

# Approximate Author-ity: Self-Crafting “Le Bec” and Other Trondheimian Masks

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## *Abstract*

Lewis Trondheim crafted an autobiographical avatar who appears to be stuck in a state of stasis. As I examine Trondheim’s self-crafting into a protagonist and a character in a narrative, I argue that his mask’s immutability paradoxically allows for an exploration of the changing nature of identity and the performative notion of authorship. Trondheim’s enterprise is a self-imposed frame, which I propose to read as a technique of the self. In my examination of Trondheim’s many masks, I show how Trondheim questions the process of identity formation through the careful elaboration both within and outside his works of his persona into a myth of the self. His variety of masks invites a reflection on the oscillation between a sense of recognition and de-familiarisation of the self. Trondheim enacts a care of the self via a self-writing which evokes a renunciation of the self only to renounce this via his comics production. This seems to embody perfectly a form of care of the self – based on parody – fitting to a contemporary moment in which the confessional has been recast as a form of affirmation of self-identity and validation.

## *Keywords*

Lewis Trondheim, self-crafting, care of the self, technique of the self, myth of the self, autobiography, bande dessinée

## *Résumé*

Lewis Trondheim a conçu un avatar autobiographique qui semble être piégé dans un état de stase. En examinant la construction de Trondheim en tant que protagoniste et personnage dans un récit, il semble que l’immutabilité de son masque permet paradoxalement d’explorer la nature changeante de l’identité et la notion performative d’auteur. L’entreprise de Trondheim est un cadre auto-imposé que nous proposons de lire comme une technique de soi. Dans cette étude des nombreux masques de Trondheim, nous montrons comment Trondheim interroge le processus de formation de l’identité à travers l’élaboration soignée, à travers ses œuvres et au-delà, de sa

personnalité en un mythe de soi. Sa variété de masques invite à une réflexion sur l'oscillation entre un sentiment de réalisation et de dé-familiarisation de soi. Trondheim met en pratique un souci de soi par une auto-écriture qui évoque une renonciation à soi-même, elle-même renoncée via sa production de bandes dessinées. Cette pratique semble incarner parfaitement une forme de souci de soi – basée sur la parodie – correspondant à un moment contemporain dans lequel le confessionnel a été redéfini comme une forme d'affirmation de l'identité et de la validation de soi.

### *Mots-clés*

Lewis Trondheim, auto-construction, soin du soi, technique du soi, mythe du soi, auteurbiographie, bande dessinée

In this article, I examine the tumultuous interactions between Trondheim's author-construct – his autobiographical avatar – and his fictional characters as part of a wider enterprise of self-writing, or rather self-crafting, which I propose to read as a technology of the self. I show how Trondheim questions the process of identity formation through the careful elaboration of his persona into a myth of the self, both within and outside his works. By having his autobiographical avatar interact with fictional characters who challenge the authority of the protagonist and of the textual narrator as an author, Lewis Trondheim not only plays with the author-construct through meta-textual discourse, but also challenges the boundaries between narration and narrative through the use of metalepsis, which has significant repercussions on the referential pact. As I examine Trondheim's many masks, I investigate how the assemblage of relations between his avatar and his fictional characters participates in his efforts of improving as an individual. These considerations lead me to explore a form of self-crafting that is a performative renunciation of the self, recast as a form of affirmation of self-identity and validation as a *bande dessinée* artist.

### Author-Constructs and Other “Myths of the Self”

Before approaching the various textual and visual self-representations of Trondheim, I now offer a brief sketch of the man behind ‘the Bird’, his most recognisable avatar in autobiocomics<sup>1</sup>. In this section, I show to what extent his official biography is itself a carefully self-crafted account that participates in the construction of the persona both inside and outside the comic grid.

Among all the assumptions that surround the creation of Lewis Trondheim's public persona, two are widespread and persistent, the first one being that *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* (1992a) was Trondheim's very first *bande dessinée*. The second assumption, which stems directly from the first, is that Trondheim could not draw before he learnt how to draw comics through the making of this five hundred-page epic. Trondheim himself does little to dismiss these assumptions as he usually omits to mention any work he made prior to *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie*.

Undeniably, *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* constitutes a stepping stone in Trondheim's output. It was a formal exercise which helped him to gain a graphic efficiency that would serve better the narrative developments. The stunning rhythm of production of *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* – five hundred pages drawn over twelve months – is the first example of Trondheim's prolificacy and the relative spontaneity that ensues from it. It also constitutes Trondheim's first known “œuvre en dessin direct” [“without any preliminary sketches”], with the panels directly drawn in ink – with the notable exception of the opening chapter. Indeed, in a move that helps to build the myth surrounding *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie*, Trondheim produced each panel of the first chapter on separate pages that he then cut and arranged in sequence.

*Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* may be considered as Trondheim's advent as an artist but it certainly does not constitute his first comic. Indeed, his series of experimental comics, *Approximate Continuum Comics Institute H3319*, a “twelve and a half”-issue fanzine was published from September 1988 to February 1990 under the penname of Lewis Trondheim two to three years before the making of *Lapinot et les carottes de*

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1 “autobiocomics” is an all-encompassing term coined by Ann Miller and Murray Pratt (2004) for autobiographical practices in comics.

Patagonie. ACCI H3319 includes some photocopied panels that are assembled into comics-strips, alongside black and white comics pages which Trondheim drew and inked. These pages are characterised with a great variety of ever-changing graphic styles ranging from minimalist, geometrical forms to a more detailed use of shadows and detailed backgrounds.

Not only is *Approximate Continuum Comics Institute H3319's* title very similar to *Approximate Continuum Comix*, a six-issue comics series (1993-1994) later published in one volume as *Approximativement* (1995), but it also features fully developed characters that would later be depicted in longer stories such as *Psychanalyse* (1990), *Monolinguiques* (1992b), *Le Dormeur* (1993), etc. ACCI H3319 thus constitutes a formal laboratory



Fig. 1 : "Trondheim's Le Bec in Davodeau's Les Ignorants (with the kind permission of the author)

for years of publication to come. Plots, situations and secondary characters in later works also have their origin in other previously published but underrated works<sup>2</sup>. Although these early works were already published

2 See, for instance, the last panel on page 7 in *Approximativement* featuring a foreigner selling roses in the restaurant where Lewis Trondheim has dinner with his wife Brigitte and Père Vincent. The character first appears in the last panel of a short story entitled *Les Aventures du steeple-chase des petits boulots*, published in *Frank Margerin présente n°6 (Les Humanoïdes associés, 1992c)*. Such characters do not seem to have undergone any significant changes regarding their characterization. Their visual designs remain

under the pseudonym of Lewis Trondheim, it would appear that the idea of an artist whose early production encompasses the work to come does not fit with Trondheim's personal myth: that of an autodidact whose alleged inability to draw is not only a leitmotiv in his work but also abounds in the paratext. However ill-founded, this recurring claim is worth mentioning, as it illustrates the importance of the author-construct not only in the persona of Lewis Trondheim himself but also in his work. In the following section, I examine the many masks of Trondheim and their significance in relation to matters of authorship.

## The Bird and Other Masks

Trondheim's most recognisable self-representation in his autobiographical and fictional works is a human bird<sup>3</sup>. While Ann Miller describes Trondheim's avatar as a cockatoo (Miller, 2007: 219), Bart Beaty sees in him the bald eagle (2007: 211), Gilles Ciment describes Trondheim's avatar as a "perruche" ["budgie"] (Ciment, 2007), Catherine Mao as a parrot (Mao, 2013), David Turgeon simply gives up (Turgeon, 2008). Trondheim occasionally uses the word "cacatoès" [cockatoo] (Trondheim, 2014) yet never entirely dismissed these various interpretations. He often shows a preference to refer to his avatar as "l'oiseau" ["the bird"]. The reference is voluntarily vague and denotes the whole of the French expressions that are built around the imagery of the Bird. "Un oiseau" – or "un drôle d'oiseau" – can mean an oddball as well as a crank, a particularly significant connotation for his depiction in his books.

Trondheim inscribes both his fictional and autobiographical works in the funny animal tradition or zoomorphism<sup>4</sup>; his works feature humans drawn with animal features who may also own pets and encounter wild animals. The identity of Trondheim's characters is therefore fluid: they appear animal-like, yet are referred to as humans. The animal avatar, just like any avatar, marks the tension between identity and anonymity, as it masks physical traits yet is a tool of individuality that accentuates a recognisable identity.

When Trondheim makes an appearance in other artists' autobiocomics, he is inevitably represented as his zoomorphic feathered avatar. In his *bande dessinée* blog, Boulet once drew Trondheim as a man in a giant chicken suit whose unmasked face is clearly recognisable as Laurent Chabosy's, with the following caption: "Afin de préserver [sa] vie privée, Lewis Trondheim sera représenté en poulet." ["in order to protect [his] private life, Laurent Chabosy will be drawn as a chicken"]<sup>5</sup> (*BouletCorp*, entry 2009/02/10). Etienne Davodeau's *Les Ignorants* contains a page drawn by and featuring Trondheim, in which his aviary avatar is metonymically referred to as "Le Bec" ["the Beak"] (Davodeau, 2011: 56) (fig. 1).

So, although his friends-colleagues do not use that anthropomorphic technique, they seem to understand how important it is for Trondheim. Regardless of the tonal and modal dissonances that these insertions provoke within a work characterised with a dramatically different style, the human bird is instantly recognisable as Trondheim: the transformation of the self into a recognisable brand is complete.

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unchanged when they reappear in later books. The process of rewriting is so limited that it would not be tenable to interpret Trondheim's silence as disdain for his pre-*Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* work, and discard it on these grounds.

