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Autor

Lukas R. A. Wilde (Trondheim)

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Homepage: <http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de> – Email: closure@email.uni-kiel.de

Essayistic Comics and Non-Narrative Coherence

Lukas R. A. Wilde (Trondheim)

Introduction

In this paper, I am going to explore a rather neglected sub-form of comics that cannot adequately be described as narrative. This is highly relevant to all considerations of coherence in comics. *If* a comic is taken to be narrative, it *must* also be coherent on a global, multimodal level: The represented situations, events, and characters can be ›read‹ as located within a consistent storyworld (a diegesis or a possible world) then, based on interconnected temporal, spatial, causal, and ontological relations. The narrativity of comics has, of course, repeatedly been challenged in recent decades, but mostly concerning abstract works (see Casper and Howaldt; Grünwald; Rommens et al.). Less attention has been paid to comics, that do – on a global, multimodal level – neither present (fictional or non-fictional) events, situations, or sequences of actions, nor show individual existents (characters or objects). Instead, they employ various forms of interrelations, juxtapositions, and tensions between ›comic-like‹ pictures and verbal essays. They present theses, formulate arguments, or reflect on thematic relations mainly through written discourses.¹ In comics – being a multimodal media form containing pictures – these verbal arguments and reflections are usually contextualized, symbolized, metaphorized, or contrasted through a pictorial ›track‹, but the respective images cannot be related to the spatio-temporal continuum of a »basic facts domain« (Margolin 2007, 71) or a »unified narrative space« (Gavaler, 157). I have discussed this before (Wilde 2017) with respect to specific webcomics (especially *The Oatmeal* by Matthew Inman) and I would now extend these observations to a larger corpus of works by Lynda Barry (2008; 2019), Nick Sousanis, and Schlogger (Johanna Baumann). I am going to analyze all three authors across their considerable differences with regard to prototypical (and, as I shall show, narrative) comics, as I think that their works all deviate in a specific way from the ›regular‹ procedures of generating (narrative) coherence in comics.

Comics that generate coherence not through diegetic pictures, but mainly through a verbal track have occasionally been recognized as important to comics, but mostly only in passing. Chris Gavaler's monumental *The Comics Form*, for instance, does not dedicate more than half a page of his meticulously developed 210 pages to »linguistic coherence« (126–127). Similarly, only short passages can be found on »Verb Dominance« in Neil Cohn (311) or »word-specific« picture-word relationships in Scott McCloud (153). The reason for this curious lack of theoretical reflection seems clear: The sort of coherence I am going to describe in this contribution does not only seem *unusual* within comic studies, it even undermines comics' formal definition and conceptual ›essence‹ (understood as, for instance, pictorial sequentiality) to varying degrees. I would argue, however, that a confusion of comics poetics (what they *should* be as an idealized form) and theory (how we can describe all actual works most comprehensively) is detrimental to a study of more recent developments in works clearly identified as comics. I am going to reflect upon that a little bit more in my conclusion. For now, however, I merely want to point to the sheer range of works – and their considerable *differences* in terms of publication form, typical readership, cultural capital, and complexity – to foreground their similarities with respect to non-narrative coherence. I am going to propose the heuristic term of *essayistic coherence* and *essayistic comics* for this discussion, for reasons I would like to make transparent.

Since my approach essentially departs from a *lack* of narrative coherence, I draw especially on transmedial narratology (see Elleström; Ryan and Thon; Thon) and Gavaler's recent *Comics Form*, borrowing some concepts and perspectives from discussions of the »essay-film« in film studies (Pantenburg). This media-comparative analogy builds on the following similarities: The *Kieler Lexikon der Filmbegriffe* [dictionary of film concepts, University of Kiel] refers to the essay film as the »intellectual brother of the documentary« (Bender and Brunner, n. pag.; my translation), since it is understood as a form of argumentation instead of narration (see Bellour). According to art historian Barbara Filser, essayistic media texts »become recognizable not as a seemingly self-narrating story [without any identifiable narrator], but as discourse« (Filser, 98; my translation). At the same time, an »essayistic subjectivity« of the respective artists is continuously foregrounded as a »content-determining and form-giving instance« (97; my translation). We could then look out for a special sort of coherence that operates on a conceptual-abstract rather than on a narrative-specific level. ›Argumentative‹ coherence could certainly also be approached via text-linguistic criteria for what is called a ›text type‹ or a ›text class‹ (narrative, argumentative, descriptive, persuasive, etc., see Malmkjær, 259). This would certainly be worthwhile, but it cannot be done in the present paper, as my aims are more modest. *Essayistic coherence* is instead proposed as a heuristic and rather broad umbrella term that, nevertheless, can be sharply distinguished from narrative coherence – conceptually, as well as with regard to actual comics expressions. Essayistic or non-narrative coherence could then be defined as follows: Unlike narrative coherence,² essayistic

coherence does not require any identity of recurring, individual characters, things, places, or events in time and space on the global, multimodal level of a comic text. The coherence created instead is facilitated mainly through the verbal track which again does not represent any consistent global storyworld. Just as in (purely verbal or film) essays, the verbal track can oscillate between many different discursive and rhetorical forms and textual functions (for instance, reflecting upon theoretical terms, discussing conceptual relations, or presenting arguments) which will remain undefined for the present purposes – except for its *lack* of overall narrative coherence. Next, I am going to discuss this absence for the three artists proposed above by introducing and reflecting on, step by step, (base-)narrativity, allegory, and pictogramatics/diagrammatics in detail. In my conclusions, I will then discuss the broader issues merely touched upon in this introduction, namely, how to reconcile essayistic (non-narrative) coherence with comics' multimodal division of labor, with authorial subjectivity, with our understanding of comics' ›form‹ vs. ›medium‹, or, in short: with the *mediality* of comics.

