Unreliable Iconicity, or: Accounting for the Cartoonish Pictures of Comics in Multimodal Reasoning

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Abstract. In this article, I explore how pictoriality in comics cannot be conceived as a single semiotic mode, but rather as two distinct thresholds of pictorial comprehension and interpretation: a mostly pre-attentional cognitive reconfiguration of two-dimensional lines on paper into three-dimensional bodies in space, as well as a more conscious interpretational mapping (or disentanglement) of perceivable features with storyworld entities, guided by often conflicting multimodal forces of specific textual cues, generic traditions, and paratextual markers. I analyze two comics by German artist Sascha Hommer that are typical for a medium-specific unreliability of iconicity in which we can never be sure how the inhabitants of both Hommer's fantastic as well as of his autobiographical storyworld may be perceived by other characters. These questions, however, remain crucial for evaluating the thematic point of both works, especially as readers have to revise their earlier assumptions throughout their multimodal reasoning. My analysis of Hommer's works will indicate how the two thresholds described prove indispensable for any account of the cartoonish pictures of comics and their media-specific unreliability.

Keywords. Cartoon, cartoonization, comics, iconicity, pictoriality, semiotics, transmedia narratology, unreliability, Sascha Hommer

Zusammenfassung. Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass Bildlichkeit im Comic nicht als eine distinkte Zeichenmodalität, sondern als zwei unterschiedliche Schwellen des piktorialen Verstehens und Interpretierens adressiert werden muss: eine zumeist prä-attentionale kognitive Rekonfiguration von zweidimensionalen Linien auf Papier zu dreidimensionalen Körpern im Raum sowie eine bewusste(re-)interpretatorische Zuordnung (oder Entflechtung) von wahrnehmbaren Merkmalen zu Storyworld-Entitäten. Diese Zuordnung wird entlang oft widersprüchlicher multimodaler Signale geleitet, die sowohl spezifische textuelle Hinweise als auch generische Traditionen sowie paratextuelle Markierungen umfassen. Der Beitrag analysiert zwei Comics des deutschen Künstlers Sascha Hommer, die typisch für eine solch medienspezifische ikonische Unzuverlässigkeit sind, da wir nie sicher sein können, wie die Bewohner:innen sowohl von Hommers phantastischen als auch seiner autobiografischen Welten von anderen Figuren wahrgenommen

werden können. Diese Fragen bleiben dennoch entscheidend für die Erschließung der thematischen Pointe beider Werke, zumal die Leser:innen im Laufe der multimodalen Lektüre frühere Annahmen revidieren müssen. Die Analyse von Hommers Werken zeigt so, wie sich die beiden beschriebenen Schwellen als unverzichtbar für die angemessene Einschätzung cartoonisierter Bilder im Comic sowie ihrer medienspezifischen Unzuverlässigkeiten erweisen.

Schlüsselwörter. Cartoon, Cartoonisierung, Comics, Ikonizität, Piktorialität, Semiotik, Transmediale Narratologie, Unzuverlässigkeit, Sascha Hommer

Even though multimodality is widely accepted as a suitable or even necessary theoretical framework to analyze and theorize comics, the respective accounts of p i c t o r i a l i t y as a d i s t i n c t m o d e differ widely (cf. Machin 2014). Put in a broader context, this is hardly surprising, since "[t]he use made of *iconicity* in multimodal studies varies considerably", as John Bateman has pointed out (2018: 18). For comic studies, this becomes especially conspicuous if we look at cartoonish representations of fictional and non-fictional characters, their bodies and faces. In this article I would like to show that there are three different ways of dealing with the 'mode' of pictoriality within comprehension and interpretation – sometimes on a global textual level of a storyworld as a whole, sometimes on a specific, local level of individual characters in contrast to backgrounds:

1. The abstract, simplified cartoon lines have to be e n r i c h e d   towards a more 'natural' perceivability (adding something to the material means of representation).
2. The cartoon lines have to be r e p l a c e d   by a different perceivability within the imagination by ignoring some of their perceivable features, perhaps because they are taken as metaphorical or allegorical (subtracting something from the material means of representation).
3. The cartoon lines should be interpreted as 'l i t e r a l' as possible within the mimetic (diegetic) domain: characters and objects would then look just as they are represented, merely within three dimensions instead of two (aligning the imagination as closely as possible to the material means of representation).

Since all three options are, in theory, always available, cartoonish pictures of comics – and a cartoonish mode of pictoriality more generally – are not inherently vague and underdetermined because of option 1), but because it remains often intentionally unreliable whether they must, should, or could be interpreted along options 1), 2), or 3). While this article is thus not primarily concerned with comics' multimodality, it will focus on the inherent tensions to the 'mode' of pictoriality within multimodal meaning-making (or storyworld-construction). With recourse to Charles Sanders Peirce's dis-

tinction between iconic and hypoiconic reasoning, pictoriality entails two distinct thresholds of pictorial comprehension and interpretation: a mostly pre-attentional cognitive reconfiguration of two-dimensional lines on paper into three-dimensional bodies in space on the one hand, and a more conscious interpretational mapping of perceivable features to storyworld entities on the other. The latter will be guided by conflicting multimodal information provided by specific textual cues, paratextual markers, and generic traditions.

Fig. 1. McCloud (1993: 36).

Discussions of cartoonish pictures in comics are initially derived from artist Scott McCloud, who reinterpreted the term "cartoon" for a specific pictorial style that he described as "amplification through simplification" (1993: 30). Andrei Molotiu recently addressed cartooning as a key term for comic studies:

> [A] graphic simplification of figurative shapes for purposes of communication, humor, and so on in comic strip and comic book rendering (as well as, of course, in gag cartoons, animation, and other fields of visual media) (Molotiu 2020: 153).

Chris Gavaler (2022: 6–7) even discussed this style as a possible criterion for defining comics in general. McCloud anyways locates comic book drawings on a scale ranging from photography to a completely simplified smiley face lacking any individual features. The idea is then that there is a ref-

erential reality 'behind' any comic book picture that, basically, 'looks like our's' – which is then abstracted, distorted, or stylized by the artist (cf. McCloud 1993: 36; Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. Delisle (2008: 34).

This assumption certainly seems plausible if we look at autobiographical works such as Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future* (2014–2018, see Sattouf 2015) or Guy Delisle's travel comics (such as *Pyongyang*, 2005, or *Burma Chronicles*, 2008). Sattouf recounts the story of his upbringing in Middle Eastern countries (especially Syria), while Delisle documents journeys into places such as Myanmar, Israel, or North Korea. Both artists have been praised for their subjective, yet faithful and sincere representations of places and cultures foreign to most international readers. That these works – and many others – are accepted as authentic may be surprising to someone not acquainted with the media form, as all the characters are strongly cartoonized. Heavily relying on caricature, bodies and faces are reduced to mere outlines, bulbous noses, and pop-eyes. There is little general doubt about these comics' faithfulness to their artists' actual experiences, however, hence readers can be sure that the cartoonization is entirely on the side of the representation, not the represented characters and worlds themselves. When Delisle's self-representation wonders "Aw Geez! If I looked a bit more Burmese, they would've let me through" (Delisle 2008: 34; Fig. 2), he most certainly does not mean the black outline contours without colors or internal features that we can see on the page. These are instead intended to represent 'regular', three-dimensional human beings within the storyworld and to Delisle's avatar himself, just as their personalities are complex and full of contradictions. Or, as Gavaler puts it:

> When Alison Bechdel draws her and her family members' mouths as single dots in her 2006 *Fun Home*, viewers likely do not imagine that the actual individuals' mouths are so impossibly proportioned (Gavaler 2022: 47).

On the level of the intersubjective communicative construct (cf. Thon 2016: 54–56), such characters are clearly p e o p l e made of flesh and blood. Their specific visible appearances, however – to other characters within their diegetic environment – remain largely undefined. At best, we can make r e l a t i o n a l claims, such as has-a-larger-nose-than or is-bigger-than. We usually have no other, 'unmediated' access to the corresponding world(s). Depictions of cartoon protagonists are thus always inherently vague, leaving ample room for the individual imagination. As Roy T. Cook (2015) puts it: "[T]he physical appearance of drawn characters in general is indirect, partial, inferential, and imperfect" (2015: 25).

