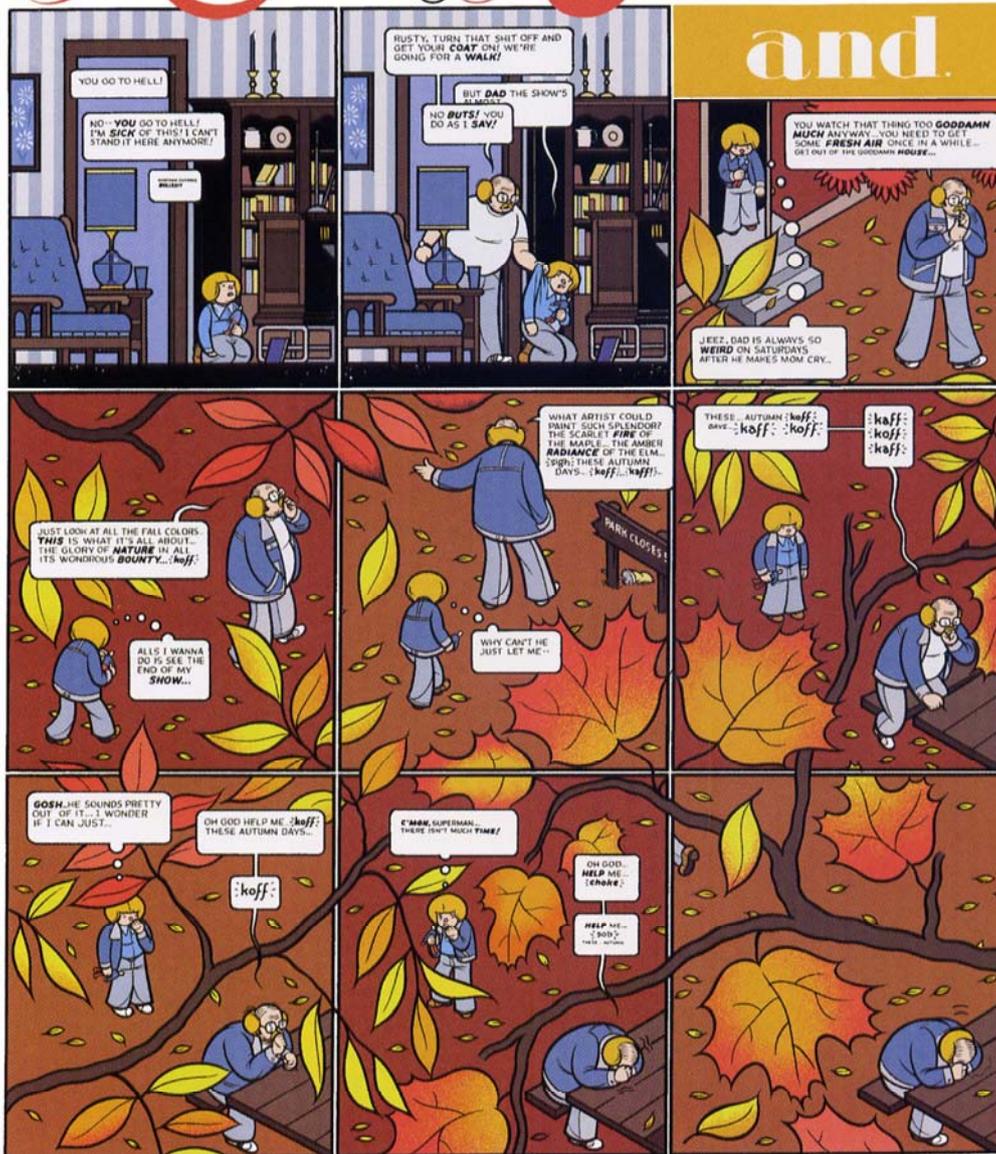


Fig. 5. Chris Ware, *Rusty Brown* (Raeburn, 2004:106).

