

Graphic Realities

Comics as Documentary, History, and Journalism

Report on the Conference “Graphic Realities: Comics as Documentary, History, and Journalism”, Justus-Liebig-University Giessen / International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), February 22-23, 2018

The conference “Graphic Realities: Comics as Documentary, History, and Journalism” was organized by *Laura Schlichting* (Justus Liebig University Giessen, GER) and *Johannes C. P. Schmid* (University of Hamburg, GER) and was a cooperation between the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and the Working Group Comics Studies (AG Comicforschung) of the German Society for Media Studies (Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft).

Spanning two days, the conference focused on exploring nonfictional comics and graphic novels, modes of documentation, and the role of graphic information in journalism. Each day, two invited speakers gave keynote presentations in addition to four panels in which twelve participants presented their papers. The materials analysed covered different aspects of national and international comic cultures, for example comics in Brazilian newspaper or feminism in Indian comics. This led to an international orientation and a great variety of entry points, perspectives, and retrospectives. The papers of the participants not only featured a wide array of theoretical approaches, but also used historical analysis, practiced close readings of works, themes and motives, or focused on artistic practices and media. The emphasis on “Comics as Documentary, History, and Journalism” provided a perfect umbrella for the different connecting factors and references between the individual papers. This initiated lively discussions and helped to establish an interesting and intense discourse that continued for the whole conference.

Day 1

The first paper was given by the invited speaker *Wibke Weber*, Professor of Media Linguistics ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences (Winterthur, CH). In “Understanding Comics Journalism: Research Perspectives on a Journalistic Genre”, she analyzed current trends in journalism and modes of authentication with a focus on how technology is shaping journalism and what role comics can

play in this development. Weber explained how algorithmic journalism will become an important field in a process towards a multi-semiotic, visual, and interactive environment, as new forms of journalism will cross the boundaries of images and texts as well as fact and fiction more and more frequently. Furthermore, she discussed the importance of subjectivity and authenticity. A starting point was the difference between commonly held assumptions about comics (satirical, emotional, personal) and traditional journalism (fairness, objectivity, neutrality, accuracy, credibility), which create a creative discrepancy and, seemingly, a contradiction. Weber concluded that these oppositions can be understood as an opportunity for establishing new visual or verbal authentication strategies.

Panel Session 1

In his paper “Reading News from Sequential Art: Brazilian Newspapers Editing Journalism through Comics”, *Felipe Muanis* (Juiz de Fora, BRA) analyzed and reflected on differences between journalistic comics published in Brazilian newspapers – so-called news comics – and journalistic comics published in Brazilian graphic novels. His thesis was that the art, style, political orientation and self-conception of news comics are influenced by the intermedial elements and contexts of daily newspapers. He demonstrated this influence using a special supplement of *O Fim* (The End), which was published on November 26, 2011 in the Daily Newspaper *Extra*. Muanis argued that journalistic graphic novels are influenced considerably by new journalism and are centered on hard news. They tend to be anti-establishment, critical, and subversive. In contrast, he sees the influence of traditional newspapers on news comics in the practices of montage, in a strict sequentialization of events, simplifications, and the representation of characters as victims or survivors. As with traditional newspaper articles their main functions are propaganda and entertainment.

Sigrid Thomsen (London, UK) presented a paper “Portraying the Constrained Love of Others in *Love Story à l’Iranienne*”. The comic *Love Story à l’Iranienne*, features interviews with Iranian women about sexuality, intimacy, and relationships. Thomsen explained that the comic is trying to convey objective statements, while using a narrow point of view, which leads to several contradictions. *Love Story à l’Iranienne* contains different modes of authentication and closeness, for example it features bullet points about the interviewed women at the beginning of every story and displays the interviewer herself, Deuxard, as part of the stories. But Deuxard also reacts to the answers and through this becomes a stand-in for a presumed “Western audience”. Thomsen also pointed to several representations of stereotypical images in the comic. On this basis she concluded that the comic is using its interlaced double mediation (interview and drawing) to simplify the diverse perspective of Iranian women.