1.   The ultimate conundrum of comic studies

The assumption that comic book characters and storyworlds are always abstractions from the regular "visual ontology" (cf. Lefèvre 2007) of our world, however, becomes more difficult to uphold for entirely fictional or fantastic works which make no claims to any sort of p e r c e p t i o n a l   r e a l i s m . Indeed, one of the most prominent features of comics' mediality might be the fact that their pictures do n o t need to be taken as abstractions, but that they open up m e d i a - s p e c i f i c spaces for the imagination (cf. Wolk 2007: 141). Gavaler revealed a general lack of attention in comic narratology, and especially in picture theories of comics, towards problems of fiction:

> To identify physically plausible exaggerations, viewers need to reference the subject's actual face, which is impossible if the subject is fictional (2022: 48).

All questions of abstraction, stylization, or underdetermination can only be discussed in relation to a given "baseline reality" (2022: 57) which, in comics, may easily deviate from non-fictional worlds:

> Though cartoon objects are impossible in our reality, their transparently drawn qualities could accurately depict a cartoon reality (Gavaler 2022: 46).

What is the 'actual' perceptibility of Donald Duck as a fictional entity anyways? Does he look like his representations in full body suits in Disneyland theme parks, or do those rather try to represent him as faithfully as possible with three-dimensional materiality? It is, in fact, possible to consider all representations of Donald as 'metaphorical' or 'non-literal'– just like Art Spiegelman's drawing of his father Vlad as a cartoon mouse in *MAUS* (1980–1991). We cannot be certain whether the members of the Duck family are (special, human-like) ducks – or whether they are regular humans, just rep-

resented as ducks, as Disney artist Don Rosa upholds emphatically (cf. Rosa 2014: 8). As Thomas Lamarre has put it for all anthropomorphic animals of comics, manga, and cartoons, "[a]re these humanized animals or animalized humans?" (Lamarre 2008: 82; see also the contributions in Herman 2017). The problem of unreliable iconicity in comics, however, does not stop at such problems of "bestial ambivalence" (Wells 2009: 72), that is, the "strategic blurring of boundary between animal and human" (Alaniz 2020: 329). Comics scholar Martin Schüwer (2008: 23, 510) addressed what he considered the u l t i m a t e c o n u n d r u m of comic studies – for human protagonists as well: Should one attribute the caricature-style of Charles M. Schultz' Peanuts solely to their representations and imagine that Charlie Brown and Snoopy 'actually' look quite differently in the context of the narrated world? The assertion that they are 'only drawn that way', but 'actually' look like photographs of 'real' people, does not seem to do justice to the drawing styles and their media forms. There is a systematic alternative to this assumption, of course: Fantastic worlds of comics, manga, or animation can not only break with physical laws (characters possessing superpowers or magic), but could also be taken to exhibit a special "visual ontology" that l o o k s entirely differently from ours. To Gavaler, all stylistic elements in comics could then possess a peculiarly "semi-representational" (Gavaler 2022: 48) quality that can oscillate freely between discourse and diegesis and may be attributed only case-by-case to one side or the other. A detachment of cartoon worlds from all demands of everyday reality, not only but especially with regard to perception, is particularly prominent in the Japanese manga and anime discourse as anthropologist Shunsuke Nozawa summarized:

> Character design strives to give characters a sui generis reality, one that is irreducible to our kind of reality (Nozawa 2013: n.pag.; cf. also Berndt 2013)

We must always 'correct' s o m e t h i n g to what we see with recourse to world knowledge, however. Black and white pictures, for instance, will usually be interpreted as a colorful world. We can deduce this from the fact that many collected manga volumes, for instance, include a few color pages in their openings, only to 'switch' to monochrome representations later. Usually, cover illustrations are also in color, as are many fan art interpretations.

Taken together, we arrive at our three interpretational options of adding, subtracting, and aligning, as distinguished earlier. Transmedia narratology (cf. Thon 2016: 39–46) has provided powerful vocabulary to describe these different options mostly alongside option 1) (adding), a "principle of minimal departure" (adding something to the representation that is only "implied", cf. Ryan 1991: 48–54) and option 2) (subtracting) a "principle of charity" (ignoring aspects of the representation that run contrary to the intersubjective construction of the storyworld, cf. Walton 1993: 174–187; Gavaler 2022: 89–91). Option 3) remains largely unexplored within narratological accounts (cf., however, Wilde 2024/forthcoming), although there are strong claims towards it from phenomenological comic theories:

> The fact that small resin sculptures of comic book characters are remarkably often produced in exactly this sense [... that they look like three-dimensional approximations of their two-dimensional drawings] is an indication that the images of comics are usually not used in such a way that the visible world is stylistically interpreted through them, but that the style of the image in a panel serves to present objects that possess this style themselves. The style of the images is interpreted by the viewer not as an interpretation of a visible reality, but as the design of a visible object itself [...]. The style of a comic book character is a property of the presented character (Balzer and Wiesing 2010: 62, my translation).

Intermedial transcriptions from comic books into animated films seem to support this idea. *The Peanuts Movie* film (2015) is a particularly good example for that: Even though its pictorial style, computer rendered 3D graphics, is materially and semiotically quite different from Schultz' drawings – the film contains colors instead of black and white pictures, the visible outlines have given way to simulated, shaded 3D bodies – they retain not only all the proportions and internal relations of bodies and faces, but also implement drawn lines within facial representations that approximate or remediate the aesthetics of the original cartoons (Fig. 3). Whereas the discontinuous comic pictures have been discussed as "an art of suggestion, not of mimesis" (cf. Lefèvre 2011: 29; Fresnault-Deruelle 1977: 31), continuous animation makes it easily possible to approximate 'direct glances' into an unmediated diegetic space that merely looks notably different from 'our' perception.

Fig. 3. *The Peanuts Movie* (USA 2015, directed by Steve Martino), 24:30.

In the real life/animation hybrid film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), an animated cartoon world of its own physical laws is g e o g r a p h i c a l l y j u x t a p o s e d to the 'realistic world' (filmed with actors in front of a cam-

era). The distinction is thus turned into a part of the overall storyworld itself. When anvils fall on heads 'over there' – in the realm of cartoon characters – their inhabitants see stars and birds which are also visible as part of the diegetic environment. Cartoonization is thus expanded from a v i s u a l mode into a uniquely n a r r a t i v e affordance which 'literalizes' such visual metaphors (cf. Rauscher 2018). It would do cartoon aesthetics little justice to generalize a 'natural' world that is 'cleansed' from the conventionality of the representation (cf. also Limoges 2011). While all these cases vary significantly, we can still approach them from one of our three initial interpretational options: adding, subtracting, or aligning.

   In this article, I will discuss how theories of multimodality are equipped to describe and reconstruct these options. While I have brought forth the same argument from the perspectives of Japanese studies and manga semiotics (Wilde 2020a), from phenomenology and cognitive semiotics (Wilde 2020c), as well as from transmedia narratology (2023, forthcoming), I would now like to develop it from both Lars Elleström's (2019) and Charles Forceville's (2020) respective notions of multimodality (section 2). While both are certainly not the only, or maybe not even the most appropriate conceptions of multimodality in comics, their 'missing links' point in interesting directions. I am going to turn to the two (rather different) conceptions of multimodality by these authors, particularly because they developed their accounts specifically for narrative, fictional media – in Forceville's case for comics proper (2020: 185–216), in Elleström's from a transmedial perspective. In both publications, however, a Peircean notion of i c o n i c i t y is mostly taken as self-explanatory. In the subsequent section I am going to discuss serious shortcomings of such conceptions, especially with regard to two close readings of comics by German artist Sascha Hommer, one (*Insekt*, 2007, section 3) fictional and another (*In China*, 2016, section 4) non-fictional. I am then going to contextualize my findings with regard to a larger corpus of more prominent works and their discussion within comic studies (section 5). In the subsequent section, I am going to indicate how we can describe these artistic strategies – and the interpretational gaps they generate (section 6). While multimodality is well equipped to do so, as my conclusions shall show (section 7), we have to go beyond the discussions of Elleström's transmedia narration and Forceville's chapters on comics and turn to a more fine-grained notion of Peircean iconicity that has been proposed for multimodality before, but not with a focus on comics and their aesthetics of cartoonization.

