

# Narratologia

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# From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels

Contributions to the Theory  
and History of Graphic Narrative

Edited by  
Daniel Stein  
Jan-Noël Thon

De Gruyter

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# Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Over the past decades, various types of graphic narrative, such as comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, have enjoyed an enthusiastic popular reception.<sup>2</sup> While the exploits of superheroes like Superman and Batman have long fascinated readers, licensing and merchandising have made comic books and graphic novels more widely known to the general public than ever. Their popularity may result from the fact that they are prone to what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) call ‘remediation,’ to transmedial storytelling and diversification: many of the novels, movies, animated cartoons, and video games launched today are based on graphic narratives. While graphic narratives are transmedial phenomena due to their remediation potential, they are also intermedial narratives based on words and images that collaborate to relate stories. Whereas writer-artists like Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware are responsible for both the words and pictures of their works, the bulk of graphic narratives are produced by creative teams consisting of writers, scripters, and plotters to outline the complete story, and pencilers, inkers, and colorists to render the story in visual form. Examples are Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Frank Miller, who collaborate with well-known graphic artists such as Dave McKean, Dave Gibbons, and Bryan Talbot.

Comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels can be read as stories due to the sequential nature of their panels<sup>3</sup>: closure, i.e., the readers’ ability and constant activity to bridge the gutters that divide the single static pictures, helps to create narrativity. Since graphic narratives combine word and image to tell stories, they are ideal test cases for a discussion of

1 Lukas Etter has contributed the examples from primary sources; Gabriele Rippl is responsible for all other parts of this article.

2 The term ‘graphic narrative’ was introduced by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven in 2006. There are additional formats outside the English-speaking world, such as Japanese manga and French-Belgian albums, which would equally qualify as ‘graphic narratives.’ For further analysis, see the chapters by Jacqueline Berndt, Pascal Lefèvre, and Jan Baetens and Steven Surdiacourt in this volume.

3 See Eisner 1985; McCloud 1993.

inter- and transmedial strategies of storytelling. After a brief analysis of the terminology pertinent to our discussion, we move on to examine theoretical concepts such as intermediality and transmedial narratology in order to gauge how fruitful these concepts are when applied to a variety of graphic narratives. As will be demonstrated, the results of intermediality research (1) are especially relevant for investigations into how word-image combinations collaborate in graphic narratives to tell stories, and (2) they have paved the way for new approaches in narratology, namely, transmedial ones that investigate the narrative potential of different media, their narrative limitations, and their affordances.

#### Terminology: Graphic Narrative as Art Form, Genre, or Medium?

In Henry John Pratt's recent article "Narrative in Comics" (2009), he defines comics as narratives telling stories by a sequence of pictures with speech balloons. While some critics have argued that non-narrative comics, like non-narrative film and literature, are possible,<sup>4</sup> the majority of comics are read with the expectation that a story unfolds, which is why Pratt considers comics "a predominantly narrative medium" (2009: 107) whose literary as well as pictorial narrative dimensions he then explores. He does so with a shifting terminology, variously calling comics a medium, an art form, a code, and a genre. As a hybrid art form, he suggests, "comics have both literary and *pictorial* narrative dimensions: it is a *hybrid* art form that employs narrative strategies closely connected to literature, on the one hand, and other pictorial media, on the other" (Pratt 2009: 107, original emphases).

Pratt's inconsistent terminology demonstrates a general problem centered around the term 'medium' and its many different definitions. Narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) has discussed the question 'What are media?' in the context of a transmedial narratology,<sup>5</sup> trying to bridge the diverging positions held by different academic communities. There is consensus on the view that all media, be it a printed text or a digital photo, function as intermediaries that allow for the production, distribution, and reception of semiotic signs, thus enabling communication. Yet it is far more difficult to define and classify media: sociologists, philosophers, literary historians and new media theorists all have deviating ideas about what exactly a medium is. What is more, while in the English-speaking world the term 'media' refers most often to mechanical, electronic, and

digital (mass) media such as photography, telephone, radio, film, TV, video, and the Internet, and while media studies tend mainly to investigate the social systems and cultural institutions on which the technologies of mass communication are based, for German-speaking academic communities, the investigation into medium/media and mediality is a more encompassing and diversified field that includes a general media theory.<sup>6</sup> In this tradition, 'medium' refers in a very general sense to the material side of the sign, i.e., its carrier<sup>7</sup>—it is that which mediates (cf. the etymology of the Latin term *medius* which means 'middle' and 'intermediate,' and *Vermittler* in German)—and the focus is on the question of how this material side of the sign/semiotic system is involved in the production of narrative meaning.

In connection with narratological issues, it is important to note that different media such as oil painting, music, digital photography, and film "are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, 'matters' for the type of meanings that can be encoded" (Ryan 2004: 1–2). Instead, "a medium is a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated, and how they are experienced" (Ryan 2004: 18). Following Ryan, we may distinguish between at least three different approaches to media: (1) semiotic approaches such as that of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1984 [1766]) and Werner Wolf (1999, 2002), who have looked into codes and sensory channels that support various (verbal, visual, and musical) media; (2) material and technological approaches that focus on how the semiotic types are supported by media<sup>8</sup>; and (3) cultural approaches that are interested in social and cultural aspects of the media as well as in the network of relations among media. While many scholars in media theory today disregard semiotic categories when discussing media and prefer to call them 'modes' and a combination of modes 'multimodal,'<sup>9</sup> we believe that Ryan is right when pointing out that semiotically based media such as music and two-dimensional images cannot be ignored: "modes of signification play a major role in distinguishing media from each other. There is simply no way to build a media system without taking semiotic criteria into consideration. Moreover, 'mode' is just as difficult to define as medium" (2014: 4–5).

<sup>4</sup> See Meskin 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See also Thon 2013; Ryan 2014; Ryan and Thon 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Voigts-Virchow 2005; Rippl 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See Rippl 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ryan 2005: 15; see also Ryan 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See Kress and van Leeuwen 2001.