Augusto Paim (Weimar, GER) questioned how media technologies are changing the ways artists think about and practice journalism in his paper “On the Characteristics of Sketchbooks as a Journalistic Tool”. He focused on the medium of the sketchbook for journalistic comic production and the aesthetics of the comic reportage. He showed that sketchbooks have a long journalistic history which is rooted in them being more versatile and handy. In comparison to modern cameras, sketchbooks can still bring certain benefits for journalistic researchers, as they don’t come ‘between’ the interviewer and the interviewee. Furthermore, Paim pointed to different instances, in which photographs are impossible. In these cases, sketchbooks can function as a medium for visual recordings that blends documentary and artistic research.

The second invited speaker was *Dirk Vanderbeke*, Professor for English Literature at the Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena (GER). In his paper “History and Journalism in the History of Graphic Information”, he argued that nonfiction graphic storytelling was very popular and important before the 19th century in churches to convey the word of god to illiterate people. He named the stained-glass windows in Saint Chapel in Paris as one example, where beheadings of knights, the crucifixion, and other scenes from the bible were presented. Vanderbeke’s thesis was that the decline of graphic information in the church around 1800 was caused by protestant iconoclasm, the translation of the bible, and an increasing focus on scripture and liturgy in the vernacular. He ended the talk by linking this development to the countermovement of Underground Comix in the 1960s, which reintroduced the usage of nonfictional graphic information.

Panel Session 2

In her paper “The Sino-Japanese War in *Terry and the Pirates*”, *Francisco Sáez de Adana* (Alcalá de Henares, ESP) analyzed the popular comic series *Terry and the Pirates*, which was written and drawn by Milton Caniff from 1934 till 1946. In the late 1930s – before the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 – US American citizens were not interested in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Caniff started to draw attention to this neglected issue by creating story lines in which his characters took a more active role in the ongoing war. This shift resulted in a broader attention, most famously traceable in the issue *The Pilot’s Creed* from October 17, 1943, which was so influential that it was read in the U.S. Congress. De Adana reflected on Caniff’s changing attitude before and after the war. While Caniff joined the army and drew propaganda pamphlets in comic form (such as the *How to Spot a Jap* Comic Strip in 1941), he became more critical of this work at the end of the war.

In “Of Superheroes in Ordinary Clothing: Reinventing Biography, History and the Comic Form in *A Gardener in the Wasteland*”, *Amrita Singh* (New Delhi, IND) presented her thesis on *A Gardener in the Wasteland* (2010), a comic written

by Srividya Natarajan and drawn by Aparajita Ninan. Singh focused in her analysis on intersectional oppression (discrimination of gender and caste system) and pointed to the different trans-cultural influences that shape *A Gardener in the Wasteland*. Singh demonstrated that the style, motifs, and characters of *A Gardener in the Wasteland* are shaped by Western superhero genres. Furthermore, she pointed out Indian influences. On the one hand, the comic refers to the very influential Indian comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal / Eternal Picture Stories) in which Indian mythology and folklore are being re-narrated. On the other hand, the comic is connected to the pamphlet *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), which was published in 1873 and in which its author Phule attacked the rigid caste system. She argued that by using this mixture of contemporary aesthetics, traditional tropes, and political themes, the comic is not only able to contrast history with contemporary everyday life, but also motivates the readers to engage with current debates.

Christine Gundermann (Cologne, GER) spoke about the legacy of Anne Frank comics in her paper “The Graphic Anne: Anne Frank as Trans-Media and Trans-National Lieu de Mémoire”. Her theses were, on the one hand, that our cultural understanding of Anne Frank can be understood as a *Lieu de Mémoire* (Memory Space) which is constructed in a transmedial and transnational context. This includes the Anne Frank house, statues, school names, movies, TV dramas, computer games, social media accounts, music and comics. On the other hand, Gundermann argued that this memory space enables Anne Frank to become an “inspirational victim”, a cultural figure which symbolizes optimism in suffering. As the title announces, Gundermann concentrated on the ‘graphic Anne’ and gave an overview of 60 years of comic production.

