



Identity, construction and memory in Joanne Leonard's *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir* (2008)

Author:

Heilna du Plooy¹

Affiliation:

¹Languages and Literature,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom Campus,
South Africa

Correspondence to:

Heilna du Plooy

Email:

heilna.duplooy@nwu.ac.za

Postal address:

Research Unit Languages
and Literature, North-West
University, Potchefstroom
2520, South Africa

Dates:

Received: 31 Jan. 2015

Accepted: 24 Mar. 2015

Published: 31 July 2015

How to cite this article:

Du Plooy, H., 2015, 'Identity,
construction and memory
in Joanne Leonard's *Being in
pictures: An intimate photo
memoir* (2008)', *Literator*
36(2), Art. #1182, 12 pages.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v36i2.1182>

Copyright:

© 2015. The Authors.

Licensee: AOSIS

OpenJournals. This work is
licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution
License.

When Joanne Leonard's photo collage *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* (1972) appeared in H.W. Janson's *History of art*, the image brought her recognition as an artist. It gave her the confidence to further develop her technique of making photo collages, and the collages became a means of giving expression to her personal emotions as well as her reactions to historical events and public debates. In 2008, Leonard published an autobiographical text, 'an intimate memoir', in which she presents a selection of photographs and photo collages narrating her development as an artist and as a person. Written text is added to the visual images, providing information about the content and technical aspects of the photographs and collages as well as about the stages of her life as a person and an artist. This article discusses Joanne Leonard's photo memoir by focussing on the relationship between identity and narrativity, on the constructed nature of all representations and especially represented autobiographical narratives and, finally, on the understanding and functioning of memory. The theoretical and philosophical aspects of identity, narrative identity, construction and memory are explored, and selected art works are analysed and discussed. The conclusion of the article suggests that autobiography, in all its variety, remains one of the most fascinating genres to study and that this photo memoir is an exceptional example.

Identiteit, konstruksie en geheue in Joanne Leonard se *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir* (2008). Die publikasie van Joanne Leonard se fotocollage *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* (1972) in H.W. Janson se gesaghebbende kunsgeskiedenis het vir haar bekendheid en erkenning gebring. Dit het haar ook die selfvertroue gegee om verder met haar tegniek vir die maak van fotocollages te eksperimenteer. Die collages het die manier geword waarop sy aan sowel persoonlike emosies as haar reaksie op historiese gebeure en openbare debatte uitdrukking kon gee. In 2008 publiseer Leonard 'n outobiografiese teks wat sy as 'an intimate memoir' beskryf. In die boek gebruik sy foto's en fotocollages om haar lewensverhaal te vertel, sowel die verloop van haar lewe as haar ontwikkeling as 'n kunstenaar. Die visuele materiaal word toegelig met kort aantekeninge en kommentaar aangaande die inhoud van die werke en die tegniese aspekte van die maak daarvan. Die talige teks bevat ook agtergrondinligting oor Leonard se lewe as individu en as kunstenaar. In hierdie artikel word Joanne Leonard se fotomemoir bespreek deur te fokus op die verhouding tussen identiteit en narratiwiteit, op die gekonstrueerde aard van representasie en veral van outobiografiese vertelling, asook op begrip van die werking van herinnering en die geheue. Die teoretiese en filosofiese aspekte van identiteit, narratiewe identiteit, konstruksie en herinnering word ondersoek en geselekteerde werke word geanaliseer en bespreek. Die gevolgtrekking van die artikel is dat die outobiografie in sy vele gedaantes een van die boeiendste genres is en dat hierdie fotomemoir 'n uitsonderlike voorbeeld van die outobiografie is.

Introduction

In his well-known *History of art*, H.W. Janson (1991) devotes a chapter to the development of photography as a major art form in the course of the twentieth century. In this chapter, he refers to Joanne Leonard's photo collage, *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* (1972), as an illustration of the use of fantasy in photographic art. According to Janson (1991:805), abstraction, documentary and fantasy are the three trends that dominated photography in the decades following the Second World War, and though elements of all three will be present in all photographs, the use of fantasy is what characterises not only this specific work of art but most of Joanne Leonard's photo collages. Janson (1991) comments as follows on *Romanticism is ultimately fatal*:

Photographers have increasingly turned to fantasy as autobiographical expression. Both the image and the title of *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* by Joanne Leonard (born 1940) suggest a meaning that is personal in its reference. We will recognize in this disturbing vision something of the tortured eroticism of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1790). The clarity of the presentation turns the apparition at the window into a real and

Read online:



Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 1: Joanne Leonard, 1972, *Romanticism is ultimately fatal*.

terrifying personification of despair. This is no romantic knight in shining armor, but a grim reaper whose ancestors can be found in Dürer's woodcut *The four horseman of the apocalypse*. (p. 808)

Joanne Leonard uses the photo collage on the cover of her autobiographical book, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir* (2008). She also states in the introduction of *Being in pictures* that she regards the reference to her work in Janson's book as one of the decisive moments in her career as a professional photo artist. It brought her recognition as an artist and gave her the confidence to pursue a career as a professional art photographer (Leonard 2008:3).

In this article, the link between personal expression and artistic form suggested by Janson as well as the transformation of autobiographical content in works of art will be used as points of departure in order to analyse and discuss the autobiographical nature of the photos and photo collages in Leonard's photo memoir. The selected photographs and collages that are presented in the memoir refer to important events in Leonard's life as an individual and as an artist, and progressively construct an autobiographical narrative. The constructive nature of autobiography will be used as the key to interpret Leonard's techniques of deliberately creating visual metaphors by combining existing or 'real' materials with elements of fiction and fantasy in collages. The collage is then 'fixed' in a photograph. Whereas iconic photographs transfix a moment in time and refer to a recognisable person or object, the constructed collages are images that refer to the artist's emotional state or her view of matters at a certain point in time. In both cases, the final photograph will be open to multiple interpretations, but in the case of the constructed metaphoric nature of the photo collages, the ability to generate meaning will be even greater. Leonard's

photographic collage techniques graphically illustrate an extreme example of the constructedness of autobiography, and the way in which multiple layers of representation are incorporated in these works will have to be taken into consideration when interpreting Leonard's art photographs.