"Image-language combinations," i.e., "combinations of still pictures and text," such as emblems and graphic narratives, are "spatio-temporal media" (Ryan 2005: 19). But it is very hard to decide where the medium ends and genre begins. Due to the problematic terminology sketched above, it is worthwhile to ruminate on Ryan's following suggestion:

Whereas genre is defined by more or less freely adopted conventions, chosen for both personal and cultural reasons, *medium* imposes its possibilities and limitations on the reader. [...] Genre conventions are genuine rules specified by humans, whereas the constraints and possibilities offered by media are dictated by their material substance and mode of encoding. (2005: 19)

Are graphic narratives, then, a hybrid medium that narrates stories by correlating words and sequences of still images, or should they rather count as a genre? How, indeed, do terms and concepts such as mode, code, channel, and art form relate to other terms, such as genre and medium? Labeling graphic narratives a 'medium' is somewhat problematic because they actually involve two basic media which they combine, word and image, and these two media or representational semiotic codes are not present independently, but interact in very complex ways on the page in order to tell a story. Something is not a type of comics/graphic narrative "if the prose is independent of pictures [... or] if the written story could exist without any pictures and still be a continuous whole" (Harvey 1995: 75). Labeling graphic narratives a 'hybrid art form' likewise raises questions: it sounds defensive (as if one had to insist that graphic narratives are an art form rather than a popular mass medium). And why should the rather vague term 'hybrid' be used instead of the adjective 'intermedial,' which refers to widely accepted typologies and is based on a rich reservoir of research in intermediality and inter- and transmedial narration? One may conclude that graphic narratives range between the two categories, depending on the angle from which they are looked at: according to semiotic approaches, graphic narratives are representational codes based on two media, words and pictures; according to cultural, material, and technical approaches, the graphic narratives' semiotic types, word and picture, are based on the medium of the printed book. We suggest a combined approach which—in analogy to film—understands graphic narrative as a medium that is able to tell stories through the combination of word and image. However, graphic narrative can also be considered as a genre which encompasses several subgenres such as the comic strip, the comic book and the graphic novel.

## Intermediality

As stated above, the programmatic results of intermediality research are highly relevant for an exploration of graphic narratives. Intermediality studies is a field of research that for more than three decades has dealt with interrelations between different media. Intermediality researchers (1) are interested in differences between media but also in their collaborations and networks as well as their functions across cultures and through history; (2) they consider intermediality studies as 'democratic,' i.e., they do not deal exclusively with art forms and highbrow culture, but also with popular mass culture products and the new media; (3) they question the applicability of verbal models to all cultural manifestations.<sup>10</sup> Werner Wolf and Irina O. Rajewsky have presented typologies that make distinctions among different intermedial phenomena. According to Rajewsky, the current debate reveals two basic understandings of intermediality, "a broader and a narrower one, which are not in themselves homogeneous. The first concentrates on *intermediality as a fundamental condition or category* while the second approaches *intermediality as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations*" (2005: 47, original emphases). Rajewsky's literary conception of intermediality in the latter and narrower sense encompasses three subcategories, but single medial configurations will match more than just one of the three subcategories:

(1) *Media combination* (also called multi-media, pluri-media as well as mixed media) such as opera, film, theatre, performances, illuminated manuscripts, comics, computer installations, etc. In this subcategory, intermediality is "a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation" (2005: 52).<sup>11</sup>

(2) *Medial transposition*, e.g., film adaptations, novelizations, etc. This category is production-oriented; the intermedial quality "has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being, i.e., with the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium" (2005: 51).

(3) *Intermedial references*, for instance references in a literary text to a piece of music (the so-called musicalization of fiction, the imitation and evocation of filmic techniques such as dissolves, zoom shots, montage editing, etc.; descriptive modes in literature that evoke visual effects or refer to specific visual works of art (so-called ekphrasis). Intermedial references contribute to the overall signification; like the first category,

<sup>10</sup> See Rippl 2005.

<sup>11</sup> It is this category of intermediality that today is often referred to as 'multimodal'; cf. Kukkonen 2011: 35-37.

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<sup>11</sup> It is this category of intermediality that today is often referred to as 'multimodal'; cf. Kukkonen 2011: 35-37.

they are of a communicative-semiotic nature, but they involve by definition only one medium.<sup>12</sup>

According to Werner Wolf, intermediality applies in its broadest sense to any transgression of boundaries between media and thus is concerned with “‘heteromedial’ relations between different semiotic complexes” (2005: 252). Wolf understands media as conventionally distinct means of communicating cultural content, which are specified principally by the nature of their underlying semiotic systems (involving verbal language, pictorial signs, music, etc. or in cases of ‘composite media’ such as film, a combination of several semiotic systems); their technical or institutional channels are merely secondary. He differentiates between

- *intramediality*, which involves only one medium, so there is no transgression of media boundaries;
- *transmediality*, which describes such phenomena that are non-specific to individual media (motifs, thematic variation, style, narrativity etc.) and appear across a variety of different media;
- *intermediality*, which is subdivided into two variants of intermedial relations/references. The involvement with another medium may take place explicitly, “whenever two or more media are overtly present in a given semiotic entity” (Wolf 2005: 254), or covertly, i.e., indirectly (e.g., musicalization of fiction or ekphrasis, i.e., visualization of fiction/poetry). For many critics the mere thematization of another medium is not enough, and they reserve the term ‘intermediality’ for an evocation of certain formal features of another medium; this category includes a change of medium (i.e., film adaptation of a novel), or combination of media (“multi-” or “plurimediality” [Wolf 2005: 253–55]: ballet, opera, film, comic strips, technopaignia).

