

Comparatismi 10 2025

ISSN 2531-7547

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14672/20253133>

## From *Here* to Eternity. Space-time singularities between literature, graphic novel and cinema

Fabio Vittorini

**Abstract** • By reconciling the narrator and the reader-spectator's opposite desires to run to the end of the story and to pause in the middle, to conclude and repeat, a literary, graphic or audiovisual narrative is a manifestation of "the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (P. Brooks). A "narrative is significant to the extent that it draws the traits of temporal experience" (P. Ricoeur), elaborating a discourse capable to exorcise the great human fears and sufferings: the senselessness of time, the prison of time, the loss of time, the end of time. The essay tests Ricoeur's theorem by analyzing *Here*, a paradoxical graphic story published by Richard McGuire in 1989 (as a comic strip) and then in 2014 (as a graphic novel), adapted for the big screen by Robert Zemeckis in 2024.

**Keywords** • Time; Space; Story; *Here*; Richard McGuire; Robert Zemeckis

**Abstract** • Contemperando i desideri apparentemente discordanti del narratore e del lettore-spettatore di correre alla fine della storia e di sostarvi nel mezzo, di concludere e di ripetere, un racconto letterario, grafico, audiovisivo è sempre manifestazione della "logica interna del discorso della mortalità" (P. Brooks). Un "racconto è significativo nella misura in cui disegna i tratti dell'esperienza temporale" (P. Ricoeur), elaborando un discorso capace di esorcizzare le grandi paure e sofferenze del genere umano: l'insensatezza del tempo, la prigione del tempo, la perdita del tempo, la fine del tempo. Il saggio mette alla prova il teorema di Ricoeur analizzando *Here*, un racconto grafico paradossale realizzato da Richard McGuire nel 1989 (in forma di fumetto) e poi nel 2014 (in forma di graphic novel), adattato per il grande schermo da Robert Zemeckis nel 2024.

**Parole chiave** • Tempo; Spazio; Racconto; *Here*; Richard McGuire; Robert Zemeckis

Ledizioni 

# From *Here* to Eternity. Space-time singularities between literature, graphic novel and cinema

Fabio Vittorini

Inexplicably, he finds himself shaking at that moment with both happiness and sorrow, if this is possible, as if he were going both forward and backward, into the future and into the past. And there are times, often there are times, when these feelings are so strong that his life no longer seems to dwell in the present.

PAUL AUSTER

## I. The discourse of mortality: time and narration

The great epistemological turning point provoked between nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and Martin Heidegger's disruptive works transformed once and for all the perception, cognition and aesthetics of time. Virginia Woolf stated that, after the radical change in the "human character" recorded around 1910 (Woolf, 1988, p. 421), life could no longer be imagined as "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged", but rather as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end". When she proposed that the narrator's task would be to "convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity" it could unfold, she was not "pleading merely for courage and sincerity", but she was "suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it" (Woolf, 1994, pp. 160-161).

Once the gap between the complexity of reality and Modern realism became evident, the stakes of post-1910 fiction consisted in reinventing its subject as much as its structures. As Robert Musil suggested in *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-42), in Modernist novels the plot development was no longer intended like the movement "of a billiard ball, which, once launched, follows a certain trajectory", but rather like "that of someone who, wandering the streets, is distracted here by a shadow, there by a group of people or by a strange cut in the facades, and finally arrives in a place he did not know or intend to reach" (Musil, 1957, p. 370). To narrate no longer meant to go straight, but to delve into the ramifications of the stories, to roam, finding things which were not sought, letting the unexpected emerge. To narrate meant to look at the plot as a "bewilderment" and at the present from which the plot subsumes the story as "a last house at the end of the city, to which in some way it no longer belongs. Every generation asks itself in amazement: who am I and who were my predecessors? They should ask themselves: where are we? And they should presume that their predecessors were not in another way, but simply in another place" (Ibid.).

At the end of the famous *matinée* at the princes of Guermantes' house, the narrator-protagonist of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* matured the intention of devoting himself to literature and decided that he would impress on his work the "form [...]"

of Time”, decreeing once and for all that, if literature wants to give access to the “true life” (Proust, 1999, p. 2399), which is Heideggerian being in time, it must take on a narrative form, using time both as a constructive principle and object of representation. Because of a “dissymmetry whose deep reasons elude us” (Genette, 1972, p. 228), a novel can narrate a story without mentioning and/or describing the place where it happened (think of folk tales and novels such as Beckett’s *Trilogie* [1951-53], Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* [1967], Marguerite Duras’ *La Maladie de la mort* [1982] and José Saramago’s *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* [1995]) or the place from which it is narrated, but cannot avoid referring to time. Even if it is not indicated in absolute terms, time is evoked by verb tenses in the form of an implicit differential between the time of the story, the time of the plot and the time of the narration. In cinema and comics, which were maturing their languages while the radical change in human character evoked by Woolf was happening, time is consubstantial both with the physical duration and editing of the shots, and with the succession of panels and the verbal tenses of their captions or dialogues; space can be left indeterminate or emptied in many ways (think of movies such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat* [1944], Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* [1966], Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich* [1999], Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* [2003]), but always has the perspectival consistency implied by the composition of the shot or the panel and by the choice of the point of view from which the story is shown.

Men’s ability to move in physical space would confine narrative space mostly within the reproduction or the extension (as in science fiction and fantasy) of the existing and the possible. On the contrary men’s inability to move in physical time beyond the present not only would open narrative time to the invention of the non-existent and the impossible (travels in time or in the afterlife, mystical or parapsychological experiences etc.), but also would make it even necessary to the challenge of the fiction, whose plot, reconciling the narrator and the reader-spectator’s desires to run to the end and to stop in the middle of the story, to conclude and to repeat (manifestations of what Freud called death and life drives), is nothing but the “internal logic of the discourse of mortality” (Brooks, 1992, p. 22). In other words, as Paul Ricœur suggested, physical time becomes “human time to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative way; in return, a narrative is significant to the extent that it draws the traits of temporal experience” (1983, p. 17), that is, to the extent that it elaborates a discourse in which narrative logic takes on a very powerful apotropaic value, exorcising the great human fears and sufferings: the senselessness of time, the prison of time, the waste of time, the end of time. In the following pages we will test Ricœur’s theorem by analyzing *Here*, a paradoxical graphic story published by Richard McGuire in 1989 (as a comic strip) and in 2014 (as a graphic novel), adapted for the big screen by Robert Zemeckis in 2024.

