

**Truth, as Only a Liar Can Tell It: Evolutions and Tensions of Self-Narratives in Comics, from Andrea Pazienza's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* to Gipi's *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male***

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# **Truth, as Only a Liar Can Tell It: Evolutions and Tensions of Self-Narratives in Comics, from Andrea Pazienza's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* to Gipi's *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male***

Abstract

This article discusses the evolution of the autobiographical genre in *auteur* comics in Italy by examining two key texts written shortly before and after the establishment of the graphic novel format: *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo*, by Andrea Pazienza (1987), and *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male*, by Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti, 2008).

The article approaches these works as two key moments of a progressive, uneven, and non-teleological medial transition affecting formats, imaginaries, and storytelling — from serial comics to graphic novels — accompanied and guided by the merging of the autobiographical genre with comics. After reconstructing this complex landscape, it analyses four key sites of narrative tensions concerning representation and truth (time and emplotment; narration and monstration; style and grammatextuality; and metafiction). It argues that in the transition to and intersection with the graphic novel, Italian autobiography unusually retains a pronounced vestigial presence of fictional elements within its non-fictional framework.

**Keywords:** autobiography; graphic novel; Italian comics; trauma; mediology; comparative literature.

## **Introduction**

This article discusses the evolution of the autobiographical genre in Italian comics by examining two key texts that can be situated shortly before and after the turn that the comics system underwent around the 1990s, with the commercial affirmation of the graphic novel and the consequent reconfiguration of comics as a medium endowed with

greater cultural legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> I argue that this reflects a change in perception and habitus due to the introduction of new formal, thematic, and medial characteristics, that nonetheless do not necessarily imply the alleged maturation of the form that some scholars presuppose. To do so, I focus on Andrea Pazienza's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* (henceforth *Pompeo*) and Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti)'s *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male* (henceforth *LMVDM*), seen as two key moments of a progressive, uneven, and non-teleological transition in comics formats, imaginaries, and storytelling.<sup>2</sup>

As already pointed out by Carlotta Vacchelli, the dialogue between Pazienza's and Gipi's work offers a privileged key to understanding the evolution of comics in Italy<sup>3</sup>. Picking up on the Foucauldian idea of the author function, Vacchelli identifies the 'Pazienza function' as an engine of transformation within Italian comics through the post-mortem mythologisation of the figure of Pazienza, which acts as a catalyst in how generations of artists and storytellers (including contemporary names such as Zerocalcare or Fumettibrutti) have imagined, shaped, and marketed their self-representation and work.

I focus here on *Pompeo* and *LMVDM* as they share several notable commonalities. While the authors belong to the same generation, their works stand at the two extremes of a medial transition: Pazienza made proto-graphic novels and pseudo-autobiographies at a time when the field was still dominated by fictional serial comics;<sup>4</sup> Gipi debuted with serial comics, but achieved success only when he began creating graphic novels (with a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms 'graphic novel' and 'pseudo-autobiography' *in lieu* of their hypernyms — that is, 'graphic narratives' and 'self-narratives' — due to my interest in how they incorporate a particular kind of storytelling in a particular format — still recognising them to be parts, respectively, of these broader categories. On the topic, see Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Andrea Pazienza, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo. Fino all'estremo* (Editori del Grifo, 1987); Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti), *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male* (Coconino Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Pazienza, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo. Fino all'estremo* (Editori del Grifo, 1987); Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti), *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male* (Coconino Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Carlotta Vacchelli, *La funzione-Pazienza: L'influenza di Andrea Pazienza nel graphic novel italiano* (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Daniele Barbieri, *Breve storia della letteratura a fumetti* (Carocci, 2009), pp. 136-41.

distinct autobiographical component), in turn deeply influencing Italian comics to come. Moreover, the two works revolve around similar traumatic topics: Pompeo, Paziienza's alter ego, has a heroin addiction and attempts suicide twice, eventually succeeding; Gipi's unnamed alter ego, after recounting various issues related to different drugs, attempts suicide twice, eventually disclosing a traumatic event that acted as a symbolic death for him. These broad thematic commonalities serve as a starting point for both authors to develop meaning-making strategies that complicate the representation of truth. The article gathers these tensions into four elements that bear the mark of narrative tensions and oscillations between realism and expressiveness, autobiography and fiction. The four elements (that will be defined and discussed below) are time and emplotment; narration and monstration; style and grammatextuality; and metafiction.

By focusing on two paradigmatic works in the Italian comics landscape, my investigation thus aims to explore the narrative techniques, temporal architectures, stylistic choices, and changes in format that have characterised autobiographical narratives in Italian comics, combining a mediological contextualisation with a narratological close reading of the two works. This allows me to trace the metamorphoses of the genre within the cultural and formal transitions that have seen comics merge with autobiography and shift towards the more culturally legitimised concept of 'graphic novel'. This, in turn, bears the marks of a movement that began in the 1970s, whereby 'la pagina stampata dei vecchi comics non riusciva più a contenere ed organizzare l'immaginario dei propri lettori,' and comics 'stava[no] mutando geneticamente per far fronte ai nuovi assetti del sistema mediale'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sergio Brancato, 'Trasformazioni dei comics tra storia e autobiografia', in *Bande à part: Graphic novel, fumetto e letteratura*, ed. by Sara Colaone and Lucia Quaquarelli (Morellini, 2016), pp. 77-87 (p. 84).

Moving from Paziienza to Gipi then means moving from one type of fragmentation to the other, and from the adoption of quasi-autobiographical structures (I will discuss *Pompeo* as a *roman à clef*) to a work explicitly framed as a self-narrative (although a peculiar one). Retracing this transition means observing the cultural and artistic legitimisation processes of Italian comics, examining the emergence of a peculiar dialectic between fiction, authenticity, and truth in Italian graphic self-narratives.

### **1. Graphic novels as ‘Drawn Literature’?**

One recurring assumption when considering the graphic novel is that the format began in 1978 with the publication of *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Eisner played a decisive role in promoting a formula that had been circulating for some time, paving the way for the legitimisation of comics through his influence. The label indeed succeeded in changing the common perception of comics, breaking them free from their reputation as a product for young readers. However, rather than having been invented out of the blue, the graphic novel results from long transnational processes occurring around serial comics.

As Gino Frezza explains, in Europe this process stems from the clear novelistic vocation of post-war adventurous and fantastic comics (notably Italian, French, and Belgian), which aimed at independence and editorial quality while aligning with the narrative dynamics of seriality. The attraction that the literary (and cinematic) imaginary exerted further proliferated with the explosion of *auteur* magazines from the 1960s on. In this sense,

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<sup>6</sup> Will Eisner, *A Contract with God* (Baronet Books, 1978). A notable peculiarity of Eisner’s book, when framing it as a ‘novel,’ is that it is composed of four different short stories — which, even when incorporating comics into the literary sphere, would make it a short story collection rather than a *novel*.

l'approdo al graphic novel è la selezione di vari momenti della storia del fumetto, della dialettica fra lato universale e popolare della narrazione scritto-visiva delle storie vignettate, e lato sperimentale dell'impaginazione e del narrabile, ovvero della ricerca di nuove storie, di dimensioni esistenziali [...] che oggi il graphic novel esplicitamente s'incarica di raccogliere, ficcare e tradurre all'interno delle tavole scritto-disegnate.<sup>7</sup>

In Italy, the persistent prejudice that regarded comics as a medium meant for children (particularly due to the popularity of *Corriere dei Piccoli* and *Topolino*) began to be undermined in the 1960s by the success of noir comics, the first 'mature' comics sold at newsstands.<sup>8</sup> However, it was the *auteur* magazines that created the conditions for the development of what Hugo Pratt, reclaiming a greater legitimacy for the medium, defined as 'letteratura disegnata'.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the birth of *Linus* in 1965 — blessed by intellectuals such as Umberto Eco, Elio Vittorini, and Oreste del Buono — allowed comics to undergo a somewhat circular process of artistic re-evaluation: *Linus* initiated a process of artistic legitimisation of comics, encouraging a generation of authors and critics to begin looking at them with fresh eyes, both in terms of visual artistry and storytelling.<sup>10</sup> As fans and intellectuals engaged in a critical discourse around comics, authors began to experiment with the affordances of the medium, aided by the spaces created within this discourse. This, in turn, led to a further critical and academic reappraisal of the medium, acknowledging its aesthetic and narrative value. Simultaneously, transformations occurred in the comics' target audience: new

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<sup>7</sup> Gino Frezza, *Le carte del fumetto. Strategie e ritratti di un medium generazionale* (Liguori, 2008), pp. 140-41. A similar reconstruction (focusing on US comics) is operated by Paul Williams in *Dreaming the Graphic Novel: The Novelization of Comics* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Francesco Artibani and Andrea Plazzi, "'L'hai letto su Topolino?'" Abbagli culturali e altre sciocchezze', *Il Mulino*, 69.6 (2020), pp. 1110-16, doi:10.1402/99441.

