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## **Projecting, connecting, reconfiguring Nostalgic and antinostalgic features in Richard McGuire's *Here***

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**Abstract** • Nostalgia is an emotion that binds a memory to an emotional component, divided between melancholy and comfort. In comics, nostalgia can be elicited through several thematic, formal, and structural triggers. McGuire's *Here* (2014) is a peculiar example of these dynamics. Through a non-chronological, fragmentary progression, the graphic novel tells several mundane moments of millions of years of a corner of the United States, seen from a fixed perspective and occupied mainly by a living room. *Here* thus shows, on first analysis, a scattered and frayed plot, which implies low narrativity and should result in an anti-nostalgic attitude. However, these effects are countered by an antithetical set of mechanisms that ask to imbue the transitions between panels with meaning and reconstitute the textual network of semantic and plastic echoes, encouraging active reading and producing ambivalent effects for the nostalgic feeling.

**Keywords** • Graphic novel; Comics studies; Narratology; Affect theory; Nostalgia

**Ledizioni** 

# Filling, projecting, connecting Nostalgic and antinostalgic features in Richard McGuire's *Here*

Giorgio Busi Rizzi

## I. Introduction

This article discusses how nostalgia is discouraged and how it is, on the contrary, elicited by the themes and textual strategies employed by Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here* (2014). The analysis applies a framework deriving from narratology, visual semiotics, and comics studies and puts it in dialogue with insights from affect theory.

Nostalgia is seen as a complex emotion characterized by a bittersweet feeling that binds a memorial act to an emotional component, simultaneously perceiving a memory as painful and desirable. While research on nostalgia and media has multiplied in the last decade (e.g., just to mention book-length contributions, Lizardi, 2014; Niemeyer, 2014; Menke and Schwarzenegger, 2016; Lizardi, 2017; Wesseling, 2017), it has touched on comics almost tangentially, focusing mainly on nostalgia as a theme (Marrone, 2016; Cremins, 2017) and, secondarily, on nostalgic practices in comics consumption (Gibson, 2015) rather than on the stylistic and structural mechanisms that substantiate it. Nonetheless, I argue that the relationship between nostalgia and comics unfolds through the interaction of specific thematic triggers, formal features, and structural configurations that reinforce their effects (Busi Rizzi, 2018, 2021, 2023, 2024). Indeed, across all media, a nostalgic effect seems to be obtained by texts that adopt comparable strategies, ultimately aimed at increasing the reader's emotional involvement in the story while pointing to some treasured, memorable past.

McGuire's *Here* (2014) is a peculiar example of these dynamics. The graphic novel tells, through a non-chronological progression made up of short fragments, the story of a somewhat anonymous angle of the United States, seen from a fixed perspective (mostly occupied by a living room) from about three billion (3,000,500,000 years) BCE to 22,175 CE. Each panel features a caption in its upper left-hand corner, specifying the date; the main panels occupy a double-page spread, but inset panels with the same perspective and different chronologies (hence, storylines) open within the main ones. The length of each storyline varies from one to several instances, but nothing happens that seems memorable: the storylines fray over the years and often boil down to small, insignificant events, many of which begin but are left suspended.

Not surprisingly, such a peculiar object has been studied from different perspectives, foregrounding its semiotic (Groensteen, 1991, 2015; Kaplan, 2015; Konstantinou, 2015; Chaney, 2017), spatio-temporal (Moncion, 2017; Balestrino, 2018; Sobelle, 2018; Misztal, 2021; Bekavac, 2022), or ecocritical (Perry, 2018; Hegglund, 2019; Olsza, 2022) aspects – the latter in turn often seen in close relation to the narratological (Caracciolo, 2016; Smith, 2018). This article focuses on how *Here*'s formal features and the cognitive and affective reactions they elicit modulate the text's (anti)nostalgic tone. Specifically, I argue that the interplay between its textual mechanisms results in ambivalent effects on the nostalgic feeling: on the one hand, its loose temporal structure and non-anthropocentric scope, static spatial configuration, and plurality of characters with little narrative depth result in low narrativity

(Moncion, 2017, p. 205) and anti-nostalgic effects. On the other hand, *Here*'s thematic, formal, and structural features counteract this effect by deploying a series of nostalgic triggers and eliciting an active decoding to reconstitute its narrative, ultimately encouraging a nostalgic reading.

Following this main trail, this article navigates the several tensions established by the comic that intersect with the issue of nostalgia, with two aims: to refine the criteria through which to observe nostalgic mechanisms in comics; and to reflect on how *Here* manages to achieve its twofold effects by leveraging the cognitive and emotional mechanisms activated by the different codes that constitute it and the different reading protocols it establishes.

## 2. Nostalgia: mood, emotion, and triggers

The premise from which this article moves is that the paradigmatic nostalgic experience consists in a bittersweet feeling, oscillating between melancholy and consolation, that binds an emotion to a memory, simultaneously perceived as painful and desirable.

In doing so, nostalgia bridges the spatiotemporal distance to something – a place, a moment, a condition, an experience, etc. – now irretrievable, which seems missing from the present (and the future). This probably explains why nostalgia is particularly salient in the contemporary world, which simultaneously tends toward the complete digital retrievability of the past, and sees social, economic, and environmental changes taking place that make the future phantasmal (Fisher, 2012). As such, the longing for the past that the nostalgic affect expresses derives from a compromise formation between the past and the present, implying a tension toward a problematic or undesirable future (Kaplan, 1987; Busi Rizzi, 2023).

In general, nostalgia feeds on tensions. Another constitutive dynamic that underlies it is that between the diverging temporalities of different subjects and objects, and the dialectic between impermanence and permanence that this discrepancy underlies: places and objects “disintegrate from internal decay and the strain of usage, erosion, and catastrophe” (Shils 2006, p. 63), but the signs of this decay (ruins, dust, dirt, rust, creaking, mold, fungi, oxidation) are different from those of the human body; in fact, decay differs from human body to human body, and this asymmetry fuels the nostalgic affect.