## 2. An inexhaustible place: *Here* 1989

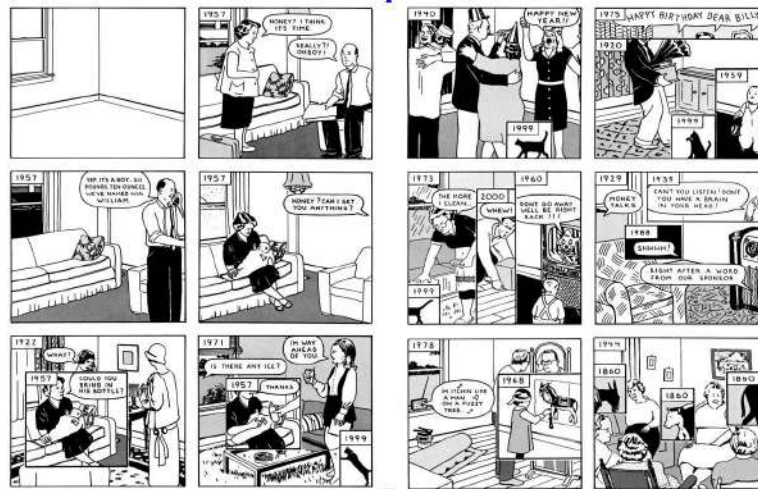
Between the Seventies and the Eighties, since American comic strips aspired to novelistic complexity and evolved towards more extensive and structured forms, they were called from time to time comic novel, picture novel, comic book novel, graphic story novel, graphic album, motion book, until the definitive affirmation of the term graphic novel with Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), *The Dreamer* (1986), *The Building* (1987) and *A Life Force* (1988), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980-91), Frank Miller and Klaus Janson’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* (1986-87). Between 1980 and 1991 the magazine “RAW”, edited by Spiegelman himself and his wife Françoise Mouly, and the less intellectual

“Weirdo”, edited by Robert Crumb, pushed the now exhausted underground comics, “stereotyped as dealing only with Sex, Dope and Cheap Thrills” (Sabin, 1996, p. 118), towards alternative comics, which were experimental in form, open to ideas from the European scene, in search of new contents and possible connections with the languages of art and literature, so much so that they were also renamed art comics or literary comics (Chute, 2008).

Each issue of “RAW” – the second of which had the programmatic subtitle “The Graphix Magazine for Damned Intellectuals” on the cover (in a variant for publisher Pantheon: “Putting The *Litter* Back Into Literature”) – was “a genuine event, like a gallery show, but exploring a medium that at that time had yet to be afforded aesthetic legitimacy” (Ware, 2014). The ninth issue, the first of the second volume published by Penguin, subtitled “Open Wounds From the Cutting Edge of Commix” (crasis of comix/mix or Common/Comix or Committed/Comix) and published in 1989, had among its contributors: Spiegelman, Gary Panter, Ever Meulen, Charles Burns, Justin Green, Drew Friedman & Mark Newgarden, Joost Swarte, Kaz, Mark Beyer, Kamagurka & Herr Seele, Tom DeHaven, David Holzman, R. Sikoryak, Kim Deitch, Jacques Loustal & Villard, Krystine Kryttre, Pascal Doury, Lorenzo Mattotti & Kramsky, Mariscal, Baru, Basil Wolverton, Ben Katchor, Edward Sorel, Georganne Dean and the newcomer Richard McGuire, who Mouly already considered a “masterful artist” (Kartalopoulos, 2005).

McGuire’s contribution was *Here*, a black and white short story in 6 plates, each divided into 6 isometric panels (rectangles with aspect ratio 1.17: one of those used in the Twenties and Thirties cinema, before the standardization of the Hollywood Academy). In the center of all the 36 panels there is the corner of a living room, whose vertical edge is common to a right wall, with variable furniture, and a left wall, with a window. It looks like a classic “cut”, but on a closer inspection it reveals its revolutionary drive. 27 panels host one or more inset panels, imitating the overlapping layers style of WIMP (Window, Icon, Menu and Pointer), the human-computer interaction system made available a few years earlier by 3RCC and Apple.<sup>1</sup> *Here*’s “multi-screen visual experience” (Apostoli Cappello, 2015) also prefigures the experimental movie *Prospero’s Books* (1991) by Peter Greenaway, where the images enclosed in the 24 internal panels illustrating the books of the title, shot in Hi-Vision (a Japanese system for shooting/transmitting analogue television in high definition) and edited with the Paintbox system by Quantel, also used to create graphic effects and animations (Geake, 1991), are overlapped on top of the images coinciding with the screen, shot on 35mm film.

<sup>1</sup> The WIMP system was conceived in the Seventies at the Xerox PARC in Palo Alto and marketed by 3RCC with the computers of the PERQ series (1979) and by Apple with the Lisa computers (1983) and above all Macintosh (1984), from which Microsoft, which at the time was developing applications for Apple, drew inspiration for the Windows operating system (1985).

R. Maguire, *Here* (1989): plates 1 and 2

All the panels except the first have a caption with a date in the upper left corner; the same can be said of all the inset panels, which are used as analeptic or proleptic windows open onto the past or present of the story. Let's see in detail the time scanning in *Here*, proceeding from left to right and from top to bottom, both in the transition from one panel to another, and within each panel (/ indicates the time of the panels, // the time of the inset panels):

|                                  |                                     |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| I: -                             | XX: /2030 //1965                    |
| II-IV: /1957                     | XXI: /1999 //2028                   |
| V: /1922 //1957                  | XXII: /100.650.010 BC //1986 //1999 |
| VI: /1971 //1957 //1999          | XXIII: /2032 //1968 //1968          |
| VII: /1940 //1999                | XXIV: /1984 //1956                  |
| VIII: /1975 //1920 //1959 //1999 | XXV: /1989 //1974 //100.097 BC      |
| IX: /1973 //1960 //2000 //1999   | XXVI: /1901                         |
| X: /1929 //1939 //1988           | XXVII: /1963 //1985 //1997          |
| XI: /1978 //1968                 | XXVIII: /1993 //1994 //1995 //1996  |
| XII: /1944 //1860 //1860 //1860  | XXIX: /1974 //2033 //1915           |
| XIII: /1967 //2029 //1971        | XXX: /2027                          |
| XIV: /1902 //1869                | XXXI: /2033 //2027                  |
| XV: /1990 //1860 //1971          | XXXII: /2029 //2027 //1987 //1850   |
| XVI: /1966 //1983                | XXXIII: /1902 //2027                |
| XVII: /1974 //1964 //1984        | XXXIV: /2027                        |
| XVIII: /1955 //1870              | XXXV: /1750 //2030 //1986           |
| XIX: /1988                       | XXXVI: /500.957.406.073 BC //1945   |

