

# On the History and Hermeneutics of Comics

## ABSTRACT

What is a comic? The simple answer states that a comic is a drawn story that is picture- rather than text-oriented and told serially. In other words, a comic is a type of illustration. Realism is not its goal; rather a narrative is developed through reduction according to specific stylistic means.

I start this article with a definition of the term “comic”, and move on to highlight the complexity of the comic and to argue that insight into this complexity is necessary for its correct interpretation. Only then can we recognise that the comic is not only entertaining but also, in its own way, a vehicle for content that might be system confirming and propagandistic but can also be system critical. Doing so allows us to see the potential of the comic that is embedded in its particular affinity with nonlinear interactive audiovisual media.

## KEYWORDS

History of comics, hermeneutic of comics, illustrative language, dissident potential, propagandistic potential

## BIOGRAPHY

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My principal area of expertise, Catholic fundamental theology, is not exactly known for its affinity with comics. Until the 1970s, comics were generally ignored by scholars; subsequently they were either vilified as an inferior genre or, worse, interpreted eisegetically. Only a small number of researchers took comics as seriously as they deserved,<sup>1</sup> and none of them worked from the specific perspective of fundamental theology. The discipline, however, cannot afford to

1 A good example of an early, high quality approach is Wermke 1976.

disregard something that, on the one hand, uses religious symbols (Christian or not) to spread a certain message and, on the other hand, utilises narratives that are deeply rooted in religious thought, such as the apocalyptic struggle of good versus evil or the myth of a saviour. Nor should it be allowed to ignore comics, for one of the true tasks for fundamental theology is to see how a society communicates, and to analyse the religious context of this communication. In this article, I mix business with pleasure: a comic fan myself, I provide an overview of the history of the comic along with a hermeneutic take, and I end by looking to the topic's potential within a society that is dominated by interactive audio-visual media.

## DEFINITION PROBLEMS

What exactly is a comic? Intuitive definitions come readily, but a precise definition is more challenging for the range of genres – comical, criminological, pornographic, horror, for example – is so great. The Japanese *man-ga* means “funny picture”, yet today the most widely read Mangas share hardly any comical elements. Just like Mangas, the comic more broadly has not been bound by the original meaning of the term used to describe it, and successful series like *Superman*<sup>2</sup> and *Mick Tanga*<sup>3</sup> or, more recently, *Deadpool*<sup>4</sup> and *Hellblazer*<sup>5</sup> (see fig. 1) are described as “comics” but have little to do with fun or humour.

The definition of the term “comic” contains a compromise frequently found in definitions, between exclusivity and restriction, on one hand, and inclusion and trivialisation, on the other.

Wiltrud Drechsel, Jörg Funhoff and Michael Hoffmann are amongst those who have pointed out that any formal definition of comics that ignores creation context and reception will be inadequate. Identification of the comic as “periodically published picture stories with fixed characters and speech bubbles with dialogues, where the picture dominates the word” leads us to “important elements of the medium,” but as these authors acknowledge, this definition “fails to acknowledge the facts [...] deliberately ignoring that comics can not be identified without their producers or purchasers.”<sup>6</sup> The comic has *formal characteristics* as well as a *functional spectrum*, both of which are defined by production and reception.<sup>7</sup> We will return to this facet below.

2 DC Comics, since 1938.

3 Published by the Dargaud Publishing House (also responsible for the Asterix series) from 1961 to 1973 and again since 2002.

4 Published by Marvel Comics, since 1991.

5 Published by DC Comics, since 1995.

6 Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 11.

7 Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, for example, argues in the tradition of the capitalist-critical thinking of the movement of 1968. Such approaches banished the bald accusation that comics were an instru-



Fig. 1: Jamie Delano, *Hellblazer*, 153. Note the religious symbols used, such as the crosses, the window with the Saint George motive, and the gesture of adoration.

The historical perspective overreaches when it looks for the origins of comics in Egyptian wall paintings or the friezes of Trajan's Column, as has repeatedly been tried.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, the image is older than the written word and was therefore the primary medium and agent of expression within prehistoric societies and societies where reading was reserved for a very small educated class.<sup>9</sup> And the picture remained the essential medium for the less educated members of a population, but was secondary for members of an increasingly literate society (as is well illustrated by the development and later decline of the *biblia pauperum*). In many ways, however, such pictures are not what we would understand today as typical of the comic.

Arguments about the history of the comic's essential Americanness<sup>10</sup> must also be challenged, for they are based on fallacy – the assumption that only “comic strips” (see below), which have appeared in the daily press since the 1890s, qualify as “comics”. While such work was ground-breaking in publishing history, the “comic” genre is not only much older but also of European provenance. We need a more precise definition that emphasises the specific medial value of comics, for which formal and functional categories are essential.

## HISTORY

As demonstrated by fig. 2, a xylograph from a Dutch workshop, elements used to classify a comic (narration, abstraction, primacy of the image, and an extended field of vision; see in detail below) could be found in the art of 15th-century Europe. The *ars moriendi* illustration in fig. 2 depicts a dying man. Gathered at his bedside are Mary, mother of God, Jesus Christ, God the Father, and a group of saints, while four demon figures fight over the dying man's soul, with a fifth looking on from behind the bed. The pain of death can be read from the dying man's face. While folding their hands in prayer or raising their hands in blessing, the saints speak words of encouragement such as “Tu es firmus in fide!” (You are firm in faith!). But the demons are very active, too. They hold out three

ment designed to dull their audience's minds, a suggestion that could still be heard in the 1980s. They deploy, however, a Marxist media theory and look at comics primarily as instruments of manipulation in favour of the status quo in the distribution of wealth and income. While the examples they used are out-dated, their argumentation should still be taken into account.