3 Trondheim's fictional character Lapinot might be at times indirectly autobiographical, Laurent Gerbier and Didier Ottaviani (2001) suggest.

4 For an analysis of the uses and significance of animal imagery, see Groensteen (1987) and Baker (2001).

5 All translations are my own.



Fig. 2 : "Self-Portrait of Lewis Trondheim, published in *Les Inrockuptibles*, 1996, issue 45."  
(with the kind permission of the author)

*Approximativement* (1995)<sup>6</sup> is arguably the text through which the most recognisable of Lewis Trondheim's avatars was created, defined and refined. The drawing of the Bird has barely evolved since *Approximativement*, as it is the text that sets up not only Trondheim's appearance and characterization for the following publications but also his persona outside the pages. Ever since the publication of *Approximativement*, whether dedicating his drawings or answering mails, the author makes a habit of signing off his recipients and fans off with "Approximativement, Lewis" ["Approximatively, Lewis"]. Trondheim always said that reading Carl Barks's Donald Duck comics made a deep impression on him as a child and that his drawing style is an affectionate tribute to Barks's work. Trondheim heavily hints on the assumption that he chose to draw in "gros nez" style à la Barks because he was not gifted enough to draw in any other way. The protagonist in *Approximativement* supports this idea as he claims "ne pas savoir bien dessiner" ["not to know how to draw well"], and accuses himself of "bâcler" ["rushing the job"] from the very first page of *Approximativement*. These affirmations contrast with the level of sophistication in the details of the cityscape behind him. As for the claim that "gros nez" is the only graphic style in which Trondheim could draw, it can be refuted with a mere look at the last page of *ACCI H3319* issue 12 and half. Trondheim represents himself as an author in a human form, bidding farewell to his characters, who would later feature in stand-alone books that are respectively entitled *Le Dormeur* (1993) and *Psychanalyse* (1990). The lesser-known fact that Trondheim used to represent himself in human form before the first appearance of the iconic bird is significant as it leads to a reconsideration of the later representation of himself in "gros nez" style. Instead of building on Trondheim's own assertions and assuming that due to his artistic limitations, the author settled down to making a tribute to what he liked to read as a child, this study examines the cartoony self-representation as the result of a conscious choice.

6 Due to its contemplative nature, it is not an easy task to provide a fair summary of *Approximativement*'s plot: the book is a collection of six separate volumes originally published between May 1993 and November 1994, and reads like an accumulation of anecdotes and fragmentary accounts of conversations, internal soliloquies and dream-like sequences.

