



This is an author produced version of a paper published in *Abstraction et bande dessinée*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the published paper:

Dittmar, Jakob. (2019). Abstraction and non-sequitur. *Abstraction et bande dessinée*, p. null

URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/27280>

Publisher: La 5e couche

This document has been downloaded from MUEP (<http://muep.mah.se>).

Abstraction and non-sequitur

Jakob F. Dittmar (Malmö)

This paper looks at abstract meaning or references in comics to understand better the limitations for comics' storytelling that might result from using higher forms of abstraction. The central question in this regard is, under what conditions the reading of sequentiality into juxtaposed images stops working. By looking at the related details of several examples, the features necessary for making images become a comic are reflected on.

While there are different definitions of the abstract in use, this paper tries to combine literary and science of arts-definitions to discuss what abstraction in comics can be. With individual images, the definition of the abstract used in fine arts is easily applied: Abstraction is not concerned with concrete figurative representation. But with sequences of images, the form and content of each image is as important as the form of the sequence itself: The narration of a comic is given in its sequence of images, in the interweaving of representations of forms: images link and relate to other images. In a comics-context, the concept of formal or narrative abstraction could be understood as a lack of connections between individual neighbouring images. This is in essence the quality that has been described as "non-sequitur" by McCloud (1993) for sequence-building in comics narrations. But non-sequitur does not exist, really. Readers always construct some kind of meaning into sequences of images, as examples of obviously non-intended sequences show.

Also abstractions of the form of comics are possible: the panel grid and frames of a page can be abandoned for an abstraction of their forms. Some "productive pages" (cf. Peeters 2003) can be understood as rather abstract in comparison to standard comics-pages. Abstract forms or content in comics would be very distinctive for the style of a comic and for the development of their comics' narration. In the following, definitions of the abstract from literature and from fine arts are reflected on to see, which definition of the abstract is applicable best on comics and their storytelling.

Comics' storytelling

How abstract a comic can become before its storytelling becomes incomprehensible is mainly depending on the individual reader's cultural and intellectual background. References to topics, significations of meaning, are read into material that was not intending to carry these meanings, but get them if readers find them in the signs and images used to tell the story. Under what conditions the reading of sequentiality into juxtaposed images stops working? As becomes clear, it does not need much to make readers' contextualise images with juxtaposed other images and construct some sequentiality into them and storytelling happens.

Readers make sense of whatever sequences of images that are presented within the same narration: a interrelation of images presented in each others context is expected and therefore constructed into the material. This becomes clear when looking at different sequences of images: Intended as a narration or not, they are seen in each other's context. Wassilij Kandinsky's *Zarte Bagatellen* (1937), an upright strip of paired images in six rows, does prove this nicely: relations between the images are easily constructed because of the return of individual forms and colours which link or rather interweave the specific places within the piece.

As with all comics, the example shows that the structural basis for comics storytelling is rather simple, while the difficulties are given in the interweaving (*tressage*, cf. Groensteen 1999): the way in which images link and relate to other images on the same and/or other pages sets the tone and quality of each comic. This juxtaposing images into contexts gives meaning to them and their details; it constructs relations between individual places in the narration (*la spatio-topie*) and between narrative elements and themes (*l'arthrologie*) (Groensteen 1999): “The first is about spatial relations and the second about semantic relation” (Magnusson 2005: 42). This is the matter we deal with, when we analyse or plan for the dramaturgical development of comics. And this is, what we expect as a logical background when we encounter sequences of images, which might have been intended to be an abstract comic or just happen to allow for reading as a comic (chance sequence-building continues to be one of the major problems with the placement of advertisings...).

Abstraction

Abstract is the opposition to concrete. But what does concrete and abstract refer to when we look at comics? Comics are graphic literature and focus on dialogue as plays for the theatre do. But the following definition used for literature seems difficult to apply to comics. J. A. Cuddon explains:

”**abstract** [...] Not concrete. A sentence is abstract if it deals with a class of things or persons: for example: 'All men are liars'. On the other hand 'Smith is a liar' is a concrete statement. The subject of a sentence may also be an abstraction, as in 'The wealth of the ruling classes'. Something may be said to be abstract if it is the name for a quality, like heat or faith. Critics use the terms abstract and concrete of imagery. (...)