Reflecting with Lynda Barry on (Base-)Narrativity

Let us have a look at the works of Lynda Barry first, specifically at her newest book, *Making Comics* (2019). The highly celebrated work poses as a material simulacrum of a sketchbook: a collage of handwriting, scribbles, and many kinds of inserts that together form what could be called an instruction manual for a creative drawing class. It is, in fact, composed after an actual curriculum that she created as a 2019 MacArthur Fellow. Still, *Making Comics* opens rather poetically with the following written words: »There was a time when drawing and writing were not separated for you. In fact, our ability to write could only come from our willingness and inclination to draw. In the beginning of our writing and reading lives we *drew* the letters of our name« (1).

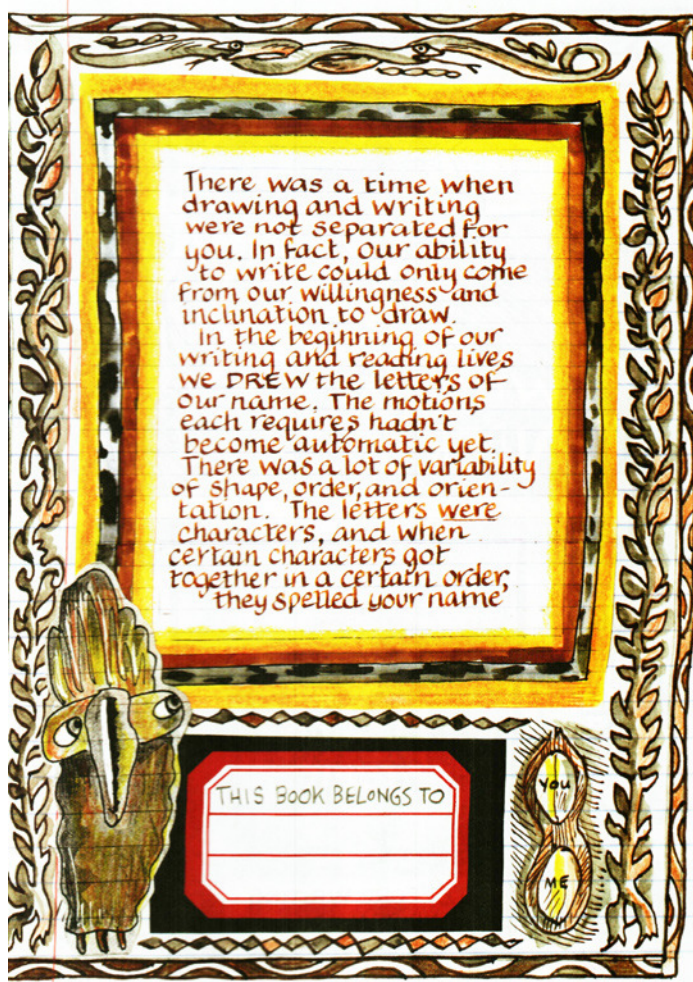


Fig. 1: Barry 2019, 1.

These anthropological ›primal scenes‹ are initially devoid of any pictorial illustrations. Instead, the page emphasizes the hand-written quality of the letters (see Kashtan, 23–53). The verbal ›story‹, if we want to call it that at all, could perhaps be taken as some sort of ›minimal narrative‹: the backstory of an unspecified collective »we«, representing the whole human race. There was a *before* and an *after* the (vaguely defined) ›event‹ of growing up and ›unlearning‹ drawing. Barry soon abandons this collective identity altogether in favor of even more general reflections and, especially, a series of questions and instructions for »you«, the implied reader: »When very young kids draw, they cause the lines that cause something to appear. It is there to be found in the same way you found the fish in the drawing above. When you knew they were there, you saw them. But what was there before that?« (2). These iterations of rhetorical questions are even more pronounced in her earlier work, *What It Is* (2008), winner of an Eisner Award for »Best Reality Based Graphic Novel«. It alternates between collages of questions and instructions, on the one hand: »You can write about all kinds of things. Think of something that you want to share. Write it here. Remember to print today's date. What happens when we put words together?« (31); and written diary entries accompanied by occasional illustrations of what seems to be her childhood self, on the other hand: »If Playing isn't happiness or fun, if it is something which may lead to those things or to something else entirely, NOT being able to play IS misery« (52).

Relating these examples to more general narratological perspectives, we could certainly ask with Umberto Eco whether *every* text (also this one you are reading right now) could be conceived of – in a very basic sense – as a narrative account about »a (grammatically implied) agent, that is, /ego/, who performs the act of understanding or uttering, and in doing so passes from a confused state of consciousness to a clearer consciousness« (1987, 137; my translation).³ But this, of course, would not amount to a very useful concept of narrativity. »[T]he insistence on *temporality* is part of every definition of narrativity, regardless of its philosophical orientation« (Steiner, 149; my emphasis; see Abbott 2014 for more detail). For



Fig. 2: Barry 2008, 52.

transmedial applications, the fixation on temporal changes of state has perhaps proven too narrow if we are primarily interested in the constitution of a storyworld (a possible world or a diegetic domain) in which changes of state can take place. A range of recent works (see e.g. Veits, Wilde and Sachs-Hombach) have abandoned the earlier conceptual distinction between ›spatial arts‹ and ›temporal arts‹ derived from Gotthold E. Lessing, which is undermined by comics' multimodal blending and frequent hybridization of words and pictures anyway. The »widespread opposition between verbal and visual media types is simply a false and hence utterly misleading dichotomy« (Elleström, 47). Many authoritative works have instead argued for the inherent (or at least feasible) narrativity of even wordless single pictures. Simon Grennan, for instance, found that,

[w]hen I make a representation, the object of the representation appears in a distinct time. This time is brought into being by everything that is explicitly represented, that is, told or shown [...]. This time exists in a wider diegetic frame of other temporal events, because [...] what is told/shown has causes and consequences, even though these remain untold or unrepresented. (149)