Rajewsky’s and Wolf’s typologies help us to investigate the medial specificities of graphic narratives, particularly how word and image interact in various complex ways to tell stories. We can further build on the work of Martin Schüwer and others who have started to explain how the static images of graphic narratives and the unique blend of graphic and verbal signs are able to construct a fictive world full of movement, space, and its own time structure and, while being related to the medium of film, still follow their own medial rules. Both graphic novels and novels are generally published in book form; their use of medial carrier/s, however, differs greatly: while novels tell stories by using one medium, namely writing, graphic novels usually combine two media, sequences of static pictures and integrated textual parts, in order to narrate.

<sup>12</sup> See Rajewsky 2010; Rippl 2012.

Schüwer—with frequent reference to Benoît Peeters (1991)—discusses the word-image interactions in comics/graphic narratives in great depth and presents several examples in which either the verbal or the visual element dominates the graphic narrative. Provided a specific graphic narrative is the product of collaboration, either the penciler or the scenarist can be perceived to be the dominant creative force.<sup>13</sup> Whereas graphic narratives without visual elements do not exist, there are examples completely devoid of text. Several effects can be achieved in such cases. Pantomimic sequences of images may either just appear “natural” (Schüwer 2008: 320; our translation from the German: “gewisser Natürlichkeit”), or they may establish a contrast to text-based passages in the same work and express, e.g., moments of trauma or alienation.

In graphic narratives, the combination of text and pictures—the fact that the “image and the dialogue give meaning to each other” (Eisner 1985: 59)—is the vital element of storytelling. It is therefore important to note that processes of decoding/reading are based on the different perception modes of both sign systems, on reading sequentially and on looking at the panel and the graphic narrative page as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Equally important is another characteristic, namely, that writing is usually represented through lettering, i.e., handwriting remediated through print. In graphic narratives, writing in general possesses more iconic freedom than in literary texts (except in *technopaignia* and other experimental forms) in order to express intonation, pitch, atmosphere, and so forth, and it also features as a visual carrier of meaning. Sequential and simultaneous modes of reception allow the reader to turn the two-dimensional fragments (panels and the gaps between them) into three-dimensional space and static pictures into movement. Since the sequences of pictures in graphic narratives are invested with a successive power and thus transcend the static quality of a single picture, they in fact invite us to question Lessing’s (1984 [1766]) influential differentiation between words and images.

In graphic narratives, word and image correlate and compete in a plethora of ways. What has been said so far relates to Rajewsky’s first category, media combination or media hybridity, i.e., to the fact that graphic narratives commonly combine two media, text and image, and are hence *per se* intermedial phenomena. However, graphic narratives’ specific intermediality is by no means restricted to this category and to the word-picture combinations in individual panels. In fact, intermediality in graphic narratives can be discussed in a different way by using Rajewsky’s categories 2 and 3.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Schüwer 2008: 315.

<sup>14</sup> See Schnackertz 1980; Schüwer 2002; Saraceni 2003.

The graphic narrative *V for Vendetta* (1988), written by Alan Moore and penciled by David Lloyd, lends itself as an example of Rajewsky's second intermedial category of medial transposition (or change of medium). *V for Vendetta* started as a black-and-white cartoon in the magazine *Warrior* in 1982 and was later completed and edited as a full-color graphic novel by DC Comics. In 2005, James McTeigue produced a commercially successful movie adaptation of the graphic narrative. Based on the screenplay, Stephen Moore wrote a homonymic novel, which was released in 2006. The filmic adaptation (what Rajewsky calls medial transposition)<sup>15</sup> led to a vocal dissent among the creators of the graphic narrative and those of the movie.<sup>16</sup> As James Reynolds and others have pointed out, the movie *V for Vendetta* does not substantially add characters or plotlines—it has a tendency to reduce both.<sup>17</sup> In fact, McTeigue's movie has gone so far in simplifying the plot that Moore ended up publicly distancing himself from it. Even critics cautious not to fall prey to the "morally loaded discourse of fidelity" (Hutcheon 2006: 7), frequently encountered when any sort of film adaptation is discussed, acknowledged that the movie reduced significantly the original plot of the 10-installment graphic narrative, as well as its political explosiveness. This is why *V for Vendetta* invites us to reflect upon transmedial narratology and graphic narratives. While probably no other major movie adaptation has caused such publicly expressed irritation by the original's author as was the case with Alan Moore and *V for Vendetta*, the question has nonetheless been the same for the full legion of screenwriters and directors venturing to make adaptations of graphic narratives: what are the central problems we face when adapting/transposing a graphic narrative to other media, and what are the medial idiosyncrasies of graphic narratives that pose challenges? Future investigations into aspects of graphic narratives' inter- and transmediality are needed, especially close readings of lesser-known graphic narratives, in order to learn more about the many intricate ways in which word and image collaborate and compete in this specific medium.

<sup>15</sup> Transmedial storytelling should not be confused with Jenkins's concept of "transmedia storytelling," defined as a strategy to reach "a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products" (2006: 293). The concept is applicable to stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, i.e., to cases where the creators of a plot focus on their collaborative endeavours across several media *from the very beginning* (see also Ryan and Thon 2014).

<sup>16</sup> The fact that *V for Vendetta*'s penciler David Lloyd was not irritated by the movie version in the same way as Alan Moore was, has gained much less publicity (see Keller 2008; Reynolds 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Reynolds 2009: 128.