This article discusses, in consecutive sequence, the artist's impulse to work with autobiographical material as part of a concern with identity, the constructed nature of all representations and especially represented autobiographical narratives and, finally, the understanding and functioning of memory. Though these three theoretical aspects are explored separately in the article, in practice, they are, in this case as well as in all autobiographical writing, interwoven to such an extent that the distinction is only valid as part of the structure of the critical and theoretical argument. In the discussion of the art works, these three aspects will overlap as Leonard's work in particular illustrates the interactive and holistic nature of autobiographical activity. The creative freedom in Leonard's work will be emphasised; the essayistic form of the present interpretation of her work is an attempt to echo this freedom.

The point that Leonard herself makes about her work concerning her awareness of the inevitable link between the private and the public is important, not only as an aspect of all published communication but especially in the case of photography, which has become one of the most common and most accessible forms of information exchange as well as personal and cultural memory making today.

In the introduction to the book, Leonard (2008:3) writes: 'Through my work as an artist, I've discovered that the realms of the personal and the public are rarely as separate as I once imagined.' This connection does not only have to do with putting one's work into the public space. She also regards as provoking, inspiring, instructive and stimulating the influence of public debates, such as those centred on movements like feminism, as well as major events in contemporary history. Though this aspect of Leonard's work cannot be specifically explored in the present article, it is an integral aspect of her whole oeuvre that manifests itself in almost every single work and will indirectly influence all subsequent interpretations.

The autobiographical impulse and identity

The first part of the title of Joanne Leonard's photo memoir, *Being in pictures*, can be read in at least three ways. In the first place, it refers to someone that is 'in pictures' in the sense of being the object of a picture in a literal or iconic way. It can also refer to regarding pictures as one's business in the sense of 'that is what I do'. In the third place, however, and I think this is probably the most important meaning in Leonard's case, 'being in pictures' describes a way of living, of being, as in 'existing' in and through pictures and photographs. Being a photographer and taking photographs is indeed part and



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 2: Joanne Leonard, Joanne in mirror (self-portrait), silver print, 1960's.

parcel of the identity that unfolds on the pages of Leonard's memoir.

Over the past four decades, critical and academic writing about ego documents or life writing of whatever nature, be it letters, journals, autobiographies or blogs, has almost without exception stressed the connection between writing about oneself and identity. Whether identity needs to be remembered, found or denied, whether the intention is the discovery or the construction of an identity of an individual, or of a person amongst family and friends, in a smaller or larger community, during a certain historical period or in an unfolding present, the quest for a formulation of the who, what, where, when, how and why of an individual's life underpins almost all autobiographies (Eakin 2004:122; Gilroy 1997:301; Gudmundsdóttir 2003:12, 45; Olney 1972:3, 16; Plo-Alastrue & Martinez-Alfaro 2002:9–14; Ricœur 2004:35; Weintraub 1975:847).

The impulse or the need to obtain a grasp on your life by telling your story is a universal human activity. Narration as such implies the need to understand and explain events and people, to consider and describe relations between people, objects, circumstances and events. It has to do with structuring information in order to obtain a grasp on events and actors in reality or in fictional worlds. In classical narratology, these aspects are regarded as some of the main functions of narratives (Bal 1985:54–56; Brink 1987:35–40; Chatman 1978:27–36; Du Plooy 1986:4–6), but the existence and functioning of narratives work both ways. Paul Eakin (2004) explains it as follows:

... autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. (p. 122)

Cognitive postclassical narratologists like David Herman (2003) stress the way in which people construct narratives according to narrative schemata with which they are encoded through their lives. Stories are thus constructed around what people know about reality and about people living in reality, and stories are represented according to the schemata through which these elements from reality are interpreted and understood in informal narratives. Undeniably the opposite also happens: Lives are interpretatively constructed and reconstructed according to existing and developing frames and scripts in narrative and cognitive schemata (Herman 1997:1047–1048, 2003:14; Kardela & Kedra-Kardela 2004:23).

This is true for all stories but even more so for autobiographical narratives. In autobiographical narratives, somebody's own life is scrutinised to identify the salient moments of change and development, and these are then arranged and structured to form a narrative. In this process, however, existing narrative patterns or schemata will influence the choice of and the value accorded to events and experiences. The representation of the self will therefore refer to a *life* but also to the *views of life and reality* of the historical period in which the individual lives because these views and values are incorporated into the narrative schemata that shape consciousness. The complex relationships between the individual and personal aspects of identity, on the one hand, and the cultural, historical, ethical and political public views of a historical era, on the other, are incorporated into language and narrative structures and internalised by individuals to such an extent that these aspects and the relationships between them are impossible to disentangle.

People indeed do not live in isolation but in communities, and '... identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed' (Gilroy 1997:301). In this regard, it is important to note that, in Leonard's case, she is acutely conscious of this dimension in her autobiographical text. In the introduction to *Being in pictures* (Leonard 2008), she describes her intention with the book as follows:

I can't think of a better way to suggest the dual nature of this book: as personal as medical histories yet with a public in mind of those who might be both intrigued and captured, as I am, by the prospect of exploring women's lives through pictures and stories. (p. 3)

This intention is reflected in the book as a whole as Leonard includes not only personal and family photographs but also collages about historical events such as 'Red triptych' (Leonard 2008:58–59) and 'Twins: Conjoined and separated' (Leonard 2008:239; see also Figure 9). Moreover, she presents her story explicitly as a woman's story in a specific historical



period, a time characterised by an increasing awareness of the growing possibilities in women's lives. She does this by focusing strongly on interpersonal relationships, and this is in line with Mary Mason's view (Neuman 1991:2) that male authors of autobiographies often stress their individualism whereas female autobiographers describe their identity in terms of the relationships with people around them.