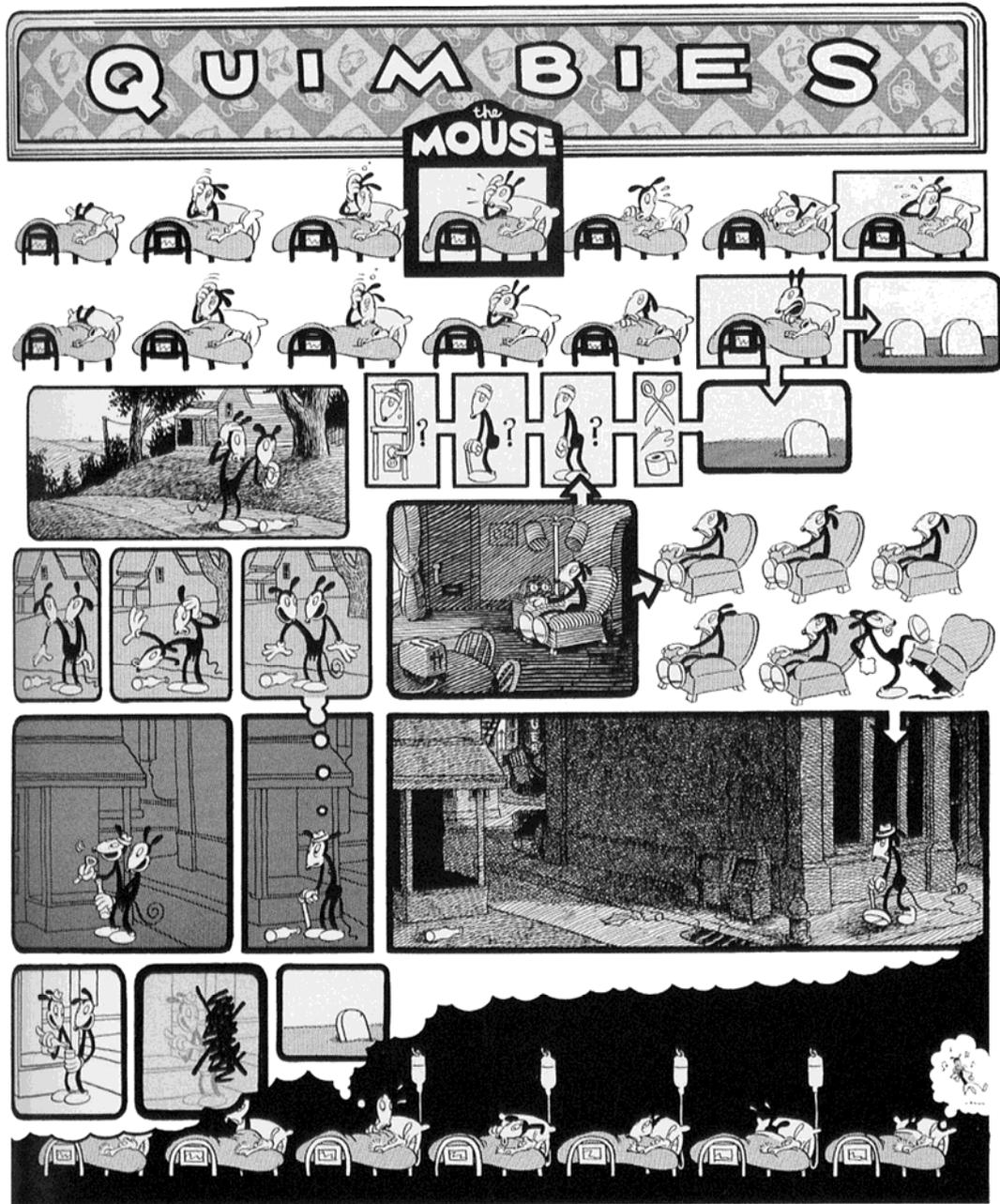


Fig. 6. Chris Ware, *Quimbies the Mouse*. Ink on Paper. (Raeburn, 2004:31)

