This paper considers potential ways comics narratives with a documentary claim can participate in the academic discussion of history. Academic historiography constructs (normally literal, mainly text-based) arguments about historical events through discussions of (often written) sources, with reference to and in dialog with other relevant positions (Evans). While comics narration and imagery do not conform to the conventions of academic historiography, we are interested in the possibility of a mutually beneficial dialog between the arguments, and the ways they are manifested, in certain comics narratives and the ones that constitute the academic discourse of history. The following analysis focuses on a precondition for such dialog: the utilization of sources, and the explanation of how these sources have been used by the authors in comics that claim to reliably portray and explicate aspects of historical reality.[1] As case studies, we look into four different approaches to historical comics: two graphic novels, one chapter in a comics anthology, and an archaeological paper in comics format. We investigate their particular ways of informing readers about research methods that were employed for preparing the story, and about the provenience of archival materials that were, directly or indirectly, quoted in the comics. An integral part of the historical argument that these works make respectively involves reflections on the attempt to understand reality. Moreover, we discuss how these attempts are communicated to evaluate their adherence to the expectations of academic historiography.
The way a source is read and cited is crucial to the perception of its capability to enhance our understanding of the historical reality it relates to. Some genres of comic writing, such as journalistic and documentary comics, have palpably attained credibility and seem to be here to stay. Our interest lies, however, in comics that go distinctly further than journalism in offering eloquent arguments about certain historical realities. Accordingly, we focus on examples of comics that can, and arguably aspire to, participate in the discourse of historians about the reality they depict. To evaluate their reliability (in academic terms), we will focus on the coding of history-related arguments in the generic grammar and visual iconography of comics. In particular, we emphasize the means in which these texts contemplate their sources and methods to establish such reliability. The ambition of the authors to ‘be taken seriously’ in their depictions of historical realities is crucial for the analysis of narrative comics as arguments about history. We claim that by virtue of their distinctive coding of historical information—the combination of pictorial iconography, written texts, and sophisticated narration techniques—comics authors can negotiate unique historical observations, which have the potential to enhance the knowledge and comprehension of the past beyond the limits of established academic writing.

With the advent of Cultural Studies, comics have been established as useful primary sources in various fields of historical research, as well as in sociology and anthropology. While they have been considered as indicators of cultural and ideological trends of the time of their production and consumption, scholars have been reluctant, however, to treat comics as secondary sources, i.e. as arguments about historical realities. This negligence is surprising, in particular, because historians were willing to blur the boundaries between historiography and other areas of popular culture. During the past decades, several prominent historians—from Hayden White to Nathalie Zemon-Davis and Robert Rosenstone—have repeatedly challenged the boundaries between history and fiction, mostly in literature and film. In their reflections on the nature of history, these scholars (and many others) did not seek to downplay the credibility—and responsibility—of academic history. Instead, they sought to draw new distinctions between the credible and the incredible depiction of historical reality. Rather than the medium or the academic background of the author, the ways the depiction is consistent with other viable sources determine these new distinctions. Accordingly, by virtue of the different emphases of other media and genres (e.g., on emotion, on relationships, on material details, etc.), novels, photographs, theatre plays and films can engage in discussion with written, conventionally accepted historiography, and thus enrich and enhance the historians’ discourse. Similar to other media and genres, historical comics have a unique meaning-production system that corresponds to specific emphases and viewpoints. Historians’ methodical consideration of comics would consequently find ways to incorporate the distinctive historical insights of the examined comics into scholars’ existing discourse. As the historian Ira Berlin explains in the first of three Nathan I. Huggins Lectures at Harvard: “History is not about the past; it is about arguments we have about the past.” As the integration of comics with historiography is possible, comic-literate historians would be able to write new history using the new sets of arguments presented in historical comics.