There is also a wide range of intermedial references (Rajewsky's third category and Wolf's third category of covert intermediality) in experimental as well as non-experimental graphic narratives: formal features of other media like film and music are imitated by the means of graphic narratives. They can take on functions similar to ekphrasis and musicalization strategies in fiction. An example can be found in a passage from Jason Lutes's *Berlin: City of Smoke* (2008), in which the Vallotton-style black-and-white depiction of a jazz clarinetist takes place in 44 panels over more than two full pages. This proliferation of panels has the effect of pausing the action; by means of small variations in the musician's posture the effect of rhythm and of musicality is created within a two-dimensional sequence of drawings (see figure 1).<sup>18</sup>

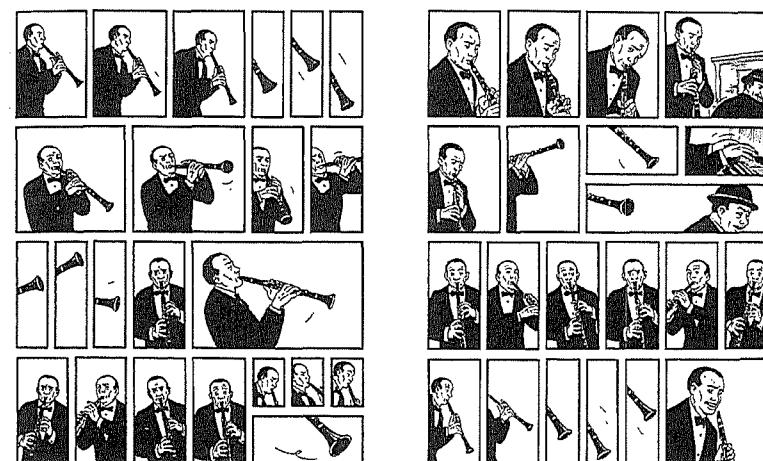


Figure 1: Jason Lutes, *Berlin: City of Smoke* (2008). © Jason Lutes. All rights reserved.

Another example of intermedial reference is Nathan Schreiber's graphic narrative *Power Out* (2009), for which the Internet functions as the medium to be imitated (see figure 2). This intermedial reference may also be described as remediation, a landmark of today's media ecology, which Bolter and Grusin have defined as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (2000: 273). According to Bolter and Grusin, a medium "is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts

<sup>18</sup> On Lutes's visual and verbal aesthetics in *City of Smoke*; including the Vallotton-style, see Etter 2013.

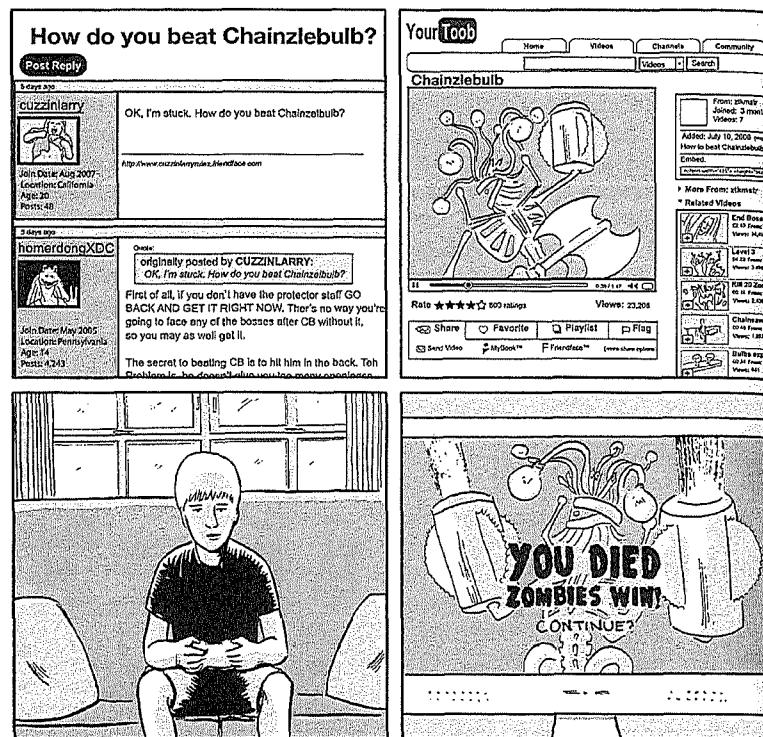


Figure 2: Nathan Schreiber, *Power Out* (2009). © Nathan Schreiber. All rights reserved.

to rival or refashion them in the name of the real" (2000: 65). New visual technologies, such as computer graphics and the World Wide Web, present themselves as

refashioned and improved versions of other media. Digital media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. [...] What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media. (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 14–15).

Schreiber's example convincingly shows that remediation is not a one-directional process of new media refashioning prior media forms, but also a process in which established media represent newer media forms. Remediation can easily be aligned with concepts like adaptation. Especially when adaptation is to a different medium, which is the case with filmic adaptations of texts, remediation may serve as a synonym for adaptation.

Nevertheless it is "hardly reconcilable with conceptions of intermedial subcategories like medial transformation, media combination, or medial references" for the very reason that remediation

necessarily implies a tendency to level out significant differences both between the individual phenomena in question and between different media with their respective materiality; differences that come to the fore as soon as detailed analyses of specific medial configurations, their respective meaning-constitutional strategies, and their overall signification are at stake. (Rajewsky 2005: 64)

While Bolter and Grusin use "*ekphrasis*, the literary description of works of visual art" (2000: 45, original emphasis), as a non-digital example of remediation, they ignore the fact that ekphrasis is closely connected with the *paragone*, the contest between the arts, which does not level the medial differences between words (literature) and pictures (e.g., painting) but in fact depends on them.

### Inter- and Transmedial Narratology

As has already been mentioned, graphic narratives are rewarding objects for intermedial and transmedial investigation. Since most research on graphic narratives today focuses on individual works and series, generally applicable theories of inter- and transmedial narration as well as an inter- and transmedial narratological terminology and methodology have to be developed further in connection with the specific means of graphic storytelling. Obviously, narration takes place in novels, films, and graphic narratives alike, and it can therefore be considered as a transmedial phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> But it is important to account for the specificities of the respective medium in which an idea or story is expressed.<sup>20</sup> The medium as the carrier of the signs is never transparent or 'innocent'; its internal structural and medial laws define the ways in which the categories of time and space are used. Generally speaking, one can say that the tellability of any given narrative may depend intimately on the resources and the constraints of a given medium, just as each medium has particular affinities for certain themes and certain types of plot: "You cannot tell the same type of story on the stage and in writing, during conversation and in a thousand-page novel, in a two-hour movie and in a TV serial that runs for many years" (Ryan 2004: 356).