<sup>9</sup> Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese. Letteratura disegnata*, ed. by Vincenzo Mollica and Patrizia Zanotti (Lizard, 2006), p. 43. For a problematisation of this incorporation of comics into the literary domain, see Giorgio Busi, Rizzi and Chiara Simone, 'Le parole e le immagini. I comics studies, la transmedialità e la paraletteratura', *Narrativa*, 46 (forthcoming 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See Paolo Interdonato's *Linus. Storia di una rivoluzione nata per gioco* (Rizzoli Lizard, 2015).

generations of readers, who grew up with comics and were aware of their artistic potential, contributed to a re-evaluation of the medium. Comics were increasingly appreciated by a broader audience — mostly young adults — who recognised their ability to tackle complex themes and offer unique narrative experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Benefitting from this favourable environment, ‘drawn literature’ began to spread, thanks to seminal works such as Guido Buzzelli’s *La rivolta dei racchi* and Hugo Pratt’s *La* [in later reprints, “Una”] *ballata del mare salato*.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, Dino Buzzati, a key author in twentieth-century Italian literature, published the proto-graphic novel *Poema a fumetti*.<sup>13</sup> These works allowed comics to break into the realm of high culture; they had a novelistic approach, but still often intersected with and drew on the logic of seriality and genre literature.<sup>14</sup> In fact, although an authorial stance of comic artists began to be foregrounded, we were still far from the contemporary figure of the graphic novel author.

## 2. From underground comics to graphic novels: Andrea Pazienza and Gipi

The contribution of *Linus* and the *auteur* magazines that followed in its footsteps (*Frigidaire*, *Orient Express*, and so on) was crucial to the emergence of young artists capable of redefining their authorial function and their relationship with their audience.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the creativity of underground comics magazines profoundly altered the Italian

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<sup>11</sup> See Lorenzo Di Paola, *L’inafferrabile medium. Una cartografia delle teorie del fumetto dagli Anni Venti a oggi* (Polidoro, 2019), pp. 67-70; Giorgio Busi Rizzi and Lorenzo Di Paola, “‘Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge?’ Comics as a nexus to Italian youth media cultures and generational imaginaries”, *Elephant & Castle*, 30 (2023), pp. 148-60 <<https://elephantandcastle.unibg.it/index.php/eac/article/view/456/390>> [accessed 11 September 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Guido Buzzelli, *La rivolta dei racchi* (Almanacco del Salone dei Comics di Lucca, 1967). Hugo Pratt’s work was originally published in *Sgt. Kirk* between July 1967 and February 1969, and later in book format as *La Ballata del mare salato* (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> [Dino Buzzati](#), *Poema a fumetti* (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> For a problematisation of this idea of ‘novelistic’, see Antonio Mirizzi, *La scimmia, il topo e il supereroe* (Nicola Pesce Editore, 2023), pp. 169-95.

<sup>15</sup> Gino Frezza, *La scrittura malinconica. Sceneggiatura e serialità nel fumetto italiano* (La Nuova Italia, 1987), p. 64.

comics landscape in the 1970s and 1980s. This is particularly true when considering the comics scene in Bologna — notably, the magazine *Cannibale* (1977-79) and its continuation *Frigidaire* (1980-2008).<sup>16</sup> It is even more so in the case of Paziienza, who impressed an indelible mark on entire generations of comics artists. As Vacchelli comments,

[a]lla morte [di Paziienza] nel 1986 [sic] è seguita una vera e propria mitizzazione, ed è possibile individuare, nel fumetto Italiano degli ultimi vent'anni, l'agire di una costante che, con un prestito dalla nota teoria sulla 'funzione-autore' di Michel Foucault, si potrebbe definire 'funzione-Paziienza'.<sup>17</sup>

Paziienza made his debut on the pages of *Alter Alter* (a supplement of *Linus*) in 1977, thanks to the serialisation of the apparently loose episodes which would eventually be collected as a unified narrative in *Le straordinarie avventure di Pentothal*.<sup>18</sup> It was a dreamlike diary of the tumultuous events of the 1977 political movement in Bologna, seen through the eyes of Paziienza's first alter ego, Pentothal. Even in this debut story, one can already find the cynicism, irony, introspection, and experimental anarchy that characterised Paziienza's whole career. Moreover, one can glimpse the authorial position and the relationship to autobiography that would characterise a significant portion of the Italian graphic novels that followed. With *Pentothal*, the world of Italian comics began to encounter an artist who presented himself as a true rock star, capable of shifting the readers' focus from characters and plots to the figure of the author himself. Paziienza's immense talent, histrionic attitude, relationship with drugs and women, and capacity to

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<sup>16</sup> See Simone Castaldi, *Drawn and Dangerous: Italian Comics of the 1970s and 1980s* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Carlotta Vacchelli, 'Le beffe di Zanardi: Andrea Paziienza, il "trickster" e la satira dello studente', *Studi Italiani*, 31.2 (2019), pp. 185-98 (p. 186) <<http://digital.casalini.it/10.1400/274113>> [accessed 11 September 2024].

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Paziienza, *Le straordinarie avventure di Pentothal* (Milano Libri Edizioni, 1982).

move across different media (television appearances, film posters, album covers, etc.), quickly made him a celebrity.

Arguably, though, it was *Pompeo* — his final work — that left an indelible mark on the Italian comics landscape. The first four episodes of the story were originally published in *Alter Alter* in 1985; however, due to dissent towards the themes addressed (notably, that of drug addiction), *Pompeo*'s publication was rapidly discontinued, until the work eventually appeared in its entirety two years later, as a book.<sup>19</sup> This gave a very peculiar spin to *Pompeo*'s materiality and storytelling: while it started as a serialised comic (albeit an *auteur* one), '[m]aneggiando il volume degli Editori del Grifo del 1987 si ha in mano un *graphic novel* [...], e ad esso si adatta anche la definizione di "letteratura disegnata" cara a Hugo Pratt'.<sup>20</sup> Yet, its uneven pace and scattered plot structure owe much to the logic of seriality:

all'epoca di *Pompeo* (seconda metà anni '80) le riviste di fumetti erano in crisi. Cercavano di opporsi al declino pubblicando storie originali d'autore suddivise in episodi, in genere con cadenza mensile. La mente di ogni disegnatore professionista era organizzata secondo una logica seriale. *Pompeo* nacque dunque a puntate, e ciò ne spiega almeno in parte la difficile accoglienza presso il pubblico di 'Alter': mentre nella sua interezza l'opera assume un ritmo che può essere facilmente amministrato dal lettore, nelle singole puntate il linguaggio ricercato e particolare di Paziienza e le illustrazioni implacabilmente penetranti e persino feroci operano in un regime a tratti discontinuo, dovuto anche alle pause irregolari tra un episodio e l'altro. La programmazione seriale di artisti come Paziienza non è assimilabile alla pratica organizzativa comune nel fumetto popolare di massa, e la lavorazione ne risente, nel bene (polifonia narrativa e totale libertà espressiva) e nel male (scarti narrativi talvolta repentini).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stefano Cristante, *Andrea Paziienza e l'arte del fuggiasco: La sovversione della letteratura grafica di un genio del Novecento* (Mimesis, 2017), p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The story of *Pompeo* begins with the eponymous protagonist — a comics artist, comics teacher, and drug addict — intent on reading a book. He is waiting for a delivery of heroin, planning to inject himself with a lethal dose. He has tried to overcome his addiction several times in the past, but never succeeded.<sup>22</sup> This premise gives way to a very long flashback, going back to twenty-seven hours earlier: we see Pompeo looking for and buying drugs several times, wandering around Bologna, talking to other heroin addicts and drug dealers, reflecting and monologuing while at home alone, giving his comics class, being stopped and then let go by the police, and eventually injecting himself with the lethal heroin dose.<sup>23</sup> Pompeo's suicide attempt is, however, discovered, and he is saved by his cleaning lady; he leaves the hospital, receives a phone call from his mother, tells her that everything is fine, then eventually goes to the family's country house and hangs himself.

