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# Science meets Comics

## Proceedings of the Symposium on Communicating and Designing the Future of Food in the Anthropocene

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Stephan Packard

## How Factual are Factual Comics? Parasitic Imaginations in Referential Cartoons

There is no doubt that factual discourse exists in comics – the kind of communication that intends to be understood as a reference to a shared and actual reality. Factual comics are not, however, common. While the formal structure of comics clearly allows for factuality, the historical specificity of its aesthetics seems to introduce a non-binding but plausible *drift* of the art form, ultimately pulling away from reality and towards fiction. This does not prevent factual comics, but it allows for subversive remnants in their aesthetic make-up. One of these is a *parasitic imagination*, which might be understood in the context of Michel Serres' concepts of the parasite. It opens up cartoonish depictions for tertiary significations beyond the drawing and its ultimate real reference. Rather than avoid this basic vehicle of comic book discourse, the *challenge to factual comics* must be how to employ them in the service of the intended communication.

### **Fictional Drift**

One of the most commonplace arguments in the recently growing field of comics studies is the (no doubt well-grounded) insistence that comics can be adult, serious, aesthetically advanced, and – factual. Haven't you seen Spiegelman's *MAUS*? Joe Sacco's *Palestine* is serious journalism! McCloud's comics on comics are scholarship, so comics can be scholarship too! And of course, Hamann's, Zea-Schmidt's, and Leinfelder's *The Great Transformation* conveys detailed scientific information about climate change alongside an earnest political appeal. All of this is 'factual' in the strict sense of a theory of fictionality and factuality (cf. e.g. Schaeffer 2013, Zipfel 2001), in that it intends to be taken as a pragmatically valid reference to a shared reality (notwithstanding that its declarations might be erroneous or mendacious, or the concept of reality metaphysically controversial). There can be little doubt that comics can be used in this way, and that such use is effective and compelling. The form of comics, it seems, does not predestine their content for either fiction or factuality.

McCloud uses the metaphor of a jug to convey this basic idea of a medium as a form opposed to its content (Fig. 1). Comics are a container; their content can be separated from its shape, and that shape might be studied on its own, an empty decanter. McCloud shows us this idea by drawing the container, but never mentions the word 'jug'; one might be tempted to think that the metaphor extends to the

imagery of these panels alone, while the text refers to the pertinent concepts directly and lucidly. Indeed, those concepts and McCloud's argument refer back to one of the most fundamental bases of media theory, McLuhan's famous admonition that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964), while the content of any medium is another medium: in this case, the genres, styles, and trends that McCloud's visualization liquefies and promises to at least momentarily liquidate.



Fig. 1: McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 1994, p. 6.

But those concepts are themselves metaphors, and McCloud is well aware that McLuhan's central argument will not yield to a straightforward isolation of the medium's message. The constant confusion of medium and content is not merely an irritation that the media analyst must avoid, but, at the same time, the core of media's very function that the analyst wants to examine. Media work precisely by bringing to our attention their content instead of their own shape. The style of the thoroughly cartoonish sequence in which McCloud's avatar drinks of that content takes us directly back to the vivid tropes so typical of comics' panels. One approach would be to consider the words of the avatar's speech to convey abstract meaning without such interruptions, if it were presented on its own in a text book. But no matter whether such a text book could ever avoid the messiness of its metaphors (it could not, for language is in its own way no less messy than cartoons): this text, in any case, is not presented that way, and the immediate resurfacing of the many colourful aspects of these drawings may engender doubt that those abstract thoughts can ever be quite purified of such distractions. As Frahm puts it, there is a parodist aesthetics to comics that ultimately parodies the idea of transparent signification itself (Frahm 2010). Understanding media, and thus understanding comics, cannot just be about separating the pure medium from its content; it must, at the same time, account for media's resistance against that separation.

The claim that comics can be factual is doubtlessly true. Its constant repetition, however, points to such resistance. Comics cannot merely be factual; rather, they can *surprise us by being factual*. Comics studies must not ignore that surprise, which plays a pertinent role in each of the factual comics mentioned. That surprise rests on the expectations created by an *interpretative drift*, a tendency to connect comics with one quality while knowing that said quality need not apply. Certain genres are expected in comics (superheroes, funny animals, adventure romps), even though we know that comics need not fall into those genres. The pure code of comics – perhaps "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence", as McCloud puts it (1994, 9) – does not imply art, or even the depiction of visible scenes, much less the construction of a narrative. But more often than not, comics will present scenes and will use them to tell stories – and more often than not, those stories will be fictional and belong to certain genres. (For a more complete account of interpretative drift, see Packard 2016.) We readily accept comics that go against that trend; but the drift remains, pulling on our interpretation, resisting the factuality with an interpretative tendency of its own. The resultant tension, far from hindering the intended factual message, can be used to great effect in its service. McCloud does just that in the drawings of his instructive avatar and his conceptual metaphors, juxtaposing the metaphor for a pure code of comics with the sequence that immediately pulls it back into its familiar scenery.