For the most part poetry is the language of concreteness; prose that of the abstract. At any rate prose tends to be better able to deal with the abstract because it is more precise; not necessarily, therefore, more accurate.” (Cuddon 1991, 3)

Images usually depict specific states and relations between things, inanimate objects and people alike. They seem to illustrate more abstract descriptions by giving concrete examples. Apart from information graphics that are using pictograms and the like, comics' images seem to make concrete statements in the above sense. But as the limitations already indicate, comics visualise and narrate on the abstract level as well. How far comics tend to be closer to poetry than prose cannot be said, because most do use reduction of details in their images, thus suggesting personhood where they in fact deliver typification, i.e. abstractions in the sense of the quotation above. If one would follow this idea dogmatically, the amount of visual detail would determine individuality and by this, concreteness of images. The reduction of figures to types would on the other hand indicate abstraction. But most comics – apart from the photorealistic – use reductions of visual details, narrate using typical and stereotypical figures. In consequence, with the definitions of literary terminology in mind, Batman, Tintin and many other comics are rather abstract figures. Many of the stories told using these figures are as typical as fairy tales and Hollywood mainstream.

In visual art, abstraction is when something has been *gestaltet*, i.e. designed

purposefully to represent the essence of something. Each abstract piece of art does refer to and depend on contexts, of course. It is never without expression as that is always given in form, modulation, and ductus of used tools (Lützel, 1967, 78-88).

While the creator of a piece of abstract art might have intended some specific reference or message, it is the audience's reading of the artefact that matters in a narrative context, based on cultural knowledge or the specific setting the piece is placed in. As with all communications, the logic of encoding and decoding applies (cf. Hall 1980).

The artefact itself is described and reflected on because of its form, the given measurements and the balance of the piece in itself (this includes lack of balance as well). Its cultural references are reflected on in different, specific settings, which might be contradictory where audiences have very different cultural backgrounds and experiences with forms, colours etc. Also, its production is of importance in this regard, as surfaces for example do inform on the way, the artefact has been produced. With abstract drawings or paintings for example, traces of production tools on their surfaces and the finish of details are crucial style elements. The style of image-production used for a comic is central to its aesthetic reference-frame. The way in which images are placed alongside each other determines the rhetoric and stylistic qualities of the resulting comic (intended or chance comics alike). Theoretically, four styles are given: pages are either regulated or constant, decorative, rhetoric, or productive (cf. Peeters 2003). In reality, many blended forms exist, but these consist mostly of sections that follow the given four basic styles.

Examples

In regards to abstraction on the formal level, this paper discusses the narrative function of abstract images and pages focusing on a few examples.

[insert illustration 1 here]

illustration 1: A page from *rutapâruta* by Jarl Hammarberg (1993, [41]). In this example, sound-words and play with other words are mixed with drawn forms, which may or may not refer to symbols from physics, astrology, visual telegraphy. (c) 1993 Jarl Hammarberg.

Jarl Hammarberg (who publishes in Esperanto as Jarlo Martelmondo) experimented on sequential visual storytelling by blending concrete poetry with very few drawn pictorial elements and putting these images into sequences, often putting six images per page, printed into the bleed, i.e. without an outer frame on the page but the end of the page being the frame to the outer edges of the images. In each strip, the text-elements are set in the same type, placed in accordance with some strategy that is not deductible from the resulting images. Hammarberg himself points out the influence of concrete poetry in his comments at the end of *rutapâruta* (1993, 103). The words given per image are sometimes synonyms, referring to the same topic, sometimes only connectable by association, and sometimes not relating to each other at all. While neither a clear message nor a general meaning can be read into the example, the style creates a specific atmosphere, which works because of possible associations of the type, the words, the drawings, the placing and composition of the images from these elements in reference to e.g. concrete poetry (illustration 1). Where drawn

elements are given, these usually are extremely reduced and only partly recognisable as references to some specific sign, object or whatever. J.A. Cuddon's explanation of concrete poetry works as description of this work, too: "In the more way-out examples of this kind of verse sense is abandoned; there is no syntax or grammar." (Cuddon 1991, 184).

The Swedish artist Elis Ernst Eriksson was familiar with comics, and produced some very important artistic comics, some reminding in their reduced and seemingly chaotic development of events and constructions of machinery to George Herriman's *Krazy Cat*, while individual pages can be seen as precursors to Chris Ware's complex logic of references on the same page (ref. Eriksson: *Pavanhäftet*, 1965).