The argument that autobiographical activity is concerned with identity and that autobiography almost inevitably includes the construction of a narrative, that the whole process is dependent on memory with all the complications of unreliability and retrospective re-evaluation, is underscored by Mark Freeman in his article 'From substance to story: Narrative, identity and the construction of the self' (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001:283–298). According to Freeman, the relationship between narrative and identity displays different dimensions, namely, historical, cultural, rhetorical and experiential dimensions. Moreover, he sees the experiential dimension as the poetic aspect of the expression of identity (Freeman 2001:284). In the discussion of Joanne Leonard's separate works of art, these dimensions will be kept in mind as they indeed determine the making and reception of especially the photo collages.

Leonard's book can be described as follows. The memoir tells the story of Joanne Leonard as a developing and later established photo artist living alongside and moving amongst other people, including family members and friends. The story is told mainly in pictures, but each photograph is accompanied by short autobiographical comments. The artist selects and orders photographs from her extensive portfolio to represent momentous or memorable occasions from a continuous life. In the written text, she presents retrospective commentary, describing the context of taking a specific photograph or making a specific collage, but she also adds remarks from her present perspective. Her present view of herself and her work may contain changed and changing and perhaps even quite different views of her previous life and her former self, but the photographs themselves cannot change. The narrative is therefore clearly and openly constructed and is in fact a story with many gaps or open places and spaces, a fragmented narrative centred on specific events and moments caught on camera. Leonard rereads and (re-)constructs her own story as reflected in her own pictures, and the reader of her book also constructs a story from the pictures, as is illustrated by Mieke Bal in her narratological analyses in *Looking in: The art of viewing* (see Bal 2001:213–238). And yet, in the first instance, this book presents the story of Joanne Leonard's development as an artist and as a person in a variety of relationships, including an increasing emphasis on her development and achievements as a woman and an artist. The impulse and the need to find a way to express an identity is clear from both the visual and the textual parts of the book.

There are in Leonard's impulse to share her life with other people a generosity and an openheartedness that is most apparent in the text accompanying the photographs and

collages. This is clearly in contrast with many contemporary literary autobiographies in which the authors actually hide themselves, like Karel Schoeman hiding his feet in the cover photograph of his autobiography to indicate that he has the right to keep certain aspects of his life from his readers (Van der Merwe 2014:139–159). Consider also J.M. Coetzee, who deliberately confuses truth and fiction and even declares that he prefers not to distinguish between truth and fiction (Meihuizen 2014:3–4). This type of literary game with its philosophical underpinnings and overtones is absent from Joanne Leonard's photo memoir, but as I shall illustrate further on, it is the richness and complexity of her photographs and photo collages as metaphors that should be interpreted.

Paul Ricoeur writes extensively on memory and the narrative structure of identity (Ricoeur 1980:169–190, 1984–1988:187, 2002:38–45). When a person reconsiders, rethinks and scrutinises his or her own life, the process itself and the representation thereof will result in a narrative that will bear witness to the process as, according to Ricoeur (2002:40), '... narrative structure confirms existential analysis'.

Another aspect that is relevant to Leonard's autobiographical memoir concerns the fact that her artworks are explicitly made and constructed. The processes of making and construction, the creative processes as such, result in a concretisation of the self-scrutiny that bears witness to an action. In an early article, Ricoeur (1980) uses Hannah Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action to define action as a deliberate and intentional activity, and then he also points out the link between meaningful action and identity:

Action deserves its name when, beyond the concern for submitting nature to man or for leaving behind some monuments witnessing to our activity, it aims only at being recollected in stories whose function it is to provide an identity to the doer, an identity that is merely a narrative identity. In this sense, history repeats action in the figure of the memorable. (p. 187)

In an almost uncanny way, Leonard's photographs mark actions that collectively constitute a narrative. As these photographs and photo collages are works of art, they serve no pragmatic purpose, but they do generate meanings concerning the private life of the artist as well as the public sphere in which the artist works and functions. They are therefore concerned with private and collective identity in a number of ways.

Ricoeur's view of narrative identity can be summarised as follows:

1. Because my personal identity is a narrative identity, I can make sense of myself only in and through my involvement with others.
2. In my dealings with others, I do not simply enact a role or function that has been assigned to me. I can change myself through my own efforts and can reasonably encourage others to change as well.
3. Nonetheless, because I am an embodied existence and hence have inherited both biological and psychological



constraints, I cannot change everything about myself. And because others are similarly constrained, I cannot sensibly call for comprehensive changes in them.

4. Though I can be evaluated in a number of ways, for example, physical dexterity, verbal fluency, technical skill, the ethical evaluation in the light of my responsiveness to others, over time, is, on the whole, the most important evaluation (Dauenhauer & Pellauer 2012).

This formulation applies directly to Leonard's autobiographical text in which construction, narrative and identity are inseparably interwoven.

The constructedness of autobiography

The theoretical views of autobiographical texts and the writing of autobiography in its many guises have undergone radical changes over the centuries. Elisabeth Snyman (2015) traces these developments that progressed from believing the autobiography to be a (an honest) reflection on a life (in the case of Rousseau) to the absolute negation and constant undermining of the possibility to represent a life at all in poststructuralist and deconstructive writings. It has also become a commonplace idea to accept that language is irrevocably compromised by previous use to such an extent that it is impossible to communicate in an unambiguous way, making concepts like truth, clarity and singular meaning suspect. Language is seen as an intertextual archive of all past uses and meanings and is therefore an exceptionally unreliable instrument. Moreover, authors like to exploit this characteristic of language to make their texts puzzling and enigmatic and thus more interesting.

The important point that Snyman (2015) makes, using Gadamer's definition of hermeneutics as not only the study, interpretation and understanding of texts but of all human experience and endeavour, is that autobiographers approach their own lives hermeneutically when they retrospectively and self-reflexively reconstruct, interpret and try to understand these lives as stories.

Autobiographical writing can, therefore, be regarded unequivocally and inevitably as a constructive act and not as a mere exercise in referentiality. The hermeneutic process and the narrative structure thus both contribute to the constructed nature of the autobiography.