The structure of the work mimics a diary, breaking the flow of the narrative into six partially self-contained episodes, leveraging the monthly cadence of the original publication. The story is entirely centred on Pompeo, his heroin addiction, and his desire to take his own life: everything else (characters, events, settings) is secondary, and only a few recurring motifs (the ringing telephone, small talks with other addicts and drug dealers, literary references) relate Pompeo to the collective. Yet the comic is an exceptional chronicle of an entire generation and its relationship with heroin.<sup>24</sup> It conveys the disillusionment and emptying of desire to which heroin use is a response but which, in turn, it causes. This is apparent in the following passage, which is reminiscent of a similar monologue from the later, but no less generational, *Trainspotting*:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Paziienza, *Pompeo*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Cristante, *Andrea Paziienza*, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Both in the book — Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (Minerva, 1996), p. 187 — and in the film — *Trainspotting*, dir. by Danny Boyle (UK, 1996).

Vivo sulla lama, mi com/muovo nei bassifondi, parlo coi ricercati dello stato, brigo, mi procuro e dilapido milioni, poi, rischio, mi struggo, mi umilio, mi arrendo, poi mi faccio, e tutto torna bello, più splendente di prima!!

L'alternativa è la birreria, il lavoro, il risparmio, il normale sfaldarsi del corpo, lo studio, l'amore, la ricerca, lo scemo naturale, il simpatico, l'antipatica, due + due fa quattro, sveglia alle otto, viaggi, incidenti in pullman, Milano, cene d'affari, e non valgono quei personaggi più di quell'altri [sic], mutuati della felicità! Palle anche lì, palle peggio di qua. Vuoi mettere risorgere, risorgere, risorgere, risorgere...<sup>26</sup>

Although as Cristante suggests, it is probably true that Pompeo's death is a way for his author to 'estrofletterne le pulsioni di morte', and although the book closes with two pages in which Pazienza-the-author takes the floor to distance himself from his protagonist, Pazienza himself would die shortly afterward (in 1988) in circumstances that have never been fully clarified.<sup>27</sup> While the family suggested it was an unexpected overdose, it is inevitable to consider the symbolic, emotional, and fate commonality between Pazienza and his last alter ego.

Pazienza's death roughly coincides with the end of the great era of *auteur* magazines and newsstand comics. The strong experimental drive his generation proposed translated into a continuous process of discovery, capable of involving all languages and media. Eventually, it gave way to the pressure of a renewed media system, governed by the impact of television, the increasing influence of the digital, and the emergence of new generations growing up in their shadow. This led to a crisis and a redefinition of the industry. Within a few years, it would stabilise around different formats and a more targeted relationship with readers, ultimately culminating in the success of the graphic novel format.

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<sup>26</sup> Pazienza, *Pompeo*, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Cristante, *Andrea Pazienza*, p. 99.

In this process, Paziienza proved to be a model, leaving an indelible mark on the storytelling of comics artists to come.<sup>28</sup> Paziienza's anarchic approach and engagement with social and political issues established a model whose influence and effect can still be distinctly seen (amongst others) in the work of Gipi, one of the leading figures in contemporary Italian comics. The latter has made no secret of considering Paziienza an essential reference point. Gipi has spoken about Paziienza's legacy in his work on several occasions:

Quando disegnavo, in quegli anni, disegnavo come lui, ma male. E quando provavo a scrivere, scrivevo come lui, ma malissimo. [...] Le cose che Paziienza diceva le mettevo nella memoria e le ripetevo dentro di me, per non dimenticarle. [...] Il suo modo di scrivere e di disegnare fu una maledizione per me, per tanti anni. Non riuscivo a staccarmi. Poi successe. [...] La voglia di disegnare e raccontare deve avere avuto il sopravvento sui pensieri e sui desideri. Credo che sia andata così.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly to Paziienza, Gipi acquired lasting critical appreciation, winning the award for best album at Angoulême in 2006 with his first graphic novel, *Appunti per una storia di guerra* (2004). Yet, and while it marks the debut of Gipi's career as we know it, at that point his work had already spanned various phases of the comics publishing history. Indeed, Gipi debuted in the 1990s, during a period of crisis for *auteur* magazines, in the satirical magazine *Cuore*. His visibility grew thanks to the works he published in *Blue*, an anthology magazine of (primarily erotic) comics that featured renowned authors such as Manara, Moebius, and Scozzari. Yet his rise to fame only happened once he transitioned to graphic novels, immediately authoring milestones in the artistic journey

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<sup>28</sup> See Vacchelli, La funzione-Paziienza.

<sup>29</sup> Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti), 'Gipi ricorda Paziienza', *Fumettologica*, 16 May 2016 <<https://fumettologica.it/2016/05/gipi-paziienza/>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

of Italian comics: *Esterno notte*, *Appunti per una storia di Guerra*, *Gli innocenti*, *Questa è la stanza*, *S.*, and *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male*.<sup>30</sup>

Gipi rapidly acquired a strong authorial identity within the media system, albeit through different channels from the 1970s and 1980s: the graphic novel label had changed the popular perception of comics into a mature product worthy of intellectual attention, and opened its market segment to the literary sphere. Consequently, in 2014, Gipi's *unastoria* was nominated for the prestigious Strega literary award.<sup>31</sup> He was nominated again in 2020 for the last episode of his autobiographic trilogy, *Momenti straordinari con applausi finti* (the other two chapters are *S.* and indeed *LMVDM*).<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Gipi's persona acquired popularity on the Internet and in TV programs, where he commented on the news with an ironic, controversial stance. Paradoxically, Gipi's ability to efficiently navigate the mediascape of the 2000s and 2010s would be what would fail him in the following decade, following another radical shift in the technological and social premises of the mediascape, giving rise to controversies that would be reflected in his works.<sup>33</sup>

*LMVDM* is Gipi's fifth graphic novel and his second autobiographical one. It is arguably the turning point in Gipi's trajectory — the work that made him a best-selling author after already being a favourite amongst the critics. The story begins with the protagonist — an alter ego of the author — talking to a doctor about his impotence, due to an unspecified sexual illness. This gives rise to a structure punctuated by several appointments with different doctors (all in some way surrogates of a psychologist figure),

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<sup>30</sup> Gipi, *Esterno notte* (Coconino Press, 2003); Gipi, *Appunti per una storia di Guerra* (Coconino Press, 2004); Gipi, *Gli innocenti* (Coconino Press, 2005); Gipi, *Questa è la stanza* (Coconino Press, 2005); Gipi, *S.* (Coconino Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Gipi, *unastoria* (Coconino Press/Fandango, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Gipi, *Momenti straordinari con applausi finti* (Coconino Press, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> See Giorgio Busi Rizzi and Lorenzo Di Paola, 'Post-Apocalyptic and Integrated? A Mediological Analysis of Gipi's *La terra dei figli* (2016)', in *Futuri. Rivista italiana di futures studies*, 21 (forthcoming 2024),.