The time span traced goes from 500.957.406.073 BC (XXXVI: a hyperbolic date preceding by more than 400 billion years the Big Bang which gave rise to the universe and time) to 2033 (XXXI: the inauguration of a monument) and encompasses several existences: that of the dinosaurs (XXII: 100.650.010 BC [Cretaceous]); that of mankind (XXV: 100.097 BC [Late Pleistocene]); that of the house where most of the story is set, from its construction (XIV: 1902) to its demolition (XX: 2030); that of the protagonist William, from his birth (III: 1957) to his death (XXXIII: 2027). So, in *Here* we see geological time, biological time, anthropic time and individual time overlapping.

If the *hic* of the story (the *here* of the title) seems to compose the space respecting the method canonized by Renaissance painting (the central perspective), the principles of analytic geometry (the three-dimensional Cartesian reference system  $x,y,z$ , coinciding with the corner's three edges of the empty living room in panel I), the axioms of classical physics (space as an absolute entity) and the uses of classical cinema (full shot with frontal view, which allows to view a large part of the vertical edge, excluding the ceiling), the *nunc* (the now) breaks apart and fragments in the dates multiplication of the panels and inset panels. The resulting *hic et nunc* pushes to the limit the isotopy (unity of place) plus diachrony (variability of time) system set by Eisner in his graphic novels *A Contract With God*, *New York: The Big City* (1986), *City People Notebook* (1989) and *The Building*, recalling the space-time of modern physics: a four-dimensional hyperspace  $(x,y,z,t)$  in which time, like the space where it is embedded, "is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer" (Eisner, 1985, p. 28). What McGuire tries to capture are therefore *events* in a relativistic sense: that is physical phenomena located in specific points of space-time and capable of influencing each other, in a dimension of hypothetical and not fully explainable causality, as if the corner of the living room was a wormhole that, like the one in Carl Sagan's novel *Contact* (1985), allows to travel through time. The means of graphic language let us grasp some cause-effect links in the apparent accidentality and entropy of existence.

The links between the events which populate the space-time of *Here* appear to be on the edge between a substantial, paradigmatic and infinite causality, which is supposed to connect all the events of the story, and a formal, syntagmatic and circumscribed casualness, which can be ascribed to the plot, or to the narrative imagination of the author (who, like William, was born in 1957). Those connections inexhaustibly try to reach a kind of "synthesis of the heterogenous" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 18), oscillating between chaos and control, disorder and order, like the two faces of the Vassily Kandinsky's double painting exhibited by the Kittredge in their living room in *Six Degrees of Separation* (1989),<sup>2</sup> a play where John Guare mentions Stanley Milgram's theory of the "small world", according to which all men are linked by a small number of connections (Milgram, 1967).

Each of McGuire's panel contains one or more events, which sometimes are thematically connected, and other times unrelated, like one of the boxes where, in Raymond Carver's short story *Boxes* (from the collection *Where I'm Calling From*, 1988), the narrator's mother crams her life before each of her frequent relocations. Like many Carver's stories, *Here's* structure is "more about what you don't know rather than what you do know, and the reader fills in the gaps, while recognizing the undercurrents" (Altman, 1995, p. 7) thanks to the logical connections and analogical transitions set by the plot. The characters involved in these incomplete events are little more than ghosts, such as those encountered by Peter Stillmann in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* (1985) or those that animate the edifice starring in Eisner's *The Building*, which, like McGuire's living room, seems to have "absorbed the radiations of human relations", being "something more than simple lifeless architectures" (Eisner, 1987, p. 4). The result is a narrative puzzle like Robert Altman's movie *Short Cuts* (1993), whose screenplay is a "mosaic" of Carver's stories: it refuses any closure and, beyond all the individual stories, it tries to "give the audience one look", even if eccentric and estranged, and a narrative which "could go on forever", because it's entropic and open "like life" (Altman, 1995, p. 7).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The faces of the fictitious painting imagined by Guare reproduce two real canvases by Kandinsky: the one called "chaos" is *Schwarze Linien* (*Black Lines*, 1913), the one called "control" is *Einige Kreise* (*Some Circles*, 1926), both exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum of New York.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Altman's movie see Vittorini, 2015, pp. 124-132.

McGuire's "treatment of time" (Joyce, 1978, p. 29) has its roots in the epistemological revolution behind the great modernist narrative tradition recalled in the first paragraph of this essay. *Here* represents life wrapped in the "semi-transparent envelope" of a living room and animated by a temporally "unknown and uncircumscribed" spirit, "whatever aberration or complexity it may display". For him to narrate is not so much about going straight ahead, as about delving into the infinite temporal ramifications of his story and rendering the present from which he subsumes the story as "a last house at the end of the city, to which in some way it no longer belongs". *Here's* living room appears with metanarrative transparency as the nucleus of that house at the end of the city from which McGuire leaves in search of his lost time. For him the distance between present and past is a dislocation in space: those who preceded us lived not only in another time (then), but also in another place (elsewhere), which, as Proust showed in his *Recherche*, is another state of the *here* and can always be evoked in it: the elsewhere is ready to re-emerge dragging the then with itself. The traces of the then are all and only in the here/elsewhere, which is a container of "time in the solid state" (Lavagetto, 1991, p. 54). What remains of time is a spatial concretion, as Auster wrote in *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), where he tried to reconstruct the life of his dead father: "Memory as a place, as a building, as a sequence of columns, cornices, porticoes. The body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there, going from one place to the next, and the sound of our footsteps as we walk, moving from one place to the next" (2007, p. 79).