8 See e.g. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comic#Geschichte> [accessed 6 Dec. 2016].

9 Between the black and white of literacy and illiteracy there are many shades of grey. In a culture that used scripture exclusively in a sacred context, reading competence was restricted to a very small group who had to have complete mastery of that skill (cf. Simek 2006, 100–102), but in the increasingly secular and economic context of later millennia the ability to read and write was acquired to support everyday life (cf. Haarmann 2002, especially the chapter “Ökonomische Funktionen des Schriftgebrauchs in Mesopotamien und Ägypten”). This phenomenon is also familiar in the 21st century, see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/PISA-Studien#Entwicklung-der-Leistungen-2000.E2.80.932012> [accessed 10 Dec. 2016].

10 See e.g. Hollein in Braun/Hollein 2016, 7 or Gubern 1978, 63–65.

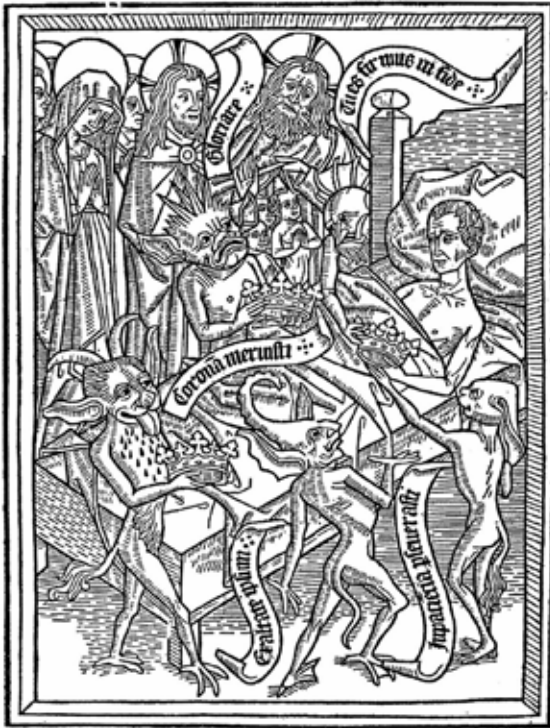


Fig. 2: Anonymous: *Ars moriendi*, c. 1460. Banners appear here as the forerunner of the later speech bubble.

crowns – symbols of earthly power and riches – towards the dying man, whom they seek to seduce with words of ambition and pride and to bring to commit a deadly sin (“Coronam meruisti!”; You deserve the crown!).

Such early forms of picture stories – designated here a “protocomic” – allowed the illiterate to access a story, as the accompanying text in fig. 3 explicitly notes: “Anyone who cannot read / need only watch the dance / to see how death always / has humans on his leash”.<sup>11</sup>

The dawning of the comic is usually located in the late 19th century, with *The Yellow Kid* often cited as the first such example,<sup>12</sup> although the parallels with what is today understood as a comic are often only limited. The *Katzenjammer Kids* certainly seems closer to today’s definition,<sup>13</sup> although its creator, exiled German cartoonist Rudolph Dirks, plagiarised Wilhelm Busch’s *Max und Moritz* even to the extent of drawing on individual episodic details. Dirks enriched Busch’s concept (though he was unable to replicate Busch’s graphic brilliance)

11 “Wer doch nit lesen kan, / beschau den tantz nur an, / wie der tott all augenblickh / den menschen hat an seinem strickh.”

12 Drawn by Richard Outcault, published in *New York World* from 1895.

13 Drawn by Rudolph Dirks, published in the *New York Journal* from 1897.



Fig. 3: *Dance of Death*, Bleibach, about 1720. © Jörgens.mi / CC-BY-SA-3.0 (via Wikimedia Commons). The banner says “Mein Trompetenschall bringt Freud oder Truebsal in Ewigkeit” (The sound of my trumpets brings joy or sadness for eternity).

with a strict seriality and the use of speech bubbles. Until the 1930s the “official” comic genre was still dominated by the humorous content that had been responsible for its name. In the mid 1920s, however, demand for pornographic comics thrived, in the U.S. market in particular, where cheaply produced booklets with eight to ten pages were sold under the collective name *Tijuana Bibles*.<sup>14</sup>

In 1929 Belgian George Remi, writing under the pen name Hergé, designed the series entitled *The Adventures of Tintin*,<sup>15</sup> a pioneering achievement in blending adventure story and comic elements. The same year saw the publication of Hal Foster’s *Tarzan*, an adventure story full of suspense but with realistic depictions,<sup>16</sup> which launched a paradigm shift, with the move away from the comic genre towards the adventure and hero genre, a trend that continued with the detective comic *Dick Tracy* (1931) and reached a zenith with the eponymous superhero characters of *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939), both published by DC Comics. The comical receded or was eliminated as the “comic” forsook its origins. The comic’s format also changed, as the comic strips that had been the rule until the 1930s were supplemented by comic albums that might have sixteen or more pages.<sup>17</sup> The time was ripe for such innovation, for, as Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann have noted, such superheroes not only provided a means of

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.tijuanabible.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> By the time of his death in 1983, Hergé had created 24 volumes in the *Tintin* series; volume 25 lay unfinished on his desk.

<sup>16</sup> Hal Foster’s renown stemmed not only from *Tarzan* but also from *Prince Valiant*. Both series lack the speech bubble, an essential part of the comic. Foster’s characters do talk, but the text is written as a side note to each panel and is sufficiently elaborate for the story to be gleaned from the text alone, without the aid of the pictures. Thus, *Prince Valiant* and *Tarzan* are more illustrated stories than comics.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the production process, the size of an album of issues corresponds to the size of the print-sheets. A printsheet is usually cut into sixteen pages, and as the number of pages in a volume is usually calculated by half print sheets, such volumes usually contain eight pages.

fleeing the disaster of Black Friday but also acted as propaganda for the New Deal, with their message of upward mobility countering the very real fear of spiralling downward.<sup>18</sup>

The comic strip – illustrated connected images that appeared in the regular print media, limited to a certain page width and with a panel height of usually one eighth to one quarter of a page – did not disappear; instead, it has continued to thrive, and with its distinctive emphases remains a popular component

of contemporary print.<sup>19</sup>

The graphic novel forms a subcategory of the comic. The term was coined by illustrator and author Will Eisner, who referred to his work *A Contract with God* (1978), composed of four comic short stories that together formed a work of 180 pages, as a graphic novel (see fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> In contemporary usage, the term “graphic novel” is applied to non-serial, book-length comics that are narratively complex and have themes taken from everyday life.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 4: From Will Eisner, *A Contract with God*, p. 86, the “graphic novel” that established a new genre.