The usability of comics as secondary sources, i.e., as presentations of valid arguments within scholarly discourse, is much more contested than their ability of merely narrating historical experiences or events. This is partly due to the lack of openness about sources in most comics about historical matters. Since sources, and the careful use of them, are crucial to the academic discussion of history, the lack of specific references to primary sources and to other relevant arguments in comics—namely, the absence of the intertextual continuation of the argument itself—appears to make them incompatible with historiography. Furthermore, comics narratives commonly use interrelating textual and pictorial information that appears to be more open for interpretations than plain textual information. Subsequently, the combination of text and images might alter their respective meanings by connoting additional references that are missing when only image or text are used.
The following pages will employ several case studies to introduce and outline the field of historical comic-analysis. They have been chosen as examples due to their different approaches to the narration of history and to the dialog with written, academic narrations of history. While their individual sets of referencing sources and discourses in texts and images are important for the argument of this paper, their specific stories are not. To keep the focus on the subject matter of this paper, their descriptions are accordingly reduced to the details necessary for the understanding of the strategy they developed for dealing with sources and references. Within this limited framework, we look into narrative strategies and relate them to questions asked by scholars, such as the correlations between these representations and the existing body of knowledge (the second layer of academic knowledge production explained above).

This inquiry takes into account the interactions between imagery and texts that form the structure of representations in comics. Also, the cultural and historical paradigms of their production are of importance in this context. However, the fundamentals of comics-analysis function here as a premise, rather than as the objective of our inquiry. After providing a short overview over common approaches in referring to sources in comics, this paper considers four examples in more detail: *Franz Seelemann* by Florian Biermeier; *Ceramics, Polity and Comics* by John G. Swogger; *Madgermanes* by Birgit Weyhe; and *Kooperatören* by Gunnar Krantz. In analyzing the ways these texts reflect on the narration of history, we point to their potential adherence to academic principles, as a gateway to possible integration of comics with conventional historiography. In evaluating the scientific credibility of a historical argument, we must calculate the interests and positions of the authors. Yet, in evaluating their compatibility with the academic discourse on history, the particular positions of the authors are secondary: they would suffice to be considered as “history” only if the argument is sound and productive.

What we refer to here as historical comics narrative is related to, but different from, journalistic and documentary comics. Journalistic comics is based on facts and presents an argument on particular occurrences, but it has commitment neither to full exposure of its sources (some cases even require concealing the sources) nor to situate its argument vis-à-vis the academic discourse on the matter (Dittmar, *Grundlagen* 107-10). Documentary comics, likewise, have limited commitment to historiography and commonly little interest in a reflexive examination of their sources (Ashkenazi and Dittmar; see also Lefèvre). When they do refer to their sources, the above mentioned genres state them plainly in the narrative, or list them in plain written text in the preface or afterword to the comic itself. For instance, in *Le photographe* Emanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre, and Frederic Lemercier simply explain the origin of its narration and the source of its pictorial material—mainly the sequences of photographs included—in plain written text, detailing provenience of visual material and of the narratives behind the production of it. The main thread of the narrative is provided by the photographer Didier Lefèvre who documents a journey of a team of volunteers to Afghanistan for Doctors without Borders during the Russian war of the 1980s. Several smaller narratives are added, all told in the voice of the first-person narrator, the photographer. At the very end, an appendix gives short biographical information about people important to the story. Also, the diaries of the story’s main characters are introduced with an entry of their own in the portraits-section of the final third volume of *Le photographe*, putting them on the same level as the individual people central to the story. The process of taking the photographic images that drive the story is central to the narrative of this comic itself and used as its title and leitmotif. But while the image taking is getting obvious from the start within the visual and textual layers of the story, information on how the photographic material from Afghanistan in the 1980s has been obtained, redacted and developed to become an integral part of the comic is added in an appendix.

More implicit about its sources is Emmanuel and François Lepage’s report on a French Antarctic exploration, *La lune est blanche*. The comic shows the collection and production of the visual material that is documenting the current research-trip, but the narrative about the history of Arctic and Antarctic exploration is only partly sourced or explained. Briefly, in sepia-toned images, the history of Arctic
exploration is told, illustrated in re-drawn images that reproduce historical material from or about these exploits. Sources to these images and materials are not stated. The tone of the narrative remains neutral with a certain reverence to the heroism traditionally attributed to explorers. In this way, the current French research-trip that is central to the narration is put into an explicit historical context. Yet, there is no critical reflection on the source materials. Instead, they are presented as a continuation of the myth-making process, namely, of the explorer’s heroism in success and failure.

