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Introduction

Narrating Reality in Comics

Comics tend to be associated with elements not typically found in our everyday reality. The prominence of speaking animals, superheroes or science fiction settings – just to name a few elements – may make us overlook that factual comics have existed from the very beginning of this medium. Whereas fictional texts represent imaginary worlds without claiming direct reference to particular extratextual facts, factual texts are taken to be true with respect to concrete features of our common reality. Such 'reality narratives' invite readers to understand the narrated events as having taken place exactly as described or as they should happen (in the case of normative narratives such as self-help or guidebooks) or as they will happen (in the case of prognostic narratives such as scientific scenarios; on the concept of 'reality narratives,' cf. Klein / Martínez 2009).

Researchers have coined a number of terms in order to categorize factual comics (cf. Hangartner 2016, 291-303). Some accentuate particular objects or claims specific to these comics as in "fact-based comics" (Kunzle 2017), "non-fiction comics" or "factual comics" (Williams 1999). Most categories, however, refer to the functions or intended effects of (some) factual comics. Using the term "instructional comics", Will Eisner (2000) emphasizes the function of comics that either convey technical-instrumental knowledge or are supposed to guide the reader's behavior. Similarly, Heike Elisabeth Jüngst's (2010) term "information comic" underlines the communicative function of this subgenre. The category of "educational comic" referring to comics "that deal in 'facts' instead of 'fiction'" (Rifas 2010, 161) has been particularly successful. Moreover, terms like "graphic memoir" (i.e. auto-/biograpical narratives in comic form) and "comic report" (i.e., journalistic documentaries in comic form) designate factual subgenres of particular importance.

Factual narratives have been part of the history of comics since the very beginning (cf. Duncan et al. 2016). Educational comics were already being published at the start of the 20th century. The German-American comic author Ernst Riebe, for instance, published episodes of a credulous character called *Mr. Block* who falls victim to capitalistic propaganda and exploitation in a US trade union's journal from 1912. In these early years, factual comics also existed in a narrow sense, that is, comics that depict actual events. From 1918 onwards, Robert Ripley's newspaper strip *Believe It or Not* in the *New York Globe*, which presented curious facts taken from a broad variety of realms of knowledge, gained enormous popularity but was soon taken over by other media. James C. Mansfield's comic strips *Highlights of History* (1926-1939), which

depicted crucial moments in the history of humankind, were another huge success.

The appearance of comic magazines on the market in the early 1940s, with their potential to present more extended stories in the comic format, opened the door for new varieties of factual comics. The series *True Comics*, starting in 1941 and edited by George J. Hecht, became a model for many other factual comic series. With his series, Hecht set out to counter the common reproach against comics that their primary goal was to produce suspenseful and thrilling stories at the expense of realistic accuracy. Consequently, the motto printed on the magazine's front page was "Truth is stranger and a thousand times more interesting than fiction!" As early as 1942, M.C. Gaines founded the publishing house *Educational Comics* in which magazines such as *Picture Stories from the Bible*, *Picture Stories from American History* and *Picture Stories from Science* appeared. In 1951, Will Eisner published the magazine *PS – The Preventive Maintenance Monthly* in which he presented, in an entertaining fashion, behavioral guides and maintenance tips for the U.S. army. The first series of factual comic magazines in Germany appeared in 1953 under the title *Abenteuer der Weltgeschichte*.

By the end of the 1960s, comics had become part of the underground movement and were increasingly used to express personal experience. In the mid-1970s, the underground comic author Leonard Rifas established the publishing house *EduComics* that printed comics about the social and political implications of diverse topics such as nuclear energy, tobacco, food, or AIDS. These comics were based on meticulous research and presented a clear personal stance. The combination of reliable information and subjective point of view made these texts a forerunner of the more recent factual Graphic Novel, which became an autonomous genre around the mid-1980s: a comic narrative of ambitious content in book form, not conceived of as part of a series, and, in contrast to the traditional collaboration of many authors, created entirely by a single author. Typical features of the Graphic Novel are the depiction of auto-/biographical experiences and a self- and media-reflective attitude. Art Spiegelman's auto-/biographic Graphic Novel *Maus* (1986/1991) soon became the model for this genre and was crucial for its increased cultural and aesthetic prestige.

Today, auto-/biographical and journalistic graphic novels are some of the most successful and popular forms of factual comics. The present issue focuses on these two subgenres and includes three essays on auto-/biographical comics and two on journalistic comics.

Olivia Albiero discusses Reinhard Kleist's successful comic biographies and analyzes the way in which he establishes characters in the gray zone between fictional and factual storytelling. Albiero contends that Kleist seeks to evoke a narrative space in his comics that not only depicts the actual individual life of the historical person but also envisions alternative lives not realized. In addition to this essay, our issue includes an interview with Reinhard Kleist in which he reflects on his intentions and aesthetic ideas. In her essay, Nancy Pedri examines the crucial function of authentic documents in graphic illness

memoirs to explore how such documents contribute to the particular oscillation between objective depiction and subjective experiences. Precisely this interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in the comic form can lead to an effect of authenticity for the reader. The increasing importance of illness narratives in the comic form is highlighted by Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff in her report on the Berlin-based research project *PathoGraphics*, which focuses on representations of the experience of illness, medical treatment, and disability in literature and comics. In her contribution on Graphic Memoirs about Holocaust survivors, Kate Polak shows how established symbols, which have become metonyms for the Holocaust, are used in these comics, on the one hand to ground the narratives historically, and on the other to challenge their status as symbols. These comics seek to avoid oversimplifying effects of such representational forms on individual histories of suffering. Julia Ludewig compares four journalistic comic reports with respect to how they use multimodality to generate authenticating as well as self-reflective effects. In doing so, they achieve, on the side of the readers, both empathetic immersion and reflective distance. Precisely this double strategy, she indicates, is crucial for the specific potential of comic reports. Marie Vanoost and Sarah Sepulchre analyze journalistic comic reports published from 2008 onwards in the French magazine *XXI* with respect to the interplay between paratextual settings and the main narrative.

A considerable number of the most esteemed and influential comics in recent years present a factual depiction of reality. The essays included in this issue analyze the narrative strategies and aesthetic intentions of some important examples of this trend. All essays underline the relevance of narrative modelling for the meaning of the depicted reality. Furthermore, these essays emphasize the interplay between expressive subjectivity and objective rendering of facts, revealing how these aspects affect the (intended) reader through a complex combination of immersion and reflection. In light of the various forms of factual narration in comics, this issue serves as an invitation to engage further – in narratology and in comics studies – with narrating reality in comics.

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