In regards to abstraction, Eriksson worked with abstraction of visual content as well as using abstractions in the accompanying or inserted texts: He published the illustrated novella *Tårar* in 2002, that did show several rectangular entities living in some urban setting. Even though we all look different from these forms, we can recognise these as representations of human beings, abstracted from individual persons into condensed types with reduced individuality. In the following year, he exhibited and published *Åkk*, a sequence of framed black and white images and texts that dealt with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In this piece, the sequence of images was constructed from the individual parts of the series, and while its narration-building worked like in a comic it was not intended as a comic. The exhibition did show sequences of images that were hung individually but in juxtaposed sequence, while the printed version emphasized the sequentiality that built the narration of *Åkk*.

Some of the images contain small text-bits typed on paper and glued in, others are written into in large block letters, while others again only consisted of text listing references, or incidents, etc. As already indicated in the definition offered by Cuddon, text allows for abstraction. Abstract concepts can be expressed by using the word established as reference to these. Concepts like e.g. democracy can be written down easily, but are much more difficult to express in drawings or other illustrations.

A completely different approach is followed by Allan Haverholm, who experiments on comics' genres and structure and has published several anthologies of his works. In *When the last story is told* (2015), he focuses on the page as a whole, as he partly presents pages filled with frames full of very similar crosshatching or other painted structures or patterns. There is no development nor are there substantial differences between the images placed in direct juxtaposition, apart from a few pages, where the panel grid has been filled with paper squares in different paper qualities and colour hues. A few pages simply show a panel grid drawn on top of a photo-collage or even overlaying one large image.

Considering its title, it might be that he intended the emptiness described to be the message of the anthology, but as all pages show almost exactly the same panel grid, his book does not even play on different page styles – and that is styles of story development in comics – nor does it invite reflections on the process of storytelling itself when there is nothing to put into the form at all. While the idea is good for a few pages, the repetition of the same formula throughout the book does not allow for increased insight. Not only from manga it is known that comics-pages constructed like these exist and work well in longer narratives, but with *When the last story is told*, this visual strategy is not working well. This is mostly because Haverholm avoids to fill the frames with content, and as a result, the pages of the

anthology remain experiments on textures and patterns without inviting the readers' imagination: While the formal style suggests the pages to be comics pages, their content does not allow for a reading of these pages. No connections remain to be constructed, no sense to be made of whatever sequence of individual images.

This is completely different with Clay Ketter's photographs of frames and panel grids given in all kinds of artefacts like shelves and kitchen cupboards to wall- and tile-patterns left over from demolished houses (cf. Ketter n.d.). With these, the reader is able to not only recognise the original object, but also to understand the reference to panel grids and sequences of frames on comics' pages. The given details invite the readers of his images to reconstruct the former building in their imagination. Remains of wallpapers, different tiled up sections and the like are recognisable and allow for cultural referencing, for building a relation to the content of the image, and many of his images even offer to be read as sequences. So, here too, we look at abstract patterns that are not comics, but only show the reference to this literary form in page structures and frame patterns. Where Ketter manages to get the reader to relate and continue from the given material, Haverholm's pages do not allow for this because of their lack of hooks for their readers.

In the context of this paper, the example of Haverholm's anthology highlights some limitations for abstract content: There needs to be visual content that is inviting the reader to engage mentally, to decode it in whatever way, to re-cognise something in the given forms and colours. The employment of a uniform panel grid put on a page without other references to the nature of comics storytelling – i.e. juxtaposed sequential images of some kind – does not suffice on its own to make visual material a comic.

The opposite to this is Olivier Marboeuf's *la Sainte face*, a comic which employs a uniform panel grid, too, but starts as a rather normal comic, only to dissolve the primarily established visual style later in the story. The *la Sainte face*-chapter is one of three comics negotiating Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* that are collected in the comics journal *Le cheval sans tête 1* and works with increasing reduction of detail: The visual style is first reduced from overall dark images in black and white (using crosshatching for greytone), or rather: white and black line-work outlaying simplified forms invades the pages that are executed in the said style before the story is continued dominated by this line-work style and ends with a page that shows the established panel grid over an almost empty page, looking like the result of a glass bead game that has taken over the discourse of the story's figures and transformed them into ink-blot at the end of lines that seem to record (or indicate) movements (image 2).

The breakdown of the visual style or rather its change from one style to another while keeping the page-structure intact, is of course a reference to the topic negotiated in the text of *Woyzeck* as well. While the visual content is reduced profoundly, the references of the visual representation change with this as well. But the content of the story, the message of the play that is used as basis for the comic, is kept intact and is told in a way that is unique to comics. In this case, not the story dissolves, but the reduction of its visual style is used to narrate the story well. While the previous example is quite obvious, this one is rather more difficult to describe in regards to this paper's main issue: is it abstract first and becomes concrete in this final recording of some movements on paper or is it concrete in its depiction

of a dreary landscapes with shadowy figures in and becomes abstract in its reductionist illustration of the story's message?