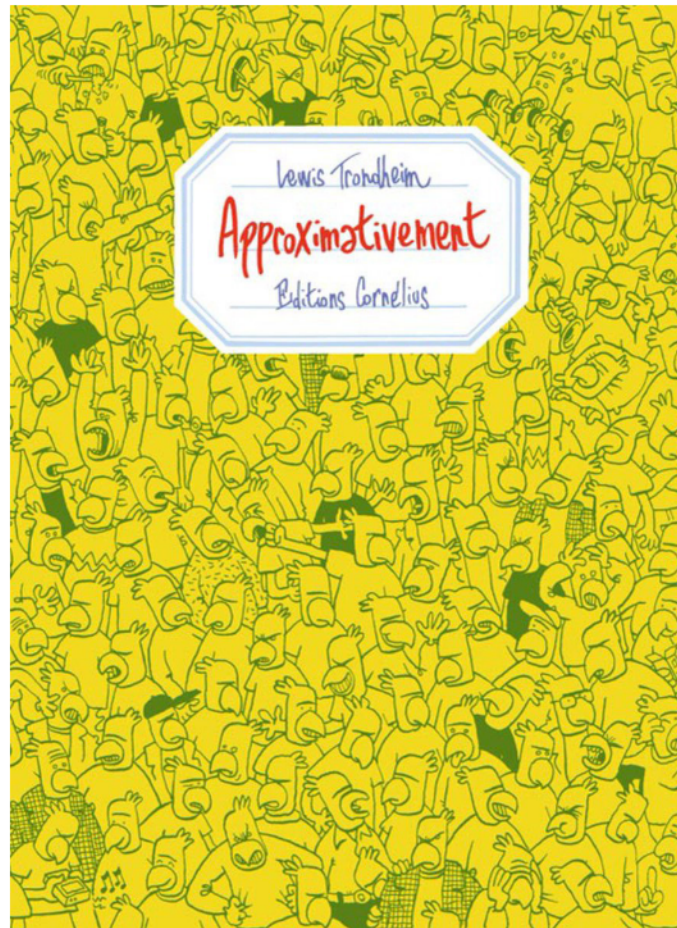


Fig. 3: “The 1995 cover of Trondheim’s *Approximativement*”  
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In a double portrait published in French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, the Bird is depicted at his drawing board, and the positioning of the sketch on the magazine’s page suggests that the Bird is frowning at the photograph of Laurent Chabosy that accompanies the drawing (*Les Inrockuptibles*, 1996: issue 45). The Bird’s frown suggests a prolonged gazing and a careful inspection of the photographic portrait, as much as it hints at the Bird’s critical stance towards it (fig. 2). Here, Trondheim alludes to the fact that the Bird is a more recognisable avatar than a photograph of himself. The question formulated in the speech balloon – “Beuh... où est-ce qu’ils ont été pêcher cette photo ? ... C’est pas du tout ressemblant ...” [“Eh... where on earth did they fish out this picture? It looks nothing like me!”] – suggests that the photograph does not seem to have any identifiable origin, in stark contrast with the drawing that shows the author’s signature and is further authenticated through the representation of the drawing board, a self-reference to its own making process. The photograph of Laurent Chabosy seems to operate here as a distorted mirror as it presents an image of the self that is eventually dismissed in favour of a more cartoony avatar, yet one deemed more accurate.

The avatar needs to be easily recognisable, so the reader can identify the protagonist as the author. Hence the seemingly unchanging iterations of the persona: a cartoon-like figure. The author converts himself into a character. The term “persona” etymologically refers to the mask and to the role that one plays in society. Moreover, the theatricality of the device stresses the performative aspect of the process, as the protagonist is depicted as taking on a role and playing a part. The protagonist is thus marked as an actor. Actors need a stage and this animalistic avatar lives in a world which has its own rules – as the permeability of dreams and numerous metalepses demonstrate –, yet is recognisable as our world. With the use of animal avatars,

the schematic depiction of the self enables quicker output, thus reducing the temporal gap. The resulting spontaneity allows for more dream-sequences and permeability of the unconscious into the conscious.

Is the protagonist hiding behind his avatar? Or is the avatar enabling further access to self-knowledge? The pedagogical aspect of the avatar allows for movements of introspection and self-analyses – a process further amplified by the very act of drawing the self which automatically involves its exteriorisation. The use of the avatar thus participates in a process in which the author turns outwards, “une mise hors de soi” that leads to a “mise à distance” of the self. This distance allows for self-observation. The use of the animalistic persona enables him to place his own body at a safe distance, while at the same time the animal-ness of the personae participates in the de-familiarisation of the human body.

The 1995 cover of *Approximativement* (fig. 3) challenges Lejeune’s concept of autobiography as referential which presupposes a unified identity as the referent, since instead of showing an individual, it is entirely covered with multiple versions of the Bird; they each illustrate a mood or a daily activity (such as brushing his teeth, playing video games, etc.). Whereas most of them are standing next to each other in gravity-defying postures, some of them are in conflict and one of them even punches another. The dark tops and grid-patterned



Fig. 4 : “Trondheim, Chiquenaude, 1996: 155”  
(with the kind permission of the author)

jackets affect the reader’s eye movements and add to the overall impression of disarray, while providing particular entry-points. They capture the reader’s attention, and as the reader focusses on these dark blocks that are arranged in an “S-path” – less common than the usual “Z-path” but still encouraging a left-to-right and down reading –, she or he can navigate more easily through the layout and notice more details. These



disordered, aggregated versions of the Bird are various personae, who will make an appearance in the book. It seemed at first that they all are a part of a whole, each representing an aspect of Trondheim's personality. The self is dissolved into multiplicities, with different personae being in charge one after the other.

Trondheim expresses some resistance to the un-changeability of the persona through the apparition of various figures that are not stable in time and which point to the fictionality of any identity-construct based on continuity. This could be approached as a "flottement identitaire", borrowing from Catherine Mao when she discusses graphic variations of Jean-Christophe Menu's self-portraits within the same page (Mao, 2013) – or as an affirmation of a certain conception of the self as multiple, an assemblage of different personae at different given moments. As suggested by a hundred of conflicting portraits of Trondheim on the cover, none predominates and their multiplicity restrains the quest for self-knowledge, which makes any attempt approximate.

Trondheim does not promise much more than a playful attempt at portraying and defining himself. It is nonetheless worth a try, as suggested by the design chosen in order to frame the title and the author's name on the 1998 re-edition cover. This design is reminiscent of the stickers that feature on the covers of primary school textbooks: "le cahier d'essais" contains drafts for other works and completed exercises. In French, "essai" literally means "attempt". The sticker thus metaphorically reframes Trondheim's life-writing practice as a formal experimentation about self-representation<sup>7</sup>. As the sticker features not only the title but also the author's pseudonym, it seems to indicate that the author is not only working at his first autobiographical book but also refining his author persona as he is working on who he is and what constitutes the self.

