

## **Innovative Methods in Multimodal Comics Research: Introduction**

Janina Wildfeuer, University of Groningen and Stephan Packard, University of Cologne

**Summary.** This special issue on innovative methods in multimodal comics research brings together linguistic as well as inter- and transdisciplinary contributions engaging with the semiotic and multimodal wealth of comics, graphic novels, and other forms of visual narratives. The contributions connect to recent research with new challenges and solutions and engage in dialogue across various approaches to the multimodality of comics. In our introduction to the issue, we want to address this ‘multimodality of comics’ further and give some explanatory notes on our understanding of this concept and the development of the field of research connected to it.

**Keywords.** Multimodality, methods, linguistics, semiotics, transdisciplinarity

**Zusammenfassung.** Diese Sonderausgabe zu innovativen Methoden der multimodalen Comicforschung versammelt sowohl linguistische als auch inter- und transdisziplinäre Beiträge, die sich mit der semiotischen und multimodalen Komplexität von Comics, Graphic Novels und anderen Formen visueller Narrative beschäftigen. Die Beiträge knüpfen an die aktuelle Forschung an, stellen neue Herausforderungen und Lösungen vor und führen einen Dialog über verschiedene Ansätze zur Analyse der Multimodalität von Comics. In unserer Einleitung zum Heft wollen wir diese „Multimodalität des Comics“ näher beleuchten und einige Erläuterungen zu unserem Verständnis dieses Begriffs und der Entwicklung des damit verbundenen Forschungsfeldes geben.

**Schlüsselwörter.** Multimodalität, Methoden, Linguistik, Semiotik, Transdisziplinarität

### **The multimodality of comics and the multimodal study of comics**

Looking through the main trends of comics studies since the 1970s and at least one strand of the last two decades’ explosion of research in the field,

one might easily be tempted to say that comics have always been studied as multimodal.

Two main aspects of comics as form have played a central role for this understanding: One, the interrelation of pictorial signs, i.e. images, in sequence; the other, the combination of pictorial signs with other expressive forms, most obviously and frequently by adding written words. The former is concerned with those devices and functions that are specific to the comics' aesthetics, the arrangement of pictures in panels and panel sequences. The latter points to another dimension of semiotic interrelations frequently but not necessarily encountered in comics: The confrontation of pictorial with scriptorial elements. Summarizing comics in the Italian monicker *fumetti*, denoting that art form that uses speech balloons, is no less restrictive than an insistence on the comical intention of some early and influential North American subgenres. The French *bandes dessinées* more appropriately covers what we understand as comics here: continued strips of graphical designs, which might or might not enter into additional semiotic relations with lettered elements.

These image-text relations are properly problems of multimodality, even though their "central theoretic concern for comics studies" has been questioned and labeled "a more or less resolved issue" most recently (Spanjers 2021: 95). Most importantly, the erroneous restriction of comics' aesthetics to these considerations mirrors a profound misunderstanding of multimodality: Not only need comics not entertain a multimodal relationship between script and pictures, but the underlying relationships between panels and panel elements is properly multimodal in itself even before written language appears on the page. It is then insufficient to subsume the multimodality of comics under the art form's confrontation with an established dominance of written words as hegemonic discourse (Frahm 2010), or with the rise of the flood of pictures, or a pictorial turn, in the last 150 years or so (Mitchell 1994), although both those contexts are relevant in most of the historical spaces in which comics appear (Packard 2017). Systematically, the correlation between pictures in a typical comics strip is always already engaged with several semiotic modes.

The multimodal study of comics, therefore, goes far beyond a general distinction of two main expressive forms: It fundamentally assumes that comics are significantly complex and multidimensional and that all their semiotic and meaning-making elements, i.e. semiotic resources and/or modes, should be examined, particularly with regard to their interplay. While a general focus on the combination of words and pictures, or text and images, of course pays some tribute to this kind of analysis, there is more to be said about both smaller units within these two categories, e.g. about (motion) lines, colors, certain framings or the use of fonts and/or punctuation, as well as larger units such as the overall page layout, the construction of metaphors, or the unfolding of narrative or argumentative structures.