Werner Wolf triggered the debate with a groundbreaking article in 2002 that systematically investigated the narrative potential of music, paintings, and of picture series by bringing together the findings of

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Rajewsky 2002: 13.

<sup>20</sup> See also Wolf 2002; Ryan 2004; Walsh 2006.

intermediality studies and literary narratology, thus developing a new intermedial narratology. On the basis of formal (chronology, repetition, teleology, causality/cohesion) and thematic indicators (tellability and singularity),<sup>21</sup> he has discriminated *genuinely narrative* genres such as novels that are based on predominantly verbal media (written and oral text) and whose recipients do hardly participate in narrativization, from works that indicate narration, such as picture series and mono- or polyphase pictures. According to Wolf, the narrative potential is low whenever a considerable input to the production of narrativity is required from the recipient.<sup>22</sup> In other words, prototypical narration in a novel requires a minimal narratavizing activity on the part of the recipient, whereas instrumental music demands a maximum.<sup>23</sup> Comic strips hold a middle position on Wolf's scale.<sup>24</sup> Thus, intermedial narration is based on the insight that narrativity is a transmedial cognitive frame. While most classical narratology has "disregarded the interrelation between narrativity and media, [...] [p]ostclassical narratology has started to dismantle th[e] hegemony of narrator-transmitted narratives and has emphasized the transmedial nature of narrativity as a cognitive frame applicable to ever 'remoter' media and genres" (Wolf 2011: 145).

Wolf defines transmedial narratology as the study of narrativity in works of art outside the literary text, such as painting, sculpture, instrumental music.<sup>25</sup> By developing a flexible concept of medium, he accounts for the material effects of a medium and "thus mediates between the positions of media determinism and media relativism" (Fludernik and Olson 2011: 16). If narratology leaves behind concepts such as that of the narrator and the preoccupation with the verbal medium and focuses instead on prototypical and cognitive aspects of narrativity, a transmedial reconceptualization of narrative becomes possible. What is necessary, however, is a compromise between the descriptions of media as mere conduits, on the one hand, and a 'the-medium-is-the-message view,' on the other. The latter "places the medium in such a strong position that a medium-independent conception of narrativity in cognitive and prototypical terms becomes impossible, for if media are the ultimate reality, cognitive frames become negligible" (Wolf 2011: 165–66). Wolf (2011: 166, original emphasis) suggests conceiving of

the function of media in transmedial narratology [...] in a more flexible way as influencing, but not *a priori* as determining, narrativity and narrative content. [...] As applicable to transmedial narratology, medium is a conventionally and culturally distinct means of communication; it is specified not only by technical or institutional channels (or a channel) but also and primarily by its use of one or more semiotic systems to transmit its contents, in particular within the public sphere; according to the nature and format of their constituents, different media have different capabilities for transmitting as well as shaping narratives.

Wolf concludes that narrative, like all cognitive macro-frames, can be realized in more than one medium. This implies that narrativity is to a large extent (but never completely) medium-independent and hence a transmedial phenomenon.

As has become clear, transmediality and transmedial storytelling are comparatively recent concepts that made their first prominent appearance in the field of narratology in the early 2000s. In addition to Wolf, Marie-Laure Ryan's pioneering work has also greatly helped to propel academic interest in transmedial storytelling. Ryan differentiates between a text "being a narrative" and it "possessing narrativity" (2004: 9) and between narrative as "a textual act of representation" and "a mental image—a cognitive construct—built in by the interpreter as a response to the text" (9) that allows for transmedial narratological approaches: any work of art can be considered to possess narrativity provided that the recipient can elicit a narrative script from it. No matter which medium, language, image, sound, or gesture is involved, according to Ryan, they are all able to narrate a story (but not equally well). Ryan frequently uses the terms "remediation" and "transmedial narration" (2004: 31–32) as synonyms. In that sense, transmedial means that a story told in one medium can later be retold in a different medium, but due to medium-specificities, the result will never be the same. Even so, the recipient will be capable of distinguishing a narrative thread. Ryan lists nine phenomena of remediation, among them the "representation of a medium within another medium by either mechanical or descriptive means" (2004: 33), such as ekphrasis in novels; the representation of performance arts or TV shows in movies; a medium "imitating the techniques of another" (2004: 33), such as cinematic and musical techniques in novels; the "[...]insertion of a medium in another," for example, texts in paintings, movie clips in computer games or photos in novels, remediation, i.e., transmedial strategies that have the potential to enhance a work's ability to tell stories; and "[t]ransposition from a medium into another" (2004: 33), such as transpositions of novels into movies, computer games based on literary works, illustrations of stories.

21 Cf. Wolf 2002: 47–51.

22 Wolf 2002: 96.

23 Wolf 2002: 95.

24 Cf. Hoppeler, Etter, and Rippl 2009: 96.

25 Cf. Wolf 2011: 158.

When we turn to graphic narratives, it was Jeanne C. Ewert (2005: 72) who called for a narratological method specific to comics/graphic narrative that

must take into account both textual and graphic elements in the panels, a challenge for critics habituated to text-based narrative. Images must contain details that propel the story forward, saving (literal) page space that would otherwise be required for textual exposition. Transitional elements which move the narrative from one scene to the next, visual elements which condense or elide textual or verbal elements, and framing devices which negotiate between temporalities of the verbal/textual narration, all contribute to a complex narrative method.

Since 2005, narratologists aware of the pertaining ‘media-blindness’ of traditional narratology have started to carry out a considerable amount of critical work related to questions of mediality.<sup>26</sup> They agree that what is necessary is a medium-specific, i.e., an inter- and transmedial theory of narrativity for graphic narratives, a theory that takes into account the collaborative and competitive interplay of *words and images* (including onomatopoetic elements, graphic symbols and lettering); *time dimensions* (which encompass three levels: the individual panels, the panel sequence, and the page layout<sup>27</sup>); *depictions of space and bodies* (which again comprehend the three levels of individual panels, the panel sequence, and the page layout); *subjectivity and focalization*<sup>28</sup>; as well as the (sometimes very complex, nested) *structures of communication*, which may include metaleptic instances.<sup>29</sup> Martin Schüwer (2008) was one of the first scholars embarking on precisely this project and set himself the task of elaborating a way of analyzing comics that is founded in postclassical narratology, informed by cultural concerns and encompassing comics’ central features.