which set off a series of concatenated, non-linear flashbacks. This use of iterative, shuffled temporalities is a constant in Gipi's production, and somewhat reinstates a serial pace inside the bookish dimension of his stories. The flashbacks recount the protagonist's youth and his experimentations with drugs, intercut with the main storyline and a pirate tale, which is drawn in watercolours. The rhythm of the flashbacks, however, is not symmetrical, and one realises after a while that the doctors' appointments and the digressions are only acting as a deferral, through

continue interruzioni, andirivieni temporali destabilizzanti, ma anche un sistematico gioco di slittamenti fra registri tonali e piani di realtà, per cui i rapporti tra affondi memoriali, inserti finzionali, deformazioni surreali o grottesche di ricordi o stati mentali, si fanno via via più sfuggenti e complessi.<sup>34</sup>

It becomes progressively clear that neither the question of the protagonist's impotence with which the story begins, nor the various flashbacks or the colourful pages telling the romance episode embedded into a pirate tale, are central to the story. The many deflections that Gipi enacts constitute, instead, a series of displacements towards the childhood trauma that haunts the story, the moment when his sister was subjected to an attempted rape in the same room in which Gipi, then a child, was sleeping, unable to react to the event. Here, as in *Pompeo*, the protagonist attempts suicide twice — as a young man, by cutting his wrist, and later in life by dodging an oncoming train at the last moment — and here, too, there is a symbolic death, albeit of a different nature. 'Io sono morto qui. Credo', the narrator states, the first time he introduces the arc related to the rape of his sister.<sup>35</sup> Accepting guilt, embracing love, and facing life, are the macro-themes of the

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<sup>34</sup> Simona Spoti, 'Stavo solo raccontando delle cose vere... quasi vere' — *Analisi di La mia vita disegnata male di Gipi* (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Università degli studi di Milano, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Gipi, *LMVDM*, p. 36. Tellingly, it does so without allowing the reader to properly understand what is happening for long, deferring any overt reference to it until very late in the book, when the reader is finally confronted with the traumatic event: Gipi, *LMVDM*, pp. 116-21.

story: a story of redemption, which symbolically ends with a female figure encouraging him (similarly, *Pompeo* closed with a portrait of Paziienza's new wife, Marina Comandini).

The similarities between the two texts do not simply regard thematic aspects, but instead involve stylistic and structural features. Both authors display their technical skills on several occasions — especially in the hatching, mostly used to convey emotional tension; and both works alternate their 'ugly line' (an issue I will discuss shortly) with extremely complex passages. In Paziienza's case, one can mention the cover depicting one of the countless permutations of *Pompeo*, in the form of a Byzantine icon; in Gipi's, this stands out in the pirate story intercut with the main one, realised in watercolours on cotton paper. Moreover, both stories are told by heterodiegetic narrators (using the third person in *Pompeo*, oscillating between first and third person in *LMVDM*) accessing and aligning to the protagonists' perception. Accordingly, both visual narrators embrace and represent the distortions that result from the altered perceptions of their respective protagonists, mostly due to drug use, but not infrequently meant to visually incorporate emotional states. Both stories stay so close to the protagonists that the physical settings of the events become indefinite backgrounds. Indeed, while they are quite explicitly mentioned (Bologna and the Tuscan countryside for Paziienza; Tirrenia and, we may infer, the province of Pisa — the Tuscan countryside again — for Gipi), their representation is reduced to a bare minimum, with a significant use of negative spaces. Secondary characters are mostly props for the evolution of the two protagonists: Gipi's punk friends, like the drug addicts and pushers in *Pompeo*, are mere background figures as they process their trauma; and both the doctors in *LMVDM* and *Pompeo*'s relatives are little more than distant listeners. This contributes to making the devastatingly moving phone call with

Pompeo's mother, and the unveiling of the attempted rape of Gipi's sister, the climaxes of the reader's emotional experiences of both books.<sup>36</sup>

More importantly, these texts point to differences between the diverse medial networks in which the two texts are grafted. Before delving into their analysis, it is thus necessary to outline their different relations with autobiography and the comics format.

### **3. Local, global, glocal: The double genealogy of Italian autobiographical comics**

Although it is an age-old literary genre, the use of autobiography in comics is a rather recent phenomenon, and one that most significantly impacted the consolidation of the graphic novel and the shift — in terms of format, storytelling, market, and reading habitus — that raised the perception of comics from 'minor' to more culturally legitimised objects.<sup>37</sup> While 'it suffices to start looking for autobiographical comics to find avatars of the genre in the pre-graphic novel era', autobiography is indeed what 'helped develop and institutionalise the graphic novel itself, which is nowadays largely devoted to the field of self-narrative (often seen through the filter of personal trauma)'.<sup>38</sup>

In literary history, the rise of autobiography was inextricably linked with the rise of the early eighteenth-century novel, that is, a form expressing

una cultura basata sull'individualismo, su una visione empirica del mondo tipica della borghesia, in cui il singolo prende coscienza della propria capacità di agire

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<sup>36</sup> Paziienza, *Pompeo*, pp. 109-13; Gipi, *LMVDM*, pp. 36-41; 117-21.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Baetens, 'From Justin Green and Art Spiegelman to Alison Bechdel. Writing the Self in the Graphic Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the American Graphic Novel*, ed. by Jan Baetens, Hugo Frey, and Fabrice Leroy (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 57-71 (pp. 57, 63). See also Elisabeth El Refaïe, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 14; Bart Beaty, 'Autobiography as Authenticity', in *A Comic Studies Reader*, ed. by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (University Press of Mississippi, 2009), pp. 226-35.

<sup>38</sup> Baetens, 'Writing the Self', p. 58.

come eroe quotidiano, ma anche delle difficoltà di plasmarsi in una realtà precaria e in continua trasformazione.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, autobiography met the legitimisation needs of the comics medium at a moment where, on the one hand, truth claims were problematised, and on the other, self-narratives related to new themes were on the rise.<sup>40</sup> These themes, that countercultures wanted to bring to the forefront of public discourse, included private, ephemeral stories, often concerning trauma, addiction, or socio-political (notably, feminist) issues.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, this does not imply that autobiography has been the only genre leading to the consolidation of the graphic novel, and that graphic novels are polar opposites of comics. Instead, in the search for cultural legitimisation, comics found a strategy in adopting the book form, which allowed for longer, unitary narratives that could potentially count on the undivided, continuous attention of their readers. They also privileged more prestigious themes and genres, prototypically based in realism and particularly in self-narratives — whose slower pace and need for narrative extension in turn worked better outside of the fragmentation entailed by publishing on comics magazines. Moreover, this allowed creators ‘a way of asserting their own identities as auteurs’, since ‘autobiography is auratic, performing the autobiographer’s narcissism and commanding the reader’s attention’.<sup>42</sup>

For brevity, and in the absence, to the best of my knowledge, of a proper transnational history of autobiography in comics, I will only survey a few key passages in the historical unfolding of the genre, following consensus in situating its origins and

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<sup>39</sup> Nicola Andreani, *Graphic novel. Il fumetto spiegato a mio padre* (Nicola Pesce Editore, 2014), pp. 35-36.

<sup>40</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, pp. 15, 135-43.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (University Press of Mississippi, 2009), pp. 111-14; Baetens, ‘Writing the Self’.

<sup>42</sup> See El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 45, and Jared Gardner, ‘Autography’s Biography, 1972-2007’, *Biography*, 31.1 (2008), pp. 1-26 (p. 22) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540919>> [accessed 11 September 2024].

key development in the US underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>43</sup> In 1972, two foundational works appeared: Robert Crumb's 'The Confessions of R. Crumb' in *The People's Comics*, and Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, a forty-four-page self-published volume telling the story of his alter ego's issues with OCD. However, many other authors were experimenting with autobiography around the same period (Spain Rodriguez, Kim Deitch, and so on). The genre's suitability to talk about personal issues aligned perfectly with the confessional mode of the do-it-yourself movement, and would be adopted shortly by a multitude of women authors — Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky, and all the artists around the *Wimmen's Comix* anthology — who were reclaiming space for their private, outrageous, and engaged stories.<sup>44</sup> A parallel change in focus stemmed from the impact of the production of Harvey Pekar, who meticulously recounted his life as a grumpy proletarian anti-hero through the series *American Splendor* (1976-2008, in collaboration with various illustrators). Those stories stressed 'the abject, the seedy, the anti-heroic, and the just plain nasty', mixing a documentary tension with the narrative modes of 'tragedy, farce, and picaresque'.<sup>45</sup> Trauma would shortly become another preferential topic, with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (serialised in *Raw* magazine from 1980 to 1991, then republished in two volumes and eventually collected in a single book).<sup>46</sup>

While the authors mentioned in this genealogy have been influential worldwide, Gardner aptly warns that in 'turning to American comics in 1972 as a scene of primal

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<sup>43</sup> This absence is noted in all genealogies of autobiographical comics: see Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, pp. 108-27, ix; Gardner; 'Autobiography's Biography'; El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics* pp. 11-48, 37; Andrew Kunka, *Autobiographical Comics* (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 21-52; Mihaela Precup, *The American Graphic Memoir: An Introduction* (Editura Universității din București, 2013), pp. 55-108.