2.   Multimodality and iconicity

In *Transmedial Narration*, Lars Elleström's recent (2019) multimodal approach to transmedia storytelling, the author accuses social semiotics of a "rather coarse notion of mode" (2019: 57). This seems especially true for problems of iconicity, as Bateman has pointed out as well:

> [I]n some approaches, such as social semiotics, there is little more than a passing mention of 'iconicity' using the traditional terms of 'resemblance' (2018: 18; cf. especially Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 8).

Elleström instead proposes a "more fine-grained concept […] circumscribed as four kinds of multimodality" (2019: 58). Based on his rather idiosyncratic distinction between "modalities" and "modes" from 2010 (that, to my knowledge, not many scholars have accepted), the author distinguishes between four different kinds of multimodalities (each with a range of further internal "modes"), namely multimateriality, multispatiotemporality, multisensoriality, and multisemioticity. For our purpose, only the latter is relevant here, the "multisemioticity" between iconic and symbolic sign, in so far as they are most relevant for Elleström's understanding of representation:

> To say that a media product represents something is to say that it triggers a certain type of interpretation (Elleström 2019: 23).

This guided interpretation is then addressed, in unusual, yet precise terms, as "cognitive import" (Elleström 2019: 22) creating "virtual spheres" (2019: 24). The latter can be understood as mental models about a structure of represented events temporally interrelated in a meaningful way (cf. Elleström 2019: 39). Elleström's account of pictoriality in *Transmedial Narration* (cf. 2019: 49–58), as well as in his more detailed model of multimodality from 2010, however, uses a rather basic Peircean understanding of iconicity ("iconicity is based on similarity", Elleström 2010, 22). This can hardly account for different degrees of cartoonization and stylistic abstraction in comics discussed earlier. Instead, Elleström, too, subscribes to a variety of Mary-Laure Ryan's (1991: 48–54) p r i n c i p l e   o f   m i n i m a l   d e p a r t u r e , the assumption

> that one construes the intracommunicational domain as being the closest possible to the extracommunicational domain and allows for deviations only when they cannot be avoided (Elleström 2019: 27).

In other words, "collateral experience" (2019: 40) considerably shapes the virtual spheres. This determines our interpretational stances on the earlier three potential options (adding, subtracting, or aligning) firmly towards 1), adding something along the "reality" principle of minimal departure, or towards 2), subtracting something when it contradicts reality uncomfortably. Although Ryan (and others) include many thoughts on deviations from reality as a point of departure toward "generic landscapes" (cf. Ryan 1991: 52–57), this is usually not discussed in p e r c e p t i o n a l terms outside of comics' studies (Ryan dedicates a passing thought to perceptional deviation in 2014: 42f., but without developing it any further). To be fair, it is hard to argue against Thon's (2016: 90f.) claim that readers attribute the frequently changing drawing styles of a series with rotating artists (such as

Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, 1989–1996) merely to the medium of representation, not to the represented storyworlds and the characters in it. Morpheus, *The Sandman's* supernatural protagonist, does possess shapeshifting powers and is perceived differently by individual characters, but entirely human protagonists like Rose Walker also look strikingly disparate in interpretations of Mike Dringenberg (#10) or Marc Hempel (#65). In terms of storyworld properties, these differences are then certainly 'ignored' or 'subtracted' – not taken into account (see Gavaler 2022: 101–109 for a more extensive discussion).

In a similar way, yet arguing from an entirely different direction, Charles Forceville's recent *Visual and Multimodal Communication* (2020) proposes an authoritative model of multimodal meaning-making on the grounds of Cognitive Relevance Theory (cf. also Forceville 2014). He arrives at similar conclusions for cartoonish pictures of comics, as we shall see. Forceville builds his model on Dan Sperber's and Deirdre Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, assuming that communication is a process where an intelligent, human agent retrieves an alleged set of assumptions "made manifest" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 58; Forceville 2020: 35) by an interlocuter. Pictoriality is taken as a distinct communicative mode which is not processed along stable codes, but according to a notion of iconicity, defined with Daniel Chandler (2017: 41; original emphasis) once again as a "perceived r e s e m b l a n c e or imitation." We interpret pictorial signs "because they very closely resemble objects, people, and events in everyday life" (Forceville 2020: 77). While it is not immediately apparent how lines in comic books can "resemble" entirely fictional entities, we certainly interpret all the character representations under discussion as anthropomorphic configurations, because humans and cartoons do share this very configuration or schema. The question, however, is whether – or, more precisely, t o w h a t e x t e n t – this schema, that we recognize in simple line drawings, necessitates a similar or a rather different a p p e a r a n c e from the material signs as part of the intended meaning: for how we imagine that the storyworld looks like, and for how we imagine what it looks like to the characters in it.

Forceville's model is less focused on imagination to begin with, but rather on propositional forms of knowledge made accessible by multimodal signs. Comics are addressed as v i s u a l l y c o n t a i n i n g (or at least triggering) explicatures like "Tintin and Snowy walk [in a certain way] in the direction of a hut in the wood/ jungle" (Forceville 2020: 192). Note that we have inserted a v e r b a l t r a n s c r i p t i o n here that 'cleanses' the represented entity from stylistic and perceptional aspects – although linguistic means are also merely representations of these explicatures and propositions. Both views are complementary or even deeply interrelated, as Elleström has addressed elsewhere, too: "We think both in an abstract way and in a concrete (visual and spatial) way" (2010: 22). We can also talk about all storyworlds, storyworld situations, and storyworld entities propositionally, since "[t]he narrated world is, strictly speaking, a world of singular facts" (Wulff 2007: 46, my translation; cf. also Wilde 2019a). The drawing style

(cartoonization), however, can then only be addressed in terms of 'reference assignment', 'ambiguity', and 'enrichment'. Reference assignment and ambiguity are initially only introduced in non-fictional terms (Forceville 2020: 74–78), but they must also be taken into account for characters that exist o n l y in comics: "consulting their mental lexicon, the addressees decide that these characters are Tintin and Snowy" (Forceville 2020: 190). Since we have no other, unmediated access to Tintin and Snowy, is this "consultation" based on iconicity/resemblance itself, or is it a matter of iconography – which is mostly understood as guided by convention? In other words: is the recognition of a human figure based on the same i c o n i c competence as recognizing Tintin? Regardless of how we might answer this question, it merely displaces the crucial issue of how the character Tintin is perceived within his world. Forceville's thoughts on "enrichment" make it clear that he d o e s conceive it in terms of 'omissions' that have to be 'filled in' by readers:

> in most comics, cartoons, and animation films, an artist deliberately l e a v e s o u t many details […]. Stick figures in some comics lack body parts […], and some manga artists o m i t characters' noses (Forceville 2020: 85, my emphasis).

Abstract cartoon drawings are then a form of "loose use of visuals" (Forceville 2020: 86), just as we sometimes 'omit' parts of a message in 'loose talk'. Again, we are back to our interpretational option 1), we have to 'add' something within our imagination – or to derive potential explicatures. Option 2) – subtracting something from the material means of representation – can be addressed as well (cf. Forceville 2016), but only as an exceptional deviation from the regular, less metaphorical form of pictorial comprehension. This is not only theoretically insufficient, I'd like to argue, it also makes us miss some of the most interesting thematic interpretations of comics which are entirely based on the hypothetical, yet often u n r e l i a b l e perceivability of characters within their world.