### How Graphic Narratives Narrate: Text-Picture Relationships and Their Narrative Potential

Some theoreticians of graphic narrative believe in the crucial role of the pictures in storytelling.<sup>30</sup> Others, however, subordinate the pictorial to the verbal elements.<sup>31</sup> Robert C. Harvey’s criteria for the formal and aesthetic evaluation of comics are governed by elements of verbal-visual blending.

26 For examples see Herman 2004, 2009; Ryan 2006, 2014; Wolf 2011; Thon 2013, 2014; Ryan and Thon 2014.

27 See Groensteen 2007; Schüwer 2008.

28 See Horstkotte and Pedri 2011; Mikkonen 2011; Thon 2014.

29 See Wolf 2005; Fehrle 2011.

30 See Stocker 1986; Groensteen 2007.

31 See Abbott 1986.

Hence he favors those comics in which word and image are as complementary as possible; he only allows for wordless or ‘pantomime’ comics as the exception that proves the rule.<sup>32</sup> In order to discuss the narrative potential of the wide range of word-image correlations in single panels as well as in sequences, we have developed a typology of five text-picture relationships in graphic narratives (Hoppeler, Etter, and Rippl 2009: 65). This typology modifies Scott McCloud’s (1993) earlier suggestions. It should be pointed out, however, that what follows are heuristic categories without clear-cut distinctions:

- (1) *word specific combinations*, “where pictures illustrate, but don’t significantly add to a largely complete text” (McCloud 1993: 153)
- (2) *alternating combinations*, meaning panels in which image and text alternate in propelling the story
- (3) *montage*, “where words are treated as integral parts of the picture” (McCloud 1993: 154)
- (4) *parallel combinations*, where “words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting” (McCloud 1993: 154)
- (5) *picture specific combinations*, “where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence” (McCloud 1993: 153)

Added to Wolf’s scale of transmedial narrativity, the narrative potential of the individual text-picture combinations in graphic narratives becomes evident, involving different degrees of narrativization by the recipient (see figure 3).

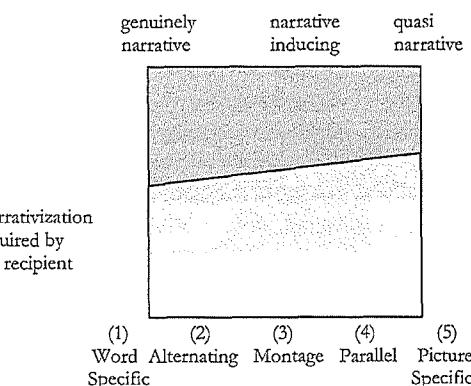


Figure 3: The Narrative Potential of Graphic Narratives (Hoppeler, Etter, and Rippl 2009: 66).

32 See Harvey 1994, 1996; for more recent publications on comics and intermediality, see Dittmar 2011; Bachmann, Sina, and Banhold 2012.

## Combination Type 1: Word Specific

In single panels, *word specific combinations* can often be found primarily where no images are needed since the text alone has sufficient narrative potential. Hence this category 1 is close to Wolf's category of prototypical/genuine narration in which the amount of narrativization required by the reader is relatively low. A good example is Alison Bechdel's memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012), many panels of which contain nothing but text. The narrative independence of these panels is often highlighted by other 'text-only' panels on the same page, which do not represent a narrator's voice but rather reproduce actual *paper-bound* texts that are part of the diegesis, such as letters from the protagonist's mother that are excerpts of (presumably) larger texts (see figure 4). They require a higher degree of narrativization by the reader than the first category of text-only panels, i.e., those containing nothing but what the narrator has to 'say.' Whereas the narrator's panels (the first category) would clearly belong to type 1 in our scheme, the reproduction of excerpts from larger paper-bound texts include the text's materiality and are therefore closer to type 3 (montage).

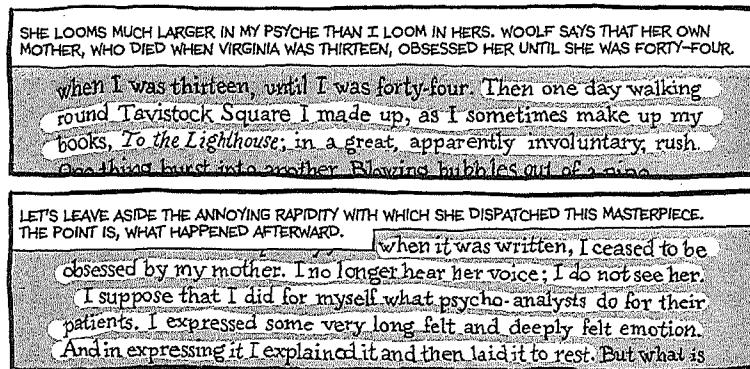


Figure 4: Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?* (2012). © Alison Bechdel. All rights reserved.

## Combination Type 2: Alternating

By *alternating combinations* we mean panels in which image and text alternate in pushing forward the narration. In this type, a higher contribution from the recipient is needed to propel the story. The most obvious example can be found in the "desperation device" (Eisner 1985: 26), i.e., speech balloons.<sup>33</sup> While speech balloons are considered a characteristic feature of graphic narratives and are usually discussed in depth in systematic monographs on the topic, the lettering itself is something largely underrepresented in such analyses.<sup>34</sup> Early newspaper comics, for example the *Katzenjammer Kids* (1897–), as well as early European comics series such as Hergé's *Tintin* (1929–1976), made use of speech bubbles which are comparatively neutral in nature. These bubbles were filled with black text on white background, usually capital sans-serif letters written in straight horizontal lines. In this way, the bubble was intended as a 'parallel' device to the figurative drawings of a panel.