<sup>18</sup> Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 80.

<sup>19</sup> The comic strip Dilbert is an integral part of almost 2,000 daily or weekly magazines; see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dilbert> [accessed 21 Nov. 2016]. Equally famous is Hagar the Horrible, a strip that is similarly widely published; see <http://kingfeatures.com/comics/comics-a-z/?id=Hagar-The-Horrible> [accessed 21 Nov. 2016]. Both strips are excellent examples of reception-oriented products. Dilbert addresses an audience comprising young technophiles who question authority more generally and in their own managerial structures in particular. Hagar is focused on the upper middle class who in their everyday life face challenges much like those faced by Hagar.

<sup>20</sup> Eisner 2006, III.

<sup>21</sup> This definition is not undisputed, but there is consensus that “comic” designates the main concept and “graphic novel” the species. See the description by McCloud 2001.

The cartoon (see fig. 5) is a further subcategory, usually employed for an individual drawing on the border between comic and caricature that is self-standing and has only a few of the typical characteristics of the comic (see below).<sup>22</sup> The cartoon will often make reference to contemporary political and/or social context.



Fig. 5: Ralph Ruthe, *Cartoon #3031*, in: <http://ruthe.de/cartoon/3031/datum/asc/> [accessed 5 Dec. 2016].

## FORMAL FEATURES

Fundamentally, a comic is a single drawing or series of drawings that tells a story (narrative element), with the depiction reduced to its essential components (abstracting element); the explanatory, verbal text is of secondary importance (priority of the image); the narrative is not bound to time (multitemporality); and the whole provides readers with new interpretative meanings (polyperception).

## NARRATIVE ELEMENT

A comic is a drawing that narrates a story that may be known or completely new. Unlike the classic painting, a comic has a narrative that is not limited to

<sup>22</sup> In the Anglo-American context, “cartoon” (short: “toon”) is also used to designate the animated short film.

the depiction of moment or phase. The comic can comprise a single image, a number of images, or many pages of images, but in each case, decisively, a process is depicted that goes beyond the moment. This narrative quality is both an essential element of a comic and simultaneously the comic's main signifier. As Scott McCloud has pointed out, the "gutter" – the term for the spacing between panels on a page – also plays a significant role in the narration. McCloud has argued that comic drawings only sketch selected phases and that readers are required to fill the gaps with their creative phantasy,<sup>23</sup> but his argument can be challenged, for (1) a single panel in a series can cover a longer timespan and (2) some comics have no gutter simply because they consist of a single image.



Fig. 6: Hagar the Horrible, from Browne, *Harte Zeiten*, n. p.

Fig. 6, a cartoon by Dik Browne, provides an excellent example of narration in a single image. Helga, Hagar's wife, is a great proponent of cleanliness, as evinced by her spotless attire, neat hair, and decorative belt. She returns home after a brief trip away (the front door is open although it is night time) to find the house turned upside down. Her husband, her complete opposite when it comes to orderliness and hygiene (scruffy attire, sloppy shaving, spotty helmet), is sitting on the floor, defeated and, according to his grim facial expression, somewhat angry. Helga's exclamation "What has happened here?!!!" makes evident the disparity between her knowledge and that of the reader: Helga, literally unbalanced by what she sees, asks about the cause of the chaos; the reader can see a single insect circling somewhat provocatively above Hagar, who still holds a flyswatter, as a weapon, in his hand. At the heart of this narration is the victory of the tiny fly over the mighty Viking. My description makes all too clear that no matter how detailed the explanation, when a visual gag (whether joke or cartoon) is expressed in words, it readily loses something of its subtext or humour. It speaks for the quality of the drawing that the cartoon can still amuse and divert readers even after my explanation.

If we are to understand the humour of this image, we need to know of the nature and function of furniture and of the status of orderliness and cleanliness

23 McCloud 1994, 66–68.

in Western tradition. To capture its full potential we need familiarity with the characters and an appropriate contextualisation. Decontextualised, the joke would be less comprehensible, with the paradox of the victory of the apparently hopelessly underpowered inferior over the powerful attacker lost.

## ABSTRACTING ELEMENT

No visual art form, including drawings, can display all the details of an actual optical event. Even Albrecht Dürer's *Young Hare* (1502), acclaimed for its stunning naturalism, is no exception: despite all his loyalty to what he saw, Dürer had no choice but to abstract. As Ernst Gombrich pointed out, artists never portray everything they see; they show us only the essence of what they represent.<sup>24</sup> In comics such reduction is extensive, reaching a degree of abstraction that can take advantage, however, of the ambiguity it creates. With abstraction the need for similarity with the template decreases tremendously. A quantitative, but not necessarily qualitative, difference is created between the precisely executed drawing and the drawing flung down in a few strokes. A comparison of fig. 6, with its depiction of a "Viking prototype" and fig. 7, with its depiction of the Norse god Thor, Marvel's comic hero, is illustrative.