Ricoeur also acknowledges the contingency and relativity of the reconstruction of identity in narratives, but then he introduces an ethical element into the argument. Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1989) explains this as follows:

Ricoeur seeks to resolve the sensed uncertainty about narrative identity by appealing to an almost transcendent notion of a true 'self-constancy' with 'ethical responsibility' as its highest factor. Narrative identity without this ethically informed selfconstancy is, at best, unstable. And in its instability, it is not to be trusted. (pp. 933–934)

It would indeed be difficult if not impossible to vouch for the 'truth', authenticity or ethical value in any autobiography. Yet the intention of being as honest and as responsible as possible, to accept accountability for what is represented and for the way in which it is represented can perhaps be deduced from a text.

The crucial aspect of Leonard's photo memoir is that, when she reconstructs her life, the hermeneutic process not only draws on her memory but is directed at and determined by the existing photographic texts that represent salient moments and events in her life as member of a family and as an artist. The written commentary provides the historical context of how and when a photograph was taken as well as information about the referential aspects of the photo content. She also gives information about the development of technical possibilities in the making and manipulating of photographic material and what she wanted to achieve with specific photographs. The commentary, however, also contains autobiographical information. The artist wants to tell the reader what the specific artwork means to her as an artist, *what* she wanted to express and *how* she wanted to give expression to experiences and emotions.

Whereas the photos and collages exist independently and remain the same, the information, the analysis and interpretation of the photographic material as well as referential autobiographical information about her life and circumstances are provided from a retrospective perspective. The photographs and photo collages guide her reconstruction of her life, but these visual texts are fixed material objects that exist and remain stable. They cannot change or be changed, but the artist's interpretation of the texts as artworks may and probably has changed over time: Her recollection of the context of the taking of the photograph, the making of the collage and her recollective rendering of the impulse behind the artwork depend on memory with all the slips, inaccuracies and unreliability associated with memory.

The main difference between this memoir and written narrative autobiographies is that this autobiographical text does not only use words and language to construct and tell its story but scrutinises photographs taken a long time ago. Many of these photographs are, moreover, complex artworks made up from autobiographical photographic material. As objects, the artworks retain a special type of authenticity and integrity, an existential 'fixedness', but they can and will be interpreted in different ways by onlookers as well as by the artist herself.

Taking a photograph is a process; it implies planning and execution. The collages are carefully and wilfully constructed objects of great complexity. Both these types of text, photographs and collages, are clearly constructed with an intense awareness of the processes involved. Although photographs and collages represent photographed elements and objects, the visual texts as artworks transcend referential or realistic truth and rather recreate various versions of



artistic truth. They do not exist on account of their iconic content but as metaphors of the artist's life and her views of the lives of those around her.

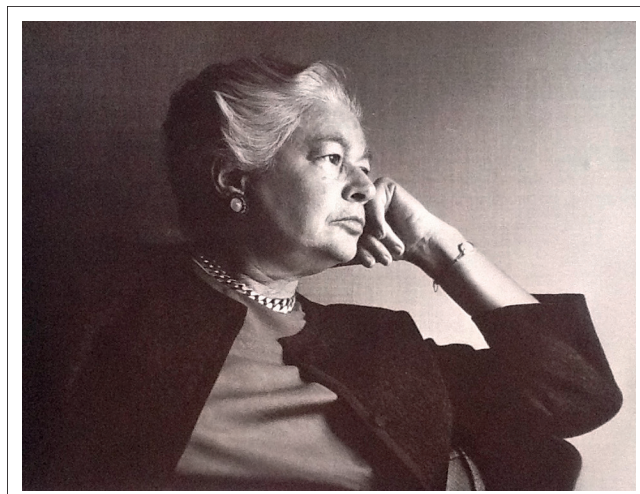
The constructedness of this memoir is therefore an integral part of what it actually is and does. It is not necessary to foreground the artistic process or the metaphoric quality and open-endedness of interpretation because it presents itself as a series of artworks in which relativity of meaning is inherent.

The structure of the book itself can also be linked to this constructedness. The content of the photo memoir follows a chronological order but is divided into sections. In one sense, Leonard simply tells her story in a seemingly uncomplicated way. As one works through the book, one becomes aware of the interplay between the two mediums, language and image, of the artistic ambiguities in every image and of the increasing complexity as the artist finds and develops her own style. The earlier and later works are also intratextually linked.

The first three sections in the book provide introductory information about the artist's family, her parents, her twin sister, the younger sister and a beloved uncle. Then there are sections in which the development of her work is the main focus, and in others, personal circumstances and prominent events are highlighted. She states and visually reinforces the main themes of her life – her quest to become an artist, to find places and spaces to develop her artistic skills as well as the importance of personal relationships with her twin sister and other family members and with different lovers. The importance of being a woman, a female photographic artist, but also a mother and one link in the consecutive generations of women in a family figures prominently right through the book. The relationship with her daughter is especially dear to her, and she speaks openly about it in the comments accompanying the many photographs taken of her daughter at various stages of her life. The concluding sections seem to provide a type of conclusion, not to a life but to a specific point in her career.

The photographic material can be divided into two main categories: the more realistic photographs in which the focus is on a person or object as such and the collages, which are intentional artworks, planned, constructed, manipulated and directed at creating new meaning and not at representing existing realistic images, as will become apparent in the discussion of specific photographs and collages below

The family photographs in the first sections (Leonard 2008:13–57) would belong to the first category of images. Many of these were taken when Leonard was still young and an amateur, and yet the artistic quality is unmistakably present. These photographs can be 'read' in terms of how they catch some essential or elusive aspect of the subjects photographed, how they capture a fleeting and precious



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 3: Joanne Leonard, 1968, *Marjorie Rosenfeld Leonard* San Francisco.



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 4: Joanne Leonard, 1968, *Alfred Leonard and dog*, Connecticut.

moment. Döring (2008:679) makes the point that '[s]ince their rise to cultural prominence in the nineteenth century, photographs have been regarded in close association with functions of family life, memory and mourning', and that is what Leonard does here. The mother's strength is evident from her photograph, and the father can be seen as a rather distant person who seems to be more comfortable with his dog than his daughters.