So far, I have defined nostalgia as an experience, a feeling, and an affect. As affect theory has long discussed, “affect” is an umbrella term encompassing different types of bodily states, “including emotions, moods, reflexes, autonomic responses, mirror reflections, desires, pleasures, etc.” (Plantinga, 2008, p. 87). Although all these elements play a crucial role in the affect process, the two that interest me most in this context are emotions and moods. Plantinga summarizes their characteristics as follows:

A human emotion is [...] a mental state accompanied by physiological and autonomic nervous system changes, subjective feelings, action tendencies (i.e., tendencies to certain behaviours in response to emotions), and outward bodily behaviours (facial expressions, body postures, gestures, vocalisations, etc.). Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are directed towards some ‘object’ [...] Moods, another type of affect, are thought to be more enduring and more widespread than emotions proper (2008, pp. 86-87).

While nostalgia can certainly be seen as an affect, it possesses a dual nature: it can be a mood (a diffuse, free-floating mental state) through which an inherently nostalgic subject approaches reality (Holak and Havlena, 1998); but it certainly substantiates into an emotion

directed towards (and triggered by) specific objects (Sedikides et al., 2015). Prototypical examples of nostalgic objects are natural phenomena and individual and social recurrences (Sedikides et al., 2015) that tie in with a subject's individual experience. Nostalgic objects are thus those that lure "the receiver into a nostalgic mood" – or elicit a pre-existing one – by triggering "internal nostalgic memories, since internal, more private experiences, have a stronger emotional content" (Salmose, 2012, p. 164).

In this sense, the nostalgic emotion rests on a cooperation between an object and a subject, who must choose to actualize the nostalgic potential present in the object or inherent in the individual's relationship with it. A nostalgic text may resonate with them, but it is up to them, depending on their repertoire and attitude, to detect this nostalgic potential and actualize it in the nostalgic experience. For this reason (and in light of the tension within it between a positive and a negative affect), I consider nostalgia as a secondary emotion, that is, a more complex affect that mixes several primary emotions and requires 'a pre-set of acquired cultural socialization', i.e. 'an already existing combination of beliefs and repertoires of experiences' (Dickinson and Erben, 2006, p. 224).

In comics, nostalgia can be elicited through a series of thematic and formal triggers, the effect of which is fostered by specific structural features: the nostalgic experience typically arises from motifs related to moments, places, senses, and objects; it is obtained through strategic choices, concerning the trait, colors, and use of details; it preferably relies on an analeptic structure (where one or many temporal levels instate a past/present dynamic, possibly displaying a dense web of analepses and prolepses), and builds a network of intertextual and interdiscursive strategies, foregrounding comics' archival working and inviting a particularly active reception on behalf of the reader (Busi Rizzi, 2018, 2021, 2023, 2024). Prototypically, this process is facilitated by a narrator/protagonist who acts as a mediator and colors the events with a nostalgic glow (Salmose, 2012). In this article, I will discuss the peculiar nostalgic dynamics at work in Richard McGuire's *Here* referring to this methodological tripartition, hence investigating thematic, stylistic, and structural features that elicit nostalgia and those that mitigate it.

### 3. From "Here" to *Here*

"Here"<sup>1</sup> first appeared as a six-page comic in 1989, in the second volume of *RAW* magazine. Hugely influential, this short story depicts a room, seen from a fixed angle, in different moments between 500957406073 BCE and 2033 CE. Its six pages are organized according to a regular layout, with six panels of equal size per page arranged along three rows. McGuire's groundbreaking yet simple technique consisted of opening inset panels within the 36 'main' ones, sharing the same spatial setting seen from the same visual perspective, but displaying different temporalities. "The year each image is taken from," Chaney writes, "is dutifully reported in accompanying captions. The year comes to figure as a reading anchor, stabilizing our navigation through vastly disconnected images" (2017, p. 177). The captions, both in the comic and in its later book version, only state the year – no further indication comes from the verbal narrator.

<sup>1</sup> From now on, I will always refer to "Here" when addressing the 1989 short comic, and *Here* when talking about the 2014 book.



Figure 1. The first page of “Here” (McGuire, 1989 © RAW)

The two main inspirations were Art Spiegelman’s *The Malpractice Suite*, a two-page comic with multilayered panels published in 1976 in the magazine *Arcade: The Comics Revue*; and Robert Crumb’s *A Short History of America*, a 15-panel (originally 12) one-page comic first published in the *CoEvolution Quarterly* magazine in 1979, depicting the same corner of America grappling with industrialization over the years.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, McGuire came up with the idea of *Here* after witnessing a lecture by Art Spiegelman where the latter suggested that “comics are essentially diagrams” (McGuire,

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, *Here* is indebted to several other works in art history – Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (1942), Richard Hamilton’s *Just What is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, so Appealing?* (1956), Tadanori Yokoo’s *Waterfall Rapture* (1996) and so on – but the genealogy of the idea is not the point of this article, and I will not discuss it further.

2021, n.p.). McGuire's original intention was to split each panel into two halves: the story would move backward on the left side of each frame and forward on the right. Then, a friend told him about the new Windows operating system. Fascinated by the account, he dropped the split screen idea for a more complex approach in which inter-panel inserts would open inside the main ones (McGuire, 2021, n.p.). McGuire worked on his idea for eight months, "furnishing it with props and figures derived from his family's photographs and the picture collection of the New York Public Library" (Smith, 2015, p. 54), until it finally featured in 1989 in *Raw*.

Over the years, McGuire thought several times about making a book out of the comic. He first proposed a nearly squared volume, with two frames facing each other on each page (Smith, 2015, p. 55). The book project was put on hold for some time, during which his parents and sister passed away. In 2014, *Here* was finally published as a 300-page graphic novel, switching to full color realized through different techniques, and expanding the perspective of the room to fill a double-spread page and place the reader at the center of the action, "literally entering the space of the room" (McGuire, 2021, n.p.).