<sup>44</sup> It would be inaccurate to consider women authors (even those hosted by *Wimmen's Comix*) as a homogeneous group. For an overview, see Trina Robbins, *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2010* (Fantagraphics Books, 2013), esp. pp. 123-38.

<sup>45</sup> Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>46</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History* (Pantheon Books, 1986); Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (Pantheon Books, 1991).

origins for the rise of graphic autobiography’ one ignores ‘the graphic memoirs that preceded it’ and does not address ‘the global reach of the comics form or the seminal works of autobiography developing at this time in France and Japan’ — a topic, as said, that is still understudied.<sup>47</sup>

Nonetheless, long-form autobiographical comics were virtually non-existent in Italy until the 2000s. This was considerably due to the monopoly of the serial publication in comics magazines, usually limiting each story to ten to fifteen pages per issue, thus hindering longer, less suspenseful narratives from unfolding. A key element is thus the limited success, in Italy, of the intermediate format of the medium-length album, which elsewhere hosted the first (serialised) publication of several US graphic novels, such as the aforementioned *Maus*, or French ones, such as the most recent *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (originally published in four issues from 2000 to 2003, then collected as a single volume in French in 2007).<sup>48</sup> The album format crucially allowed these stories to unfold across the middle distance and their authors to anticipate critical and commercial responses, keeping a tension toward a unitary narrative that would eventually be fulfilled by the single book.

Consequently, Italian nonfiction comics of the 2000s and 2010s are shaped by a double genealogy: they are linked to key, isolated precedents in the national history of the genre (in this case, *Pompeo*; in graphic journalism, Mannelli’s *Nicaragua 1984*;<sup>49</sup> and so on). However, they do not proceed from these works in a continuous evolution, but recover and rediscover them only after the genre has established itself globally, through a genealogical path that, as we have seen, is totally unrelated. Comics autobiography

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<sup>47</sup> Gardner, ‘Autobiography’s Biography,’ p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis, tome 1* (L’Association, 2000); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis, tome 2* (L’Association, 2001); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis, tome 3* (L’Association, 2002); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis, tome 4* (L’Association, 2003); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (L’Association, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Riccardo Mannelli, *Nicaragua 1984* (Art Core Edizioni, 1984).

arrived in Italy bound to the graphic novel format, which endowed these stories with a new cultural legitimacy and, above all (from the point of view of the publishers), had proven successful in the comics market. Indeed, the translation into Italian of key graphic novels from the late 1990s to the 2000s opened hitherto unexplored artistic and commercial spaces to local artists and publishers, alleviating the crisis of newsstands and the end of most national experiences of *auteur* magazines.<sup>50</sup> This allowed artists new spaces of expressive freedom, in which international narrative models and themes merged with forms and imaginaries stemming from cult Italian authors from previous generations.<sup>51</sup>

#### **4. Autobiography's typology: Comics, truth, and the autobiographical tale**

The fact that self-narratives '(across comics and other media) ha[ve] multiple histories with some distinctly notable parallels' also affects terminology, with a fluctuation in the critical vocabulary.<sup>52</sup> Although many scholars adopt the term 'autobiography' some prefer 'graphic memoir' (Versaci uses 'comic [book] memoir') and some favour 'autographics', usually to stress the metafictional component.<sup>53</sup> Notoriously, Lynda Barry

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<sup>50</sup> As a reference, *Maus*' two volumes were translated in 1994, and the first collected edition in Italian (with a more prestigious publisher) dates to 2000: Art Spiegelman, *MAUS Racconto di un sopravvissuto I, Mio padre sanguina storia*, trans. by Ranieri Carano (Milano Libri, 1994); Art Spiegelman, *MAUS Racconto di un sopravvissuto II, E qui cominciarono i miei guai*, trans. by Ranieri Carano (Milano Libri, 1994); Art Spiegelman, *MAUS*, trans. by Cristina Previtali (Einaudi, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> See Brancato, 'Trasformazioni'.

<sup>52</sup> Michael A. Johnson, 'Autobiographical Comics', in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. by Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (Routledge, 2017), pp. 192-200 (p. 192).

<sup>53</sup> See: Kunka, *Autobiographical Comics*; Baetens, 'Writing the Self'; Nancy Pedri, 'Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact nor Fiction', in *From Comic Strips to Graphic. Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, ed. by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon (De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 127-53; Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2007). El Refaie (*Autobiographical Comics*) and Gardner ('Autobiography's Biography') often use 'autobiography' and 'graphic memoir' interchangeably. On the use of 'autographics,' see Anna Poletti and Gillian Whitlock, 'Self-regarding Art', *Biography*, 31.1 (2008), pp. v-xxiii <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540918> [accessed 11 September 2024]; Gillian Whitlock, 'Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.4 (2006), pp. 965-79, doi:10.1353/mfs.2007.0013.

defined her own book *One Hundred Demons* as ‘autobifictionalography,’ asking herself: ‘Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? // Is it fiction if parts of it are?’.<sup>54</sup>

This variation is not only due to historical heterogeneity; instead, it ties in with a major dynamic within autobiography: the inherent oscillation of the genre both towards and away from the idea of truth. Indeed, the autobiographical genre, by its very nature, has an ambivalent relationship with reality: on the one hand, it appeals to it, constituting its fidelity to events as foundational; on the other, like any other form of nonfiction, it rests on a process of remembrance, reconstruction, and narrativisation based on cognitive, emotional, and narrative mediations that hinder access to events as they were. This is well known by theorists and practitioners: as anticipated, ‘at the same time as autobiography was starting to colonise larger and larger areas of discourse, literary theorists were busy dismantling its very foundations,’ challenging the ‘concept of a single, straightforward Truth’ and advocating for a view of the self as ‘fractured, dynamic, and plural’.<sup>55</sup>

As a consequence of this twofold relationship that (auto)biography establishes with reality and truth, the genre ‘cannot exist without formal as well as pragmatic dimensions’.<sup>56</sup> David Davies calls this ‘the fidelity constraint,’ when readers ‘assume that the author has included only events she believes to have occurred, narrated as occurring in the order in which she believes them to have occurred’.<sup>57</sup> Besides pointing to the prototypical linearity of autobiography’s chronology (which foregrounds the causal nexuses that tie events to each other), this definition implies that the truth of autobiography resides ‘not in the “facts” of the story itself, but in the relational space between the story and its reader’.<sup>58</sup> This is the ‘pragmatic dimension’ mentioned by

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<sup>54</sup> Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2002), pp. 18, 21-22.

<sup>55</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 15; see also Precup, *The American Graphic Memoir*.

<sup>56</sup> Baetens, ‘Writing the Self’, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Pedri, ‘Graphic memoir’, p. 125.

<sup>58</sup> Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p. 125.

