From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels

# From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels

Contributions to the Theory
and History of Graphic Narrative

2nd edition

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# Introduction: From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels

## Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory

The story of narratology has been told and retold countless times in the past five decades, so that it seems neither necessary nor desirable to attempt another detailed retelling of the events that have led from the publication of the eighth issue of *Communication* in 1966 and the first works of classical narratology within French structuralism to the current prominence of postclassical 'new narratologies' with widely different epistemological and methodological orientations.[1] In order to situate the present volume within the field of current narratological practice, however, it will still be helpful to introduce what may be considered the three "dominant methodological paradigms of contemporary narratology" (Meister 2009: 340). The first of these paradigms, contextualist narratology, "relates the phenomena encountered in narrative to specific cultural, historical, thematic, and ideological contexts" (Meister 2009: 340). The second paradigm, cognitive narratology, "focuses on the human intellectual and emotional processing of narrative" (Meister 2009: 340). The third paradigm, "transgeneric" and "intermedial approaches" (Meister 2009: 340), includes not only research on the *trans*medial dimensions of narrative, but also a variety of *inter*medial and *intra*medial studies primarily concerned with a single medium or genre other than the literary text, such as poetry, drama, painting, film, computer games, or, indeed, comics.[2] Narratological practices aimed at comics and other forms of graphic narrative evidently belong to the third methodological paradigm identified by Meister, and recent scholarship by comics theorists such as Karin Kukkonen (2011), Kai Mikkonen (2011, 2012), and Martin Schüwer (2008) even suggests that the field of graphic narrative offers a particularly promising 'test case' for the project of a 'transmedial narratology.'[3]

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1   See e.g., the surveys by Nünning 2003; Fludernik 2005; Meister 2009.
2   On the relations between (intra)mediality, intermediality, and transmediality, see e.g., Wolf 2002; Rajewsky 2010; Thon 2014a.
3   See e.g., Herman 2004, 2009; Ryan 2004, 2005, 2006; Wolf 2005, 2011; Thon 2014c, 2014d for more general discussions of the aims and scope of a transmedial narratology.

While current literary and media studies tend to use 'transmedial narratology' as an umbrella term for a variety of narratological practices concerned with media other than literary texts, a genuinely transmedial narratology should not merely aspire to be a collection of medium-specific narratological models but, rather, should examine a variety of transmedial phenomena across a range of conventionally distinct narrative media.[4] One way or another, though, in order to remain 'media-conscious,' such a transmedial narratology would still have to acknowledge both similarities and differences in the ways in which conventionally distinct media such as literary texts, films, or comics narrate.[5] Moreover, it should be noted that current narratological practice tends to be methodologically inclusive insofar as exploring narrative representations 'beyond the literary text' often goes hand in hand with a particular attention to narrative's cultural and historical contexts as well as a concern for the cognitive processes involved in making narrative meaning.[6]

Likewise, narratology is, of course, not the only possible approach to the study of graphic narrative. Indeed, anyone trying to map the burgeoning field of comics studies will quickly realize that there is no dearth of theories and methods on which scholars may draw.[7] The panoply of available approaches includes various types of formal analysis; both media-conscious and transmediality-oriented research; historical, political, and cultural investigations; economic examinations; philosophical inquiries; as well as semiotic and psycho-semiotic perspectives; not to mention the genre- and format-based work done by many scholars.[8] Yet as Jared Gardner and David Herman write in their introduction to a recent special issue of *SubStance*, we can detect "emerging connections between comics studies and narrative theory" that may eventually converge into a "new, hybridized field of study" (2011b: 3). Gardner and Herman christen this field-to-be 'graphic narrative theory,' and the aim of the present volume is to explore new ways of thinking about the narrativity of comics from this theoretically as well as methodologically refined vantage point.

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4    See Wolf 2002; Rajewsky 2010; Thon 2014a on 'conventionally distinct media.' See also Ryan 2009, 2014 for a discussion of media's narrative limitations and affordances.

5    See Ryan and Thon 2014 for the notion of a 'media-conscious' narratology. See also Thon 2014c, 2014d for a more detailed version of this argument.

6    See e.g., the contributions in Kindt and Müller 2003; Meister 2005; Olson 2011.

7    For useful surveys, see e.g., the contributions in Heer and Worcester 2009; Eder, Klar and Reichert 2011; Smith and Duncan 2012.

8    To name only a few pertinent studies of a corpus of secondary literature that is much too vast to be referenced in anything resembling its entirety here, see Carrier 2000; Hein, Hüners, and Michaelsen 2002; McLaughlin 2005; Packard 2006; Groensteen 2007, 2013; Schüwer 2008; Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein 2009; Duncan and Smith 2009; Chute 2010; Gabilliet 2010; Chaney 2011; Beaty 2012; Gardner 2012; Meskin and Cook 2012; Pustz 2012.

The emergence of graphic narrative theory, Gardner and Herman suggest, is the result of "disciplinary reconfiguration[s]" (2011b: 3) in narratology and in comics studies. These reconfigurations attest to an increasing interest among postclassical narratologists in a broadened textual and medial corpus that includes various types of graphic narrative as well as a growing concern among comics scholars for theoretically and methodologically advanced assessments of the narrative properties and specific medialities of graphic narrative. The present volume is both a reflection of, and a tribute to, this convergence, and it is intended to further the cross-pollination of narratology and comics studies. And just as graphic narrative theory should not only position itself within the field of transmedial narratology but also within the fields of contextualist and cognitive narratology, we would argue that, in order for this cross-pollination to have its full effect, the relation between comics studies and narratology should not be conceptualized as overly exclusive, either.

As Gardner and Herman further note, comics scholarship has too long been hampered by "a defensive relationship to the academy at large" (2011b: 6). This defensiveness, they maintain, has its roots in the generally low cultural esteem of comics and the lack of scholarly interest that has characterized the academic reception of this historically maligned medium roughly until the 1990s.[9] The most effective efforts to overcome this niche status, Gardner and Herman propose, have been characterized by "alliances forged with related [research] fields [such as] autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, etc." (2011b: 6). But some of these alliances have endorsed a medially unspecific and narratologically questionable literary approach to graphic narrative. This is why Gardner and Herman "believe that of all the alliances forged with related fields in recent years, the most profitable for comics studies will be that of narrative theory, a field increasingly invested in foregrounding and theorizing the differences that medium-specificity (and multimodality) makes to storytelling" (2011b: 6).[10] While current work in narratology offers significant theoretical and methodological reflections, then, it is

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9  Ecke 2010 speaks of "Comics Studies' Identity Crisis," while Groensteen 2000 asked more than a decade ago: "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" Cf. also Hatfield: "Academic comics study, not exactly a new but certainly a newly self-conscious field, has been particularly notable for this sort of anxious throat-clearing about how to define its object" (2009: 19). For early, and mostly semiotic and structuralist approaches, see Eco 2004 [1962]; Faust 1971; Harvey 1979, 1994; Abbott 1986. For early German studies, see Fuchs and Reitberger 1971; Hünig 1974; Krafft 1974; an early French example is Rey 1978.