My point here is not that there is anything within the formal makeup of comics that principally resists factuality. Rather, there is a current cultural disposition to read whatever formally resembles comics as likely narrative, likely fictional, and as less likely than serious. At the same time, there is in comics' aesthetics an invitation to a resistant graphic surplus created alongside any abstract idea conveyed. In current factual comics, that cultural disposition connects to this surplus, creating a specific parasitic space of tertiary significations that may both challenge and ultimately enrich the intended factual communication.

### Parasitic Imaginaries

Fictional drift interlocks with the aesthetic devices that guarantee a surplus of meaning in the graphic presentation of comics that goes beyond the depicted. Perhaps the most fundamental device in comic books is the cartoon, as McCloud defines it (Fig. 2): The reduced and exaggerated depiction of the human body, focusing on those aspects that emphasize the action of any given scene, and that foreground communication among characters, but also between the depicted character and the reader (cf. Packard 2006, chapt. 4). Imbuing the depicted agents with the agency and potential for singular individuality that the reader herself possesses, the cartoon's semiosis combines the generalized iconic qualities of the simplified drawing with a suggested unique reference. Rather than seeing a universal depiction of any face, as we would at the extreme right of McCloud's scale, we need only go a few degrees to the left to imagine a vivid individual character about to take stage in the comic's narrative. In a similar way, the simplified outline

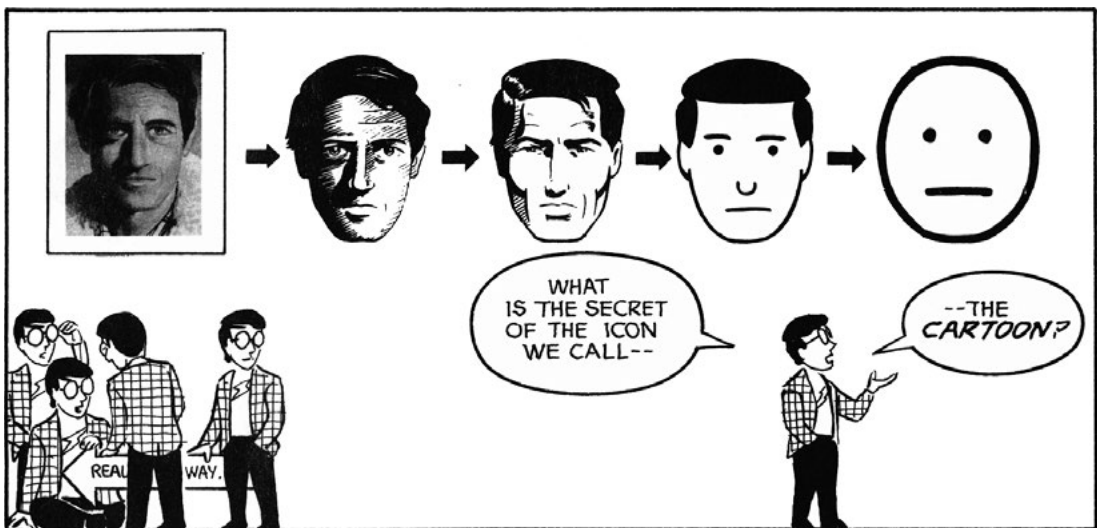


Fig. 2: McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 1994, p. 29.

of Uncle Scrooge, even when further reduced to a mere silhouette as in this short sequence from one of Don Rosa's most famous stories (Fig. 3), by no means conveys a mere general shape of an anthropomorphic duck. Rather, it is precisely in this reduction that the image leaves us with no doubt: That *is* Scrooge!

