UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

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Rewriting the self: re-framing narrative identity via metafictional resources in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

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REWRITING THE SELF: Re-Framing Narrative Identity Via Metafictional Resources In Art Spiegelman's *Maus* And Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

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Orientadora: Elaine Barros Indrusiak

Dissertação de Mestrado em (Inter)Textos Literários e Tradução nas Literaturas Estrangeiras Modernas submetida ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras

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Resumo:

Esta dissertação explora os usos de recursos metaficcionais em *Maus* (romance gráfico de Art Spiegelman) e *Tudo se Ilumina* (romance de Jonathan Safran Foer). A presente leitura enfatiza o uso destas técnicas autorreflexivas como um modo de promover uma discussão em torno da construção narrativa da identidade. Uma vez que ambas as obras apresentam autores-protagonistas empenhados em recriar as relações de seus familiares com eventos traumáticos vivenciados sob o regime Nazista, elas acabam revelando-se terreno fértil para a análise de estágios por quais passam os indivíduos em conflito de identidade frente a esse legado familiar. Esta pesquisa se utiliza de estudos em Teoria de Metaficção em interação com leituras contemporâneas na área de Identidade Narrativa, desejando observar como as obras analisadas articulam a relação entre o processo de criação artística e de construção de identidade.

Palavras-chave: Art Spiegelman, Jonathan Safran Foer, Metaficção, Identidade Narrativa, Identidade

Abstract:

This dissertation explores the uses of metafictional resources figured in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: a Survivor's Tale* as well as in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*. The present reading emphasizes the use of such self-reflexive devices in the works as a means to promote a discussion surrounding the narrative constructiveness of identity. As both artworks present author-protagonists who turn to their respective media willing to recreate their forbearers' connections with traumatic events related to the Nazi regime, these books eventually become fertile ground for the analysis of stages through which individuals undergo while struggling to make sense of their identities. This research relies on studies of Theory of Metafiction juxtaposed to contemporary views on the field of Narrative Identity, seeking to observe how the works analyzed articulate the relation between processes of artmaking and identity construction.

Keywords: Art Spiegelman, Jonathan Safran Foer, Metafiction, Narrative Identity, Identity

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INTRODUCTION

This research is developed upon the analysis of two works regarded as *metafictional*, namely *Maus* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, exploring the representation of the artist in the process of narrative artmaking (one among many links that tie both works together), and seeking to answer two questions, the first being (a) what are the elements that classify these works as metafictional, despite their belonging to different mediums? Popular names of their own artistic mediums, the authors (and their respective fictionalized versions) of those works make use of metafictional strategies, which allow them to portray their artist-protagonists in the construction of their own works of art, leading to the second question: (b) what is the function attributed to the metafictional approach in these works? As a preliminary hypothesis, I argue that, by making use of metafictional devices which emphasize the process of narrative construction along with the events that take place in their stories, the *author-characters* expose traits of their narrative identity, turning narrative storytelling into an instrument to give sense of coherence to their personal life-stories**.** This view is endorsed by the links established between psychoanalytical research and literature after the post-structuralist turn, which fashioned the centrality of narrative[1] as an operational tool to convey identity.

In *Maus*, the author and character share the same name, Art Spiegelman (*Spiegelman* will henceforth refer to the author, and *Art* to his graphic representation), also sharing the gift and background of comics drawing and conferring the narrative with a biographic register. Famously using the image of anthropomorphized rats to represent Jews during the third Reich, the story revolves around Art's private life and difficult communication with his father Vladek, both Jews themselves, being Vladek a survivor of the Nazi camps. Having left the traumatic memories aside from his daily routine, that obscurity of Vladek's past becomes the source of Art's creative project, who intends to produce a long and ambitious narrative in comics format, a medium that, as Spiegelman acknowledges, used to take length for granted. After years of annually published chapters between 1978-1985, *Maus*'s first volume is compiled in the year of 1986, becoming an instant best-seller and a ground-breaking work in the realm of comics and graphic novels.

[1] "Within the overturn of linguistics and Lévi-Strauss structural anthropology, Lacan works on the defense of the precedence of the signifying and the symbolic domain. And, in its clinic, to restitute the singularity of the analysand's talk and defend the analyst's interventionist role of suspension of meaning, of seism in the analysee's discourse which can cause it to open to the (poetic) force of the effect of subject". Rivera, p. 41 (my translation).

All prestigious attention received from the media is distressingly portrayed in the second chapter of *Maus*'s second volume, published in 1991. Although the huge success of the first volume meant a great achievement in his artistic career, Spiegelman cuts loose from earning excellent reviews by selling out his father's tragic narrative. This ethical and extremely personal quandary becomes incorporated in the narrative through the insertion of a new, metafictional layer, where Art – now drawn not as a rat, but as a person in a rat's mask at his drawing station, marking the formal distance from the layers previously disclosed in Maus I – takes the business of thematizing the construction *Maus*. This *mimesis of process* (as put by Hutcheon, 1980, p. 18) uncovers the impact of the creative and publishing processes in Art's life, who is now able to partake in his father's traumatic legacy, as well as to better cope with their troubled relationship.

In comparison to *Maus*, *Everything Is Illuminated* pushes metafictionality to a further level. Although presented in a less biographic register, Jonathan Safran Foer also brings "himself" as a character; his story also holds relations to a non-fictional account revealed during the publishing of the book: while one of the protagonists – Jonathan's fictionalized character (*Safran Foer* henceforth denoting the author, and *Jonathan* the character) – takes a trip to eastern Europe in search of the narrative of his ancestors, the "real life" author himself had undertaken the trip, and it is said that its resulting lack of findings may have inspired him to write this debut novel, therefore recreating the history of his precursors. In relation to Spiegelman's, Safran Foer's work increases the distance between fact and reality through the ingenious recreation of the genealogical narrative of the Safrans' lineage. As I demonstrated in my undergraduate final monograph (Machado, 2013), the construction of the story is deeply connected with the author's view of Judaism, in which a subject's sense of identity is greatly grounded in his ancestral past. The narrative reconstruction of that Jewish shtetl – where the protagonist's great-great-great-grandmother, more than 200 years ago, would have been saved after an accident in the river Brod (and which would later be ravaged by a Nazi assault) – is replete of features that inspire conversation on the role of telling and writing a story, making use of a range of metafictional devices.

Furthermore, a second protagonist, Alexander Perchov, provides an alternative point-of-view, through which the reader is provided with a second narrative, that of Jonathan arriving in Ukraine and heading towards the countryside in search of his ancestors' lost

narrative. This second division works as the humorous, fictitious 'making of' of Jonathan's novel. Alexander's backstage view of the author's search helps, among other things, to undermine the fictionality of that first division (not exactly for the reader, who was never meant to believe the narrated facts outside of the world of the novel, but for the author-character himself), since the trip was unsuccessful in clarifying the author-character's history. In addition, a third diegetic layer provides the reader with letters, from Alexander to Jonathan, where he updates the American writer with news about his relationship (also troubled, as in *Maus*) with close relatives. In this context, both fictitious authors find in writing the terrain for gradual and self-reflexive deepening into their individual life-stories: the American Jew in search of lost origins in eastern Europe, and a same-age co-protagonist (the former's "double", in a sense) in a conscious attempt to build himself to receive and guide the "American writer" around Ukraine's countryside. Because of his affective acquaintance with Jonathan, he discovers and takes on writing – arduously laboring his account of the trip in self-taught English – to compose his own, personal narrative, a manner to conveniently elaborate the discovery of his living grandfather's involvement in WWII-related events.

In both works, we are presented to protagonists striving to tell and understand their own, personal narratives, taking at a literal level the premise of Narrative Identity, in which

> (…) selves create stories, which in turn create selves (McLean et al., 2007). Through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity.(McAdams and McLean, p. 235)

The process of artmaking, like in a psychoanalytic session, makes room[2] for such characters to suspend their personal narratives in order to analyze, interact with and manage them, in agreement with the views of Jacques Lacan, for whom "art and psychoanalysis occupy, in the expanded field of Culture, homologous positions." (Rivera, p. 41).

The making of this dissertation took as its main methodology the close examination of the three narrative strands that compose each of the works, with the intention of

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[2]In an essay on the representation of the act of writing in Paul Auster's works, Stephan Fredman provides a view on "'the room of the book', a place where life and writing meet in an unstable, creative, and sometimes dangerous encounter" (Fredman, 2001, p. 7).

highlighting aspects that foreground the topic of identity. After the brief outline of the metafictional resources employed by each author, a further analysis of these uses in consonance to the protagonists' attempt at arriving at an acceptable self-portrait (and hence a self-defining identity) is sustained by the approximation between the separate function of the strand within the novel and the codifications of life-stories as assembled by McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 234). Finally, a dialogue is proposed between McAdams' and Paul Ricoeur's notions of narrative identity, assigning a range of functional attributions to each strand as they seem to represent different stages of attaining a congruent and satisfactory narrative for the 'self'.

What here seems to be at stake is the congruence between the theory of Narrative Identity, in its tendency to localize the narrative agents which reign individuals' lives, and the use of metafictionality to explore issues of identity construction in contemporary narrative. Furthermore, the adoption of metafictional devices has the advantage of incorporating the reader's response into the body of the narrative work, acting as an invitation for the reader to take part in the experience of undermining the narratives that compose the "self". This study takes the works of Hotti(2015), Crous (2010), Meyer (2010) and Vieira (1991)[3] as models, as all these draw their analyzes on the uses and functions of metafictionality from comparative studies built upon two or more works of art.

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[3]KatjiaHotti's MA thesis examines the uses functions of metafictional devices in Ian McEwan's S*weet Tooth* and *Atonement;* André Crous's essay compares Wes Anderson's *Life Aquaticof Steve Zizou*, Kaufman's *Synecdoche, NY* and Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (screenplay by Charlie Kaufman), emphasizing the role of performance in metafictional movies and the search of truth, via artmaking, in everyday life; Meyer examines the role of metafictionality in Kate Atkinson's novels *Emotionally Weird* and *Human Croquet*; Nelson Vieira offers an overview on occurrences of metafictionalilty in Brazilian literature, tracing the relation between the representation and questioning of the rigid authority of power structures in Brazil through the issue of authorial collapse offered by metafictional writing.

1 THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

1.1 Theory of metafiction: an overview

Provoking for critics, enticing for readers: the term ‘metafiction’ usually refers to a kind of narrative practice in which a given aspect related to the construction of an ongoing narrative is acknowledged and, therefore, made visible to the reader. It can be stated that, while ‘traditional’ storytelling – fictional or not – aims at conducting a process of narration whose main goal is to communicate a somewhat purposeful sequence of unfolding of events, metafictional narratives, by pointing to one or several of its constitutive elements, will generally stress – for one reason or another – the manner in which a narrative is built, laying bare its fictional constructiveness. Metafictionality has long been a feature of the novel as a genre, but for the last century it has been coexisting (infiltrating) within all typologies of verbal or partially-verbal media, from poetry to drama, from comics to cinema, from novels and short-stories to TV series. Poems that present as well as discuss the abstract object of poetry, or those which bring the reader to the scene of writing, can be seen, respectively, in iconic writings of Ferreira Gullar, as well as in the early poems of Paul Auster (later becoming one of the main themes of his prose writing). In drama, the first half of 20th century staged the theater of the absurd, disrupting all standards to the construction of meaning in live performance, which paved the way for Brecht's constant 4th-wall-breaks, as well as Pirandello's chaotic presentation of "6 Characters in Search of an Author", transforming secular, solid tradition of mimetic theater into an experience of the unpredictable. Contemporary cinema casually addresses issues related to its own construction; examples are scattered throughout the history of the medium, from assertive explorations of the constructivists (as in *Man with a Movie Camera*, D. Vertov, 1929) to self-commented films in a mockery tone (*8.1/2*, F. Fellini, 1963), from entirely metafiction-based works (*Synecdoche New York*, 2008, C. Kaufman; *Adaptation*, 2002, S. Jonze; *Stranger Than Fiction*, 2007, M. Forster) to ones which occasionally call an aspect of film making to debate (*Birdman,* A. G. Iñárritu, 2015); from works with characters who, dissatisfied with the direction of the plot in which they take part, rewind the movie they are in so as to achieve a desired effect (*Funny Games,* M. Haneke, 1997), to movies that acknowledge and subvert as many aspects of cinematographic communication as they can (“*Schizopolis,* S. Soderbergh, 1996”). In short-stories and novels, names like Ian

McEwan, J. M. Coetzee, Jonathan Safran Foer, David Foster Wallace and Kurt Vonnegut meet those of Calvino, Borges, Cortázar and Cervantes, Stern and Jane Austen (specifically in *Northanger Abbey*, 1817), dismantling boundaries of time and geography in favor of one amusing ground: the metafictional effect, that of either bringing the readers' perception of their own sense of reality into the action of the diegesis, or that of making them feel in the background of the writing process. While the world of super-hero comics has often affirmed its irreality with barely no relations to the unfolding of the story, Art Spiegelman had always experimented with the reading experience of his panels long before the publishing of Maus.

When held together, the narratives elected as objects of this analysis ("*Maus*" and "*Everything Is Illuminated*") present several common characteristics. Among those, I would say that, regardless of the medium they work on, one of the most consistent is their metafictional frameworks, since it allows us to perceive them, in concomitance with the main themes they disclose, as works about creating, consuming, questioning and explaining things through the making of fiction.

Throughout the last decades of the 20th century, a few authors embraced the task of defining and describing metafictional works as a literary tendency, a technical resource among others as well as a movement. It is certainly not a simply delimited mode of narrating, but rather a mode which admits a collection of narrative devices that raise issue for the act of constructing and narrating a story, directing the reader's self-awareness to the act of reading, creating and discussing fiction at the same time. It remains clear that metafiction is exactly what Hutcheon's cliché suggests: "fiction about making fiction". (1980, p. 1)

Although it can be said that metafiction as a narrative fact can be, at this time, observed as a transmedia event, the first theoretical explorations took *literary* metafiction as object. In 1980, Linda Hutcheon publishes *Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox*, a seminal work to this area of interest, where she defines metafiction as "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1980, p. 1). Borrowing Freud's concept of the narcissistic subject, who turns himself into his own object of desire, Hutcheon's title creates the image of the *narcissistic narrative*, which is obsessed with its own nature and identity, partly because of "an increasing interest in *how* art is created, not just *what* is created" (p. 8) – which transforms "the process of making, of *poiesis*, into part of the shared pleasure of

reading" (p. 20) –, and partly because the reader feels his/her sense of "reality" included within the narrative, given the "certain curiosity about art's ability to produce 'real' order, even by analogy, through the process of fictional construction" (p. 19). By reading a metafictional work, the readers are led to experience self-awareness through the very act of reading, to question the governing agents that structure their own sense of reality, and to admit a dimension of artificial constructiveness within their own perception of the facts and beliefs of the world they inhabit.

Hutcheon's *paradox* lies exactly on the crossing line between the two faces explored by the metafictional work, since it points, at the same time, to the text itself, capturing it as an object of its own analytical remarks, and to the reader's active engagement with the text:

> In all fiction, language is representation, but of a fictional "other" world, a complete and coherent "heterocosm" created by the fictive referents of the signs. In metafiction, however, this fact is made explicit and, while he reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. (…) The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader. (Hutcheon,1980**,** p. 7)

Another scholar who offered a book-length analysis of metafiction, Patricia Waugh publishes *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious novel* in 1984, defining metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, p. 2). While acknowledging itself as an artifact, product of one's imagination and artistic effort, this narrative mode is often willing to explore the potential effects of fictional representation, culminating in what she describes as a "*theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (p. 2). Rather than perceiving the work as a spectator placed outside the narrative, the reader is invited to observe both the construction and deconstruction of the narrative, as if in a jaunt into creating and receiving fiction, since "metafiction novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (p. 6).

Despite also centering her view on metafictional *writing,* therefore leaving any source of visual media aside of her scope of analysis, her study emphasizes the relationship between fiction and reality, therefore embracing one of the most fertile areas of debate

as to metafiction, that of the willingness to represent the world through language and, at the same time, question that same representation, therefore revolving around the ontological status of fictionality. According to Waugh,

> "Metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems" (1984, p. 9)

In spite of aiming at the same narrative phenomenon, the topic of metafiction opens up for a terminological quest, due to the vast number of structuring frameworks as well as isolated techniques that can be seen as source of metafictional insight. It is surely defined as a kind of narrative writing which can address any sort of implications of fictionality to the process of narrating a story while, at the same time, existing as a work of fiction itself. However, the term used to describe or synthetize such qualities has never been stable. Waugh (1984, p. 14) lists a few terms used to name this literary phenomenon which appeared to be taking over the literary scene around the 60s-70s, such as 'the introverted novel', 'the anti-novel', 'irrealism', 'surfiction', 'the self-begetting novel' and 'fabulation'. As every term is coined in attribution to a specific aspect of those "ingenious" narratives – like the intrusion of narrator in the story (surfiction) or the narration of a story in which a book is being written, whose ending is the revelation that the fictional book in process is the one in the hands of the actual reader (self-beggetting novel) – it became a tendency to approach that kind of writing by the umbrella term *metafiction*.

Hutcheon develops a consistent terminology to describe specific uses of metafiction. Her approach is organized in two modes of self-reflexivity – *diegetic* (where the acknowledgement of the artifactuality of the text is somehow imposed during the narratorial process) and *linguistic* (where the key that organizes the interpretative structure of the text is formally provided by the text, either through the manipulation of formal elements or by fitting a pre-established set of rules or codes). The author also notes that both modes can manifest either *overtly* or *covertly*, that is, either explicitly or implicitly (it's interesting to notice that the overt modes are popularly considered "more metafictional" then the covert ones, which seem to address their artifactuality only by allusion). The *overt* forms of narcissism are present in texts where self-consciousness and self-reflexivity are evident, in general being explicitly thematized or alegorized

along the narrative. In opposition, in its *covert* form, this process is internalized, forming part of its structure and narration. The works observed in this research fall in the *overt diegetic* kind of narrative self-reflexivity.

In *Overt Diegetic* works, the readers are constantly made aware of their act of conceiving, through the act of reading the literary text (or attending the play, or watching the movie), a fictive universe through the conduction of a narrative. Therefore, the text is explicitly conscious of its status of textual artifact, of its narration and the necessary presence of the reader. In all examples listed below, the reader is reminded of the artificiality of the world they are "entering". What seems to be the most redundant of the formulations, that of a narrator informing that he is doing what he is meant to do (to narrate), finds its motivation synthetically clarified by the enriching hypothesis made by Katja Hotti "A possible motivation for employing metafictionist devices in literature appears to be that the author wishes to draw the readers' attention onto considering their own presence, their existence, the world around them, their roles as readers". (Hotti, 2015**,** p. 10)

A few examples can demonstrate this operation: in the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*, while the audience is watching the events of Harold Crick's life, the movie makes explicit the fact that he's a character belonging to (author-character) Karen Eiffel's latest novel; in Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night a Traveler*(1979)*,* the text brings an ideal reader – who mirrors the actual reader – as the protagonist (pointed in the use of second person) on the process of buying, opening and enjoying the novel in his hands; Pirandello's *6 Characters in Search Of An Author*(1921) presents a cast of characters who play the roles of *Characters* looking of a narrative to join in; in Coetzee's *Slow Man*(2005), protagonist Paul Rayment finds a manuscript whose introductory lines duplicate the first lines of the novel itself.

The terminology as developed by Hutcheon, here only partially demonstrated, points to one of the earliest comprehensive studies of metafiction as a collection of narrative modes. It is interesting to perceive that Hutcheon's divisions and subdivision organize works that differ in degrees of "metafictiveness", that is, the fictionality or constructiveness of the work can be more or less decisive in the content, as well as more or less explicit to the reader. In the *overt* forms, it is as though fictionality were a topic among the others in the narrative work; in the *covert* forms, although the constructiveness might be implied by the elements described, the status of fictionality is

not necessarily problematized. Other authors also brought about the business of understanding what the qualities that define the metafictional work are. Richard Walsh (1995), for instance, argues for a separation between what he considers *a metafiction* and a work which casually makes use of metafictional devices:

> "It is important to distinguish between a novel that employs occasional metafictional devices and one to which metafiction is essential, and which can therefore be designated *a* metafiction; between truly metafictional *self-reference*, in which the medium is incorporated as subject, and more general *self-consciousness*, in which it is simply acknowledged; and between fictions that are avowedly metafictional and those that are only rendered so by the violence of critical interpretation". (Walsh *apud* Hotti, 2015, p. 17)

The author is pointing to a double use of the term *metafiction*, a natural confusion when considering how the proliferation of metafictional devices affected narrative writing in late 20th century. Walsh's view sustains that a separation must be held between "fiction *about* fiction" (that is, a specific kind of fiction, as in a 'love story' or a 'murder story', which gives it the semblance of metafiction as if it were a genre of its own), and "texts that [only] heighten their own status as fiction" (Walsh Apud Hotti, 2015, p. 17). We can say that a film like *Adaptation* is *a metafictional* work, because while it acknowledges its process of narration and construction of an adaptation of the book "The Orchid Thief", this acknowledgement actually *results* in the film/mockumentary on rare orchids accessed by its view, meaning the thematizing of its construction affects directly on the final work; in opposition, narratives that, in occasional and isolated events, point out their constructiveness, like Jimmy Five being hit by Monica's stuffed rabbit thanks to the gutter of the panel, or Monica in a conversation with her cartoonized author-father Maurício de Sousa, a narrative where metaficionality is used solely as device, as if the characters' explicit constructiveness had no impact in the development of their stories. The classic example of Monica's Gang is mentioned as a mere sample of this kind of "uninvolved" act of self-referentiality (statements in which characters casually declare their 'unreality'

(FNDE/MEC, 2007, p. 16)

without turning it into a theme) which, through the course of this research, has proven to be customary in the world of comics.

The metafictional effect: fiction as reality, reality as fiction

It is common to describe metafictional narratives as works that make the reader feel tested, as if their authors were playing with his attention or capacity to conceive the world constructed on the page (Dzialo, 2009, p. 109, even mentions the manipulation of *story length* as it appears in Kaufman/Jonze's *Adaptation*, intentionally done to convolute the audience's sense of chronology in relation to the ongoing final adaptation of Susan Orlean's book on rare orchids, and its strenuous making of). This impression, highly attainable within works falling in Hutcheon's "overt diegetic" category – which fairly describes the two works herein analyzed – is generated because the text creates an intricate narrative game manifested in a textual crisis of referentiality**.** The works explore the reader's engagement to more than one level of "reality", which happens because of the characters' tendency to thematize or comment the making of the artwork while presenting and taking part in its "final result". The text, via metafictional suggestion, attempts to convince the reader that what is being read is the product of the character's artistic effort[4]. It happens in *Maus*, when Spiegelman makes use of a "realistic", human register, which appears as an above-leveled instance that takes responsibility and deals with the consequences of the rest of the work, generally ascribed to an anthropomorphic register; in *Everything Is Illuminated*, when the presentation of both pre-war and contemporary narratives discovered through the act of reading is undermined by the comments of characters Alex and Safran Foer, pointing to the constructiveness of the narrative as dependent on a subjective, aesthetic choice. While it is necessary for any story, fictional or not, to be believable in its own terms or frame of reference, the use of metafictional devices appear to break with that illusion, drawing the reader's attention to the form of the text or even to its cause of existence.