Put even more concisely: Even a »depiction of a single scene (say, Constable's painting *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*) always has both [*sic*] a story time, a post-story time and a pre-story time« (Grennan, 152). Chris Gavalier has recently proven the analytical power, if not the theoretical necessity of such an approach in great detail (15–32), concluding that »[t]he shapes of the ink marks [in comics or other pictures ...] require a viewer to interpret them and so co-produce their representational content mentally. When viewers interpret physical qualities, they experience a diegesis« (19). If we follow Mary-Laure Ryan's widely accepted transmedial definition of narrativity, it amounts to a bundle of prototypical features, or a »fuzzy set« (2007, 28). The (selective) representation of a spatiotemporal, local situation – within a possible world, a diegesis – is at its center. Ryan outlines this set as follows:

(1) a spatial constituent consisting of a world (the setting) populated by individuated existents (characters and objects); (2) a temporal constituent, by which this world undergoes significant changes caused by non-habitual events [...]; (3) a mental constituent, specifying that the events must involve intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world (or to the mental states of other agents). (2014, 475)

These three components must be the foundation of all ›narrativity-enhancing‹ elements later on (which especially include represented or implied temporalities and causalities). Nevertheless, a (more or less) *explicit* representation of temporality and causality is still considered crucial for the assessment of narrativity in many fields (see, for instance, Lars Elleström's recent definition of a story, »which should be understood as the scaffolding core of a narrative, [...] circumscribed as represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way«, 35). To reconcile these two strands of recent narrative theory, I have proposed the

term *base-narrativity* for the constitution of Ryan's prototypical core (or Gavalier's discourse-diegesis distinction): the semiotic establishment of a spatio-temporal domain of particular objects and/or characters located in a possible world distinct from the representational material (see Wilde 2017; 2018, 221–269; 2020c). Base-narrativity might not (yet) constitute a plot or a story – whatever our definition of both may be – but certainly of a diegesis, of a diegetic situation distinguished from the pictorial material.

Little or no potential for base-narrativity, in contrast, can be found, in »representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects, scenarios involving ›the human race‹, ›reason‹, ›the state‹, ›atoms‹, ›the brain‹, etc.« (Ryan 2007, 29). Elleström also reasons that, if narrativity must entail »existents and events« (77), then »[t]his largely excludes communication that is not primarily about what goes on in a physical place inhabited by concrete entities but is rather about more abstract notions« (78). While he also considers more abstract, non-material (or non-spatial) ›existents‹, such as mental states or social collectives, these must still be *located within* a spacetime-continuum (a diegesis) to experience temporal transformations (and thus undergo events). As Gavalier (157) put it aptly: »The absence of a diegetic world peopled by characters performing actions in settings would seem to preclude narrative«. If we compare Barry's works with McCloud's meta-comics, the avatar of the latter constitutes a distinct ›bubble‹ of base-narrativity that Barry's verbal account is missing (if we do not want to attribute base-narrativity to *every* account of a »(grammatically implied) agent, that is, /ego/« in the sense of Eco once again). This difference – based on whether an enunciative situation constitutes base-narrativity by itself – can then be traced back to a question stated lucidly by Jan-Noël Thon, namely, »to what extent the narrating situation is represented as part of the diegetic primary storyworld, which, in turn, usually boils down to the question of whether the narrating situation is represented« (158).

Pictorial avatars like McCloud's always do this, to some extent, while purely verbal discourse, such as Barry's presented above, can choose to self-represent and locate an utterer within a storyworld – or not. But, of course, even if single pictures typically always establish a diegetic situation and thus base-narrativity within their surrounding frames,⁴ the range and ›stability‹ of this diegetic domain can vary considerably. Base-narrativity of individual pictures does not always lead to base-narrativity (and especially not narrativity proper) on a global, multimodal level – and thus not to narrative coherence of a comic as a whole. Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* is highly interesting in this respect.

Reflecting with Nick Sousanis on Allegory

Not only is *Unflattening's* ›comicity‹ (see Beinike) beyond question, Sousanis' panels clearly *do* represent spatio-temporal situations without recourse to any narrating avatar-character.

The book opens up with the following words: »Like a great weight descending, suffocating and ossifying, flatness permeates the landscape« (5).

Right on the next page, it becomes clear that ›flatness‹ is merely a metaphor in his general verbal discourse: »This flatness is not literal (though we will take that up shortly) --- It is a flatness of sight, a contraction of possibilities« (6). Nevertheless, the pictorial track (see fig. 3) *does* present a spatiotemporal domain that – by itself – could be taken as a storyworld, somewhat similar to the one introduced by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story *The Library of Babel* from 1941, containing »all that is able to be expressed, in every language« (115). The library, which is very similar to Sousanis' initial pictorial representations, has a precise spatial architecture, »composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries« (112). The story certainly has an allegorical, rather than a merely mimetic (fantastic) meaning. It is perhaps a metaphor for the ›universe of texts‹, or a reflection on meaning vs. arbitrariness, or simply on complexity (although countless other interpretations have been proposed; see Basile). Any such reading must first be based on the imagination of an actual, physical spacetime setting in which characters *exist* and make *experiences* within it. Borges'