10  Important work in the field of graphic narrative theory beyond Gardner and Herman 2011a includes Ditschke and Anhut 2009; Horstkotte and Pedri 2011; Mikkonen 2011, 2012; as well as many of the essays published in *Image [&] Narrative*, e.g., Lefèvre 2000; Baetens 2003.

worth stressing that the emerging field of comics narratology will also benefit from forging further interdisciplinary alliances of its own.[11]

<p style="text-align:center">From Comics to Graphic Novels:<br>Theoretical and Historical Conceptualizations</p>

While we largely agree with Gardner and Herman's assessment of the converging fields of comics studies and narratology as well as with their identification of the challenges facing graphic narrative theory, we want to formulate a series of critical reflections that will foreground the rationale behind, and aims of, the present volume. For one, Gardner and Herman champion 'graphic narrative' in favor of other possible terms, among them the more conventional and more widely embraced 'comics,' without offering much of an explanation for this choice. Of course, rebranding comics as 'graphic narratives' makes particular sense when the focus is on the storytelling mechanisms—and thus: the narrativity—of comics and when the task is to trace the "stylistic specificities of graphic storytelling" as a means of "confront[ing] the verbal bias of foundational work" (Gardner and Herman 2011b: 6) in narratology. But we would argue that existing definitions of 'graphic narrative' tend to be rather fuzzy and geared toward the specific research interests of individual scholars. A few terminological clarifications are therefore in order.

In a U.S.-American context, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven have defined graphic narrative "as narrative work in the medium of comics" (2006: 767) in their introduction to the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, which first brought the term to a wider scholarly audience. Two years later, Chute suggested that "graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics" (2008: 453) and that the term was able to include nonfictional works in ways that the term 'graphic novel' was not. From a narratological standpoint, however, these definitions seem somewhat problematic. If we can agree that comics prototypically include sequences of panels (unless we are talking about single-panel cartoons) and that they usually combine images with words (unless we are thinking of special cases such as wordless comics), then their narrativity should be

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11    Jenkins advocates "radically undisciplined" (2012: 6) approaches to the study of comics that poach their shifting tools and vocabulary wherever they appear useful; Hatfield imagines comics as an "antidisciplinary [...] phenomenon, nudging us usefully out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas where various disciplines [...] overlap and inform one another" (2009: 23). See also Kukkonen and Haberkorn's 2012 proposal for a 'comics studies toolbox.' Suggestions for cross-fertilizations among comics studies and American studies perspectives that seek to foster a mutually beneficial dialogue between these fields of research can be found in Stein, Meyer, and Edlich 2011.

largely self-evident. Moreover, story-length does not qualify as a necessary or sufficient condition for determining a work's narrativity; in fact, one could feasibly argue that even single-panel comics narrate.[12]

Despite these caveats, the terms 'comic' and 'graphic narrative' are frequently used synonymously. Such usage, however, marginalizes salient historical, formal, and cultural differences. Therefore, we propose a historical distinction that locates the beginnings of comics either in the early 1830s, when Rodolphe Töpffer created his *histoiries en estampes*, or in the 1890s and 1900s, when American newspaper cartoonists such as Richard Felton Outcault developed Sunday pages and later daily strips. According to this distinction, artifacts such as ancient cave paintings, the Bayeux tapestry, or stained-glass church windows may be older forms of graphic narrative, but they are historically and culturally distinct from the modern kinds of comics storytelling developed by Töpffer, Outcault, and other artists. Second, we would argue that there is a formal distinction to be made here. When we speak of comics, we generally expect at least some of the following narrative properties, none of which needs to be present in works we would call graphic narratives: sequential storytelling, gutters separating framed panels, direct speech represented in balloons, with additional conventions such as motion lines, thought bubbles, and much more. Third, the term 'comics' is culturally specific as its discursive origins are Anglo-American, and many narrative theories and historical accounts that center on comics also tend to be America-centric. The term 'graphic narrative,' on the contrary, is much more inclusive. Indeed, it is capable of encompassing different forms, formats, genres, and storytelling traditions across cultures and from around the world.[13]

Furthermore, we remain skeptical of approaches that suggest that narrativity does not necessarily represent a constitutive element of comics. Aaron Meskin, for instance, claims that the existence of what he calls "nonnarrative comics" (2007: 372) throws any narrative-based definition into question.[14] This claim, however, rests on a reductive understanding of

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12  We are also wary of the linguistic lexicon within which Chute and DeKoven and many other comics scholars frame their arguments when they speak of "comics grammar" (Chute 2008: 454) and graphic narrative as an "intricately layered narrative language" (Chute and DeKoven 2006: 767). This is not to say, however, that the authors are not aware of the cross-discursivity and the significance of comics as a hybrid visual-verbal medium (cf. Chute and DeKoven 2006: 768, 769).

13  See e.g., Duncan and Smith 2009; for international and transnational studies, see Berninger, Ecke, and Haberkorn 2010; Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013.

14  One example in this context is provided by the kind of abstract, or non-representational, comics collected in Molotiu 2009. Then again, recent developments toward an 'unnatural narratology' focus precisely on these kinds of 'non-mimetic' or even 'anti-mimetic' forms of narrative. See the general discussion of 'unnatural narratology' in Alber 2009; Alber et al. 2010; Richardson 2011; as well as Fehrle 2011 for a discussion of 'unnaturalness' in comics.

narrative, which becomes apparent when Meskin argues that a "sequence of juxtaposed pictures" does not *per se* establish a narrative but could be related by being "thematic or character based" (2007: 372). After all, even thematic or character-based connections among image sequences may create simple forms of narrative; following a character from one image to another easily produces the impression of causal or temporal relations that will constitute something akin to a very rudimentary plot, and thus narrative.[15] At the very least, then, Meskin underestimates the reader, whose role in the reception of graphic narratives is especially prominent because she must translate sequential images into a continuous narrative by imaginatively filling in the gutters between panels and by negotiating the complex interaction of pictorial and verbal information on the page.[16] Thus, juxtaposed pictures are always narrativized in the process of reception,[17] and they are routinely accompanied by paratextual and contextual clues that communicate to the reader that she is reading a comic (e.g., the funnies section in the newspaper, the attribution of a work to a creator whose name readers may recognize, the market niche of a particular publisher, etc.).[18]

These and other attempts at defining, or perhaps un-defining, comics and graphic narratives necessitate the further clarification of terms and concepts such as medium, format, and genre, and they call on scholars to specify crucial distinctions among aesthetic, formal, and narratological approaches.[19] Chute, for instance, conceives of comics as a medium determined by its visual-verbal hybridity and its spatial construction of time; she further discriminates among different comics formats, such as comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, and different genres, such as superhero stories or nonfictional reportage and historical accounts.[20] Finally, she underscores the significance of publication schedules and

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15   For a more detailed general discussion of narrativity and prototypical features of narratives as a gradable quality, see e.g., Jannidis 2003; Wolf 2003; Ryan 2006: 3–30; Thon 2014b. See also Ryan's distinction between "having narrativity" and "being a narrative" (2006: 11).

16   See e.g., Hatfield 2005; Herman 2010; Kukkonen 2013. The role of the reader in comics and the narrativity of pictorial sequences is also eloquently assessed in Gardner 2010, 2012.

17   For further discussion of the notion of 'narrativization' see e.g., Fludernik 1996; Wolf 2003. See also the discussion of different kinds of relations between panels in e.g., Peeters 1991; McCloud 1993; Saraceni 2003; Packard 2006; Groensteen 2007; Schüwer 2008.