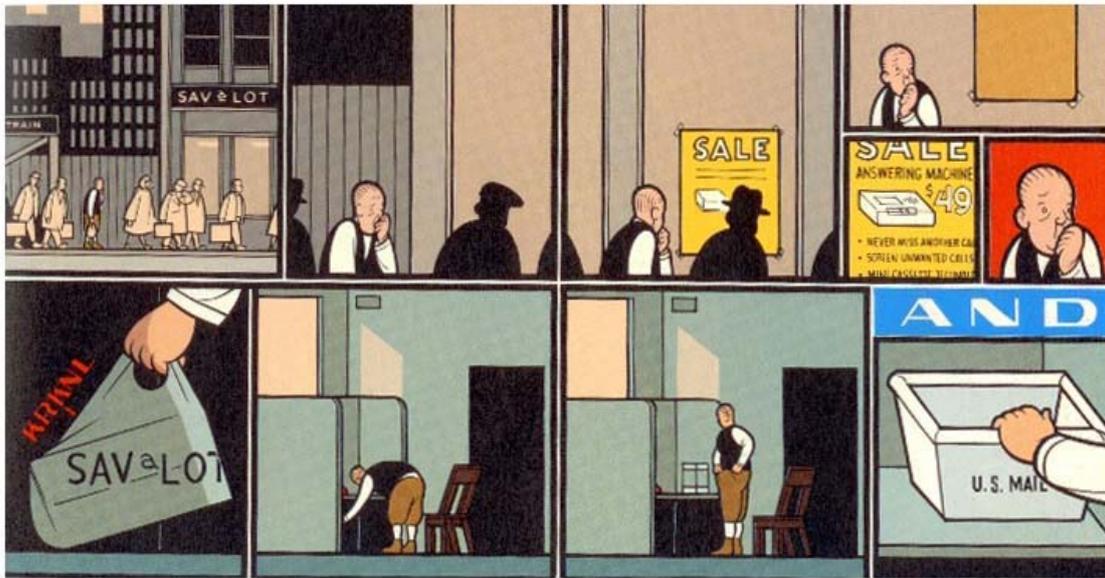
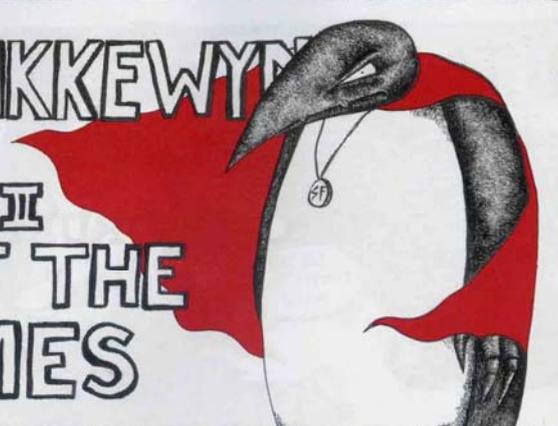


Fig. 7. Chris Ware, selection from *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). (Prager, 2003:197)