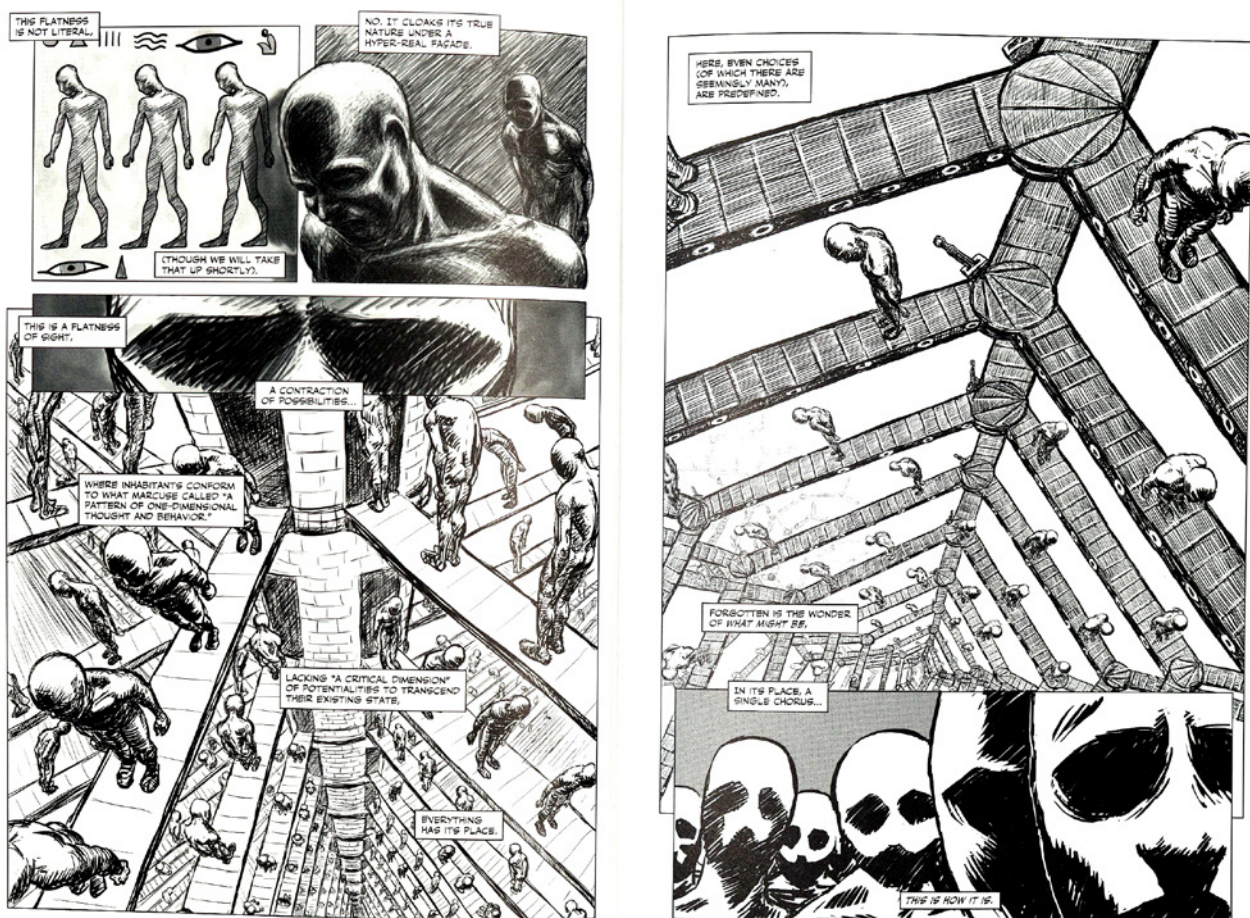


Fig. 3: Sousanis 2015, 6–7.

unnamed, homodiegetic narrator, for instance, writes: »in my younger days I traveled [...]. Now that my eyes can hardly make out what I myself have written, I am preparing to die, a few leagues from the hexagon where I was born« (112). Narrative and abstract topics thus continuously feed back into each other through allegory as the ›relay‹. An even more obvious example of this feedback loop between narration and abstraction is Plato's »Allegory of the Cave«, the opening of Book VII of *The Republic* from 375 BC. The section is often defined as »a symbolic narrative that can be interpreted as having a hidden meaning« (McAleer, 211). The text *does* create its philosophical arguments with recourse to a specific storyworld situation of complex spatial relations (there's an interior and an exterior, light projections bouncing off of puppets of various materials, etc.), antagonistic groups of characters (one keeping the others chained and imprisoned for some reason) that possess intentionality and an inner life (believing wrongly that the world is nothing but the shadows of those artifacts), and its »tellability« (Baroni) even centers around a decisive *narrative event* (one prisoner breaks free and experiences an epiphany).

To account for these narrative representations *within* non-narrative discourses, Thon's distinction between two areas of representation is helpful. On the one hand, we are dealing with (›locally‹) depicted situations, which can be located within (›globally‹) depicted worlds (storyworlds) on the other hand (see Thon, 46–56). While every local situation must, by definition, always be located within a global storyworld that is at least *implied*, not all represented local situations can then be related to *the same* storyworld. Even within ›regular‹ narrative texts, any hypo-diegesis (a story-within-a-story) introduces a narrative distinction between ontological levels. In order to construct a storyworld on a global textual level, readers must infer the spatial, temporal, causal, and ontological relations between all locally represented situations. This then amounts to what David Herman called »mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate« (9). Jan Baetens has argued convincingly that non-narrative (what he calls »abstract« comics) include not only works that do not feature any representational (figurative) images, but also those whose pictorial scenes can no longer be assigned to any spatio-temporal continuum in which the depicted objects would have an individuated or particularized existence. »Abstract's opposite is not only ›figurative‹ or ›representational‹ but also [...] ›narrative‹. Abstraction seems to be what resists narrativization, and conversely narrativization seems to be what dissolves abstraction« (Baetens, 95). Similarly, Thierry Groensteen has developed an extensive typology of »infra-narrative« relations between pictures that cannot be considered narrative, connected via a coherent storyworld (although certainly base-narrative on their own: each picture does show a represented situation within a possible world). In narrative works, all diegetic sub-domains are coherently relative to a basic facts domain or a unified narrative space in which the narrative participants (characters and objects) are re-identifiable.⁵ While a storyworld is a complex spatiotemporal structure of situations, it is

also possible to speak about it propositionally (i.e. making acceptable or unacceptable statements). As Uri Margolin put it: »[A]ny narrative, regardless of its lengths, is a macro speech act of the constative type, claiming that such and such happened« (2014, 647). This is independent of whether or not they are presented as fictional or non-fictional.