18   Meskin further proposes that comics do not necessarily have to be pictorial, pointing to the possibility of nonpictorial comics that "are blank except for speech balloons and captions" (2007: 374; see also Cook 2011). Here, Meskin downplays the fact that speech balloons and other kinds of text are always also a representation, and not just a presentation.

19   See also Cohn 2005.

20   Cf. Chute 2008: 452–54. On comics as a medium, see also McCloud 1993; Packard 2006; on comics as a popular medium, see Heer and Worcester 2004; Stein, Ditschke, and Kroucheva 2009.

materiality when she mentions "serial forms and contexts from weekly or daily strips to monthly comic books" and refers to "the comics page itself [a]s a material register of seriality" (2008: 453–54). In that sense, the development of graphic narrative has been, and continues to be, intricately tied to the physical media through which individual forms of graphic storytelling have emerged as prominent cultural artifacts and practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[21]

Francophone, German, and other non-English research traditions have their own vexed terminological controversies. In Germany, the label *Comics* still carries negative connotations as it is mostly associated with earlier academic and non-academic discourses of trivial literature and children's entertainment. Scholars like Schüwer (2008) therefore use the designation *grafische Literatur* (graphic literature), capturing the multimodality (or intermediality) of comics storytelling but implicitly sanctioning a literary approach to comics that seems less desirable than a more general terminological choice such as 'graphic narrative,' which primarily emphasizes their status as a form of multimodal narrative.[22] In the Francophone discourse, *bande dessinée* seems less controversial, but even here, the term is employed to cover works published in French-speaking countries (French, Belgian, French-Canadian, and so forth) but also functions as a generic term to describe any kind of graphic narrative. In that sense, it is similar to the Anglo-American term 'comics': It tends to privilege a specific national and linguistic perspective on an inherently transnational and multilingual form of multimodal narrative.[23]

In the present volume, we retain the historically resonant and culturally specific terms 'comic strip' and 'graphic novel' while also subscribing to the more general notion of 'graphic narrative,' signaling both the aim of developing a comics narratology (or graphic narrative theory) and an awareness of the transcultural and transnational varieties of graphic storytelling from different American comics formats to Francophone *bande dessinée*, Italian *fumetti*, German *Bildergeschichten* or *grafische Literatur*, Asian *manga, manhua*, or *manhwa*, and the whole panoply of globally dispersed types of graphic narratives routinely discussed in the

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21  On storytelling in comics and graphic narratives as a cultural practice, see also Kelleter and Stein 2009, 2012.

22  On the multimodality of comics, see Herman 2010, who also reviews some of the existing literature on multimodality within linguistics and social semiotics, of which the works by Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010 are among the most well-known.

23  See, for instance, Peeters 1991; Groensteen 2007; Miller 2007; Grove 2010; for a study of European comic books, see Beaty 2007; on *bande dessinées* in Quebec, see Hardy-Vallée 2010.

pages of John A. Lent's *International Journal of Comic Art* (1999–).[24]
Moreover, we refrain from placing graphic narrative into any set categories
of art or entertainment, highbrow or lowbrow, elite culture or popular
culture, because we perceive it as a narrative form that can be found
across cultural spheres and national borders, performing different
narrative functions in a variety of socio-economic contexts.[25] While any
attempt to exhaust the breadth of this continuously expanding field would
be foolhardy, the contributions to the present volume will examine some
of the more salient contexts and their effects on specific *narrative*
affordances and limitations, conventions and innovations.


## Survey of the Contributions


The volume is divided into four parts that proceed from the examination
of fundamental narratological concepts as they apply to different kinds of
graphic narrative (Part I) and aspects of the medium that extend beyond
the 'single work' (Part II) to format and genre-oriented (Part III) and
cross-cultural investigation (Part IV). The chapters collected in these four
parts combine (albeit to different degrees and with different goals) an
interest in narrative theory and a commitment to historical perspectives
that account for the evolution of particular narrative strategies, individual
works, genres, formats, and cultural traditions of graphic storytelling. This
historically-minded type of graphic narrative theory distinguishes the
present volume from previous essay collections and special issues. In
making the case for a medium-specific 'comics narratology,' the essays
collected here also aim to contribute to the project of bringing
narratological theory into conversation with the formal and historical
research that has shaped the bulk of comics studies. Thus, we propose
that our understanding of what it means (or should mean) to study
graphic narrative needs to be broad enough to include narratological
reflection focusing on conceptual, theoretical, and methodological
questions as well as historically, culturally, and medially specific analyses.

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24   For transnational perspectives on graphic narratives, see Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013;
     on the global spread of manga, see Johnson-Woods 2009; Berndt 2010, 2011, 2012; Berndt
     and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013.

25   Some scholars associate comics with discourses of art (which is reflected in terms such as
     'comic art,' 'graphic art,' or 'sequential art'), while others conceive of comics as a 'medium.'
     For different approaches, see Eisner 1985; Abbott 1986; Harvey 1994; McCloud 1993;
     Sabin 1996; Stein, Ditschke, and Kroucheva 2009. Eisner 1996 uses the phrases "graphic
     storytelling and visual narrative." In France, comics have been labeled the *9th art* (*neuvième
     art*) by critics such as Francis Lacassin (1971), while the *locus classicus* of American comics
     criticism, Gilbert Seldes's *The 7 Lively Arts* (2001 [1924]), discusses them as a popular art.

The chapters in the first part are mainly concerned with how, to what extent, and with which aims in mind fundamental narratological concepts such as story/discourse, storyworld, narrator, or focalization can be applied to different kinds of graphic narrative. Accordingly, Silke Horstkotte's "Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds" examines the strategies that allow graphic narratives to represent 'graphic storyworlds.' Combining theoretical and terminological reflections on the forms and functions of panels, frames, gutters, and page layouts with detailed analyses of well-known graphic novels such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, and Charles Burns's *Black Hole*, Horstkotte demonstrates that trying to explain the meaning making processes involved in 'reading' graphic narrative by way of some kind of comics-specific 'grammar' or 'language' tends to be misleading, as it often over-emphasizes the sequentiality of the reading processes. Rather, as Horstkotte argues, "the linear sequence is only one of many possible ways of organizing visual information in comics," and comics scholars would be well advised to take these different dimensions of meaning making into account.

While Horstkotte examines graphic narrative from a neo-formalist perspective that emphasizes the 'discourse' side of the traditional 'story/discourse'-distinction, Karin Kukkonen's "Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: An Embodied Approach" turns its attention toward the 'story,' or rather the 'storyworld,' that readers of graphic narrative (re)construct in the process of reading. Taking the kind of 'embodied approach' to cognition that has gained traction in cognitive narratology over the last decade, Kukkonen analyzes the ways in which readers reconstruct the space, time, and causality of the dream-like storyworld(s) represented in Winsor McCay's *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* before evaluating the metaphor of transport that is commonly used to describe the process of 'immersive' reading. Against this broader background, Kukkonen examines the role not only of 'embodied simulation' for 'cognitive' as well as 'emotional transport' but also emphasizes that "[t]he actual space of the page turns out to be just as much an arena of embodiment and readerly transportation as the storyspace represented in the panels."