By deceiving the reader into buying the notion that the work of art was conceived by a character, the materiality of the work (its actual existence in the material world, its availability in the bookstore, its disposition on the shelf, its spine holding the pages on the hands of the reader),which shares the same level of reality of the reader, becomes

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[4] "Sadovska notes that 'Metafiction implies motives of inventing a story through the presence of the author-creator who has a text double in the image of the character-writer. More often than not, he is the author of the book the reader is reading, thanks to which narration acquires a mirror-like character'". (Sadovska*apud*Hotti, 2015, p. 26)

incorporated by the narrative, and hence the feeling of collapsed boundaries between fiction and reality becomes evident in the reading experience. If, as the theory of narrative identity will argue, one can say that any individual is the subject of (and subjected to) his own narrative, the main idea here is that metafictional texts borrow such (the reader's) narrative in order to compose its multilayered structure. In my graduation monograph (2013), I took the occasion to outline the conceptual illusion generated from these collapsed boundaries, provisionally coining it *crisis of referentiality*[5].

As stated earlier, the central characters of Spiegelman's and Foer's works adopt the process of comics drawing and narrative writing (respectively), in order to trace and scrutinize issues related to their own, personal narratives. In these works, artmaking is displayed as an alternative for attaining and rewriting one's narrative identity, seeking to create conditions for the perception of the constructed nature of the self and the recasting of life events which source their anguish and "need" to write. The reader is given the role of discerning the subject's actual life-story and the narrative-product he builds upon it, as well as relating both constructions in order to produce and attribute meaning to the work read. In a comparative analysis of metafictional films from Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman, Crous observes that

> [T]he search for the truth of everyday life has transformed into a search for the truth of the film as constructed fiction. All of this is communicated by means of characters involved in explicitly stated plots and *mise-en-abyme* structures of representation that erase the original, even if the original itself is sometimes fictional. Usually, fictional events are "true" within the diegesis, but when the diegesis acknowledges itself as artificial (false), a grip on the fictional reality becomes all the more difficult and these worlds may be said to be both true and false. (Crous, 2010, p. 122)

The problem of coping with the narrative hierarchy of the work is crucially related to how the *suspension of disbelief* seems manipulated by the metafictional approach. The concept, famously formulated by British romantic Samuel Coleridge, is understood as

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[5](...) An illusory impression motivated by the crossing of two (or more) different diegetic levels within the work. This illusion is usually consequential of a conflict of referentiality experienced by the reader, caught in trouble when trying to regard the hierarchic coordination of the diegetic levels of the narrative in his hand. Out of this conflict, the reader is induced to feel as if being part of a game of illusions which provides means to believe that he is either participating on the content narrated, or that the fictional content is penetrating his surrounding reality". (Machado, 2015, p. 10).

the agreement, between reader and text, on the reliability of the events narrated (even in spite of the *narrator's* occasional unreliability) *as if* they were truthful, hence worthy of the reader's investment of affection and engagement (why would someone cry upon the pages of a book, words of an invented tale, if not for regarding – at least temporarily, while the agreements holds up – the words read as truthful?), a condition upon which the success of fictionality depends (Calvino, 1987, p. 106). The works analyzed present the coexistence of parallel narrative strands, which can be read as narrative levels, and which, in literary theory, receive different treatment from one author to another. In his essay book *O Livro da Metaficção* (2010), while discerning narrative levels in Cortázar's *La Continuidad de los Parques,* Gustavo Bernardo terms them "levels of *fiction*":

> "We can say that the reading of the reading that the character does in his own armchair establishes a communication (otherwise impossible) between fiction and reality. However, if the reality presented by the short-story is the reality of character, it is fictional in itself. Therefore, if there is communication it happens between different *levels of fiction".* (Bernardo, p. 37. My emphasis and translation.)

The confusion regarding what is represented in the protagonists' work, whether it should be called *fiction* or *reality*, is made explicit when contrasting Bernardo's words to those of Italo Calvino in an essay called *Levels of Reality in Literature*, whose title speaks for itself, and where he explores "the various 'I's that go to make up the 'I' who is writing" (Calvino, 1986, p. 111). The author develops a casual speculation on the topic of narrative layers, pointing to the amount of entangled levels of representation which is defining of literature since its earliest days (his own analysis departing from Homer's *Odyssey)*. Not only does he choose to term those levels *reality levels*, which "may be matched by different levels of credibility – or, to put it better, a different suspension of disbelief" (p. 108), but he also distinguishes them from *levels of truth*, "referring to things outside [the work]". By designing an uncomplicated formula for commenting the "whirlpool that sucks in all the levels of reality", Calvino also takes the occasion to comment what he calls *metaliterature*, "these metatheatrical and metaliterary processes" that "have acquired fresh importance, with foundations of a moral or epistemological nature", in agreement with Brecht's theoretical assumptions, which claim that "the spectator must not abandon himself passively and emotionally to the illusion on the stage, but must be urged to think and to participate" (p. 109-110). By aligning narratives from different media (like we attempt to do here), Calvino

acknowledges a narrative mode in which the reader's attitude towards the work (which amounts to his own narrative, at his own level) acquires a function within the process of meaning construction, in agreement to Waugh and Hutcheon, who incisively attribute to metafiction the centrality of a reading experience which privileges a reflection on the constructed nature of the narrative text.

Whether or not we should opt to call them levels of *reality* or *fiction*, it must be clear by now that metafictional writing deals with the articulation of different levels of representation which can be perceived distinctly. According to Calvino, this structural issue of storytelling fits perfectly in a line of "research carried out in French literature during the past fifteen years, and in both critical thought and creative practice this puts the material side of writing – the text itself – firmly in the foreground" (p.110). Chances are that the Italian author was referring to the field of Narrative Theory, also called Narratology, a reasoning that might offer some clarification of the comprehension of narrative levels.

Narratology, in its separation and manipulation of the formal elements that compose a narrative, can offer some useful insight on the protagonists' use of artmaking to achieve the disclosure of their narrative identities. The manipulation of narrative levels (whether or not we chose to call them 'fiction' or 'reality' levels, as seen above) can be better understood in their identification to what narrative theory calls 'diegetic levels'.

Works like Safran Foer's and Spiegelman's can be perceived as narratives which include the compound of different, concurrent yet collaborative diegetic levels, or strands. The term diegesis stands for a narrative level of its own, an independent narrative with its own constellation of elements, settings and characters. In classical narratology, the term derives from Aristotle's opposing concepts *diegesis* and *mimesis*, the first understood as the telling or summarizing of a story, and the second as the representation or demonstration of a story, equaling crystalized dichotomies like "showing and telling" and "presentation and representation". Such opposition views the narrative text as a more diegetic kind of narrative, and drama as a more mimetic genre. (Herman and Vervaek, 2001, p. 13-14). Furthermore, Genette uses the adjective *metadiegetic* to describe a narrative level which holds some kind of relation with the 'main' diegesis. The author proposes three categories of metadiegetic function: *explanatory*, where the 'main' diegesis' course of events is explained by extradiegetic characters; *thematic*, which expresses a relationship of contrast or analogy between both

diegeses; and a third, unnamed function, where no relation between stories is presented, but it is rather "the act of narrating itself which fulfills a function in the diegesis, independently of the metadiegetic content" (Genette, 1983, p. 233). The author brings the example of *One Thousand Nights*, where the act of narrating has the function of distracting the Sultan.

As will be seen in the separate analysis of the two works, these modes of metadiegetic relation between the different strands appear in both analyzed works. For example, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, three diegetic levels can be easily acknowledged thanks to the very distinct set of formal elements each one disposes: on the order brought by the work itself, a first level can be distinguished for its elaborated treatment to language, both grammatically and poetically, as well as for its narrator, which doubles the author and receives his name; this level contrasts with the second, where English grammar and vocabulary is presented in a radically different register, comically emulating ESL acquired by its own narrator, Alex, in a creative incursion in literary storytelling intending to report the encounter with Jonathan (first level narrator) and how their search for Trachimbrod affected himself and his family; both levels can be contrasted to a third, epistolary section, which is brought in distinguishable typing and is addressed to a specific narratee. The same occurs in *Maus*, where two levels are distinguishable by the manipulation of formal elements, such as verbal expression, setting and characterization: the first with Art in the process of interviewing his father and collecting the material for his work; the second, in a different setting and time, brings his father's memories of the Nazi camps. A third level is introduced in the second volume, where a new set of elements characterizes the author, personally affected by his own work and the decision to make it, struggling to deal with the sequence of the previous levels.

Therefore, it can be noticed that each diegetic level composes a narrative of its own, each containing its own delimitation for 'story', 'narrative' and 'narrator'. Herman and Vervaek remind us that narrative works that surpass the conventions of storytelling by multidiegetic narratives with extended, often complex chronology, might imply an arduous challenge to traditional narratology. One of the main difficulties lies in the attempt to hierarchize the strands, since all diegetic levels compose a larger "syntax" that comprises the totality of the work, largely due to what Genette termed *metalepsis*, "the act that consists precisely of introducing one situation (…) the knowledge of

another situation” (Genette, 1983, p. 234). These *structures en abyme*, as called by the French author while terming this “prized” feature of the *New Novel* (Nouveau Roman) of the 60s, impose a methodological problem to narratology, thanks to the general impossibility to establish a demarcated hierarchy between the diegetic levels.

In the case of the works comprehended by this analysis, we can observe how the concurrent diegetic levels can be understood as layers of a bigger project, that of the authors in search of their own self-narratives, a concept we shall outline in the following paragraphs.

1.2 Theory of Narrative Identity: an overview

Narrative Identity is a theory that seeks to explain the individual’s process of identity construction through its ability to produce narrative out of life experiences, since it “reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person’s life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning” (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 233). It is the focus of interdisciplinary research, deeply rooted in psychology and has ever been gaining more space throughout the years. In aligned reasoning, J.M Coetzee, in collaboration with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz, builds on the relation between narrative and self in *The Good Story*: *Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (2015)*,* a dialectic collaborative work where both authors discuss and compare the process of narrative construction in storytelling and psychotherapy, investigating

> “how self-narratives work in many people’s lives: as a faculty we use to elaborate for ourselves and our circle the story that suits us best, a story that justifies the way we have behaved in the past and behave in the present, a story in which we are generally right and other people are generally wrong”. (Coetzee and Kurtz, 2015, p. 4)

By thematizing the act of producing and interpreting narratives, metafictional discourse as employed by Spiegelman and Safran Foer endorses the theory of Narrative Identity, which argues that the human subject, by having access to itself and to the world only if mediated by language (a view consolidated after the linguistic turn in philosophy, in the 60s), turns this self-relationship in one of active interpretation.

> “This hermeneutical phenomenological human subject emerges, for Ricoeur, essentially through narrative. “Narrative” means more than simply a story here; narrative refers to the way that humans experience time, in terms of the way we understand our future potentialities, as well as the way we mentally organize our sense of the past”.(Barker, 2016)

In this approach, the identity of the individual is perceived as narrative construction, as postulated by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, for whom the psychoanalytical cure is "to substitute for the bits and pieces of stories that are unintelligible as well as unbearable, a coherent and acceptable story, in which the analysand can recognize his or her self-constancy", and psychoanalysis constituting a "particularly instructive laboratory for a properly philosophical inquiry into the notion of narrative identity" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 247).

Since metafictional works demonstrate a tendency to explore, at some level, the narrative structure that sustains not only the work of art as a whole, but the characters ascribed to it, Spiegelman and Safran Foer, by using a wide range of metafictional techniques, turn their narrative mediums into a fertile soil for their author-characters to explore, within their medium specificities and technical potentialities, their own conflicted grasp on their "selfhood" in order to create a less unstable sense of identity. For these author-characters, protagonists in the analyzed works of above-mentioned authors, the act of narrative making, at an aesthetic level, becomes the vehicle for the appropriation and reshaping of their sense of existing and belonging; in other words, artmaking enables the transposition of their personal, narrative-based conception of identity to the medium of their predilection. In this sense, the process of artistic making echoes psychotherapy, "a major arena for the narration of suffering" with "therapists work(ing) with clients to re-story their lives, often aiming to find more positive and growth-affirming ways to narrate and understand emotionally negative events". (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 235)

By observing the self-contained process of construction of both works, it is possible to associate these diegetic levels to three of the categories of discourse employed through the individuals' attempts to render their self-narratives, as elicited by McAdams.

The examples of "Life-Story Constructs Used in Research on Narrative Identity" are, in the original article, expressed through a chart, which here we attempt to briefly summarize.

Consisting of data collected through the sessions with psychotherapeutic patients – the narrators –, the life-stories observed by the researchers were organized into 7 distinct groups which attempt to define narrative patterns that qualify the individuals to assert some degree of self-confidence, either by reinforcing assurance or through the

overcoming of a previous difficult period of time or specific life event. The manners of "coding" life-story constructs are:

1. "**Agency**", in which the "narrators" become able to affect change in their own lives (...) often through demonstrations of self-mastery (...).

2. "**Communion**", where the rewarding comfort of social reciprocity is made prominent.

3. "**Redemption**", in which arguably bad or negative events become source of good or positive outcomes.

4. "**Contamination**", in which good events are suddenly followed by a bad consequence.

5. "**Meaning-Making**", "the degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event. Coding ranges from 'this situation taught me nothing' to 'lesson learning' to as provider of 'deep insight about life'.

6. "**Exploratory Narrative Procession**", which, unfortunately for us, is less metafictional than it may seem, actually emphasizing degrees of self-exploration/self-commiseration

7. "**Coherent, positive resolution**", where there is some rhetorical interest in promoting sense of closure or resolution.

In the artworks observed, it was perceived the patterns offered by the codings “Agency”, in relation to the character-author's decision of appealing to the conscious or unconscious desire of attaining a coherent/worthy view of themselves through the act of self-narration, stressed by the "work-in-progress" approach; “Redemption”, as the varied characters demonstrate their capability of learning/improving from and getting by traumatic or severely conflicting life-events; and “meaning-making”, seen in the poetic process of meaning construction enforced by the presence of the "written" (narrated) word.

We argue that the distinct diegetic levels are assigned to specific functions in the process of narrative construction of one’s (the artist-characters’) identity. In revising the narrative components of the three diegetic levels, we can trace the character-artists’

choices for managing self-narratives: each level entangles a kind of narrative discourse as those offered by McAdams and McLean, uncovering the process of "cure" through artmaking, that is, "to provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning" (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 233), or the achievement of "stability and orientation" in the effort of "regarding themselves as coherent personalities" (Meyer, 2010, p. 443). The association takes form in the following scheme:

Codified narrative construct	Redemptive	Meaning-Making	Agency
Maus	Vladek's story	Chronicling Vladek in Nazi Poland	Authoring *Maus* - revaluating self-perception
Everything Is Illuminated	Safran's Saga	Chronicling "the Hero in Ukraine"	Letters - revaluating self-perception

Table 1 – Assigning observable narrative strands to codified narrative constructs of self-understanding.

By undermining its own system of representation (a characteristic of overt diegetic works of metafiction, as seen above), the works encourage the investigation of the functions occupied by those narrative levels in the process of self-narrative (re)construction via artmaking. Such an approach allows us to understand the two works as a poetic interpretation/realization, or internalization, of the theory of narrative identity, as well as a meditation on the role of artmaking in the psychological development of artists under particular conditions, which shall be clarified in the following sections.

2. MAUS: A SURVIVOR'S TALE

2.1 The author

If Art Spiegelman is one of the biggest names in the world of Graphic Novels, this is certainly due to the success of *Maus*. Prior to that, the author had taken part in the "Underground Comix", a somewhat organized wave of alternative comics which published contents forbidden by the *Comics Code Authority*, often bringing political and moral satires and criticism. Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1948, and moved to the USA in 1951 along with his parents, both Polish Jews who had outlived the Nazi camps a few years earlier. During the 60s, he was a regular user of LSD, which led him to a nervous breakdown that sent him to a mental institution. A few years later, his mother committed suicide, an event whose impact the author tries to convey in one of his earliest short works, *The Prisoner of Planet Hell*, which is entirely reproduced in the fifth chapter of Maus. In the 70s, Spiegelman joins the underground comix scene, while keeping side jobs such as illustrating masculine magazines and collectable cards for the bubblegum brand Topps, the latter being, for decades, his main source of income. During this period, he gains the attention of the public with the production of strips that often displayed experimental and autobiographical elements. In 1972, Spiegelman was invited to publish for the comix magazine *Funny Animals*. He Took the occasion to design a shorter version of *Maus*, which would become his main project by the end of the 70s and throughout the 80s. A selection of these early stripes was organized by Spiegelman and published in 1977 under the name of *Breakdowns*.

Maus, Spiegelman's most ambitious project, had its chapters separately inserted in the issues of *Raw* magazine, a publication co-founded and edited by himself and his wife, French designer Françoise Mouly. *Raw* was published between 1980 and 1991, with each issue bringing one of *Maus*' chapters, but the magazine ceased activities before *Maus* was complete. This work gave shape to the author's desire to publish a lengthy graphic work in order to escape the logics of the graphic short-stories, which did not, in his opinion, bear enough weight to become autonomous, long-lasting works. In addition, it had always been his intention to transform his father's experience on the Nazi concentration camps into a graphic narrative, as his early attempt on the subject suggested. *Maus*' first 6 chapters were compiled in a book edition, becoming the volume I. The intention of publishing these early chapters was rushed when Spiegelman

learned that Steven Spielberg was producing an animated film which, like *Maus*, brought characters as mice and told a similar story, wishing to avoid comparisons or even thoughts of plagiarism. He got the contract with Pantheon Books and the first volume, entitled *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and subtitled *My Father Bleeds History,* was published 3 months earlier than Spielberg's *An American Tail* (1986). The book found a large audience, partially due to Pantheon's distribution to bookstores rather than comic shops, where comic books were most commonly found. The last 5 chapters, which would later compose the second volume of *Maus,* subtitled *And Here My Troubles Began,* were also published by *Raw*, and finally compiled by Pantheon in 1991. The huge success of *Maus* yielded a Pulitzer Prize under the category of Special Award in Letters, marking it as the first graphic novel to ever win such distinction. In 2011, Pantheon published *MetaMaus*, bringing a large source of background information about the making and reception of his work, including a CD with original recordings of the interviews with Vladek, conducted by Spiegelman, a process which served as basis and content of the work.

After becoming one of the most influential artists in the US, Spiegelman spent the following decade working at *The New Yorker* magazine, signing various of its polemic front covers. His last contribution was dedicated to the 9/11 attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center, featuring an entirely black cover that reveals, in the correct position to lighting, the empty shadows of the Twin Towers. Spiegelman left The New Yorker two years later and published a new graphic book, dedicated to the 9/11 incident called *In the Shadow of no Towers* (2004). The author had other works published, and nowadays, at the age of 70, he is simultaneously working in different projects, which include a secret co-working project with Neil Gaiman, and the planning of a work that intends "to make [Trump] more ridiculous and contemptible than what a cartoon can do" (James, 2018).

2.2 The work

As earlier stated, after over a decade of separate published chapters, *Maus* was finally compiled into two volumes, the first comprehending a period between the 1930 and the winter of 1944, while the second was dedicated to the last year of the war, when central character Vladek Spiegelman is sent to Auschwitz, as well as a separate temporality in

which the effects of production of *Maus* on his author is thematized. Vladek is Art Spiegelman's father, and the book revolves around the attempt to depict the former's traumatic experience as a Polish Jew during World War II. Spiegelman chose to reenact the German genocide by making use of anthropomorphic animal characterization, building a correlation between different species and ethnic or national groups. Deriving from Hitler's association of the Jews with mice (the book is introduced by Hitler's sentence "The Jews are undoubtly a race, but they are not human", v. I, p. 3[6]), an analogy expanded to the visual Nazi propaganda of the time, Spiegelman uses such scornful imagery to shape his representation of the Jews. It seems coherent, then, the choice of portraying the German Nazi as cats, their natural predators. Within this logic, the Americans, whose intervention was decisive for the end of the war, are defined as dogs, who chase cats. Poles are controversially pictured as pigs, which inspired criticism[7] and caused the work to be published in Poland only in 2001. One possible explanation is that pigs are hardly tamable animals, however extremely sensitive and intelligent, which would explain their ambiguous relation to Jews - as seen throughout the work - both protective and raging, possibly due to the massive presence of Jews in Poland prior to the war, which caused the country's destruction. Characters with minor participation in the narrative of *Maus* include the French as frogs, the Swedes as reindeers and the Gypsies as moths. However biographical Spiegelman's work might be, the anthropomorphized animal characters help to qualify *Maus* as partially fiction, eliciting the "animal register" as a mark of his authorial voice. In addition, the idea of bringing Jews as mice will later in the narrative reverberate on Art's character in regards to the construction of his own identity, as he has to deal, at a metafictional level, with his own aesthetic choice upon his depiction of himself.

The narrative is preceded by a two-page prologue, set in New York in 1958, featuring Art at the age of 10. After facing a small social distress with his young friends during a roller-skating session, he goes to meet his father working at his garage door, and reports the episode to him. Vladek's response "*Friends*? Your friends? If you lock them

[6]Direct quotations from *Maus* will be addressed to by volume and page number, in reference to Vol. I: My Father Bleeds History by Penguin Books1989 and Vol. II: And Here My Troubles Began by Pantheon Books 1992.

[7] In the biographical introduction to the excerpt from *Maus* that appears in The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 7th edition (New York: Norton, 2007), Volume E, p. 3091, editors Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B.Wallace describe Spiegelman's representation of Poles as pigs as "a calculated insult" leveled against Poles.

together in a room for a week without food… *then* you could see what it is, friends." (p. 5, original emphasis) already points to some dominant features in the work, such as Vladek's ever-present willingness to solve problems with his own hands (as he was "fixing something", p. 4) and, more crucially, his fast connection to the memory of the deprivation lived over a decade earlier during the war, even in the most domestic contexts. After that, the reader is finally able to learn the summary of contents, headed by the subtitle "My Father Bleeds History".

The first page brings Art visiting his father after a long time, introducing the reader to a number of traumatic events, including the war, the suicide of Art's mother, two heart attacks suffered by his father, Vladek's unhappy second marriage and his misled desire to make Art feel comfortable, disturbed by an unimportant fuss around the quality of the hanger used for hanging Art's coat. This sequence leads to one of the most important pages in the entire work, which launches the comprehension of *Maus* as a story narrated in two simultaneous strands, one covering the past, bringing Vladek's struggle to survive under the subhuman conditions imposed on Jews during the Third Reich, and another comprising Art's posterior effort to obtain this narrative directly from Vladek, via penned and later recorded interviews.