This tension – between short and long form, and between the events featured in the comic and the book – is only one of the many that connotes McGuire's work. The dialectic between what is (prototypically) a comic and what is (prototypically) a graphic novel has been reproduced since the 1980s in many discussions by comics scholars, and I will not delve into this issue here, as it is not directly relevant for my analysis.<sup>3</sup> It suffices here to consider the greater complexity allowed by the book format: the number of pages is consistently larger than the original comic, which allows for a different extension and layering of the story; the six homologous panels on which the original comic was structured expand to occupy the entire visible area of the open book; the stylistic heterogeneity is in contrast to the minimal homogeneity of the comic. Due to these choices, issues of style and structure are closely intertwined in *Here*, and will be discussed together in the following sections.

#### 4. Structure and style I: plot progression, storylines, and salience

According to Thierry Groensteen, "*Here* tells the story of a place – an indifferent corner of America – and that of the beings who inhabited it over the centuries. [...] It is a vast historical fresco in which existences intersect and follow one another, echoing each other before precipitating into oblivion" (2015, my translation). Joel Smith (while discussing the short comic version) argues that "'Here' orbits loosely around the life of a man who is born in 1957 and grows up in the house" (Smith, 2015, p. 55). It may seem counterintuitive, but both descriptions are fitting for both versions of the comic – and this engenders the first tension that runs through *Here*.

Indeed, the book is set in a fixed corner of the United States, which from the paratext (particularly its epitext,<sup>4</sup> namely, the interviews: see McGuire, 2021) and from some diegetic elements (e.g., the presence in the background of Benjamin Franklin's Proprietary House) we know to be based on McGuire's childhood home in Perth Amboy, New Jersey – whose corner of a living room is, we have reason to believe, the book's main protagonist. This is equally suggested by the peritext (the book's cover, the only instance where the point of view is reverted and shows the room's window from the outside)<sup>5</sup>; the hypotext

<sup>3</sup> For those who wish to explore this further, see Baetens and Frey (2015).

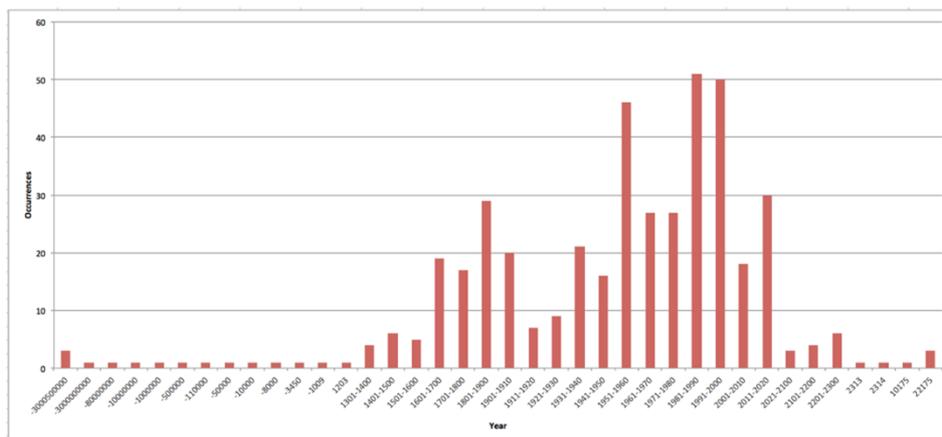
<sup>4</sup> I adopt here Genette's terminology (1987).

<sup>5</sup> This choice literally frames the story and plays with the idea of the materiality of the book which embodies the diegetic space of the room, while foreground the role of the cover as a border that separates the inside from the outside.

(in “Here,” the room’s corner occupies, at least partially, 34 of the 36 panels); and the first pages of the book itself. Thus, the unity of space anchors and holds the narrative together, where both the unity of time and action break loose (Moncion 2017, p. 204). In fact, we soon see the chronology switching to 1623 CE and 8000 BCE (McGuire, 2014, pp. 16-17 and 20-21, respectively), with no trace of the house. Indeed, as the story in the book spans over three billion years, the house in question occupies only a small part of its chronology: it is built in 1906-07, inhabited and renovated several times, suffers a fire (1996), a burglary (1997), a collapse (2015) and finally is destroyed by a flood (2111). Before and after the house is built, not much memorable happens, to the point that Groensteen, when commenting on “Here,” states that “none of this is worth telling” (1991, p. 98, my translation). Different plants, animals, and humans alternate over the years; many small things happen, some of which begin but are never concluded, like the arrow that is shot in 1402 and, similar to that of Zeno’s paradox, never hits its target; and the plot only thickens during few years in the life of a family that inhabits the house.

In the absence of a consistent plot, internal coherence is thus maintained by storylines that derive from the accumulation of fragments, a process patrolled by what Groensteen calls ‘braiding’ (1999) – that is, by the network of plastic and semantic references that each panel establishes with the others. Reconstituting these storylines (what Postema calls ‘weaving: 2013) ultimately gives *Here* cohesion, allowing to grasp the overall sense of its narrative. But is it true that all storylines in *Here* matter equally? Is temporal extension proportional to narrative extension (and to the importance a certain period has for the economy of the story)?