Although the execution of the Thor cover is colourful, realistic, and far more detailed, the strongly abstracted depiction of Hagar is no less dynamic than the image of the Norse god. The cartoonists have emphasised different aspects, primarily as a product of the message they intend to deliver. Umberto Eco has pointed out that the painter produces a significantly less realistic representation than the graphic art-



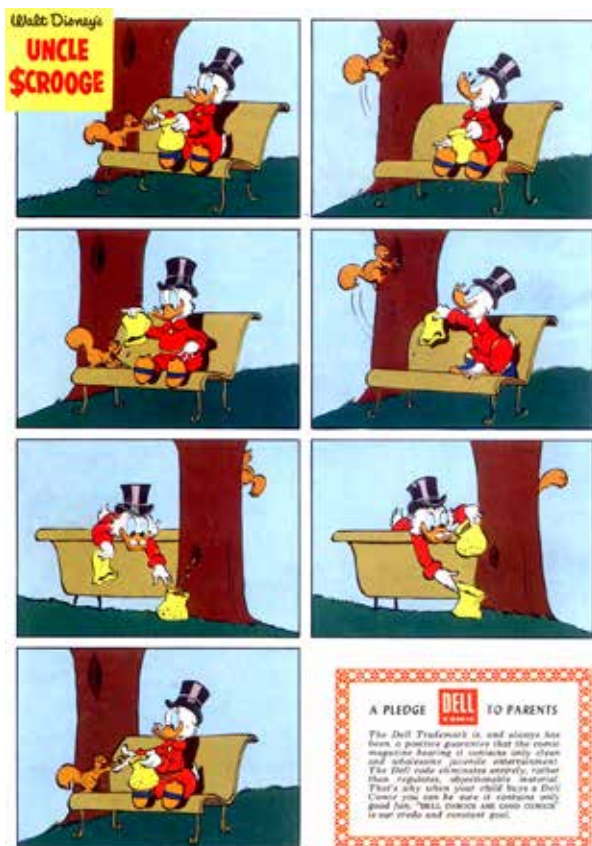
Fig. 7: John Buscema, Cover of Comic Magazine *Thor*, No. 272, 1978.

24 Gombrich 2004, 55–78, esp. 73.

ist. A drawing captures at least one characteristic that is real (the outline), but a painting works with much more ambiguous features, namely colour and density. Eco proposed that an image's iconic quality stems not from the depiction but from the conventions met by illustrator and viewer in a minimal consensus.<sup>25</sup>

## PRIMACY OF THE PICTURE

The weighting of picture and text can be reversed in illustrated narration. Conventionally, text outweighs pictures, with the latter often static and used sparsely. In comics, however, pictures dominate the text, with words necessary only when the picture on its own cannot fulfil the narrative purpose.



The noteworthy single-page cartoon in fig. 9 makes its point without using a single word, a rare exception in Carl Barks' work.<sup>26</sup> The priority of the picture allows the comic to traverse language barriers – in Michael Haneke's film 71 FRAGMENTS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF CHANCES (AT, 1994) a homeless refugee child steals a comic in the hope that "reading" it will provide security, comfort, or even amusement.<sup>27</sup>

Fig. 9: Carl Barks, *Uncle Scrooge* 11 (09/1955), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Eco 2002, 209–210.

<sup>26</sup> The intervention from the publishing house at the bottom right is remarkable. It addresses the preconception that comics are trash and therefore harmful to youth. The Dell code introduced in 1955 was intended to prevent such preconceptions. I sincerely thank Ernst Horst for drawing my attention to this aspect.

<sup>27</sup> 71 FRAGMENTS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF CHANCES (Michael Haneke, AT 1994), 00:18:04.

## POLYPERCEPTION

A visual medium is usually subject to distinct framing. For comics these boundaries are traditionally established through the use of panels. Arranged on a page in rows and sections, such panels structure the perception process in terms of both place and time. On one hand, the sequencing of pictures/images is established, with a line of montage from which the “reader” can deviate only with great difficulty (for an example of this challenge, see fig. 10). On the other hand, however, this structure opens up a new visual field through interruption, for unlike film, which is bound to projection formats or pixel resolution, the picture/image in a comic can be altered, can break boundaries, and can allow different weightings within representations of the “reality” of a narrative (see fig. 11, and also fig. 1). Freed from all narrative conventions, one character can appear multiple times in a single panel, for the act of reception is open to freely established rhythms of perception. The author cannot then expect that the conventional reception order will be followed by the reader, who might linger on one page, look repeatedly at one or more panel, or turn back to previous pages to enjoy certain passages again. This abandonment of



Fig. 10: The temporal sequence is fixed by convention – in Chinese/Japanese culture the traditional direction of reading is from right to left. N.N., *Meister Pao Blauhimmel, Das Geheimnis des unterschobenen Leichnams (I shih chia-huo)*, in: Wolfgang Bauer, *Chinesische Comics*, 45.

limits – the drawn reality is perceived without boundary-setting boxes – brings the comic closer to physical reality than a movie, for example, which is strictly limited to the film’s frame.<sup>28</sup>

Another exclusive polyperceptive feature of the comic is the artist’s/viewer’s ability to read the mind of the characters. The thought bubble is a distinctive expressive form (see lower panels of fig. 12) and in revealing a character’s thinking provides the reader with knowledge that the other characters in the comic do not possess. Neither film nor computer game can deploy this possibility,

other than in the inner monologue borrowed from literature, unless it draws on the comic’s toolset.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 11: Milo Manara, *Tag des Zornes*, 70. Even when an intuitive reading direction is adopted leading left-right and top-bottom, the internal ordering of the panel is dislocated (polylocation) and panel boundaries are broken.

- 28 The split-screen technique, invented in the cinema of the late 1920s, is not comparable as it only further divides the limited space provided by the film frame (the projection screen) into smaller units (cf. Monaco 2001, 103–109, esp. 105). By contrast, the comic leaves the eye of the viewer free to choose its own distance, rhythm, and sequence; the viewer can “read” a whole page or a panel again, look back to earlier images, and ignore the gutter at will.
- 29 Examples of this strategy to surmount frames and to depict polylocation and time flow can be found, however, early in art history. A famous example is provided by the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo indicated God’s dynamis by depicting God from the front and from behind simultaneously; cf. Toman 2010, 518–519.

## FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

### THE SPECIFIC RECEPTION SITUATION

Schleiermacher defined hermeneutics in summary as a process that seeks to remedy the fundamental misconceptions that encompass every human communication. Such correction can be found in the circular and active interaction of reader and text<sup>30</sup> that he deemed necessary for the reception process from its outset.<sup>31</sup> An appropriate frame of comprehension (or texture in the case of comics) will allow a precise process-oriented understanding of the text. An earlier understanding is corrected and a hermeneutic draft simultaneously developed, producing a profound new understanding of the texture, which becomes its own pre-understanding (the hermeneutic circle). Every texture can be considered, and every significant texture must be considered, in this light. And Hans-Georg Gadamer ponders whether it is truly sufficient for understanding to mean the avoidance of misunderstanding, for, he asks, does not every misunderstanding require a supporting understanding?<sup>32</sup>

The supporting understanding that precedes every understanding – and also every misunderstanding – is tied to the possibility of comprehension or miscomprehension. Every texture is seen by the recipient through this precondition, and if a texture is incomprehensible, the reception is bound to fail. Here we have a balance between precision and ambiguity: the richer a medium's communicative potential, the greater the challenge for the hermeneutic process; in reverse, however, an accurate and singular description – a mathematical formula, for example – has a minimum of hermeneutic requirements and a single possible meaning.

The reception of comics as viewed in this context is very specific and expressed synaesthetically: sound, smell, taste, and touch are transformed into the visual effect contained by the picture and the word; lines give the impression of movement; time's course is defined by the sequence of panels.<sup>33</sup> Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann note that comics do not follow the laws of reality that we humans expect, with our logics of space, time, and dimension.<sup>34</sup>

A fine example of synaesthetical expression can be seen in fig. 11: while word and picture complement each other, the picture dominates; smell is expressed by facial colour and facial expression; the reproduction of the scene is accompanied by sounds that can be “heard” in onomatopoetic articulation outside the speech bubbles (“Fschchch”, “Schnupper Schnupper”), movement is por-

30 Schleiermacher 1838, 30.

31 Schleiermacher 1838, 189. While Schleiermacher discusses the example of dialogue, his results are compelling for all forms of communication.

32 Gadamer 1990, vol. II, 223.

33 Other media might utilize synaesthetic approaches, but only the comic is necessarily synaesthetic.

34 Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 94.



Fig. 11: Albert Uderzo/René Goscinny, *Asterix and the Soothsayer* (Asterix Vol. 19), Stuttgart: Delta 1972, 30.

trayed by lines indicating motion; lines that suggest vibration bring something tactile to the image. The sequence of the panels, which follows Western reading habits that work from left to right and from top to bottom, provides a time line. The presentation is inherently visual, but the overall impression engages all the senses.

According to Gadamer, in our reception of the image we anticipate that the texture is comprehensible, that it will provide coherent meaning. We thus start with a premise of perfectness that is lost only when the subject of our reception appears incomprehensible. This anticipation is related not only to form, but also to content, with our expectation, Gadamer notes, of a relationship between truth and meaning.<sup>35</sup>

Gadamer starts from the genus of text and stays true, perhaps surprisingly, to the original orientation of hermeneutics, which dealt with the interpretation of authentic writings – texts with historical or religious claims. From this position, however, in an extension of Heidegger's description of the hermeneutical circle he postulates that understanding precedes every concrete act and is in effect inherently transcendent. Every method, every formal means of access is secondary to the interrelated act and framework of understanding. That position is adopted specifically with reference to works of art, to which Gadamer

<sup>35</sup> Gadamer 1990, vol. II, 62.

devotes a section of his *Wahrheit und Methode*.<sup>36</sup> The subject, he writes, is the work of art itself, not the subjectivity of the individual who experiences that work of art. For Gadamer the game has its own being, independent of those who play the game.<sup>37</sup> Just as the game masters its players, so too the work of art masters those who create and observe it.

Gadamer assumes that the work of art wants to be taken seriously. But does this interpretation stand for a comic? What if the image does not want to be taken seriously, if its form already makes evident that it is humorous, utopian, dystopian, or somehow remote? Gadamer's game analogy allows that even in its apparent not-wanting-to-be-taken-seriously, the comic does want to be taken seriously. It is a subject, not an object, and a partner in the hermeneutic process. This proposal leads us back to Dreschel's claim that a comic unseen by producers, market, and consumers cannot be. In other words, "the comic" as an abstract does not exist; it must be considered a dynamic product of the reception process that is, in turn, determined by its basic functions.

## ENTERTAINMENT FUNCTION

A comic lives decisively from its ability to entertain. The drawings delight in detailed and skilful imagery of what is unusual; the stories are designed for brevity and tension. Some comics are reduced to these aspects alone, but in most cases the entertainment factor serves as a medium for other functions. Yet the relegation of their entertainment function in favour of apparently more important factors can lead to the complete failure of the medium. A telling example of such failure is found in the ambitious experiment that seeks to portray Scripture according to the popular comics genre. The Deutsche Bibelstiftung made several attempts to this end in the early 1980s, but the unskilled and, as a result, loveless product ensured the series failed, despite a good story line with high moral standards (see fig. 12 and 13).<sup>38</sup>

Fig. 12 (r.): André Leblanc, *Der König kommt*  
[*The King comes*], unpaginated.  
The important pericope John 2:1-11  
is summarised on just one page.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer 1990, vol. I, 107–174.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer 1990, vol. I, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Every translation of the Bible is a sensitive subject, and both successful and failed attempts abound. The following examples demonstrate how a comic can miss its target audience completely.

Am Eingang der Stadt begrüßt sie ein Freund von Jesus.



Nach einiger Zeit bemerkt Maria, daß der Wein zu Ende geht. Sie sagt es Jesus und geht zu den Dienern.