This page (v. I, p. 12) brings a sequence of panels which include Art and Vladek entering the former's old bedroom, in a first visual movement towards the past symbolizing the entrance in the past of Vladek's memory. Combined with the text of the speech bubbles, where Art communicates his interest in producing a work which tells about the life of Vladek in Poland during the war, the reader can find the indications of this backward movement, such as a flag of Harpur University (panel 2) where Spiegelman studied Visual Arts in his youth and a picture of his late mother (panels 3, 4, 5 and 6). In addition, Vladek starts his exercise in his ergometer bike, symbolizing a movement of pedaling without going anywhere. In effect, the sequence of panels, when put together, form a wider picture of Vladek on his bike, occupying half of the page: the exact panel emphasizing his shoe on the pedal brings the speech bubble where he begins his report, resulting in the transference to another strand, which takes place in the past. The end of sequence, forming the wheel of the motionless bike, becomes the round framework for Vladek's portrait, visibly younger.

From there on, *Maus* becomes effectively divided in two narrative strands until the second chapter of volume II, where a new, third strand is finally added to the structure.

Uniquely based on the chronology of the facts narrated, we here establish the first strand being Vladek's story, the one intended by Art Spiegelman prior to the construction to the work as it is now available. The second strand is therefore the one that displays Art and Vladek as co-protagonists, featuring the encounters, interviews and, as shall be seen, the aftermath of traumatic events on the daily routine of the survivor. As we approach volume II, the third strand will be discussed.

2.3 The First Strand – Surviving the Holocaust

Vladek's reconstitution of his past begins in 1935, when he was a young man pursuing a career on the commerce of fabrics. He sees his young self as handsome, neat, entrepreneurial and women-enticing. Early in the narrative he meets Anja, with whom he falls deeply in love, and the couple gets married, later having their firstborn, Richieu, who didn't survive the holocaust. Anja's wealthy family demonstrates total approval of the union, with Vladek's father-in-law providing full financial support for him to become a prosperous fabric trader in Sosnowiec. Still, Anja is described as a fragile woman, needing medication to keep her mental health under control. While heading to Czechoslovakia in search of an expensive treatment for a severe afterbirth depression that befell Anja, the couple first learns, from the window of the train, that the German Reich is starting to spread over the borders of Germany. Shortly after, Vladek receives a draft notice requesting him for the Polish reserve army.

At this point, Vladek remembers that, over a decade earlier, he had undergone, under his father's supervision, severe starvation diets and sleepless nights in order to avoid the army. The strategy worked for the moment, but the strict conditions made him prefer to serve in the Polish army in the following year. In practical terms, this side-story is merely a preamble to all the deprivation that was to come. Back to 1939, he went to the war front and became a prisoner of the Germans for the first time. Although the imposition on Polish soldiers was hard enough, the Polish Jews suffered more, having to endure freezing tents and almost no food. Whenever he foresees the opportunity, Vladek emphasizes the advantages taken out of his positive attitudes in spite of the bitter conditions, such as bathing in a cold river: "I'll be clean and I'll feel warm all day by comparison" (v. I, p. 53), "every day I bathed and did gymnastics to keep strong (…) often we played chess to keep our minds busy", manners that reiterate his willingness to

survive by keeping himself busy, alert and in shape. Such mindset leads him to "volunteer" as a substitute for Germans who left their positions and went to the fronts: "I'm not going to die here! I want to be treated like a human being" (v. I, p.54), another decision with a positive outcome, the case accounting for decent housing and regular food in exchange for slave work. At this point, Vladek narrates a dream he had, guided by the voice of his late grandfather, who said he would be able to "come out of this place – free!... on the day of *Parshas Truma*" (v. I, p. 57), the emphasized expression standing for a yearly week of specific prayers in the Jewish calendar. The dream indeed came true, and a set of coinciding events taking place on this date – his release from that soldiers' prison, as well as his marriage to Anja, besides Art's birthday *and* Bar Mitzva – transformed it into a rather mystical experience. However, his release proved politically mischievous, leading farther from home, and he still had to count on a great deal of luck – although he credits it as consequence of his rich network of contacts and abilities to deceive Poles into believing him to be a non-Jew – to finally arrive home to the arms of Anja and Richieu.

As Vladek returns to Sosnowiec, he learns that the Germans have taken all the businesses belonging to Jews, leading him to find alternatives for money making in black markets, where he could still find his clients to sell the remaining fabrics and charge for old debts. The Germans start taking all private property, forcing him and his family to move out. He is soon impeded of trading in the black market, as he learns that Jews engaged in illegal commerce have been hanged in public. Thanks to the influence of Anja's father, Vladek always finds people who hide him from the German officers, saving his life a few times during the chaos installed on the streets. He is given a job at a tin shop, which would help him to escape death years later, in Auschwitz. Vladek is offered by an acquaintance to send his son to a safer location, but Anja refuses to be apart from him. At this point, Auschwitz-Bikernau camps were still a rumor among the Jews. The Nazi authorities then make a convocation for all Jews to present themselves at the Dienst Stadium to be inspected for an unclear selection. The Jews were separated in two groups, and those sent to the right side, which included Vladek and Anja's family, got working passports and were safe. Those sent to the left, Vladek's father included, were never seen again.

After having their lives temporarily spared, all Jews remaining in Sosnowiec are sent to the village of Srodula, which would be later turned into a guetto. This new relocation of Jews proves to be a new filter for sparing the useful ones, and little by little this population starts being either killed there or sent to the camps. Vladek and Anja are again offered to send Richieu away, and this time they accept it. Only after the war would they discover that Tosha, who was taking care of Richieu and her own children, poisoned herself and the children, as a last measure to avoid being sent to the camps. As a general genocide takes place on the vicinity of Srodula, Vladek manages to build a bunker in the basement of their installation. They are discovered and snitched, and then sent to a new area, where Jews were put to wait for transportation to Auschwitz. Again Vladek's destiny is saved by his connections, and thanks to his determination of keeping with him whatever valuable object for negotiating his life, he is sent to register in a shoe shop where Jews worked in resoling shoes for Nazi officers. There, some time later, as the ghetto of Srodula is emptied by the Nazi, he and Anja are guided through a tunnel of shoes where a new bunker is found. They manage to endure hunger and despair in the company of a dozen of survivors, only leaving the bunker after the movement in Srodula seems to be over. They leave the bunker to find the empty streets of the ghetto, and the couple's destiny is finally portrayed by their solitary walk in a crossing of streets shaped as a swastika, symbolizing the ineffectiveness of attempting to escape the Reich in a panel that clearly demonstrates that all directions taken will inexorably lead to death.

(Vol. I, p. 125)

The couple finds housing at the home of their (now) late son's babysitter, risking being discovered by the Poles who denounced the presence of Jews. Vladek is told about the possibility of escaping to Hungary. He does all necessary to put this plan into action, but in the end he discovers to be in the center of an ambush that spots escaping Jews. At the last scene of volume I, they are arrested, and finally put in a truck heading to Auschwitz, believing that they will never come back.

Regarding this strand, volume II is exclusively dedicated to the year spent in Auschwitz, in Poland, and the subsequent march to the camp of Rosen-Gross, in Breslau, Germany, until the war is finally over and Vladek walks for weeks back to Sosnowiec. Once in

Auschwitz, Vladek and Anja are separated. The inmates are given uniforms and receive the tattooed numeric registers they would carry for the rest of their lives. Immersed in a reality of violence and extreme conditions, Vladek is able to endure the camps thanks to his crucial working distinctions, like his knowledge on languages such as German and English, as well as the previously acquired skills on tin working and shoe making. He becomes the English teacher of one of the Nazi supervisors, which grants him special treatment for some time. He then learns that Anja is in Birkenau, lodged in a female section. They start exchanging notes, until the moment he finally manages – as he is in a somewhat privileged position, with better working and food regimes, thanks to the above-mentioned skills – to visit Birkenau to meet her, sighting the ovens for the first time. Anja too demonstrates wit as she informs her Kapo, who was wearing worn out boots, that Vladek is working on shoe fixing. The Kapo, with her boots now fixed, changes her attitude towards her, allowing Anja to rest in her room and providing her with decent food. Art's work is provided with detailed visual schemes of the ovens, gas showers and timetables that help to increase the visual potency of the narrative.

Rumors that the Russians were advancing to Auschwitz led the Nazi officers to organize a seemingly endless march to the camp of Rosen-Gross. The course took weeks of walking in harsh climate conditions. There, a train with an unknown destination waited for hordes of prisoners. They were put into the wagons, originally made for animal transportation, which enhances the animal metaphor designed by Spiegelman. Vladek strikingly manages to find a fairly comfortable position among the hellish environment of the overcrowded wagons by stretching a blanked on the ceiling hooks over everyone's shoulder, which also made the snow in the roof accessible, solving *his* problem of thirst. As many died during the transport due to, among other things, lack of food and water, Vladek traded snow for sugar with one of the prisoners. He openly refuses to share the snow, just as he had done in several occasions, always saving goods for situations he could profit from, which adds to the stereotypical portrait of the Jew often encountered along the narrative and questioned by the author in the second strand. After months in the trains, the prisoners were released in another camp, that of Dachau, where many were sent to death according to new selective processes. Vladek reports that many were executed due to having lice, which was an almost unavoidable situation. He ingeniously uses rain water to wash his shirt and convince the Gestapo he was clean. After that, he becomes extremely sick, and just when he was about to die of typhus, the

officials inform that those strong enough to endure a new train trip would be exchanged by German prisoners in Switzerland. He finds help to walk to the train, in exchange for the bread he couldn't eat, and is finally sent to be released.

It still takes a long time until he is definitely saved by the American army, looking for new places to hide from reminiscent officers and anti-Semites and trying to find Anja, who was released by the Russians much earlier than him. The final scene is indeed his encounter with her, in juxtaposition with his last breath in deathbed, which simultaneously occurs in strand two.

2.4 Second strand: Encounters with the past

After the prologue, it is the second strand that opens *Maus*, featuring Art visiting his father and the beginning of the interviews that will serve as source in the first strand. Captions embedded in the early panels situate the physical and emotional distance between father and son, while also presenting Vladek as an ageing man who has endured his first wife's (Anja's) suicide, two heart attacks and the war. The reader is also introduced to Mala, his second wife, for whom Vladek will rarely demonstrate affection, rather feeding distrust and resentment towards her throughout the story. Soon, Art announces his interest in learning his father's past, leading to the above-mentioned scene where Vladek takes his son to his ex-bedroom, which now is furnished with the ergometer bike. As stated earlier, many times the movement of pedaling the static bike serve as a motif for delving into the memory of the past. The bike metaphor for narrating the past is prominent in chapter 4. As he pedals, he goes on telling the story, with the wheel spinning vigorously. However, in two moments the wheel is drawn motionless, signaling Vladek's ceased movement – these are the moments when he reports the death of his son and his father.

The strand consists mainly in the recollection of Vladek's personal experience of WWII, and its process of reconstruction eventually leads – via Vladek's narratorial act and later Art's translation into comics -, both personally and artistically, to an overwhelming experience for Vladek and Art himself. The strand alone would consist in an overt diegetic kind of self-reflexivity, in Linda Hutcheon terms, as it serves as the

background of how *Maus* came into being, bringing questions regarding its structure, aesthetic choices and the intangibility of the reality it aims to present.

The reader is therefore able to accompany Art in his attempt to tell this story in a convincing manner. When, for example, Vladek asks his son to suppress events unrelated to the Holocaust, Art answers that these details consist in "great material", as "it makes everything more *real* – more human" (v. I, p. 23, original emphasis).

It is interesting to notice that, in this strand, Spiegelman also maintains the animal register for the depiction of his interviewing process, which implies that the mouse characterization is not only used for depicting the Jewish status through the eyes of the Nazi regime: it is a reality that outlasts the war, falling on the author as a continuation of that perspective, as well as an identity trait.

The eleven chapters that compose *Maus* usually open and end in the second strand register, situated in the years of 1978-1979, which features the ongoing conversation between the two characters, and what should be a bridge to a most factual account of the war – portraying the war events through the direct speech of its survivor – ends up greatly emphasizing the troubled relationship between father and son. On this strand, the delineation of Vladek's narrative identity is made visible, as a correspondence is established between the experiences suffered during the war – conveyed by his own perception of the facts, through the interviews – and Vladek's "survivor's life" in the present time of the interviews, seen through the eyes of his son. In addition, the course of their encounters has a decisive role in the construction and disintegration of (pre-war) Spiegelman's family identity, which causes Art to have problems finding his own place in the Spiegelman's family, supposedly his own.

Although three decades separate the two strands, the memory of the camps stills looms in Vladek's present life. As his health conditions worsen, causing him to depend on regular medication, he asserts: "On my condition I have to fight to *save* myself" (v. II, p. 23, original emphasis), with the emphasis on *save* addressing a word-play whose ambiguity lies on the fact that even after he had enough "fights" for survival in the camps, his struggles to remain alive linger decades after the war was over. In fact, in many moments of the narrative we have the impression that Vladek is still living in fear of the Nazi regime, as he constantly reproduces behaviors developed during his traumatic experience of the camps. In spite of his advanced age, he insists on doing

household chores with his own hands, risking his health and leaving his close ones in distress. With the intention of saving his money for an appropriate occasion, he refuses to spend money anytime he can, generating embarrassing contexts, such as returning to the supermarket open packages of food, or providing less than enough for Mala, whose main activity is to take care of him. Vladek's character is greatly build upon stinginess and obsessiveness for material accumulation, taking home objects found on the streets, like an old cheap telephone wire, and storing them at home in maniacal organization. His behavior disturbs Mala and Art, who has to accept it although in disagreement with most of his attitudes, all in order to prevent distress. Eventually, Mala abandons him, overwhelmed by the lack of affection, money and comprehension on his part. Eventually she steps back, as his health condition worsens towards the end of his life.

The encounters held between the two main characters of this strand represent an important act of approximation between father and son. The evolving narrative presented here makes visible the complicated relationship between the two. There is a mutual dissatisfaction between Vladek and Art in regard to their position as father and son. On the one hand, Vladek is constantly disappointed at Art's smoking, dressing and professional choice. The reader learns that this distance dates from Art's childhood, as

the son seems to be resentful of the days when his father would send him crying to his room for not having finished the plate of food.

(Maus, vol. I, p. 43)

Art easily loses his temper when Vladek makes a fuss out of wasted salt or matches, lacking patience to cope with his stickler father, who fails to see his strictness or

cheapness as flaws. When Art says he fortunately had his Anja to defend him, he gets the line “Anja was always too easy on you” (v. I, p. 44). A few times, Art mentions his “predilection” for his mother, suggesting he identifies himself more with Anja than with Vladek.

Page after page, the strand accompanies the making of the first strand, not only staging the act of narrating performed by Vladek and translated into comics by Art, but also showing how this process of narration resounds in their lives. While it becomes apparent that there had always been some problems of communication between them, Art slowly acknowledges that this distance may have its roots on the traumas of war, stories which, prior to the book project and interview sections, he had barely heard of, seeing them as a distant shadow of the past reflected in the pictures of Anja and Richieu across the rooms. For Vladek, bringing those memories out becomes more than analogous to re-living those events: it reminds him of the person he was before the camps, culminating in the arousal of a latent sense of identity, forged upon the struggle of surviving and the presence of his beloved first wife and a son who no longer exists. We perceive that there is a remarkable tendency of Vladek sticking to attitudes he believes “redeeming” (and which guaranteed his survival, as he seems to believe in the narrative he shares), either in desire of keeping that identity alive or in denial of letting it go. Indeed, an identity chasm is established as Vladek *ad nauseam* expresses his sorrow over the absence of Anja, whose “photos of her all around [his] desk – like a *shrine*” (v. I, p. 104) seem to bother his second wife, who resentfully utters the line quoted. Mala reports at some point that, instead of providing her with new clothes, Vladek opened Anja’s wardrobe and told her she could stay with his late wife’s dresses, in an unconscious movement of keeping Anja’s memory alive, which occasionally arouses breakdowns where Vladek longs for Anja’s presence and affection (“Everywhere I look I’m seeing Anja”, vol. II, p. 103).

As for Art, portraying the making of *Maus* in this strand develops into an intense side-story of its own, capturing the artist who seeks to narratively organize his relationship with his father while getting acquainted with his family’s past and memory. As he learns more about the constitution of his family, Art starts questioning the place he occupies in it.

> “Just thinking about my book... it's so presumptuous of me. I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father... how am I supposed to make any sense out of

> Auschwitz?... of the holocaust? (...) I wonder if Richieu and I would get along if he was still alive. (...) My ghost-brother, since he got killed before I was born. (...) I didn't think about him much when I was growing up... he was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents' bedroom. (...) They didn't need photos of me in their room... I was alive!... The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... it was an ideal kid, and I was a complete pain in the ass. I couldn't compete. They didn't talk about Richieu, but that photo was a kind of reproach. He'd have become a doctor, and married a wealthy Jewish girl... the creep. (…) It's spooky, having sibling rivalry with a snapshot. (v. II, p. 14-15)

The composition process of *Maus* leads Art to take sight of a few inconsistencies, or unresolved matters in relation to his life. One of them is in relation to the suicide of his mother, with whom he claims wider identification, and which led him to create *Prisoner in Planet Hell – A Case History*, a four-page biographical strip where he depicts the agonizing struggle of coping with her suicide. The short work is entirely reproduced in the strand, portraying the moment he discovers the cause of her death, and also capturing the sad news as given by a doctor physically resembling Hitler.

The comparison between the first and second strand makes explicit Vladek's desire of reestablishing his 'older' pre-war self, contained by the irreplaceable presence of his first son and Anja, and frustratedly juxtaposed by the actual presence of Art, whose every aspect consists in disappointment (heavy smoking, shabby-clothed, "jobless") and Mala, perceived by him as a "gold-digger", among other failures. At the same time, Art too, by reconstructing his father's past and his own relation to it, discovers that his identity has been shaped upon absences – of his brother, an "ideal kid" to whom he believes to vehemently oppose; of his mother, whose diaries could have at least satiated the need of having his maternal point-of-view (the diaries had been burnt by Vladek, who says he intended to get rid of the memories they evoked; to increase Art's misfortune, the only information Vladek remembers of its content was the line "I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this", v. I, p. 159); of being himself a survivor of a trauma he did not experience.

The strand ends with the uncanny scene of Vladek, in his deathbed, calling Art by the name of Richieu, right after concluding his report, which finishes with the reencounter between him and Anja.

2.5 Third Strand: Facing the narrated content

While the third strand is considerably shorter than the previous ones, – taking place exclusively in the second chapter of volume II –, it also corresponds to what effectively turns *Maus* into a metafictional work. If the second strand is to be seen as a metanarrative that serves as a side-story to the process of turning Vladek's narrative into a graphic novel, the third strand heightens the metafictional quality by bringing a new perspective upon the now partially-closed and published *opus* (the volume I), provided by a new narratorial stance consonant with yet separate from the representation of Art as earlier presented; resounding the reader's position, this new representation of Art is now able to see *Maus* as a closed and published work.

Here, the author-protagonist no longer features Art depicted as a minimalist mouse, but as a human person in a mouse mask, confronting the overwhelming effects of his published, critically acclaimed first tome, in contrast to the emotional expense invested on his craft.

Chapter 2 is entitled *Time Flies*, a linguistic ambiguity that can be easily lost in translation. The cover of the chapter (each chapter brings a different illustration as front-cover, inspired on the ones used in Nazi propaganda claiming that Jews are an inferior race) differs from the others in that it brings a few flies scattered around the page. The occurrence the flies out of the frame of the illustration, two of them placed onto the lettering that says "Chapter Two". The flies can be read as if they had landed after hovering over the page, coming from out of the book, pointing to the materiality of the printed artwork, which is explored thematically in the following pages.

The beginning of the chapter brings a new set of elements which contrasts the register adopted earlier, such as the above-mentioned Art portrayed in human figure, along with low-case lettering for captions and speech bubbles. Under the top-page caption "Time flies", mouse-masked Art at his desk, surrounded by flies hovering near to his face, starts drawing somewhat occasional relations between dates and events: Vladek's death in 1982 and the period spent with him 3 years earlier; Vladek as a tin shop worker in Auschwitz in 1944, Art drawing "this page" in 1987; Art and Françoise's first child born in May 1987 and the death of over a hundred Hungarian Jews in May 1994; and finally, the publishing of *Maus'* first part in 1986, "a critical and commercial success" (vol II, p. 41).

The sequence leads to the disturbing half-page panel featuring mouse-masked Art resting in his working desk, which is placed on the top of a pile of mouse-men corpses where the flies seem to come from. At the window, a wired deck is made visible, resembling a lifeguard tower. The potency of the image lies on the juxtaposing of the two registers, human and anthropomorphic, signaling an accurate visual metaphor to indicate how Art has been absorbed by the narrative he has been pursuing. The last speech bubble points to someone else's voice, and it reads "Ok Mr. Spiegelman, we're ready to shoot".

New human characters, all wearing dog and cat masks, enter the scene as journalists in an attempt to obtain answers Art feels unable to deliver. The scene translates Art's awkward feeling after experiencing commercial success as an artist at the cost of revealing his father's story. After drastically reducing it in size and confessing to the journalists all he wants is "absolution" (vol II, p.42), he climbs down his now oversized chair, glancing at the lifeguard tower, which has now turned into a barbed-wired watching tower, in resemblance to those of prisons and concentration camps. Art's life is fully immersed in the reality of his book, as he walks on the streets crowded with mouse-men cadavers.

His walk finishes in his psychologist's home, where Art discusses his "career" in counterpoint to the maladjustment of having exposed his father, as well as trying to embrace a historical account in which he did not take part.

2.6 Uses of metafictional resources within the work

The present section provides a list of several metafictional devices observed in *Maus*. As earlier asserted, these devices furnish this graphic work with a series of self-reflexive elements through which the making of the artwork is thematized within the narrative itself.

Frame-story

Maus is structured as a *frame-story*, that is, a story that unfolds while its central characters aim to narrate another story. While the two types of frames, here comprehended as narrative strands, are clearly distinguishable in terms of formal

resources (visibly different settings; with 30 years separating the first frame from the second; verbal register) the development of the narrative increases the sensation of an unresolved conflict which is shared between the two diegetic levels. By intersecting two alternate narratives, some effects are obtained, such as how that artistic production impacts on the life of the artist, younger vs older Vladek, as well as a contrast between Vladek's perception of himself and Art's view of his father; and finally, the notion that the ghost of the Holocaust still looms over contemporary survivors and their descendants.

Metalepsis

In the third strand, which bears direct reference to *Maus* as a published work, Spiegelman provides a separate type of framing where he is able to produce an impressive visual metalepsis, making the two strands merge during a short sequence of pages, where Art, born decades after the end of WWII, is shown sharing the same setting with a pile of burning corpses. The contrastive effect of that metalepsis is essential to determine the presence of the past in Art's own present time.

Overt Diegetic mode of Self-Reflexivity

When Art first mentions (to the reader) about a book he's been planning on writing (p. 12), he is in fact talking about the book that we as readers are reading. This event as it appears signals that it is the author's desire not only to emphasize the history as told by Vladek; it signals that the process of accessing this narrative should also be taken into account, therefore suggesting that, at a long shot, this process might be revealing of something still occult. This revelation will appear with more depth only at the early chapters of the second volume, when Art starts to perceive how the construction of *Maus* has been affecting him at a very personal level, culminating in chapter 2 of vol. 2, where his identity crisis is finally unleashed. By connecting the work he is producing to the work the reader is accessing, Spiegelman and the reader share the vehicle that becomes the source of his anguish. Furthermore, the events portrayed in chapter two of vol. 2, where Spiegelman is temporarily pictured as a human wearing a mouse mask

instead of actually being a mouse, mark the moment where his perception of reality becomes permanently affected by his choice of working with mouse characters.