To answer this question, it is necessary to untangle *Here*’s chronological complexity. Preliminarily, we can count how many times each year appears in the story and add up these appearances,<sup>6</sup> immediately observing the concentration and thickening of events during the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries:



In fact, one can already notice the overlap between McGuire’s life and the most significant arc of events in *Here*. The action of the book begins (following the page progression, hence the *syuzhet*, not the *fabula*) in 1957, the year McGuire was born, with a female character wondering why she entered the room. Although no character in *Here* is about to give birth (unlike the six-page comic, in which the action began with a woman in labor), the first panel set in 1957 features a cradle, suggesting to the reader that there must be a baby (we later see the 1957 newborn, together with several others through different years, on the double spread on pages 58-59). Chaney comments that “what seems to be the autobiography of a place turns out to be a mask for autographic business as usual” (2017, p. 178).<sup>7</sup> This is a first glimpse at the subtle, ongoing interplay of nostalgic and anti-nostalgic stances in the comic: on the one hand, there is no verbal narrator and no main character(s), which prevents channeling the narrative towards a nostalgic response the way prototypically nostalgic texts do (Busi Rizzi, 2018). On the other hand, however concealed, *Here*’s story is first and foremost a semi-autobiography about (an alter ego of) McGuire himself; thus, albeit in a ghostly form, *Here* does provide us a narrator/protagonist to align ourselves with, to anchor the drifting of the narrative to, and from whose perspective nostalgic cues can potentially spring.

We can further process the chronological diffusion of the story going through each year and identify the most discernible storylines (understood as successions of events contiguous in time). The method is not entirely sound, as, for example, there are several occurrences during the year 1990, but they all seem unrelated and uninfluential. This demonstrates the plasticity that the year indication alone offers to the work, allowing the mega-narrator to modulate the amount of indeterminacy so that the reader doesn’t know whether one event is unrelated, or loosely related, to another that happens in the same year or whether they are immediately successive in time.<sup>8</sup>

However, retracing the storylines does provide a significant clue as to when *things* happen in *Here*:

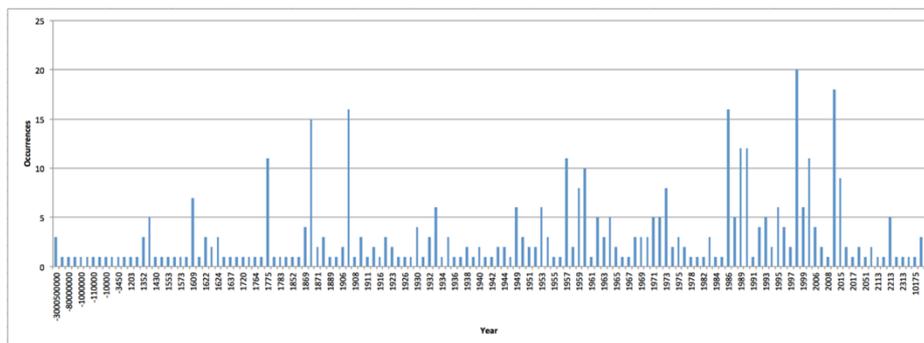


Figure 3. Distribution of *Here*'s storylines per year.

Twenty years feature at least five occurrences each, which makes their storylines somewhat more consistent than the others; of these, about half are longer. If we try to retrace the

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there is another small but significant signature of this autobiography by McGuire himself: in a small inset panel that continues for three double spreads (2014, pp. 244-48), a character that resembles McGuire himself is talking on the phone about the father who has just broken a hip, and a few pages later he is talking to his father, temporarily sleeping on the sofa-bed in the living room (2014, pp. 264-74).

<sup>8</sup> McGuire frequently uses this resource to play with polychronicity, as in the double page with nine inserts depicting the construction of the house in 1907 (same day or days: McGuire, 2014, pp. 234-43) or in the similar one in which a bird enters the house in 1998 (consecutive moments: McGuire, 2014, pp. 170-71).

events of *Here* by following its most important storylines, partially reconstituting its *fabula*, we will isolate four main temporal cores: the pre-anthropoc, pre-historical Earth of the Pleistocene; the Holocene, roughly until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the house is built; the Anthropocene,<sup>9</sup> during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; a post-Anthropocene future where humans are at first almost, and eventually completely, absent.

First, one can notice that the part of the book that transcends human history is extremely broad in diegetic time, but quite limited in story time. The scarce action unfolding in early Earth times moves from a primordial mélange of gasses and liquids (painted with impressionist brushstrokes) to some wandering prehistoric animals; similarly, the only windows we have into the distant future concern few animals and flowers (McGuire, 2014, pp. 276-81). The pages that cover these intervals are the most pictorial, and seem to borrow from painting a kind of negative time, a stillness in which the absence of action (at least, of observable, short-time action) is charged with an almost Zen-like quality that foregrounds its non-human quality and some disinterested distance from human vicissitudes.

The anthropic part of the book, which lasts until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and still features many animals) is, in contrast, more eventful – although it is quite difficult to tell what exactly these events are *about*. In 1402, a Native American shoots an arrow (McGuire, 2014, pp. 200-05); in 1609, a (non-consensual?) sexual intercourse is interrupted by a noise (2014, pp. 96-99, 160-69); in 1624, Dutch traders misinterpret a peace offering (a little sack full of local soil) from the Lenni-Lenape Indians as a joke (2014, pp. 265, 267, 269). In 1775, in a nearby house, Benjamin Franklin quarrels with his loyalist son William (2014, pp. 104-27). In 1870, a painter (according to Smith, a figure merging the painters William Dunlap and George Inness: 2015, p. 55) is sketching Franklin's house (and ignoring his muse: McGuire, 2014, pp. 172-89, 200-09, 215), in what will become a painting preserved in 'our' house in the 1930s. History is the protagonist in these timespans, but it does so through a series of ephemeral moments, both factual and verisimilar, presented in a database-like logic that does not seem to order or even select them because of their importance.