Following Horstkotte's and Kukkonen's discussions of medium-specific strategies such as panels, frames, and gutters and the cognitive processes involved in the reconstruction of a storyworld's space, time, and causality, Jan-Noël Thon's "Who's Telling the Tale? Authors and Narrators in Graphic Narrative" examines contemporary graphic novels from a more traditionally narratological perspective. Arguing that narrators in

graphic narratives are best understood as more or less explicitly represented characters, Thon analyzes various prototypical forms of narrators in contemporary graphic novels such as Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series, and Craig Thompson's *Habibi*. Furthermore, Thon distinguishes between narratorial representation as (usually fictional) verbal narration that can be attributed to narrating characters, authorial representation as (usually nonfictional) verbal narration that can be attributed to authoring characters, and non-narratorial verbal-pictorial representation that can be attributed either to authoring characters or to what he calls hypothetical author collectives, but usually cannot be attributed to narrators-as-narrating characters.

If Thon's discussion of authors and narrators in graphic narrative addresses one of the two core areas of a post-Genettean 'discourse narratology' embodied in the canonical questions 'Who sees?' (or 'Who perceives?') and 'Who speaks?' (or 'Who narrates?'), Kai Mikkonen's "Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives" covers the other. Emphasizing that "[t]he question of subjectivity in graphic narratives is vast" since it can relate to the subjectivities of (real or hypothetical) authors as well as to (narrating or non-narrating) characters, Mikkonen primarily focuses on particular characters' subjectivities and their graphic representation. After a brief review of the notoriously thorny terminological thicket that surrounds narratological terms such as 'perspective,' 'point of view,' and 'focalization' (the latter of which he distinguishes from 'ocularization' and 'auricularization' *sensu* Jost), Mikkonen uses graphic narratives as different as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Fransesco Tullio Altan's *Ada* series, Lewis Trondheim and Matthieu Bonhomme's *Omni-visibilis*, Tommi Musturi's *Walking with Samuel*, and Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* to examine the graphic representation of subjectivity as it relates to issues of 'graphic style' and 'mind style.'

The chapters in the second part address various textual, paratextual, and contextual dimensions of graphic narrative beyond the 'single work': nonfictional narrative(s), seriality, intermediality, and transmedia storytelling. Nancy Pedri's "Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact Nor Fiction" examines complex forms of nonfictional representation in 'graphic memoirs' such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*, and David B.'s *Epileptic*. Building on philosophical theories of fiction as well as on theories of autobiography from literary criticism, Pedri shows that while graphic memoir is no less bound by the 'fidelity constraint' than literary autobiography, more recent works tend to be particularly self-reflexive and employ metafictional strategies in order to deconstruct problematic

notions of reliable memory and stable identity. Moreover, Pedri argues that the specific mediality of graphic memoirs may create 'as-if effects' by stressing the mediated nature of both the verbal and the pictorial elements of the representation. According to Pedri, "much can be said to weaken claims that fictionality is inherent to the medium of comics," then, but graphic memoirs still present "complex reading demands born from complementing the fidelity constraint with more general interests in storytelling."

As Daniel Stein argues in "Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext," the serial publication and reception of superhero comic books has generated genre-shaping authorization conflicts among producers and consumers that find their most consequential expression in the letters pages and fanzines surrounding popular characters. Accordingly, Stein reconstructs the history of paratextually negotiated authorial fictions and author functions in American superhero comics from the 1940s to the 1960s, offering extended close readings of *Batman* letter columns and fanzines as well as suggesting that the diversification and increasing narrative complexity of the *Batman* storyworld can be traced back to the authorizing powers of such comic book paratexts. Long-running popular series, Stein proposes, demand mechanisms through which their inherent drive toward proliferation and their tendency toward narrative sprawl are managed, and paratextual negotiations have historically been a particularly effective means of serial complexity management.

While the contributions by Pedri and Stein are, each in their own way, concerned with specific textual, paratextual, and contextual manifestations of graphic narrative, Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter's "Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative" is the first contribution in the present volume to explicitly transgress not only the boundaries of individual works but also the boundaries of comics as a medium. Referring to a variety of different examples from Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* to Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, Rippl and Etter not only distinguish between word specific combinations, alternating combinations, montage, parallel combinations, and picture specific combinations as five prototypical forms of word-image combinations that define the mediality of graphic narrative through what can be described as media combinations on a fairly basic level. They also use the concepts of 'intermediality' and 'transmediality' to illuminate graphic narrative's position within the broader media landscape and assess the promises of a comics narratology specifically dedicated to graphic narrative within the more encompassing field of transmedial narratology.

The final chapter in the second part of the volume, Greg M. Smith's "Comics in the Intersecting Histories of the Window, the Frame, and the Panel," is likewise concerned with the interrelation between media, in particular comics and film. Noting that "both audiovisual and graphic narrative have engaged in considerable interaction," Smith traces the 'traveling concepts' of windows, frames, and panels throughout the precursors of contemporary multimodal storytelling. After a *tour de force* that leads him from Renaissance painting to the camera obscura, from photography to early cinema, and from early cinema to computer games, Smith arrives at a discussion of the panel's many forms and functions in graphic narrative. As he suggests, "[a]lthough comics images themselves are static, their component lines capture a kind of movement, with the artist's hand movement across the panels guiding how the reader's eye traverses the page." Despite certain similarities between comics and film (as well as other potentially narrative media such as computer games), then, a historically informed perspective illuminates the differences between these media, as well, allowing us to better understand the ways in which windows, frames, and panels are used in graphic narrative.

The third part of the present volume introduces some of the most important formats of graphic narrative from both a historical and a narratological perspective: comic strips, albums, and graphic novels. It begins with Jared Gardner's "A History of the Narrative Comic Strip," which traces the narrative development of the American newspaper comic strip from its inception to the present day. Gardner focuses especially on changes from single-panel cartoons to sequentially structured newspaper comic strips, which quickly led to ongoing serial narratives with extended plotlines and recurring characters, and the development of new styles and genres. Ingrained in Gardner's argument is the idea that the narrative properties of the American comic strip are the result of a long historical process during which cartoonists have developed and refined their narrative apparatus as they have been creating ever new stories within increasingly detailed serial storyworlds. The daily need for new material and the cartoonists' creative solutions to the endless demand for commercially attractive forms of serial storytelling thus contributed to the creation of new formats of graphic narrative and new ways of verbal-pictorial storytelling. While Gardner does not engage in any extended transmedial analysis *per se*, he maintains that the narrative evolution of the comic strip in the United States has been driven by various forms of media competition and by the existence of a larger, and evolving, media ecology, including film, radio, comic books, and television.

Gardner's analysis of the American comic strip, its narrative evolution, and its embeddedness in specific production contexts is followed by Pascal Lefèvre's historical reconstruction of the narrative peculiarities stemming from the Flemish dual publication system, "Narration in the Flemish Dual Publication System: The Crossover Genre of the Humoristic Adventure." This system is in some ways similar to the American system of publishing daily strips and Sunday pages, but it is also quite different because it produces daily strips with the specific purpose of a later release as an album. Lefèvre argues that the two intersecting publication formats in Flanders have shaped their own "aesthetic system with a set of norms that offer[ed] a bounded set of alternatives to the individual creators of comics." As his detailed analysis of *Suske en Wiske* strips from the 1950s and 1960s shows, the Flemish dual publication system did not just determine the length of individual stories, the number of panels available to the artists, and the overwhelming linearity of plot constructions, but it also facilitated the emergence of a new crossover genre, the humoristic adventure story.