When Leonard includes in her commentary a letter from her father to his daughters on an American Field Service trip in Germany, another dimension is added to the photographs. Joanne Leonard's parents met and fell in love in the late 1920s in Berlin. Her father was a young German-Jewish lawyer, dedicated to fight against the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in Berlin, and her mother was a young American-Jewish woman who went to study in Germany. When her



father's name appeared on the first arrest lists of the Nazis, her mother helped him to escape to America where they were married in 1933. The children knew that their father was reluctant to speak of the land of his birth and, therefore, wanted to visit Germany. In the letter that he requests them to read on the boat after departure, he describes his conflicting emotions about Germany, a wonderful country with a wonderful cultural heritage which was taken over by the barbarism of power. He ends the letter with a remark about great men and evil men, and also himself: 'Neither has any value, merit or even meaning when taken by itself. One can be good or bad as a German, good or bad as a Jew' (Leonard 2008:20). The wistfulness in these words is what can also be seen in the photographs of the man, and it reflects the elusive quality of photography, something with which Roland Barthes concerns himself in *La chambre claire*.¹

Döring (2008) explains this as follows:

Viewing, or re-viewing, the familiar face in photographs is thus dramatized as an uncanny moment of return, a haunting, a confrontation with a past which must appear so ghostly even as it so lively re-appears and whose effect is so unsettling because it confronts the beholder, too, with his own death. (p. 691)

Even though Barthes makes the point that photographs do not recapture time but defeat it, Susan Sontag writes: 'All photographs are memento mori' (Döring 2008:691).

In these family photographs from many years ago, of Joanne and other little girls, of unknown children in a garden, Joanne and her twin sister, a young family with their baby, and so on, one sees how the past is brought into the present, confronting the photographer as well as the reader of the book with the complexity of temporal experience. The pictures contain and preserve time but also illustrate and emphasise the passing of time.

Döring (2008:683) mentions the fact that, in all photography design, determination and construction play a part, and yet the cultural perception that photographs have '... evidential force and the ability to authenticate real events and people' persists. The tension between natural, truthful pictures and design is very strong in Leonard's work. She loves to photograph sleeping people as she believes that, in sleeping, the subject of the picture is honest and 'innocent'. Yet the photographer can plan perspective, angle, distance and lighting to her heart's delight. This tension intensifies when, as her career develops, Leonard begins to make photo collages.

In the second-last section of the book, Leonard (2008:215–236) presents the reader with 21st-century digitally manipulated works in which family photographs are incorporated into larger artworks, scrolls and strips. In these works, she gives expression to her views on family life and the idea of a maternal lineage so that commentary on the depicted objects



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 5: Joanne Leonard and Judith Fuss Adell, ca. 1960, Two children and lily, silver print.



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 6: Joanne Leonard, ca. 1994, Map of that Ground-note, silver print from laser-copy transparencies with collage, white ink, translucent plastic stars and leaves, 19 inches X 42½ inches, collection of Diane M. Kirkpatrick.

is incorporated into the works. In these cases, her written commentary on the works is of a more technical nature, explaining how she made them. In these texts and in all the collages that precede them, the evasions of and slippages in meaning are much more marked than in photographs than can be regarded as analogical images even though they may be haunting and evocative.

The hermeneutic impulse therefore does not only apply to Leonard's recollecting her life in writing and putting together the photo memoir. The very act of making the photo collages is and was in every case an act of self-interpretation and an attempt at expressing emotion and experience. As an artist, she has been analysing and interpreting her life hermeneutically from very early on in her career and has been giving expression to thoughts and emotions in her work by constructing and reconstructing visual images as metaphors. How truthful or authentic are these representations and what is the role of memory in the reconstructions in this

1. Barthes experienced an epiphanic moment when he looked at a specific photograph taken of his mother in a winter garden when she was a child, and he regards that special quality of photography as its distinguishing characteristic (Döring 2008:680).



photo memoir as a whole? What is truth and what is fiction, and where does fantasy come into play?

Memory

Exploring issues of truth, fiction, fantasy and representation in this photo memoir is a fascinating undertaking. Reconstructions of any kind are dependent on memory, and memory is fallible and untrustworthy in most aspects. According to Ricoeur (2004:5), '... the presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist does indeed appear to be that of an image'. The interesting aspect of Leonard's work is that her artworks are *made* as images. She uses these images to capture moments, experiences and reactions to life events as well as public events, and she constructs them intentionally to function as metaphors. For the memoir and the narrative comments in the memoir, her memory is aided and guided by the images she has been making through her life.

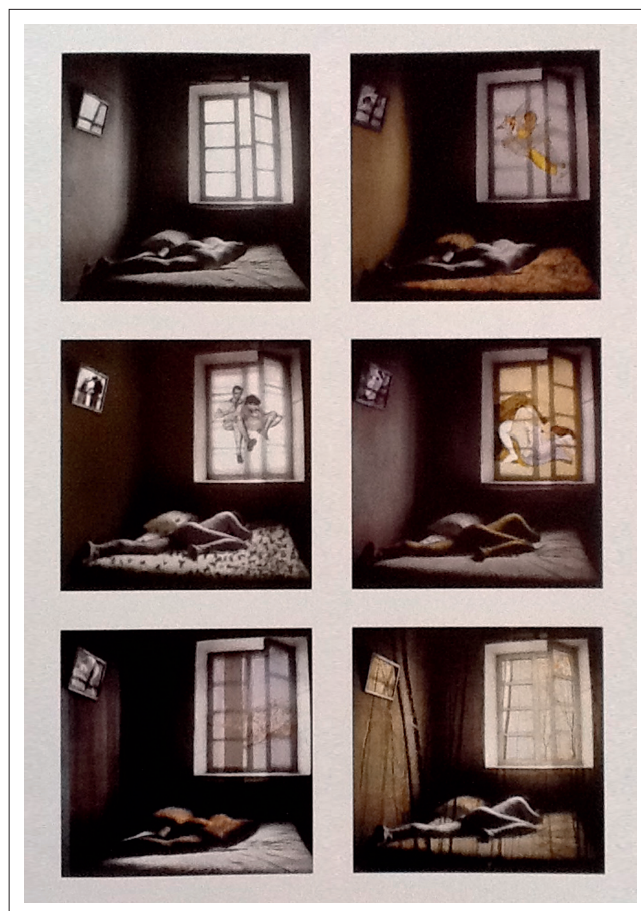
As mentioned before, the photos in the book, like all photographs, possess a certain degree of authenticity because they either completely or partially contain analogical or iconic images. First and foremost, the artist-autobiographer 'reads' her own photographs when she provides them with commentary. The interpretation becomes more complex when readers read the book, the photos, collages and the commentary with the intent to analyse, understand and interpret.