The plot becomes denser in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as mentioned, with a peak corresponding to McGuire's real life span, which depicts a family over three generations, when the house is inhabited by the same couple. In 1907, the house that fills the scene is indeed built (2014, pp. 234-43), and our view is finally occupied by the corner of a room (the transition seems natural in light of the reading progression, but we only witness the construction of the house in the last third of the book). In 1973, people gather to watch a family film; in 1986, members of a local archaeological society want to search the backyard for Native American remains (2014, pp. 96-113); in 1989, a joke about death is interrupted by what appears to be the heart attack of one of the listeners: 2014, pp. 18-35); in 1998, a bird enters the house and attacks a girl (2014, pp. 166-71); in 2005, an old man (the alter ego of McGuire's father) sleeps in his living room after having broken his hip (2014, pp. 264-74); in 2014, a new couple moves into the flat (2014, pp. 4-7, 42-43, 48-49, 56-57, 78-81, 94-95, 124, 147, 186-89, 196, 198, 210-11, 216, 229, 244-47, 252-53, 283-85).

The last chronological cluster concerns a post-apocalyptic future and is, again, extremely succinct. In 2111, the house is destroyed by a flood, turning the place into a water basin inhabited by large sea animals (2014, pp. 138, 274-75); in 2213, the place seems to have become a swamp, and a tour guide (a robot or hologram) leads tourists around and tells them about the house that once stood there (2014, pp. 254, 256-62). Finally, we have

<sup>9</sup> The idea, extension, and exact nature – whether distinct or not from the Holocene – of the Anthropocene is still debated, but for the sake of brevity I will simply align to the hypothesis that it is a different epoch starting around the 1960s (see Lewis and Maslin, 2015).

isolated glimpses of unknown creatures and flowers inhabiting a post-anthropoc Earth (McGuire, 2014, pp. 133, 277).

## 5. Structure and style 2: gaps, networks, and interpretive tensions

If the plot is so heavily episodic, made up of short storylines that are often left without a conclusion, what holds *Here* together?

Certainly not its stylistic affinity. On the contrary, the book displays a controlled stylistic heterogeneity (that, it must be underlined, is not less coherent). The drawings are a collage of styles and change according to the historical moment they are depicting: some pages are made with vector art, others with watercolors; some drawings are colored by hand, others with Photoshop; some pictures have sharp lines, others are raw sketches. The Earth of 3000500000 years ago is a series of blurred, brushed strokes, while the room in 2015 contains very recognizable furniture: we can distinguish a design seat (the Egg Chair by Arne Jacobsen), two IKEA bookcases, an IKEA lamp, a Vermeer exhibition poster. As Groensteen (2015, p. 31) points out, the furniture and decoration of the room embody the passage of time and the marks it leaves on objects, in a continuous dialectic between permanence and impermanence that (as mentioned) is one of the primary drivers of nostalgia.

Rather than specific characters or objects, though, the fixed visual perspective is the primary semantic unifier of the book. However, narrative fragmentariness is equally counteracted by the ecology of comic reading.

Earlier I mentioned as typical of comic reading the process of adding meaning in the transitions between panels – which McCloud calls closure (1993<sup>10</sup>). The idea is based on the Gestalt mechanism, “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1993, p. 63). The act of cognitively filling the gaps between panels is one of the most peculiar aspects of the medium, though not the only one, and not exclusive to comics, because “segmented sequences and fragmentation function as a provocation to meaning-making [...] *across the arts*, inviting the audience to make a connection and fill the gap” (Mikkonen, 2017, p. 18, italics mine). Moreover, gaps in comics are far from confined to the space between panels commonly referred to as ‘gutter’ (in more technical terms, ‘inter-iconic space’: Baetens and Frey, 2015, p. 121). They have to do with narrative omissions, the tension between the verbal and visual codes, and the modulation of graphic details and deformation. Indeed, the balance between the amount of detail provided (directly triggering the reader’s memory by portraying recognizable elements of their past, as in the example of the IKEA furniture) and the amount of detail that is denied determines how much of the story the reader have to fill in with their own experience. It is in filling these gaps that much of the reader involvement happens – and thus, the nostalgic potential of comics resides.

Moreover, comics display another peculiar semiotic resource, establishing a network of semantic and plastic references, links and echoes between non-consecutive panels (Groensteen influentially called this ‘braiding’ or ‘general arthrology’, in opposition to linear reading or ‘restricted arthrology’, 1999, and Postema stresses how the echoes are narrative as well: 2013). Indeed, in *Here*, as Caracciolo observes, “the use of inset panels, and the constant movement between different temporal planes, disrupt the linearity of the restricted arthrology: what holds the series of panels together is no longer a temporal or causal sequentiality, but stylistic suggestions or thematic resonances” (2016, pp. 187-88, my translation). These elements hence ‘rhyme’ with each other, an effect made all the more perceptible by the continuous use of analepses and prolepses that disseminate fragments of the

<sup>10</sup> For a critical appraisal of the concept, see Mikkonen, 2017, pp. 38-45; Gavalier and Beavers, 2020.

storyline throughout the book. This creates a network that overrules linear reading, where singular assonances come together in a rhizomatic structure.

*Here* works consistently on these mechanisms, adding semantic layers that often go in complementary directions to that suggested by linear reading, simultaneously encouraging and frustrating its interpretation. This friction frequently happens in comics – Hatfield notoriously calls comics “an art of tensions” (2009). Yet, *Here* does so in a particularly salient way, leading the reader to constantly superimpose in their mind two successions: the linear one of the reading progression and the fragmented, shuffled one of chronology (and thus, causality), linked to braiding.

This network calls for a decoding typical of comic reading: navigating the pages (cognitively and physically) to reconstitute connections and progressions (a mechanism that Postema calls ‘weaving’, 2013). To do so, *Here* requires its readers to pay attention to details and engage in an active interpretation and investigation, browsing its pages to look for links and constantly reconfiguring hypotheses about its narrative unfolding (Kostantinou, 2015, n.p.; Moncion, 2017, p. 205). Iser famously described this dialectic with the terms, borrowed from Husserl’s terminology, ‘protensions’ and ‘retensions’ – i.e., anticipations and reconfigurations (1978). Caracciolo signals that “the physical work of constantly flipping pages back and forth, recognizing a character or situation, thus becomes an equivalent of the cognitive work of building a narrativity network” (2016, pp. 189-90, my translation). It is thus a twofold labor that simultaneously points towards an interpretive stance and a haptic involvement with the book’s materiality (Kostantinou, 2015).