Metanovel

By addressing his intent of producing a book on his father's story, *Maus* flirts with the concept of *metanovel* as formulated by Lowenkron (1976, p. 434), "a work in which an inner fiction, narrated by an inner persona, is intercalated in an outer one". The author highlights the critical quality of works which feature metanovels, as they are found "in the intersection between the novel, which deals with people, manners and personal relationships, and the critical essay which surveys the architecture of a novel" (p. 344). By presenting the steps taken on the formulation of his work, *Maus* addresses specific issues regarding, for example, the best form to represent the distinct identity traits that compose the ethnic variations of characters, as well as impossible challenge to synthetize in a graphic work the immensurable complexity of a theme such as the Holocaust. Lowenkron explains that "the epistemological innovation implied by this technical intrusion of an inner fiction" – despite this 'innovation' dating back to the early metafictional works, such as the *Quijote* and *1001 Nights* – "is that the central conflict between fiction and reality is reproduced within the structure of the novel itself". Although his view centers on the concept of fictionality, it should be noticed that the conflict in *Maus* is not one in which fiction and reality clash. Rather, the situation established in Spiegelman's work is a conflict between the narrative reconstruction of his father's past and his own reality. Art's perception of his father's narrative resembles fiction, in the sense that he feels too disconnected to it, having trouble to imagine a scenario he has not personally witnessed. The conflict in Maus results from Art's realization that such a distant narrative is rather a crucial component on his own identity.

Self-referentiality

Self-referentiality is a metafictional device that highlights the artifactuality of the work within itself, that is, when the work borrows from its own status as an art product in order to exploit something in relation to its existence. In *Maus*, it happens in two

distinct forms, although simultaneously. In vol. 2, p, 41, Art makes direct references when he states “I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987”, and a few lines later, “In September 1986, after 8 years of work, *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success”. In addition, while verbalizing these sentences in the speech bubbles, Art is now designed in human traits, is wearing a mouse mask, in explicit reference to the animal register carried throughout the work.

The mask on his face illustrates the impact that constructing *Maus* has generated while being a vehicle of self-mirroring and identity exploitation. Through the aid of the mask, which circumscribes the distance between the "I" that takes responsibility in creating *Maus* (the author as a person) and the one presented as a mouse along the narrative, Spiegelman designs the appropriation of the textual artifact. In the case of *Maus*, which is autobiographic, incorporating the materiality of that artwork means absorbing the attempt to project his own self narrative on the pages. Under a functional perspective, this appropriation (which in fact is also valid for Vladek) comes to 'save the story', that is, to fill in the psychological and narrative blanks left throughout the pages. This self-narrative, conveyed as artwork, if not arising as a potential "truth", can at least be deemed standing for one.

2.7 Metafiction in service of narrative identity: portraying artmaking, attaining selfhood

The making of *Maus* is an integral part of this work. Were it Spiegelman’s main interest to solely represent, via comics, a reconstitution of the traumatic events experienced in the camps as they befell upon his parents’ life, why would it be necessary to bring along sections in which the process of construction of *Maus* becomes so evident? What is ascribed to the *making* of *Maus* that makes its portrayal desirable or relevant? Here, I contend that the reason for portraying the process of artmaking is that such a feature stresses how the conscious act of narration of one’s life story helps individuals who aim to understand the constructive dynamics of their own identity.

Maus is commonly addressed to as a graphic novel, although the term *novel,* frequently associated to fiction, raises issues regarding the biographic nature of the content it presents. As the book emphasizes the traumatic experiences outlived by the artist’s father during World War II, while also portraying the relationship between father and

son during the “research days”, it is tempting to describe it as a graphic *biography* or *memoir*, as it appears tagged in other long-length comic books, such as Alisson Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (Mariner, 2007) and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (Pantheon, 2007).Attempting to define the structure of *Maus*, *HHhH*’s author Laurent Binet refers to it as a non-fictional meta-novel (Binet, 2013).

Lato sensu, one could say that *Maus* mainly consists of Art Spiegelman’s effort to recreate his father’s narrative of the wartime. However, this assertion disregards the presence of its second strand, which features the artist on the pursue of this narrative, and even more severe, it ignores the complexity of the third strand, which features the author confronting the limitations of the comics media in relation to the struggle of apprehending the immeasurability of his main subject. In addition, he undergoes a crisis as he faces the effect the work has in his own sense of identity, as well as the uncanny feeling of having achieved critical and commercial success (through the publication of the first volume of the work) by exposing the personal tragic suffering of his father. The author is self-portrayed as visibly disoriented as he has now to deal with offers to profit from this successful and terrifying narrative, as well as with disturbing questions about the Holocaust whose answers he feels inapt to provide.

These additional strands constitute the distinguishing feature that turns this work into more than a review on the suffering imposed by the Nazi between the late 30s and mid-40s. The presence of Art as a character on a book, whose central story took place years earlier than his own birth, indicates that *Maus* is also a book about his own life, and how he relates to the contents he has approached. However, presenting himself in the process of interviewing his father, obtaining his reports and producing this book reveals that *Maus* is more than a narrative about making a book: it arouses issues tied to the search and reconstitution of an uncertain sense of identity, thus turning its creator into a co-protagonist who, in spite of not having experienced the camps, has to deal with the constitutive elements surrounding its representation – his father and their relationship, his personal and historical memory, their shared narrative as well as his own. Thus, the metafictional quality of *Maus* implies the centrality of the subject of creating this graphic memoir, a movement that engages in the transposition of narrative identities to an artistic composite.

In the metafictional sense, upbringing this narrative out of his father’s memory consists a narrative of its own, with its own context, purpose and consequences. In an interview

(Spiegelman for BBC News, 2011), the author said that his motivation for working on Holocaust through the eye of his father was, above all, a justification for working on a long comic, promoting its medium credibility by pursuing a complex theme. By presenting his father on the "present" of the second strand, the narrative counts on the reliability of the eye-witness report (reducing the distance between the reader and the reality of the camps, which would be farther in case Spiegelman, who wasn't in the camps, either took responsibility over the role of narrator or created a fictional, ideal or hypothetical one), providing the artistic quest with a dimension of documental, hence historical validity. In addition, as the subtitle 'A Survivor's Tale' suggests, *Maus* isn't so much an overview of the Holocaust, in the manner of a historical record, as it is about surviving it, relying on personal memory, therefore comprehending its inherent, humanly frailty. The presence of Vladek decades after the war amounts to the disquieting effect obtained by contrasting the motifs of mass murder and the continuity of life in a redemptive quality.

The conscious attempt to organize his father's story in consonance to his own perception of it, stressed by a blatant representation of narratorial activity on the part of both characters, foregrounds the topic of identity in *Maus*. Both central characters in the book, Vladek and Art, are apprehensive in concerning themselves as coherent personalities. Narrating their life stories can be read as an attempt to surmount this inadequacy, setting them on an introspective expedition to achieve stability and orientation through the aid of verbal and visual communication; Vladek through the penned/recorded interviews, Art through the manipulation of the formal tools offered by the comics, recalling, in a rather literal sense, what Mark Freeman terms "*rewriting the self*: the process by which one's past and indeed oneself is figured anew through interpretation" by "weaving (…) meanings into a whole pattern, *a narrative,* perhaps with a plot, designed to make sense of the fabric of the past" (Freeman, p. 4-9, original emphases).

Vladek has plenty of reasons to strive to find coherence regarding his own identity, as his story is pervaded with absences. Not only did he lose a son to the horrors of the German Reich, but also an entire framework of idealized prosperity and familiar communion was effaced from his life. As his quest for survival unfolds during the Nazi years, his self-appreciation is constantly challenged or replaced: his "handsomeness" turns into ill-looking; his intelligence and social skills, which had formerly made him

enjoy social esteem within his community, become essential tools for surviving another day; the comfortable life he once relished gave room to years of inhospitable conditions. In addition, he emigrates to the US, leaving his homeland and mother tongue behind, and has to face Anja's suicide, who could not bear being the last survivor of her parental family. Vladek, attempting to evade thoughts on his late wife, also gets rid of Anja's journals, as they "remind to [him]self what happened" (vol I, p. 158). Therefore, by telling his story to Art, Vladek attempts to reconstruct the past, creating conditions to restore his own identity. The narratorial act presented by Vladek makes visible the role, attributed to narrative, of discretizing elements of memory which, prior to the period of interviews, rested as an indefinite amalgam of undiscernible, co-related traumas. In effect, the use of metafictional devices combined with a narrative that goes back and forth in the timeline helps illustrate the task of putting together the pieces of an identity puzzle.

The blanks left in Vladek's identity, pointed by the absences stressed above, become even more evident as the character demonstrates dissatisfaction towards Mala and Art. By reliving the facts stored in memory, Vladek starts reliving his "old self", prior to the trauma, setting a great contrast to his new life, where Mala and Art, respectively greedy and lazy in his view, fail to substitute Anja and Richieu. It is no coincidence that Vladek, immersed in the maze of memory where the past and present become indiscernible, calls Art by the name of his late son, in a rather revealing Freudian slip.

Art too has to manage his own identity blanks – the loss of his mother, who took her own life in his youth; the suicide note that she did not leave; the journals, meant for his appreciation, though he did not have a chance to access; the absent-presence of the brother he never met, but whose image was always hanged on his parents' wall, inspiring a brother's rivalry he saw himself doomed to lose; the Holocaust trauma which makes him feel like a survivor without having any participation.

While serving as a means to spur the memory, the narratorial act as devised (by Art's project, like an art director) becomes, above all, a vehicle to convey identity in narrative form. The task forces both characters to select and stablish the events that will constitute the narrative of their autobiographical story. The narrative account of the characters' lives uncovers the respective blanks upon which their "selves" get constituted. Narrative

making allows the characters to locate these blanks in their life stories, allowing them to work them out and finally move on.

The use of metafictional devices in *Maus* points to the work as an artifact, to the impact of its creation in the lives of its co-narrators as a duplication of reality, due to the function it fills within their identity narratives – that of fulfilling the absences, proposing answers for the silent questions which the protagonists had long been living with. To the extent that the act of 'narrating' performed by Vladek becomes art in Spiegelman's hand, we can say that Art and Vladek collaborated in the production of an artifact based on the reconstruction of their shared, however imprecise reality. By telling his story, and above all by capturing into a narrative that will give birth to a book, Vladek is able to bring Anja and Richieu back to life, perpetuating their life in the materiality of Art's talent, turning memory into literary fact and re-living its (partially) happy ending in Sosnowiec.

Needless to say, exploring the theme of identity is not by any chance exclusive to *Maus*. Left alone the genre of *graphic novels*/*memoirs*, Alisson Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* also bring to mind the idea visual narratives/graphic works which explore the theme of identity construction and narrativization. The works mentioned indeed have the quality of promoting biographic narratives in the spring of youth, which accounts decisively to the theme of portraying identity and self-understanding. However, as witty as these works are in manipulating visual and narrative resources, they do not fall in the category of metafictional or metanarrative works. Although both works certainly foreground the topic of identity construction, in rare moments do they point 'a finger to themselves', making its constructiveness an issue to be considered on its own right. In comparison, *Fun Home* even gets closer to *Maus* than Satrapi's book, for Bechdel's narrative also addresses a father-daughter relationship, the reconstruction of the past and mutual influence regarding a shared sense identity construction. However, the process of writing, in spite of all of the intertextual acrobatics that furnish the book with rich references from western literary classics which bear a great importance on the development of the author-co-protagonist's identity in different levels (artistic, personal, sexually), is hardly addressed; differently from *Maus*, the book as a thing in the world, its artifactuality, does not erupt in the narrative as a theme to be regarded, nor is its process ever issued or its formal elements ever "problematized".

On the other hand, the metafictional resource in *Maus* is made very prominent. From the earliest pages the reader acknowledges that the second strand will explicitly address the making of the work. In comparison to *Fun Home* and *Persepolis*, *Maus* too would be hardly discernible as meta*ficional*, if one considers the nature of contents narrated in relation to the events that took place in the real work, leaving the critic with the automatic choice of calling it a *metanarrative*. Monika Flüdernik makes it expedient to carefully discern both terms from several others, heading as further as to a narratological look upon the uses of terms in German and English, observing translational points of collision and discrepancies among them. In her essay[8] , she departs from the definitions offered by Ansgar Nünning: "metanarration 'thematizes the act and/or process of narration', whereas metafiction 'discloses the artefactual nature of the narrated or the act of narration'" (Nünning *Apud* Flüdernik, 2003, p. 4). In this view, a metanarration will address the making of the narrative, posing questions which draw a relation between the contents narrated and the act of narrating in itself. Meanwhile, metafictional works will pose questions in relation to the constructiveness of the narrated world which, through the eyes of the characters, the manipulation of formal elements, or even by the decoding labor of the reader, is discovered to be subject to someone's will to create.

Indeed, employing the term *fictional* for discussing *Maus* seems to be cause of discomfort, since its contents, however selected by the right of choice of its authors (bearing in mind the words of Said *apud* Meyer and Kurtz, who agree that no narrative account can be said to accurately represent reality), are not fictional. Regardless of how much of an authorial voice, who selects the events at its own 'fictional' convenience (Kurtz), Vladek's testimony goes beyond 'his own view' of the Holocaust, given the historical proportion conveyed by his testimonial. With that in mind, the extended commentaries as they appear in the second strand, where Art deliberately explores the making of *Maus*, would rather send the work to the category of *metanarrative*, since "metanarrative comments are concerned with the act and/or process of narration, and not with its fictional nature" (Neuman and Nünning, Living Handbook of Narratology, online). By portraying the narrative quest shared between Art and Vladek, *Maus* thematizes the process of narration without questioning or disclosing the reliability or "truthness" of the contents portrayed, especially because "metanarration can also be

[8]Flüdernik, 2003.

found in many non-fictional narrative genres and media" (*ibidem*), allowing biographies and/or graphic memoirs to take part in this catalog.

Nevertheless, the animal metaphor as resorted to by Spiegelman – which could stand for the 'only' fictional device to separate it from the real world, amounting to a 'creative' choice for a biographic account (but what else to expect from a graphic novel if not facetious visual scrutiny?), hardly creating any suspicion about the reality of the facts narrated – is itself made object of inquiry in *Maus*, more specifically in vol. II c. 2, when new light is thrown to the prefix *meta-*. The "making of" quality of metafictionality, as presented in the second strand, is turned into a meditation on the power of narrative not only to evoke past and memory of one's life-story, but also to produce a transformative perspective of reality on the narrated subject.

The representation of Art wearing a mouse mask circumscribes a game of perspectives, typical of metafictional works, between the author's production (*Maus* itself) and an outer view of himself in relation to it, two diegetic levels that mingle in an integrative and symbolic manner. Out of this process, emerges the new consciousness of an ambivalent sense of identity – the "I" that either writes and the "I" that is written.

The presentation of the author as a character who is outside – above, if one prefers – of his represented world, the one inbuilt in his metanovel, represents an abrupt chasm between the two levels of representation – anthropomorphic and human –, the latter, if not directly taking part on the same of the reader (for it also belongs to the realm of the represented), at least resembling it. If in the one hand we have, on the second strand, the staging of the act of interviewing and learning his father's story, on the other hand this third strand inaugurates a new level of diegetic representation, whose central character, despite of sharing the same identity of the "Art" of the second strand, is now conceived to emphasize authorship. Thus, the author promotes a one-of-a-kind mode of *myse-en-abyme*, unique in its being oriented outwards, in the direction of the reader, who shares with third-strand Art, the capacity of perceiving *Maus* "from the outside". So far, it can be established that *Maus* has been largely structured as a metanarrative and briefly – as the third strand takes less of 10 pages of the whole work –as a metafictional graphic memoir.

In *Narrative and Time in Spiegelman's Maus,* McGlothlin proposes a three-parted mode of reading *Maus* based on Genette's system of classifying narrative in levels of story,

discourse and narrating. The author assigns the first strand in *Maus* to the level of *story*, "Genette's term for the signified or narrative content" (McGlothlin, 2003, p. 181). This association is enhanced by her reading of Tabachnick's ordering of *Maus'* strands according to conventions of genre, which brings Vladek's story of his survival as an epic narrative, 'a "monstrous odyssey". The second strand displays the scene of this narration, when Art meets his father to listen and record the interviews, adjusting, in Genette's typology, with the location of the narrative *discourse*. Adopting Tabachnick's angle, "the middle layer [second strand], which focuses on Art[ie]'s relationship to his parents and the effects of their Holocaust experience on his own life, corresponds to the *Bildungsroman*". Finally, the third strand, which presents Art as the authorial instance of M*aus* in direct confrontation with his creation, stands for Genette's level of *narrating*, without which "there is no statement and, sometimes even no narrative content, (…) since the narrative discourse is *produced* by the action of telling" (Genette, 1983, p. 26). In Tabachnick's scheme, this strand falls into the category of *Künstlerroman* (German for artist-novel), a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* which, more than portraying the individual's "coming of age", centers on the protagonist's psychological and technical growth as an artist.

By proposing such model of reading, McGlothin's perception of *Maus* enables the reader to engage in distinct yet simultaneous modes of reading. Departing from the idea that the construction of *Maus* implies either the exploitation or the pursuit of narrative identities (both in the case of Vladek and Art), it is also possible to assign different roles for each diegetic level in terms of obtaining a coherent grasp on selfhood, which is promoted by the act of narrating as performed by each character.

Considering McAdams' and McLean's (2013) review of modes in which life stories are codified in order to achieve "a coherent account of identity in time" (p. 233), Vladek's story acquire the quality of a *redemptive* narrative construct, where "scenes in which a demonstrably 'bad' or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably 'good' or emotionally positive outcome" (p. 234). This view is backed up by perceiving that Vladek, who had to endure extreme conditions in the concentration camps, is in the end redeemed by meeting Anja in the last moment. In addition, his readiness to address, within his narratorial act, his eagerness to employ manual, social and intellectual skills also highlight the compensating facet with which he endows his narrative, as he perceives that he was constantly redeemed for his quickmindedness by

taking advantage in several contexts where the vast majority under the same roof could not avoid oppression, humiliation and, ultimately, death. Providing a narrative with such a satisfactory ending appears as a manner to overcome his traumatic experiences by drawing a concise picture where his identity remains coherent and in control of the facts rather than shattered by all physical and psychological violence and losses he suffered along those years.

Meanwhile, the process underlying the construction of *Maus* – from gathering the necessary information out of his father's reports to struggling to find a manner to turn it into an artwork – becomes the occasion when Art is compelled to reevaluate his own position in relation to his family and his self-perception while belonging to the second generation of Holocaust survivors. This recognition amounts to a perception of the second strand in terms of *meaning-making*, another mode of surmounting one's life-story according to McAdams and McLean: "The degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event. Coding ranges from no meaning (low score) to learning a concrete lesson (moderate score) to gaining a deep insight about life (high score)" (p. 234). According to Brown (1993), the frequent meetings with his father combined with the story learned leave him "with the feeling that he is an intruse in his own family, a person who does not belong. To be fair, he does belong, but it is just as if he had missed the (pre-holocaust) peak of happiness once shared between his family" (p.136). Therefore, the occasion created for the making of the book throws a new light onto his mother's suicide, as well as his difficult relationship with his father.

As for the third strand, the representation of Spiegelman in which his authorial significance is visually and diegetically addressed can be seen as a struggle to demonstrate *agency*, the third category of discursive framework out of the few pinpointed by McAdams and McLean. Although Art does not proceed to display, at least verbally, "demonstrations of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement or status" (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 234) – rather revealing himself on the verge of a mental breakdown –, it is the visual disposition of information that puts him in a place of control: the author figure, sitting on his drawing table, glancing at his own work, wearing the mask of the characters he created. The character is aware that, in the course of his production, he has been transformed by the contents learned on the first strand as well as by the experience of turning it into a graphic narrative. In an analogous situation to that observed in Meyer's appreciation of Kate Atkinson's novels, "telling the story of

her life might really be a means to reconstruct the past and thereby her own identity" (2010, p. 449), bringing to mind the concept of narrative identity as formulated by Ricoeur:

> "Not only do '[s]ubjects recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves', but 'a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity.' (Ricoeur *apud* Meyer, 2010, p. 448)

In the third case, Art establishes the metafictional position in which he is presented at the same level of the reader, witnessing *Maus* as a thing in the world, featuring himself as a reader of his own *opus*. In this view, the act of reading becomes the irreversible appropriation of the events narrated, yet without bearing direct involvement with the events described other than telling it. In a sense, telling and reading become analogous exercises of absorbing the depth of the story told, as if inviting the reader to wear the mouse mask, putting on the shoes of Jews enthralled in the figure of Vladek. While inviting to consider a diegesis mainly formed by historical past (first strand), demonstrating the capacity of the textual artifact to evoke the past (second strand), Spiegelman's intrusion in the reader's level of reality (third strand) demands from him a position within the reality exposed by it. In McGlothlin words,

> Rather than allowing the reader to immerse herself comfortably in the mouse-and-cat universe, Art's wearing of the mask (…) ejects the reader from the complacency of the animal metaphor and points to both its artifice and its effectiveness as a normalized aesthetic device. (McGlothlin, 2003, p. 183)

The movement of recollection of Art's selfhood can be described according to Ricoeur's understanding of one's apprehension of narrative identity, as meticulously interpreted by Patrick Crowley. As reported by the author, "narrative identity is realized in three successive moments. The first, what Ricoeur calls *prefiguration*, is the individual's experience of being-in-the-world that is semantically construed but without clear form or figure" (Crowley, 2003, p. 2). For Spiegelman, this would stand for the ghostly presence of a vague Holocaust story which took the life of his brother, brought his mother into committing suicide, affected permanently his father's personality and made him live as if something was always occult or uncertain. In *MetaMaus* (2011), the author comments that his parents

> "didn't talk in any coherent or comprehensive way about what they had lived through. It was always a given that they had lived through "the War", which was their term for the Holocaust. I don't think I even heard the word "Holocaust" till the late '70s, but I was aware of "The War" for as long as I was aware of anything, just from passing references in our home." (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 12)

"The second", continues Crowley, "is that of *configuration* where the contingencies of experience are selected, shaped and ordered within the plot of narrative" (2003, p. 3). In *Maus*, this stage is translated into Art's desire and attempt to transform that blurred story into a narrative properly elaborated, furnishing it with characters, localizing events in time, develop the alternance between settings and providing it with a suitable aesthetics, which in case takes form in the "provocative generic choice of the comics and animal fable" (Hirsch, 1993, p. 9).

Finally, "the third moment", coined *refiguration*, "occurs in the noetic act of reading where the self comes to a greater understanding of human experience over time through the mediation of narrative. This final act results in a transformative understanding of one's self in the world" (Crowley, p. 3). This last phase is demonstrated by the incorporation of that narrative produced, symbolized in the act of wearing the mask, where Art comes, if not to full realization, then to a better understanding of the juxtaposition between his own self and this colossal narrative which somehow has always surrounded his personal experience of the world. In conclusion, 'the fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we call their narrative identity (Ricoeur *apud* Crowley, 2003, p. 3).

