

Sandra Eva Boschenhoff

Tall Tales in Comic Diction

From Literature to Graphic Fiction

An Intermedial Analysis of Comic Adaptations
of Literary Texts

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If I had been asked some years ago to consider writing a thesis about comics, I would most likely have answered with no. Even though I have always done cartoon drawing myself, comics were never much of a serious issue for me and thus the topic never occurred to me as researchable. How very wrong I was.

Hence I am greatly indebted to my supervisor, Frank Erik Pointner, who encouraged me to tackle this topic which he thought – after seeing me with my artwork portfolio – was perfectly fit and proper for me. Thank you, Frank, for all your assistance, encouragement, constructive criticism where it was due and for all the precious time you were always willing to spend. Many thanks are also due to Jens Martin Gurr for his commentary and suggestions, particularly during the final phase of my writing process.

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For my parents

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1. State of Research and Object of the Present Study

Listen; there's a hell
of a good universe next door: let's go
e. e. cummings

Today the comic, a medium that has spurred controversy from the very beginning of its existence, has evolved into a mass-media phenomenon, influencing other media in its wake. Comic enthusiasts gather at conventions all around the world to discuss the latest releases, to buy rare collector's editions or simply to connect with other ardent readers. Leafing through the pages of a comic book is no longer something only teenaged boys do, looking for cheap thrills in exciting superhero or action comics. Nor are comics¹ "seen as a sign of psychological maladjustment or arrested development" (Versaci 2) anymore, as they have often been denigrated in the past by the self-appointed guardians of Western civilization.

Favoured through the introduction of reprography, be it through wood carvings, engravings, copper plate printing, etchings, lithography or high-speed rotary presses and photo-technical printing methods, the way for the mass distribution of what was eventually to be called comics was clear (cf. Grünwald 34f). Out of the broadsheets cartoons the comic developed into its current form as a printed format at the beginning of the 20th century in America and Europe. Here it appeared under a variety of notations, e.g., *historieta* in Spain, *fumetti* in Italy or *bande dessinée* in France. The journalist and comic expert Paul Gravett points out that, with the spreading of the comic across the globe, its many different incarnations influenced one another in return:

Comics have always been a global medium, many innovations in formats, styles of drawing and writing, characters, genres and techniques constantly flowing between the nations and continents, cross-fertilising back and forth. (Gravett 2000)

The result is a thriving industry, manifold in its works and ever refining them in order to expedite the form. The outgrowths of the comic industry even meandered into other media, which led to blockbuster films of comic books or cartoons. They also produced such curious developments as for example the 2011 Broadway production *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark*, a \$65 million musical featuring complicated aerial stunts, based on the eponymous comic book series about a spunky hero endowed with spider powers (cf. Amaya 2010). The 'Will Eisner Comic Industry Award', the comic industry's very own version of the film industry's 'Academy Award', has been awarded

1 Although the habit of treating *comics* or *comix* as a singular has become quite common of late, I decided to refer to comics as a plural in accordance with Robert C. Harvey.

at the annual San Diego Comic Con for creative achievement in American comic books since 1987 (in continuation of the 'Kirby Award') and among its winners were celebrated cartoonists and writers such as Frank Miller (*Sin City*), Alan Moore (*From Hell*), Jeff Smith (*Bone*), David Mazzucchelli (*Asterios Polyp*), Chris Ware (*ACME Novelty Library*), Craig Thompson (*Blankets*) or Mike Mignola (*Hellboy*). But outstanding works are not only recognised by the comic industry itself: in 1992 Art Spiegelman won the 'Pulitzer Prize Special Award' for his Holocaust fable *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, the first comic book to ever win the prestigious award. This breakthrough success was later repeated by Chris Ware's *ACME Novelty Library*, which received the 'Guardian First Book Award' in 2001. The advance of the medium comic and its growing success speak for themselves, yet it remains to be investigated what makes comics special in contrast to other narrative media.

What we subsume under the umbrella term *comic* can be defined as a sophisticated medium characterised by its hybridity. Comics work through an interplay of words and pictures that is integral to their storytelling. They are able to create what Robert C. Harvey calls a "verbal-visual blending" (Harvey 4), i.e., a crossover of two media, benefiting from the conciseness of words and the immediateness of pictures. This combination offers the form a broad palette of narrative opportunities that are also intriguing aspects of research such as the compact depiction of space in panels, the ability to render simultaneity synoptically (and not consecutively as in a narrative text), the optical juxtaposition of phenotypical features, the visualisation of inertness or the general visual catenation of text and pictures – to only name a few. These quintessential characteristics of comics already suggest the complexity of their narratology and demonstrate that comics cannot simply be equated with narrative texts in their way of storytelling.

It has been widely discussed how comics are supposed to function as a narrative format, yet the majority of approaches towards the medium do not offer a conclusive narrative theory. Comics have been acclaimed in a number of studies that are mostly based upon the approved and generally valid theoretical concepts, but also try to analyse new, hitherto undocumented, features. Consequently, the theoretical framework of the medium is expanding constantly. In the francophone European countries such as France and Belgium, comics are cherished as the 9th art (cf. Lacassin 9), and the academic discourse about comics is much further advanced than elsewhere due to a longstanding comic tradition that introduced many of the famous characters of the medium.² The studies of Thierry Groensteen (*Système de la bande dessinée*, 1999 / *Bande dessinée et narration*, 2011) or Benoît Peeters (*Case, Planche, Récit. Comment lire une bande dessinée*, 1991/*La Bande Dessinée. Une exposé pour comprendre. Un essai pour réfléchir*, 1993) deserve special mention, yet these texts

2 Cf. the long-running series *Asterix* (1959) by Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny, *Tintin* (1929) by Hergé, *Gaston Lagaffe* (1957) by André Franquin, *Lucky Luke* (1946) by Morris and René Goscinny or *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec* (1972) by Jacques Tardi.