

Coherence in Comics: An Interdisciplinary Approach

16th Annual Conference of the German Society for Comics Studies

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Organisers: Elisabeth Kriebler, Markus Oppolzer & Hartmut Stöckl (University of Salzburg)

Due to the fragmentation of comics into distinct units and the co-presence and interdependence of various modes, all scholars – no matter their academic affiliation – face the challenge of providing a theory of continuity and connectivity that transcends the particularities of the single constitutive element. Gestalt psychology offers a holistic approach that inspired Scott McCloud's principle of *closure*, Wolfgang Iser's aesthetic response to literary texts, but also various comics theories, such as Thierry Groensteen's, Charles Hatfield's or Barbara Postema's, who seem to be indebted to Iser's conceptualization of gaps as central narrative devices. Hatfield approaches the uniqueness of comics by looking at four foundational types of tension: between word and image, single frame and sequence, sequence and page, but also continuous narration vs. comics as material objects.

In addition to reader-response criticism and other cognitive approaches, the continuity of comics narration can also be explained via textual features that provide the 'blueprints' that readers need to experience the text in a certain way. Dominant approaches here are discourse analysis (cf. Bateman & Wildfeuer; Emmott), stylistics, multimodal analysis or (trans)narratology. In contrast to predominantly image-centred theories, it may be worth exploring what role language plays in this context (cf. Miodrag).

It is the express aim of this conference to not only negotiate and explain meaning-making across panel borders and semiotic modes, but also across disciplines, seeking commonalities, shared interests and points of contact. If we take continuity as a starting point, there is a whole range of phenomena that can be studied, from Groensteen's braiding (*tressage*) to intertextuality and seriality, all of which go beyond the somewhat limiting view of linear panel transitions. While microstructural phenomena should play a role, we explicitly invite contributions that look at the broader picture, such as translinear phenomena. Accordingly, we suggest the following **guiding questions**:

- What (discourse analytical) theories about coherence and cohesion can and should be explored in the context of comics? What are the limitations of such an approach?
- Can theories about other narrative media (e.g. prose fiction, film, picture books) help to make sense of comics (e.g. continuity editing)? Why is it that simplistic transfers do not work?
- Does it help at all to speak of a 'grammar' or 'language' of comics?
- To what extent do conceptual metaphors and image schemas provide coherence?
- What visual and/or verbal forms of continuity exist in comics? How are they instrumentalized to guide reader attention?
- How does narrative world building work in comics, both practically and theoretically?
- What do cartoonists have to repeat to guarantee continuity? How can we conceptualize the interplay between redundancy and gap?
- How can gaps be used for creative/thematic purposes? What genres rely on the narrative potential of implying events rather than showing them?
- If the performance of repetition and variance is the basic principle of comics narration (cf. Sina; Frahm), what is the (subversive) potential of staging characters across multiple panels?
- Are (visual/verbal) stylistic choices central to the continuity of comics narratives?

- Under what circumstances can incoherence and discontinuity serve as an artistic stance or narrative strategy? How do cartoonists undermine rules and social norms (e.g. in the context of gender, body images, racism)?
- How widespread and relevant is the influence of Gestalt psychology and reader-response theory on comics theory (as suggested above)?
- How much influence do paratexts (and especially peritexts/frames) have on the reading process?

We are looking forward to **keynotes** by Janina Wildfeuer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Information Studies at the University of Groningen, Barbara Postema, author of *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*, and Charles Forceville, Associate Professor at the University of Amsterdam (Department of Media Studies). The entire conference will be held online, for mainly two reasons: It is still not foreseeable whether the COVID pandemic will be sufficiently under control by next term (2021/2022). In addition, participation in the conference is facilitated for those who do not receive financial support from academic institutions, those who care for the young or the elderly, or those who face limitations in their mobility.

Apart from the conference's central focus on coherence, ComFor aims to promote interdisciplinary cooperation and dialogue across all areas of comics research. The 16th Annual Conference will therefore continue the tradition of an **open workshop format** that allows researchers to present and gather feedback on various projects within comics studies, without any thematic restrictions. Participants are not required to be members of ComFor. Please indicate whether your **submission** for a 20-minute paper is intended for the main conference or the open workshop. Please send an abstract of approx. 500 words plus a short biography (as a word or pdf file) in English or German no later than 30 June 2021 to comfor2021@sbg.ac.at. We plan to publish selected contributions in an edited volume.

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