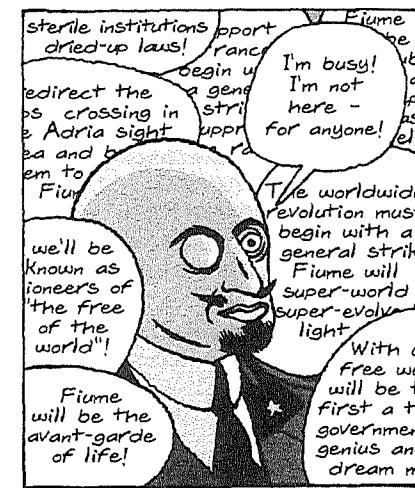


Figure 5: David B., *Black Paths* (2011). © David B. All rights reserved.

Using freer ways of placing speech-bubble text, authors of later graphic narratives have found ways to highlight their individual drawing style and mise-en-pages. Among Western artists with highly recognizable lettering styles are Molly Crabapple, Nicolas Mahler, Peter Bagge, and

33 Cf. Schüwer 2008: 326, 361.

34 Jean-Mathieu Méon is currently working on a publication on lettering.

Debbie Drechsler. Idiosyncratic lettering can also be found in the comics by Kati Rickenbacher and Vanessa Davis, who are less concerned with the traditional *horizontal* nature of the text. This freedom can go so far that some of their characters occasionally have to ‘lean back’ awkwardly in order to give way to huge ameboid speech bubbles. While in these cases the dominance of the speech bubbles highlights the mediality of the graphic narrative and decreases the reader’s willingness to ‘suspend disbelief,’ other artists have used abundant and stratified speech bubbles within one panel as a specific narrative device—either to indicate the oversupply of simultaneous speech acts<sup>35</sup> (see figure 5) or to add a narrator’s layer of comment to the character’s utterance, rendering the latter almost indecipherable and thereby highlighting that its significance is subservient to that of the narrator’s comments.<sup>36</sup>

#### Combination Type 3: Montage

Midway between the genuinely narrative and the quasi-narrative media, our third category, *montage*, comes into play. McCloud uses this term to denote the integration of text into an image. Examples can be found both where letters are integrated into a narrative and where they are used (partly or fully) in their iconic quality.<sup>37</sup> Some authors of graphic narratives take this potential to a meta-level, properly exemplifying it, as for instance Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli’s *City of Glass* (1994) and Mike Carey and Peter Gross’s *The Unwritten* (2009–).<sup>38</sup> The iconic use of letters is widespread among authors of graphic narratives and not only known thanks to such prominent headings as the ones found in Will Eisner’s *Spirit* installments (1940–1952). It has even been used as an inspiration for entire narratives: French comics author Fred has based his album series *Phlémon* (serialized since 1965) on a character whose adventures take place on a number of fictitious islands, each one of which has the shape of a letter and which together form the word “Océan Atlantique” (see figure 6). The fact that textual elements are turned into iconic elements and forms that are primarily looked at and not read demonstrates that graphic narratives question the clear division between words and pictures.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. David B. 2011: 30.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Clowes 2011: 42.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Schüwer 2008: 53.

<sup>38</sup> On this meta-level in *City of Glass*, cf. Schüwer 2008: 303; for extended analysis of *The Unwritten*, see Christina Meyer’s contribution in this volume.

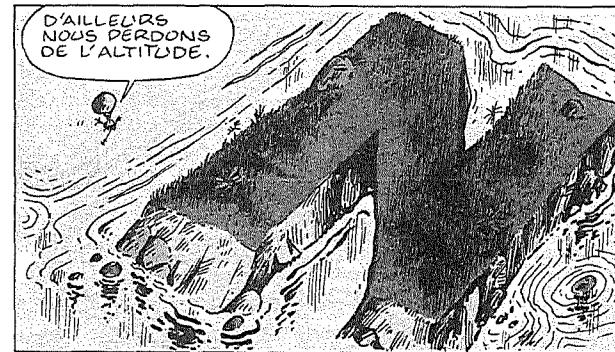


Figure 6: Fred, *Phlémon: L'intégrale* (2011). © Fred. All rights reserved.

#### Combination Type 4: Parallel

Our fourth category, the *parallel combination*, subsumes those cases where text and image (seem to) diverge, which may result in an intensification of the reader’s narrativization activity. Inevitably, the reader will attempt to construe the narrative coherence of whatever he or she confronts. A genuinely parallel combination in which little sense can be made of the connection between text and drawing in the same panel is unlikely. The closest we get to it is the suggestion of the ‘empty’ gaze, such as that frequently found in the Tibetan adventures Cosey presents in his album series *Jonathan* (2009).<sup>39</sup> Panels with a less action-oriented visual content are better suited to such parallel combinations. Nylso is a pertinent example in this context. In his *Jérôme et le lièvre* (2004), he draws a simple black-and-white character who makes a long journey through nature. Over the course of more than thirty panels, this character wanders across beaches and meadows, while reciting aloud a text by Paul Nizon which compares the process of walking to that of keeping a diary. While the choice of topic, i.e., the comparison, may create at least a vague connection between word and image on the page as a whole, no such connection can be found in the single panels: the content of the speech bubbles does not directly relate to the action depicted (see figure 7).

<sup>39</sup> Generally speaking, Cosey seems to conceive of his *Jonathan* series in close proximity to what Wolf places at the right-hand side of his schema, namely, instrumental music. On the first page of a single installment, the author-artist suggests a ‘soundtrack’—groups such as Pink Floyd and Tangerine Dream—to be listened to during the reading process.



Figure 7: Nylso, *Jérôme et le lièvre* (2004). © Nylso. All rights reserved.