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A strikingly different approach is taken by Raus Rein, the anthology on a ‘colonial school’ in the German city of Witzenhausen edited by Marion Hulverscheidt and Hendrik Dorgathen. From 1898 until 1944, the school sought to prepare its students for work in the colonies with their different climates and conditions for farming. The anthology contains research papers on various aspects of the school’s activities that blend text and images, some are in typical comics formats, others could rather be described as illustrated texts. Also, various blends of these formats are used. While the introduction to the works explains the difficulties involved in the production of the anthology, it is left to the reader to combine information on the different details and themes provided in its individual contributions. Most of these contributions reflect carefully on the gaps in archives, on the unknown aspects of stories that have been omitted from documentation or were never documented at all. The reflexive consideration of sources, the open discussion of their limitations, distinguishes this comic from other graphical texts that investigate historical realities. We argue that this sense of reflexivity is essential for the integration of comics and historiography, or at least for interactions between them.

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One comic within the anthology tries to piece together the biography of a man who was taken from Africa as a child and became a waiter at the colonial school much later: Florian Biermeier’s account of Selemani Bin Juma’s life exemplifies this approach with recurrent references to the sparse information available on the narrated events. The substantial gaps in documentation are particularly evident when it comes to knowledge about the personal feelings of Selemani Bin Juma. In narrating Bin Juma’s experiences at the school, Biermeier’s story illustrates primarily the powerlessness of its main figure: Symbolically, he is introduced first under the name given by his German masters as “Franz Seelemann.” The visual style of the drawings of the comics does little to expand the reader’s knowledge beyond the details mentioned in the sources. It thus underscores the scarcity of documents and cautions the reader to be aware of it. The graphic images are accompanied by textual narration, which drives the biographical development through recurrent reminders of the lack of known details. The reflexivity with regard to sources and the encouragement of the reader to be aware of the role of imagination in the construction of the historical narrative reach its climax at the end of the story: At this point, the narration ends with photographs instead of drawings and the gap between what was documented and what can be deduced (or imagined) from it. The inclusion of reproduced material from the archive into the narrative highlights the comparative unreliability of the latter, but also demonstrates the benefits of the constructed narrative and its potential contribution to our knowledge of the person and of the circumstances he lived in.

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However, this approach is limited. In its emphasis on gaps and the challenges embedded in the sources, the historical context in Biermeier’s comic is not fully explicated. Many details lack historical and biographical contexts and their significance might be lost on non-expert readers. For example, the story mentions the ways National Socialist organizations treated the possessions of black persons in 1940 Germany, but it fails to note the particularities of German racism at that time and the contemporaneous enactment of euthanasia. The issue remains implicit in the story, apparently because the details of the connections between these phenomena and the protagonist of the story are not fully documented. The only known photo of Selemani Bin Juma is shown as the last image of the story, documenting his facial expression in all details, showing him while he is waiting tables, what seems to have been the given occupation for most of his life. As with Le photographe, the photographs add individual detail that the reader combines with the information obtained from the reduced content of the drawings. In this case, the list of his clothing items documents not only what
clothes he had but illustrates also administrative routine and linguistic style in Nazi Germany, with only the hand-written adage of his name explaining why it is part of his personal file in the colonial school’s archive at all. Yet, the limits of photographic representations are highlighted here as well: The image reveals nothing about the emotions of the photographed person. Intriguingly, this time Biermeier does not mention this gap. He seems to signal the readers that they are now on their own and it is their task to study the character, by carefully looking at him, while being aware of their inability to fully comprehend him. One can see this approach as a truly humane statement. Bin Juma’s story has to be told, relying on the available few sources and knowledge of historical contexts, despite the lack of detailed sources that would constitute a valid narrative for academic historians.