The reader can of course doubt the validity, the truthfulness of and the ethical intention in Leonard's choice of photographs as well as in the written commentary, even if the visual images speak for themselves. Any autobiographer can be guilty of 'hineininterpretieren', but autobiography, just like any other genre, must be practiced and interpreted within its own constraints. Ricoeur (2004) reaches the following conclusion about the fallibility of memory:

The constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory.

And yet, we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it. Historiography itself, let us already say, will not succeed in setting aside the continually derided and continually reasserted conviction that the final referent of memory remains the past, whatever the pastness of the past may signify. (p. 7)

I regard especially the photo collages as complex metaphors constructed by the artist in order to give expression to her feelings at a certain moment in time. Her own process can be described as follows: A collage is put together by arranging selected objects in a specific structure, in which the artist strives to achieve a powerful visual impact through either juxtaposing or relating elements. This is done with an eye for composition, line, shape, form and colour, and then the arrangement is photographed. These photo collages are intentional artworks, deliberately defamiliarising ordinary



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 7: Joanne Leonard, 1972, *Dreams and nightmares* series, layered works incorporating continuous-tone positive transparencies, selectively opaqued, and collage.

objects and elements by creating new relations and structures in order to generate new meanings or to indirectly comment on situations.

The cover picture of the book, which is also the photograph that made Leonard famous, is part of a series of collages called 'Dreams and nightmares' that she made after her husband had left her. In her commentary, she explains it as follows:

The difficulties of my marriage had been partly obscured by an overriding romanticism; the loss of some of my romantic dreams is the theme of these window collages. I have selected elements to recall feelings of longing, loneliness, the passing of time and anger. (Leonard 2008:82)

It is also relevant here to mention the conventional gender difference by which words have traditionally been credited with masculine power and the silent image with feminine expression. The suggestion would then be that the image cannot speak for itself and would need male verbal explication (Döring 2008:687). Leonard does create strong visual images, so strong as to speak louder than words, but even though she initially used these pictures to talk in her stead, in her autobiographical memoir, she also adds her own commentary.



In the 'Dreams and nightmares' series, the basic elements in all the works remain the same. Leonard's sleeping husband lies on a bed in front of a window, and there is a picture hanging on the wall. This image is then manipulated in a series of improvisations. The picture hanging on the wall and the window are different in every collage, and in the last one, the trees outside the window enter into the room and spill over into the whole image.

The series culminates in the picture that contains an ultimate reckoning with her own dreams, namely *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* (see Figure 1; Leonard 2008:72–83). This is her way of acknowledging the hierarchy and the unequal underlying attitudes of both parties in the relationship: She is powerless and is swept off her feet in a perilous way, and in the overbearing male figure, there is arrogance and even cruelty. The Arthurian image that can be seen outside the window is juxtaposed with the empty room inside, emphasising the loneliness that is left in the empty room. The black and white parts of the image, the inside of the empty room, contrast strongly with the coloured figures outside – the beautiful colourful image is false and the truth is this bleak room. The image as a whole thus reflects loss, anger, loneliness and nostalgia.

The commentary added by the artist-autobiographer reinterprets the collage and the context of its origin, and of course, the readers or onlookers construct their own interpretations, but the initial impulse of the artist was to render emotion as authentically as possible. To do so, she manipulated materials and devised new techniques, not only photographic techniques but also compositional techniques such as juxtaposing fantasy and myth with reality. The artist went to great lengths to capture something of herself, to represent emotion truly felt and an insight achieved at great cost.

With regard to the fallibility and untrustworthiness of memory, Ricoeur (2004) warns against the following:

... the tendency of many authors to approach memory on the basis of its deficiencies, even its dysfunctions ... It is important, in my opinion, to approach the description of mnemonic phenomena from the standpoint of the *capacities*, of which they are the 'happy' realization. (p. 21)

The arguments about the unreliability of memory in autobiographical texts should therefore be applied differently in the case of Leonard's memoir, not only on account of the views expressed by Ricoeur but also on account of the specific type of text with which the reader is confronted. It is generally assumed that an autobiography is always partly imagined and fictionalised, either in order to present a certain image of the self or because of the unreliability of imagination. Gudmundsdóttir (2003) writes about it as follows:

Gaps in the narrative – the space where forgetting impinges on the writing – are an inevitable feature of any text of remembrance ... The writing process reveals a need to confirm or deny memories. (p. 9)

The interesting thing is that this series of collages is as true a picture of Leonard's feelings as she could produce at the time. Visually it is neither referentially authentic or true nor is it analogical to any realistic set of pictorial elements. Yet, it is truer than what she could have said or explained in words at the time. It is a reflection or representation of the image she had of herself at the time of her loss. As such, this work of art can be seen as an attempt to achieve an authentic rendering of emotion, and yet, it can afterwards be interpreted in many ways.

In the process of making the collage, the emotions of the artist are the signified for which she needs to find a signifier. Later on, she uses words to describe and explain the collage that then becomes the signified of her words as signifiers. For the reader of the book, the collage exists as an aesthetic object and is as such also a signified to which the reader reacts with another set of signifiers. In the artist's comments, she is not completely free to re-interpret and adapt her past to suit more recent views of herself as the fixedness of the collage cannot be denied and restricts her freedom – she cannot tweak or twist or adapt her memory as freely as literary autobiographers can. However, the richness and complexity of the collages suggest aspects of meanings and associations that she was not even aware of at the time.