As for Daniel Quinn, protagonist of *City of Glass*, the past (his own and that of the old Stillmann, on whom he investigates) does not look like so much a road to be traced, as the map of a city to be reconstructed: "an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps" (Auster, 2004, p. 3). An agglomeration of locations, smells, objects, bodies, atmospheres, material and psychic events. A network of simulacra. For the contemporary narrator to tell a story is no longer just to invent a chronology, but also to spatialize time, both the inner time à la Bergson-Proust (a finite space becomes a container of a psychologically infinite temporality) and the physical time à la Einstein-Joyce (a finite time becomes a container of a relativistically infinite spatiality), in a dimension of inexhaustible (dis)continuity. Let's recall how Marco Polo describes his ideal city in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (1972): "I will put together the perfect city piece by piece, since it is made up of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals that one sends and does not know who receives them. If I tell you that the city to which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now sparser now denser, you must not believe that one can stop looking for it" (1972, p. 169).

Openness, digression, incompleteness, intermittency, (in)consistency: these are the traits of the narrative tradition where *Here* is inscribed. Calvino, Carver, Auster and McGuire fight against the tyranny of time and the constructions of history, which are "comparable to military orders armoring real life and turning it into barracks", by mobilizing what Walter Benjamin called "the riot of the anecdote", which brings us closer to "things in space and lets them into our lives" with its "pathos of proximity" (1983, p. 677). The anecdote understood as *an event* in an infinite network of events is offered in a "Metamodernist" space-time (Vittorini, 2017), which is configured as an emergent system, whose overall properties cannot be explained by the laws of its single components, but are a further level of signification of the system, deriving from non-linear interactions between the components themselves (as in videogames, financial markets, the Internet: Holland, 1998). Thus the meaning of *Here* cannot be reduced to the sum of the space-time relationships between its 36 panels and 49 inset panels, nor to the diagram of the variations of the  $x,y,z,t$  system, but lies in the effort to represent the complexity of space-time itself,

without renouncing gaps and aporias, indeed inducing the reader to face them, to turn them upside down, to disassemble them, “to wallow in it, so that in the end the reader might emerge with new insights into the seemingly unbreathable gulf between the formal and the informal, the animate and the inanimate, the flexible and the inflexible” (Hofstadter 1979, 28), the physical time and inner time, the matter and the memory, the being and the on-being, the life and the death.

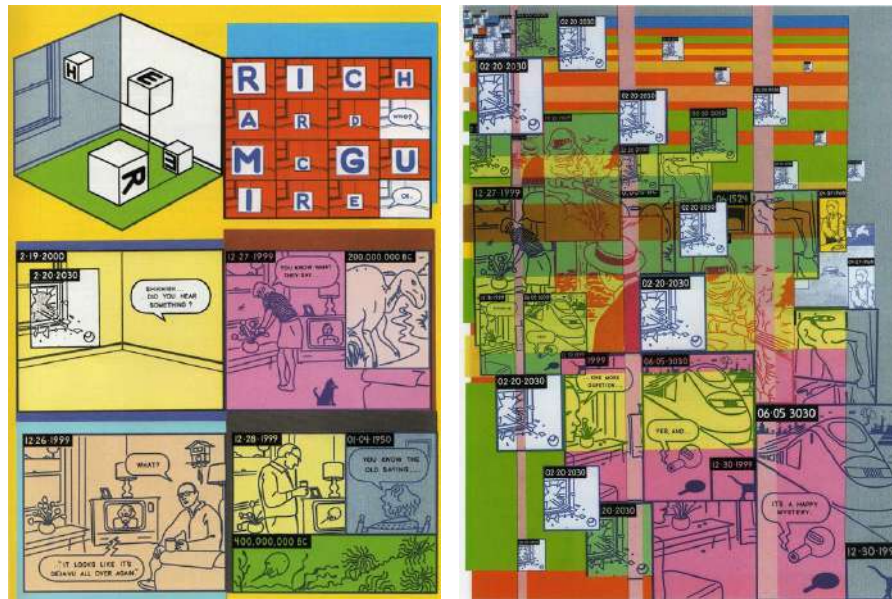
This gulf can be clearly seen when *Here* skirts its points of space-time singularity, which not surprisingly coincide with the birth of the protagonist William in the house in 1957 (3 panels [II-IV] and 2 inset panels [V-VI]) and his death elsewhere in 2027, which overlaps with the birth of a new child (2 panels [XXX and XXXIV] and 3 inset panels [XXXI-XXXIII]), reminding us of the cyclical nature of biological time and its displacement with respect to human time. The house, which William leaves in 1997 (XXX), will be damaged or destroyed by fire in 2029 (XIII)<sup>4</sup> and permanently demolished in 2030 (XX),<sup>5</sup> without being told whether the child and his parents died in the fire or simply moved elsewhere. It is no coincidence that the balloons in the inset panel within the final panel contain a non-specific question (“What?”) and an envoy (“Skip it”) which invites us to jump into the void after the end of the strip, to let go of the story, returning it to an inevitable oblivion. According to the typical structure of the Metamodernist fiction, the nostalgia for the Modern mimesis of the real hybridizes with the Postmodernist drive to play with narrative devices by making them the object of the fiction itself: the completion of the form (which, while preserving the matrix of the *plot*, assumes the reticular structure of the hypertext) does not correspond to the closure of the content (the story is presented as a set of continuous and closed temporal intervals).