Fig. 1: Florian Biermeier’s biography of Selemani Bin Juma, who became “Franz Seelemann” in Germany. Text and images are explicit about the scarcity of information about the main figure: the images are devoid of detail, the texts point to gaps in documentation. In the example above, the text states: “Whether or in what way Franz said farewell to his family is not known.” [my translation, JD] (image: Biermeier & avant-verlag, 2016).

Several other texts in the collection *Raus Rein* reflect extensively on ethical and methodological aspects of historical narration. Indicating it as a major theme of the book, the foreword to the anthology underlines details about the documents that were consulted and quoted by some of the contributors. Moreover, the anthology presents a detailed registry that lists all primary and secondary sources for each of the contributions, no matter what narrative or graphical style these contributions themselves have been executed in. The reader is prompted to understand how the narrators’ voices have processed archival matter and oral
traditions of the former colonial school. The process of writing historical accounts and negotiating meanings of the archival matter is thus in itself documented as part of the process of documenting histories. In underlining their particular use of the sources, the authors of these comics also disclose the way in which meaning is produced: They reveal gaps between the sources and the narrative highlights the places and the ways the narrator interpreted the sources and the connections between them. More than a mere gesture of transparency, this conscious use of sources reflects on the faults of many “academically valid” historical narratives. Narrators of written history often conceal these gaps and thus convey (occasionally misleading) certainties; the authors of these comics, however, invite the readers to be aware of their production of meaning and to challenge their argument.

Fig. 2: Details from the third page of John G. Swogger’s “Ceramics, Polity and Comics” exemplifying the use of different visual styles to communicate archaeological issues. Distinct in this example is the use of explanatory textual references pointed at pictorial details to interconnect textual and pictorial information (image: Swogger 2015, 18).

Our next example, John G. Swogger’s “Ceramics, Polity and Comics,” demonstrates a different approach to the same challenge. Unlike Biermeier’s story, this comic has been published as an academic paper in an archaeological journal. Swogger’s comic is a critique of the poor use of images in traditional archaeological communications and advocates the use of comics to communicate archaeological principles, processes, and findings. The comic combines various visual styles and includes traditional archaeological illustrations that are documenting the details of found objects painstakingly, or the location of artifacts in relation to each other during an excavation. They can be described as very realistic and different from the reduced representation used in most comics. The narrative of the paper revolves around the case of specific pottery-finds and archaeological research on these to argue for the advantages of using sequential images for telling and explaining interrelations and processes, even backgrounds in different archaeological schools. The paper supports its main argument with references to selected comics artists and their work, who developed the visual language employed in documentary comics today. This framework enables Swogger to phrase his ideas as relevant beyond the specifics of his case study, and to develop a graphic narration that might function as a sub-genre of information comics.[3]
Each page of the comic is designed in reference to different genres or narrative styles. The first page, for instance, consists of a collage divided up by the frames of a uniform panel grid—a typical split panel composition in adventure comics, which uses many small text-frames to introduce the topic and the progression of the plot. This generic first page, however, unconventionally includes endnotes that add detail and point to the sources to specific aspects of the text. During the entire comic, while text refers to the images and vice versa, the endnotes add detail to both (fig. 2). The second page imitates the typical style of (auto-)biographical comics. It combines images from archaeological fieldwork with reflections on the communication of this work referring to established comics artists and their styles. The page concludes with a gallery of works by these authors, which demonstrate the potential of comics as a scientific text. Swogger himself is represented as a drawn figure in this page, whose spoken text (in speech bubbles) continues from the narrator’s text in rectangular frames. While the comics artists are not individually discussed in the narration, their visual representation is accompanied by a text-frame that states the name and a year in brackets, again referring to individual publications contained in the list of references at the end of the paper.

The third page uses sequences of images in the style used for popular science and education comics, with each image containing names and textual explanations of details, mostly connected to the images by little arrows (fig. 2). Text and image are closely interrelated, raising the precision of description and preparing the development of consecutive use of this level of detailed information. At the lower right corner of the page, the figure of the author is shown again, lifting that very corner to open the next page. In a speech balloon, he explains that the following pages will show the possible look of a formal publication in comics format.