Baetens: despite the impossibility of measuring the proximity between a narrative and its referent, and the awareness of the inevitably re-creative work of the memorial act, readers must believe the autobiographical account to be authentic and truthful.<sup>59</sup> This assumption is shaped by claims made both in the text itself and, most notably, in its paratext,<sup>60</sup> concerning the ontological status of the story narrated, and meant ‘to elicit in readers a complex narrative response that secures belief in the narrative’s content.’<sup>61</sup>

This pragmatic dimension is nonetheless difficult to substantiate: if memory is ‘a continuous process of reinterpreting, or re-remembering, the events of a life,’ telling one’s story will always be a matter of selecting, altering, and forgetting some events.<sup>62</sup> One should thus conclude that ‘there is no such thing as a “uniquely” true, correct, or even faithful autobiography’, and all autobiographies are, to some extent, fictive, establishing an indissoluble tension between occurred and narrated events.<sup>63</sup> This has to do with nothing less than the basic storytelling devices of the genre: as Hatfield observes, autobiography applies narrative techniques drawing from fiction to stories certified as true, while at the same time deferring to experience situated outside the text: ‘[t]he tacit rules of the genre demand fidelity to such experience, yet storytelling demands license; narrative needs shaping. Thus, autobiography inevitably mingles the factual and the fictive’.<sup>64</sup> This tension occurs in all media, but is particularly visible in comics,<sup>65</sup> where the visual component — a semi-referential sign that ‘performs authenticity’<sup>66</sup> — multiplies the testimonial mediation.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Versaci, *Comics as Literature*, p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> Pedri, ‘Graphic memoir’, pp. 133-34.

<sup>62</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Jerome Bruner, cited in El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 137.

<sup>64</sup> Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p. 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-27.

<sup>66</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, pp. 135-77.

<sup>67</sup> Gardner, ‘Autobiography’s Biography’, p. 6.

Hence, some scholars argue that comics autobiographies ‘make it theoretically unattractive to distinguish between fact and fiction’, since the genre is based on ‘the foregrounding of the subjective viewpoints, memory filters, or emotive charges operative in the representation of self’,<sup>68</sup> featuring ‘aspects that are quite obviously and deliberately exaggerated, adapted or invented’.<sup>69</sup> Yet others maintain that (auto)biographical comics, while ‘draw[ing] attention to gaps and omissions, to doubt and invention’,<sup>70</sup> rest on an ‘emotional truth’.<sup>71</sup> As Hillary Chute felicitously put it, graphic life narratives dare to assume ‘the *risk of representation*’,<sup>72</sup> and, by foregrounding their cognitive and visual mediation, offer ‘a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation’.<sup>73</sup>

When acknowledging and trying to solve these tensions, many scholars return to Philippe Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’ as a fundamental criterion for the veridicity of autobiography. Lejeune proposes that autobiography lies on ‘an institutionalized communicative act wherein the author and the reader enter into a pact, which may be stated explicitly or left implicit’,<sup>74</sup> resting in the identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, thus distinguishing the genre from fiction.<sup>75</sup>

This offers another hint of what happens in the passage from Paziienza’s to Gipi’s work. I have anticipated that *Pompeo* is a pseudo-autobiography in the form of *roman à*

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<sup>68</sup> Pedri, ‘Graphic memoir’, p. 148.

<sup>69</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 165.

<sup>70</sup> Pedri, ‘Graphic memoir’, p. 128. In this sense, we ‘might think of the “autobiographical” in “autobiographical comics” as always having an invisible, understood prefix “(semi-)” attached to it’, Kunka, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Frederik Byrn Köhlert, ‘Working it through: Trauma and Autobiography in Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*’, *South Central Review*, 32.3 (2015), pp. 124-42 (p. 127) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44016909>> [accessed 11 September 2024].

<sup>72</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women*, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> Lejeune, cited in Johnson, ‘Autobiographical Comics’, p. 193. See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Seuil, 1975).

<sup>75</sup> El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, p. 17.

*clef*, a work that hides real life besides a façade of fiction. Indeed, the more we know about the real Andrea Pazienza, the more we can notice that, notwithstanding the different name of the protagonist, Pompeo shares several features with Pazienza: his father's name, sister's nickname, brother's physiognomy, friends, colleagues, work, habits, and addiction.<sup>76</sup> In short, '[n]el riconoscere l'identità tra i due, il lettore capisce che Pompeo è un'iperbole di Andrea; ma anche in questa letterarietà, si percepisce ugualmente l'aura autobiografica, autotestimoniale'.<sup>77</sup> Conversely — and although the protagonist of *LMVDM* is never directly addressed by his name — there is an explicit declaration of intent in Gipi's title ('my life') pointing to a character/narrator/author overlap that is confirmed by the book being marketed as autobiographical. Moreover, the two works enact different autobiographical strategies: *Pompeo* is a confession, picturing the alter ego of the author in the last moments of his life, while *LMVDM* is a Bildungsroman, allowing for the protagonist to grow out of the events that are recounted.

##### **5. *Je est un autre*: Fictional tensions in Italian comics autobiography**

These reconstructions tie in with my initial assertion that, from a textual point of view, in the transition from serial comics to graphic novels, Italian autobiography retains a pronounced vestigial presence of fictional forms and stylistic features within nonfiction to the point that *LMVDM* can be considered to border on autofiction. Retracing the main areas where these tensions resurface allows us to better understand the historical evolution of the autobiographical genre in Italy and its medium-specific features in comics. In particular, I will address four key sites of tensions concerning representation and truth in

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<sup>76</sup> Cristante, *Andrea Pazienza*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>77</sup> Daniele Barbieri, 'Lo straniamento e il DAMS, Pompeo e Andrea', *Fumettologica*, 16 May 2016 <<https://fumettologica.it/2016/05/andrea-pazienza-pompeo-dams/>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

autobiographical comics in general, and in *Pompeo* and *LMVDM* in particular: time and emplotment; narration and monstration; style and grammatextuality; and metafiction.

The first tension involves time and emplotment. As mentioned, to elicit an immediate understanding of the events, autobiographical narratives should prototypically be as linear as possible, following a chronological order, not to require their readers too many reconfigurations of the narrated events. This linearity is nonetheless challenged by the inherently fragmentary nature of the semiotic system of comics, and may be further manipulated by authors.<sup>78</sup> In his analysis of Dominique Goblet's *Portraits crachés*, Baetens enumerates three techniques:

First, several stories are told in reverse order. [...] In certain cases, the chronology is even more disrupted, for instance when the reverse order is replaced by a system of repetitions and variations that exceeds all recognizable temporality. Finally, images are frequently doubled.<sup>79</sup>

According to Baetens, these peculiarities are due to how the main influence of Francophone comics 'has not been the model of the American graphic novel but the 'local' model of autofiction [...] that purposively blurs the boundaries between the documentary and the fictional'.<sup>80</sup> Since Francophone and Italian comics are quite close, continuously exchanging forms and imaginaries,<sup>81</sup> and given the success of autofiction in

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<sup>78</sup> See Matteo Stefanelli, 'Autocartografie: elementi di teoria del fumetto auto(bio)grafico', *Comunicazioni sociali*, 3 (2012), pp. 490-95 (p. 491), doi:10.1400/209476; Adrielle Anna Mitchell, 'Distributed Identity: Networking Image Fragments in Graphic Memoirs', *Studies in Comics*, 1.2 (2010), pp. 257-79, doi:[10.1386/stic.1.2.257\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/stic.1.2.257_1); El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, pp. 125-30.

<sup>79</sup> Jan Baetens, 'Dominique Goblet: The Meaning of Form', in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. by Michael A. Chaney (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), pp. 76-92 (p. 87).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 76. *Autofiction* is 'una narrazione in cui, come in un'autobiografia, autore, narratore e protagonista coincidono; ma in cui, come in un romanzo, il protagonista compie atti che l'autore non ha mai compiuto, e ai fatti riconosciuti come empiricamente accaduti si mescolano eventi riconoscibili come non accaduti', Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Il Mulino, 2014), p. 130.