### Challenging "God"'s Author-ity:

How does Trondheim interrogate the construction of authorial identity? In *Chiquenaude*<sup>8</sup>, the Bird claims that the respective personalities of the characters from the Lapinot series are very different from his. However, the characters are all resting on hangers in the Bird's closet (fig. 4), which implies not only that the Bird owns them but also that they are costumes that he can wear à loisir. The characters are lifeless: Lapinot has crosses in place of his eyes, a visual symbol used to express that the character is either unconscious or dead, and Pierrot's goose neck is hanging lifeless along his torso, ironically contrasting with Trondheim's claim that showing the characters "va donner de la vie" ["will infuse life"] (1996: 155). The characters need their author to bring them to life. Although he creates them, he does not show them much respect, as he grabs Lapinot's ears – in a move which emphasises Lapinot's rabbit-likeness –, drags him to the floor and leaves him there while he gestures towards the other characters still hanging in the closet.

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7 Would this be an invitation for the reader to approach *Approximativement* as an OuBaPo work? "Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle", a movement founded by l'Atelier Nawak (which takes its name from French slang for "nonsense"), encourages formal experiments in comics in the vein of Raymond Queneau's OuLiPo. While OuBaPo comics (*Oupus* vol. 1-6, L'Association 1997-2015) were puzzles and games in the form of comics as well as playful parodies, the OuBaPo movement is important within the wider political landscape of comics as it influences experimentations about self-representation within constrained comics.

8 In 1996, Dargaud commissioned a supplement for the promotion of a Lapinot album entitled *Pichenettes*. The resulting *Chiquenaude* was incidentally made a year after the publication of *Approximate Continuum Comix* as a whole book entitled *Approximativement*, and became its short sequel when published in *Les Inrockuptibles* issue 45, as indicated by the pagination, before being revised and republished as the opening scene of *Les Formidables Aventures sans Lapinot: Les Aventures de l'Univers*.



Fig. 5 : "Trondheim, ACCI H3319, issue 12.5."  
 (with the kind permission of the author)

This scene bears certain similarities to the introduction of the characters in the printed version of a play, as the Bird lists his highly typed characters ("le héros", "le dragueur", "l'intello"...), their function and relationship. Therefore, the Bird appears to be an actor playing different parts. In *Approximativement*, expressions suggesting that the protagonist may be playing a part abound: "on n'aime pas les sales types mais on joue soi-même le rôle?" ["you don't like bad eggs but you take on that role yourself"], a hydra symbolising his guilty conscience taunts him (125). Although the Bird shows some reluctance about "jouer au gros con de touriste" ["playing the part of the tourist douchbag"] (134), he nonetheless embraces playing this part in the later four *Carnets de Bord*, which relate his adventures around the world as a reluctant traveller. However, he still shows some anxiety about the idea of taking other parts, as he fears he might "[faire] le râleur, l'angoissé ou l'hypocondriaque?" ["to play the part of the whinger, the anxiety sufferer, the hypochondriac"] (2002a: 45): the vocabulary is particularly significant as "faire le" is a depreciative expression for "playing a role", thus suggesting that the Bird is staged.



Fig. 6 : "Trondheim, Carnet de bord, 10-19 avril 2002 / 11 juin - 12 juillet 2002: 18"  
 (with the kind permission of the author)

The conception of the Bird as an actor may explain why his second appearance after *Approximate Continuum Comix* (1993-1994), was as a secondary character in the follow-up album of the *Formidables Aventures de Lapinot* series. In this book entitled *Blacktown* (1995), the Bird is the sheriff of the town, a figure of authority, or “author-ity”, who enforces the law and thus makes the characters respect the rules. Trondheim deliberately plays with the phonic similarity between “auteur” [“author”] and “autorité” [“authority”]. The noun “author” takes its origin from the medieval term “auctor”, which refers to one who is endowed with “auctoritas” [“authority”]. The fundamental quality of the medieval “auctor” is to guarantee an argument’s validity. Barthes builds on this etymology in order to define his concept of the “Author-God”, who not only has ownership rights over the text but also a certain authority over its interpretation, its “message” (Barthes, 1984: 64). Trondheim often depicts himself as an Author-God, only to see his authority questioned and challenged, in ways that recall Barthes’s notion of the death of the tyrannical author. After examining various depictions of Trondheim as an Author-God, this section will move on to discuss to what extent his “author-ity” is challenged.

In *Chiquenaude*, the characters that were hanging lifeless in the closet come to life in a panel taking liberties with the rules of depth perspective, as it shows an oversized Bird leaning on his elbows on the meadow, holding

a quill whose end brushes Richard's head (1996: 156) (fig. 4). Hence, it presents Trondheim as a demiurge. He is the Maker. In the last issue (number twelve and a half) of *ACCI H3319* (fig. 5), Trondheim appears as "God", who has the power of reshaping the world that surrounds him, as well as the characters inhabiting this world. The character, who would later be known as the main character of *Psychanalyse* (1990), asks his creator to make him appear as whole rather than cropped: "Dieu? [...] Je... je voudrais, si possible ne plus être partiel... je voudrais être en entier, que l'on me voit en entier..." ["God? [...] I ... I would like, if possible not to be cropped anymore ... I would like to be in full, to be fully visible]. This process puts emphasis on instantaneous result: all "God" has to do for changes to occur is to snap his fingers. Trondheim may be a maker, but the narrative here does not hint at his drawing process. Instead, it shows his power over the narrative as a framing process: the snap of fingers produces a reframing of the character within the grid in order to display the lower part of the body. The displacing of the frame reveals another set of details, thus suggesting some pre-existing reality, which implies and participates in the construction of the author as a mere transcriber of events.