The European format of the comic album has often been perceived as a precursor to, or relative of, the American graphic novel format. In "Un/Taming the Beast, or Graphic Novels (Re)Considered," Christina Meyer zooms in on the terminological controversies surrounding the 'graphic novel' label. Focusing on what she calls the narrativity of comics and its impact on, and self-reflexive realization in, the creator-driven American series *The Unwritten* by Mike Carey and Peter Gross, Meyer examines 'patterns of narrative' and 'generic promptings' ranging from intertextual references to paratextual cues that continually challenge the postmodern reader by pointing back to the rich history of the comics medium and the American comics industry. Contemporary series such as *The Unwritten*, Meyer argues, display a strong awareness of their own role and position within the genre histories and storytelling modes of, as well as public debates about, American comics, and they develop and display their very own understanding of what a graphic novel might be and which narrative tools it may deploy to tell stories.

Henry Jenkins's "Archival, Ephemeral, and Residual: The Functions of Early Comics in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*" connects Gardner's focus on the American comic strip with Meyer's treatment of the graphic novel format. Singling out Spiegelman's critically acclaimed and purposely fragmentary response to 9/11, Jenkins investigates "the ways old icons transmit old values into the present, representing the locus of conflicting claims and bids on legacy and tradition (archive), offering vehicles for expressing autobiographical and collective memories (ephemera), and embodying old ideologies which still exert a claim on our

current thinking (the residual)." Jenkins's analysis serves as a reminder that narrative and history are inseparably intertwined: that graphic novels frequently graft historical meanings onto objects (or 'stuff') and, in turn, derive some of their narrative meaning from them. In light of the resulting interrelations, any adequately informed and culturally sensitive analysis of such narratives will be well advised to combine narratological approaches with a historical, material, and media-sensitive perspective on meaning making processes.

The contributions in the fourth and final part of this volume trace the breadth of graphic narratives across cultures by reflecting on historically influential traditions of graphic storytelling. All of the chapters in this part display an awareness of the fact that any simplistic assumptions of distinctive national lineages of graphic storytelling are not only becoming increasingly problematic in the age of multinational corporations and the global dispersal of narratives but have always been grossly reductive. Accordingly, in "Anglo-American Graphic Narrative," Julia Round discusses the most influential transatlantic narrative convergences in recent superhero comic books that have largely evolved from the so-called British invasion of the American comics industry by prominent writers like Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and Warren Ellis since the 1980s. These convergences, Round explains, were prepared by the parallel histories of American and British comics, including censorship campaigns in both countries, and they derive much of their innovative potential from metafictional and postmodern engagements with the possibilities and limits of comics storytelling: experiments with narrative voices, alterities, and different modes of audience address, as well as self-reflexive interrogations of comics' most basic narrative strategies.

If Round traces the narratological implications of the recent transatlantic reformulation of the comic book superhero, Jan Baetens and Steven Surdiacourt examine the *longue durée* of European graphic narratives. As their chapter title "European Graphic Narratives: Toward a Cultural and Mediological History" indicates, they pursue a cultural approach that opens up narratological questions to "historical contexts and the social stakes of storytelling," and they propose a connected mediological perspective that ties changes in the production and reception of graphic narratives to various kinds of media transformations. Baetens and Surdiacourt stress "the correlation between the evolution of visual storytelling and a wide range of technological and communicational innovations" such as nineteenth-century engraving and printed magazine publication as well as twentieth-century strip serialization, album production, and web-based stories. Their reading of European graphic narratives from Rodolphe Töpffer and Wilhelm Busch to Hergé and the

L'Association publishing cooperative challenges traditional approaches to graphic narrative theory, treating these works not "as isolated and independent genres or media, but as parts of continually reconfigured media networks or dynamic cultural series."

In the wide world of contemporary graphic narrative, manga easily outsell any other type of comics. Today's manga include Japanese and other Asian productions as well as European and American stylistic and narrative adaptations. As Jaqueline Berndt argues in "Ghostly: 'Asian Graphic Narratives,' *Nonnonba*, and Manga," conventional views of Asian graphic narratives tend to falsely homogenize an inherently diverse field of cultural production and imagine manga as a representative of the cultural Other to European and/or American comics. In her close reading of Mizuki Shigeru's *Nonnonba*, Berndt reveals narrative structures and storytelling devices that have irritated Western commentators unfamiliar with their indebtedness to Japanese folklore and rhetorical principles such as *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* that diverge from the more familiar Western tripartite dramatic structure and shape the narrative progression of Mizuki Shigeru's manga. Focusing on narrative ambiguities such as indeterminate frames and fields of vision as well as innovative mixtures of fantastic and realist elements, Berndt discusses 'manga's ghostliness' as a condition that haunts both Western projections of Asian Otherness in the context of orientalism and a mode of resisting "evaluative criteria based on modern notions of authorship, work, and aesthetic sophistication."

The volume concludes with Monika Schmitz-Emans's "Graphic Narrative as World Literature." Complicating structuralist and semiotic approaches that implicitly or explicitly associate graphic narrative with verbal storytelling, and critically questioning the tendency of visual analyses to conceive of images as universally understandable, Schmitz-Emans documents the discursive maneuvers through which different forms of graphic narrative have been identified as examples of world literature and through which the graphic novel has been offered as a new paradigm of the latter. Schmitz-Emans then categorizes different genres of such a potential graphic world literature vis-à-vis already established literary genres. She ends her chapter by relating today's graphic narratives to Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*, arguing that the transgressions of cultural borders and the cross-adaptations of narrative styles, subject matters, and publication formats do not only induce new genres and modes of graphic storytelling but also reflect back on "one's own cultural and literary heritages," which increasingly "appear as renewed and open to innovative interpretation and continuation."

## Conclusion

In further enriching the interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary dialogue that has shaped recent studies of graphic narrative, the chapters collected in the following pages will provide a theoretically and methodologically refined basis for future investigations of comics and other forms of graphic narrative in the context of a dedicated comics narratology. When positioning itself vis-à-vis ongoing debates in postclassical and transmedial narratology as well as in comics and media studies, such a comics narratology will need to pay attention to the specific mediality as well as to the various intermedial and transmedial frames of reference that define graphic narratives. But it will also have to take seriously the diverse cultural and historical contexts in which graphic narratives have been, and continue to be, created and read, and to whose further diversification they inevitably contribute, as well. Against this background, we believe that the present volume constitutes an important step toward refining existing theories of graphic narrative by emphasizing not only theoretical and methodological questions extensively discussed within the narratological tradition, but also the historical breath as well as the transcultural and transnational diversity of narrative representations as they are realized in the conventionally distinct medium of comics.

Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to Wolf Schmid and the other editors of the Narratologia series for their steadfast belief in the project through its various stages of realization; to our contributors for their captivating work, their dedication to the volume's aims, and the collegial spirit in which they engaged with our editorial concerns; to the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their astute comments and constructive criticism; to Manuela Gerlof at De Gruyter for the outstanding support along the way; and to Martin Gerecht for his assistance with formatting and standardizing the book's layout.