The artworks, amplified by the explanations and discussions in the commentary, tempt and tease the reader of the book to make further and multiple interpretations. In this staggered process, layer upon layer of meaning come into existence, and the status of the linguistic and visual texts is repeatedly re-evaluated, compromised, complicated, undermined or augmented. Signifiers become signified and are signifiers on the next level or next stage of interpretation, and in the end, interpreter and the interpreted material are simultaneously bound or limited (or even fixed), and free and polyvalent.

The use of fantasy in this case provides the artist with a means to construct a visual image that is more powerful than a realistic picture can ever be. This is done by activating cultural and visual associations and by appealing to and undermining expectations of visual beauty. It reminds one of the old saying that writers (and artists) lie truthfully, that the artist's truth is a lie truer than truth. What they depict, suggest or evoke through indirect aesthetic means calls forth meanings truer and richer in association than scientific or realistic information. In creative processes, fantasy is therefore a potent instrument to carry ethereal meanings.

A final remark on *Romanticism is ultimately fatal* is that the title links it to contemporary feminine and feminist discourse. The woman in this picture is clearly the subordinate, the passive one. The artist suggests that the romantic interpretation of a position of subordination and passivity is fatal, it is destructive and destroys creativity and identity. Even though this image is highly personal, it does provide social commentary in a way described as follows by Gudmundsdóttir (2003):

Remembering is not only a personal matter necessary for our sense of identity and mental wellbeing, it is also a very



public matter, formed by social situations and often politically contentious. Our lives are intricately and sometimes drastically linked to and/or inseparable from what happens in the society we live in. (p. 45)

Concluding comments

Leonard is particularly sensitive to the way in which artworks as products of subjective understanding of the self interact with cultural and historical settings. Many of her collages illustrate how an individual subjectivity is formed and develops in its fragility and/or strength over time. This becomes more and more apparent in her later work.

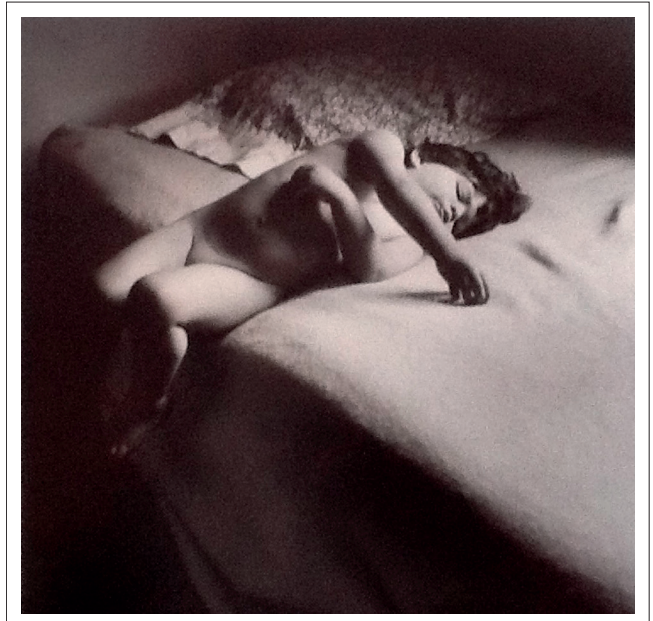
After separating from her husband, she decided to have a child with someone she respected but whom she knew she would not marry. However, she then had a miscarriage. She explains that '[s]ome of my strongest work seems to come from my capacity to meet anguish with artistic output' (Leonard 2008:118). The initial joy of being pregnant changed into despair when she miscarried. Facing her loss in the most real terms, namely using her body fluids on paper as the background in the collages that she makes, helped her overcome her grief (Leonard 2008:97–117). Eventually she decided to become pregnant again and attempted once more to embrace happiness: 'I was taking chances with both my life and my art and picturing things about female life that I'd never seen pictured before' (Leonard 2008:118). This child became the most enriching aspect of her life. She eventually dedicated this memoir to her daughter: 'To Julia Marjorie Leonard, my beloved and dazzling daughter'.

What strikes me as remarkable about this book is that the artist often turns her eye upon herself through the lens and becomes conjoined to the lens of her camera. However, she also edits and censures herself relentlessly (Leonard 2008:117). She acknowledges that, in her focus on and devotion to her daughter, she might even cross a boundary, transgress so to speak into the private domain of her child. This also goes for the photographs of sleeping people. She puts it as follows:

But a mother's act of paying close and frequent attention to her child through photography can be read in many ways, including as devoted and attentive or as horridly intrusive, too objective, and thus cold, exploitive, or even pornographic. (Leonard 2008:142)

Thus, she does not only open up towards her audience by representing her emotions in visual format, but she also writes in words about shortcomings and the many pitfalls of her trade. This is to my mind another indication of her search for identity: What is it that she is doing and why? The book abounds in (poetical?) meta-artistic commentary and remarks.

The second-last collage in the book was made after the 9/11 disaster of 2001. Leonard (2008:238) relates how she was torn between the decision not to respond because there was such an overflow of pictures of the shocking event that it became numbing and the realisation that it was impossible not to



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 8: Joanne Leonard. 1977. Julia, half asleep, silver print.



Source: Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

FIGURE 9: Joanne Leonard, ca. 2003, *Twins: Conjoined and separated*, glassine with gold paint, watercolour, scanned photographs, constellation map of Gemini, newspaper clippings, 17-inch diameter circle on 22 × 22-inch square glassine sheet.

respond. What then remained in her mind was the 'word-image' of 'twin towers'.

Being part of a twin became the theme she then explored further. She collected material about twins and put together a circle of images called *Twins: Conjoined and separated*. She describes the image in a way that relates as much to the incident as to her personal experience thereof, the way in which Joanne Leonard (2008:238) as a person with a specific



identity worked through the terrible knowledge of carnage: 'The piece takes details from the public sphere and blends them with my recurrent personal themes of twins, women, separation, and family.'

This once again illustrates Joanne Leonards' hermeneutical view of her life and work as an extended search for and development of identity, attempting to find in each situation her own unique reaction and representing the reaction as well as the processes of working through the experience through her art. She is concerned with how she, as an individual with specific sensibilities and abilities, reacts to the world in order to say, in the words of the psychologist James Hillman (1996:3): 'This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am'.