[insert illustration 2 here]

illustration 2: The last page of the *la Sainte face*-chapter by Olivier Marboeuf that is looking like the result of a glass bead game while keeping the comic's uniform panel grid as structure for all its pages. (c) 1996, Olivier Marboeuf.

Units of storytelling

As comics are drawn or assembled and finally printed on more or less flat surfaces, or presented on screens, they all have this dependence on surfaces in common. Abstract comics are in no way different from that: a defined space is used for the juxtaposed placing of several images. They are recognisable as a sequence of images, otherwise they would be only one image and thus not a comic. A synthesis of the different images may happen, no narrative plot or story need to be recognisable, but the reader needs to be able to differentiate between pictorial units contained by the "page" (let us consider such a unit as a page, even if it might be placed on the wall of a house or in another setting). The page is a very important unit in the structure of comics' storytelling (cf. Groensteen 1999: 26f.) and it is obvious that each page is an image that contains several images. Accordingly, pages are referred to as hyperframe (or *hypercadre* in Peeters 2003), meta panel or super panel (Eisner 2004), etc. The narrative, constructed from the different pages, can be seen as a multiframe (*multicadre*, *multicadre feulleté*, cf. van Lier 1988). This is the comic's skeleton around which its narration develops all its other decisive qualities are defined (cf. Magnusson 2005). In due consequence, the rhetoric of each comic is built using and combining frames: they allow for punctuation of the story, for visualizing narrative rhythm and structure. Otherwise the material presented might be a collage rather than a sequence of images.

There is no such thing as "non-sequitur"

One side-effect of the way, in which we read meaning into sequences of images is that McCloud's definition of "non-sequitur" (McCloud 1993, 72) is impossible in comics storytelling, as the reader makes sense of whatever sequences of images that are presented within the same narration: Interrelations between images are expected and therefore constructed into the material, especially with short strips, but even in longer visual narratives. The fact that images are placed in juxtaposition within the frame of a page or under a shared title makes the reader expect a reason and construct relations between images that might never have been intended to make sense together. Two examples might illustrate the problem well: on the one hand, placing of advertisements today is mostly done by some publisher's algorithm. In due consequence, very unfortunate combinations of articles on whatever subjects alongside advertisements for all kinds of products and services are published and relations between the two are constructed by the readers, usually resulting in free extra placements for additional advertisements by the same company in way of compensating for the "mis-placement" of the original article.

The other example has been provided by Mikael Fisk in his *Odd Panels: A Comic Strip Generator Prototype*. The generator combines pre-produced single images, adds

comments and speech balloons at random. Each resulting strip is presented on a webpage in slot-machine style (illustration 3). The reader (or user) only has to determine whether the strip is to consist of two, three or four images and whether it is supposed to contain comments and/or speech balloons or not. The rest is done by random selection, and the reader always makes sense in some way of the resulting strip, as a story is supposed to convey a message or even a morale. There seems to be no way around this expectation and its performance in the reader's imagination.

[insert illustration 3 here]

illustration 3: One example of a comic strip produced in random selection from a stock of images, comments, and speech balloons by the *Odd Panels comic strip generator* by Michael Fisk. (c) 2014 Mikael Fisk.

Conclusion

The definitions of what abstract is, differ in literature and fine arts. While the first is concerned with generalisations and conceptualisation, the other focuses on the visual aspects of abstraction as non-figurative expression. In comics, both concepts can be applied meaningfully, especially as abstraction as generalisation from individual to typical forms is used in most character design for comics, fictional as well as non-fictional.

Also, many comics concern themselves with reflections on abstract qualities that are important for societies. As mentioned earlier, text allows for generalisations easily, while it is considered difficult to express abstract concepts in pictures. Many comics negotiate abstract issues on their pictorial plane as well, visibly not content with restricting themselves to showing personalised examples only.

In regards to abstract storytelling, the examples in this paper show that a comic needs to offer material for possible connotation and/or association in content and also, but very little, in form. The example of Eriksson's *Åkk* does show that it is not the placing of images in specific juxtapositions that make a sequence of images become a comic: it is only necessary to have juxtaposed images at all. From *When the last story is told* we can conclude that it is not sufficient to use comics-specific page-structures without content that allows for at least some flights of imagination. Instead, pictorial content of sorts is needed.