<sup>81</sup> See Castaldi, *Drawn and Dangerous*, pp. 32-37; Claudio Gallo, 'Sul fumetto francese e su quello italiano: differenze, influenze, affinità', *Publifarum*, 14 (2011), <<https://riviste.unige.it/index.php/publifarum/article/view/1512/1622>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

contemporary Italian prose,<sup>82</sup> one should expect to see similar processes at work in Italian comics. Indeed, in both *Pompeo* and *LMVDM*, the chronological succession is disrupted: in the former case, through a long flashback, in turn punctuated with slowdowns in rhythm and distorted perceptions; in the latter, through a recursive opening of flashbacks and a side narrative that repeatedly defer the key event in the story. In both cases, this translates into a series of repetitions and scenes that are difficult to place in time and space. Most of these transitions are signalled by changes in the layout: by default, *Pompeo* is made up of single panels that occupy the entire page, or a minimal layout of two or three rows of irregular size, usually featuring one panel per row, extending horizontally; *LMVDM* prototypically features borderless panels, but establishes horizontal partitions of the page that phantasmatically impress three or four rows to the layout. When chronology is disrupted, these layouts are altered: *Pompeo* switches twice to successions of squared, rough sheets, accompanied by a multiplication of the panels per page which accelerates the narrative rhythm;<sup>83</sup> *LMVDM*'s long pirate tale interspersing with the main storyline is fully drawn in watercolours, with bordered panels following a regular three-row layout.<sup>84</sup>

The second tension concerns the use of narration and monstration — the latter being a synonym for ‘graphic enunciation,’ visually expressing the narrator’s subjectivity.<sup>85</sup> This is often a battlefield in the relation between autobiographical comics and the (transcendent, abstract) notion of truth, since, as anticipated, ‘comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction’:<sup>86</sup> first, because the tension between verbal and visual codes allows for

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<sup>82</sup> See Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*.

<sup>83</sup> Paziienza, *Pompeo*, pp. 50-68, 113-26.

<sup>84</sup> In addition, just before the conclusion, *LMVDM* presents eight pages showing the protagonist swimming amid completely white pages, seen from a bird's-eye perspective, moving from the bottom of the page until he disappears at the top, in a triumph of negative spaces that slow down the very dense rhythm that preceded.

<sup>85</sup> Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (Routledge, 2017), p. 82.

<sup>86</sup> Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p. 112.

‘complex, multivalent meanings, irreducible to a single message’.<sup>87</sup> Second, because we can only access ‘the subjective interpretation of the facts [...] what some call the ‘cartooning as interpretation’ effect’.<sup>88</sup> Third, because autobiographical comics, per their definition, feature the continuous representation of a protagonist that is always similar, but *never identical* to themselves (nor to their real-life referent). Hence, the very ‘syntax of comics — specifically, its reliance on visual substitution to suggest continuity — puts the lie to the notion of an unchanging, undivided self’, confronting us, instead, with *multiple selves* over a span of time.’<sup>89</sup>

This is perhaps most evident in Paziienza and Gipi’s conspicuous use of estranged perceptions. Estrangement occurs at the verbal level, alternating erudite quotations and poetic language with slang, juvenile expressions, and neologisms, and in the friction between verbal and visual codes.<sup>90</sup> Paziienza more noticeably leverages language by constantly presenting the reader with *non-sequiturs*; Gipi relies on continuous verbo-visual metalepses that transfer utterances from the narrator’s perspective to the characters and vice versa.

The third tension concerns style, both in itself and at the intersection with grammatextuality — that is, the way textual signs are rendered graphically.<sup>91</sup> The first and most evident operation at the level of style — besides those that I have already

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>88</sup> Douglas Wolk, cited in Pedri, ‘Graphic memoir’, p. 145. See also Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p. 116.

<sup>89</sup> On the unchanging self, see Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, p.126. On multiple selves, see El Refaie, who calls this process ‘pictorial embodiment’ and discusses it at length: El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, pp. 49-92.

<sup>90</sup> See Mirko Tavosanis, ‘Andrea Paziienza: un italiano vero (o verosimile)’, *Lingua italiana. Treccani on line*, 1 March 2012, <[https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua\\_italiana/speciali/fumetti/Tavosanis.html](https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/fumetti/Tavosanis.html)> [accessed 14 October 2023]; Alberto Sebastiani, ‘Viaggi nella polifonia: la scrittura di Gipi’, *Lingua italiana. Treccani on line*, 17 June 2021, <[https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua\\_italiana/articoli/percorsi/percorsi\\_323.html](https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/percorsi/percorsi_323.html)> [accessed 14 October 2023].

<sup>91</sup> See Jan Baetens, ‘Visual-Verbal Materiality’, *Comparative Literature*, 70.3 (2018), pp. 357-68, doi:[10.1215/00104124-6991755](https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-6991755).

discussed — concerns the hasty passages, made on low-quality paper (a squared notepad for Paziienza, photocopy paper for Gipi), that frequently appear in both books.<sup>92</sup> Quite evidently, both Gipi and Paziienza are virtuoso drawers, yet both frequently incorporate the expressionist approach that characterised comics avant-gardes from the 1970s onward.<sup>93</sup> In this respect, Vacchelli's analysis of Paziienza's trait and its legacy for Gipi identifies 'un lascito preciso: un certo senso di malinconia, un brutto, per così dire, intenzionale, artistico, atto a esprimere un cosmo bloccato, un universo ripiegato su sé stesso'.<sup>94</sup>

This is both an aesthetic and a semantic strategy, tying in with the abovementioned estranging effect. Indeed, we could extend to both works Nigro's irreverent hypothesis that an 'ugly line' (a concept modelled by analogy and contrast to that of the French 'clear line') has consolidated over time, representing

una ricerca della semplificazione e dell'esaltazione del potere simbolico del fumetto. Il segno che si fa brutto, naive, essenziale, traballante perde l'aderenza con il reale, con il paesaggistico, con il fotografico, per rifugiarsi nel mondo delle icone. Dal punto di vista psicologico, il risultato è immediato: perdita dei riferimenti che più si conoscono, perdita di una presunta neutralità visiva, per dare spazio al mondo letteralmente visto e re-interpretato dagli occhi e dall'esperienza umana dell'autore.<sup>95</sup>

This expressionist aesthetics extends to the visual representation of the textual elements: in both works, 'words are always strongly visualized. Their visual aspects are foregrounded and their spatial dimension is heavily marked',<sup>96</sup> resulting in a 'blurring of

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<sup>92</sup> Cristante, *Andrea Paziienza*, p. 91; Gipi, cited in Alberto Casiraghi, *Gipi. Lo straordinario e il quotidiano di un narratore per immagini* (Comicout, 2013), p. 53.

<sup>93</sup> See Chute, *Graphic Women*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>94</sup> Carlotta Vacchelli, 'Le beffe di Zanardi', p. 171.

<sup>95</sup> Guglielmo Nigro, 'La Mia Vita Disegnata Male (LMVDM)', *Lo spazio bianco*, 14 January 2009, rev. 22 September 2017 <<https://www.lospaziobianco.it/vita-disegnata-lmvdn/>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

<sup>96</sup> Baetens, 'Dominique Goblet', p. 82.

the spheres of the text and the image, which are no longer neatly separated'.<sup>97</sup> Baetens here is discussing Goblet's *Portraits crachés*, but this ideally suits the two texts under analysis, where textual signs continuously overflow and slow down the reading pace. In *Pompeo*, pictorialised words overlap and invade the images, revealing themselves as graphisms rather than transparent vectors of meaning (as they appear in prose). While *LMVDM*'s lettering does not have a markedly pictorial function, it nonetheless has an expressive one, recreating a rushed handwriting, uncertain and difficult to read.<sup>98</sup> This conveys the effect of an improvised, spontaneous narrative, whose sincerity derives precisely from its inaccuracies; moreover, it foregrounds 'the subjective positionality of the author.'<sup>99</sup>

To consider the fourth and final tension, one must keep in mind that some metafictional techniques are mostly used in autobiographies as authentication strategies.<sup>100</sup> Narrators may mention their inexact memory of an event, or having altered certain details for specific reasons. This device is systematically applied in graphic journalism as a means of protection, to avoid revealing sensible information.<sup>101</sup> While *Pompeo* and *LMVDM* feature similar kinds of metafictional comments, they seem to use them mostly for antirealist purposes: in an inherently postmodern fashion, their narrators break the fourth walls to reflect on narration itself. In doing so, they perform a function both phatic and illocutionary, connecting with the reader and directing their interpretation of — and progression through — the narrated events: 'La storia riprende dalla 4<sup>a</sup> tavola della prima

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>98</sup> As in *S.*, we can observe some erasures in the caption text.