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PART I

GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND NARRATOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

SILKE HORSTKOTTE

(Leipzig)

# Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds

## Narrative Beginnings

Comics—defined by Scott McCloud as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993: 9)—are often considered to be one of the most recent narrative media. On the other hand, theorists anxious to respond to cultural criticism have sometimes been at pains to rehabilitate sequential storytelling as an "ancient form of art" (Eisner 2008: xi), pointing to predecessors from the Bayeux tapestry to William Hogarth's print series. There are arguments for as well as against both positions. Telling a story through a series of discrete images accompanied by textual elements is an old and efficient method of addressing, instructing, and entertaining the illiterate or semi-literate. However, there is a vast gulf separating these early examples of pictorial storytelling from the highly sophisticated graphic novels by authors such as Art Spiegelman, Neil Gaiman, or Alan Moore that have emerged from the broader tradition of comics since the mid-1980s. Moreover, graphic novels owe as much to the tradition and conventions of the literary novel and to the narrative strategies of film as to the comic strip. The present chapter concerns itself with these latter, more complexly structured graphic narratives. In introducing readers of this volume to the narrative operations particular to comics and graphic novels, I will begin by comparing how two of the earliest comics to use ambitious narrative techniques and structures—Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986–1987) and *Preludes & Nocturnes* (1988–1989), the first volume in Neil Gaiman's ongoing *Sandman* series—go about constructing complex narrative worlds with the medium-specific tools and techniques of comics.

Both books had originally been serialized by DC Comics. They introduce readers into the narrative world by means of a splash page, a full-page panel (the basic narrative unit of comics) that is a conventional

starting point for comics narration.[1] Like the establishing shot in a movie, such an introductory splash page serves to set the tone of the ensuing narrative, and it introduces key symbols, scenes, and/or characters. In *Watchmen*, the opening page shows part of a yellow smiley button in a sea of red liquid in an extreme close-up view. The second page, based on a grid pattern, then zooms out of this close-up in a series of successive panels revealing that the red liquid is a pool of blood on a sidewalk that is being flushed into the gutter by a clean-up man with a spray nozzle, while another male character with a cardboard sign stating "The end is nigh" walks through the clean-up operation (see figure 1).

Thus, the first page introduces both the graphic novel's theme of extreme violence and its clash with incongruent elements, here the smiley button, later the very existence of a band of costumed superheroes. More than that, however, it also establishes a narrative point of origin that is both elevated, suggesting omniscience, and curiously limited. For the six panels through which the narrative zooms out are all seen from an extremely elevated, 'eye-of-God' vantage point, which is finally, in a wider panel across the bottom of the second page, revealed to be slightly above a balding man who looks down on the blood puddle from a broken window on a high floor of a skyscraper while saying, "Hmm. That's quite a drop." Thus, the elevated spectator, although possessing a privileged vantage point on reality, is far from omniscient. This tension between the suggestions of omniscience inherent in an extremely elevated perspectival point, on the one hand, and the curiously limited knowledge and trivial commentary of the spectator who seems to embody that perspective, on the other, has important consequences for the reader's ability to gain orientation in the storyworld. For readers cannot draw any specific inferences about the events preceding this narrative beginning from what they encounter on the page. The zooming-out operation of the first pages is therefore symptomatic of a narrative strategy that only appears to be objective while constantly withholding or disguising crucial information from its readers. For instance, it will be a while before careful readers will be able to conclude that the character walking through the pool of blood is the mysterious Rorschach, whose journal is quoted in the non-diegetic text boxes accompanying the diegetic representation of the second page.

Another graphic narrative with a cult following, a different way into the storyworld: The first chapter, "Sleep of the Just," of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* opens with a crayon-style drawing of a dark head with white, glowing eyes that seems to be emerging from a sea of grass in an eerie underwater world. Two columns to the sides of this

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1    On the comic book splash page, cf. Eisner 2008: 64.
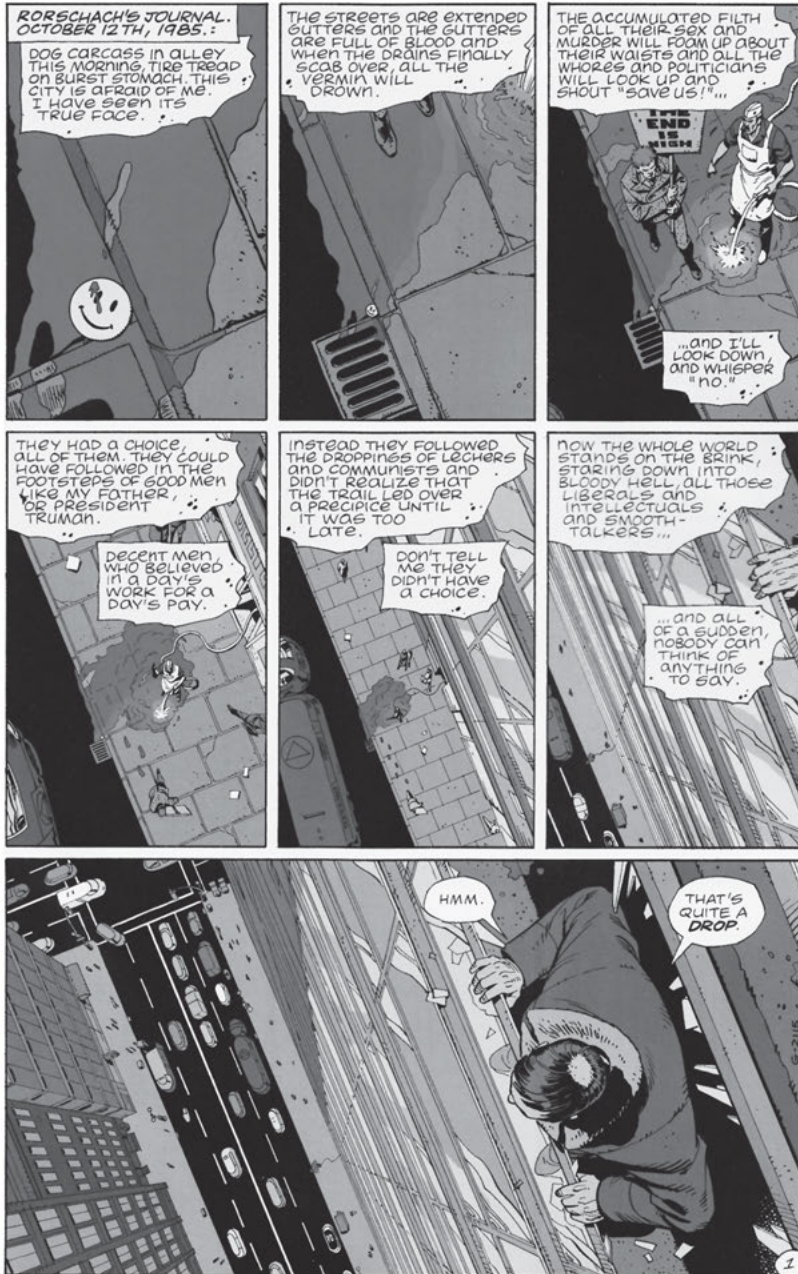
Figure 1: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (2005).

image show photorealistic depictions of flowers, a book page, a cat statuette, a chunk of rock crystal, an hourglass, and other objects arranged as if in a showcase. The following recto page contains the beginning of the narrative proper, and it constitutes a sharp break with the stillness and still life aesthetics of the verso page (see figure 2). Like the second page of *Watchmen*, it appears to be arranged in a grid pattern combining panels that span the width of the page with sequences of narrower panels. However, the succession of perspectival angles on this page is much jumpier than the zooming out that smoothes the way into the *Watchmen* storyworld. The top panel establishes the locale in a large country mansion and sets a gothic tone by focusing on the looming bird of prey statues by the sides of the gate. A speech bubble reads, "Wake up, sir. We're *here*." The panel below introduces the character being addressed thusly: an elderly gentleman in a top hat being driven up in an automobile, emerging from the car and approaching the doorway hesitantly, drops of sweat forming on his forehead. A narrow close-up view shows his hand grasping the door knocker and then a man's eye peeking out the door. Below, a wide panel represents the two characters on both sides of the door from a slightly elevated, bird's eye view, while the bottom panel mirrors the top one in all details except that the speech balloon now reads, "The master is in his study, sir. Please follow me."