Borges' library generates such a (fantastic) basic fact domain, a unified narrative space. Its metaphorical meanings are accessed in no other way than with any other literary *subtext*: through interpretation. Plato's cave or Sousanis' *landscape permeated by flatness*, in contrast, frequently abandon all base-narrativity (global narrative coherence), all spatio-temporal referentiality, for entirely extra-diegetic discourse. In *The Republic*, a dialogue between Glaucon and his mentor Socrates about matters of politics, education, and knowledge frames the allegory. We could perhaps take the representation of these two ›talking heads‹ as the narrative basic fact domain and the cave as an embedded hypo-diegesis – just as McCloud's avatar anchors all reflections of *Understanding Comics* within a ›bubble‹ of base-narrativity: ›there is this guy and he goes on talking about comics‹. Sousanis constructs no such ›anchor‹ for his extra-diegetic, disembodied voice in caption boxes. It often also does not narrate at all but presents abstract reflections such as: »Languages are powerful tools for exploring the ever greater depth of our understanding. But for all their strengths, languages can also become traps« (52). Yet, the base-narrativity *lacking* in these sentences on the verbal track is often added through the pictorial track: by base-narrative representations of little people ›in boxes within boxes‹ (see fig. 3); through storyworld situations depicting – or modeled after – Edwin Abbot's novel *Flatland*, in which a character inhabits a 2D world; through non-fictional representations of Eratosthenes of Alexandria calculating the circumference of the Earth; and through countless others (see, for instance, Sousanis, 32, 93). Many of these only ›pop up‹ for individual panels, however. While these panels could be taken as representations of local storyworld situations within an implied global storyworld (and hence, as base-narrative), they are not spatio-temporally, causally, or ontologically connected to each other. There is simply no basic fact domain, no unified narrative space of diegetic cohesion on a macro-textual level: the countless ›micro-storyworlds‹ emerge and disappear throughout his treatise. They are only made legible through his verbal account, which is often neither narrative *nor* base-narrative, as it does not state any facts about a »world populated by individuated existents« (Ryan 2014, 475). If we wanted to maintain that *Unflattening's* reflections were *always* about a world, our world (and hence base-narrative throughout), then only in the ubiquitous sense that *all* essays or philosophical reflections (also the present text here) claim to be *about our world* in some sense, but not necessarily about particulars in time and space. Often, even Sousanis' pictures abandon base-narrativity altogether. This is the case when he introduces diagrams that are intended as representations of mere relations between abstract terms and concepts: »Consider: Similarity, difference. Proximity, distance, structural organization, and its lack« (Sousanis, 75).

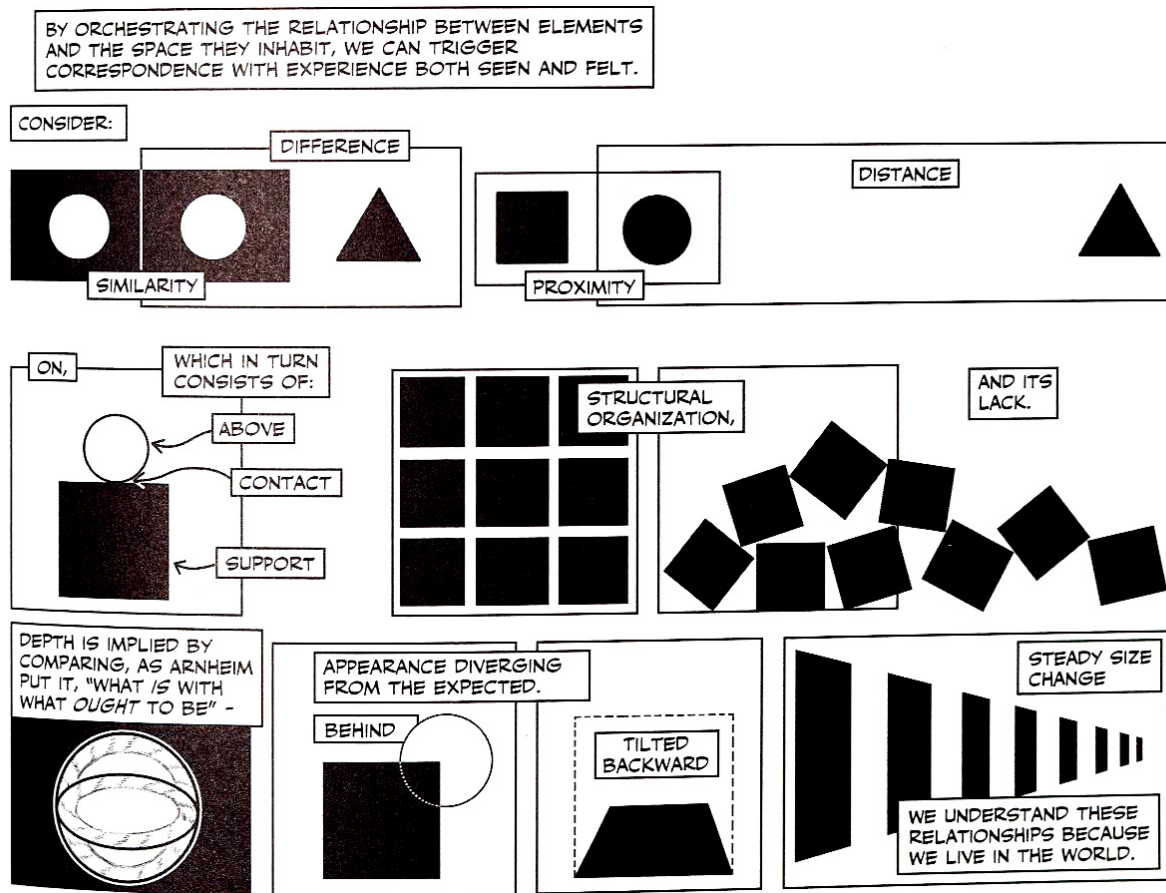


Fig. 4: Sousanis 2015, 75.