3.   Close reading #1: *Insekt* (2006)

I would like to analyze two very different works by German artist Sascha Hommer (*Insekt*, 2007, and *In China*, 2016). Born in 1979, Sascha Hommer is surely one of the most important German independent comic artists. Sebastian Bartosch and Andreas Stuhlmann describe his drawing style as follows:

> Referring back to the stereotypical drawing style of newspaper strips, he also borrows heavily from the industrial graphic design of the time as well as from classic Japanese comics such as Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy* (1952–1968) or the work of Hideko Mizuno (Bartosch and Stuhlmann 2013: 62–64).

Hommer's books are typical for a medium-specific narrative unreliability (cf. Packard 2018: 133) – precisely at the intersection of our three options for interpreting iconicity in comics. I borrow the term from the extensive literature on unreliable narrators (cf. Shen 2013) that addresses literary examples where it is not clear to what extent a narrating instance is communicating 'truthful' information about the narrated world. Apparent facts can thus turn out to be unreliable when they have to be revised later on due to contradicting new information, so that a reader has to assume they have been intentionally misled in their storyworld construction. In all the following cases it is not any aspect of the verbal narration that must be mistrusted and revised, however, but (aspects of the) pictoriality and the assumed iconicity between cartoonish drawings and their diegetic meaning. Whether we want to attribute the pictoriality of comics to a medium-specific 'visual narrator' or to the actual (or hypothetical) author is a disputed question (cf. Gavaler 2022: 184–191) that does not need to be resolved here, for it does not change the fact that parts of t h e n a r r a t i o n – whoever we might attribute it to – seem purposefully misleading and thus unreliable in their referential function. My two examples are also intended to show how these distinctions cannot be drawn between fiction and non-fiction, but remain an essential part of comics' pictoriality (or even mediality) across this divide. As Ole Frahm has aptly remarked (2011: 12), Hommer's comics open many spaces for a plurality of interpretations between multimodal texts and images. Such interpretational tensions and 'stitches' can also be observed w i t h i n the individual drawings and between them – but only with recourse to the overall diegetic world which rests on multimodal information. Readers can never be sure how the inhabitants of both Hommer's fantastic as well as of his autobiographical storyworld can be perceived by other characters. More importantly, these questions are even crucial for evaluating the thematic point of both works.

Hommer's 128-page book *Insekt*, published by Reprodukt in 2006, is set in a fantastic world in which some large, unnamed metropolis ('the city') seems to be shrouded constantly in a kind of fog or black haze. The comic is rendered in sharply inked black and white contrasts, many white areas are additionally darkened with halftone film (Fig. 4). This could certainly represent a perception clouded by fog – or obscured by poor lighting conditions. As readers, however, we can clearly see the sharp ink lines underneath as well as those representing the characters. On the mimetic (diegetic) level, the comic asserts something quite different, however: the city initially appears to be populated by human people, even though they are clearly cartoonized in stark exaggeration. In the case of children, head-to-body proportions roughly correspond to the extremely popular Funko Pop vinyl Figures, the heads being roughly the same size as the rest of their bodies (Fig. 4). Round eyes, in turn, take up a significant part of the head. This aesthetics is obviously quite common in comics; in manga, it is referred to as 'chibi' (or 'super deformed') (cf. Wilde 2020a). It is important to note, once again, that 'chibi-fication' usually leaves indeterminate whether it is merely

a stylistic device (abstracting from 'regular' humans) or intended as an element of the represented world itself.
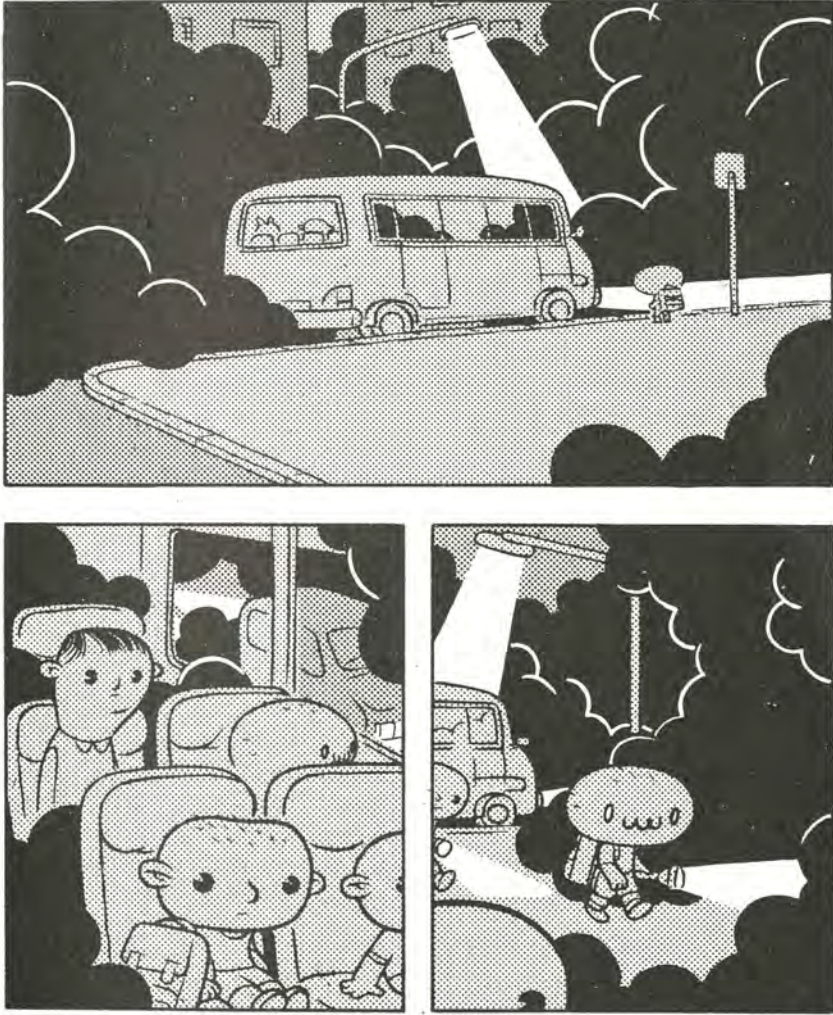

Fig. 4. Hommer (2006: 13).

Hommer does not stop there, however. In addition to the – stylistically interpreted or visually alien – humans, another species exists in the depicted world, to which our protagonist Pascal actually belongs, according to the verbal information: he is an "insect", as the title suggests, but not one that exists in our world, but a member of a fantastic, anthropomorphic species shrouded in myth ("Oh nonsense, that's just an old fairy tale with the insects, isn't it?," 2007: 24; "In truth, people don't even know what the insects look like – but they do exist!", 29; my translations). Pascal is not only of the same

size as humans and gifted with reason and speech, but also indistinguishable from the other inhabitants of the city due to the overall poor visibility clouded by smog or haze. He himself does not even know that he belongs to another species, and his diegetic environment has not yet recognized this either. Like in a Platonic shadow world, the haze seems to inflict literalized boundaries on the knowledge and awareness of all inhabitants. Only those who leave the city and its veils of mist like the stranger leaves Plato's cave, can truly perceive one another, and perceive one another as members of a different species. Hommer thus uses the sense of sight as a metaphor for knowledge and awareness. He builds on it a somewhat Kafkaesque, certainly disturbing coming-of-age story about his protagonist, whose youthful feelings of o t h e r n e s s , of not belonging, is literalized. As an insect, he is indeed an alien being who disturbs and repels his childhood crush as soon as she looks into his eyes outside the confines of the city walls (Fig. 5). Afterwards, he is bullied and brutally humiliated by his classmates, forcing him to remove himself to his insect relatives outside the city. The uncomfortable dynamics between the narrative and aesthetic level is regarded as a particular appeal of Hommer's work:

Fig. 5. Hommer (2006: 67).

> The humiliations [Pascal's classmates] subject him to stand in shocking contrast
> to the childish scheme Hommer used (Welt.de 2007: para. 1, my translation).