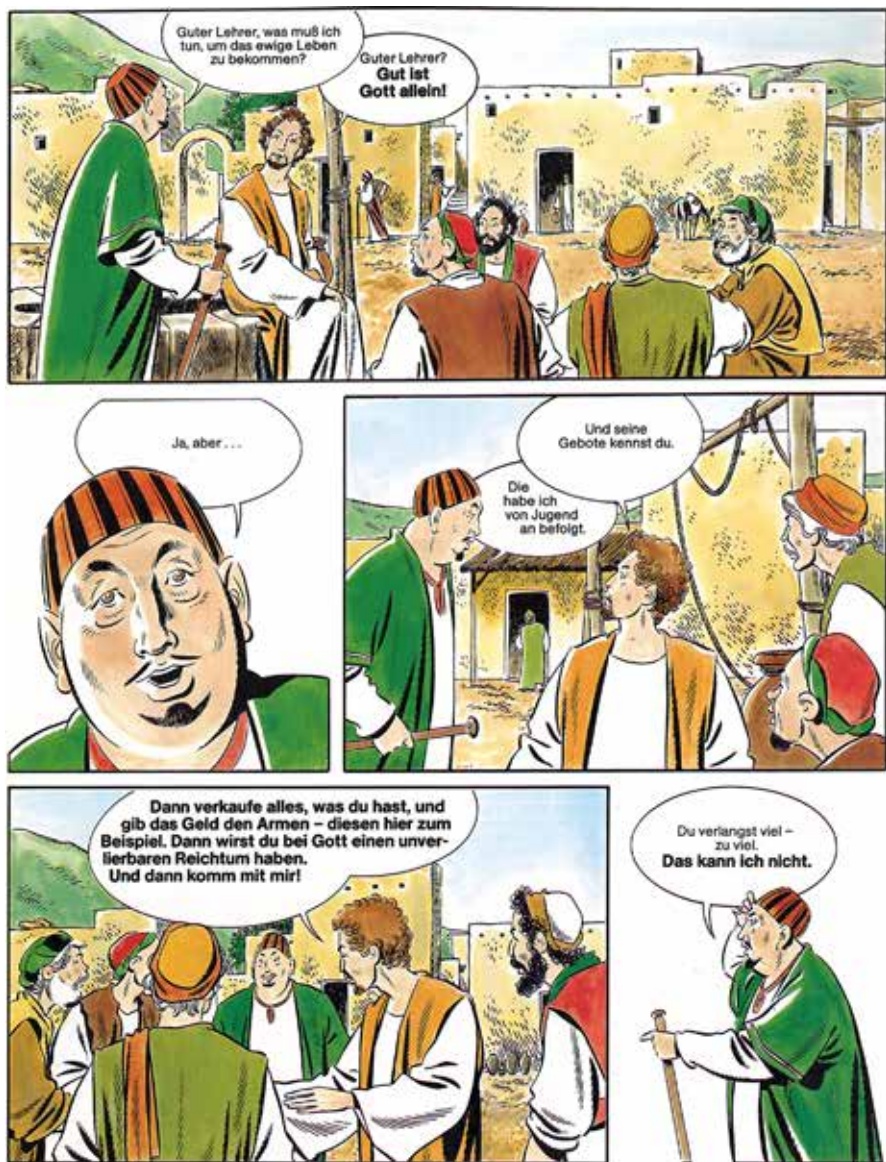


Fig. 13: Norbert Scholl, *Unruhe in der Provinz* [*Unrest in the provinces*], 37: the significant verses in Mark 10:17-22 are reduced to a few (horribly bad) pictures with the message distorted: Jesus' call for his followers to sell their possessions is launched in Mark with the words "One thing thou lackest", as a condition for "perfection" (even more evident in the parallel Matthew 19:21: "If thou wilt be perfect"), which is not what the questioner has asked for. The concept is omitted from the comic, giving the pericope a very different meaning.

## MORAL FUNCTION

The earliest examples that can be attributed to the comic genre were intended not as entertainment, but as instruction and moral example. The *ars moriendi* scene in fig. 2 is not intended to amuse. It was designed as an appeal for a spiritual response by an individual facing inevitable death and it vividly presents the consequences of persisting in sin, with the demons pointing to the mortal sins of pride and vanity. In light of the extensive circulation of this medium, the comic was evidently becoming a vehicle for broader understandings of what made a life good or bad.

Ironically the comic developed intense messages about right and wrong precisely in contexts where it was perceived as disgraceful, by the cultural establishment and by psychologists.<sup>39</sup> The Disney character Donald Duck is a paradigm of this form. Donald Duck bears the typical everyday problems of the common man without obviously favouring a certain political system or religious faith. Despite occasional violations of the rules, he stands up for fundamental values (or is persuaded by his nephews to follow the value system). In the narrative of *The Persistent Postman*, he is forced to deliver a letter from his rival Gus Goose to his beloved Daisy. Jealous, he decides to “lose” the letter in a raging snowstorm, but he then heeds his conscience and tries to find the letter again (fig. 14a). He succeeds, but then loses the letter once more, this time unintention-