These two narrative beginnings will serve as my starting point for discussing how storyworlds are built in comics and graphic novels, and for critically engaging with some of the topics and concepts that have been proposed for studying comics as a narrative medium, especially concerning the basic elements of comics narration: panels, frames, and gutters.[2] In their different ways, both sequences highlight the importance of narrative beginnings for setting the mood and tone of a storyworld, and they can be used to show the complexity that multimodality, or the simultaneous communication on verbal and visual tracks, introduces to the building of such a narrative world in graphic narrative.[3] While *Preludes & Nocturnes* uses non-diegetic text sparingly in its initial pages, in *Watchmen* the visual zooming out is accompanied by and commented upon in a series of journal entries that, even though they echo motives and elements from the visual track, do not refer to it directly. Thus, the first text box speaks of a "Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach," taking up the theme of death and blood in the streets while shifting the locale from a wide main street to a dark alleyway and contrasting the killed man on the sidewalk with a dog run over by a car.

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2    On comics as a medium, see Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein 2009; see esp. the
     contribution by Hoppeler, Etter, and Rippl 2009.
3    See Kress and van Leeuwen 2001.

Figure 2: Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* (2010).

The unique way in which graphic narrative creates narrative coherence forms a distinct path, but it also draws on established narrative patterns adapted from other media. In particular, classic Hollywood film is an important reference point for comics narration. In *Watchmen*, for instance, techniques for establishing plot and character, as well as the positioning of the murder sequence in the narrative, have been adapted from film. The opening with a murder mystery relates *Watchmen*'s narrative beginning to 1950s *noir* film, and it is in this context that the contrast between the visual and the verbal track has to be read. Non-diegetic voice-over narration is a standard feature of *noir*, and it is often employed to create an unreliable narration.[4] Similarly, even though graphic narrative is not photorealistic, the choice of panel size and perspectival angle may be described productively by using the terminology of film studies, as Hans-Christian Christiansen (2000) has shown: close-ups, panoramic shots, and birds' eye views, as well as specific ways of composing shots in a sequence by means of editing and montage have established meanings and functions in film narrative which graphic narrative here productively adapts. This should not surprise us since it is, according to Marshall McLuhan, a rule of media history that "[the] content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera" (1964: 31). That is, new media routinely develop their narrative vocabulary and syntax by adapting and expanding the narrative capacity of an older medium; although comics and film first developed their narrative propensities around the same time, more recent graphic novels have added to the medium's narrative complexity by building upon filmic devices.

However, film shots and camera angles as well as film editing are constricted by technology, while hand-drawn comics are much more variable in style and composition. Panel size, shape, and placement, drawing style, coloring, and the use of frames, as well as the use or lack of narrative text boxes, their size, shape, color, and position in- or outside panels are just some of the elements that contribute toward the unique ways in which a graphic narrative draws its readers into the storyworld. Because of the multiplicity of factors at play, the style of each graphic narrative is much more variable and distinctive than is the case in other narrative media. Every reading of graphic narrative has to calibrate these formal aspects, or *syuzhet*, with the story, or *fabula*, evoked in a graphic narrative,[5] and there is no universal grammar for this decoding as there is in verbal narrative in a natural language, or in the established narrative format of the Hollywood movie. Because of the infinite variety of graphic

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4    See Kozloff 1988; Ferenz 2005.
5    In the sense of Tomashevsky 1965. See also Chatman 1978; Meister 2003.

styles, each graphic narrative evokes not only a storyline but a complete narrative universe with a highly distinctive feel. As Pascal Lefèvre argues, "a graphic style creates the fictive world, giving a certain perspective on the diegesis" (2011: 16). The strongly stylized, hand-drawn quality of much cartooning serves to highlight the discursive qualities of the narrative representation, rather than emphasizing a story-level similarity to the actual world. Of all media that developed in technical modernity, graphic narrative alone has not effaced the line, thereby indexing its embodied creation.[6] While the viewer of a movie, particularly of mainstream Hollywood film, is able to imagine the filmic diegesis as an addition or supplementation of the real,[7] the foregrounding of different drawing styles in graphic narrative and the endless variety of ways in which panels can speak to each other require a new comics literacy that engages much more closely with individual choices in style and patterning.

## Beyond Gaps and Gutters

Despite these infinite choices, one of the most repeated dogmas of comics studies is the understanding of comics as a linear or "sequential art" with a "grammar" composed of panels and frames separated by gaps and gutters.[8] By "dividing the picture into several distinct frames," the argument goes, graphic narrative "uses the eye of the spectator moving from panel to panel to keep narrative time running. The reader (for the eye movement amounts to an act of reading) constructs a story" (Ryan 2004: 141; see also Ewert 2000). According to this school of thought, comics narrative is structured by means of grids and gutters, that is, it breaks the narrative flow down into discrete panels, and it opens up a space between the panels that offers a way in for readerly engagement and imagination.[9]

Yet while *Watchmen* uses a continuous zooming-out technique that opens up an almost seamless path through the panels that are all seen from a high-angle perspective, the visual sequence in *Preludes & Nocturnes* is much jumpier, alternating between close-ups and long 'shots' and using only one high-angle panel, which thus gains a special emphasis.[10] Remarkably, although the recto page in *Preludes & Nocturnes* appears at first to be constructed on a grid pattern, a closer look reveals the page to

6    Cf. Gardner 2011: 56.
7    Cf. Grodal 1997: 29.
8    Prominent representatives are Eisner 2008; McCloud 1993.
9    See Berlatsky 2009.
10   The reference to 'shots' is, of course, metaphorical here.

be based on a continuous background image that shows the old gentleman approaching as he would be seen by someone peeking out from the house, with the top and bottom of the picture overlaid by the other panels on the page. This embedding or overlaying of panels within and above a more continuous background, which reoccurs on many of the pages in *Preludes & Nocturnes*, contributes to the distinctive style of the *Sandman* series, and it is charged with meaning and with atmosphere. It can indicate the simultaneity of geographically distant events and experiences, as on the fourth page of *Preludes & Nocturnes*, where the very different dreams of Ellie Marsten, Daniel Bustamonte, Stefan Wasserman, and Unity Kincaid are framed within the menacing gates of Wych Cross (see figure 3). However, this framing also implicates the other characters within the grandiose plans and actions of Roderick Burgess, Wych Cross's "master," which will have very serious if entirely unforeseen consequences for all of them.