Day 2

The opening lecture of the second day, *Nina Mickwitz’s* (London, UK) talk “True Story: Documentary Claims in Comics Form” addressed nonfictional comics and the negotiation of truth claims. In her analysis of autobiographical works, true crime comics of the 1940s and new journalism, she focussed on documentary tools and their importance for distinguishing fictionality and factuality. Drawing on John Grierson’s *The Documentary Idea* (1942), she highlighted the importance of materiality. Comics with underlying truth-claims can be considered as reflecting upon historical and real circumstances, while also drawing attention to tensions between script and image, further eliciting affective resonances on part of the reader.

In “Comics as Sources, Sources in Comics”, *Jakob F. Dittmar* (Malmö, SWE) presented a joint research project with *Ofer Askenazi* (Jerusalem, ISR), who unfortunately could not participate in the conference. His guiding question was how and to what extent comics can be made productive as secondary sources

for historical research. Central to this are tensions of credibility and non-credibility in depicting historical reality as well as subjectivity and its impact on interpretation. Dittmar argued that some comics comment and reflect upon their own methods, so that they use their sources for documentary purposes and question their viability at the same time.

In “Two Styles to tell the Truth”, *Dieter Declerq* (Kent, UK) investigated the comics of Matt Bois. He observed two distinct drawing styles in the comics, which he suggested correspond to contrastive genres and tones: a fictional mode which carries the agenda of narrative satire as well as a nonfictional, documentary style. On a broader scale, Declerq discussed how fiction and nonfiction cater to different artistic possibilities and responsibilities and offer diverse techniques for negotiating truth.

Joanna Rostek's (Giessen, GER) talk “Documenting the Experience of Polish Labour Migrants in the UK” analysed the nonfictional comic of Agata Warwyniuk. The comic combines documentary and journalistic elements, such as photographs, with drawings and an autobiographical narrative. Since Warwyniuk's work is well-received in Poland and among Polish emigrants, it can be seen as symptomatic for addressing subjective and universal experience alike.

Jörg Ahrens' (Giessen, GER) “Why Documenting? The Quest for the Limits of Indexicality” took a theoretically dense approach to examining the nonfictionality of comics. Ahrens claimed that comics are qua form fictional and hence unreliable. The inherent fictionality of comics, albeit a contested claim, also requires further research, particularly on the interaction of text and visual media. On a broader scale, this necessitates insight into comic's documentary potential and associated methodologies.

Chiao-I Tseng's (Bremen, GER) talk “Merging Fact and Fiction: Graphic War Narratives, Persuasion and Narrative Immersion” addressed war films and intermedial strategies of narrative immersion. On the basis of evidence-based description, Tseng identified three rhetorical devices: the insertion of multiple filmic frames, narrative immersion through character engagement and identification, and the role of generic expectations on the part of the readers and viewers. This media-specific rhetoric further highlight a merging of fact and fiction.

Lukas R. A. Wilde (Tübingen, GER) discussed the vital role of the comic industry in post 9/11 visual culture. In his paper “Non-Fictional Comics as Historical Reenactment: Pictorial Representations of 9/11 beyond the Index”, he observed a coordinated comic publication output following 9/11 which he explained is due to a preoccupation with re-enacting and documenting the event's aftermath. Sparking controversies, the re-actualizations tie in with an ongoing blurring of fact and fiction due to the irritation of boundaries between the representation and what is represented.

The concluding paper by *Philip Smith* (Nassau, BHS), “C'est un livre pour enfants: Mickey au Camp de Gurs”, turned to Horst Rosenthal's representation of the iconic Walt Disney character positioned in the Gurs camp. Invoking a constant sense of danger throughout the text, the central placement of Mickey in each page of the comic performs a clash of cultural symbols. By creating a

binary between American and French culture and their values, the use of a well-known character further stages a mixing of genres and reading expectations, which causes irritation on part of the reader and challenges limits of interpretation.

The conference ended with an internal meeting of the AG Comicforschung of the Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft, which provided not only a closure to two dense days of discussion but also facilitated outreach for further collaborations and events.

All in all, the two-day conference in Giessen provided a lively forum for exchanging ideas about comics and their documentary function, with topics ranging across different media and language. Thanks to a stimulating atmosphere and lively discussions, it provided a basis for future collaborations and scholarly endeavours.

Further Information:

<https://www.uni-giessen.de/faculties/gcsc/gcsc/events/conferences-symposia-summer-schools/conference-sites/graphicrealities/index.html>

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