While, in principle, this active decoding increases readers’ involvement, the game they have to play is not clear from the beginning. On the contrary, they might initially believe in the possibility of fully deciphering the book’s code, rearranging the fragments in the proper order and reconstituting a unified narrative that makes complete sense of what is happening (Kaplan, 2015). However, as soon as they progress in the story, they will realize that the fragmentation and lacunae in the narrative ultimately prevent its reassembly: even when reconstructing the chronology, there will always be missing information and seemingly drifting blocks.

Another tension derives from how *Here* leverages this mechanism in a way that is ironic and tragic at the same time: the heart attack sequence, for instance, begins with the telling of a joke inside an inset panel set in 1989, embedded in the main double-spread panel showing the empty room in 1955 (McGuire, 2014, pp. 18-19). The narrative continues for a few consecutive pages, during which the chronology of the background panel shifts to scarcely humanized open spaces, until the inset panel opens up to occupy the entire double-page spread at the moment of the stroke (2014, pp. 34-35). The sequence only concludes much further in the book, occupying another double-page spread (2014, pp. 140-41). This way, the comic visually materializes the contrast between two chronologies (human and non-human): it stresses human mortality by confronting it to “the incomprehensible vastness of time” (Konstantinou, 2015, n.p.) – what Chaney calls a “non-human ontic timelessness” (2017, p. 178) – where death is nothing but a passing occurrence. This opening to a different temporality transforms the reader into an epigone of Dr. Manhattan, the being above time from Moore and Gibbons’ graphic novel *Watchmen*, able to perceive several temporal tracks synchronically. Reading *Here* indeed truly means “to engage, at least on the level of the page, with tenseless time,” a surface where “past, present, and future are simultaneously real, and time is mappable, like space” (Gardner, 2016, p. 168).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> This synchronicity can be used to obtain diverse effects of meaning: in this case, the juxtaposition becomes a commentary on the finitude and fragility of individual life in relation to life at large. Vice

A different, but similar tension originates from the friction between the various framings of the story. Apparently, the book closes on three concentric levels: in the opening and closing backflaps, the room is empty and dark, except for the light coming out of the window, and no time indication is given. On the first and last double spread, both set in 2014, the room is empty again, except for a bookcase and a box, which is open in the first case and closed in the second. Shortly further in the book's progression (McGuire, 2014, pp. 14-15), a woman is looking for something. We no longer see the character until we find her, in the final pages, walking around the room in a progressive series of inset panels (McGuire, 2014, pp. 288-97) that, in a similar manner to the sequence of the heart attack, open onto a spread page (McGuire, 2014, pp. 298-99) in which she eventually remembers why she entered the room. She was there to pick up a yellow book, the salience of which is emphasized by its stark contrast with the dominant purple of the page, suggesting a *mise en abyme* of the entire narrative structure: the book portrayed is (symbolically) a copy of *Here* itself, and the story is over (the very year in which McGuire is born). On the next page, as mentioned, the bookcase is empty and the box is closed: once again, the story seems to get its closure, since the narrative arc focused on the alter egos of the author's family has ended. The concluding backflap shows the same image of the empty, dark room.

However, an opposite movement comes from reconstructing the chronological progression: the bookcase in 2014 turns out not to be the (fictional) McGuire's'. It is instead owned by the young couple who must have bought the house when McGuire senior died: we witness them unconvincingly furnishing the room in 2015 (McGuire, 2014, pp. 210-11), and we see, the same year, the same bookcase filled with books, and next to it the Vermeer exhibition poster that was missing during the moving in/furnishing phase (2014, pp. 94-95). The fact that the bookcase is theirs means that the apparent closure is not conclusive, but rather only part of a circular loop: another story starts from the end of the McGuire's', which the book already partly tells: the story, in this sense, symbolically overcomes itself, crossing its own boundaries.



Figure 4. My elaboration: from left to right, the same detail from the first, last (dated 2014), and middle pages of the book (dated 2015) (McGuire, 2014, pp. 6-7, 300-01, 94-95, 210-11 © Pantheon Books).

versa, the three different panels showing, in the same double spread, people playing Twister in different historical moments (1966, 1971 and 2015: McGuire, 2014, pp. 216) suggest continuity and identity in the replication of habits and traditions over the years.

## 6. Motifs I: time, space, and everyday routine

Throughout the graphic novel, “we are solicited to see place as timely, perishable” (Chaney, 2017, p. 186). Nothing lasts, *Here* reminds us, “however permanent it seems” (McGuire, in Smith, 2015, p. 55). This cautionary tale about the finitude of (individual) human lives and the Anthropocene itself is mirrored by the events involving animals that surround the human portion of the narrative. Most of the animals – many of the characters, in fact – seem to face some sort of impending danger that they “sense but cannot confront or name” (Chaney, 2017, p. 185); and the house (as well as the objects and people that inhabits it) undergoes a series of accidents of varying magnitude. In a sort of existential nostalgia, the ultimate danger in *Here* thus seems to be mortality, be it individual or collective. Death and grief are *Here*’s most recurring themes, as proven, on a micro level, by the four double pages where each character laments the metaphorical or literal loss of something (McGuire, 2014, 141-49).

*Here* partially counteracts this theme through the ubiquitous presence of the water metaphor. Water is indeed a veritable *fil rouge* that incorporates both the theme of the passing of time and that of life changing, perishing and reinventing itself in an unbroken and incommensurable continuity that concerns cosmic time and points to the circularity and fluidity of existence itself, a concept more abstract than human ones and foreign to their attempts to cling to impermanent and transient things.