Multimodal analyses of this kind take an integrative approach to shed light on the different roles and functions of these individual components of

a comic. At the same time, they examine comics' complex and systematic intersemiotic interplay that guides and influences readers. Comics as multimodal artefacts can therefore be seen very broadly as "communicative situations [...] which rely upon combinations of different 'forms' of communication to be effective" (Bateman et al. 2017: 7) – and it is a multimodal task to examine this effectiveness from various perspectives.

### **From linguistics and semiotics to multimodality research proper**

An interest in the complex interplay of expressive forms, or modes, in comics has certainly been present in the early fascination with semiotics that emerged with isolated but thorough accounts and encompassing theories of comics production and interpretation. Since Umberto Eco (1964 [1972])'s convincing arguments for a semiotic reading of comics that does not only focus on verbal signs, the work of Roland Barthes (1967, 1977) has played a significant role for expanding linguistic analyses to include non-linguistic units. Several other works use comics as a playing field for new insights into textual comprehension and referential movement (Krafft 1978); they speak from a creator's experience while attempting some overarching definitions and conceptual clarifications (Eisner 1985); or they continue structuralist semiotics' straddling of linguistic and aesthetic approaches into a language of comics strips (Barbieri 1990; see also the overview of linguistic approaches in Bateman and Wildfeuer 2015). The importance of semiotics for this early, fragmented research discourse is still mirrored in the formalist approach of McCloud's seminal and popular *Understanding Comics* (1994: 9), in which comics are defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence". It might be worth noting that the suggested helplessness of the phrase 'and other' here mirrors the same tension between categorizing the specific aesthetics of comics either by means of a confrontation between pictorial and non-pictorial signs, or by the juxtaposition of pictures alone.

If comics studies have drastically grown in scope and ambition since McCloud, one of the results has been the relegation of a particular branch of semiotic accounts and their questions to just some of the strands of investigation. To overcome this, the debate can be broadened by asking 'what more semiotics can do for comics studies' – such as the employment of semiotics for questions of media sociology, historical differentiation, or ideological criticism (Packard and Wilde 2022). The rise of a particular multimodal semiotics and linguistics in the last three decades exactly offers potential for yet another such 'more', building from Kress and van Leeuwen's pioneering reading of images and the description of multimodal discourse (1996, 2001) and continuing through expansions and approaches towards systematization (Kress 2010; Jewitt 2014; Klug and Stöckl 2016; Bateman et al. 2017). Many recent approaches to comics studies (including Lim 2007; Forceville et al. 2010; Forceville 2011; Cohn 2013; Bateman

and Wildfeuer 2014; Cohn 2016; Dunst et al. 2018) have already followed these pioneering attempts and developed individual research foci on some of the most daunting questions from a multimodal perspective.

Looking at the developments of this field or discipline of multimodality research over time, the potential for ‘more’ has emerged from the ongoing diversity of and interest in the field. While multimodality research has for some time been described as a discipline of its own (e.g. Wildfeuer et al. 2019), it is now rather seen as a “stage of development within a field” (Bateman 2022: 49) that many different fields and disciplines undergo by entering their own multimodal phase with new or different interest in multimodal phenomena. As we have shown above, comics studies is surely not a discipline that only now develops an interest in multimodality as such. On the contrary, it is in fact a field or discipline that has experienced a similar development: comics have seen interest from several disciplines and these disciplines have committed to the development of comics studies with their own theoretical principles and methodological tools. Multimodal analyses of comics are just one important strand that has, however, profited significantly from both the development of comics studies in general and the further growth of multimodality research in particular.

Placing multimodality anew in the field of comics studies can now lead to even more productive work that pushes both fields forward, but also gives reason for the establishment of multimodal comics studies as a field of its own.