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IN
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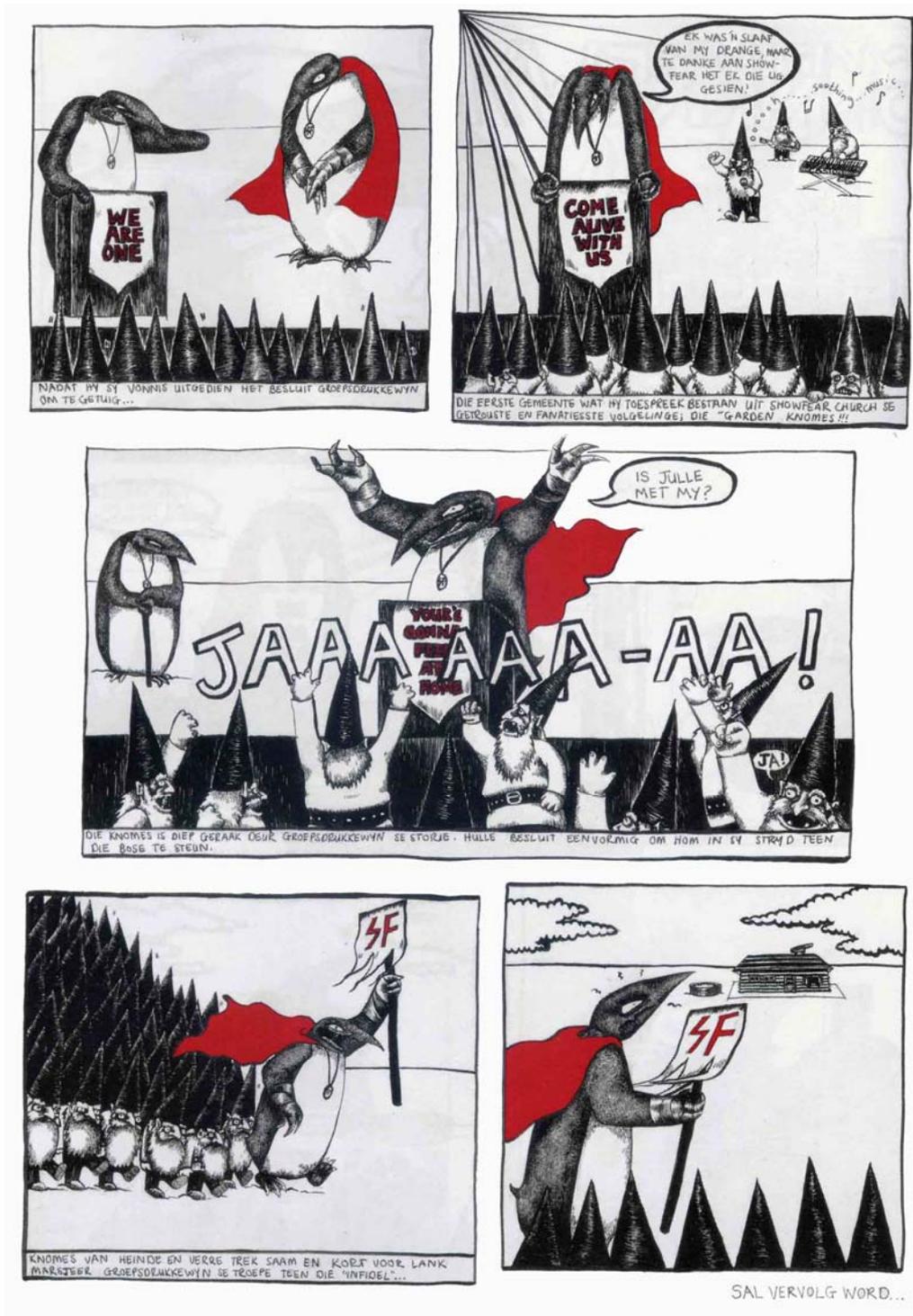
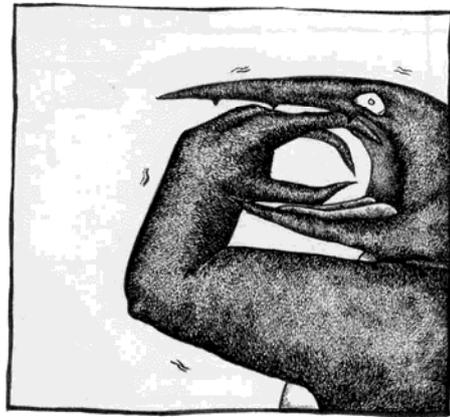
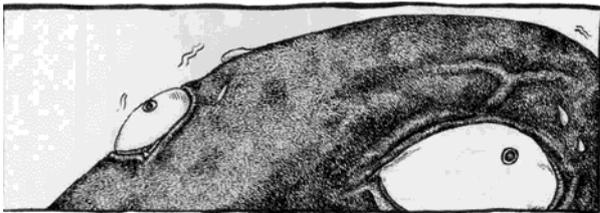
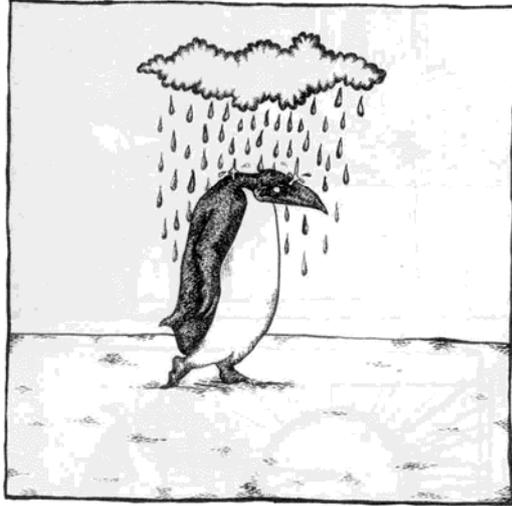
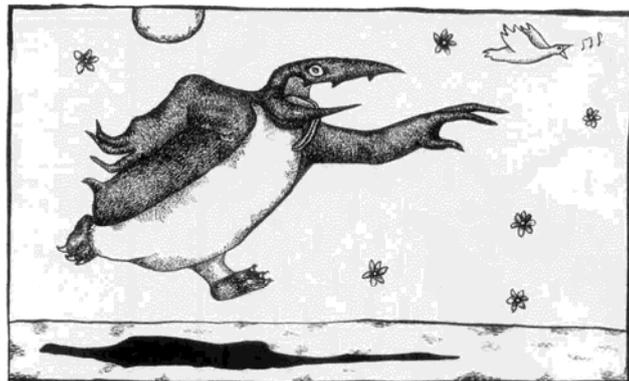