### 3. A Happy Mystery: *Here* 2000

In the summer of 2000 McGuire participated in the exhibition *Bubbles ‘n’ Boxes ‘n’ Beyond*, held at the Swiss Institute in New York, with a 3D version of *Here*, an installation of plates containing some panels from 1989 strip. Four of these plates have been published in the catalogue of the exhibition, the special issue 59 of the Swiss magazine “Strapazin”. In terms of content, the original temporal structure is lightened (many of the original panels are missing) and integrated by detailing the dates (the indications of the day and month are added) and inserting other stages within biological time (200.000.000 BC and 400.000.000 BC) and anthropic time (1524), whose end point is postponed (first to 2999, then to 3030). In terms of form, new infographic elements give prominence and emphasis to otherwise negligible details; the black stroke of the original panels is lightened and overlapped on unrealistically colored shadings (similar to those of McGuire’s illustrations for the “New Yorker” covers), which only in the first plate have the same margins as the panels; in the following panels they develop an autonomous geometry, triggering an effect of increasing visual congestion, up to the chaos of the fourth plate, occupied by an accidental perspective of dwindling panels whose vanishing point is in the upper left corner. The result is a very concise “happy mystery”, according to the words in the last panel balloon, moreover pronounced not by a human being but by a small robot.

<sup>4</sup> David Mazzucchelli will remember this at the beginning of his graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The sphere used for the demolition of the interior space which encloses a universe teeming with individuals and signs reminds us of that in Federico Fellini’s movie *Prova d’orchestra* (1979).



R. McGuire, *Here* (2000): plates 1 and 4

#### 4. The Human Understanding of Time: *Here* 2014

In December 2014, three months after the exhibition *From Here to Here: Richard McGuire Makes a Book* at the Morgan Library & Museum, which displayed drawings, diaries, photographic sources and other preparatory materials for the book,<sup>6</sup> the definitive version of *Here* was published. It is a graphic novel of 151 isometric panels which, starting from the endpaper, extend on the verso of each page and on the right of the next one (the aspect ratio has increased to 1.37, the same imposed by Hollywood Academy between 1932 and 1952). Each panel shows in central perspective the corner of a living room, whose vertical edge, shared by the right wall with a fireplace and the left wall with a window, coincides with the binding of the book, which divides each panel in two. The “frame” becomes wider (similar to the cinematic long shot), allowing to view the entire vertical edge, along with a portion of the ceiling. Each panel can contain one or more inset panels; each panel or inset panel has a caption with a date in the upper left corner (only the year, as in 1989 edition). The time span is less wide than that of the original strip, but no less hyperbolic: it goes from 3.000.500.000 BC (losing about 497 billion years and being a plausible part of the estimated chronology of the universe) to 22.175 (gaining more than 20 thousand years), still mixing geological, biological, anthropic and individual time, with intervals of variable density (all the centuries between the thirteenth and the twenty-fourth are loosely mentioned; all the decades of the twentieth century are minutely mentioned).

The panels are in color, as in the 2000 edition, but they are soft colors, whose shadings coincide with the represented spaces and objects. The panels or inset panels representing the interiors (the same living room with variable furniture) are made through digital rendering with the texture mapping technique; the panels representing the exteriors (variable landscapes) are made by digitizing colored pencils and/or watercolor drawings. The human figures are almost all made by digitizing the magazine clippings, photos and

<sup>6</sup> Published in the catalogue of the exhibition (Hamilton, 2014).

Super8 films frames found by McGuire when, after the death of his parents and sister, he returned to his Perth Amboy, New Jersey, family house, built in front of the Proprietary House (where the Royal Governor William Franklin, the illegitimate son of the father of the country Benjamin Franklin, lived between 1774 and 1776). The graphic novel tinges the relativistic *events* and their mysterious causality already shown in 1989 strip with an explicit personal nuance, as McGuire himself stated: “going through the closing of the house was definitely an emotional thing. [...] it was a cathartic thing to go look at all that stuff” (Lohier, 2014).

As Chris Ware pointed out, *Here* is “the first successful attempt to visually recreate the matrix of memory and human understanding of time” (Ware, 2014), which is both mournful (for the time and affections lost in real life) and euphoric (for the time and affections regained in fiction). The graphic novel is opened and closed by two similar sequences of panels, assuming a concentric but slightly asymmetrical form: the first and last undated neutral panels portray the empty living room in grayscale (a sort of sinopia or pre-text, like the first panel in 1989 strip); the second and penultimate panels dated 2014 (the present of the narrative) portray in variations of yellow the half-empty living room during a relocation; the seventh and fourth from last panels dated 1957 (when, as in 1989 strip, the central character, now anonymous,<sup>7</sup> and, in real life, the author, were born) portray in variations of rose the same woman in the middle of the now fully furnished living room. In the seventh panel, the woman asks herself: “Now why did I come in here again?”; her ephemeral question is echoed by other questions and statements about loss (of memory, sight, hearing) from other epochs (1963: “Did I lose something?”; 2008: “I think I am losing my mind”; 1996: “Then I lost my self-control”; 1951: “I am losing my eyesight”; 1962: “I am losing my hearing”), but above all by the ontological question uttered in 2014 by a character we barely see: “Where did the time go?” (McGuire, 2014, pp. 140-149 and 47). In the fourth from last panel, the same woman lifts from the low table in front of the sofa a yellow volume (the McGuire’s volume we are reading?) and answers to her initial question: “... now I remember” (Ibid., pp. 13 and 297), sealing *Here* with an epigrammatic celebration of regained time, which is the Proustian narrative transfiguration of the lost past.

<sup>7</sup> In panel 115, dated 2007, the protagonist tells a dream where a woman says: “Everyone has the same name here” (McGuire, 2014, p. 229).



R. Maguire, *Here* (2014): Panel 7 (pp. 13-14)



Panel 73 (p. 145)



Panel 24 (p. 47)



Panel 149 (pp. 297-298)

If 1989 strip “was a piano sonata, this book is a symphony” (Ware, 2014) using the original sonata as its constructive principle, or, in other words, a work in the shape of a “cathedral” (Proust, 1999, p. 2390: the *Recherche* uses Vinteuil’s sonata as its constructive principle), whose structure is perfectly balanced, since the beginning and the end refer to each other circularly. McGuire’s work clearly expresses the Metamodernist zeitgeist in a similar way to other great fictions released between 1989 and 2014.