The final presentation of the functions occupied by the different strands *Maus* can be observed on the chart below.

	First Strand	**Second Strand**	**Third Strand**
Genette	Story	Discourse	Narration
Tabachnick's	Epic	*Bildungsroman*	*Künstlerroman*
McAdams	Redemption	Meaning-Making	Agency
Ricoeur	Prefiguration	Figuration	Refiguration

As much as the reader would feel comfortable by understanding *Maus* as a book *about* the Holocaust, it remains clear that Spiegelman's book offers captivating insights on subject of narrating, establishing an analogous position to Stephan Freedman's reading of Paul Auster's use of metafictionality, through which the New York writer is able to explore "'the room of the book', a place where life and writing meet in an unstable, creative, and sometimes dangerous encounter" (Fredman, 2004, p. 7). Opposing to Freedman's view, which suggests that Auster's books "are allegories about the impossibly difficult task of writing, in which he investigates the similarly impossible task of achieving identity - through characters plagued by a double who represents the unknowable self" (Fredman, 2004, p. 12), *Maus*'s minute exploration of metanarrational and metafictional devices seem to unveil the formation of narrative identity, highlighting the unique quality of narrative making as a tool to promote self-understanding.

3. *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*

3.1 The Author

In 2002, when he was discovered, the literary community was entertained by appearance of Jonathan Safran Foer, a youngster debutant writing with the confidence and talent that many "grown-up" artists still lack. Majored in Philosophy, he took a course on creative writing in Princeton, where he had Joyce Carol Oates as an adviser for his final paper – later expanded into his first novel, object of the present analysis.

Everything Is Illuminated has had many positive reviews, all adorned in a variety of opulent adjectives: "shattering", "wildly exuberant", "rambunctious", to quote a few from the paperback's cover. The author's supposedly early age was closely associated to his meteoric success, and to be fair, although authors like Zadie Smith, Bret Easton Ellis and David Foster Wallace (to say of authors not too removed from Foer's generation) were also on the brink of 'finding their voices' at the age of 25, none of them, despite all the success waiting for them, had such resounding beginning. It should be remarked that Safran Foer had already edited a compilation of short-stories (featuring one of his own) based on the singular meticulousness of the visual artist Steven Cornell, an interest for precious simplicity and passion for small details that would be fully developed in his first novelistic effort.

Today, Safran Foer is no longer a young writer, though remaining a successful one, despite his rather short production. The hasty appraisal lead to the natural path of the American cultural market: in 2005, *Everything Is Illuminated* was adapted into a movie (dir. Liev Schreiber). In the same year, he published his acclaimed best-seller, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which was a cause for fuzz, perhaps for the quickness of bringing the 9/11 to fiction, creatively exploring the capabilities of visual communication within the novel genre, adjusting to the trend of the times in contemporary literature. He invested greatly on typographic invention as well as on visual aids, such as photography, drawing and a flipbook, all seeking to reconfigure the New York traumatic episode in a child's imaginary. This too would get an adaptation, (2012, dir. Stephen Daldry). In both works, along with the gift of story-telling, Foer demonstrates an inquietude towards the potentialities of language based creations as well as the book as its medium, therefore investing a great deal of his efforts on confronting and celebrating the writing act.

The writer would let down most of his followers as it took him 11 years to produce another long-length piece of original fiction. Meanwhile, Safran Foer took advantage of his popularity and prestige, allied with the concerns of paternity, to voice out his pro-animal cause position. The author traveled around the US visiting slaughter-houses in order to have a full grasp of how the industry of meat is structured, and the enterprise culminated in a successful title in the vegetarian canon, named *Eating Animals* (2009).

In the following year, another ambitious project took place in his career. *Tree of Codes* (2010) accounts the re-working of someone else's novel, namely Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles.* There, he literally cut a huge number of words off the original novel, leaving the holes in the page to create a new story out of the absent words, in a work that resembles less a book than a sculptural object. Due to the obvious difficulties implied in the production of such product, the book has been out of print since its year of publishing.

Finally, in 2016 Safran Foer returns to the ground of fiction story-telling with the long-waited *Here I am* (the title almost an answer to a certain question on the mouth of critics and readers who thought he could have abandoned the 'traditional' novel), a work twice as long as his previous creations, where he approaches the Jewish identity from a new angle, both in relation to the solid Jewish American literary tradition and to his first book, whose connections to the theme shall be explored below.

3.2 The work

While *Everything Is Illuminated* is a novel dedicated to the Holocaust trauma as its most apparent theme, it challenges the reader's sense orientation in relation to the facts narrated, while at the same time delving into the value of narrative making in the human experience. Regardless of the nature of the narratives inbuilt in human lives, whether factual or invented, what is at stake in this novel – aside from the most evident issues that it attends to, namely Nazism in Eastern European countries, trauma and mortality – is the individual capacity of management of one's self-narrative, which, much like in *Maus*, is achieved through the scene of literary storytelling, firstly motivated by the desire of producing art, but later to be perceived as an attempt to have a deeper "illumination" on the comprehension of selfhood.

Comparisons to Spiegelman's work are unavoidable, especially to the extent of themes, as both are deeply concerned with the appropriation of the Holocaust's narrative by means of artmaking. Furthermore, also like *Maus,* this novel results from the combination of 3 distinct yet entwined diegetic levels, also guided by two distinct narrators, which eventually unfolds into an attempt to clarify their personal engagement with the story produced.

The first strand emphasizes the whimsical story of the Jewish shtetl of Trachimbrod, in rural Ukraine, beginning at the story that originated the narrator's genealogy, in the late 18th century, until its massive destruction, in March 1942, after a sudden Nazi assault from which only a few could manage to survive. One of these was Safran, the narrator's grandfather, who died only 5 weeks after arriving in the US, the last of a lineage of "Safrans" offered to the reader across the established timeline. As it turns out, this strand results from the narrator's trip to modern Ukraine – which is chronicled in the second strand – as he hoped to discover more of his ancestors, and hence of his own origins.

The details of this trip are therefore acknowledged in the second strand, through the narration of the Ukrainian character Alex Perchov, a late teenager (aged 20, like the previous narrator) working for Heritage Tour, a family business allegedly specialized in guiding tourists who seek to visit the locations inhabited by ascendants scattered in the Ukrainian territory. Exhilarated by the chance of meeting an American *and* a writer *and* a Jew for the first time, he sees the opportunity to escape the monotonous life of domestic violence, economic restraints and narrow perspectives. After the actual trip takes place in the timeline of the book, Alex and Jonathan start exchanging the chapters of the books they are simultaneously writing. While for Jonathan it is the case of recreating the past of his forebears, for Alex it becomes the possibility of reinventing himself through fiction, so that he can finally accept who he is out of it.

A third strand, also delivered by Alex, comprehends a story ("non-fictional", within the novel's universe) running in parallel to the other, openly creative ones. Here, the epistolary register is adopted to create an environment of literary criticism, second language literacy enhancement (as Alex carries his writing in English) and revealing confidences. An interesting movement is refined along the work as the reader is able to trace both the "genetics" of Alex writing competence and its evolution, contrasting the contours he employs in his "artistic" project – where he can give shape to his idealized

self – and the way he really feels about the shocking discoveries made during the trip, which brings his own family – and therefore, himself – closer to the devastation of Trachimbrod than he could ever had imagined.

Apart from the reality of the Nazi persecution in itself, other coincidences with reality also spice up the content narrated. It starts by the fact that Jonathan Safran Foer turns himself into one of the narrators, exploring, from a fictional perspective, his familiar lineage, constantly referring to the fictional characters as his great-great-great-(…)-grandparents. In addition, the trip to Ukraine portrayed in Alex's strands indeed took place in the author's life, during his studies at Princeton. The place he aimed at finding, Trachimbrod, is a creation of his own, though inspired by the actual name of the shtetl, Trochenbrod. In the soviet period, the region was renamed as Sofiowka, which in Jonathan's book refers to a character.

3.3 First Strand: Heyday to Fall of Trachimbrod: The "Safrans" lineage

This diegetic level mainly comprehends two thematic spheres: the history of Trachimbrod, from the days prior to its naming, until its destruction, and the progression of the narrator's familiar lineage. While the use of a homonymous alter-ego hints to the topic of identity (either by proposing a fictional familiar biography or playing with the relation between the person who writes and the voice that narrates), the scattered occurrences in which the theme of writing, fictionalization of life stories and art studies/art-making come up may request an attentive reading.

It all starts with an accident in a nameless shtetl, "when Trachim B's double axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod river" (p. 8[9]). A number of unexpected items (like a map of the universe and petals of some sunken forget-me-not) start emerging from the water, colouring the scene with charming poetry. In commotion, the members of the community gather on the shore to speculate about the event as the small body of a baby is seen on the surface of the river. The reader is introduced to a few of these characters, such as "Menasha, the physician", "the candle dipper Mordecai C", "Avrum R, the lapidary" and "grieving Shanda T", widow of the "deceased philosopher Pinchas T", who, in his only notable paper, 'To the Dust: From Man You

[9] Direct quotations from the novel will be addressed by page number with reference to *Everything Is Illuminated* by Penguin Books, 2002.

Came and to Man You Shall Return,' argued it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed" (p.11).

A lottery was carried out in order to find the baby a suitable father, and the winner turns out to be the "disgraced usurer Yankel D", referred by the narrator as his "great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather". While such information denotes that the book is being written in the "present" by an individual able to relate to this past narrative, we learn that this individual is called Jonathan Safran Foer, the American writer to whom Alex refers in his own strands.

At this point, the reader is introduced to one of the supplementary texts that compose that universe, here the case being "The book of recurrent dreams", whose title is self-explanatory, and which seems to entertain as much as to retain a function within that community as they write, read, share and learn more of themselves through its contents. One of the many entries "reproduced" in the novel, particularly relevant to our reading, is named "The dream that we are our fathers", and it says

> "(…) So simple. In the water I saw my father's face, and that face saw the face of it's father, and so on, and so on, reflecting backward to the beginning of time, to the face of God, in whose image we were created." (p. 41)

We are then introduced to the Yankel D, whose original name, prior to the time of the narrative, was Safran. He lost his usurer's license due to unexplained reasons, being sentenced to wear an incriminating abacus bead on a string around his neck, signaling his loss of prestige within the community. "Before the trial, Yankel-then-Safran was unconditionally admired" (p. 46). Yankel happens to be the one – yet the farthest in the narrator's genealogy – to insert the artistic interest in the lineage of Jonathan, as if it were the first impulse which would have reached its completion in the form of this novel, making it seem as if the novel, much like the narrator, were seeking for its own roots too. The character is described as having had (before the trial) profuse relations with art studies:

> "He was the president (and treasurer and secretary and only member) of the Comitee for the Good and Fine Arts, and founder, multiterm chairman and only teacher of the school of Loftier Learning, which met in his house and whose classes were attended by Yankel himself." (p. 46)

The narrator attributes to Yankel the most individualistic – not to say solitary – aspect of being an artist (or closely related to it), a choice, it reads, that can even lead to one's

death[10]. This loneliness is compounded by the departure of his esteemed wife, who left him with his lawyer, leaving only a note saying "I had to do it for myself". He will only have his faith restored when fathering Brod, the baby named after the river where she was miraculously found.

When Brod is finally given to Yankel, he develops a deep affection for the baby, feeling compelled to find a manner to explain the maternal absence without breaking her heart. For that, Yankel makes up an entire story to explain the birth of Brod, creating a narrative for her "late" mother – who died "painless, in childbirth" – and eventually falling in love with his own invention. "So he created more stories – wild stories, with undomesticated imagery and flamboyant characters. He invented stories so fantastic that she had to believe" (p. 77). Considering the motivations of Jonathan's narrative, it is interesting to notice that this episode mirrors the role of fictional writing within the project itself, which is to provide an alternative, fictional version of the past in order to explain the present.

Brod grows into an incredibly complex character, and so does their mutual affection, delivering to the reader a handful of warmhearted prose.

> Yankel made every effort to prevent Brod from feeling like a stranger, from being aware of their age difference, their genders. He would leave the door open when he urinated (always sitting down, always wiping himself after), and would sometimes spill water on his pants and say, *Look, it also happens to me*, unaware that it was Brod who spilled water on her pants to comfort him. When Brod fell from the swing in the park, Yankel scraped his own knees against the sandpaper floor of his bathtub and said, *I too have fallen*. When she started to grow breasts, he pulled up his shirt to reveal his old, dropped chest and said, *It's not only you*. (p. 82)

Among all things that could describe her eccentricities, her obsessive listing of different kinds of sadnesses should be highlighted (613, to be precise), her hunger for impossible achievements ("She learned impossibly difficult songs on her violin", only to complain: "*It's so terrible! I must write something that not even I can play!", p.79*), and her frank inaptitude to comprehend the nature of love. Even though she could not feel satisfied to direct her love to any tangible object in the world, not even to Yankel ("They were strangers, like my grandmother and me", says Jonathan, p. 82), each other "was the

[10]In the effort of remembering to whom the wrecked wagon could possibly belong, the dubious and disliked character Sofiowka retracts from a previous thought by saying "No, wait. He died from being an artist (p. 9)

closest thing to a deserving recipient of love that the other would find", causing them to sustain the most amiable a parental relationship can get. In this context, appears the meaningful distortion of the facts of reality, again conferring fiction a rather practical part to play within their relationship.

> And when she said, *Father, I love you*, she was neither naïve nor dishonest, but the opposite: she was wise and truthful enough to lie. They reciprocated the great and saving lie—that our love for things is greater than our love for our love for things—willfully playing the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life. (p. 83)

As Yankel was already 72 when elected for fathering Brod, he starts to feel that his life is moving towards its end. Afraid of the consequences that the process of aging imposes to memory, he writes key information about his life-story, literally transforming his bedroom ceiling in a reminder of his own identity.

> *You used to be married, but she left you*, above his bureau. *You hate green vegetables*, at the far end of the ceiling. *You are a Sloucher*[11], where the ceiling met the door. *You don't believe in an afterlife*, written in a circle around the hanging lamp. (p. 83)

A short moment after his death, Yankel is found by Brod in his library, while in bedroom "his lipstick autobiography came flaking off [the] ceiling" (p. 97). At the same time, a figure appears on the window – it is the Kolker (meaning "a person coming from the region of Kolki") named Shalom, winner of the competition for a sack of gold coins, one of the most interesting attractions of Trachimday along with the float parade. Trachimday, it should be noted, is the name of the annual festival of the shtetl, which aimed to remember the wreck of the wagon and the baby's appearance.

In a movement of substitution, the Kolker marries Brod, proceeding with the continuation of Jonathan's lineage. The couple lives an intense marriage until the last breath of the Kolker's life. Despite their graceful loving and devotional relationship, a tragic incident in the flour mill altered the dynamics of their marriage. In the night before the event, "Brod said '*don't go'* (to work) to her husband, too familiar with the flour mill's course of taking without warning the lives of its young workers" (p. 212). Later, the reader is informed of how a disk-saw blade escaped the engines of the mill, spinning through the working area and finishing its journey "embedded perfectly

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[11]*Slouchers* and *Uprighters* is a subdivision meant for grouping the Jews of Trachimbrod, respectively, between "progressive" or "modern" and "orthodox". Only the latter would make use of the shtetl's synagogue, and the former would be constantly hostilized by them.

vertical in the middle of his skull (p. 125). The Kolker, it is said, “was barely hurt at all” (p. 126). However, the accident caused him a strong Tourette’s syndrome, besides turning him unrecognizably violent. For this reason, the Kolker had his young life shortened, and when death finally started to surround him, Brod “persuaded him to change his name for a second time” (p. 136). Resembling the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was punished by the gods for trying to deceive death, Brod thought that the name change “would confuse the Angel of Death when He came to take to Kolker away (…). So Brod named him Safran”. Almost simultaneously, Brod gives birth to their baby while Shalon-then-Kolker-now-Safran dies”, and without ever acknowledging the exact moment of his death (“the house was so consumed with new life that no one was aware of new death, p. 139), she found herself unable to homage her husband by naming the newborn after him, since “the Jewish custom forbade the naming of a child after a living relative. So instead she named him Yankel, like her two other children”.

From this episode, it is possible to infer that all male characters of this family might carry either the name of the original Safran or its analogous name choice, Yankel, until the day it reaches the narrator, Jonathan *Safran* Foer, making the name to conform as a distinctive identity feature of his lineage.

Retracting from providing an entire genealogy ranging from 1791 until his own generation, Jonathan makes a huge temporal jump in the narrative, leaving a blank between the death of the Kolker, in the beginning of the 19th century, and the birth of his grandfather, in the early 20th (“And it was this Safran for whom my grandfather, the kneeling groom, was named”, p. 136). Instead, the narrator makes use of a device to separate past and present while still connecting them into a continuous narrative flow: the Dial, best known as sundial, term for sun-clock. By attaching a disk-saw blade into the head of the Kolker, a symbolic tool for the passage of time is build precisely in the body of that character, who is turned into a bronzed dial statue as a tribute to his strength and vigilance. Accordingly, Jonathan’s grandfather goes to the Dial in search of advice from the Kolker, his great-great-great-grandfather, whose monument had to be rebronzed every month due to the overwhelming rubs and kisses it received from its worshipers, making it look less like the original Kolker and more like its farthest descendants.

> “For each recasting, the craftsmen modeled the Dial’s face after the faces of his male descendants—reverse heredity. (So when my grandfather thought he saw that he was

> growing to look like his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was growing to look like him. His revelation was just how much like himself he looked.)". (p. 140)

Safran, the narrator's grandfather, plays a key role in the novel, since it is mainly because of him that Jonathan goes to Ukraine to find about his family origins. He is depicted as a prolific lover, being in charge, since very young, of the (sexual) "consolation" of the widows of the shtetl. His "intimate" expertise, despite his early age (he was only ten when started to undertake such tasks), is related to an odd deficiency of nutrients during his infancy – odd for resulting from the extraordinary condition of having been born with teeth, which would have made "his mother's nipples bloody and sore", and which eventually "made breastfeeding impossible" (p. 165). The condition caused him to grow without movements in his right arm, which caused pity on the widows and would end up working as a rather strange erotic tool. Among a whole set of attributions, his moveless arm prevented him from a) working in the fateful flour mill; b) getting sent off to be killed in hopeless battles against the Nazis; c) dying trying to swim back on the Brod river to save his wife when Trachimbrod was under attack; d) drowning in the river (p. 166). Lastly, "his arm saved him again when it caused Augustine", an enigmatic (anti)character whose presence remains unsolved in the novel, "to fall in love with him and save him". A picture of his grandfather with this woman was the only clue Jonathan had when departing to Ukraine, although he was never able to find any trace of her.

The cyclic lineage chaining the four Safrans of the novel – Yankel, the Kolker, the grandfather and Jonathan – has their identity consolidated through the device incapsulated by the Dial. This mystical figure elicits an identitarian unity that embraces the sequence of Safrans who share a common, sanguine memory, as if perpetuating the same string of life. Memory, after all, is perhaps the most imperative among all Jewish businesses.

The concept of memory, it should be noticed, is a strong presence in Jonathan's lengthy family chronicle, just as if it were itself a haunting character. In this work, memory and writing entangle in such a manner as if they were indistinguishable concepts. On the part of its narrator, writing is turned into the means for exploring memory. Thus, this work, within its (fictional) biographic context, will consist of a release of memory

through writing. In a sense, the act of telling as performed in this novel may find correspondence with a Jewish sacred text called *Haggadah*.

In 2012, Jonathan Safran Foer had an article published in the New York Times, where he explained and exposed his motivations for leaving his own writings aside in order to invest in another project. He was talking about a new, revisited version of the *Haggadah*, the Jewish guidebook "whose main core is the retelling of the Exodus from Egypt" (Safran Foer, 2012). While the *Haggadah* literally means *The Telling*, he explains that the book is read yearly during the first night of Passover, as a ritualistic act of preserving the origins and the memory of the Jewish tradition.

At first, Jonathan's strand holds similarity with the *Haggadah* in that both aim at telling a story that helps to shape the identity consolidation of a group of people – in the Jewish text, the Jews; in Jonathan's strand, the inhabitants and descendants of Trachimbrod.

As previously mentioned, the "baptism" of the shtetl only happens after the incident in which a wagon – where the name *Trachim* could be read – sinks in the Brod river, whence emerges a floating baby (bringing up the natural allusion with Moses floating on the Nile in a basket). A few days after the episode, "an irascible magistrate in Lvov had demanded a name for the nameless shtetl (…) that would be used for new maps and census recordings" (p. 50). Yankel, previously chosen to care after the baby, had his idea elected in a new lottery. His suggestion, *Trachimbrod* (linking the wagon's and the river's names), performs the consolidation of the identity of the shtetl, not only for now having a name, but also for it being included in the maps, leaving behind a past of political inexistence.

A second approximation that can be made between the *Haggadah* and this biographic strand is the festival that takes place yearly to celebrate memory. In the Jewish tradition, a celebration named *Passover* is held on the 15th day of Nisan (Jewish calendar) – which typically falls in March or April of the Gregorian calendar. During the Seder – the ritual that opens the Passover holiday, consisting of the reading and discussing of some passages of the *Haggadah* – the collective memory of the Jewish culture is elicited: it is a reflective moment in which every Jew should demonstrate concern with his/her origins and trajectory, in other words, as Jonathan Safran Foer says, "in every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if he were the one who went out to

Egypt". Through a religious practice, the Seder encourages the Jewish individual to value its own, personal narrative within a collective perspective.

In Jonathan's narrative, the holiday receives the name of *Trachimday*, holding similar structure and purpose in relation to the *Haggadah*: it is a festivity that celebrates a fundamental event within the context in which it is inserted. The dates also coincide, for it maintains the original date of the wagon's wreck (March 18th 1791), and the festival is also kept annually until the destruction of the shtetl, which takes place on the very same day, in 1942. For the convenience of the theorist, Jonathan's narrative seems to project *Trachimday* out of the Passover, frankly differing on the respective facts that they celebrate, but nevertheless conserving its symbolic dimension, whose concern is centered in the memory of the past and the importance that it holds on the reflection upon the present. In his article, the author explains that he has taken time away from his writings because he intended to "take a step towards a Judaism of question marks rather than quotation marks"; towards the story of his people, his family and himself. Analogous to this disposition, the fictional narrator Jonathan demonstrates the same as he decides to investigate and, afterwards, tell his story; and when the real Jonathan Safran Foer informs, in his article, that his answer for his 6-year-old child's inquiry *was Moses a real person?* was *I don't know, but we're related to him*, Jonathan-the-narrator too demonstrates, through the encounter of his grandfather with the Kolker – through the name Safran that accompanies the evolution of the lineage, through the inclination for writing and how it can be ultimately connected to Yankel D's passion for books – that a person is always closely related to their past. In this sense, the loud (hence capitalized) words of the Uprighters' Venerable Rabbi are turned into an ethos which largely rules the novel in all levels and senses: *AND IF WE ARE TO STRIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, MUSTN'T WE BE FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH OUR PAST?* (p.196)

In addition, another correspondence to the *Haggadah* can be found in the novel, this time not in relation to its contents, but to form, that is, to the text in its material presence, though transmuted into a more simplistic version of the original guidebook. In Jonathan's strand, *The book of antecedents* plays the role of historical document through which "every schoolboy has learned the story of Trachimbrod" (p. 196). Although it started out as a record of historic events, the book has soon gotten the proportions of a diary in which all kinds of information concerning the life in Trachimbrod could be found. Soon enough, it became an encyclopedic diary of lengthy detailing, until it

turned into a somewhat simultaneous reproduction of the events that ever occurred in the shtetl (largely consisting in a metafictional game of perspectives where reality is duplicated, in real time, within the text). At some point, two pages of the novel are filled with lines of one single sentence repeating countless times, as if to express how complementary are the acts of living and writing to one another.