Fig. 8. Sunell Lombard, *Groepsdrukkewyn in Episode II: Attack of the Gnomes*. 2005, Ink on Paper

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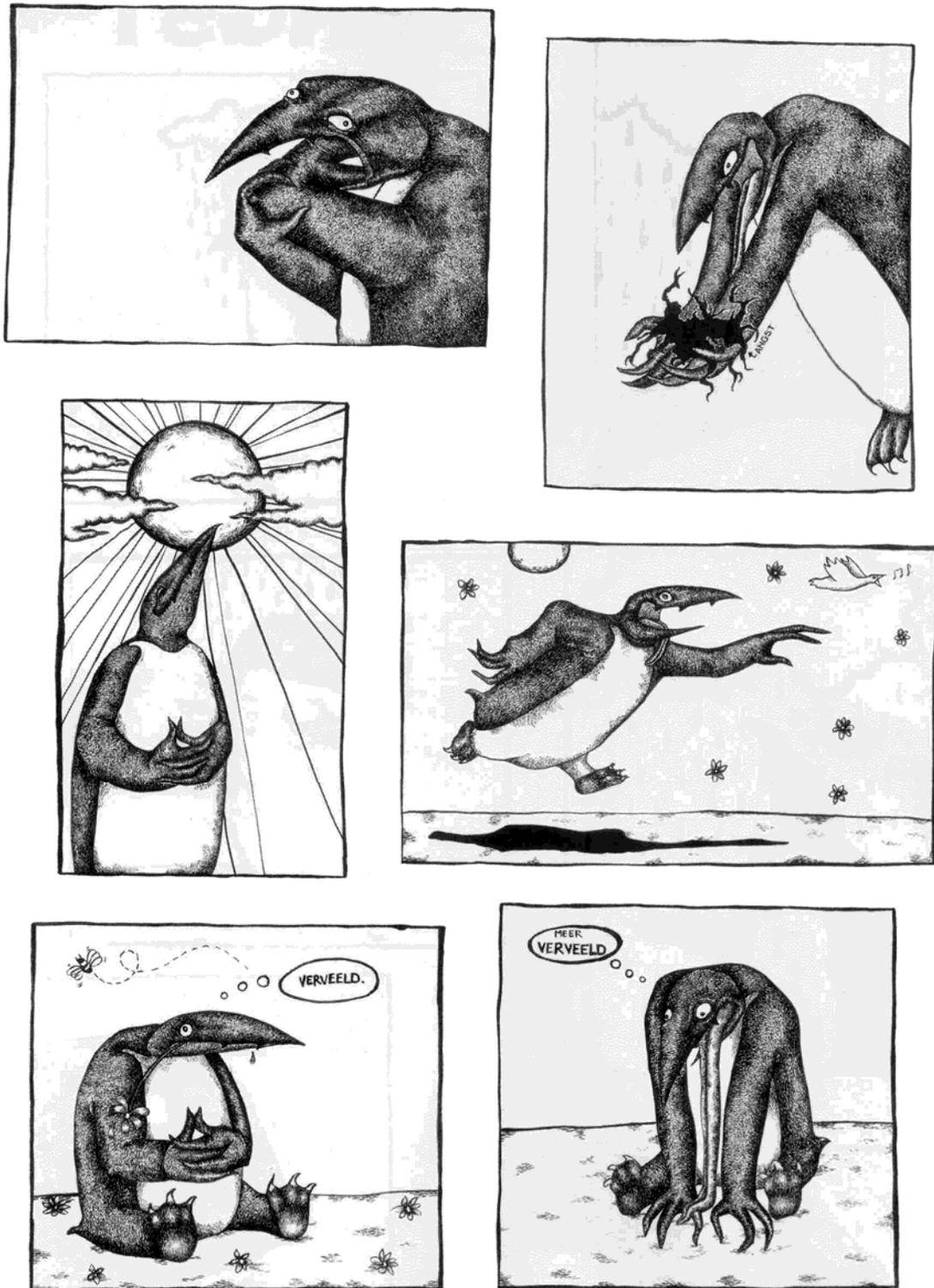