It has to be emphasized in this context that abstraction is a quality attributed to descriptions or visualisations according to the individual reader's background. Hammarberg's example does prove this point in its reduced styling of the page and of the typography used. The uncertain references of the drawn elements together with the text placed in the tradition of concrete poetry invite the reader's imagination to make sense of the mystery and make the comic more interesting.

Given knowledge of some kinds of codes and of the usage of signs, their general and specific references determines whether something is considered as a signification of some meaning or not. Incomprehensible are those communications that are not composed of signs that are neither known to the reader nor decodable from known or elements or relations to known forms.

Marboeuf's *Woyzeck*-adaption attacks a rather conventional pictorial style first with overlays of mock-tribal line-work, i.e. abstracting from realistic representation of

figures, before the picture plane is dissolved into a concrete recording of disoriented movements on paper shown within the orderly pattern of the comic's established panel grid. In the content and the form of this, core-issues of Büchner's text is expressed in several ways. At the same time, the example shows how abstract concepts like identity can be visualised in comics' images.

To conclude: Humans are storytelling animals (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 216) and are highly trained to invent and discover stories in all kinds of materials and contexts, be it concrete or abstract. We read structure not only into chance sequences of advertisements but e.g. into multimedial material. Our focus on narration is exemplified by the way we construct some kind of hypertext from all sorts of information snibbles (cf. Murray 1998). In due consequence, interrelations and sequences are read into all kinds of material, appropriate or not. This ability to make sense and create structure into strings of information is only limited by restrictions in signification: as long as forms are reminding their readers of something, or rather anything, these will be put into context and interpreted improvising on these references, even where relations are constructed from some assumption of the individual reader.

Illustrations

Illustration 1: Jarl Hammarberg, *rutapåruta*, page 41. (c) 1993 Jarl Hammarberg.

Illustration 2: Olivier Marboeuf, *la Sainte face*, page 156. (c) 1996 Olivier Marboeuf.

Illustration 3: Mikael Fisk (2014): "Odd Panels: A Comic Strip Generator Prototype" Panel Soup.

Sources

Primary

Eriksson, Elis Ernst (various) "Pavan", "Tårar", "Åkk" in: Hultberg 2006.

Fisk, Mikael (2014): "Odd Panels: A Comic Strip Generator Prototype" Panel Soup.

(accessed 25.08.2015) <http://oddpanels.bitballoon.com/>

Hammarberg, Jarl (1993): *rutapåruta. 3 serier*. Stockholm: Författares Bokmaskin.

Haverholm, Allan (2015): *When the last story is told*. Malmö: C'est Bon Kultur.

Marboeuf, Olivier (1996): "[Woyzeck] la Sainte face" in: Amok: *Le cheval sans tête 1*.

Excerpt reprinted in: *Schreibheft*, Nr. 51, Sept. 1998; 152-156.

Kandinsky, Wassilij (1937): *Zarte Bagatellen*. Oil and watercolours on paper, 60 x 25 cm.

Nina Kandinsky.

Ketter, Clay (1992 to present): "Works" (accessed August 24, 2015)

<http://clayketter.com/works.html> and <http://clayketter.com/now.html>

Secondary

Cuddon, J.A. (1991): *Dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. London: Penguin.

Eisner, Will (2004): *Comics and Sequential Art*, Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.

Groensteen, Thierry (1999): *Système de la bande dessinée*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Hall, Stuart (1980): "Encoding/decoding", in: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed.): *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-79*, London:

Hutchinson, pp. 128-138.

Hultberg, Teddy (2006): *100 år av åttlydnader. elis ernst eriksson*. Paris: Schultz förlag.

van Lier, Henri (1988): "La Bande Dessinée, une Cosmogénie Dure", *Bande dessinée, récits et modernité. Colloque de Cerisy*, 6 août 1987. (accessed August 24, 2015)
http://www.anthropogenie.com/anthropogenie_locale/semiotique/bande_dessinee.pdf

Lützel, Heinrich (1967): *Abstrakte Malerei*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981): *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Duckworth & Co.

Magnusson, Helena (2005): *Berättande Bilder*, Göteborg and Stockholm: Makada.

McCloud, Scott (1993): *Understanding Comics*. New York: Harper Collins.

Janet H. Murray (1998): *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. MIT Press.

Peeters, Benoît (2003): *Lire la bande dessinée*, Paris: Flammarion.