## **Multimodal comics studies**

Our goal in this issue is exactly this: We aim at relating disciplinary contributions from both comics studies and multimodality research effectively in order to strengthen the research field of multimodal comics studies.

In our call for papers for this issue we originally and explicitly challenged comics studies, as an interdisciplinary field with a rich array of opportunities and challenges, to investigations of multimodality. As a result, interestingly – and thankfully!, we received contributions that go beyond the simple application of existing theories and methods from comics studies to multimodal analyses, or from multimodality research to comics studies. Instead, all articles in this issue develop their own particular combination and integration of approaches stemming from several connected fields such as semiotics, linguistics, literary theory, culture and media studies, empirical cognitive studies, and aesthetics. This shows a broad toolbox of methods and perspectives, partially complementary, that is available for the field of multimodal comics studies:

John A. Bateman argues that a semiotic framework built around multimodality is better suited to reflect and integrate recent conceptual and empirical insights into the cognitive and semantic properties of comics comprehension than some established literary or aesthetic approaches. In a

critical dialogue with literary and cultural critics, his contribution explores the potency of a multimodal semiotics to illuminate not only the possibility, but also the specific complexity and significance of some chosen readings of mainstream comics such as *Watchmen* and *MAUS*.

Bateman and many others proceed from a model of pictorial comprehension that assumes a segmentation of dense pictorial arrangements into graphically and functionally distinguishable elements. The empirical foundation of these ideas is widened by Lauren Edlin and Joshua Reiss's series of experiments measuring agreement. Through annotation tasks, general problems of panel segmentation are revisited with a specific focus on what constitutes background information, and whether readers can agree both on the recognition of such elements as opposed to other stylistic conveyances. The complementary continuation of aesthetic appreciation emphasized by Miloš Tasić and Dušan Stamenković's close reading of Lobačev's comic book adaptation of the epic *Dušan's Wedding* demonstrates how a semantically rich reading can still be articulated and better understood in dialogue with particular attention to formal elements and stylistic realizations.

Lukas Wilde and Stephan Packard consider two aesthetic particularities of comics from the point of view of a multimodal semiotic approach: Wilde discusses comics as multimodal in the sense that they combine at least two semiotic modes, a cognitive reconfiguration of lines on paper into the depicted conceptions of bodies in space, and a more elaborate interpretational mapping that revolves around the idea of an unreliable iconicity prompted by the cartoonish style prevalent in comic books. In German artists Sascha Hommer's work, Wilde finds evidence of the delineation between both modes while elucidating the artfulness of the oeuvres. Packard looks at the concatenation of images in sequence and discusses how the modes of interpretation explicated by backtracking and re-evaluating fortuitously ambiguous elements may support either a grammatical or an aesthetic model of comics comprehension, aiming to integrate both in a semiotic pragmaticist view and to point out the Romantic echoes of hermeneutic theory involved in perspectives that separate or even oppose the two to one another.

While these semiotic approaches take the fundamental observation of a multitude of semiotic modes into conceptions from other semiotic theories, Janina Wildfeuer concludes the issue with an overview and argumentative re-perspectivation of multimodal discourse analysis in a stricter sense. Discussing the basis for such a theory of signs in philosophy and logic, she presents a set of discourse relations that reflect at least some of the grounding processes of semiosis involved in reading a comic.

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these and many more discussions as the field of multimodal comics studies continues to grow.

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Asst.-Prof. Dr. Janina Wildfeuer  
 Rijksuniversiteit Groningen  
 Faculteit Letteren – CIW  
 Oude Kijk in't Jatstraat 26  
 9712 GK Groningen  
 The Netherlands  
 E-Mail: j.wildfeuer@rug.nl

Prof. Dr. Stephan Packard  
 Universität zu Köln  
 Institut für Medienkultur und Theater  
 Meister-Ekkehart-Str. 11  
 50937 Köln  
 Germany  
 E-Mail: packard@uni-koeln.de