Daniel Stein & Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels – Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative.*

Hannah Birr

Résumé

Compte rendu de Daniel Stein & Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels – Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative.*

Abstract

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Very recently, a group of authors, creatives and others around the German comic artist Ulli Lust self-confidently presented a manifesto[1], demanding the initiation of a public cultural support infrastructure for those working creatively in the comics "industry", equal to structures long-established in literature and the fine arts. They asked for new ways to enable artists to obain scholarships and the like, giving them the chance to work freely and concentrate wholly on their art. Though the central argument revolved around the necessity for financial funding for artistically ambitious projects, the need for a German comics studies institute at university level was also voiced.

Such public initiatives demonstrate how the cultural status of comics has changed in recent years and illustrate the interconnectedness of growing acceptance and cultural recognition on the one hand and academic reflection on the other.

There is little doubt that what was formerly dismissed as mere pulp entertainment is nowadays not only addressing a wide readership of both young and adult readers, but has also gained intense scholarly interest as a subject of study. The initially dominant discourse around how and why to acknowledge comics as art (as in Will Eisner's 'instructional books' or the work of Scott McCloud)[2] presented a perspective at the juncture of comics seen primarily as an unjustly disregarded artform on the one hand, and a budding theoretical interest in them on the other, expressing an urge to approach comics as more than craft, to discuss techniques, yet also examine underlying principles and characteristics of graphic storytelling, albeit not necessarily adressing an academic readership yet.

1. The exact words of the comics manifesto (in German) can be found under: *Tagesspiegel*, 02.09.13 http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/comics/das-comic-manifest-es-ist-ein-skandal-dass-dies-noch-nicht-konsens-ist/8723426.html (retrieved, 04.09.13, 10:08am)
2. cf., for example, Eisner, Will (1985, rev. ed. 2008) *Comics and Sequential Art: principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company; or McCloud, Scott (1993 *Understanding Comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Collins.

Though still of relevance, those initial questions have been surpassed. The anthology *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* illustrates today's confidence in the medium of comics and questions of graphic narrative as a relevant subject of academic study.[3] The diversity of approaches assembled in this volume serves to present the field of comic studies as being well on its way to a discipline in its own right.

Stein and Thon identify the promising intersection of comics studies and narratology as the frame of reference for the anthology's contributions. Their intention to introduce narratological theory to the formal and historical body of work in comics studies accordingly aims for a "historically-minded type of graphic narrative theory" (p. 8). In a brave attempt at grappling with the pitfalls of defining comics and graphic narratives and disentangling related terminologies, the editors argue that a productive notion of graphic narrative allows for historical, formal and cultural variations, encompassing differences in terms of aesthetics, formats or socio-economic contexts.

Embracing a broad understanding of narratological reflection and methodological inclusiveness, they bring together approaches from across disciplines, which share an interest in narrative theory, and over the course of the anthology locate aspects of comics theory in successively wider contexts. The collection thus pursues a twofold aim, "making the case for a medium-specific 'comics-narratology'" (p. 8), while at the same time providing potential insights for the development of a genuinely transmedial narratology (p. 2).

The contributions are divided into four chapters, the first adressing "fundamental narratological concepts", followed by aspects extending "beyond the 'single work'", format and genre-oriented approaches and cross-cultural investigations respectively. Looking at individual articles, it immediately becomes evident that the contributors employ a wide range of approaches, different in analytical focus, scope and methodology, and engage with a variety of different phenomena and contexts. Each part would easily offer enough thoughts for a separate volume.

Closest to the anthology's core area is the first chapter, which presents discussions of concepts and analytical categories from classical narratology, ie. storyworlds or questions of narration and authorship, and their necessary modification when applied to graphic narratives. The contributions compellingly demonstrate the fruitful potential that different narratological perspectives, be they neo-formalist, cognitive, or other, bring to grasping medium-specific strategies, and serve to pinpoint the crucial challenges a graphic narrative theory has to face.

Regarding the at times very specific focus of some contributions, the overall context of a comics narratology does not always come to the fore in equal measure. Nonetheless, especially the last two chapters illustrate the rewards of considering narratological questions in wider contexts. Both the historical perspectives on the relation between narrative development and material constraints of different formats and publication systems in the third part, and the analyses of very distinct cultural contexts

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3. A surprising number of contributors continue to address this perceived stigma, albeit in dissent. It appears that scholarly interest in comics still defines itself with regard to this 'inferiority complex'. The need for justification no longer constitutes the core of the discussion, however, and there is little doubt that the necessity to assert this will subside even further.

of graphic narratives in the fourth chapter open up productive links. All the more so, as contributors adhere to the editors' initial claim, that an awareness of the uniqueness of specific contexts and the near impossibility of taking into account the whole multitude of manifestations remains indispensable.

As the less decisively titled chapter-heading (in need of inverted commas) perhaps indicates, the second part "Graphic Narrative beyond the 'Single Work'" builds the least cohesive part of the volume's four chapters. Particularly diverse in terms of methodology, the contributions' topics range from degrees of fictionality and the fidelity constraint in graphic memoirs, to comic book paratexts and related aspects of fandom, a dicussion of terminology between intermediality studies and transmedial narratology, to a broad historical investigation into the conceptualization of windows, frames and panels. Though arguably inspiring, this caleidoscopic view hinders the emergence of a coherent overall picture to some degree. At the very least it takes the reader's decided effort to draw possible interrelations and connections between what seems at first a rather arbitrarily grouped section of highly divergent foci.

One might have broadened the other chapters a little to distribute the second chapter contributions, then focusing three chapters via theoretical, historical and cultural contexts respectively. Or, to refer back to what the editors, following Meister (2009), identify in their introduction as the three dominant methodological paradigms of current narratology (Stein & Thon, p. 1), taking the trichotomy of 'contextual-cognitive-transmedial' as vantage points for separate chapters also would have been feasible.

Given that this is hardly avoidable, the different essays involuntarily illustrate the permanent underlying difficulties of combining cross-disciplinary approaches in a volume, as becomes apparent when terms and phenomena problematized in the theoretical essays in the beginning are used less considerately in latter articles. However, whether regarding usage of terminology or understanding of core concepts, this should be seen as an inspiring and thought-provoking effect rather than a shortcoming. All in all the anthology lives up to its stated intent in more than one way – some quibbles in terms of chaptering should not imply that individual contributions fail to convince.

Both despite and due to its quite broad focus the volume will be valuable to students as an introduction to (future) comic studies, yet also relevant to everyone working in this expanding field, as a concise illustration of the numerous parallel approaches burgeoning at the moment. Thus, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* succeeds in meeting the editors' aim of contributing to the legitimate positioning and furthering of a theory of graphic narrative within the overall field of narratology.

Hannah Birr, M.A. is a research associate and junior lecturer at the Department of Media Studies at the Eberhard Karls University Tuebingen. Her research interests include media and film studies, reception theory and questions of audio-visual emotion elicitation as well as genre and cognitive film theory. She is currently working on her PhD thesis, dealing with the effects of digital live-distribution on aesthetics and reception of classical performing arts.

Email:hannah.birr@uni-tuebingen.de