Throughout the text, Swogger accentuates the roles played by sources in the construction of the scientific narrative and explores ways to incorporate sources in a graphic narrative to disclose hitherto overlooked elements of the studied historical reality. While the topic of the example is the archaeological treatment of ceramics from Chihuahua, Mexico (fig. 3), it introduces periods of pottery and pottery decoration in a visualization of the developmental model of these artifacts before it introduces different theses on what they can tell about the cultures they had been used and left by. All positions described and all quotes used are sourced, maps indicate localities, portraits of the involved scholars accompany their quotes etc. (Swogger 19-21).
On the next page, the example ends by showing an overlay of the framing narrative over the discussed text. The author’s reflections on what the example did for his case are developed, using one distinct pot from the example to offer a brief introduction to the methods and motivations of archaeological work in the following pages before the comic goes on to show some distinct examples of visual styles in comics that could be employed for archaeological comics. All these include references to their sources as well. The comic concludes with meta-level reflections on what journalistic and documentary comics have been able to do, how this could be used to the benefit of archaeological research, and promote the scientific discourse about past societies. The development of such sophisticated methodological reflections in comics display the often-overlooked potential of the medium to function as a critical, self-conscious text, which can explore new approaches to historiography in the original meaning of the word: writing or depicting history. Again, this historical comic does not hide the conspicuous artificiality of comic-narration: i.e., the fundamental role of pictorial imagination and of generically defined units of meaning (an image, a page, a sequence). Instead, it uses this manifest artificiality to challenge the existing methodology and to offer a new reading of familiar sources. Rather than seeking to replace historiography, it aspires to be part of it and, at times, adds perspectives that cannot be revealed in written texts.

The next example of an academically sound treatment of sources adheres to a very different tradition in the way it introduces, develops, and supports its argument. Birgit Weyhe’s Madgermanes reports and reflects on the fate of foreign workers that were sent from Mozambique to the former German Democratic Republic. Expecting to attend a university at the GDR—and to return home equipped with knowledge that would enhance their conditions in Mozambique—the protagonists of Madgermanes were exploited as cheap labor. Their reference to themselves as “madgermanes” derives from the slogan “Made in Germany.” But as is shown in the book, these people have been cheated out of that education and most of their pay for the work.
done in the GDR. To make matters worse, after the German reunification most of them have been sent ‘back’ and left stranded in Mozambique.

Madgermanes is a graphic narrative that follows the investigation principles common in sociology. It focuses on the process of identifying the objective of the scholar’s research. As such, it describes Weyhe’s motivation and biographical background that influenced her work on the subject matter, and it explains the methods applied for collecting and presenting the data (fig. 4). Weyhe combines and condenses visual and textual information to give voice to a position located in between cultures—namely, her narration divulges the construction of individual positions that relate to collective constructions of culture. This way, her comic takes part in the continuous negotiation of meanings of fundamental terms for the construction of identity. In applying a different strategy from the ones mentioned above, Weyhe’s graphically narrated research conceives individual figures from a series of interviews. The comic, thus, exposes and analyzes the self-perception of real individuals without giving away their true identities. The book goes beyond journalistic representation when it openly presents, and discusses, the process of the inquiry, and noting its relations to the methods conventionally applied in sociology research and journalistic writing.

Fig. 4: Birgit Weyhe’s Madgermanes explains the method applied for presenting the collected biographical information that is relevant for the story told. In adherence to the ethical
prerequisites, she is protecting the identities of her sources (image: Weyhe & avant verlag, 2016).

Weyhe lives in Germany but spent her childhood in Uganda and Kenya, providing her with cultural knowledge and visual repertoire for visual expression (cf. Weyhe 7-12). Most of her visual language is perfectly understandable for readers with only a vague knowledge of African flora and fauna, sculpture, signs, and symbolism. At no moment in her graphic novel, it is necessary to know much about Mozambican culture. Yet, some knowledge of the cultural contexts of the GDR and its foreign policy is needed to be able to understand the negotiation of meanings that is driven forward in the combinations of motifs and words put forward by Birgit Weyhe.