The conception of the author as a God-like figure is further explored in *Carnet de bord Tome 3* (2002b: 18) (fig. 6): Trondheim as the Bird is floating in the air, which provides him with an ideally remote viewpoint as he observes a family scene and comments on it. This representation constructs the author as an omniscient theological figure, who requires withdrawal in order to carry through the autobiographical project.

*Galopinot* (2000) – a collaboration with Mattt Konture featuring Konture's Galopu and Trondheim's Lapinot bickering with the avatars of their respective authors – plays with the idea that the characters evolve on their own and that the authors only transcribe what becomes of them to the reader. On page 2, the characters state that they are free and that they are improvising as they go along. Their claims of freedom are reinforced visually as the panel is unframed. This panel is also used for the cover, which extends the implications of this selective statement to infer our reading of the whole book. The authors are shown as mere scribes, who most of the time struggle to keep up with the improvised adventures of their characters but are not shy passing judgement over their characters' actions.

Despite his God-like status, the Bird seems to struggle to make his characters respect his authority. Just as the cropped character made whole in *ACCI H3319*: issue 12.5 immediately complains about his absence of sexual organs, Lapinot rebels against his creator's authority. He confronts his author about his death in *Désœuvré* (2005) and regularly accuses him of abusing his power, such as in *Galopinot* (2000: 6): "J'ai deux mots à dire aux auteurs." ["I want to have a word with the authors."] As the adventures of Galopu and Lapinot do not quite meet the authors' expectations, Lapinot repeatedly offers his own suggestions for the next book: he expresses the wish to sleep over sixteen pages. It is an obvious reference to *Le Dormeur* (1993) and it suggests that Lapinot is not only aware of being a fictional character but also jealous of the treatment of other characters in other books by Trondheim. Lapinot acknowledges his author's responsibilities towards his fate, which somehow contradicts previous claims that the whole adventure was improvised.

Lapinot not only challenges Trondheim's narratorial decisions, but also questions his skills as an artist. In *Chiquenaude*, Lapinot expresses contempt over the landscape, which he finds over-simplistic, since the desert is suggested with random potato-shaped rocks and upright traits to symbolize grass. Moreover, Lapinot gestures towards the landscape and indicates that Trondheim has drawn that exact landscape on the same page. While the first occurrence of the setting seems a fitting representation of the inner desperation that

overwhelms the artist, who finds himself unable to express any idea worth mentioning, the second occurrence appears as evidence of laziness and Lapinot denigrates his maker's ability to draw: "quelle feignasse!" ["what a slacker!"] (1996: 156).

In this section we have seen that Trondheim deliberately interrogates the construction of authorial identity in various ways. His author persona is carefully crafted as a personal mythology. When he represents himself as an omniscient author in his most experimental texts, it is to play with the notion of authorial control over his art. Just as Barthes in "La Mort de l'auteur" dismantles the "Author-God" (1984), Trondheim dismantles the author's single authority by multiplying his avatars, thus withdrawing himself from his prominent position as sole authority on his texts. Moreover, when Trondheim uses 'the Bird', a seemingly constant, unchanging avatar across his fictional and autobiographical works, he instates the notion of authorial representation as a performative act of self-invention, which opens spaces for new forms of author-figures.

### **The soliptical depiction of the self as care of the self**

*Approximativement* and the autobiocomics that follow are characterised by the overwhelming presence of Trondheim's persona on panels – in 839 panels out of 973, as noted humorously by his fellow *bande dessinée* artist Jean-Yves (Duhoo) in *Approximativement*'s postface. This can be read as self-absorption or even self-obsession. Yet this overwhelming presence of the self in panels arguably results from Trondheim's exploration of possibilities of bettering himself as an individual. His attempts, failures and prospective successes constitute the subject matter of *Approximativement*. Their depiction can be explored by turning to Michel Foucault in his exploration of how the notion of a care of the self can extend beyond the individual's tendency to self-fascination.

Foucault identifies and discusses the care of the self in relation with specific moments in Ancient Greek and Roman thought and society. While the care of the self is not a transferrable practice, Foucault's study provides us with analytical tools to approach self-examination as a form of exercise that aims at self-crafting. Indeed, for Foucault, the care of the self means the concern for the self and encompasses the attention to and knowledge of the self but also activities, works and techniques that are collected and compiled as an inherent part of the process. Autobiocomics are a contemporary form of self-writing which emerges within a certain socio-historical moment in late capitalism and provides a response to that context. The technical and material framework of this enterprise is significant, and Trondheim is not only concerned with making his own life into an object for knowledge, but also with the form that his autobiographical recollections take on paper.