Such symbolic interpretations – the implicit theme of the comic is accordingly Hommer's recurring motif of exclusion and alienation – certainly make up the actual relevance and appeal of the work. We can only discuss this motif through the multimodal construction of a primary, 'literal' diegetic world, in which an actual urban fog clouds all (self-)perception, where anthropomorphic insectoid beings co-exist alongside and with ordinary humans that are only (and barely) visually distinguishable from each other. Much about the actual perceptibility of *Insekt's* world must remain paradoxical, however. As readers, we can see even on the first page that Pascal looks different from the (Funko Pop) humans: The halftone film can hardly disguise his identifying contours. Its later absence will add little to the perceptual difference. Just as with theatrical conventions where a scene is intended to take place in complete darkness while the stage remains lit for the audience, we can never quite ignore a difference between what we see, and what it should represent. But what does his not-quite-girlfriend perceive at the moment when she catches sight of Pascal unveiled, especially in contrast to before (Fig. 5)? To what extent is it a matter of social projection, which is undoubtedly at play here: the insect creatures, after all, seem to be communicatively undistinguishable from humans, Pascal's identity went unnoticed for years. They are o t h e r e d for social reasons, perhaps not so differently from humans that are o t h e r e d and r a c i a l i z e d in our world (cf. Spivak 1985). The fictionality of the storyworld adds many questions about the alleged species-difference that cannot quite be resolved: Pascal's classmates are increasingly frightened by him, but not nearly to the degree that a supernatural shock would entail. Regular lessons are taken up again at school, and his classmates merely ask the teacher to replace Pascal as their class president. Is the entire story – as well as the difference between both species – merely a metaphor for entirely mundane, social forms of exclusion? While that seems entirely plausible, we cannot state where the metaphor begins or ends, just as with Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect (cf. Kafka 2020):[1] Pascal's teacher even points out that what distinguishes insects from humans is their "balloon heads" (*Ballonköpfe*, Hommer 2007: 42; my translation) – exactly what we see depicted on top of the 'regular' humans as well, even if, perhaps, only due to aesthetic conventions. What is more, we only arrive at our thematic interpretations through inferences about Pascal's emotions and affects that we can see 'directly' from his face and posture. Just as in Kafka's most famous story, it remains programmatically open where exactly the boundary between 'literal' and 'metaphorical' meaning must be drawn, but Hommer achieves that effect through cartoonization. If the humans 'actually' have a 'photorealistic' appearance and Pascal a monstrous one, this would require readers to add many details to the schematic drawings (color, skin texture, etc.) and alter/replace others (head-body-proportions etc.), a combination of our earlier options 1) and 2). Or is this a c a r t o o n world in

which humans and insects are a l m o s t , but n o t e n t i r e l y indistinguish-
able so that the othering rests on social, but mundane differences (option 3)?

4.   Close reading #2: *In China* (2016)

The same unreliability can be found in another comic by the same author,
even though this is taken as clearly non-fictional by most reviewers. *In China*
(2016) is based on autobiographical experiences by the artist. In 2011, he
helped a friend publish a magazine for foreigners in Chengdu for four months.
Chengdu comprises fourteen million inhabitants (at the time), the sky is
filled with bleak skyscrapers, there are continuous horns on the streets,
smog, again, clouds every street. The book has been compared to Delisle's
travel reports by reviewers (cf. Steinaecker 2016). Hommer similarly pres-
ents uneventful 'slice of life' episodes without much commentary. He medi-
ates his own everyday experiences abroad, his difficult search for an apart-
ment, taking Chinese classes, and his many conversations with other expats.
Meetings with locals remain the exception. If they take place, both parties
usually remain strangers to one another. The impossibility of truly 'encoun-
tering' a foreign culture like the Chinese is highlighted through intermedi-
ate chapters that explicate the thematic interest of the book. Each of its five
parts is accompanied by a drawn reproduction of some 'canonical' view on
China and on the cultural practice of travel, mostly from Western perspec-
tives or from the Western cultural imaginary (cf. Taylor 2004). Among them
are 'classics' like Marco Polo's travelogue, the VHS tape of *Bigbird in China*,
and the Tintin book *The Blue Lotus*.

Fig. 6. Hommer (2016: 68).

What strangely distinguishes the diegetic chapters, in contrast, is the fact that Hommer draws all the foreign visitors with animal and monster masks (Fig. 6). While Chinese residents are once again presented according to familiar manga conventions, the foreigners literally appear as aliens (while describing themselves so metaphorically on the verbal track, "we will always remain 'aliens' here", 2016: 53, my translation). At the same time, this makes it impossible – unlike the case of Pascal – to read any of their emotions, which adds a laconic and often depressing atmosphere to most events. But while the mask of Hommer's avatar appears as a static, physical object, his friend Linda has a highly stylized 'camel face' which d o e s change its cartoonish expressions. The effects of this technique on the overall mood of the story cannot be overstated, but the question of what these masks are supposed to m e a n, both on a mimetic (diegetic) and on a thematic level, is difficult to answer. Reviewers suggest that the masks "cleverly emphasize the role-like nature of one's own situation" in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Steinaecker 2016: para. 2, my translation) or that they indicate "skepticism about being able to encounter the foreign, to perceive the other" in *Taz* (Schirrmeister 2016: para. 2, my translation). If the discourse of exoticism in the intertexts makes it clear that a foreign culture can never be understood outside of metaphors or clichés, Hommer perhaps intends to turn this perspective around:

> They [the expats] have animal or even monster heads superimposed on them, which obscure their view of China and set them apart from the locals (Schirrmeister 2016: para. 2, my translation).

The Chengdu inhabitants, however, also remain indistinguishable, at least their pictorial representations. Pronounced manga conventions do not allow them any individuality, their faces remain template-like and devoid of distinguishing features (Fig. 6). While the 'masks' of the Chengdu residents are, at best, on the level of media conventions – concealing their perceivable features but making no claims on the visual ontology of the world – Hommer emphasizes at many points the l i t e r a l quality of his own's: In a key scene he will buy a new, different mask after watching a Sichuan opera performance, and continues to wear it from then on. When he directly asks another expat what the opera masks m e a n, that question could equally be directed towards the text as a whole. The answer remains equally unsatisfactory: "No idea. That's just the Sichuan variant of the famous Peking opera" (2016: 70, my translation). Later, at another expat party, Hommer even fails to recognize another friend, Markus, until the latter takes off his mask (in a lighting/coloring that makes it impossible for the readers to make out his face in turn) (Fig. 7).

Once again, the metaphor – if we even want to call it that at all – cannot be clearly deciphered, and once again the line separating it from a literal interpretation cannot be clearly drawn: should we take the entire work as generally autobiographical and imagine a storyworld that is 'disguised'