> "We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing…We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… We are writing… (…)" (p. 212-213)

Taking the form of an appendix, 35 of its innumerous (and anonymous) entries are fully included in the novel, appearing as tool that helps to complement the variety of topics approached in the narrative from other points of view. For example, concerning the Safran's "saga" for the maintenance of its lineage across the times, details of its main characters offered in entries named *Yankel D shameful bead; the first rape of Brod D* and the genealogic exposition of *The five generations between Brod and Safran*. To what concerns the history of the shtetl, the strand brings entries on *The flour mill* and *The Dial.* Conceptualistic discussion on arts and literature can be seen in *The novel, when everyone was convinced he had one in him,* and also in *art,* as well as derivatives *artifice, artifact, ifact, ificie*and the inventive *ifactifice*. Concerning the Jewish identity, some thought is ironically addressed in sections like *Us, the Jews*, and *Jews have 6 senses*, this last one providing useful insight for the understanding of the role of memory within this people's culture. It says:

> "Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks—when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain— that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like*?" (p. 199)

While contrasting the use of memory made by Gentiles, the excerpt highlights the intimate relation that Jews hold towards their sense of collective memory. Through the metaphor of the pinprick, a notion is again provided that events of the present may not

only be motivated, but also explained by past ones. In addition, the uniqueness that is given to the Jewish people upon the idea of memory as a vital sense only contributes to the specific role that is given, in this narrative, to memory in relation to memory. In effect, this vital property of memory is here illustrated by two episodes: the first related to Yankel's fear of dying; the second to the first bombing of Trachimbrod.

As Yankel was already 72 when he fathered Brod, his fear of dying grew proportionally to the expanding love he felt for her. "Fearing his frequent deficiencies of memory, he began writing fragments of his life story on his bedroom ceiling with one of Brod's lipsticks (…). This way, his life would be the first thing he would see when he awoke each morning, and last thing before going to sleep each night" (pg. 83). Years later, when Brod arrives home after a Trachimday parade, she finds Yankel dead on the floor of his library, while "Yankel's lipstick autobiography came flaking off his bedroom ceiling, falling gently like blood-stained snow to his bed and floor" (pg. 97). [emphasis added]

Generations had passed when, on June 18, 1941, "nine months before the shtetl was the focus of direct Nazi assault" (pg. 258), Trachimbrod would suffer a complete twist on what is referred to be the sense of memory, as a consequence of the misled attack which was actually intended to a site in Rovno hills. In the chapter *The persnicketiness of memory, 1941*, which also brings the symbolic conversation between the grandfather and the Kolker, the narrator addressess the shock suffered by the community of the shtetl, whose aftermath was involved in "strange inertness".

> "Activity was replaced by thought. Memory. Everything reminded someone of something, which seemed winsome at first (…), but quickly became devitalizing. Memory begat memory begat memory." (pg. 258) [emphasis added]

Jonathan uses the term 'devitalizing' to express the feeling shared by the shtetl, a particularly interesting choice when it is noticed the vital properties of memory as it is mentioned in *the book of antecedents*. Both situations above mentioned demonstrate a strong correlation between memory and life. In the second episode, the notion of memory – and all the sense of time referentiality it provides – is shattered by the chance of imminent death. In reverse, as depicted in the first one, the fall of the flakes of memory from the ceiling onto the dead body of Yankel D illustrates an idea that memory too is extinguished in the absence of life.

Memory is thus seen as an organizing force that orders the events of life in a rather different, perhaps more useful manner than time does. In conjunction with the Haggadah, this narrative conceives the experience of life in a broad perspective that overcomes individuality in service of memory itself. In this sense, back to the NYT article, Foer addresses the Haggadah as a "book of memory", similarly to what his alter-ego does when exposing *the book of antecedents*:

> "The book of antecedents, once updated yearly, was now continually updated, and when there was nothing to report, the full-time committee would report its reporting, just to keep the book moving, expanding, becoming more like life: we are writing… we are writing… we are writing…" (pg. 196)

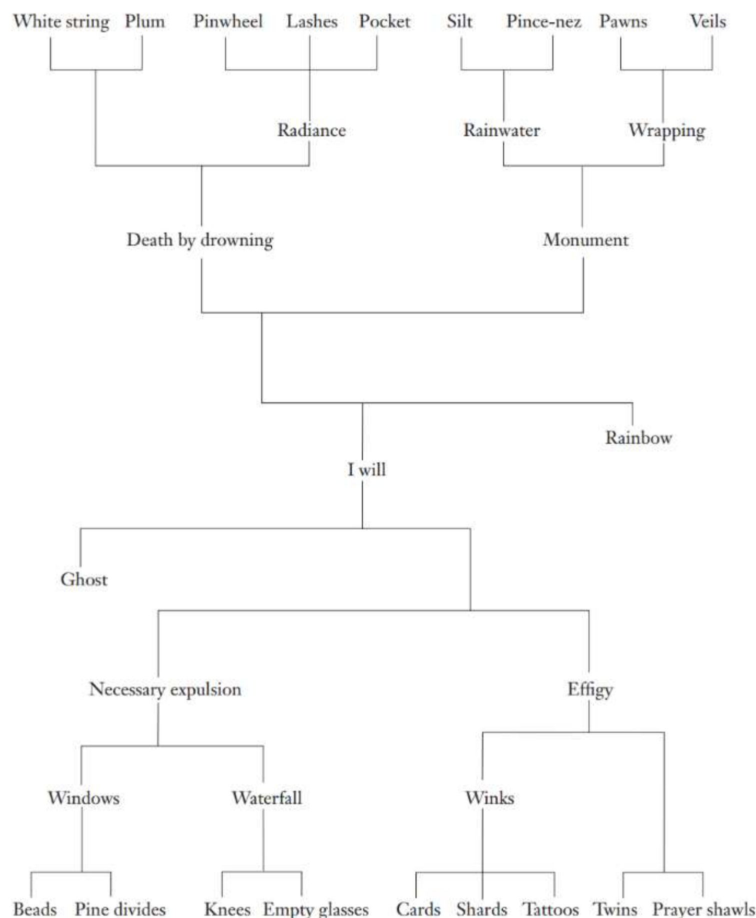
Before the end of the strand, which culminates in the telling of the shtetl's destruction in a rather unusual narrative fashion, the reader is offered a delightful theater-dramatization, attended by Safran-the-grandfather and "the Gypsy girl" – with whom he nurtured a 7-year passionate, secret and morally forbidden relationship – again redirecting the narrative to its beginning. Their affair starts at the shtetl's theater, whose play onstage tells the story of Trachimbrod. Here, in a movement of self-reduplication, the text of the novel turns into a theater script, with character's names (which are created after the characters in the novel earlier on) heading the lines they should speak, along with the supplementary stage instructions, and a very close text to the one read in the first chapters. The text of the play onstage eventually intertwines with the dialogues between Safran and the Gypsy girl, suggesting, to some extent, the roleplaying aspect, and hence the textuality of life itself.

In the eminence of the second (and last) deadly assault, a final recapitulation of the shtetl's identity is celebrated, this time by means of the thematically decorated floats which, while entertaining the last of all *Trachimday's* parade, conducts a narrative of the shtetl's beginnings. At the same time, this narration is constantly interrupted by the ongoing attacks. Here, the setting of the festival consists of a network formed by a variety of random articles of the local residents, attached by long, white strings which form canopies linking different objects scattered throughout the shtetl.

> "One end of white string tied around the volume knob of a radio (NAZIS ENTER UKRAINE, MOVE EAST WITH SPEED) on the wobbly bookcase in Benjamin T's one-room shanty, the other around an empty silver candle holder on the dining room table of the More-or-Less-Respected Rabbi's brick house across muddy Shelister Street; thin

> white string like a clothesline from the light-boom stand of Trachimbrod's first and only photographer to the middle-C hammer of the darling of Zeinvel Z's piano shop on the other side of Malkner Street; white string connecting freelance journalist (Germans push on, sensing imminent victory) to electrician over the tranquil and anticipating palm of the River Brod; white string from the monument of Pinchas T (carved, perfectly realistically, of marble) to a Trachimbrod novel (about love) to the glass case of wandering snakes of white string (kept at 56 degrees in the Museum of True Folklore), forming a scalene triangle, reflected in the Dial's glass eyes in the middle of the shtetl square". (p. 267, original typographic enlargement).

This context reflects the previous attempts of the settlers to linking their memories in a coherent manner – that is, to narrate – after experiencing the "strange inertness". As previously mentioned, this activity becomes impossible after the first bombing of the shtetl, 9 months prior to its extermination. Jonathan even provides a scheme (below), resembling a defective genealogy tree, differing only in that, instead of attempting to connect relatives, it does so in a desperate attempt at connecting facts of memory in a reasonable, logical manner.



(p. 259)

The strand finally concludes with the complete razing of Trachimbrod, something the narrator demonstrates difficulty to put into words, bringing hints of his emotional distress in comments between parentheses:

> (And here it is becoming harder and harder not to yell: *GO AWAY! RUN WHILE YOU CAN, FOOLS! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!*) (p. 269)
>
> (Here it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happens, and wonder why they don't. Or it's impossible because we fear that they do.) (p. 270).

The final chapter concludes with a wordless narration, as if Jonathan was not strong enough to reproduce the shtetl's death sentence, which would imply the telling of how his grandfather's first child did not resist his pregnant mother's drowning.

> She threw them high into the air. . . . .
> . . . .
> . . . .
> . . . . They stayed there . . . (…) . . . .
> . . . . .They hung as if on strings . . ..
> . . . .(...) (p.270)

Wisely enough, what Jonathan refused to narrate appears later, as a final act, imprinted on the only page of "The book of recurrent dreams" out of its 9 volumes which was spared from the fire made out of "a bonfire of Jews". There, the reader will find the dramatic telling of the death by drowning of his grandfather's wife and first-born, which, in an unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness, reaches one of the two points of emotional climax of the novel. The other, as will be seen in the next section, happens at the conclusion of Alex's strand.

3.4 Second Strand: A quest for Trachimbrod / A quest for the self

In this strand, we are introduced to Alex, who aims to narrate the experience of receiving and guiding Jonathan Safran Foer around the countryside of Ukraine. In many aspects, the narrative presented by Alex will pursue many of the themes explored by "the Hero" (as he constantly refers to the American visitor), such as memory and familiar ascendancy, World War II, similarities between the two narrators and, ultimately, the haunting appearance of Augustine.

Alex "was sired in 1997, the same year as the hero of this novel" (p.1). In a first moment, two connections approximate both narrators: the age and the fact that both are simultaneously working on the making of a novel, whose process is emphasized by means of the mailed letters that will compose the third strand, as well as countless commentaries between parentheses. The term *sired*, misused in the opening chapter, is one of the many examples of how Alex, born in the idyllic city Odessa, Ukraine, attempts at communicating in English. Confident that he "had performed recklessly well in [his] second year of English at the university" (p. 2), he will rely on the most unconventional lexicon to make himself understandable, exchanging, among uncountable examples, "work v." for "toil", "spend money" for "disseminate currency", "sleep v." for "manufacture *Z*s", "call v." for "dub" and so on. These vocabular choices amount for the comic facet of the strand, along with some delightful hints of misinformation and inappropriate statements: according to him, the sexual position *69* receives that name for being invented in 1969, and "the women I know who are taller than me are lesbians, for whom 1969 was a very momentous year" (p.3). Encouraged by Jonathan's commentaries on his writing (which appear in the letters) Alex makes use of a range of comic devices, conscious that they make the reading process more enjoyable. One of them is the presence of his grandfather's dog, the "seeing-eye bitch" Sammy Davis Junior Junior, whose constant interactions with Jonathan – who is afraid of dogs – turn the text so hilarious that it is hard to imagine how disturbing it will get.

Alex is the son and grandson of two other important characters who are also named Alexander, a matter that also holds similarity with Jonathan's strand, where all of his ancestors are linked through the name "Safran". When Alex learns that he is about to translate for the Jewish-American writer, he becomes overwhelmed by culture shock, which little by little will reveal his contempt in relations to his origins, interests, reality and therefore, his personal narrative. This will lead him to recast his identity through his writing, which in turn will result in his constant attempts to seem American. Reproducing – through an exhibitionistic yet broken English – an extensive repertoire of clichés of Miami lifestyle, Alex pictures himself in a fictitious world of expensive cars, beautiful girls, intense sexuality and infinite money. In effect, his writing is always trying to convince the reader of his good appearance, his successful sexual affairs in the nightclubs of Odessa, his manliness and sensitiveness (although in successive times he

might pejoratively define demonstrations of sensitiveness as "queer"), and how familiar he is with the American way-of-life.

The other Alexes that compose this narrator's lineage will demonstrate strong differences in character: while Jonathan's narrative pictures hardworking and warmhearted men, Alex portrays his father and grandfather as authoritarian, hostile and bitter. While Jonathan's process of narrating the progression of his lineage may have inspired Alex to review his own, the latter's narrative attempt assigns, in terms of family structure, a noticeable contrast between them.

Alex's father is described as a shameful, occasionally violent person, who makes use of strength anytime his social and parental skills lack. Many times, when Alex adopts a protective posture in relation to his younger brother, "Little Igor", one can sense that the latter struggles harder with their father's abusive behavior. A few times, sequences of disagreement staged between Alex and the father end in punching, with Alex acknowledging that as being the "end of the conversation" (p. 29).

The father works as a somewhat dysfunctional manager at *Heritage Tour*, the family business in which they guide Jews "who have cravings to leave that ennobled country America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine" (p.3). In order to undertake the search for Trachimbrod, son and father rely on the knowledge of Alex's grandfather, an elderly man who has been claiming to be blind ever since he lost his wife (whence the need of a "seeing-eye bitch"), 2 years prior to the time of the narration. His blindness suggests another relation to Jonathan's writings, in which the senses are again thematized. Furthermore, as the text suggests, his blindness seems to be a psychological response to his wife's death.

> "Father commanded my never to mention Grandmother to Grandfather. 'It will make him melancholy, Alex, and It will make him think he is more blind. Let him forget'". (p.6)

Alex's grandfather demonstrates no interest in going on Jonathan's trip, dissatisfied with the destination and with the fact that they will be driving for a Jew, which establishes a question mark that will later be elicited by Alex: "what did he do during the war?" (p. 74).

On the road to Lutsk, Jonathan shows to Alex the picture of Augustine with Safran, explaining to him that this is the girl who saved his grandfather, although we don't really know how it occurred. Alex refers to the girl in a romantic tone, as in a strong

effort to seduce the reader. As the trip goes by, Alex's grandfather analyzes the picture, demonstrating interest in the girl. In the end, it seems as if all characters in the car had fallen in love with Augustine, turning them all obsessed with the possibility of finding her.

As they don't know the route to the lost town of Trachimbrod, they need to ask strangers for information. However, the erratic men who wandered on the road were not able to inform the location of the place, and these encounters only serve to make Alex feel humiliated, paranoid with the idea that the presence of an American in the Ukrainian countryside may trigger any embarrassment, as it could have happened with the border guard, who "knows he will never go to America, and knows that he will never meet the American again. He will steal from the American, and terror the American, only to teach that he can". (p. 33), and also at the hotel, where he asks Jonathan to stay in the car during the check-in "because the proprietor of the hotel would know that the hero is American, and Father told me that they charge Americans in surplus". (p.63) Feeling the contrast between his nationality and Jonathan's is something that constantly – though discreetly – upsets Alex, who felt really awkward during their first meeting "because he was an American, and I desired to show him that I too could be an American." (p. 28)

Nevertheless, chance leads them through the right path, which allows them to find someone who has lots to say about the lost shtetl during the war time. Not Augustine, but Lista: not the savior of the hero's grandfather, but one of his innumerous lovers. As Alex approaches the white-haired lady, insisting a few times on the question "Have you ever witnessed anyone in this picture?" (p. 117), he finally obtains what he wants.

> "'I have been waiting for you for so long'.
> I pointed to the car. 'We are searching for Trachimbrod'.
> Oh, she said, and she released a river of tears.
> 'You are here. I am it.'" (p. 118)

As they talk, Lista starts remembering the time when the shtetl existed, her visual memories of Trachimbrod closely resembling the imaginary settlement designed by Jonathan. Combined with that, the small house inhabited by Lista contained all items she could collect after the Nazis were gone, transforming her room into some kind of museum, and herself into a book of spoken memories.

> There were many boxes, which were overflowing with items. These had writing on their sides. A white cloth was overwhelming from the box marked weddings and other celebrations. The box marked PRIVATES: JOURNALS / DIARIES / SKETCHBOOKS / UNDERWEAR was so overfilled that it appeared prepared to rupture. There was another box, marked SILVER / PERFUME / PINWHEELS, and one marked WATCHES/WINTER, and one marked HYGIENE / SPOOLS / CANDLES, and one marked FIGURINES / SPECTACLES. (p. 147)

For the first time, Grandfather feels released of the tension that has been damaging him since he lost his wife, beginning to feel attracted to their new friend. As soon, however, as she mentions a particular name, that of Herschel's, starting to allude to the night when the shtetl was erased from the map, Grandfather becomes extremely aggressive. She goes on telling that Herschel was shot by his best friend Eli in order not to be killed by the Nazi. The grandfather's reaction worsens, reaching a high level of aggressiveness: "Shut up", "You are lying about it all", "You can keep your non-truths to yourself", "She's not from Trachimbrod" (pg. 153), and ultimately, "You should have died with the others." In effect, the boxes constitute the physical presence of memory in the narration, something that holds relation to his voluntary blindness claim, all of them serving as visual stimuli used to trigger Alex's grandfather's discomfort within his own past, while providing the first hints that might clear his so far obscure relations with the tragic episodes of War in the region.

Before going to the actual location where Trachimbrod used to be, four kilometers away from the woman's house, Grandfather and Lista are left alone to talk, while Jonathan and Alex wait outside. In this interval, Alex takes Jonathan's diary, discovering annotations about his (Alex's) distressing relationship with his father on the writer's notebook, a parallel story fully enlightened by means of the letters in the third strand. The note brings the exact contents of the final letter that Jonathan will receive from Ukraine, indicating that Alex would be irreversibly influenced by the Jonathan's annotation, taking the final decision of parting with his father for good.

Once they arrive at the presumed location of the extinguished shtetl, the night has already turned the site into complete darkness. Grandfather commanded Lista to tell *Alex* what she knows, emphasizing his grandson, more than the American traveler (supposedly the main interested), as the one who should learn those facts.

> "'Tell him what happened', he said. 'I do not know everything'. 'Tell him what you know'. It was only then that I understood that 'him' was me." (p. 184)

Lista describes how the massacre took place, blindly pointing to the directions where the synagogue was burned, the Torah was unrolled to be spat at by a line of Jews, including members of her family, one by one. At this point, the narrative gets so violent that Jonathan asks Alex to stop the translation. Here, Alex opens a parenthesis: "(Jonathan, if you still do not want to know the rest, do not read this. But if you do persevere, do not do so for curiosity. That is not a good enough reason)" (p. 186). Alex then proceeds with the narration, his warning for Jonathan suggesting that reporting those facts no longer holds the sole function of informing the "hero", but himself too. Lista tells of how the Nazi officer, verging on the obscene, shot her pregnant sister "in her place", leaving her to crawl for life unattended by the gentiles who witnessed the scene.

> "'(…) All of the Gentiles were watching from their windows, and she called to each, Help me, please help me, I am dying.' 'Did they?' Grandfather asked. 'No. They all turned away their faces and hid. I cannot blame them.' 'Why not?' I asked. 'Because,' Grandfather said, answering for Augustine, 'if they had helped, they would have been killed, and so would their families.' 'I would still blame them,' I said. 'Can you forgive them?' Grandfather asked Augustine. She closed her eyes to say, No, I cannot forgive them. 'I would desire someone to help me,' I said. 'But,' Grandfather said, 'you would not help somebody if it signified that you would be murdered and your family would be murdered.' (I thought about this for many moments, and I understood that he was correct. I only had to think about Little Igor to be certain that I would also have turned away and hid my face.) It was so obscure now, because it was late, and because there were no artificial lights for many kilometers, that we could not see one another, but only hear the voices. 'You would forgive them?' I asked. 'Yes,' Grandfather said. 'Yes. I would try to.' 'You can only say that because you cannot imagine what it is like,' Augustine said. 'I can.' 'It is not a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining. (p. 187-188)

As they return to Lista's home, Jonathan is given one of the many boxes that furnish the rooms of the house. At the hotel, they meet an attractive waitress who earlier in the narrative – when Alex took occasion to sound emasculated by referring to her "bosom" – had demonstrated interest in Jonathan, which had made Alex feel secondary and frustrated, something easily relatable with his somewhat depreciative feeling of being uninteresting in comparison to the foreigner. However, something changed in Alex after

the experience in “Trachimbrod”, as he corrects himself, in parentheses, after once again referring to the woman’s body:

> “(*For whom did I write that, Jonathan?* I do not want to be disgusting anymore. And I do not want to be funny, either)”. (p. 219, emphasis added)

After that, the trio – Grandfather, Alex and Jonathan – decide to investigate the box, from where they take out some of the objects, one of them being one of the volumes of “The Book of Antecedents”. Crucially, though, is the last item they pick up: a picture containing four people, one of them closely resembling Alex. Eventually, they realize that resemblance is not coincidence: that person is Alex’s grandfather, probably around the former’s age. “And to write the rest of this”, Alex concludes, “is the most impossible thing”. (p. 226)

It should be noticed that the number of comments between parentheses seems as if they did not belong to what Alex would have desired the “final version” of his text to be. One comment in particular rather clarifies that not only Alex is contributing to the American’s novel, but also that Jonathan is free to edit the material that Alex sends him.

> (You may understand this as a gift from me to you, Jonathan. And just as I am saving you, so could you save Grandfather. We are merely two paragraphs away. Please, try to find other option.) (p. 224)

In that passage, Alex is alluding to the moment when they realize that the man in the picture is Grandfather, and the act of saving him would stand for sparing him from taking part in the tragic conclusion of the narrative that is to come. At this point, the narrative becomes saturated with comments in parenthesis, which translates as Alex anxious attempt to avoid the climatic acknowledgement that Grandfather, in order to save his family, had pointed to a Jew, therefore sending him to burn in a synagogue, just like in Lista’s (and Jonathan’s) narrative, but in a different shtetl – in the Kolki.