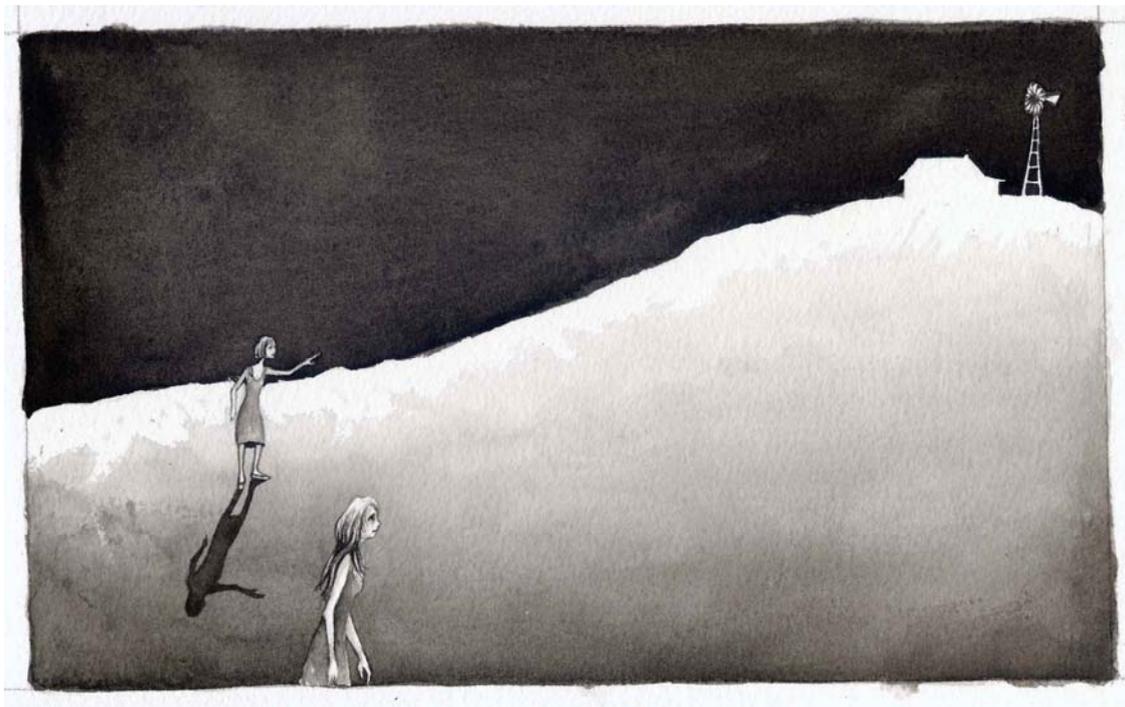
Fig. 9. Sunell Lombard, *Angst* (2005). Ink on Paper.



Fig. 10. Sunell Lombard, *Haat Jy Partykeer Jouself* (2007). Scraperboard.



Fig. 11. Chris Ware, selection from *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*. (Juno 1997:39)