Let’s think of the calculated asymmetry between spatial invariance and temporal variations in Eisner’s *Dropsie Avenue* (1995), where the constant space is the street in the Bronx that gives the graphic novel its title, while time moves linearly from 1870 to the present. Let’s think of the deconstruction and dizzying temporal twist of Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld* (1997), which, after defining in the Prologue the beginning of the time of the story (1951), jumps near the end (1992) and regresses irregularly for hundreds of pages towards the beginning, finally conquering the present of narration in the Epilogue (1997). In both DeLillo and McGuire, the present is constantly haunted by an indefinable “something way back then”, a sort of container without content, which at the end of the story leaves us with an unsettling doubt: “I don’t know what happened, do I?” (DeLillo, 1997, p. 807). This present can only be captured while “falling indelibly into the past” (Ibid., p. 60). It can be redeemed from its painful lability by anchoring it to the previous or next times by means of an inexhaustible search of details and connections (“everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does” [Ibid., p. 465]). It can be validated by arranging the “ten thousand wisps of disinformation” produced by “the solid and availing stuff of our experience” in “a single narrative sweep” (Ibid., p. 82), which mixes History (J. Edgar Hoover in DeLillo, Benjamin Franklin in McGuire) and stories, “big moments” and “small moments”, official events and “forgotten little things” à la Carver (Schuessler, 2014). The arrangement is made possible by the search for recurrences and rhymes within both History and the stories, because, as in 1775 Franklin says to his nephew in *Here*, “Life has a flair for rhyming events” (McGuire, 2014, p. 128) and, as the narrator of Paul Thomas Anderson’s movie *Magnolia* (1999) argues, we cannot reduce recurrences to “something that happened” or “just a matter of chance”, but we must use

them as hubs which allow the story to preserve and illuminate the mystery of life (such as, in two panels of *Here* dated 1954, the “symbiotic relationship” that unites the dog with the postman in their daily “little ritual”: the postman brings the mail, the dog proudly barks believing it has protected the house [McGuire, 2014, p. 68]).

Let’s think of the radical manipulation of time through retrocessive and/or paradoxical structures in the music videos *Sugar Water* by Michel Gondry (1996, Cibo Matto), *Drop* by Spike Jonze (1996, The Pharcyde), *The Scientist* by James Thraves (2004, Coldplay) and the movies *Memento* (2000) by Christopher Nolan and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) by David Fincher. Let’s think of Bill Viola’s video installations whose images unnaturally advance on the screens by means of the techniques of slow motion, rewind and loop; let’s think in particular of *The Greetings* (1995), where the quotation of Pontormo’s painting *La visitazione* (1528-29) – not unlike the quotations of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Triumph of Death* (1562) and *The Children’s Games* (1560) in *Underworld*, or those of Edward Hopper’s *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963), Jan Vermeer’s *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657) and Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *La Liseuse* (1770) in *Here* – testifies that “we are living database of images” which, once “they enter us, do not cease to transform and grow” (Belting, 2003, p. 210), giving life to a real “sculpture of time” (Bellour, 1986). In *Here* this sculpture goes beyond the paper publication thanks to the e-book version, designed by McGuire himself with Stephen Betts, which allows three kinds of reading experience: we can linearly scroll through the pages like in the volume, or we can follow single narrative lines by sequentially scrolling through panels or inset panels placed at a great distance in the volume, or we can choose to randomly remix and recombine panels and inset panels with unpredictable effects.

Let’s think of the cosmogony placed in the middle of Terrence Malick’s movie *The Tree of Life* (2012): as in *Here*, the circumscribed story of procreation and mourning of an American family implies the entire universal space-time as an infinite series of cycles of life/death, up to the final transcendence, which in Malick is metaphysical (like in Andrej Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood* [1962] and Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* [1995]), while in McGuire it is aesthetic (life is re-signified by fiction, as in *City of Glass*, in the sense of a nihilistic deconstruction, or in *Magnolia*, in the sense of a hypertrophic construction). Let’s think of the vertiginous time travel in Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014), whose screenplay was supervised by Kip Thorne, the same physicist who in 1985 gave a consulting on wormholes to Sagan for *Contact*, later adapted for the big screen by Zemeckis: like McGuire’s living room, Nolan’s final tesseract is an implementation of the ordinary space-time allowing to unite present, past and future through the thread of the affective relationships.

Let’s think of the reverse kineographic sequence<sup>8</sup> (snapshots of a vertical video shot with a smartphone showing a man falling from a tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001) at the end of Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2006). Foer breaks the persistence of vision on which the audiovisual text is based, with an operation of scopic archaeology not too far from the diorama of panels

<sup>8</sup> Invented during the nineteenth century, the kineograph or flip book was a pocket book whose pages, slid quickly between the fingers, gave the illusion of movement by exploiting the phenomenon of persistence of vision that will be the basis of the cinema.

in *Here* (related to the frames of analog cinema, ancestors of digital video snapshots).<sup>9</sup> In this way he demystifies the ontological claim of the “superreal” or “maybe underreal” content of the video (DeLillo, 1997, p. 157): the separation of the snapshots, their rough grain and the grayscale printing denounce their artificiality, bringing to light the same simulacral vocation of the family photos digitally reworked in *Here*. In both cases, the images maintain a paradoxical aspect by finding/losing their subjects: while they retain the traces of the past in the present, they denounce the absence, the confinement of their subjects in an unattainable space-time.

## 5. A radical off-screen: *Here* 2024

Let’s think especially of the movie adaptation of McGuire’s graphic novel released ten years after its publication by Zemeckis, who brought together a large part of the crew that thirty years earlier contributed to the success of *Forrest Gump* (1994): the screenwriter Eric Roth (who wrote the scripts of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* [2011] by Stephen Daldry, an adaptation of Foer’s novel), the cinematographer Don Burgess, the composer Alan Silvestri, the sound designer Randy Thom, the costume designer Joanna Johnston, the actors Tom Hanks and Robin Wright in the lead roles. Zemeckis’ meeting McGuire’s graphic novel closes the intertextual links between the two authors, who started at the time of the writing of the strip *Here*, whose temporal paradoxes visibly recalled the first two chapters of *Back to the Future* saga, released in 1985 and 1989, while the technical experimentation, the metanarrative and theoretical verve reflecting on the relationships between static and moving image, as well as between photography and drawing, recalled *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). In the graphic novel *Here* there are traces of the aesthetic exorcisms of aging and death of *Death Becomes Her* (1992), of the mixture of fictitious and historical characters of *Forrest Gump*, of the temporal paradoxes of *Contact* (1997), of the mix of photography (live action) and CGI (digital animation) of *Polar Express* (2004), *Beowulf* (2007) and *A Christmas Carol* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> See panels 85 and 121 (McGuire, 2014, pp. 169 and 241). In panel 85 the same event dated 1998 (a bird enters the living room and frightens a girl) is fragmented into 9 inset panels which recall few similar frames from Alfred Hitchcock’s movie *The Birds* (1963). In panels 121 the same event dated 1907 (the construction of the house) is also fragmented into 9 inset panels which recall few similar frames from the movies *George Washington Slept Here* (1942) by William Keighley and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) by Henry Codman Potter.