<sup>99</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>100</sup> Pedri, 'Graphic memoir', p. 133.

<sup>101</sup> See Zerocalcare, *Kobane calling* (Bao, 2016), pp. 24-25.

puntata’;<sup>102</sup> ‘Ho scritto “primo dottore,” “secondo dottore,” ma ho mentito. L’ho fatto a scopi letterari. I dottori, in realtà, sono molti di più’.<sup>103</sup>

Local, high-intensity metafictional techniques are accompanied by more diffuse, low-intensity ones. I said that *Pompeo* is not a proper autobiography, but rather a *roman à clef*. Coherently with its disguised nature, the book signifies through a series of ‘metaliterary and cross-medial’ allusions:<sup>104</sup> the narrator quotes passages by Du Maurier, Yesenin, Pasternak (one wrongly attributed to Mayakovski), and Bryon; Pompeo is shown reading Yourcenar, Hemingway, and Dumas; and occasionally, some (distorted) Disney characters appear. In fact, *Pompeo*’s intertextual references begin with the very title, which mimics that of Bulwer-Lytton’s historical novel (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1834), and the opening page, where the protagonist is shown reading a long passage, allegedly from Alessandro Serpieri’s introduction to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, sealing and directing the interpretation of the events we are about to witness. Interestingly, the passage does not come from that introduction, but from another book by Serpieri, titled *T.S. Eliot: le strutture profonde*.<sup>105</sup> Hence, just as the story that we are about to read is not Paziienza’s (but it is), the opening quote is not Serpieri’s (but it is). Appropriately, the book ends with an afterword, in which an extradiegetic narrator (literally, the author’s voice) offers a conclusive comment on the events narrated, simultaneously confirming his symbiosis with the protagonist and symbolically distancing from him.

In Gipi’s case, the most apparent metafictional recourse is the interpolation of the pirate tale. Tellingly, this storyline opens without any premise that connects it to what precedes,<sup>106</sup> at the end of three pages that are themselves oneiric and metafictional, in

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<sup>102</sup> Paziienza, *Pompeo*, p. 99.

<sup>103</sup> Gipi, *LMVDM*, p. 66.

<sup>104</sup> Cristante, *Andrea Paziienza*, p. 99.

<sup>105</sup> Alessandro Serpieri, *T.S. Eliot: le strutture profonde* (Il Mulino, 1973).

<sup>106</sup> Gipi, *LMVDM*, p. 32.

which a swearing bear guides the protagonist into a war scenario while talking about love. This death/love dichotomy also increasingly sustains the pirate tale as it reappears, echoing and intertwining with the main storyline. Its role thus becomes progressively clear: on the one hand, that of a symbolic sublimation of the protagonist's relationship with love, and on the other, that of yet another strategy of deferral in proximity to key moments of the narrative. The pirate tale and the main story find their resolution once the deferral concerning the rape of the sister is broken, which paves the way for the book's conclusion. The irruption of the traumatic event — which, as mentioned, up to that point had never even been clearly addressed — thus allows the book's arcs to close, dissolving, so to speak, their resistance to reality.

Cara Takakjian affirms that Gipi 'blends elements of fantasy and reality in his storytelling, elaborating a tension between the commitment to reality and the tendency to deflect, veil or avoid the real in many of his works, resulting in a critical self-reflection'.<sup>107</sup> I have shown that these strategies have a clear antecedent in Pazienza, whose *Pompeo* even more radically left up to a very active reader to weave the links within the narration, those between that text and others, and those between the story and Pazienza's own life.

Pazienza's work was an isolated precedent in a phase in which Italian comics authors, when talking about themselves, rarely adopted the techniques and symbolic structures of autobiography. His legacy consists of this blend of expressionist, anti-realistic narrative features within a (pseudo-)autobiographical framework — a lesson that Gipi incorporated and re-interpreted along his whole artistic production.

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<sup>107</sup> Cara Takakjian, 'An Amalgam of Voices: A Prismatic Approach to Memory and History in Gipi's Graphic Novels', *European Comic Art*, 15.2 (2022), pp. 27-55 (p. 47), doi:[10.3167/eca.2022.150203](https://doi.org/10.3167/eca.2022.150203).

## Coda

According to Julie Delporte, the 2000s saw comics autobiography entering a self-perceived phase of crisis. ‘Yet the three symptoms that Delporte enumerates sound a lot like signs of the successful establishment of the genre in the market: ‘(1) the commercial cooptation of autobiography by large publishers; (2) the calcification of autobiography into a codified genre; and (3) a generally risk-averse group of “new autobiographers” who tend to focus on inoffensive, benign aspects of their daily lives’.<sup>108</sup> These considerations dialogue well with Antonio Mirizzi’s identification of some key characteristics of contemporary Italian autobiographical graphic novels: ‘la scarnificazione estrema della narrazione, finalizzata a garantire una maggiore accessibilità’; the use of ‘trame esili’ configured as ‘collettori di micro-episodi circoscritti a livello tematico e/o temporale’; and above all, ‘l’assolvimento della promessa di autenticità come propulsore di empatia’, which relates to a preference for more inclusive stories and perspectives, traditionally excluded from the mainstream circuit.<sup>109</sup>

The symptoms noted by Delporte and the characteristics isolated by Mirizzi point to a different phase of autobiographical comics when compared with the two works analysed here. Just as the latter speak of the transition from one mediascape to another, which deeply affected comics’ semiotic and thematic levels, contemporary productions reflect a novel historical phase, whose social and medial shifts result in visual and narrative changes. As said, eighteenth-century literary autobiography was the most suitable form to foreground the agency of bourgeois individuals, and when comics autobiography debuted in the 1970s, it intertwined with comics’ legitimacy claims and

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<sup>108</sup> Julie Delporte, cited in Johnson, ‘Autobiographical Comics’, p. 199.

<sup>109</sup> Antonio Mirizzi, ‘Le forme e il vuoto: presenza e assenza del vissuto nel fumetto autobiografico italiano’, in *For real: Il fumetto italiano tra realtà e realismo*, ed. by Studying’n’Investigating Fumetti (Franco Cesati, forthcoming).

the emphasis, coming from underground culture, on discussing private issues such as addressing one's physical and mental health. In yet another turn, contemporary autobiographical graphic narratives consistently focus on pressing issues affecting minority identities in terms of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and the renewed discourse about illness brought forward by graphic medicine.<sup>110</sup> These works are prototypically more formulaic, episodic, and denoted by a narrative depletion (in discontinuity with the expressionist replenishment of the two authors discussed here). On the one hand, this relates to the internal evolution of the comics medium (the graphic novel now being a fully established genre, administered by a restricted number of key publishers who prefer to invest in successful formulas). On the other, this stems from the introjection of reading protocols and communicative habitus derived from digital practices, favouring shorter, more linear narratives and a new artistic and emotional stance, owing to the postdigital and metamodernist aesthetics.<sup>111</sup>

Certainly — *pace* Delporte — the genre is still very much alive, and continues to offer precious insights to research. A more systematic genealogical reconstruction of autobiography in Italian comics, like the one that this special issue aims to realise, could then shed light on other nodal moments besides the one highlighted by this article. Such an investigation should ideally be only a part of a transnational reconstruction that breaks free from a US-centric filiation. This way, the pivotal role the US played in the global consolidation of the autobiographical genre within the comics medium could be

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<sup>110</sup> See Kunka, *Autobiographical Comics*, pp. 83-149.

<sup>111</sup> See David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2.1 (2010), doi:10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677; Alison Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and The Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and 'the utopian glimmer of fiction'', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62.2 (2021), pp. 137-51, doi:10.1080/00111619.2020.1784828.

intertwined with different traditions and local evolutions, foregrounding the double genealogies that originate from the merging of the two.

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