Figure 4 employs diagrammatic iconicity devoid of any figurative or diegetic (base-narrative) meaning. The shapes and contours represent only themselves, or more precisely: they exemplify physical features that the lines on paper actually possess (see Wilde 2019 for a more detailed discussion). To quote Gavalier (16) once more: »[A] representational image is both the subject matter simulated (diegesis) and the physical substance that simulates (discourse). More simply, a representational image has both form and content, while a non-representational image has form only«. Even a representational image that *has* content, however – we see a represented object, for instance – can be used in the same way without the establishment of base-narrativity. For verbal language, this is indisputable: The written sign ›CATS‹ is *not only* non-narrative (because it does *not* present changes of state or any sort of temporality). Much more importantly, it does not refer to any particular event or thing (such as a cat) that belongs to a distinct possible (non-fictional or fictional) world. The written sign ›CATS‹ (without being part of any proposition) does not afford base-narrativity on its own. Instead, it refers to the level of the linguistic dictionary (see Eco 1984, 255). Exempt from all referential uses (within a dictionary, or perhaps as graffiti art), the sign remains separated from (even fictional) extensionality. Pictures can also operate on this level, and we use them quite

frequently in this way when they are employed as pictograms or ideograms. I would like to show that by using Schlogger's webcomic strips as illustrations/examples of ›small forms‹ of essayistic (non-narrative) coherence in comics where even pictoriality often abandons all base-narrativity.

Reflecting with Schlogger on Pictogramatics and Diagrammatics

Johanna Baumann, aka Schlogger, is certainly among the most important German webcomic artists today. In 2013, she was awarded the webcomic prize »Lebensfenster«. In April 2017, her contributions to the German webcomic scene were also recognized with an ICOM Award for Special Achievements. Schlogger's print publications include a bachelor's thesis in comics form published by Panini (Schlogger 2012). Professionally, she offers – among other services – »graphic recordings« of workshops, lectures, and meetings. A graphic recording provides explanatory visuals, diagrammatics, and pictogramatics that contextualize the content of a conversation (see Schlogger n.d.). In a similar vein, she creates diary-like posts on her comics blog and via her social media accounts that present creative snapshots of thought processes about current events and topics.

From April 2018 onwards, for instance, she reflected on her pregnancy (Schlogger 2018), not only through a comics diary (which entails many autobiographical *narrative* passages) but also through short comics essays presenting and discussing topics and controversies surrounding motherhood and child education.

In Figure 5, for instance, we see an illustration of Gary Chapman's *The 5 Love Languages*. Chapman's central idea is that »Words of affirmation«, »Physical Touch«, »Receiving Gifts«, »Quality Time«, and »Acts of



Fig. 5: Schlogger 2021c.

Service« are parallel forms of communication between parents and their children. Schlogger then points out how miscommunication occurs and how people feel neglected when their attention is not focused on the same ›language‹. The first five illustrations show strongly abstracted human figures that can be understood as pictograms or ideograms. Most semiotic and analytical-philosophical understandings of the pictogram do not focus on questions of design and aesthetics but on specific semantics. When we use a picture pictogrammatically, we want it to be understood not as a depiction of a specific object but as a generalized sign standing for a whole class of objects (see Kjörup; Scholz, 131–133; Wilde 2020a). This means that the pictoriality of a pictogram is relevant only in *one* single property (or in the common sum of *all* its properties), namely that it allows recipients to infer a conceptual category such as ›men's room‹ or ›beverages‹ (see Sachs-Hombach, 207–212). The further recipients move away from linguistic base levels (instead of ›apple‹, ›fruit‹, or even more generally: ›food‹), the more *ideogrammatically* (instead of pictogrammatically) the sign is used. Signs prohibiting the consumption of food and beverages in trains, for instance, depict only exemplary items of food, which, however, also stand for other objects of the same, more abstract category ideogrammatically. In the following, I am going to use ›pictogram‹ as an umbrella term for pictures which might also be interpreted more ideogrammatically.

The pictogrammatic potential of pictures in comics can, first, contribute to additional thematic layers of interpretation: »An antique grandfather clock and a digital watch are discursively dissimilar while still representing objects belonging to the same diegetic category« (Gavaler, 94). More interesting for our purposes are cases where there are *no* corresponding diegetic objects within a unified narrative space (transporting such secondary thematic meanings) to begin with. Pictogramatics are, in fact, mostly discussed in comics theory with respect to »emanata« (see Gavaler, 44–46): If we see a picture of a lightbulb over a character's head, it does not (usually) mean that there is a physical object of that appearance within the storyworld (the diegesis), but that a character experiences a sudden realization. Not only is its diegetic meaning conventional, the specific appearance of the pictogram is largely irrelevant to its diegetic meaning as it only communicates the proposition (the narrative fact) *that* a psychological event takes place (see Wilde 2020b). Pictograms, however (or, more precisely, pictogrammatically employed pictorial signs), can also be used *without* any diegetic situation at all (›anchoring‹ them as a subjectivized expression, for instance). This is the case in figure 5. Schlogger's pictogrammatic signs create visual ciphers for the respective ›five languages‹, or perhaps for people currently focused on one of them. No specific storyworld situation comes into play. Of course, we are always free to imagine one (with ample room for imaginative gap-filling), just as we are always able to abstract any diegetic situation to create an exemplified type. Pictorial signs never entirely determine their signification with regard to individualization vs. generalization. Some toilet doors using photographs of male/female movie stars exemplify their pictogrammatic meaning through individual ›tokens‹,