It is important to point out that details of life in the former Socialist East Germany may appear to the reader today as foreign as some aspects of Mozambique’s history. Direct references to historical entities, events, and conditions in textual and pictorial elements partly have to be put into a wider context to be understood in their reflectiveness within the comic’s narrative. References and meanings of visual detail are not explained or sourced explicitly, but rather put into question by combining symbols and references in unusual ways (fig. 5): In this case, a baked pretzel and a leopard are shown together with a caption that asks, what is “Heimat,” or “What is where-you-belong?”[5]. Visually, a baked product typical for Southern Germany is combined with an animal that can be found in specific parts of Africa. Each element of the image symbolizes distinct issues on its own and refers to other contexts in the given, rather unusual combination. As always, the meaning read into the image is highly dependent on the reader’s cultural relation to the elements used in a specific context: Here, a complex meaning is constructed from combining two distinct visual elements that are put into a wider context by writing the question with reference to “Heimat,” a fundamental element of modern German identity discourse.
Fig. 5: In *Madgermanes*, Birgit Weyhe negotiates the meaning of signs by putting them in new contexts. Here, a rather Bavarian baked pretzel and a leopard are shown together with words asking (approximately) “What is where-you-belong?” [my translation, JD] (image: Weyhe & avant-verlag, 2016).

The narrative of this comic surrenders no lexical meaning for the visual elements, and no reference to the broad connotations it relates to, but the reader is asked to make sense of the image from its elements and the narrative context of the comic. As a result, the reader is required to investigate the individual signs on her own to enable the reflection on the meaning of the image as a whole. The reflexive work of the reader here is mirrored in all the individual images and sequences that comprise the narrative. The meaning of an image’s elements might be very different in these contexts from what they usually stand for, their use does challenge and maybe even influence the change of the meanings of these signs. The visual elements link the narrative to various cultural details, while at the same time they negotiate the very meaning of these artifacts or signs. In other words, the visual language of this comic is a distinct semiosis, i.e., it negotiates the meaning of signs by putting them in specific contexts that might be different from previous uses and, in this way, undermines previous implications and encourages the formation of new ones.[6] Notably, Weyhe openly discusses her methods and motivations. At the very beginning of the comic, she explains her perspective onto the matter and even her ethical considerations. Before she narrates the biographical details of the
Mozambique-born workers, who refer to themselves as “madgermanes,” Weyhe describes her method of condensing narratives of several people into fictional biographies to protect the identity of her interviewees. Her narrative manifests the actual conflicts of identity, confusion, and despair, felt by a historical individual in particular historical circumstances, emotions that might be inexplicable in valid historical writings. Yet, her discussion of her sources and of her construction of the argument facilitate a dialog between her narrative and the one in the established historiography on this topic.

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A very different strategy to explain the backgrounds and give sources to the comic’s narration itself is applied by Gunnar Krantz in Kooperatören. This comic documents approximately 20 years of the development of the Svea-advertising bureau that was working for the Kooperativa Förbundet in Sweden (a Swedish organization based on co-operative principles). The narration is centered on the biography of Krantz’s grandfather, the head of the bureau. In his research for this biography, the author was able to collect enough material beyond the sources held by the family. He sophisticatedly employs his findings not merely as the basis for the narrative, but also as the basis for the visual imagery of the book. The appendix painstakingly lists all crucial sources to this work, including diaries and other non-published material by his grandparents from private and public archives (fig. 6). Also, it shows photographs of people, events, and buildings that are of visual importance for the story, but not generally known. While the comic retells the development of the company in its historical context, the notes-section allows for deepened scrutiny of individual moments as given in the sources. Remaining uncertainties about individual visual and narrative details are noted there to indicate to other researchers the foundations of the argument, as well as the realms in which archival sources are scarce. It is therefore easy to include this comic in wider research on the issue and its contexts, no matter what medium is used.
Kapitel 1: Anarkisten

Berättelsen om riviskorna, munftig källa. Göran Krantz.