In the final chapter, while Alex reproduces his grandfather’s speech of the time he lived in the Kolki, it is as though a parallel narrative ran along, all within parentheses, where Alex constantly interrupts the flow of his grandfather’s story. These interruptions serve, within the narrative, to portray the inner dialogs between grandfather and grandson, making up for years of embarrassing silence between the two (Alex refers to this silence early in his strand), as though he did not want them to take part in his “final version”,

preventing them to maculate his one and only opus. In addition, these interruptions are also directly addressed to Jonathan, who becomes the necessary interlocutor for him "to listen to his own voice", that is, to have a conclusive grasp of who he is and how he relates to all these discoveries. And just as it was meant to be, Alex's strand too ends in a stream-of-consciousness, in the same fashion as presented by Jonathan, his 'hero' and writing model and adviser, in his final act.

3.5 Third Strand: The letters

The third and last strand in the novel is composed by 8 letters, all written and signed by Alex, except for the last one, which consists of Alex's translation of his grandfather's letter to the American writer. Each letter was sent along with one of Alex's (2nd strand) chapters, all addressed to Jonathan, dated between July 20th 1997 and January 26th 1998, short after the end of their search for Trachimbrod. Jonathan's epistolary replies are not included in the novel, although they are frequently referred to by Alex. By inference, it becomes clear that Jonathan's replies were also accompanied by his own chapters, which compose the first strand in the novel.

The first letter introduces us to the major subjects that will be developed along this period of exchanges, as the contents present a relatively organized form, consistently approaching the same topics: explanatory comments on Alex's own writing, interpretative and critical comments on Jonathan's chapters, updates on Alex's private life (his desire to move to America, his relationship with his father and so on) and also updates on his Grandfather's worsening health and behavior, as he has been irreversibly impacted by his meeting with Lista and the arousal of his traumatic memories of the War.

Alex starts this period by apologizing for his "mediocre job as a translator", and also for not finding Augustine. In the letters, his character differs from the image he attempts to convey in his novel. He admits he is "not so premium in English", and also the fact that he is not tall, something he reinforces in the chapters in his novel in an attempt to build an image of strength and masculinity. He also thanks Jonathan for sending him 'currency', which implies that Alex is being paid to produce a chronicle of the writer's stay in Ukraine.

Concerning Jonathan's writing, he associates his difficulty to read the American's early chapters with the fact that he is Jewish. "*There were parts that I did not understand, but I conjure that this is because they were very Jewish*" (p. 25). Clueless as to the origin of names like Menasha, Shloim and others, he wonders if Jonathan is "being a humorous writer or an uninformed one". Nevertheless, he expresses his desire to learn from his talented fellow writer.

A few comments are shared about his grandfather's worsening health ever since they returned from Lutsk. In addition, he mentions Little Igor appears with an "eye blue again", refusing to look at his father, which suggests that the latter has the habit of abusing his youngest son.

While the last of the 7 letters focuses more on Alex's relationship with his father and grandfather, the early ones emphasize the writing process. Concerning his own work, Alex appreciates corrections on previously misused idioms (such as the expression "*shitting bricks*"), stating, in other words, that he does not want to sound degradingly silly, however humorous that might be. Humor, it seems, is something indulged by Jonathan. Alex also takes a paragraph to mention his appraisal of Jonathan's "Book or Recurrent Dreams", in which he identifies with the entry "The dream that we are our fathers". Other than addressing writing processes, the novel seems to approach the process of reading as well, presenting each step of Alex appreciation of Jonathan's work, identifying with its contents, displaying emotional engagement and, eventually, some personal improvement**.** The strategy foregrounds one of the highly regarded functions of literature, that of helping to clarify aspects that are defining of individual, human experience. It can happen, so we see, through similarities – when the text seems to bridge our perception of reality by presenting inquisitive and intimate questions on social behavior: *"When Brod asks Yankel why he thinks about her mom even though it hurts, and he says he does not know why, that is a momentous query. Why do we do that?"* (p. 103). Sure enough, it can also help answer the question "who am I?" through dissimilarities, when Alex suggests that Jonathan substitute Neil Armstrong for a "*Russian cosmonaut*" like Yuri Alekseyevich, "*who*" (he adds, rather proudly) "*in 1961 [eight years before Armstrong achievement] became the first human being to make an orbital space flight*" (p. 104).

Following this track, in varied moments the exchanges with "the hero" seem to trigger in Alex hints of self-esteem, otherwise perceived as low in most of his novelistic strand. Indeed he enjoys messages of encouragement ("search for your dreams") coming from Jonathan, sounds relieved when finding himself understood ("*do you think we're comparable?*") and eventually learns to accept who he really is by taking "petit" steps – for example, accepting his medium stature: "*As you commanded, I removed the sentence 'He was severely short' and inserted in its place, 'Like me, he was not tall'*". If there is any transformative experience altogether concerning the events of in which he takes part, Jonathan certainly has a big part in it, performing functions as editor, advisor, therapist and friend. For that reason, Alex accepts many of Jonathan's suggestions, paving the way for the hard time he is about to have when finally "*pointing a finger*" to his grandfather.

In the course of the epistolary communication, the reader witnesses the increase of confidences from Alex concerning his appalling relationship with his father – who will often arrive home late on vodka, breaking things and making noise. Alex also reports the aggravation of his grandfather's misery, who's been caught crying 3 times – over an old photo album, then a replica of Augustine's portrait and finally over Jonathan's photo, a hint to the novel's cause/consequence game.

At some point, when his narrative moves towards the revelation of Grandfather's involvement with the decimation of his own shtetl, Alex openly addresses his desire to be known and understood, that is, to clarify, before other people's eyes, who he really is, certainly unaware of his disposition to take responsibility over internal and external agents that help him to make sense of who he is.

> *There is so much that I want to inform you, Jonathan, but I cannot fathom the manner. I want to inform you about Little Igor, and how he is such a premium brother, and also about Mother, who is very, very humble, as I remark to you often, but nonetheless a good person, and nonetheless My Mother. (...) I want to inform you about Grandfather, and how he views television for many hours, and how he cannot witness my eyes anymore, but must be attentive to something behind me. I want to inform you about Father, and how I am not being a caricature when I tell you that I would remove him from my life if I was not such a coward. I want to inform you about what it is like to be me, which is a thing that you still do not possess a single whisper of. Perhaps when you read the next division of my story, you will comprehend.* (p. 178)

Eventually, this parallel, simultaneous and private narrative unfolds into Alex's fight with his father, which will further lead to their definitive estrangement. Meanwhile, his grandfather meets him on the beach – where Alex spends most of his nights to save the "currency" transferred by Jonathan, nurturing his dream of leaving home, hopefully to "America" – to ask him a favor: to borrow Alex's cherished savings, so he can go after Augustine.

It becomes more evident that Alex finds in his mailing trade with the US a safe place, where he can fearlessly expose himself. He is certain that his relationship with Jonathan "*can bring [them] safety and peace*" (p.214), alluding to their partnership as if they formed a pair like Brod and Kolker, or Safran and the Gypsy Girl, that is, as if they formed a pair-work in a novel (something they actually do). In this context, he will rely on Jonathan's advice as to whether he should or not lend his money to his Grandfather, risking postponing his American Dream and, worse, losing forever his Grandfather in the countryside of Ukraine.

Their conversation on the topic of writing, acquires more complexity in their inquiries, as Alex approaches the moment of portraying his grandfather's moral fall. He speculates, then, about the possibility of changing, at least via literature, his grandfather's fate. "*Perhaps, and I am only uttering this, we could have him save your grandfather. He could be Augustine. August, perhaps*" (p. 180). Rejecting Jonathan's demand, he refuses to remove, from his narrative, Jonathan's talk about his grandmother, implying that the cathartic experience of facing his life on the paper should also be benefiting for the "hero", as it has been for him. He questions how Jonathan dares to picture his own grandfather in what he believes to be such inferior portrait, given his sexual excesses and love denial due to raciale conflict. Instantly, he realizes that, if he were to represent those characters with easier choices, there would be no occasion for the book to exist, or for Jonathan to have been born.

In his last letter, Alex states he has refused to lend his grandfather his savings.

> *Let me explain why I did not give Grandfather my money. It is not because I am saving it for myself to go to America. That is a dream that I have woken up from. I will never see America, and neither will Little Igor, and I understand that now. I did not give Grandfather the money because I do not believe in Augustine. No, that is not what I mean. I do not believe in the Augustine that Grandfather was searching for. The woman in the photograph*

> *is alive. I am sure she is. But I am also sure that she is not Herschel, as Grandfather wanted her to be, and she is not my grandmother, as he wanted her to be, and she is not Father, as he wanted her to be.* (p. 241)

In the passage, it is possible to perceive that Alex has realized that, through the pretext of finding Augustine, his grandfather was in search of means to atone for attitudes of irreversible consequences, belonging to an unattainable past. After his explanation, the character briefly declares that he, "now the man of the house", found the dead body of his grandfather in the bathtub, who committed suicide 4 days prior to the writing of the letter.

As for his father, Alex gladly informs: "*For the first time in my life, I told my father exactly what I thought"(p. 242)*, and what follows is the last section of his novel, which is full of comments in parentheses, as if borrowing into the second strand the confessional, intimate register of the third one.

Surprisingly, the letter that closes the strand is not written, but only translated by Alex, as its real author is his grandfather, moments before dying in the bathtub. "*It is important that you know what kind of man [Alex] is* (p. 274)*,* begins Grandfather, who ambiguously addresses the letter earlier to Jonathan, but in the end to Alex. He tells of how Alex parted ways with his father, giving his savings "*to pay for everything [he] will leave behind".* (Here, Alex's translation of his grandfather's letter match perfectly the words discovered in Jonathan's notebook earlier in strand two, an episode that deepens the games of perspectives in which the reader has taken part since the opening of the novel.) As if in an act of blessing, Grandfather expresses his pride of his grandson's maturity, gladly confident on the person Alex has become. His last advice is that Alex and Little Igor now "*cut all of the string*" and "*make [their] own life*" and "*begin again*" (p. 275). The reader is left with Grandfather's silent steps towards the bathroom, and the last, incomplete sentence, saying "I will…" (p. 276).

3.6 Uses of metafictional resources within the work

Frame-story

The delimitation of the frames that contain the narratives that constitute Safran Foer's novel is a complex business, as it implicates establishing the hierarchization of the narrated contents. Primarily, we can say that *Everything Is Illuminated* results from the union of two different novels, written by two different writers, whose coexistence may shed light on some of its common themes, namely the circumstances of emergence and extinction of the shtetl of Trachimbrod. Furthermore, as readers, we learn that this collaborative novel is not yet concluded, as we are invited to accompany its ongoing production. In addition, we are able to discover the "backstage" of writing, as we have access to Alex's letters (and, through inference, some of the contents of Jonathan's letters), which ends up raising new issues to be found as further topics of Safran Foer's novel. From this scenario, we can stipulate degrees of interdependency between the three diegetic levels, in which Jonathan's level is the most autonomous, able to stand on its own, as result of pure exercise of fictionalized family memoir, representing the time scope between Jonathan's present and his ancestor's past. Alex's novel is conceived as a separate frame, though it explores Jonathan's as a character in the field-search which inspired the construction of the latter's work. Alex's novel develops its own conflicts, which will be then reframed by the letters, which allow the reader to contrast his literary self-portrait and the foundation of his poetics. Furthermore, the letters also enlighten *Everything Is Illuminated* as a fictional exercise of collaborative writing, situating its construction in time and circumstance. However, to some extent escaping the metafictional ethos of disrupting the novelistic illusion, the fact that Alex is a creation of the outer Jonathan Safran Foer (author) is never acknowledged.

Overt-Diegetic Mode of Self-reflexivity

Everything Is Illuminated never really hides what it is – a written construct –, an attitude that prevents the reader's engagement with the narrated contents "as if" they should be regarded, even in their own microcosm, as real. Safran Foer makes use of authorial parenthesis which often belong to a different diegetic level, disentangled from the main text. It happens, for example, when Jonathan evades his explanation on the "inflationary

aspect of love" – which should prevent his lovers to know about one another – to state, in parenthesis: "(Alex, this is part of the reason why I can't tell my grandmother about Augustine)" (p. 170). It also appears in the ambiguity of the word "hero", used by Alex to denote "a novel's hero", as well as "leader of an adventure" and, needless to say, to express his frank admiration for the American character. Alex strands are much more overtly diegetic, that is, conscious of their own process of narration, given his evident awareness of the effects of humor and subtlety in reading and writing("One of the potatoes descended to the floor, PLOMP, which made us laugh for reasons that a subtle writer does not have to illuminate", p. 149).

Thematizing writing, fiction and arts

The themes of literature, fiction and arts appear in innumerous occasions throughout the novel, aside from its self-commented process of making, as previously addressed. In Jonathan's strand, the attribution of fiction making is sometimes analogous to the fictional project of the novel itself. These are visible moments, in which fiction appears to stand for and hence recreate reality, as is the case of Yankel's invention of a character to supply Brod's unknown mother, with whom he eventually falls in love, to the point of rereading the letters she had never written, though the reader can access one of them in the novel. Its reasonable to consider that Jonathan's recreation of Trachimbrod results from its very inexistence, once again turned accessible to the reader from complete darkness, as performed by Lista – in Alex's strand, who points her finger in the darkness to remember how the shtetl was organized –, reminding us of the narrator's truisms, "the origin of a story is always an absence" (p. 230). Meanwhile, in Alex's strand, the composition of their work is alluded as possibility to heal, through fiction, wounds of reality: "if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life?" (p. 179), which brings to mind the role of fiction as exploited in Ian McEwan's 2001 novel Atonement.

The theme of writing, too, is explored in several contexts of the work. In Jonathan's strand, *The book of recurrent dreams* and *The book of antecedents* appear as the manifestation of writing as a constant activity within the routine of the Shtetl. The entries on the first, harbored by the Slouchers, consist of their descriptions of dreams as

an attempt to cope with the mystery of our unconscious narratives. A few entries are "reproduced" on the novel, gathering the intimate, melancholic revelations (both dreams and factual stories) of the citizens, in a context where the act of remembering is being digressively praised by one of the congregants: "What is being awake if not interpreting our dreams, or dreaming if not interpreting our wake?" (p. 36). The second book works initially as a book of registers of the shtetl events, but which eventually turns into an encyclopedic collection that encompasses all the knowledge and world views shared among the inhabitants.

In the levels authored by Alex, the reader is never informed of Alex's reading habits, but is invited to acknowledge his process of captivation for, like the reader's, the experience of reading Jonathan's novel. There is some classic metafictional mirroring here, as the reader's "real time" action of reading is being effectively mimetized by one of the characters in the novel (which renders convincing, in terms of suspension of disbelief, the effect of the novel appearing to have been constructed by two characters). By creating an ideal reader, an explicit narratee, the author (Safran Foer) is able to guide, to some extent, a possible – however fictional – reading of his own novel. Moments of Alex's captivation appear noticeably – his initial allured estrangement, as well as a childlike interest in cooperation ("if I think something is very half-witted, I could tell you, and you could make it whole-witted"). The reader also views him engaged with the themes of love and loss presented by Jonathan's novel as one who discovers how a novel works, how literature makes us think of questions that apparently are not ours, and how we either end up relating to them or learn to wear other people's shoes. We also follow his discontent when the text displeases him, blaming its narrator for the turning of the events, while learning that undesirable plots can actually make literature seem more like life (an important lesson in Alex's process of coping with the recent facts added to his narrative identity).

Finally, *The book of antecedents* offers entries which decidedly turn the spotlights to literary and art criticism. The first is *The Novel, When Everyone Was Convinced He Had One in Him*, which tells of the literary interest born from Trachimbrod's inhabitants who, "in the middle of the nineteenth century", first discovered the books, emphasizing the countless novels produced by the residents of the shtetl.

> "This period was likely the result of the traveling Gypsy salesman who brought a wagonload of books to the shtetl square on the third Sunday of every other month, advertising them as *Worthy would-be worlds of words, whorls of working wonder.* What else could come to the lips of a Chosen People but *I can do that*?" (p. 201)

The "more than seven hundred novels" produced "between 1850 and 1853", it says, are categorized in "272 thinly veiled memoirs, 66 crime novels, 97 stories of war", among which "a man killed his brother in 107" and in "all but 89 an infidelity was committed", stored in "a special room was added to the Yankel and Brod Library for the Trachimbrod novels", all of them, so informs the librarian, about love. This entry holds particular interest as to the aspect of narrative identity which, further in this analysis, I hope to clarify.

The entries *Art, Ifice, Ifact, Artifice, Artifact and Ifactifice* also furnish the metaencyclopedic tomes of the shared book, opening a broad room for theoretical speculation. While critical research on metafictional literature will often brings the terms *artifact* (the book as an object, frequently subject of thematization, as is the case in *Everything Is Illuminated*) and *artifice* as the technical resource employed in the metafictional work, such as the list I am casting in the present section, *art* usually appears at the core of the metafictional debate in this kind of novel, mostly concerning the issue of 'representation of reality' vs its 'creation' or 'presentation' through narrative artmaking, as well as the roles or attributions that artworks supposedly might have – a view that is explicitly contradicted by Safran Foer through that entry:

> **Art**
>
> Art is that thing having to do only with itself—the product of a successful attempt to make a work of art. Unfortunately, there are no examples of art, nor good reasons to think that it will ever exist. (Everything that has been made has been made with a purpose, everything with an end that exists outside that thing, i.e., *I want to sell this,* or *I want this to make me famous and loved,* or *I want this to make me whole,* or worse, *I want this to make others whole.*) And yet we continue to write, paint, sculpt, and compose. Is this foolish of us? (p. 202)

The author then plays with the suffixes -*ifice* (a "thing with purpose, created for the sake of function, and having to do with the world") and the even more abstract -*ifact* ("a past-tensed fact") in juxtaposition with the noun (and radical) *art*, where he is able to

imply some questioning of his novel in relation to modes of perpetuation of memory (one of them being through writing, and another in form of identity).

The elements here presented demonstrate that the making of as well as concepts surrounding art and literature consist of relevant topics in the architecture of Safran Foer's novel, turning it into a critical reflection about the pursuit of identity developed and released via literary exercise.

3.7 Situating *Everything Is Illuminated* in the context of narrative identity

Again, we are confronted with a complex mode of storytelling, where two different plots converge to one same, life-changing end. Like in *Maus*, the author does not conform only with the telling – he needs to stage, or at least fictionalize its very process of making, conducting the reader not only to ponder on the themes and topics explored by the stories that form the novel, but also to consider its construction as a narrative of its own.

Although one of the protagonists of the novel is presented as its author, little, in fact, is acknowledged about him, least from "his own" voice. Most of what we learn about Jonathan is communicated either through Alex's writings, both in his own novel as well as through the letters, where he frequently refers to Jonathan's comments. In addition, a clear view of himself is also scarce in his own strand, whose emphasis lies on the fictional reconstruction of his antecedents, a relation we are able to grasp by his first-person familiar relation to some of the characters of his novel. Despite the novel never hides its status of fiction – frequently verging on the fantastic –, the association between Jonathan-the-character and the homonymous, actual writer is unavoidable, helping raise questions on the roles that can be attributed to the act of narrating as means to pursuit a coherent, meaningful sense of identity.

We then have the real author fictionalizing himself at the act of writing a novel about his ascendency, a lineage that was lucky enough not be interrupted by occurrence of a devastating war that predates his own existence. Despite their common ground, as a grandson of witnesses, Safran Foer's distance from the traumatic events that displaced his grandfather in 1942 is greater than Art Spiegelman's, a son of witnesses. Jacobs

(2009) richly detailed analysis of the same works here observed demonstrate that the differences, between Safran Foer and Spiegelman, in treating the Holocaust is symptomatic of their belonging to different generations in relation to that event. Nevertheless, their similitudes in exploring deeply personal stories which marked their identities despite taking place before their birth is what situates them as "post-memorial" authors. "Post-memory", according to Marianne Hirsch, "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated." (Hirsch, 1993,p. 23)

Jacobs, in his appreciation of Safran Foer's work, formulates that "fiction provides a way for members of the second generation to 'imagine' their version of the Holocaust through a post-memorial process" (2009, p. 20). Given the transgenerational remoteness from the war time, which makes the author even a more indirect recipient of the trauma than Spiegelman, this distance becomes a gap to be filled with storytelling – "not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation", in Hirsch words (1993, p. 23) –,turning the "present-absence" of the Holocaust memory into an inner mythology of the self.

As little as we might be able to grasp about the character of Jonathan solely through the reading of the novel, the use of the 'self-doubling' resource should not go unnoticed. By "dubbing" a character after his authorial name, the writer defines the centrality of the topic of identity in his work. Since it's not new that metafictional ventures usually exceed in borrowing facts of the reader's immediate reality into their narratives, the case is not really of falling into the trap of believing the contents of the novel as if standing for the author's biography – in fact, Safran Foer was virtually unknown by the publishing of the work –, but rather the other way around. The act of using his name – and, more specifically, the writer figure – is, in itself, a literary statement to be comprehended among other resources through which he will succeed in exploring issues of identity, the first step towards an identity of question marks in its narrative nature, once aesthetically produced through the practice of perhaps the main object of his novel – writing.

In his novel, as earlier observed, the role of fiction is frequently at stake. It various cases within the characters in the novel, fictions come to supply for physical absences, along with emotional voids left by them. Jonathan too has an absence to deal with, as he admits his age ("My mother is twenty-one. My age as I write these words", p. 98), therefore localizing his character in the unique imaginary of post-war Jewish identity's third generation. Members of the second and third generation "often feel an equally big or even bigger urge 'to tell their story'", as they "do not have this access to the Holocaust past through memory" (Jacobs, 2009, p. 21). As the generation passes, the tendency is the trauma of the Holocaust ever more internalized and less accessible (recalling the image of Kolker and Brod living by a noisy waterfall, until the day they can no longer hear its sound, p. 265), with future descendants relying mostly on general and impersonal history, documents and other artifacts in order to build their own, unique narratives. Using his name, Safran Foer explores the figure of the writer, encompassing the social function that such public instance can provide for inquirers to come. His methods, however, far from attempting to accurately reconstruct the past, will rather emphasize, via fictional invention, the act of remembering as a Jewish resounding identitarian trait.

In the novel, the double is designated as a "memorial candle", which means, among other things, "giving (…) sons or daughters the name of a perished family member. 'They were not perceived as separate individuals but as symbols of everything their parents had lost in the course of their lives'" (Wardi *apud* Jacobs, 2009, p. 13). For that, the narrator delineates an entire lineage connected through the same name, Safran, who shares with Jonathan the interest in arts and an acute and dominant sense of loss.