only where Hommer and his friends are concerned? Or, conversely, are we to imagine a diegesis in which all expats actually d o wear masks all the time, forming a more fictionalized metaphor for experiences abroad on a global textual level? What would both interpretations entail for the moment when Hommer decides to change masks to buy a new one, or when Markus reveals his face? What about the difference between his mask and Linda's? The added, aesthetic value seems to lie precisely in the fact that, once again, the line between the literal and the metaphorical cannot be drawn clearly – yet it must be drawn, somehow, in every reading, all the same! Again, we have to decide whether to enrich and replace certain aspects of the cartoonish representations towards a 'photorealistic' world, or whether to take them as closely at 'face value' as possible, merely in three dimensions instead of two, thus fictionalizing the overall storyworld.
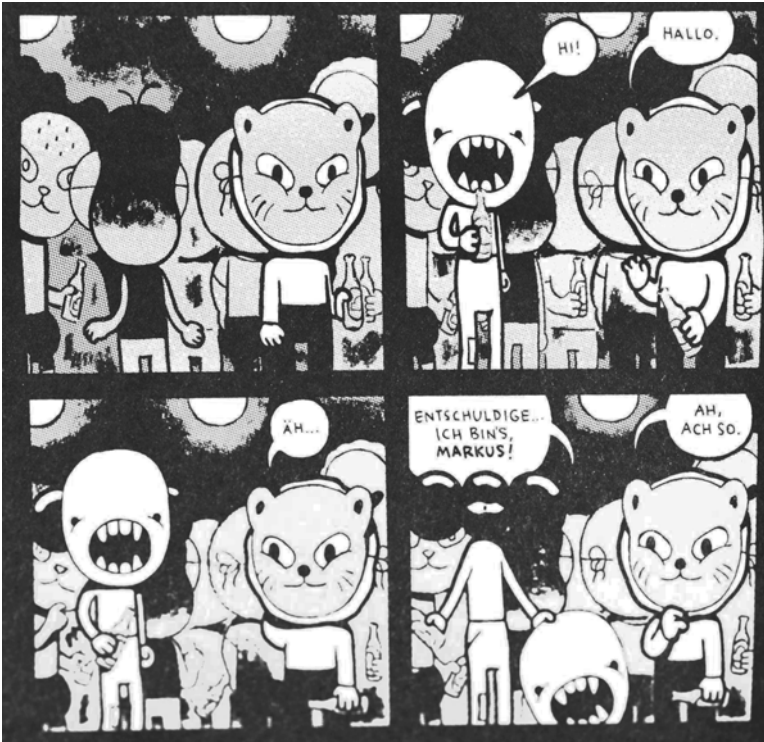

Fig. 7. Hommer (2016: 174).

5. Proposals from comic studies: Referential meaning and the semiotic third space

Consider these two examples in the context of some other, perhaps more prominent works that have been discussed extensively in comic studies.

The genre of 'funny animal comics' is one of the most prominent and publicly visible within the medium, ranging back to groundbreaking works like George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913–1944) and modern classics like Walt Kelly's *Pogo* (1949–1975) to newer genre subversions like Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* (1965–1972) (cf., once again, Alaniz 2020 for a concise survey). The metaphorization and allegorization of pictures in comics through animal representations is certainly one of their most discussed aspects – usually, however, with respect to specific works (and their assumed strategies). The canonical example is Art Spiegelman's celebrated graphic novel *MAUS* (1980–1991; cf. Spiegelman 2003) retelling the autobiographical story of his father Vladek, an Auschwitz survivor. Although the work is clearly intended – and by now generally accepted – as non-fictional, Spiegelman represents Jewish people as mice, Germans as cats. Nevertheless, it should be clear to readers that these disguises are not to be taken literally, as Jan-Noel Thon had stressed in his comics narratology:

> [W]hat is represented here are not anthropomorphic animals but rather quite regular human beings whose affiliation with certain social groups is represented by more or less 'visible' but nevertheless exclusively metaphorical 'masks' (Thon 2016: 93).

Importantly, the meaning of this technique would be quite problematic if readers attributed it to Spiegelman, the author and artist of the book – whether taken as the actual, empirical creator, or as some overall, implied author of all multimodal (pictorial as well as verbal) elements. In fact, *MAUS* has initially been criticized for 'literalizing' a perceived ethnic difference, by reiterating "Hitler's racist thinking by casting groups as different species" (Spiegelman 2011: 131). After all, within Vladek's account, Germans and Jews can actually be perceived as biologically different races who cannot reproduce.

Fig. 8. Spiegelman (2003: 210).

Crucially, however, Spiegelman alternates his metaphorical or allegorical pictures of mice-humans with representations of humans wearing literal

masks attached to their foreheads with string. Some of the 'mice' within the historical narrative also disguise themselves by 'transforming' into other animals, a strategy that none of their co-protagonists ever see through – their animal representations are r e v i s e d (cf. Fig. 8). The reason for this is, of course, that it is not possible to tell whether someone actually 'looks Jewish'. Instead, the Jews-as-mice-metaphor must be understood as focalized, as bound to the ideological perspective of the characters, and the society in which they participate, to stress the point that the "racism [in National Socialist Germany] was all so arbitrary" (Spiegelman 2011: 132). The thematic meaning of the visible mice indicates that these differences are merely s o c i a l   p r o j e c t i o n s about a l l e g e d ethnic differences. The aesthetics are hence employed as a media-specific means of characterization and subjectivization, to comment about the character Vlad and his experiences within his social surroundings. The fact that there have been extensive discussions about the contested meaning of these 'mice skins' shows two things: First, it is clear to most observers that Spiegelman does not want his readers to take these pictures literally, resulting in an ambiguity that can only be resolved on the thematic level once again: what does he (the actual or implied author, or perhaps 'the text' itself) want to convey here? The discussions result, secondly, in a number of d i s t i n c t proposals.

Fig. 9. Asano (2013: 54–55).

In other, perhaps even more challenging works (from a theoretical point of view), there are no identifiable options for metaphorical meanings to begin with, although most readers would still agree that the pictorial meanings cannot be taken literally. Inio Asano, for example, uses this technique to great effect in the manga series *Good Night, Punpun* (*Oyasumi punpun*, 2007–2013, cf. Asano 2016). The series, running to over 3,000 pages, tells of the depressing and often disturbing youth of a boy named Punpun, who is depicted as an abstract anthropomorphic configuration. The cartoon vaguely resembles a highly stylized bird (via the mark of a beak), while backgrounds and surroundings are rendered in the most detailed hyperrealism, with many pictures based on edited photographs (Fig. 9). Punpun's friends and teachers, in contrast, are drawn in manga aesthetics (especially their faces with huge eyes and almost absent noses), but nevertheless as clearly human. In selected key scenes, especially those connected to Punpun's first sexual experiences, individual body segments regain human traits in close-ups and angled shots. His bird-like regular appearance must thus be taken as another 'mask', leaving his actual perceivable identity completely indeterminate. The meaning of this device remains hard to pin down, however – it is hardly contingent on any connotations of 'birdness'. Punpun might be considered a center of subjectivity and unconstrained imagination which readers can easily empathize with, while the inexorability of his 'more intersubjective' lifeworld leaves little room for imagination or escape. In any case, calling this a 'pictorial metaphor' or 'allegory' – without being able to specify what it s t a n d s   f o r – seems unsatisfactory.

While it would be tempting to connect this problem to Gilles Fauconnier's and Mark Turner's (2002) Conceptual Blending Theory, this would have to be done in a separate study. Instead I would like to stay within existing approaches of comic book aesthetics and semiotics, specifically Stephan Packard's (2017b) expansion of McCloud's concept of cartoonization that the former has developed into a powerful conceptual toolbox for analyzing comics and cartoons. It allows addressing comics' pictoriality on a global-textual, as well as on a local, character-bound (or domain-bound) level. Packard proposed a "semiotic third space" (cf. Packard 2017a; 2017b; Wilde 2020a) in which the 'duckness' of Donald Duck, the 'mouseness' of Vlad, and the 'birdness' of Punpun would be located if we were to decide that these characters were merely represented as animals, but 'actually' quite regular human beings in the storyworld (Gavaler discusses the same problems extensively as a problem of medial "transparency and non-transparency", 2022: 46–50). Comics' mimetic domain can be addressed as a cartoon's r e f e r e n t i a l   m e a n i n g (cf. Persson 2003: 28; Thon 2016: 53; Wilde 2024/forthcoming). Since we can clearly see some stylized animal traits (although in dire need of enrichment) that would be neither part of our reality (where only lines on paper exist) nor of the referential meaning (where there would be a human being), we must assume a t h i r d   d o m a i n distinct from both, as neither reality nor fiction seem to have a place for these aspects. That does not mean that the character traits in the third space are

redundant, or devoid of meaning. Often, there is meaning on the thematic, not the diegetic/referential level that can be interpreted through multimodal reasoning, as we have seen in Hommer's works (t o p i c s such as othering or exoticism). But sometimes the possible intentions behind the aesthetic device remain entirely undetermined. We can merely describe its effects in loosely defined 'aesthetic' terms. The thresholds between semiotic third space and referential meaning, however, are exactly what Hommer works with in his books, since we can never be sure about their precise delineations.