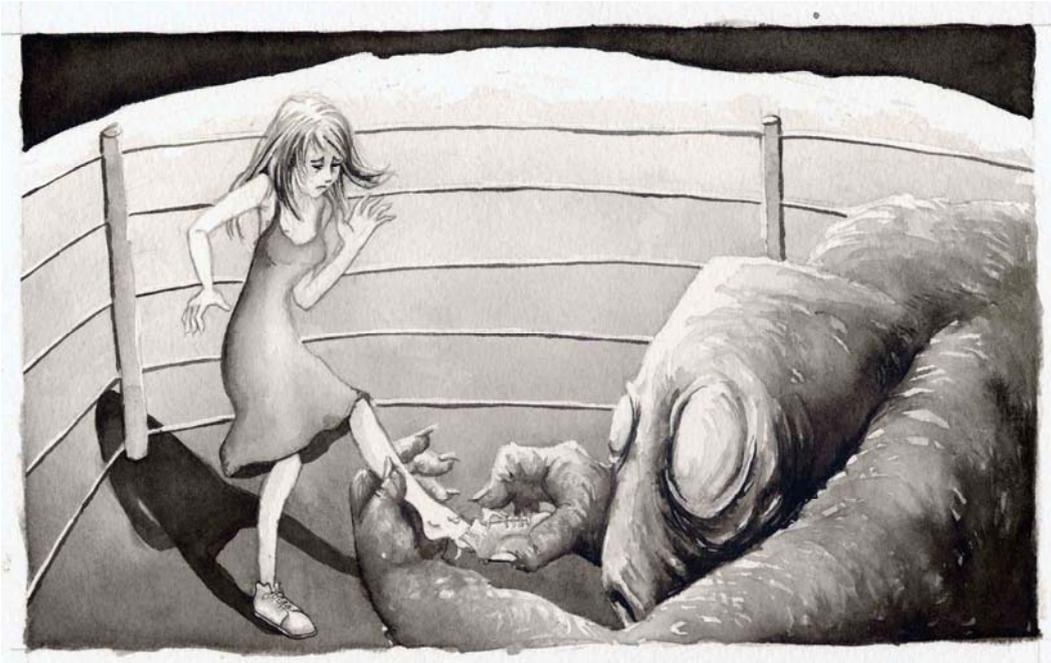
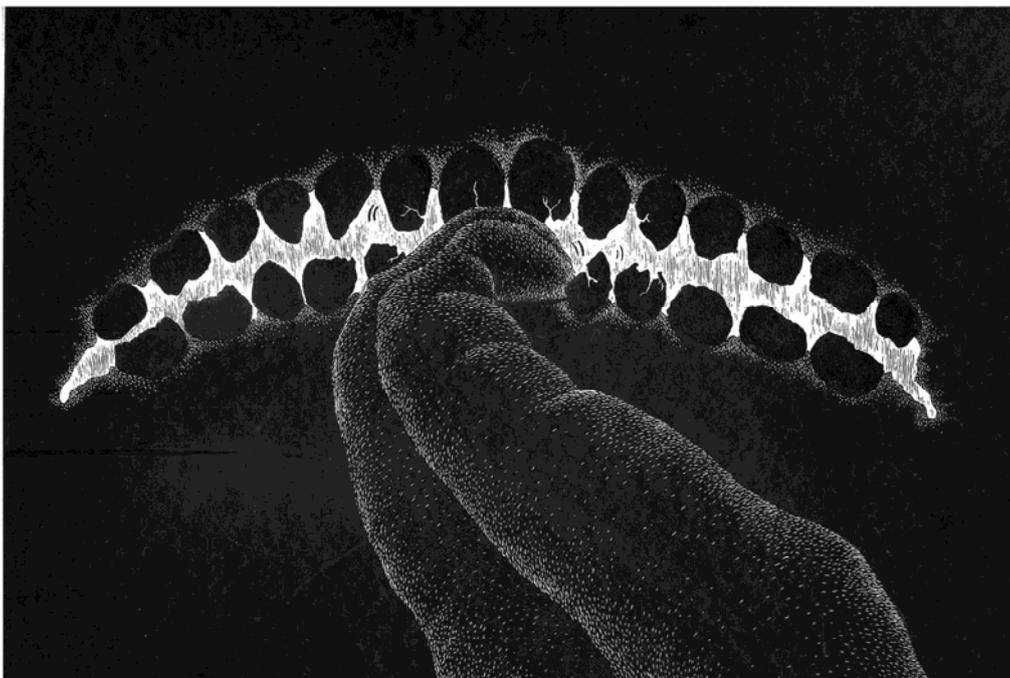
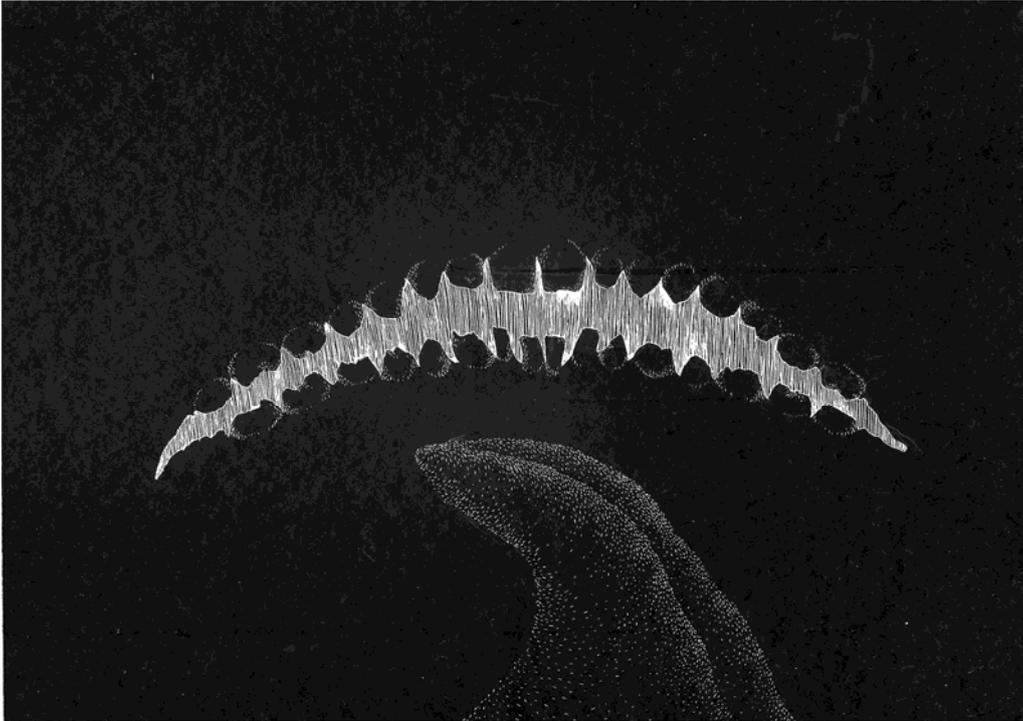