39 See Wertham 1955.

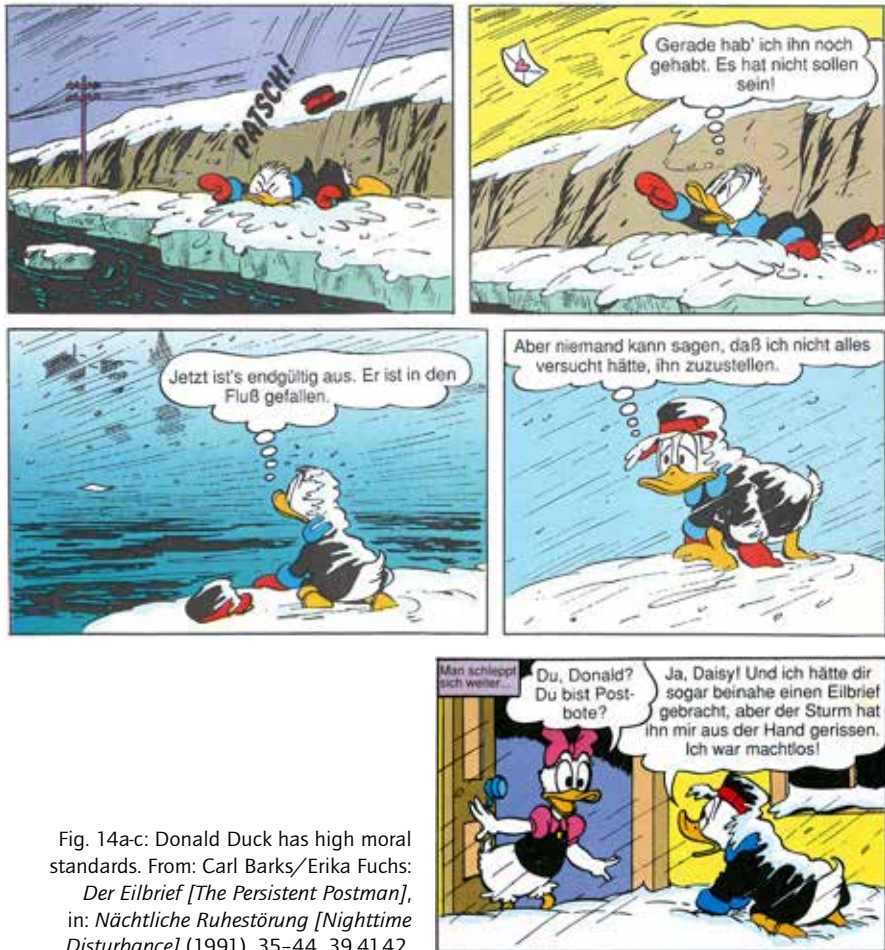


Fig. 14a-c: Donald Duck has high moral standards. From: Carl Barks/Erika Fuchs: *Der Eilbrief* [The Persistent Postman], in: *Nächtliche Ruhestörung* [Nighttime Disturbance] (1991), 35–44, 39.41.42.

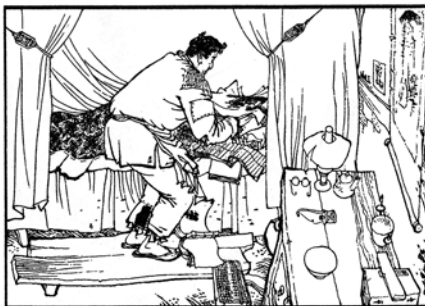
tionally (fig. 14b). Empty handed, he makes his way to Daisy to admit his failure (fig. 14c). The moral message is plain: perform your duty even if it seems odious and do be not afraid of admitting failure. Here as in so many other instances Donald Duck precisely illustrates Kant's categorical imperative.<sup>40</sup>

40 Within limits: the Donald Duck stories by Carl Barks were exceptionally well translated into German by Erika Fuchs; other less skilful artists too easily fall into cheap moralizing.

## AFFIRMATIVE AND PROPAGANDISTIC FUNCTION

Unlike with the moral function, the comic's propagandistic function is used to affirm an existing political system and to persuade recipients to show affirmative behaviour. A prime example is provided by American superhero comics of the 1930s and 1940s, in which the Western democratic system and the legitimacy of its actions, including its military actions, are clearly presented. From the beginning Superman was a model of the great (American) patriot,<sup>41</sup> while *Captain America* was "created specifically to combat what was un-American".<sup>42</sup> In Japan, *The Adventures of Dankichi* conveyed the legitimacy of Japanese expansion in Southeast Asia. In Italy, the character Dick Fulmine re-created Mussolini's physiognomy, and the comics in which he appeared were subjected to regular censorship.<sup>43</sup>

The Soviet Union, however, did not draw from the comic well, with only a single magazine for children, *Veselye Kartinki*, which first appeared in 1956, containing comic-like stories. The comic genre had a dubious reputation as decadent, primitive, and American.<sup>44</sup> In East Germany, however, *Mosaik* advertised in its own way the cultural and technical advantages of the Soviet Union over the West.<sup>45</sup> China liked to use comics to convey desirable system-compliant behaviour, with millions of comics printed and distributed to this end during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (see fig. 15).<sup>46</sup>



–Ich kaufte von ihm eine Maschinenpistole, um für die Zukunft gerüstet zu sein. Diese Maschinenpistole ... ist unter meinem Bett. Ich habe keine Ruhe ... schau nach ...– Ma Yung-kuei zieht ein Ölpapierpaket hervor.



T'uan-t'uan flüstert: –Die haben eine Maschinenpistole! Schnell – wir sagen es Opa Lung-kuan!– Der hält die Sache für so wichtig, daß er nachts den nächsten Posten der Befreiungsarmee verständigt.

Fig. 15: Denunciation as a desirable behaviour. N.N., *Zwei kleine Detektive* [*Two Little Detectives*], in: Wolfgang Bauer, *Chinesische Comics*, 216–217.

41 Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 107–108.

42 Gubern 1978, 20.

43 Fossati 1990, 90–91.

44 Zhirkoreva 2013.

45 See Frahm 2010. Launched in 1955, *Mosaik* is still published today and is therefore the oldest continuous German comic series.

46 See Bauer 1979; Kluver 2011, 237–254.

Islamic terror organisations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda have two principal reasons for not using comics for propaganda purposes: a strong tradition in Islam of rejecting images,<sup>47</sup> and the primary orientation of the largest audience in IS towards social media, which means that a comic would miss its target audience. In the last months, there are rare examples for subversive islamistic propaganda in popular Marvel comics;<sup>48</sup> however, the thriving comic scene in moderate Islam is mostly system critical.<sup>49</sup>

## SYSTEM-CRITICAL FUNCTION

Comics can also contain a system-critical and subversive potential. Disdained in the Soviet Union, the comics that reached the hands of the ruling class presented the Western way of life as very attractive, and were therefore potentially troublesome. Numerous more-current examples can also be cited: in India, which is characterised by strong traditions and social continuities, in addition to innumerable system-affirming comics, comics that convey social-political themes confronting the social and religious traditions of the country are also sold in great number. Such comics broach issues such as homosexuality, women's rights, social injustice, and the military and political orientation of the country.<sup>50</sup>

For Iranian culture, the film adaptation of *Persepolis* by Marjana Satrapi has gained international renown. In this comic movie, Satrapi deals with her childhood in Iran, engaging Iranian social and political conditions critically.<sup>51</sup> Indonesia has a thriving comic scene that denounces hypocrisy and corruption in local politics.<sup>52</sup> For Europe we can cite cartoonist Olaf Schwarzbach, who until his escape from East Germany in 1989 was under observation by state security because of his system-critical drawings.<sup>53</sup> Feminist discussions have also produced a long series of comic publications.<sup>54</sup> More recently, comics have been used as means of raising awareness against Islamism, and in particular against IS (see fig. 16).