#### Combination Type 5: Picture Specific

The last category in the transition from the graphic narrative to monophase single image is what we call *picture specific combinations*. Authors of graphic narratives can either partly or entirely dispense with text. This fifth category is a vast one. Examples in which readers can relatively easily construe narrative coherence can be found in comic strips consisting of single-line (e.g., Carl Anderson's *Henry*) or single-page (e.g., Antonio Prohías's *Spy vs. Spy*) pantomimic episodes. Many authors of manga produce long pantomimic sequences with detailed successions of the protagonist's movements. The size of the present-day manga industry and

its high degree of labor division allows for a vast production of pages in both weekly and monthly series, resulting in some of these pantomimic graphic narratives approximating McCloud's experiment of a roll of film laid out instead of projected.<sup>40</sup>

'Depriving' a panel sequence of verbal language can, of course, be used to very particular effect. In comics series where the verbal element is relatively dominant, readers confronted with such a deprivation will not only need to employ a "more intensive process of combination and deduction" (Schüwer 2008: 320; our translation from the German: "höhere Kombinations- und Deduktionsleistung"), but will also feel the particular effect of 'silence' when going through the respective panels. An example can be found in a September 2001 episode of Alison Bechdel's monthly strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The subtle humor of this series has always been heavily based on the *verbal* sarcasm of its protagonists. After eight years of producing the single-page weekly strips, in September 2001 Bechdel drew an episode in which all the characters are silent. They are depicted in the moments when they learn about the attacks on the Twin Towers. The 'silent' atmosphere of this episode shows the characters in a profound state of shock. The progression from panel to panel is a flash-like tour through the entire group of characters, dispersed as they are throughout the city, and it requires a high degree of reader participation, as well as a certain amount of knowledge of the context to make sense of this 'jumping' panel series.<sup>41</sup>

Wordless panel sequences are used to particularly good effect in those graphic narratives which, in the tradition of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–1914), have a surreal or quasi-surreal plot. Examples are the works of Moebius or Geof Darrow, but also some dream-like episodes in the works of Chris Ware. However, it is undoubtedly abstract comics that demand the highest level of narrativization amongst all types of graphic narratives. In this relatively recent form of experimenting with the genre, abstract (or almost abstract) geometrical forms are placed on a page in such a way as to suggest a sequence of panels, provoking the reader to see in them a type of narrative (see figure 8).<sup>42</sup>

40 Cf. McCloud 1993: 7–9; Pratt 2009: 114; cf. also Schodt 2007: 24.

41 Cf. Bechdel 2008: 267.

42 Cf. Baetens 2011: 95.

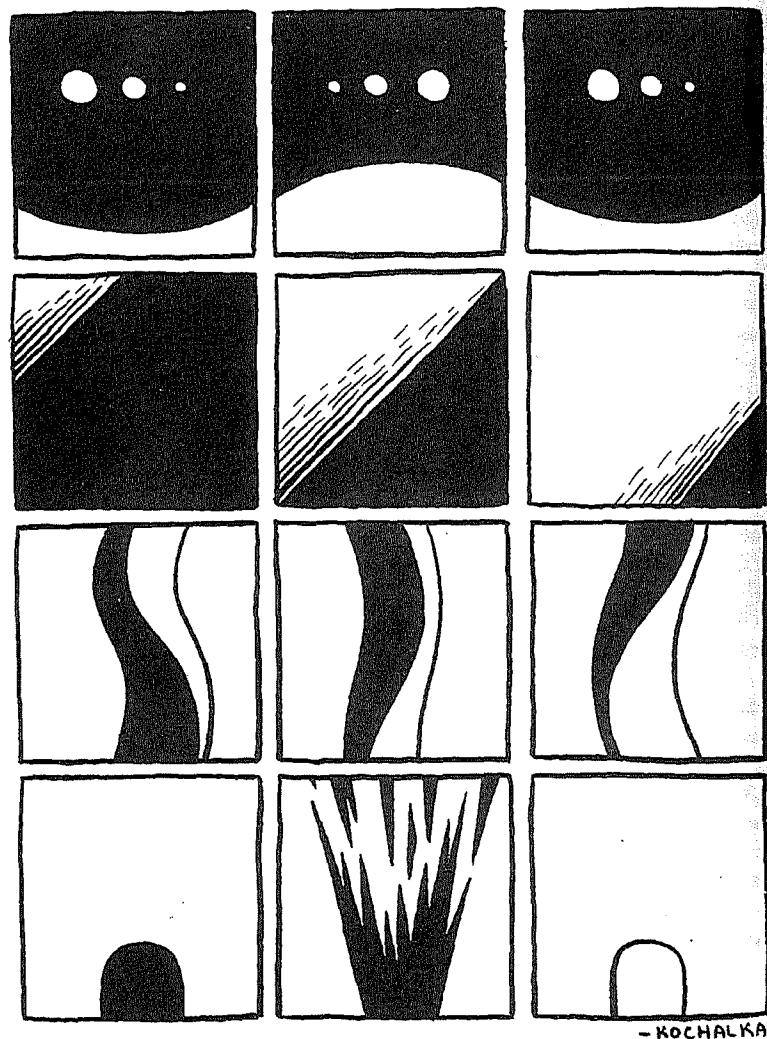


Figure 8: James Kochalka, [No title] (2009), published in Molotiu 2009 (n.p.).  
© James Kochalka. All rights reserved.

### Conclusions

Postclassical narratologists such as Ryan and Wolf are interested in developing a transmedial narratology that is based on the insight that narrativity is a cognitive macro-frame to be activated in different media. They are, however, very much aware of the fact that the narrative potential of different media, i.e., the limits and affordances inherent to specific media, varies. We have discussed the results of intermediality studies and combined them with recent theoretical results from transmedial narratology in order to develop a more specific terminology and typology that help explain the wide range of intermedial relationships in graphic narratives and their transmedial narrative potential. The fields of intermediality studies, transmedial and interdisciplinary narratology, comics studies, media studies as well as semiotics have developed diverging terminologies, methodologies, and concepts, but we hope to have demonstrated how these approaches can be combined in a fruitful way.

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