Hillman believes that every person has an inner core that is the blueprint determining what the person does and how that person reacts in different sets of circumstances. The core is like an acorn that contains in its small self all of the eventual oak tree. It causes a person to be '... answerable to an innate image' (Hillman 1996:4). Even if it is impossible in philosophical and theoretical terms to be true to this inner core, to reach for or find this core or to search for the self with absolute integrity, I do believe that a good reader will be able to discern if this is the ideal or the intention of the autobiographer. And as a reader, this is what I thought I could sense in Leonard's case.

Ricoeur (2004) speaks of the polarity between reflexivity and worldliness:

One does not simply remember oneself, seeing, experiencing, learning; one rather recalls the situations in the world in which one has seen, experienced, learned. These situations imply one's own body and the bodies of others, lived space, and, finally, the horizon of the world and worlds, within which something has occurred. Reflexivity and worldliness are indeed related as opposite poles, to the extent that reflexivity is an undeniable feature of memory in its declarative phase: someone says 'in his heart' that he formerly saw, experienced, learned. In this regard, nothing should be stripped from the assertion that memory belongs to the sphere of interiority – to the cycle of inwardness, to borrow Charles Taylor's vocabulary in *Sources of the Self*. Nothing should be removed except the interpretative surplus of subjectivist idealism that prevents this moment of reflexivity from entering into a dialectical relation with the pole of worldliness. (p. 36)

It seems to me that Joanne Leonard approaches her art as a means to strip herself of subjectivist idealism (for example in the *Dreams and nightmares series* and in *Romanticism is ultimately fatal*). Through her work as a photo artist, she taught herself to strip outward appearances down to the essentials which are then captured in the photographs and collages.

This photo memoir once again illustrates that studying autobiography in its many guises remains a fascinating process. In spite of the philosophical assertions of unreliability, untruthfulness, even lying, the evasions and

deliberate lacunae, something of the inner core of the acorn of a personality will still be discernible in any well-written autobiography which will make reading worthwhile. Autobiography remains an important literary or visual format to account for identity and individuality, more so if this self-conscious cultivation and exploration of identity and individuality is done living in and interacting with the world with a sense of historical awareness and consciousness. Autobiographical writing therefore seems to be an almost archetypical activity without which the world of art and literature would be much poorer.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

References

- Bal, M., 1985, *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen*, Dick Coutinho, Muiderberg.
- Bal, M., 2001, *Looking in: The art of viewing*, Overseas Publishers Association, Amsterdam.
- Brink, André P., 1987, *Vertelkunde: 'n Inleiding tot die lees van verhandelende tekste*, Academica, Pretoria.
- Brockmeier, J. & Carbaugh, D. (eds.), 2001, *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/sin.1>
- Chatman, S., 1978, *Story and discourse: Narrative structure in fiction and film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Dauenhauer, B. & Pellauer, D., 2012, 'Paul Ricoeur', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, viewed 15 January 2014, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/ricoeur/>
- Döring, T., 2008, 'Double exposure: Uses of photography in Ted Hughes's *Birthday letters*', *Textual Practice* 20(4), 679–704. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502360802457442>
- Du Plooy, H., 1986, *Verhaalteorie in die twintigste eeu*, Butterworth, Durban.
- Eakin, P.J., 2004, 'What are we reading when we read autobiography?', *Narrative* 2(2), 121–131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nar.2004.0004>
- Freeman, M., 2001, 'From substance to story: Narrative, identity and reconstruction of the self', in J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture*, pp. 283–298, John Benjamins, Amsterdam. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/sin.1.16fre>
- Gilroy, P., 1997, 'Diaspora and the detours of identity', in K. Woodward (ed.), *Identity and difference*, pp. 301–315, Sage, London.
- Gudmundsdóttir, G., 2003, *Borderlines: Autobiography and fiction in postmodern life writing*, Rodopi, Amsterdam.
- Herman, D., 1997, 'Scripts, sequences, and stories: Elements of a postclassical narratology', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 12(5), 1046–1059.
- Herman, D., 2003, *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences*, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/463482>
- Hillman, J., 1996, *The soul's code*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.
- Janson, H.W., 1991, *History of art*, revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Kardela, H. & Kedra-Kardela, A., 2004, 'The virtuality of the text and the role of the reader: A cognitive analysis of Elizabeth Bowen's short story "Oh, Madam ..."', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 1(2), 15–31.
- Leonard, J., 2008, *Being in pictures: An intimate photo memoir*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Meihuizen, N., 2014, 'Achieving form in autobiography', *Literator* 35(2), Art. #1143, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v35i2.1143>
- Neuman, S. (ed.), 1991, *Autobiography and questions of gender*, Frank Cass, London.
- Olney, J., 1972, *Metaphors of self: The meaning of autobiography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Plo-Alastro, R. & Martinez-Alfaro, M. (eds.), 2002, *Beyond borders: Re-defining generic and ontological boundaries*, Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.
- Ricoeur, P., 1980, 'Narrative', *Critical Inquiry* 7(1), 169–190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/448093>
- Ricoeur, P., 1984–1988, *Time and narrative*, vols. 1–3, transl. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.



Ricoeur, P., 2002, 'Narrative Time', in B. Richardson (ed.), *Narrative dynamics: Essays on time, plot, closure, and frames*, pp. 35–46, Ohio State University Press, Columbus.

Ricoeur, P., 2004, *Memory, history, forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226713465.001.0001>

Snyman, E., 2015, 'Outobiografie as hermeneutiek van die self: Van Rousseau tot Le Clézio', *Literator* 36(1), Art. #1131, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v36i1.1131>

Van der Merwe, C.N., 2014, *Die houtbeen van St. Sergius: Opstelle oor Afrikaanse romans*, Sun Press, Stellenbosch.

Wagner-Pacifici, R., 1989, 'Narration and identity: Time and narrative: vol. 3, by Paul Ricoeur', *Contemporary Sociology* 18(6), 931–934. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2074217>

Weintraub, K.J., 1975, 'Autobiography and historical consciousness', *Critical Inquiry* 1(4), 821–848. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/447818>