*Here* thus repeatedly points to a comparison between human time and the vaster natural time that opens to various interpretations:

Are [...] human tragedies small and insignificant against the backdrop of geological time? Are they the stubborn and unconscious efforts of humans to make a mark on the hugeness of existence? Are the minutiae of human history being celebrated, mocked, or both? [...] the smallness of human accidents and accomplishments is sandwiched between a vast, unknowable past and a precarious, environmentally catastrophic future. (Moncion, 2017, p. 207)



Figure 5. A family video is shown in 1973 (McGuire, 2014 © Pantheon Books)

The stress on the finitude and peripherality of human lives is nonetheless accompanied – in a typical nostalgic fashion –<sup>12</sup> by the recurring motif of childhood and adolescence, notably seen as sites of play and community. This includes the frequent games played by the characters throughout the story<sup>13</sup> (McGuire, 2014, pp. 40-49, 56-57, 70-71, 74-77, 88-89, 162, 206-09, 216-17, 224, 228, 271, 273, 275, 281, 295, 297) and the recurring pictures that the reunited family takes each year (2014, pp. 38-49). Taking pictures, in particular, is a nostalgic-flavored ritual that carries with it “both the cyclical nature of human affairs and the irretrievability of the past” (Smith, 2015, p. 55). In this sense, the family reunion in 1973 to watch a Super8 about the childhood of one of the family members (McGuire, 2014, pp. 190-91) – a typical thematic trigger for nostalgia (Busi Rizzi, 2023) – is a perfect example of the book’s credo: enjoying life in its transience, as it happens, before those fleeting moments disappear forever.

In this sense, and notwithstanding the difference between the comic and the graphic novel, I disagree with Groensteen’s consideration that “Here” would represent the denunciation “of the mediocrity of so many human existences [...] a mode of existence that could almost be described as vegetative, so much does it concentrate the symptoms of an alienated condition” (1991, p. 99, my translation). Indeed, the story often lingers on mundane, repetitive actions, such as checking for the key before leaving home, moving or renovating furniture and decoration, or having small talks with friends. But rather than showing alienation, these actions can be “comfortingly familiar, even nostalgic” (Moncion 2017, p. 207) – especially for the “North American middle-class reader” (2017, p. 207).

In the apparent insignificance and routine of the fragments of life that *Here* isolates, we can find the very essence of the ephemerality of everyday life, with its collection of small, trivial moments that ultimately make up our lives, which we must cherish before they disappear forever. The mundane episodes of *Here* are thus to be read, I argue, as a nostalgic commentary on the impermanence of things, rather than the sarcastic critique of postmodern alienation (as in Groensteen’s view); and the shortness of human lives, more than a worry, should be a reason to appreciate the little time we are given.

## 7. Motifs 2: history, memory, and nostalgia

To realize *Here*, McGuire did extensive research, a process that went from collecting images of families to annotating sentences in the language of the local natives, the Lenni-Lenape Natives, who inhabited New Jersey for over 10,000 years (Smith, 2015, p. 55). He included in the book historical facts and figures, such as William Franklin, the estranged son of Benjamin Franklin (McGuire, 2014, pp. 104-27), and smaller, plausible episodes, such as an exchange between Dutch traders and the same Lenni-Lenape (McGuire, 2014, pp. 265, 267, 269). This is a precious example of the comic behaving like a database, triggering in the reader a “historian’s impulse to narrativize, to clean up and organize a messy and sometimes overdetermined reality” (Moncion, 2017, p. 200). Readers hence must perform what Hayden White has called ‘emplotment’ and narrativize the historical facts the comic hints at. This act of narrativization is another instance that requires readers to fill in the many gaps left by the story by providing additional meaning coming from their

<sup>12</sup> According to Chaney, those scenes are even more intrinsically nostalgic, as they are conspicuously “riven with loss” (2017, p. 180).

<sup>13</sup> One such scene sets up another *mise en abyme*: on page 281, the dollhouse the little girl is playing with mirrors the perspective and arrangement of the main living room.

repertoire and supplementing the story with models provided by their autobiographies, memories, and experiences.

‘Experience’ is another key to understanding *Here*’s relation to nostalgia. In discussing *Here*, Caracciolo quotes Monica Fludernik’s concept of ‘experientiality’, affirming that it is inseparable from human interests and parameters, since it “presupposes, to various degrees, the time scale of human life and its bodily as well as cognitive characteristics” (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 178, my translation). As a result, the staging of broad temporalities (as that of *Here*) undermines “not only the chronological tightness of the plot, but its very causal and teleological nature” (2016, p. 178, my translation).

However, this process has a twofold effect on nostalgia: if the lack of experientiality potentially obstacles it, being confronted with such a chronological vastity (which points to death and nothingness) may instead reinforce the nostalgic effect of the narrative, prompting the reader to cling to the small, finite, everyday experiences. Nostalgia, Salmose argues, indeed “dwells in the grey zone between Husserl’s internal time consciousness and an external temporal measurement” (2012, p. 121).

Moreover, *Here*’s reflection on experience is complexified by its intersection with that on place. On the one hand, the relationship with the corner of the US that it stages is related to what Altman and Low call ‘place attachment’, “the emotional bond between people and places” (Lowe, 2018, p. 178) and particularly toward what we call home: “*Here* is as much about time as about concepts of home and the traces of lives lived” (Sobelle, 2018, p. 221). On the other, the book foregrounds the idea that places move on a different temporality than the human one, as Rommens notes when he contrasts an experiential temporality and a deep time “situated on a slow, geological level (the *très longue durée* of the planet)” (2019, n.p.). If attachment and experientiality point toward nostalgia, the shift toward deep time – and the ‘chronological vertigo’ it engenders (Hegglund, 2019, p. 196) – points to the effect on the planet of the Anthropocene. In this, *Here* gestures towards what Albrecht has called ‘solastalgia’, the distress “produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment” (2007, p. 95).