Among the tools identified for exercises of self-examination, *hypomnemata*<sup>9</sup>, for Foucault, consisted in a "matériel et un cadre pour des exercices à effectuer fréquemment: lire, relire, s'entretenir avec soi-même et avec d'autres" ["raw material and a framework for exercises to be performed frequently: reading, re-reading, conversing with oneself and with others"] (Foucault, 1994: 419). Foucault points out that the role of the *hypomnemata* was to collect the already-said, to reassemble that which has been heard or read (Foucault, 1994; 1999), and while Trondheim endeavours to do this in his work, he only promises to do so 'approximately'.

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning "note" or "reminder", the *hypomnemata* constituted a raw material memory of things read, heard, or thought, accumulated for rereading and later meditation, as a daily exercise of self knowledge (Foucault, 1994: 419).

His fragmentary recollection of the logos is a process that is hinted at in a conversation about selecting a town where he would settle with his wife and raise their children: “faire des recouplements de ce que chacun nous dit et on choisira après” [“cross-check what everyone tells us and then we’ll choose”] (33). Interestingly, this peek into the decision-making process is immediately followed by considerations on his graphic style and creative process. As the conversation moves on to a discussion about the previous scene and how it was depicted, Trondheim justifies his creative liberties: “J’en avais un vague souvenir et j’ai juste reconstruit selon les différentes directions qu’a pris la conversation” [“I had a vague memory of it and only built it around the different directions that the conversation took”] (1995: 33). As his interlocutor points out, “[c]’est comme ta façon de reconstruire les décors et les perspectives sans documentation.” [“it’s like your way of drawing backgrounds and perspective without any reference”] (33): this seems to be the overall approach that unifies Trondheim’s œuvre. The juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated observations suggests putting the two unrelated statements in relation and enlightening the latter with the former, revealing the method that shapes his creative process, his autobiographical practice and care of the self.

*Approximativement* features evocations of Trondheim’s work on the self not only as an artist, but also as an individual<sup>10</sup>; the relation between the two is suggested from the opening panel, and made explicit a few pages later: “pas d’exigence sur son travail, ça veut dire pas d’exigence sur soi-même” [“no self imposed requirement on your work means no requirement on yourself”] (1995: 5). Trondheim strives to apply this value to his own existence. On page five, as he acknowledges the need for making “des efforts sur moi-même” [to better myself], the text in the narrative boxes coincides with the time of the diegesis. It transcribes Trondheim’s inner monologue, his thought-process and reactions as events unfold – such as his anxieties about the image that he gives of himself when shaking the hand of Père Vincent on page 6.

When the text shows traces of narrative distance, it is for dressing a quick *bilan de fin de journée* and listing small resolutions for the following day. “Heureusement que cette journée s’achève, je tâcherai d’être de meilleur poil demain et de faire plein d’efforts.” [“Today is over, thankfully. I’ll try to be in a better mood tomorrow and to make a lot of efforts”] (1995: 8). Nevertheless, these short-term efforts from one day to the next are futile as his small resolutions are countered by his increasing difficulties in changing his behaviour (21). Making better use of his time than just playing numbing video games necessitates “un vrai effort sur moi-même” [“a serious effort to better myself”] (25). Trondheim laments: “je cherche juste à m’améliorer. // Et encore... Je cherche à reculons. // Juste ce qu’il faut pour ne pas devenir trop vite un vieux et gros con.” [“I am just trying to better myself. // Still... I’m barely trying // Just what it takes to slow down the process of becoming old, fat and stupid.”] (53) There is a subtle link here between the care of the mind and that of the body – *mens sana in corpore sano* – reasserted by the giant sandworm harassing him, repeatedly hurling “gros” as an insult, and asserting that neglecting the body is detrimental to the development of the mind (56). “C’est plus facile de se laisser aller que de se reprendre en main” [“it’s easier to let yourself go than to pull yourself together”] (54), Trondheim concludes. As he decides to work on himself, physically, by lifting weights once - he confesses “ça m’a pris d’un coup. J’ai fait 25 minutes de gym. J’ai bien sûr eu des courbatures pendant deux heures et je n’ai pas recommencé depuis” [“once, on a whim, I did gym exercises for 25 minutes. Of course,

10 In contrast, his later series *Les Petits Riens de Lewis Trondheim* (eight volumes published so far), while featuring the Bird, moves away from considerations on self-representation and self-transformation, and instead compiles daily observations with situational and verbal humour.

afterwards, I had aches and pains for two hours. I haven't done any since"] (48). Self-derision and humour are important aspects of Trondheim's work, with humour often masking other feelings such as anxiety.