and these exemplifications *could* be regarded as constituting a base-narrative. We are free to focus on the specific situation the photograph was taken in, which has a *before* and an *after*. Nevertheless, within the context of use, the ›message‹ of the communication can clearly guide our attention toward one side or the other, as can the chosen aesthetics. A strongly abstracted visual style will usually afford a pictogrammatic ›reading‹ more readily. If this means that the distinction between pictogrammatic vs. diegetic pictures is never a clear-cut one, as pictoriality always affords both interpretations to a certain degree, then base-narrativity can never be entirely disregarded for pictorial representations (Even a lightbulb in a comic could be taken as a representation of a physical object within a base-narrative context, for example if the character was imagining a lightbulb, relegating the bulb to a subjective hypo-diegesis. It would be hard to find narrative support for such an interpretation, though). At the very least, however, Schlogger's illustration does not establish a global storyworld in which the individual ›characters‹ (the pictogrammatic figures) are spatio-temporally, causally, or ontologically related to each other. Coherence is only provided through the verbal discourse, which is not narrative or base-narrative, but only presents theories of how communication works (in ›our‹ world or in any other).

Another example (see Schlogger 2021b) illustrates a video essay by German science journalist Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim about common misconceptions concerning ›hypocrisy‹ when it comes to environmental protection (see maiLab 2017). Usually, Mai Thi's argument goes, the hypocrite who only *claims* to care about the environment (but then secretly throws garbage into the woods) is judged much more harshly by society than a person who is ›upright‹ about not caring at all. There is a logical fallacy in this, Mai Thi and Schlogger point out, because the environment does not care about ›hypocrisy‹ at all, so the hypocrite at least contributes somewhat to the good cause, while the ›honest culprit‹ actively encourages environmental damage. The three respective figures that Schlogger uses to exemplify both positions are not specific characters, but representations of types, so the drawings operate pictogrammatically again. Yet, they *could* be taken as base-narrative (and hence as characters within a local storyworld situation serving only as examples), but the global, mainly verbal coherence cannot.

Just as Sousanis, Schlogger also works with diagrammatics quite often. In figure 6, she illustrates that many problematic dogmas about childcare that are still prevalent today (that it was ›healthy‹ to let a baby cry without coming to their aid, for instance) are actually derived from a notorious book popular during German National Socialism that still lingers unconsciously within cultural memory. The illustration shows a simplified drawing of Johanna Haarer's *Die Deutsche Mutter und ihr erstes Kind* from 1934 (»The German Mother and her First Child«, Haarer 1961). The drawing is clearly not a representation of any individual copy (in any base-narrative context), but the whole ›work‹ in all its editions. A pictogrammatic reading is thus strongly encouraged. What is more, the pictogrammatic representation is not even situated in represented space, but within a diagram. It seems to conceptualize the

cultural consciousness where Haarer's book is below some critical threshold of awareness (represented through ocean waves), but still sending messages ›upwards‹ along a Y-axis labeled »generational telephone game« [Generationenflüsterpost]. The representational space thus blends a temporal dimension (generations succeeding each other) with a conceptual one (degrees of conscious awareness).

As I have laid out elsewhere in more detail (see Wilde 2019), diagrammatic iconicity has become one of the most productive fields of experiments within comic book

narration, perhaps because the drawn line is indifferent to the distinction between perceptual and diagrammatic iconicity (In live-action film, in contrast, diagrams are always distinguished from the photographic imagery by necessity; see Ernst). While perceptual iconicity represents tangible ›things‹ situated in time and space, diagrammatic iconicity reduces ›things‹ (or ›states of affairs‹ that were *abstract* from the beginning) to cognitive relations and represents these by visual means: »The ›objects‹ of diagrammatic depiction are always relations and proportions« (Krämer, 31). Just like pictograms can be employed as emanata to represent narrative facts about characters, diagrammatic representations can be ›anchored‹ in regular storyworlds. They are frequently employed in works ranging from Fabrice Neaud's *Journal 2*, via Jonathan Hickman's *The Nightly News*, to Kevin Huizenga's *The River at Night*, Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, or the famous *Hawkeye*-issue »Pizza is my Business« by Matt Fraction and David Aja. In Schlogger's case, however, there is again no *global* storyworld providing spatio-temporal, causal, and ontological coherence (except for the ubiquitous sense that *all* texts are about our world in some sense, just like the present text here). This abandonment of a global diegetic domain has interesting consequences for the multimodal ›division of labor‹ between writing and a (*pictogrammatic* and *diagrammatic*) form of imagery that I want to reflect upon in the context of my concluding thoughts on the relevance of the essayistic (non-narrative) coherence with regard to the mediality of comics in general.



Fig. 6: Schlogger 2021a.

Reflecting on Essayistic Coherence and the Mediality of Comics

When reference to a *global* basic fact domain, to a unified narrative space of individual things (narrative coherence), is not possible or breaks down, the regular communicative situation of comics changes fundamentally. First, although this is purely terminological, if Barry, Sousanis, and Schlogger do not establish any global diegesis – whether fictional or non-fictional – their drawings and writings cannot be attributed to ›narrators‹ (but, perhaps, to implied authors instead of the actual artists, although I see no reason for any such differentiation here). Any narrator can only be determined relative to the global diegetic *primary storyworld* they constitute (see Thon, 155). What is more, when we encounter pictogrammatic and ideogrammatic images, the conventionalized medial transparency of comics that seems to provide ›glances into‹ a diegetic world breaks down as well (see Gavaler, 46–50). If there simply is *no* spatiotemporal domain that the pictures grant access to (on a global textual level), then we *must* take note of an authorial agency outside of the individual base-narrative local situations that wants to signify or communicate *something* to us on a conceptual level – something that the pictorial track only exemplifies, illustrates, or contrasts.