What we can see from these examples across different generic and cultural contexts is that various multimodal cues can guide our imagination in one direction or the other among the initial options 1), 2), and 3):

a. Paratextual markers identifying a work as fiction or non-fiction: If we accept Delisle's work as non-fictional, it is clear that his line drawings are intended as vague, underdetermined abstractions from a more perceptually rich reality; although this does not dissolve all (or even many) questions with regard to *In China*, it is clear from the 'non-fiction' label that the manga aesthetics of his regular Chengdu inhabitants must be partly enriched, partly ignored, towards a more realistic visual ontology.
b. Generic traditions, including established 'reality principles' and rules of the imagination: In many parodic works, characters can be e x p e c t e d to perceive and manipulate 'extra-diegetic' signs (such as light bulb up-fixes) as if they were three-dimensional bodies in the diegetic space that look exactly like they are represented on the page; Superman can be expected to go entirely unrecognized as Clark Kent.
c. Specific textual cues, especially those concerning the perception of characters: When protagonists in *MAUS* put their animal 'masks' on or take them off without other characters noticing, these masks do not seem to exist within the referential meaning but within the semiotic third space; again, these cues must be related to paratextual markers and generic traditions, as we have to decide what sort of storyworlds we can expect in the first place and what seems ordinary or extraordinary within it (*Insekt*).

6. Multimodality, iconicity, and diagrammatics

To account for the media-specific unreliability of cartoonization in comics, two different distinctions must be strengthened within theories of multimodality as provided by Forceville or Elleström earlier on. Arguing from relevance theory, a deeper consideration of Sperber and Wilson's (1995) distinction between the cognitive and the communicative principle of relevance turns crucial. This distinction, introduced for Forceville's overall theoretical design (2020: 33–40), remains largely neglected in his understanding of pictoriality. For Elleström's Peircean perspective, a more fundamental distinc-

tion between iconic and hypoiconic signs is helpful, which the author has provided himself in an earlier article (but not for narrative or fictional texts).

Generally, many discussions about the distinction between iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs isolate this trichotomy, while it is actually part of a much larger semiotic model (cf. Santaella Braga 1988, for instance). Without discussing Peirce's equally foundational trichotomies – that of representamen, object, and interpretant, of qualisigns, sinsigns, and legisigns, as well as that of rhemes, dicents, and arguments (cf. Nöth 1995: 42–45) – any discussion of iconicity must remain insufficient, because iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity are "already situated somewhere in the 'middle' of the fuller account," as John Bateman has put it aptly (2018: 7). It is easy to get lost within these distinctions, however, as Peirce himself has revised his terminology (as well as his underlying concepts) many times during his career. For the context of multimodality, authors such as Elleström (2014) and more recently Bateman (2018) have provided thorough reconstructions and evaluations. Since I am only concerned with the specific problems posed by the iconic unreliability of cartoonization in comics – the distinctions provided by the semiotic third space in contrast to a cartoon's referential meaning – I am going to focus on my two proposed theoretical clarifications from above.

My overall suggestion is that 'pictoriality' in comics cannot be conceived of as a single mode, but as two distinct thresholds of pictorial comprehension and interpretation (cf. Wilde 2018: 89–213, more briefly Wilde 2020b): a mostly pre-attentional cognitive reconfiguration of two-dimensional lines on paper into three-dimensional bodies in space on the one hand, and a more conscious interpretational mapping (or d i s e n t a n g l e m e n t) of perceivable features to storyworld entities on the other, the latter guided by the aforementioned, often conflicting multimodal forces of specific textual cues, paratextual markers, genres and traditions. Iconicity is obviously not the same as similarity or resemblance, but semiosis b a s e d o n a n a p p e a r a n c e o f r e s e m b l a n c e (cf. Elleström 2013: 97). The 'regular' comprehension of more typical pictorial signs, such as photographs, is not merely – or not even primarily – a d e l i b e r a t e process of decoding, but "the result of interpretation also o n t h e s u b l i m i n a l l e v e l" (Elleström 2010: 22; my emphasis). Within relevance theory, communicative relevance is sharply distinguished from cognitive relevance, the everyday meaning-making according to schemata of sensorial perception. Cognitive semiotics and empirical research have shown that cognitive schemata allow us to perceive regular objects a s o b j e c t s and not merely as meaningless sensorial data, and that these schemata are stored according to principles of everyday relevance (for a species as a whole, within a specific historical or cultural context, but even for any one individual with all their past experiences, cf. Blanke 2003: 31). Cognitive types that have a higher relevance in the lifeworld will thus need fewer salient features to be recognized as such:

> There must be […] a Lifeworld hierarchy of most probable objects, beginning per-
> haps with the human body itself, in particular the human face (Sonesson 1989:
> 279).

Pictorial media can, at least to a certain degree, remediate the sensorial
data provided by regular perception. Prototypical pictures can then be said
to provide s u r r o g a t e   s t i m u l i of perception (cf. Eco 2000: 353–382).
Since we can categorize pictorial signs at the same time as the actual
shapes, lines, and colors that are materially present, iconic categorization
has been conceived of as a d o u b l e   c a t e g o r i z a t i o n (cf. Blanke 2003:
62–70). The iconic categorization of surrogate stimuli allows three-dimen-
sional objects to be 'seen in' (or rather: projected onto) two-dimensional
surfaces. While the immediate pictorial comprehension above a certain
iconic threshold of relevant sensorial data may be considered as 'purely'
iconic, it does not allow us to make any claims or form any propositions yet,
as Bateman has shown:

> [T]aking a painting, which is itself rhematic since it does not, by itself, assert, and
> adding a caption such as 'The Eiffel Tower', which, by itself, is also a rheme. The
> combination of rhemes may then lead to a dicent with content corresponding to
> 'This is what the Eiffel Tower looks like': only then can one respond to the painting
> and caption combination with 'truth' judgements and evaluations (2018: 13).

Such an indexical element does not need to point to any 'real' thing, howev-
er. In narrative (and especially in fictional) media texts it is primarily direct-
ed towards a storyworld which, by definition, is always already distinguished
from its media and materials of representation. It is easy to see how our
comprehension of sequential images necessarily transcends a more imme-
diate, pre-attentive, 'purely iconic' understanding: If still images are read
in a temporal sequence, this already adds a "symbolic element, namely the
convention of sequential decoding" (Elleström 2019: 55). If this domain is
established, aspects (or 'facets') of the material sign and its recognition can
be transferred onto it, just as in Bateman's example of the picture of the Eif-
fel Tower. Elleström (2013) has reconstructed Peirce's distinctions between
the more immediate, 'pure' iconicity from another form of hypoiconicity in
greater detail (cf. Wilde 2018: 117– 129; Wilde 2019b; as well as Peirce 1932:
CP 2.274–2.282). Hypoiconicity always entails a comparison, a process of
mapping, because we are now transferring aspects or facets of the materi-
al sign and its recognition onto some other, distinct object. In the case of
narrative representations, these can be entities within the storyworld. This
comparison or transfer can be of three different kinds, distinguished by
Peirce's internal trichotomy w i t h i n hypoiconicity, namely 'image/imagic',
'diagram/diagrammatic', and 'metaphor/metaphorical'. Even though this pas-
sage is notoriously difficult to interpret even for Peirce experts (cf. Braga
1996; Farias and Queiroz 2006; Colapietro 2011: 158), it precisely address-
es the conundrum of cartoonization. If we consider a pictorial sign as (most-