47 Although the Qur'an does not strictly regulate aniconism (like Exod 20:1–6 and Deut 4:15–19, the suras 5:90 and 6:74 are directed against pagan idols and their veneration) but early hadith indicate a fundamental mistrust of pictures in general; cf. Paret 1976, 158–181.

48 Marvel had to withdraw parts of X-Men Gold #1 due to hidden islamistic messages one of the artists hid in some panels (see <http://news.orf.at/stories/2386857/> [accessed 10 Apr. 2017]).

49 See <https://de.qantara.de/search/overview/comic> [accessed 15 Dec. 2016]; I thank Ulrike Bechmann for this reference.

50 See Otto 2014, 79.

51 Satrapi 2005; filmed by Marjana Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, FR/US 2007.

52 See <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/comicszene-in-indonesien-goldenes-zeitalter-fur-talente> [accessed 15 Dec. 2016].

53 See Schwarzbach 2015. Unfortunately little original material from Schwarzbach's years in the GDR has survived, partly as the result of raids by the Stasi, and partly because when Schwarzbach fled in 1989, he took with him only what he could carry.

54 Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List-of-feminist-comic-books> [accessed 3 Dec. 2016]. It is noteworthy that many such books are the work of men.



Fig. 16: Harris, Eleri Mai, Where did Islamic State come from, and what does it really want?, in: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-06/where-did-is-come-from,-and-what-does-it-really-want/7369802> [accessed 6 Dec. 2016].

## SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The relationship between text and picture has changed several times in history. In the 19th century, innovations in technical production and reproduction were accompanied by the growing importance of the picture, in particular after the second half of the 19th century, and they gained tremendous momentum through audiovisual media, film and television.<sup>55</sup> In the internet-based media of

<sup>55</sup> As Paul Virilio (1991) showed, technical development and the audience's affinity with the products thus made possible the formation of a circle. He locates the arms industry as the main stimulus for this development. In this context, it is of importance that the roots of the internet also lie in military purposes. The ARPAnet of the late 1960s was developed at the command of the U.S. Ministry of Defence.

the late 20th century, the text became more important again, and once more the technical framework played a role: the connection speed of the network for individual and private use remained relatively low until the late 1990s, such that the transfer of pictures and of videos in particular remained the exception.<sup>56</sup> However, since the triumph of the interactive digital media, made possible by the exponential increase of network speed and the establishment of mobile devices as a normal form of network participation in the last two decades, an increased concentration on the (moving) image can be observed, yet without neglecting text completely.

But in electronic media the nature of this text has changed again: it is used mainly to explain the pictorial representation. The text aims at either defining a picture that is inherently plurivalent, or it opens new horizons of meaning that cannot be seen clearly in the image as such. Language is increasingly contracted to slogans, onomatopoetic descriptions (\*giggle\*), acronyms (\*ROFL\*) or shortened without regard for grammatical conventions.<sup>57</sup> The parallels with the comic are obvious: Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat seem to function according to similar rules, just like the well-known medium of the illustrated booklet.

So the comic could develop striking potential in the current media environment. As we have seen, comics are characterised by abstraction, a compressed form of narration, concentration on images, and delimitation. Like comics, social media is dominated by shortened, contracted language, and narrative is reduced to a minimum. The image dominates the text but is still dependent on it. Abstract image elements that utilise characters are employed, as in the case of emoticons and memes. Even more fascinating are the possibilities thrown up by the debate on virtuality, given new stimulus since 2014 by technical developments. The promises of a “virtual [in the sense of ‘actual’] reality” that dominated the discussion in the 1980s<sup>58</sup> have given way to a realisation that abstraction must remain, despite all the potential in technical improvement. In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich has noted with reference to simulated reality:

To support the idea of progress of computer graphics toward realism, researchers privilege particular subjects that culturally connote the mastery of illusionistic repre-

56 I experienced the dawn of the internet in the 1980s using a device called an acoustic coupler, which had a 300 bit/second transmission rate. Today, for private use 100Mbit is not uncommon (a speed increase by  $3 \times 10^5$ ).

57 Cf. Wessely 2005.

58 Moravec 1994, 86. Hans Moravec, AI researcher and robot engineer at Carnegie Mellon University, has written, “newest studies of the anatomy of the brain have shown that the most mysterious spiritual phenomena have a physical cause. I do no doubt that a mechanical process like data processing in a computer may induce intense spiritual experience [of the computer itself, my remark]” (my translation).

sensation. [...] In summary, the differences between cinematic and synthetic realism begin on the level of ontology. New Realism is partial and uneven, rather than analog and uniform. The artificial reality that can be simulated with 3-D computer graphics is fundamentally incomplete, full of gaps and white spots.<sup>59</sup>

Manovich draws our attention to a fundamental fact: despite all the achievements of computer-generated reality, it remains ontologically different from physical reality, and the immersion of users in that computer-generated reality ultimately requires abstraction and delimitation.

Two particular implications should be recognised. First, it is both legitimate and desirable for the tools of comic analysis and comic interpretation to be deployed in the interpretation of media products in the context of Web 2.0. Secondly, when media content is created in this environment, the methods of comics can be deployed to make the message conveyed both more accessible and more acceptable. The comic genre is surely entitled to a place in media theory, especially in the media environment of the 21st century.

And of course it is very interesting to observe that in the western societies that are largely perceived as almost completely secularised, religious symbols and structures are still important stylistic devices as well as sales arguments in contemporary media products. Theology and Religious Studies will be well advised to watch the further development closely, not only commenting them but also reflecting them on a level as high as possible.

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<sup>59</sup> Manovich 2002, 195–196.

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