A frame from *Here* (2024) by Robert Zemeckis

In their version of *Here*, Zemeckis, Roth and Burgess keep the camera angle and the framing (a long shot) fixed throughout all the narration. The image, whose aspect ratio is 1.85 (the standard panoramic ratio for American film productions since 1953, called Academy Flat), has in its center the usual living room, but this time it pictures two corners connecting a central wall which is shown entirely and almost frontally (what in McGuire was the left wall, in the center of which there was/is a window), the usual right wall with a fireplace, and, for the first time, the left wall with a door, both foreshortened. A strip of the ceiling is also shown. The framing, the front wall and the window refer to each other homothetically; the window constitutes a frame within the frame: on the set “the window exterior was an LED wall portraying over 80 different eras, weathers and times of day in the neighborhood” (Williams, 2025). As in *Prospero’s Books*, the images enclosed in numerous insets frames are overlapped on top of the images framed by the screen, all shot with a RED Raptor Camera with Panavision 35mm P70 lenses.

In this classically centralized space, although less centripetal than in the Cartesian structures invented by McGuire, time breaks apart and fragments by means of layers multiplication. The more realistic chronology goes from the age of the dinosaurs (from 230 million years to 65 million years ago) up to the present (2024), and is mostly distributed over a few narrative lines: the more substantial one about the Young family (which goes from the second post-war period to the present), the slender ones about the Harter family (the first two decades of the twentieth century), the Beekman couple (twenties-forties) and the Harris family (years 2010-2020), and the two micro-stories about the indigenous couple (set in the seventeenth century, if we stick to McGuire’s chronology) and the visit of Benjamin Franklin (1775).

The story of the Youngs is followed for over seventy years. The visual effects supervisor of the movie Kevin Baillie said that it would not have been possible to use the “traditional face replacement techniques with CGI” in order to realistically portray the Youngs, “because it was going to be too expensive and time consuming. And it would also be difficult to maintain consistent quality” (Williams, 2025). So an AI digital (de)aging technology (Metaphysic Live) was used to make the actors look younger or older during the live shooting, avoiding the classic post-production compositing. Together with the multiplication of narrative layers, it pushed the movie into a liminal dimension between real and virtual, where the great epistemological questions about true and false, the ontological question about space and time, the existential questions about memory and the

aesthetic questions about the gaze and the relationship between the images shown on the screen and the offscreen seem to become liquid. Only once, about 2/3 thirds of the way through the film, during the Harrises' move out of the house (around 2020), the monolithic frontality of the vision is broken through by placing a piece of furniture with a mirror in the center of the living room (a trick Zemeckis has already used in *What Lies Beneath* [2000] and *Allied* [2016]): although it allows us to take a look beyond the camera, visualizing for a few moments the radical off-screen opposing the images shown on the screen, ultimately the mirror does not reveal who knows what hidden truth, but shows a prosaic kitchen where the Harrises (and in an overlapping frame the Youngs) discuss.

The story begins with a complete extinction (dinosaurs 65 million years ago) and ends shortly after an escaped extinction (mankind during Covid19 pandemic in 2020-21: Harrises' housekeeper Raquel dies), passing through another escaped extinction (mankind during Spanish flu pandemic in 1918-1920: John Harter dies) and several family deaths: in addition to Raquel and Harter, Rose and Al Young, mother and father of the protagonist Richard (namesake of McGuire), a family friend of theirs and the indigenous woman die. The loss of time and affections is the thread uniting all the events, still relativistically understood as phenomena which, while distributed in physically separate points of space-time, are crossed by a common reverberant and inscrutable logic.

Like McGuire's graphic novel, in addition to the loss of affections the movie shows motor and cognitive skills loss (Rose affected by stroke), memory loss (Margaret affected by Alzheimer's), hearing loss (Al), illusions loss (Richard would like to be a painter but ends up being an insurance salesman like his father; Margaret would like to have a home for her family that is not that of the Youngs), history loss (despite seeing the post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by his father Al, a veteran of the Second World War, the youngest son Jimmy decides to voluntarily enlist to Korean War). The only couple immune to mourning and loss is the playful and winner Beekmans (Stella is a pin-up, Lee the inventor of the La-Z-Boy recliner that will make him rich), who embody the same American dream which is gradually corroded by the other couples stories, revealing the painful background of "dissatisfaction, sacrifice, renunciation of one's artistic and life ambitions, suffocated by Capital" (Settis and Romagna, 2025).

But the movie seems to timidly outline an option. The dream could be stripped of any ready-made ideology and success could be considered not as a status to be achieved and maintained by fighting against the others, but as the sum of the mysterious epiphanies of meaning which life gives us together with (or thanks to) the others: as when Richard shows his newborn daughter the moon outside the window and the one he painted; or as when the old Margaret, emptied by Alzheimer's, remembers having lived in the Young house when Richard tells her about the blue ribbon lost by his young daughter in the sofa, regaining possession of the here and now which the disease stole from her: "I remember all that. That was right here. I remember being here. I loved being here". On the first emotional "I remember" the camera moves for the first time and leaves the space cage where it has been trapped since the beginning of the movie. While dancing around the protagonists, it shows the same radical off-screen we peeked at in the mirror about twenty minutes earlier. The frame widens out of the "well-proportioned, modified colonial house, white with green shutters" (Lee, 1952, p. 140) and shows the entire city, one of those Hollywood melodramas of the Fifties portrayed non-stop in the lush states of Connecticut, Vermont or New England during the poignant autumn feuillage (Vittorini, 2020, pp. 127-141).