Knuts irressa till USA, manifest States Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival 20 August 1920. Ellis Island Archives. [http://libraryofcongress.org/ark/c8am1h6wM3AMt6xMxY.jpg/la-sCpYwY5pZvNz1]


Och:

Om Knuts amerikaresa även ur Wikström, Arvid [1959]. "Nu far jag till USA - inventeringen är klar". Kooperativa Försäkrings AB, Högidsnummer. Årg. 34. Mauritzen, Arvid. Sid. 7.

Carlele house i South Bend, Indiana, USA. Byggt 1894 av Clement Studebaker, som en brödlöpssaventyr till hans dotter Anna. Källa: [http://buildingasland.web. nd.edu/history/studebaker-family/family residences/](http://buildingasland.web. nd.edu/history/studebaker-family/family residences/)

Fig. 6: One page from the notes-section for the Kooperatören-comic by Gunnar Krantz, in which he tells the history of the Svea advertising company of Kooperativa Förbundet in Sweden based on his grandparents’ biographies. Here, the sources to his grandfather’s arrival in the US are listed, also visual material that was used as background information for the comic is detailed and reproduced to allow for the reader to understand in what way visual material has been interpreted in the drawings (image: Krantz 2016).

The main figures of this comic are from the family of the creator of the comic, Gunnar Krantz. Consequently, the division between biographical distance and autobiographical involvement is blurred. Yet, the narration does not dwell on family issues nor does it try to excuse or soften the actions and decisions of family members. Instead, the comic uses the advantage of a broad, unique, access to the family’s memories and memorabilia from the personal archives of some family members. This personal information is combined with thorough research into contemporary contexts and the history of the Swedish cooperative movement during World War II, its departments and production facilities, etc. All these sources are accounted for and many are even reproduced in the appendix to allow readers—including, of course, other researchers—to evaluate these sources and validate their meaning within their narrative and historical context. It remains to be seen, in what way and how far historians take up such comics as a source to add to their research into these matters, or even engage in an open dialog with the author of this comic (who is its researcher, writer, and illustrator all in one person).
Gunnar Krantz has developed a conspicuous style of drawing, with an extreme reduction of details and references to modernist design principles being used to construct the narration. Krantz began participating in the discourse on history recently, based on the integration of archival sources—both visual and material—in the visual narrative, after he gained a reputation as a leading comics artist (of mainly autobiographical narratives) in Sweden. *Kooperatören* brings his style and treatment of sources to its climax. It tells the story of developments over many years while using one color per chapter—primary colors first, and then blended colors; in line and as an allusion to the Bauhaus-tradition. Differences in color-saturation are used to balance the images and to give weight to details in each image and each page (fig. 7). This distinct use of color adds layers of meanings to each chapter (apparently, it mainly negotiates the slightly, and slowly, changing the disposition of the protagonists vis-à-vis their own actions). Such touches of added, implicit visual information complicate the narrative beyond the capabilities of historical writing and its dependence on explicit statements. According to Krantz, it seems, the historiography dedicated to this theme misses essential components of the reality it depicts; components that can only be manifested in tacit, non-verbal terms.

![Fig. 7: Two pages from the *Kooperatören*-comic by Gunnar Krantz. On these pages his grandfather’s arrival in the US is retold, based on the sources that are detailed in fig. 6 (image: Krantz 2016).](image)

The comic *Kooperatören* shows as clearly as *Mad germanes* that a comic can be executed in an individual artistic style, still provide substantial factual information, and be part of the academic discourse on its topics. While they employ visual reduction in the representation of artifacts and people, they still manage to refer pointedly to these and the historical and social realities that frame the individual moments of their narratives. The *ligne claire*-style that John G. Swogger is characterized by reduction of details and the emphasis on subjective interpretation, which allegedly contrast the historians’ ambition to describe the situation as it “really” was. Yet, as we noted above, “history” is a set of arguments about the past that seek a better understanding of past experiences, comprehension and decision making. Swogger’s style underscores the interpretive framework he employs—as a “historian” who represents the realities of the past—and adds emotional layers to the description (which are often absent from the works of academic historians). Variations on *ligne claire* are used by many illustrators, often for documentary and information comics.
Since it can be produced rather quickly, it is considered mostly as a tool of convenience. We argue, however, that it can also be viewed as a rhetorical means in the hand of a perceptive artist-historian interested in an enhanced understanding of the experience of past events. As this example suggests, there seems to be no graphic style that would not be usable for academic comics. The only difficulty might be that some styles are not as accessible for a wider audience that is not used to this kind of expressive visual language.

