Student experiments on narrative options
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We teach comics courses and we do research into comics, mainly into how they work, how they tell their stories, construct narratives and propose specific styles and emotions to their readers. Our research is partly influenced by our teaching, accordingly, as all our comics-courses include larger production exercises to allow for reflections over the process of composition and the consequences of specific decisions in layout and composition of individual images, pages and the comic as a whole. Some years ago, one of our students developed tactile comics for visually impaired and blind readers. The consequences and the potential of this new form of sequential pictorial storytelling continues to be subject of research (forthcoming e.g. this autumn on the ComicsForum). Others, again, have worked on digital formats to sequences within a narrative unit, more on two of them during the presentation. Important is how much our students participate in comics research and contribute to it as well. And how much they make us better researchers and teachers, because teaching integrates research-questions and current developments of comics' theory.

Especially issues that deal with the limits of comics-formats, with storytelling in comics on specific printed or digital platforms are considered of high relevance and are returned to again and again. Individual students chose to experiment on specific issues to test statements or problems that have been formulated in comics-theoretical texts, the course has discussed. Also, issues that have not been covered in theories, really, are picked up to test options. In this way, individual comics productions by students have triggered more research by us teachers. They also have helped a lot to drive forward the discussion of comics composition and narrative styles in general and particular.

To be more specific and explain the basic understanding, our reflections on comics start from, some background has to be provided here: Comics make everything visible – everything is translated into graphically designed content. And digital comics can offer additional options by adding sound and animated visuals or even film clips. But the way this works in detail is not simple at all.

Experiments help to develop further the known options for telling stories in comics, they help us to understand how comics work. They allow us to understand better how individual elements and layers work within comics and are perfectly suited for artistic expression of narrative voice. In analysing comics, attention on the use of individual layers allows for better understanding of how these stories are told and contextualised in detail. But not only in analysing comics but also when planning comics productions, the strategic use of the individual layers helps to create distinct styles for individual narrations or to create and communicate specific undertones and references to all kinds of discourses.

Some Experiments in Digital Comics
To show the importance of layers in comics, a few distinct examples from the field of digital comics are discussed and the concept of layers in comics is introduced in detail in the presentation. The examples illustrate consequences of decisions about page design for the narrative style, i.e. the voice of the comic in question. Digital comics tend to be planned and formatted for specific visual media, e.g. in screen formats and resolutions, in colour settings etc. While the first two examples follow that logic, the third tries to deliver a comic that is flexible in its layout and adjusts to different settings of the browser or screen.

Page Formats and Sequentiality
The visual rhetoric of comics can use elements of all kinds of codes and other visuals, even empty spaces. While the smallest unit in comics-storytelling is the individual image that is enclosed by its frame, the largest unit is the complete narration, e.g. some graphic novel. As said before: A very important unit in the structure of comics-storytelling is the page as a whole (e.g. Groensteen 1999, 26 f.): Each page is an image that contains several images. The format of the page is a central element of a comic's appearance as it defines possible pacing of the narrative per page (cf. Lefèvre 2000). Page style is of importance for the built-up of atmosphere and emotions in the arrangement of images and texts, executed in more or less distinct styles. So, the display of elements effectively forms the individual style of each comic and needs to be carefully planned and analysed to understand its function for each specific sequence of images, i.e. the comic's narration.

The way in which images and texts are placed, grouped on pages, and put into sequence, makes the comic speak with a distinct voice of its own. But with some digital formats, comics are re-arranged according to the size of the browser-window, as we have seen in the third example, so these are subject to change and would have different visual properties depending on the screen-format used for reading. Comics-definitions so far do allow for, but do not discuss the consequences of floating or flexible page layouts for the dramaturgy of stories. And while digital formats allow for changing layouts with each opening of the story, printed matter of course is not flexible in this way. Digital comics and comics that can be opened to various extents can follow these conventions or break them by introducing different story-arches that result from the width of the browser-window or how much one unrolls or opens a comic.

Comics-narrations are constructed from elements placed on various structural layers that are overlaying each other. The different layers are separated according to their internal visibility or audibility, respectively, i.e. the visibility or audibility their content is imagined to have for all figures within the story: Unsurprisingly, most experiments on comics storytelling start from focusing on and working with the properties of one of these layers.

Summary
Most comics do apply established patterns and sets to construct their narrations on the pages. Some are divided into uniform sized images put in simple rows, as they have been produced to be syndicalised and need to be put into pre-defined spaces on diverse newspapers' pages

etc. Others provide mainstream stories but do design the pages with the intention to create visual units that support the developing narrative by establishing some emotional tone or atmosphere. Experimentation in these comics formats does happen in comics in general and on our courses in particular. Also, possible topics and approaches to tell about specific issues are tested, but they have to remain topic for another time. What can be stated is that content creates stories on the readers' minds, as soon as it is put in an obvious sequence. And mainstream-entertainment can be offered as easily as reflections on identities or documentaries on diverse and even complex issues.

The distinct properties of the individual layers allow for strategic use of their elements, e.g., to intensify the effect of content on other layers, or on the contrary to weaken, break, or ironize elements on other layers. Therefore, it is important to understand what each individual layer can be used for best. Most of the times, visual information is accessed much quicker than information coded in text. Text-layers allow for reference to abstract concepts and ideas, and can of course be used to contextualise specific pictorial information. But the differences between explicit or implicit references in text are very different in their effects from pictorial references. And while textual references connect an image explicitly to specific issues quite well, pictorial references allow references to be put into the composition of an image, be it a figure or a place or details thereof. How our students use specific parts of comics to make their point about formal or narrative issues is what I want to detail in the examples.

References

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