As the *Sandman* example indicates, then, gaps are not necessarily just empty spaces. Instead, the space between panels is here shown to be continuous. Panels are embedded within other panels, indicating the continuity of the storyworld or actually of the plural worlds in *The Sandman*, as the main theme of the series is the interaction between waking and dreaming states and the role of supernatural characters, especially the eponymous Sandman, who mediate between them. A continuity between various characters' experience in *Preludes & Nocturnes* is often also expressed through the distinctive color coding of the background against which panels on a page are set: the background to the scenes in Burgess's castle is dominantly black, suitably so for the rituals of black magic in the course of which Burgess captures Dream, while a light background embeds the dreams of different characters within a continuous range of experientiality later in the first chapter.[11] Switches in background color or frame within the same page, on the other hand, are frequently used to indicate a sudden change of atmosphere or a shift in the ontological order (reality vs. dreamworld).

Even in graphic narratives that follow a more formal grid pattern, the linear understanding implied by the term 'sequentiality' may be too reductive and the emphasis on gaps and gutters misleading. After all, readerly engagement with the storyworld is bound to focus not on the space between panels but on what is inside the panels as well as on the ways in which panels speak to each other. A responsible comics hermeneutics would do well to move away from the linguistic-structuralist idea that comics narrative has a "grammar" (Eisner 2008: 2) and

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11   On experientiality as a defining characteristic of narrative, see Fludernik 1996.

Figure 3: Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* (2010).

that this grammar entails a linear reading. As film semiotician Christian Metz (1974) has shown, the images in a visual narrative do not function as signs in a manner comparable to words in a sentence.[12] The image in a visual narrative may be understood more productively as a full statement whose relation to preceding and following statements is much "less embedded in paradigmatic networks of meaning" (Metz 1974: 26) than that of words in a sentence. An understanding of comics in terms of signs as it is proposed, for instance, by Ole Frahm (2010), is reductive.

In fact, the linear sequence is only one of many possible ways of organizing visual information in comics. Since narrative directionality in comics is not dictated by technology, as it is in film, graphic artists may, and increasingly do, choose other ways of presenting a course of action than that of grids and sequences—either exclusively or intermittently. For instance, the third page of *The Sandman* combines no less than six distinct scenes of varying size and detail within one overall frame (see figure 4). The top half of the page is enclosed within a highly detailed gilded frame decorated with the skull of a goat at the top, other demonic heads on the sides, and runes running around the bottom. While the enclosure within an overall frame highlights the temporal and spatial unity of the individual scenes, the frame's details create a sinister mood and prepare the reader emotionally for the evolving plot, in which the evil character Roderick Burgess, an occultist contemporary and competitor of the historical Aleister Crowley, captures Dream, the mythical entity governing people's dreams, with the aid of a grimoire acquired from the museum curator Dr. Hathaway. The third page chronicles Hathaway's arrival at Burgess's house and the handing over of the grimoire in three sets of scenes. First, there are the two large scenes at the top and bottom, each covering close to half a page. The top half, which seems to grow out of the gilded frame that here blends into a curtain rod from which a heavy chintz curtain hangs, shows Hathaway standing in Burgess's library at some distance from the seated Burgess, while the servant Compton hovers in the doorway. Behind both protagonists, the library interior is depicted in some detail; however, in the middle of the scene between the two characters, pale yellow rays appear to emanate from a light blue oval crossed by yellow dashes. The incongruity of this element within the library setting (it does not appear to be a window) renders it difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend within a realistic reference frame. The bottom half of the page shows Burgess and Hathaway at a slightly later point in time: Burgess has just been handed the Magdalene grimoire. The perspectival orientation

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12   On pictures as 'signs close to perception' ('wahrnehmungsnahe Zeichen'), see also Sachs-Hombach 2003.
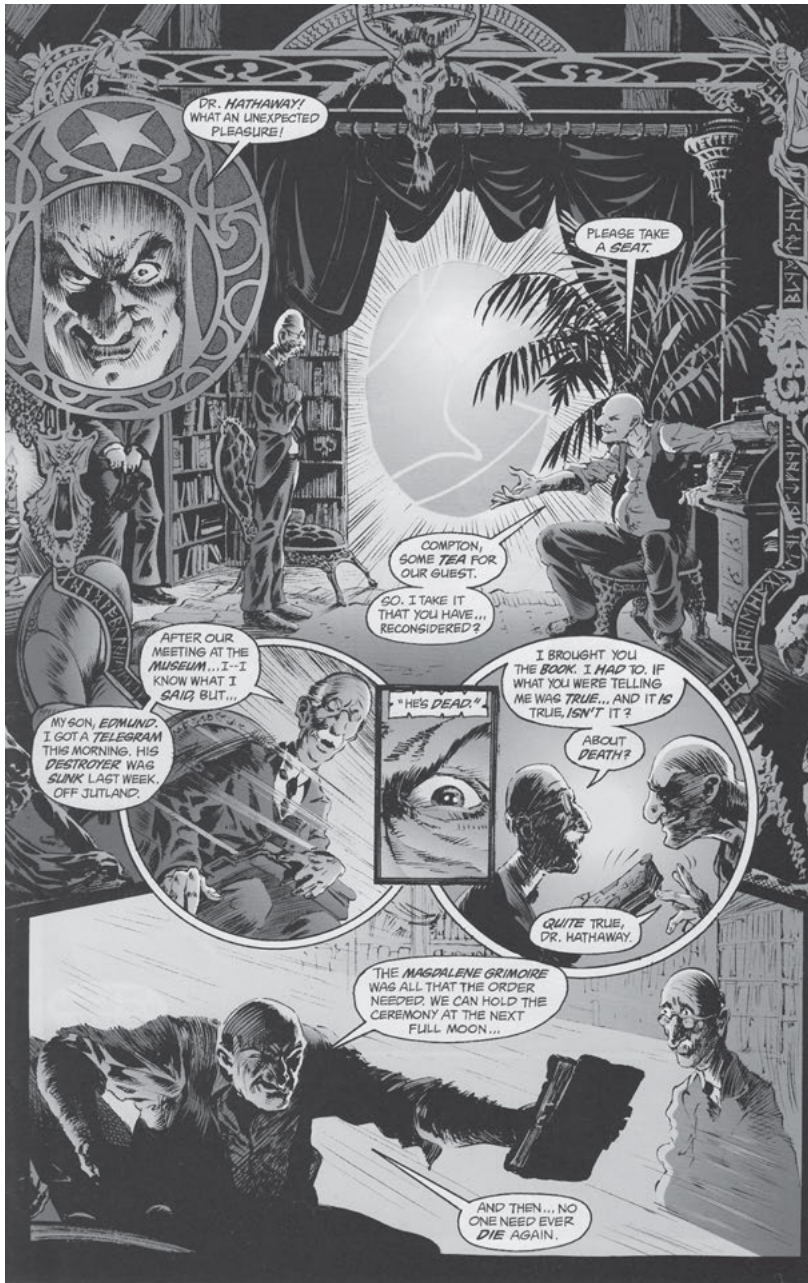
Figure 4: Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* (2010).