The case studies we discuss above show ways in which academic historiography can potentially be communicated in comics-form. As in all academic work, publications have to provide information on their sources that are detailed enough to enable the reconstruction of their reasoning. Research methods have to be specified if they are not obvious. Also, processes and results need to meet the formal criteria of their subject area and to address the existing knowledge and main arguments in their academic field. As this paper has shown, all these criteria can be met in comics, in various graphic styles, and narration strategies. Yet, while many academic subjects use interrelating images and text, their presentation in the form of a comic is still scarcely employed by both scholars and artists. It seems that the interpretability of images is the major obstacle for the integration of comics text to the mainstream of historiography as the meaning of images in sequential context is not as definitive as the meaning of words tend to be. Each element of an image can potentially influence the meaning of not only the particular image, but the entire sequence of images (the historical argument of the comic, that is). The meaning of a depicted gesture strongly depends on its context inside and outside of the comic: As cultural frames and discourses change, the reading of meanings into images alters with them. Accordingly, academically sound comics need to address the vagueness embedded in its narration, and to employ language that would either reduce the openness of the text to interpretation or openly utilize the vagueness in its historical argument. In fact, these challenges are not limited to comics; they characterize mainstream historiography of recent decades, as well.

The artists discussed above documented their research and at times even questioned it (or prompted the reader to challenge their methods); they discuss their sources and reflect on their methods and conclusions in a re-producible way. The above-mentioned texts exemplify different potential contributions of comics to the academic discourse of history. They do it without surrendering their imaginative approach and their subjective viewpoint, and in a variety of narrative voices and styles. While the documentary values of these comics are easy to defend, their integration within the existing historiography still requires refinement of the methods of comics-analysis and of our understanding of historiography and its functions. As the mentioned texts demonstrate, comics narratives of history do not lack rigorous treatment of sources, nor a critical approach to one’s sources and methodology; rather, their comparative absence in historians’ discussions attest to their lack of comics literacy. Historians with proper training in the analysis of arguments based on combinations of textual and visual information would be able to integrate the sophisticated and implicit layers manifested in comics with their studies on the same topics. Such integration would result in more complex, multi-layered arguments and, consequently, a better understanding of past reality, experiences, and decisions.

Notes

1 We develop part of this argument, in other contexts, in an article published by the International Journal of Comic Art in Spring 2018.

2 See discussion of recent developments in this field in Ofer Ashkenazi, “The Future”.

3 Into which literary field we place documentary, journalistic, and other non-fictional comics, or comics
that tell of natural science, or other scientific or non-scientific knowledge, is not yet settled. These genres are fluid and some even blend fictional and non-fictional strands of narration. The difference between information graphics and information comics certainly is fluid, especially where a sequence of individual information graphics is used to explain a more complex process or situation, it would be difficult to argue against their comicality. Information comics are produced and distributed to explain in a non-fictional way a political, social, or technical process or principle, e.g., public health issues, the Geneva Convention, or how to assemble and use artifacts (cf. Dittmar, Comic Analyse a for a more detailed discussion).

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[5] We translate “Heimat” here as “place of belonging” that is referring to more than “home.” “Homeland” works as approximation, if “land” is not understood as reference to a nation or country only. On the complex and partly contradictory uses of concepts of “Heimat” in the German identity discourse, we refer to Ashkenazi, “The Non-Heimat Heimat.”

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[7] Ligne claire is well established and accordingly rich in cultural connotations, as can be seen from its use in African comics that refer to Hergé’s work and its cultural frames in many ways. For a more detailed discussion, cf. Dittmar, “Narrative Strategies.”

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