‘Memory’ is another key concept, as *Here* continuously foregrounds memory processes, both represented and symbolized. In the former case, characters tell themselves “You’re going to remember this day for the rest of your life” (McGuire, 2014, p. 45), or ask “What do you want to be remembered for?” (2014, p. 46) (in Moncion, 2017, p. 205). To consider the latter, more subtle case, we can turn to the double page that shows, in the main panel (set in 1986), an old lady (the alter ego of McGuire’s mother) vacuuming the floor. Two inset panels show, on the left, a man in 1960 scraping off two layers of wallpaper (one purple and one green, almost perfectly complementary), and on the right, a man in 1949 covering the green wallpaper with the purple one (McGuire, 2014, pp. 62-63). In her reading of the scene, Laura Moncion suggests that it has to do with the “fundamental futility to human action, or at least a deep impermanence” (2017, p. 207), and that “while the left-hand page shows that loss over time is inevitable or likely, emphasizing decay or removal, the right-hand page, with the man affixing the new wallpaper, emphasizes repair, novelty, construction, and perhaps some optimism” (2017, p. 207).



Figure 6. Scraping off old wallpaper, putting on new wallpaper, and wondering how memory works (McGuire, 2014, pp. 62-63 © Pantheon Books).

However, more can be said about this image, as the two inset panels stand in the foreground of the main 1986 spread page, where the dominant green, the uniform color of the paint on the walls and the carpet on the floor, is similar to those of the wallpaper that was being covered in 1949 and resurfaced with the scraping in 1960.

On the one hand, this points to *Here's* cyclical conception of history. On the other, the way the double page is designed, by putting together three apparently unrelated moments, recalls the process of mental association, suggesting a similarity between the way braiding works and the tendency of human memory not to “select memories according to any ‘objective’ importance, but based on intimate resonances” (Groensteen, 2015, p. 34, my translation). The stress on memory is suggested by the old lady’s remark that “the older I get, the less I know.” It would be interesting in this sense to consider who we think is the subject of the memorial act we are witnessing: is the visual narrator showing us its omniscient (albeit messy) perspective on the vicissitudes of the house over the years, or are we following the memory trail of the old lady in the main panel?<sup>14</sup>

In relation to this, and insofar as what authors say matters relatively, we know from several interviews that many inputs behind the gestation of both “Here” and *Here* are autobiographical: a reflection McGuire made when he was moving into a new flat and wondered who had lived there before him; his family’s habit of taking a collective portrait every Christmas; the death of his parents and sister, which led him to look back at “all those old memories, family photos, videos, all those things that had to be moved and archived somewhere else” (McGuire, in Groensteen, 2015, p. 35, my translation). It is McGuire himself

<sup>14</sup> This can be related to the occurrence that displays a character experiencing a *déjà vu* (McGuire, 2014, p. 198), another *mise en abyme*, this time of the memorial process that the whole book mimics with its echoes and links.

who, reflecting on the process of creating the book, enumerates several themes that are extremely familiar to those who investigate nostalgia:

When you look through thousands of personal photographs you see the commonality of the things we hold important enough to document. It's all the same: birthdays, weddings, holidays, sometimes just silly moments with friends. I think the book strikes a chord with people because they recognize themselves in it. It feels a bit like a photo-album. If you take a long view of time our lives are small and transient, and these moments are all we have (McGuire, 2021, n.p.)

As these themes resonate in the comic, they result in a feeling of subjectivity and grief that pervades the work and compensates for the dilution of story time over a much longer period than the human life, foregrounding inherently nostalgic reflections on the cyclical and irreparable nature of passing time (Salmose, 2012; Busi Rizzi, 2018, 2023). These reflections are universal, yet so deeply ingrained in anybody's personal experience that they further lure the reader in, setting the premises for a deeper emotional involvement.



Figure 7. Preparatory page for *Here* (McGuire in Smith, 2015, n.p.)

## 8. Conclusions

*Here* presents itself as a database that is up to the reader to narrativize, actualizing its archival potential and linking both events close in time and those far away in time but close on the page – in this sense, it is an example of what Kinder defines “database narrative”, that is, narratives “whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories” (2003, p. 349). Its fragmented and gappy narrative requires intense cognitive participation from the readers, who must reconstitute its threads by following the many semantic and visual references woven by the comic, reconfiguring its plot progression and coupling the rhymes and echoes between different panels. Filling gaps and connecting loose threads augments the readers' involvement and leaves space for projecting their own experience onto that observed.

Moreover, the comic's fragmentation and tension between panels point to another kind of tension – between individual and collective life, human and non-human existence, ultimately pointing at the finitude and transience of it. Indeed, *Here* continuously builds a dialectic between collectivity and individuality, where “by eschewing the individual-centered narrative (punctuated by protagonists and narrators) in favor of multiplicity” the text apparently gives us “no single entity with which to identify” (Chaney, 2017, p. 17). Yet, while we may lose ourselves in the plural, vast dimension that the comic stages, *Here*'s textual mechanisms bring these tensions back to a dimension that encourages an empathic response and prompts the reader to project their own experience onto the events depicted by giving salience to the semi-autobiographical account of McGuire's family. As Groensteen affirms, “on the scale of the cosmos and of nature, in relation to the long time of world history, of matter and life, human actions, whatever they may be, all appear equally insignificant” (Groensteen, 2015, p. 34, my translation). While this is true, this insignificance and the ubiquity of the themes of death and loss in the story are contrasted by the references to the cyclical nature of existence, its mechanisms of repetition and recreation, and by an affectively charged displaying of small convivial and playful moments. The consideration of one's smallness and impermanence, and the importance of treasuring one's mundane manifestations, is thus the fundamental trigger of the nostalgia that I have called ‘existential’, which is only one of the many affects the book elicits (together with solastalgia, grief, and so on).

In fact, the peculiarity of *Here* lies in the many refractions of the dialectic between nostalgic and antinostalgic drives, which, as this article has tried to show, makes it a most interesting case study when discussing nostalgia in narratives across media, and comics in particular.

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