Fig. 12. Sunell Lombard, *Untitled* (2007). Ink on paper.



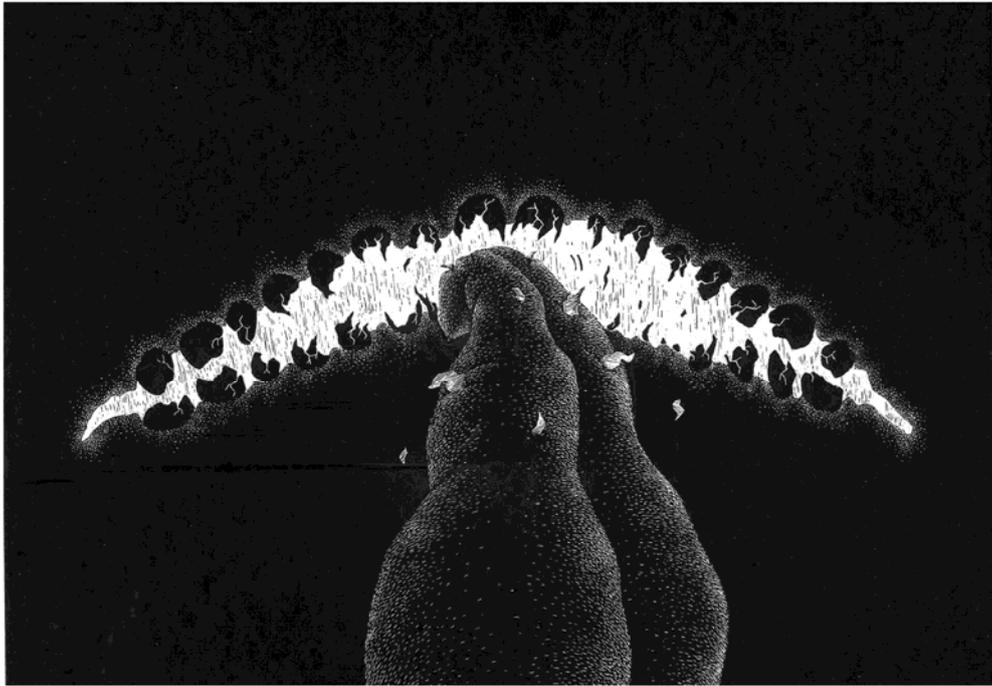


Fig. 13. Sunell Lombard, *Untitled* (2007). Scraperboard.



Fig. 14. Dan Clowes, *Just Another Day* (1993:44-45,47). Ink on Paper.



Fig. 15. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I* (1986). Ink on paper. (Gravett, 2005:61)



Fig. 16. Art Spiegelman, *Maus II* (1991). Ink on Paper. (Gravett, 2005:61)