In many levels, the novel insists on the appraisal of memory and remembering, turning itself into a solution to cope with loss. There has never been any about Safran Foer real, and quite frustrating, trip to Ukraine, in search of the shtetl of Trochenbrod[12], the original shtetl where his grandfather lived, turned into *Trachimbrod* in his fictional version. In a sense, this failure encompasses a side narrative, once again locating the genesis of his novel in the absent information he desired to collect. In parallel, within the fictional world of the novel, the origin of the novel is again resulting from the categorical but scarce information Jonathan manages to find during his brief encounter

[12]Produced by survivors and their sons, a book named *The Heavens Are Empty* (2010) was dedicated to tell the history of the lost shtetl. It was prefaced by Jonathan Safran Foer.

with only the Trachimbrod survivor, the Ukranian-speaker character Lista (countless drawer tags and occasional descriptions he will only be able to access through the mediation of Alex's translation and writings).

It is through the act of remembering, here transmuted into the act of writing, that Jonathan will be able to shed light onto the once existing life in Trachimbrod, even if is not fully able to recollect the specificities of his antecedents, eventually recurring to fiction to give it shape – he does not have to know what they were called or who they loved to remember how and why they were gone. A scene in one of the Slouchers meetings, early in the novel, seems to translate that very same feeling by emphasizing the importance of the act of remembering:

> "*It is most important that we remember*, the narcoleptic potato farmer Didl S said to the congregation (...).
>
> *Remember what*? the schoolteacher Tzadik P asked, expelling yellow chalk with each syllable.
>
> *The what*, Didl said, *is not so important, but that we should remember. It is the act of remembering, the process of remembrance, the recognition of our past...*" (p.36).

Writing is not only a means for him, Jonathan, to achieve, through fiction, illumination on his own, absent past, for he describes it as a distinguishing feature of the Jewish people (see "The Jews have 6 senses"). Therefore, the act of remembering is represented as a founding trait of himself, and whether or not it should prevail a humorous or ironical reading on entries like "Jews" or "Us, the Chosen People" (through which the author is able to question Jews' debatable high self-appreciation in relation to other communities), it is a fact that the Holocaust drastically imposed itself on Jewish collective identity.

By fictionalizing himself, Safran Foer is also able to fictionalize his narrative identity, and so to find relations – nominal, artistic – with his mythicized ancestors. In that strand, the act of writing is analogous to the act of remembering, a condition on which the constitution of Jewish identity depends – here, it is sufficient to recall the ritualization of the *Hagaddah*, in which the reading of the Exodus performs the function of "remembering where you came from". In writing, he remembers. In remembering, he connects.

His lack of findings, translated into the handful of absences that furnish the book[13], juxtaposed with the centrality of the act of remembering as means to reliving the past, can be seen as a *redemption* mode of framework, in McLean's terminology, for rewriting the origins as well as the journey through time undergone by his lineage, as the combination of those elements allow Jonathan to creatively manipulate the founding basis of his own character.

Such reading allocates (contextualizes) the making of his novel within the idea conveyed by the "Book of Antecedents" entry "*The novel, when everyone was convinced he had one in him*", revealing a direct relation with the theory of narrative identity, which suggests that one's sense of selfhood can be seen as structured in a narrative fashion - here represented by the idea of 'novel', an approach to be found useful for psychotherapy:

> “psychotherapists might be able to learn from writers (in this case fiction writers) how to aim at, or at least be satisfied with, a life-narrative whose truth is poetic (a hard term to define - later you write of 'the truth of what is in the heart and the mind', which may or may not be the same thing) rather than pragmatic, conforming to the facts of the case.” (Coetzee and Kurtz, 2015, p. 14)

In terms of genre, asserting that narrative in such myth-oriented approach – widely acknowledge by critics – implies degrees of genius and inventiveness necessary for achieving a sense of “poetic truth”, as suggested in Coetzee and Kurtz (“the best way of trying to get something both true and new, or newly conscious, is often a creative one”, 2015, p. 5), recalling Hirsch’s previously mentioned words on the need of “imaginative investment” (1993**,** p. 23).

Alex’s strand, his first novel attempt, will both approximate and distance from “the hero’s” approach to self-fictionalization. Alex too makes use of the writing trade as a manner to better visualize who he is from an outer perspective. He begins his production by a series of self-praising, often distorted acknowledgements of himself, as he wishes to be seen as an manly, eloquent, womanizer, wealthy youngster from an Ukrainian paradise called Odessa. Although his novel is not explicitly concerned with the pursuit of a satisfactory answer for the question ‘who am I’, rather presenting

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[13]In his thesis, Jacobs (Jacobs, 2009, pg. 43) situates Safran Foer's work through the term 'Poetics of Absence”, a characteristic he perceives as descriptive of authors belonging the third-generation of Holocaust survivors,

himself in confident statements and fixed places within his family and the world, he does see in fiction the opportunity to produce an improved version of himself (and, as the story unfolds, of his grandfather as well).

Surely enough, one of the main causes for this opulent movement of self-aggrandizement is the arrival of Jonathan, this contrasting presence which causes him to abandon the hopeless boredom of domestic environment in search of adventure and excitement. The figure of the "American writer" embodies, in Alex's mind, everything that Alex seems to long for, that being the stereotypical image of independency, success and recognition. "America" is turned into the horizon through which he can channel his dream of becoming an accountant, unaware of the modesty of his desire when compared to the his extravagant American Dream. Due to that presence, which makes him feel as if eclipsed by the American's foreignness, Alex becomes overtly self-conscious as well as fearful of one thing: being perceived as dull, provincial, uninteresting, unattractive. The short experience with the foreigner (three days of misunderstandings, communicative contrivances and an emotional rollercoaster for both) is then turned into a piece of literature – rather lengthy, for a first-timer – where he hopes to produce a revised version of himself, or, as he puts it, to "make the story more premium than life" (p. 179).

Taking him 6 months to compose the totality of his strand, the act of writing also comes for Alex as a mean to "digest" the overwhelming facts about his grandfather, learned during a single day in the countryside of Ukraine: that he was not born in Odessa, that he had been disconsolately involved in the killing that took place in one of the shtetls, that the guilt resulting from this fact causes Alex not only to perceive his grandfather aside to the perpetrators, but also to end up sharing his guilt. The narrative account of this acknowledgement is gradually offered to the reader, who is able to perceive how that revelation impacts him through the dramatic change in Alex's style and self-expression along the process (besides the evident evolution of his English). As previously observed, the early chapters of his strand feature the attempt of creating an improved version of himself, as if he would have a dissatisfying content to offer in case he opted for an accurate self-portrait. So he adopts the model offered by Jonathan's writings, in which the narrator goes a few generations back in order to situate himself. Therefore, Alex too will make use of his literary endeavor to explore his own ancestral family connections, though in a much shorter string. There, he delineates the Perchov's

generative lineage, blatantly borrowing Jonathan's resource of generations connected through a same name, hence establishing the three Alexes that make up his life.

Identifying himself in conjunction with his father and grandfather, Alex too is able to delineate a narrative of his origins, something to help him explaining who he is. Nevertheless, this identification also implies the bearing of his ancestors acts and traumas, furnishing this narrative with depth and complexity, resounding the words of Ramalho (2006, p. 27, my translation):

> "This self-construction by one's own – typical of modern individualism – which alludes to total self-sufficiency is, in reality, an illusion, as the subject does not come from nothing. The story, the novel that he builds for himself, departs exactly from the signifiers of his history, from his symbolic determinations (even if repressed). In other words, he has been told his own story even before he existed, in the talks that preceded him, in his parents' expectations for him, in the choice of his name, in short, in the desire or non-desire of his parents or providers". (Ramalho, p. 27, my translation)

Hence, for the last two chapters, Alex feels that he no longer needs to be "humorous", (manly) "disgusting" or even Americanized, as he discovers that, much like the hero, he too, by telling the story of his family – who was able to "survive" only due to dreadful circumstances – has his own, profound tale engraved in his narrative identity. He realizes he too is an indirect survivor, although at the expense of another person's ruin.

In McAdams and McLean's rhetoric, Alex's realization of the facts of how his self-perception is narratively structured would hence fall in the category of a *meaning-making* manner of coding his sense of identity:

> "The degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event. Coding ranges from no meaning (low score) to learning a concrete lesson (moderate score) to gaining a deep insight about life". (McAdams and McLean, 2013 p. 234)

In terms of score, Alex's narrative is pervaded with the explicit demonstration of attaining enlightenment over his self-perception, something perceivable in the contrast between his 'novelistic' attempt to force language to a somewhat convenient picture of reality and, mostly in parenthesis – and effectively dominating his conclusion of the strand –, his real perception of the facts in an entirely personal and transformative degree. As for the genre, Alex too – like Art Spiegelman, in his second strand - frames his interior quest through the elaboration of a bildungsroman, "'a novel of development',

tracing the protagonist's growth (...) into adulthood and maturity" (Cambridge Guide to Literature in English, 1993, p. 85)

This somewhat cathartic illumination makes Alex pay closer attention to his father's and grandfather's behaviors, as well as to his relationship with them, themes that can be found in his epistolary confidences. There, the reader becomes witness of the decline of his grandfather's emotional life, who slowly descends into a suicidal depression after his encounter with Lista, when he is forced to remember and narrate his deadly role in someone else's extermination. We are also presented to Alex growing antagonism towards his father. Finally, we are granted with Alex's meditation on how to step back from failure, exposing his desire to get rid of the erasable errors that taint his life, an attitude that can be read as the characters desire to reclaim control over his own narrative.

Apart from few occurrences in his 'novel' in which Alex states his limited communication with his father, as well as his violent means of ending conversations, from the earlier letters the reader, along with Jonathan, is informed of his discomfort with the father's presence. Throughout the letters, he suggests violence towards his younger brother, alcoholic tendencies leading to appalling outbursts of violence. Alex also confesses his virginity, admitting to have lied about "being carnal with girls" for the his father's contempt. In short, his father is a reminder of his lack of self-government, an issue that will find closure when he finally "decide[s] to remove him father from [his] life" (p. 178).

At some point, Alex rehearses, through one letter, a clear organization of all the surrounding relatives, one by one, and the narratives ascribed to them.

> "There is so much that I want to inform you, Jonathan, but I cannot fathom the manner. I want to inform you about Little Igor, and how he is such a premium brother (…), and also about Mother, who is very, very humble (…) I want to inform you about Grandfather (…) and how he cannot witness my eyes anymore, *but must be very attentive to something behind me* (…) I want to inform you about Father, and how I'm not being a caricature when I tell you that I would remove him from my life if I was not such a coward. I want to inform you about *what is to be me*, which is a thing that you still do not posses a single whisper". (…) I have been putting on a high shelf what I know I must do, which is point a finger at Grandfather pointing at Herschel." (p. 178, emphasis added)

While wondering on “what is like to be me” sounds analogous to questions such as “who am I” and therefore “what defines my identity”, the paragraph quoted appears as an epiphanic concern of the constitution of Alex’s self, and as he strives to “fathom the manner” to appropriately explain “what is to be me”, he turns to his immediate surroundings – his family members, with personal connections as the narratives ascribed to them – to establish a starting point. In addition, his perceptive indication of his grandfather’s, “attentive to something behind [him]” just echoes the words of Arabella Kurtz: “the urge to fix the story of our lives may be an aspect of largely adaptative drive to rehearse the lessons of the past, issuing implicit instructions to ourselves in the present” (Coetzee and Kurtz, 2015, p. 23).

Eventually, he realizes he cannot change the past (something early acknowledged as “the immovability of truth”, in cognate relation to his reading of Jonathan’s work), but that he can try to gain control over the present, which will be later expressed as “For the first time in my life, I told my father exactly what I thought, (…) exactly what I think” (p. 242). If what defines someone’s identity is the surrounding events in which one is immersed, eliminating what is wrong and reaching for a humanly ethical behavior might be an alternative to lower the possibilities of a regretful narrative. Such “illumination” culminates not only in his refusal to give his grandfather all his savings – aware it was not “Augustine” he would be looking for, but the unreachable past of Herschel, along with the forgiveness he can no longer obtain (“We were not five days from finding her. We were fifty years from finding her”, p. 216) –, but also in his decision to grant it to his father, in “payment for everything you will leave behind”. (p. 274)

The level of letter-exchange conveys the degree to which Alex can improve his sense of *agency*, granting a narrative in which the protagonist "[is] able to affect change in his own life (...) often through demonstration of self-mastery (...)" (McLean, 2013, p. 234) – the “sense of mastery of one’s narrative”, in Coetzee and Kurtz’s view, being often more decisive, in the personal narratives of our everyday lives, than the stories that one tells, (Coetzee and Kurtz, 2015, p. 14). The desire to attain self-mastery is brought up in one letter.

> “We all choose things, and we also all choose against things. I want to be the kind of person who chooses for more than chooses against, but like Safran, and like you, I discover myself choosing this time and the next time against what I am certain is good and correct, and

> against what I am certain is worthy. I choose that I will not, instead of that I will. None of this is effortless to say.” (p. 241)

In addition, in the closure of the novel, Alex’s “self-mastery” is punctuated by his grandfather’s in his (suicide) letter to Jonathan – the last of the epistolary series – as he asserts, in plain conviction, to be “certain of who he [Alex, after “all he had endured”] was” (p. 275), the words of Grandfather crossing the filter of Alex’s translation, as he had to translate for the American, bring Alex closer to his textually-based identity closure. This fact is visible in the improvement of Alex’s autonomy within his surrounding, noticeably in his making hard decisions (refusing to lend his money to his depressive grandfather) and assuming the necessary authority for bringing his current life into a satisfactory context (by casting out the generally harm-inflicting presence of his father). Serving as the vehicle through which the artists communicate, the letters also help add to a *künstlerroman* reading of the strand – based on the countless occasions in which their literary production was at stake throughout their correspondence –, stressing the association of the balancing/meditation of reality through the filter of the narrative composition.

Ricoeur, observing the stages through which an individual undergoes while in process of establishing a comprehensive sense of self, approximates language and reality by means of systematized uses of narrative-making. "In making this link between narrative process and lived reality, whilst establishing a dialectical relationship at the heart of identity, Ricoeur’s approach understands knowledge of oneself to be interpretative. It is this interpretation that seeks to provide stability in the face of conflict, complexity and uncertainty". (Mallet and Wapshott, 2011, p. 276) In its turn, the assemblage of Safran Foer's concomitant diegetic levels allows us to perceive the three stages of that process ("prefiguration", "configuration", and "refiguration") in correspondence with its three constitutive strands.

The first stage, "prefiguration", is the one in which a "pre-narrative" is situated as the context from which the individual will establish his network of references within a horizon of "expectations of the self and of narrative conventions", although this semantic construction is often unclear in form or figure (in agreement with Mallet and Wapshott, 2011, p. 278; Crowley, 2013, p. 2). Jonathan works this "pre-narrative" out through what can be perceived as a fictional construction of his ancestors filled with

uncertainties (or 'absences'), to whom he will owe the stories that comprise his sense of present as somehow affixed to the past. Alex’s posture, modeling after "the Hero", can also be seen as demonstrative of this early step, as he hopes to textually formulate his identity from his desire to take part in an idealized (and fictional) "pre-narrative" of his perception of the American life-style.

Less abstract (more practical), the second stage, **"configuration",** appears in a second moment, resulting from the interaction between expectations and real actions and exchanges within the world, a process of “emplotment” of experience “which ‘brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results’” (Ricoeur *apud* Mallet and Wapshot, p. 278-279). Such process is characterized by the experimentation of ‘new senses of self’, fostering the ‘reshaping of our experiences’, hence drawing “a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents” (ibid). In his novelistic undertaking, Alex finds himself able to experiment with manners of self-portrayal, trying to merge in his figure the horizon of expectations that is (somewhat) imposed through/with the arrival of the American Other and the facts recently learned about his grandfather’s past. Therefore, the early narrator’s values (opulence and luxury, self-praise, manliness) slowly give room to a new style of narration, more confessional (frequently addressed to Jonathan under secrecy requests), doubtful (mostly posing questions) and by means of clearly distinguished written register, as this change is manifested through the aid of parentheses, which appear as exceptions at the beginning of his novel and as standard register at its last chapter. This relocation of narratorial act into parentheses, abandoning previous discursive patterns produced in the strand’s first half, qualifies this adjustment of self-perception under the process of configuration.

> “(I will tell you, Jonathan, that at this place in the conversation, it was no longer Alex and Alex, grandfather and grandson, talking. We yielded to be two different people, two people who could view one another in the eyes, and utter things that are not uttered. When I listened to him, I did not listen to Grandfather, but to someone else, someone I had never encountered before, but whom I knew better than Grandfather. And the person who was listening to this person was not me but someone else, someone I had never been before but whom I knew better than myself)” (p. 245)

Finally, the self-portrait achieved through his process of configuration leads him to confess, in the letters, the desire of ‘authoring’ his own narrative, in correspondence to

the stage of reconfiguration, therefore refraining from negative external facts and events that compose and define his life.

According to the authors, the process of reconfiguration results from "these processes [where] conflicts and tensions are mediated and new, accommodating narratives are hopefully authored that bring concordance to the tensions of discord. In an extreme sense, this intersection between the narrative process of the individual and the extant world of action can be viewed as a moment of 'revelation' where understanding is reached. Faced with contradictions and uncertain desires and demands, we are required to innovate new understandings or narrative compromises (Tilley *apud* Mallet and Wapshot, p. 282-283). Alex's "revelation", resulting from his experience of posthumous guilt ("the truth is that I also pointedatHerschel and I also said heisaJew and (...) you also pointedatHerschel and you also said heisaJew (...) Grandfather also pointedatme and said heisaJew and you also pointedathim and said heisaJew", (p. 252, original agglutinations) leads him to willfully take responsibility for the facts of his own, personal story, as stated in his final letter:

> We all choose things, and we also all choose against things. I want to be the kind of person who chooses for more than chooses against, but like Safran, and like you, I discover myself choosing this time and the next time against what I am certain is good and correct, and against what I am certain is worthy. I choose that I will not, instead of that I will. None of this is effortless to say (p. 241)

In short, the organization of *Everything Is Illuminated*, and its reframing of narrative identity can be summarized as follows:

Everything is Illuminated	**First Strand**	**Second Strand**	**Third Strand**
Genre convention	Myth-oriented	*Bildungsroman*	*Künstlerroman*
Coding modes of narrative self	Redemption	Meaning-Making	Agency
Ricoeur stages	Pre-figuration	Figuration	Refiguration

In conclusion, Jonathan Safran Foer explores the potentialities of the novel form as a tool for experimenting with the construction of the "narrative self". Departing from a

more traditional canon of Jewish literature, in which artists tend to explore the presence of the Holocaust in the post-war Jewish imaginary, the author focuses on how the influence of (familiar) past memories can bear influence in the individual's self-perception in further generations, not only as descending from victims, but also from perpetrators. Concomitantly, the final product of the literary effort, its 'artifactuality', is also debated through questions that raise awareness the arbitrariness of Art, supposedly devoid of ontological functions other than existing as it is (as expressed in the *Art* entry on *The Book of Antecedents*, p. 202) and its primordial characteristic of imprinting the views and perceptions of human experience concerning the past, the self and the reality.

4. CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the uses of metafictional resources presented in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survival's Tale* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* to investigate the advantages of the authors' choice for turning the novels into self-conscious narratives, instead of simply coping with the narrative presentation of the facts that they seemly aimed at telling. What, after all, is the gain in portraying the backstage of writing in *Maus* and *Everything is Illuminated*?

Apart from their narrative self-consciousness, these works can be paralleled in many aspects. Both author-protagonists are artists who turn their attention to their ancestry, initially hoping to turn their forbearers' life-narratives into art. These forbearers, namely Vladek and Safran (and, in extension, Alex's Grandfather), also share the connection of having endured the Nazi imposition, the first through the dreadful experience of ghettos and concentration camps, the second by managing to escape the destruction of his homeland, the shtetl of Trachimbrod, and Alex's Grandfather by desperately choosing to sacrifice someone else's life in exchange of his own survival. In addition, these author-characters – Alex included, as he is encouraged to produce his own novel – perceive themselves as intimately connected to these stories, despite belonging to later generations. At some point, they perceive themselves as members of the "post-generations", as they realize that their identities are contingent to events that took place before they had been born, events whose spectral presence still lingers on in their current, post-war lives.

Just as metafiction poses questions to the structure ascribed to a narrative, these characters too become aware that their own existence, which is determined by the unfolding of prior – and terrifying – events. By means of metafictional resources, the two novels are able to draw a rich analogy between the narrative construction of selfhood and that of the graphic/literary text. Relying on the figure of the artist-character, both Spiegelman's and Safran Foer's works explore this "textuality" of life narratives, echoing Patricia Waugh's assertion that "metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'. (WAUGH, 1984, p. 18)

Both in *Maus* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, the process of artmaking creates opportunities for these artist-characters to achieve these absent narratives, as they have to reach for a suitable rhetoric in order to (re)produce their stories so that these narratives can coherently accommodate each character's sense of identity. In this path, we could observe that the different diegetic levels comprised by each artwork can be read in association to constructs of narrative identity as identified by McAdams and McLean (2013), namely "redemption", "meaning-making" and "agency": modes of discursive patterns through which individuals are able to codify and therefore narrate their identitarian sense of being.

Firstly, in relation to the first strands in both novels, the "redemption" construct appears for Vladek as means to "re-live" (via narratorial act, in which he co-participates actively) his old, pre-Holocaust "self", while for Jonathan, the experience of fictional writing propitiates, in a semi-religious ground, the reconnection with his ancestral family.

Secondly, the "meaning-making" mode of self-narration appears in relation to the second strands in both novels, where the characters on focus, now Art (in *Maus*) and Alex (in *Everything Is Illuminated*) undergo a transformative experience which causes them to reframe self-perception in relation to sense of past and place within their families.

Finally, the last mode of codifying self-narratives appears under the construct of "agency", through which the characters (again Art and Alex) are able to take responsibility for their sense of identity, graphically informed in *Maus* by the hierarchical contrast where the 'human' Art is portrayed in full – yet emotionally erratic – control of his self-portrait as a rat, while in Alex's case we can read, through his letters, that his role within his family has altered dramatically.

As the metafictional levels observed in the works are able to produce ontological questions regarding the construction of individual identity, they also point to the centrality of the theme of "artmaking" within those identity narratives. Both in *Maus* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, the artists-protagonists are faced with the impossibility of art to "represent" reality, a realization explained by a number of reasons, the most resounding one being the characters' inaccessibility to the original narrative sources - the facts themselves. Nevertheless, this impossibility never prevents the characters from

achieving the implicit goal of substantiating their narrative identities through the negotiation between what they can factually grasp and that which they have to creatively produce. In this fashion, the works contribute to the convolutive debate of how the narrative arts are to deal with the appropriation of facts from reality without attempting to presumptuously stand for or substitute them (or, as famously put by William Gass, "there are no descriptions in literature, there are only constructions"). Thus, the works remain exemplary of the tendency, within the end of the twentieth century, to prioritize the individual, sedimentary construction of reality instead of accepting and submitting to a given “reality as it is”:

> The increased awareness of ‘meta’ levels of discourse and experience is partly a consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness. Beyond this, however it also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday ‘reality’. (WAUGH, 1984, p. 3)

In conclusion, the works under scrutiny attest to the power of narrative composition, for their authors and – by extension – their readers to purge issues related to identitarian incongruencies, celebrating the process of artmaking as a healer for those open and willing to experience the recasting of selfhood and of the surrounding reality through the interactive juxtaposition of narrative constructs.

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