Self-control seems to derive from self-imposed austerity practices: Trondheim contemplates – rather than imposes upon himself – a series of renunciations, interdictions and prohibitions. The temptations are great, as demonstrated in his inability to resist terrorising pigeons just one panel after he forbade himself from doing so (28). For Trondheim, resisting temptations inevitably implies some form of bargaining. Addressing his guilty conscience that took the form of a giant sandworm, Trondheim minimises the state of his current demeanour: “Je vous ferais remarquer que je me suis exprès dessiné un peu plus gros afin de culpabiliser tout seul” [“I’ll have you notice that I deliberately drew me a little fatter to make myself feel guilty”] (57). And in a rare but significant flashback sequence, Trondheim is shown taking risks as a child to get what he desires (52) with the erroneous belief that the higher the risks, the worthier he becomes of their possible rewards. He narrates his resulting conduct using a confessional tone. “Dégouté de moi” [“Appalled at myself”], he tries through *Approximativement* to come clean, revealing for the first time his misdeeds since “personne n’a jamais rien su” [“nobody ever found out”].

Trondheim's ‘renunciation of the self’ may be interpreted using Foucault's critique of Christian practices in *Surveiller et punir* (1975), and the later opposition that Foucault sets up between these and care of the self. Here, Trondheim enacts a care of the self via a self-writing which evokes a renunciation of the self only to forsake this via his comics production. As he puts his confession on paper, his atelier becomes a monastic cell. This seems to perfectly embody a form of care – based on parody – fitting to a contemporary moment in which the confessional has been recast as a form of affirmation of self-identity and validation. But the constitution and care of the self through the keeping of drawn notebooks is not an easy practice, and numerous pages (60, 77, 83 and 94) end with one last panel featuring Trondheim's anguish as he sits at his drawing board.

This is one example of the many instances in which Trondheim uses the syntax of comics in order to provide a visual counter-narrative against his textual claims. The last panel of page 26, captioned “Je suis un être abouti” [“I am an accomplished person”], features Trondheim walking down a corridor, with imaginary people applauding him, while Trondheim waves back at them. The bottom of the page often suggests the end of the sequence, and Trondheim cultivates this expectation by having the previous pages, from pages 16 to 25 all constructed as sequences running on one page each, and ending with a panel that has the narrative weight of a punch-line. This reading pattern in place for almost ten pages is unsettled by the first panel that opens page 27, a panel which not only continues the sequence that seemingly just ended but also contradicts it. “Et entre abouti et abruti, il n’y a qu’une lettre de différence” [“The French word for “accomplished” [“abouti”] is only one letter away from the word “fool” [“abruti”]”], the narrative box states, as the panel shows Trondheim with his arms raised, still smiling, yet the disparity between the blissful image and the statement in the narrative suggests that he froze on spot; the following panel confirms this interpretation, as it shows Trondheim has stopped smiling (27). *Lapinot et les carottes de Patagonie* was about him working on his narrative skills and improving as an artist. The fictional characters interact with his persona in *Approximativement* in order to help him improve as a person – and as an author, in a *double jeu* around the constructed self, where a confessional renunciation of the self is transformed into a care of the self.

## Conclusion

With his Bird avatar, the body image in Trondheim's works is less a reflection – or a forced choice due to artistic limitations, as he tries to suggest in the carefully constructed narrative of his own official biography – than a conscious choice underlining his agency as an individual. The body becomes the site of questioning self-identity and redefining the other, making the self other and becoming other. Trondheim's playful explorations of his body image participate in the de-familiarisation of the generic, universal “human”. By enacting alterity and playing the various roles of otherness, Trondheim experiments with the notion of alterity within identity, and through this very process, questions the very notion of interiority.

Trondheim's early autobiographical practice<sup>11</sup> oscillates between an examination of the self and an exploration of the creative possibilities of the comic form: it is through one that Trondheim achieves the other, yet there is no causal relation here but a movement between the two, one feeding the other in a back and forth movement. The processes of drawing himself and capturing his persona on paper work here as a technique of the self, and constitute attempts at understanding the significance of the resulting persona. But the process of knowing oneself through self-depiction is a non-linear process with editions and self-interruptions. Trondheim's enterprise is a formal *carcan*, a self-imposed frame, and his non-fictional output seems to be repetitions and variations of this exercise, resulting in different forms of the autobiographical practice in Trondheim's career. There is no grand discovery or epiphany moment. Self-knowledge is an on-going process, always revised and questioned, with no certainty and no definite answers. The form of *Approximativement* itself reflects upon this, as it ends with a spatial move, with the family moving out of Paris and to Montpellier, but with the protagonist no doubt taking his ongoing existential questioning with him.

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11 In contrast to the eight volumes of *Les Petits Riens*, in which he re-proposes his Bird avatar with further narrative and ontological implications, which would require further studies.



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