This is another reason why the term ›essayistic‹ has been suggested for this non-narrative form of coherence. In an essayistic film, Filser argues, a medial articulation »becomes legible not as a seemingly self-narrating story, but as discourse« (Filser, 98, my translation). At the same time, it highlights a specific authorial subjectivity (see Corrigan, 80–130) that we are more willing to overlook in ›transparent‹ narrative representations. The essayistic is then not a ›genre‹ of comics – it is not recognized as such at all to my knowledge – but more precisely a sort of articulation that continuously undermines not only genre boundaries themselves, but also conventional media boundaries (see Gavaler, 11–12; Elleström, 51–53, Wilde 2021). Essayistic comics, oscillating between locally represented situations and pictogrammatic exemplifications, both connected only through verbal discourse, represent »intermedia« in Stephan Packard's (2016) sense (building on Dick Higgins). They question the individual media form's conventional reading protocols within visual culture, both in terms of an unfamiliar ›division of labor‹ between the written and the verbal, as well as in terms of media boundaries. We can, and perhaps even should ask to what extent my chosen examples correspond to established formal definitions of comics as ›sequential images‹.

The discussed works by Barry, Sousanis, and Schlogger position themselves very differently in contrast to prototypical »comicalness« (Miodrag) or »comicity« (Beinike) – up to the point where we might even exclude them from formal definitions of comics entirely. Lynda Barry is certainly considered one of the most important comics artists today, but her works, especially her newest book *Making Comics*, could perhaps be defined as an illustrated book *about* comics – rather than a comic itself (it was in fact nominated for an Eisner Award for »Best Comics-Related [!] Book«, but also as a »Great Graphic Novel for Teens« by the Young Adult Library Services Association). In contrast, no one would deny *Unflattening's* status as

a comic – although reviewers note that Sousanis »pushes the form of graphic narration to its limits« (Pietrzak-Franger, Packard and Schwertfeger, 12; my translation). Schlogger's webcomics occupy an interesting middle position: she clearly identifies as a comics artist and her works are, to my knowledge, fully accepted as such by practitioners, although formally, she is much closer to Barry than to Sousanis.

The *conventional* understanding of ›comics‹, in any case, is drastically changing at the present moment. Webcomic artists increasingly publish illustrated essays (such as Schlogger's) *as comics* more and more in recent years. These works often merit their ›label‹ – their comicity – through the incorporation of other comic conventions below or beyond picture sequentiality and narrative coherence (cartoonish drawings, speech bubbles, comicitious pictograms, and so on). Considerably more ›highbrow‹ graphic novel artists like Barry also rely on the same essayistic, non-narrative coherence more and more often. Eleanor Davis' *Why Art?*, Nora Krug's *Belonging*, Liv Strömquist's *Im Spiegelsaal* [Inne i spegelsalen], Katja Klenkel's *Girlsplaining*, or Lisa Frühbeis' *Busengewunder*, all published within the last five years, immediately come to mind. Perhaps not accidentally these works all represent female and/or feminist voices using comics (as a ›medium‹) in inventive formal ways in service of an essayistic expression.

Meta-comics (like those of Sousanis), in contrast, certainly *do* fall under established formal definitions of comics (another beautiful, more recent example, aside from McCloud, would be Enrique del Rey Cabero, Michael Goodrum, and Josean Morlesín Mellado's *How to Study Comics and Graphic Novels. A Graphic Introduction to Comic Studies*), as do educational comics like David Vandermeulen and Daniel Casavane's recent adaptation of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. Any description of their strategies could also profit from a more thorough conception of ›essayistic‹, as they abandon global storyworld coherence frequently as well. Sousanis' work has been praised as a »novel medium of thought« (Pietrzak-Franger, Packard and Schwertfeger, 11; my translation), after all. The reason why all these essayistic forms of comics coherence have been thoroughly undertheorized in present scholarship can perhaps be found in the definitional project of comic scholarship itself. The ultimately arbitrary decision to define the comics form as images in narrative sequence can only be justified through pragmatic considerations: »Images and sequences [...] are both the most repeated and the least contested features in comics definitions« (Gavaler, 9). An ongoing search for revised definitions of comics, in contrast, should remain an essential part of comics scholarship (see Packard 2016), precisely because their prototypical or innovative features will keep changing in front of our eyes, alongside their employed forms of coherence. Our theory should reflect that and, perhaps, pay more attention to emerging non-narrative, essayistic expressions. There is much work to be done to describe the various forms of interrelations, juxtapositions, and tensions between ›comicitious‹ pictures and verbal essays.

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Table of Figures

Fig. 1: Barry 2019, 1.

Fig. 2: Barry 2008, 52.

Fig. 3: Sousanis 2015, 6–7.

Fig. 4: Sousanis 2015, 75.

Fig. 5: Schlogger 2021c.

Fig. 6: Schlogger 2021a.

- 1] What should perhaps be mentioned immediately is that we have known ›arguing‹ comics, of course, at least since McCloud's »metacomical« trilogy (see Cook). But McCloud makes use of an avatar »guiding through arguments as if he was not arguing himself (as the overall author/artist) but instead narrating [the articulation of] an argument« (Packard 2013, 26; my translation). We do not find such pictorial avatars in my following examples. In terms of the theory proposed later, McCloud's pictorially represented avatar, always located in spatiotemporal situations, generates base-narrativity across the work – and thus narrative coherence – while Barry's, Sousanis', and Schlogger's works do not.
- 2] To avoid misunderstandings, narrative coherence can usually also be found within non-fictional works of comics journalism, graphic memoirs, documentary comics, etc. (see Johnson; Worcester). The question of (non-)narrative coherence is independent from the assumed (non)fictionality of the represented domain under discussion.
- 3] Eco's example is Spinoza's *Ethics*.
- 4] In the fourth section I will consider cases where they do *not* do this.
- 5] If an extradiegetic narrating character is fictional (or in some other ways distinguished from the actual writer) the ›plane‹ they must exist on *could* be considered such a ›first-level domain‹, relegating all narrated facts to a lower level.