Thus Zemeckis, McGuire, Eisner, DeLillo, Viola, Foer, Malick and Nolan, use different declinations of narrative language, at the same time demystifying and deontologizing it (Pasolini, 2000, p. 226), to relive and rework the vicissitudes and paradoxes of memory,

where the trauma of loss (of time, life, affections, meaning) and the trauma of vision overlap. Once and for all subtracted from the documentary religiosity to which they seem to aspire, the images can tame the uncanny power of memory and the pathogenic power of oblivion, freeing time, particularly the present, from their grip. The power of fiction (the one contained in the volume handled by the woman at the end of McGuire's graphic novel, and the one celebrated by the flying camera in Zemeckis' movie finale) invites us to taste time in its albeit transient vitality. After all, as McGuire said, if *Here* "is about anything, it's about impermanence. [...] The now is the only thing that exists" (Schuessler, 2014).

## References

- Altman R. (1995), *Collaborating with Carver*, in R. Carver, *Short Cuts*, London, The Harvill Press.
- Apostoli Cappello M. (2015), *Qui, ora e sempre. La simultaneità del fumetto secondo Richard McGuire* [Intervista], "Fumettologica", June 8, <http://www.fumettologica.it/2015/06/qui-richard-mcguire-intervista/>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- Auster P. (2004), *City of Glass*, in Id., *The New York Trilogy* [1987], London, Faber and Faber.
- Id. (2007), *The Invention of Solitude* [1982], London, Penguin Books.
- Bellour R. (1986), *La Sculpture du temps. Entretien avec Bill Viola par Raymond Bellour*, "Cahiers du cinéma", n. 376, January, pp. 35-42.
- Belting H. (2003), *A conversation. Hans Belting and Bill Viola*, in *Bill Viola: The Passions*, ed. by J. Walsh, Los Angeles-London, The J. Paul Getty Museum Publications.
- Benjamin W. (1983), *Das Passagen-Werk. Zweiter Band. SV*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Brooks P. (1992), *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press.
- Calvino I. (1972), *Le città invisibili*, Torino, Einaudi.
- Chute H. (2008), *Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative*, "PMLA", vol. 123, n. 2, March, pp. 452-465.
- DeLillo D. (1997), *Underworld*, New York, Scribner.
- Eisner W. (1985), *Comics and Sequential Art*, New York, Poorhouse Press.
- Id. (1987), *The Building*, Princeton, Kitchen Sink Press.
- Geake E. (1991), *Review: The new tricks of the trade*, "NewScientist", September 28, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg13117885-500-review-the-new-tricks-of-the-trade/>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- Genette G. (1972), *Figure III*, Paris, Seuil.
- Hamilton, H. (ed.) (2014), *From Here to Here: Richard McGuire Makes a Book*, "Five Dials", n. 35.
- Hofstadter D. R. (1979), *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York, Basic Books.
- Holland J. H. (1998), *Emergence from Chaos to Order*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Joyce J. (1978), *Lettera a Italo Svevo del 30 gennaio 1924*, in *Carteggio con J. Joyce*, V. Larbaud, B. Crémieux, M. A. Comnène, E. Montale, V. Jahier, ed. by B. Maier, Milano, Dall'Oglio.
- Kartalopoulos B. (2005), *A RAW History: The Magazine*, "Indy Magazine", Winter, [https://web.archive.org/web/20080210081625/http://64.23.98.142:80/indy/winter\\_2005/raw\\_02/index.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20080210081625/http://64.23.98.142:80/indy/winter_2005/raw_02/index.html), last access: June 8, 2025.
- Lavagetto M. (1991), *Stanza 43. Un lapsus di Marcel Proust*, Torino, Einaudi.

- Lee E. L. and H. (1952), *All That Heaven Allows*, New York, Putnam.
- Lohier P. (2014), *Here is Richard McGuire's epic of time*, "Boing Boing", December 11, <https://boingboing.net/2014/12/11/here-is-richard-mcguires-epi.html>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- McGuire R. (2014), *Here*, New York, Pantheon Books.
- Milgram S. (1967), *The Small World Problem*, "Psychology Today", vol. 2, pp. 60-67.
- Musil R. (1957), *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften*, Gamburg, Rowohlt Verlag.
- Pasolini P. P. (2000), *La lingua scritta della realtà*, in Id., *Empirismo eretico*, Milano, Garzanti.
- Proust M. (1999), *Le Temps retrouvé*, in Id., *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by J.-Y. Tadié, Paris, Gallimard (Quarto).
- Ricœur P. (1983), *Temps et récit. Tome I*, Paris, Seuil.
- Id. (1984) *Temps et récit. Tome II. La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, Paris, Seuil.
- Sabin R. (1996), *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. A History of Comic Art*, London, Phaidon Press.
- Schuessler J. (2014), *Sharing a Sofa with Dinosaurs. Here, Richard McGuire's Book, an Exhibition at the Morgan*, "New York Times", September 25.
- Settis N., Romagna M. (2025), *Here (2024) di Robert Zemeckis*, "CineLapsus", January 9, <https://www.cinelapsus.com/here-2024-di-robert-zemeckis>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- Vittorini F. (2015), *Narrativa USA 1984-2014. Romanzi, film, graphic novel, serie tv, videogame e altro*, Bologna, Pàtron.
- Id. (2017), *Raccontare oggi. Metamodernismo tra narratologia, ermeneutica e intermedialità*, Bologna, Pàtron.
- Id. (2020), *Melodramma. Un percorso intermediale tra teatro, romanzo, cinema e serie tv*, Bologna, Pàtron.
- Ware C. (2014), *On Here by Richard McGuire – a game-changing graphic novel*, in "The Guardian", December 17, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/17/chris-ware-here-richard-mcguire-review-graphic-novel>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- Williams T. (2025), *Creating Here with FilmLight*, in "British Cinematographer", February 24, <https://britishcinematographer.co.uk/creating-here-with-filmight>, last access: June 8, 2025.
- Woolf V. (1988), *Character in Fiction*, in Ead., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 3: 1919 to 1924*, ed. by A. McNeill, London, The Hogarth Press.
- Ead. (1994), *Modern Fiction*, in Ead., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, ed. by A. McNeill, London, The Hogarth Press.