ly) 'imagic', we transfer its perceivable qualities as closely as possible onto the represented object – 'something somewhere' is supposed to look like the material sign in front of us, to some degree. A distinction will always remain, however (a picture is usually flat, while the represented object is not; the picture is here 'with us', while the character exists in some other world).
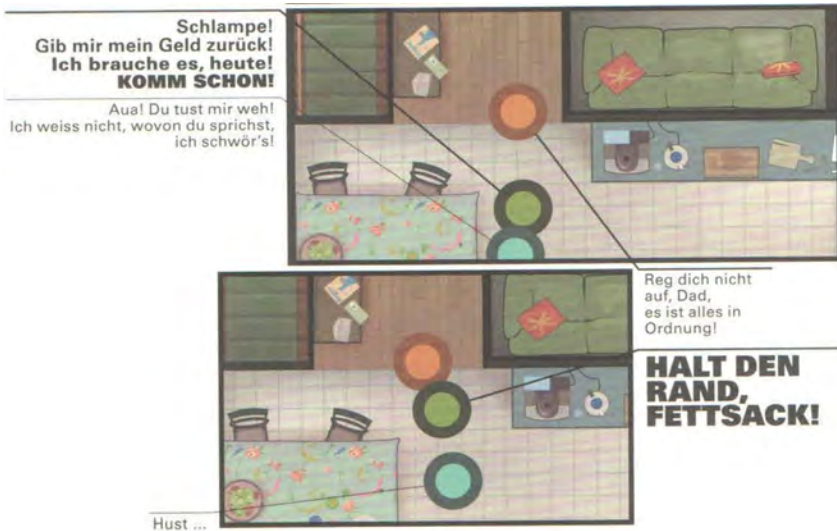

Fig. 10. Panchaud (2020: 48).

In contrast to such a (mostly) 'imagic' mapping, more diagrammatical forms of reasoning do not take any perceivable qualities into account (or considerably less so), but only the relations of the parts (cf. Stjernfelt 2007; Bauer and Ernst 2010; Krämer 2010 for different accounts of diagrammatics). Around the turn of the 20th century, Peirce described such a 'diagram' as a 'skeleton'. This evokes imaginations of a "skeleton diagram, or outline sketch" (Peirce 1932: CP 2.227). Elleström gives the following account: "[W]hile an image is a complete picture, a diagram is a sketch, characterized by the schematic relations of its parts" (2013: 101). The third form of hypoiconicity, 'metaphorical iconicity', does away with all physical resemblance – and all structural equivalence of physical resemblance – and only transfers aspects of the sign with regard to something else signified or implied by it. This is where iconic signs become charged with symbolism and conventionality. That is clearly the case for the 'mice' associations charged with notions of 'rodents' and 'vermin'. Cartoonization generally stays 'below' such clearly explicable metaphorical meanings, however, somewhere on two s p e c t r a   o f   h y p o i c o n i c i t y incorporating varying degrees of both the imagic and the diagrammatic. We can see the most pronounced forms of diagrammatic hypoiconicity in works like *Die Farbe der Dinge* by Swiss artist Martin Panchaud (2020), wherein all the characters are represented by differently colored dots moving across a (much more 'imagic') map (Fig. 10).

The multimodal narrative d o e s refer to characters' body parts in verbal speech, however, and other diagrams even show their entirely human internal anatomy (Panchaud 2020: 77), or represent alcohol circulating through their bloodstream (2020: 131). Multimodal reasoning leaves no reason to doubt, then, that Simon Hope, Panchaud's protagonist, can be perceived as a three-dimensional human body in space, even though a gap between imagic and diagrammatic hypoiconicity seems to run exactly along the borders between characters and backgrounds. Interestingly, the semiotic third space closes in on the 'first' one here (the material means of representation), as the colored dots have no purely iconic meaning to begin with (if we do not wish to imagine them as spherical shapes or balls floating across space). They can be taken as strongly symbolic instead, perhaps as references to the digital location markers of GoogleMaps. They do retain s o m e hypoiconic (diagrammatic) aspects within the overall text, just like location markers do, by representing the exact spatial relations to other characters, their surroundings, and between each other. The s p e c t r a of (imagic as well as diagrammatic) hypoiconicity are thus entirely independent from material and physical properties (and 'looks') of the material signs. They are only determined by aspects we take into account in the process of the semiosis that constructs the storyworld alongside multimodal cues. Perceptually, characters can be based on images that we can comprehend 'subliminally' or pre-attentively ('pure' iconicity), or they can be as abstract as Panchaud's. To what degree we decide to map what we see onto a represented plane, situation, or character (as a hypoicon) remains subject to various aspects of multimodal reasoning, guided by specific textual cues, paratextual markers, or generic traditions.

7.   Conclusions

If we decide to interpret a cartoon drawing alongside our initial option 1) (adding something), it has already entered semiosis as a diagrammatic hypoicon: we take it to represent only relations of body parts, facial expressions, differences between character sizes, and so on. The rest is added according to collateral experience or 'minimal departure'. The diagrammaticity can then be strengthened even further through option 2) (subtracting something), by 'blocking' not only many qualitative aspects such as colors or head and body contours, but disregarding a l m o s t e v e r y t h i n g of what the material sign is made of (and comprehended as in 'purely iconic' or 'imagic' terms). Perceivable features s h a r e d by Punpun, the cartoon bird, and Punpun, the human being, are almost entirely absent in terms of hypoiconicity. The most general spatial information is preserved, however (indicating where in the represented space the character is located), as are the body and face relations that signify posture, movement, affect, and emotion. This is where the semiotic third space opens up, 'swallowing' everything that does not enter into hypoiconicity and will thus not be mapped

onto the referential meaning. Additional metaphorical meanings c a n come into play (facilitated by the objects in the third space), but they can also remain vague, ambiguous, or entirely absent for most readers. If, on the other hand, we decide to close the third space and align our imagination as closely as possible to the material means of representation, the diagrammaticity is strongly deemphasized towards a more salient 'imagic' hypoiconic form of semiosis (although the diagrammatic information certainly remains equally 'valid'). We never take e v e r y t h i n g into account, however, as black and white flat pictures will usually be 'corrected' into a colorful, three-dimensional world. The spectra of hypoiconicity remain continuous scales, but there are discontinuous gaps and stitches even within one picture (between characters and backgrounds) and within one and the same cartoon (between facial expressions and aspects designated to the third space). According to relevance theory, this is decided according to communicative relevance (in comics through multimodal communication), distinguished from cognitive relevance (that is a mostly subconscious perception within the iconic mode).

Although the iconicity of a cartoon will hence always retain some ambiguity alongside the distinct options 1), 2), or 3), adding, subtracting, or aligning – an ambiguity that can be attributed to authors and artists as well as to individual characters and their subjective states themselves – it is far from arbitrary in any given context. As my examples have shown, this ambiguity can always be exploited artistically and thematically as a deliberate form of representational unreliability. We see in Hommer's works that the possibility to shift our attention across the hypoiconicity affordances between image and diagram (and, possibly, metaphor), between third space and referential meaning, offers one of the most powerful aesthetic resources of the medium of comics. Nevertheless, diagrammatic reasoning remains unguided in many cases, allowing readers to choose freely between options 1), 2), and 3). There is much to be done for a multimodal theory of cartoon comprehension, however. As I hope to have made clear, an account of multimodal reasoning could provide many tools to trace the aesthetic strategies of comics, especially across different semiotic modes beyond pictoriality. I could only indicate the broad range of specific textual cues, paratextual markers, and generic traditions that guide our attention along the hypoiconicity affordances and into, or out of, the semiotic third space. A more refined typology of reading instructions would be helpful, as would a r h e t - o r i c s of comic semiotics. Diagrammatics might be a suitable starting point for such endeavors, if it can be more clearly connected to theories of multimodality.

Notes

1   I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of my article for this observation.

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Fig. 1. McCloud (1993: 36).

Fig. 2. Delisle (2008: 34).

Fig. 3. *The Peanuts Movie* (USA 2015, directed by Steve Martino), 24:30.

Fig. 4. Hommer (2006: 13).

Fig. 5. Hommer (2006: 67).

Fig. 6. Hommer (2016: 68).

Fig. 7. Hommer (2016: 174).

Fig. 8. Spiegelman (2003: 210).

Fig. 9. Asano (2013: 54–55).

Fig. 10. Panchaud (2020: 48).

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