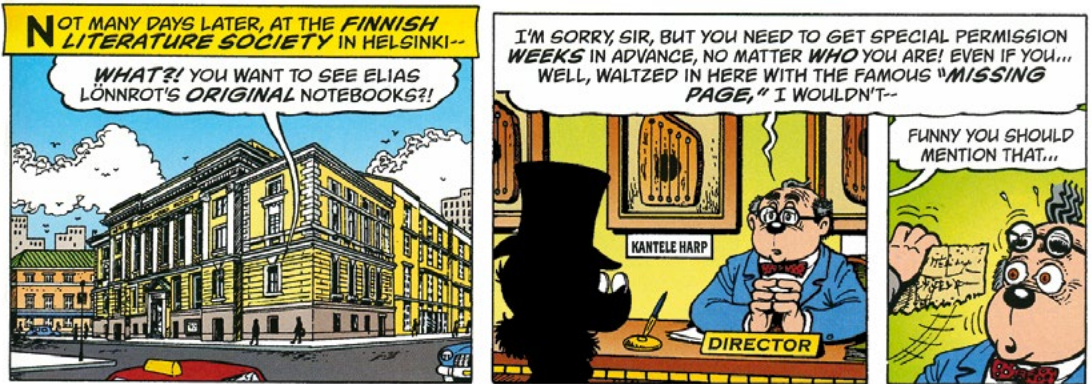


Fig. 3: Rosa, *The Quest for Kalevala*, 2004, p. 17.

But the previous panel contains a different kind of definite reference. The decisively uncartoonish style and accurate perspective that make the somewhat sober depiction of the building housing the Finnish Literature Society all imply to the routine reader of Rosa's comics that this is a factual reference. Indeed, society and building exist, can be found in Helsinki, and look very much like that building. The director, nameless or otherwise, will never have looked like the dog that Rosa presents next to Scrooge, however, and the 'Kantele Harp' in the painting next to him leads us to the neighbourhood of the imaginary Sampo, a wealth-promising magical artefact from the *Kalevala*, the elusive prize Scrooge wants to find. The short sequence embodies the masterful way in which Rosa juxtaposes factual and fictional references in his comic books, telling his readers about real Helsinki even while telling them a fantastic tale about that city. Again, there is nothing about the cartoon that necessitates fictionality in any general semiotic sense, but it belongs to the aesthetic resistance of the comic, and the fictional drift fastens on to that potential, pulling Scrooge and the unnamed director into the ongoing story and away from the more factually informative architecture to the left.

Mainly factual comics, of course, eschew anthropomorphic ducks and dogs and fairy-tale treasure hunts. But given the interpretative drift historically attached to comics, cartoon depictions cannot help but open third spaces with the potential for additional content. The cartoon iconically depicts a character that it resembles – but in a greatly reduced way; that reduction indexically connects it to the reader,



effecting a full character. Beyond the reduced primary similarity – Scrooge must look like the anthropomorphic hero he plays in the story –, additional shapes come up in the cartoon – Scrooge looks like a duck.

This need not be harmless. When Spiegelman's depiction of his father's survival of the Shoah (2011a) represents Jews as mice, the routine drift that would connect to the playfulness of Mickey Mouse is interrupted by national socialist propaganda that renders Jews as vermin; and more fundamentally, by any propaganda that identifies Jews by qualitative and recognizable essential traits. Spiegelman uses the ensuing confusion artfully: Because cartoons show us human bodies without showing us what they look like, readers, characters, and indeed the narrator all constantly experience uncertainty about the quality of identity – a 'living mask', as Frahm puts it, that beckons with the fantasy of suspicious recognition, which can be exchanged for others but never removed entirely (cf. Frahm 2006; Fig. 4). The art connects back to the racist underpinnings of caricature, which ever insists on recognizing essential qualities in physiognomic features; not least in the Vaudevillian blackface progenitors of Mickey Mouse's trickster appearance with his black-framed white-eyed face. If the fictional drift of comics suggests an interpretation as innocent genre literature, Spiegelman's approach reveals how such innocence is missing altogether from the origins of the cartoon. In this way, his comic is doubly factual: On the one hand, it deals with the real facts of the Shoah and his father's account. On the other, it deals equally seriously with the problematic reliance on visual recognition that drives comic books as well as the racist gaze that *MAUS* negotiates.



Fig. 4: Spiegelman, *Meta-MAUS*, 2011, p. 9.

*MAUS* is factual discourse. It achieves both its art and its factual reference to real issues not by avoiding or resisting, but by understanding and employing the devices of the comic book and its interpretative drift. Taking up the imagery of vermin once more, one way to understand these aesthetics might be in accordance with Serres' concept of the parasite, at once the interruption and the content of a given communication. In his central metaphor, the tax farmer interrupts the original production of paying subjects and takes his tax; but his enjoyment is again interrupted by the city rat feasting at his table after dark; who is interrupted according to the plot of the famous fable by the nervousness of the visiting country rat, who is ever ready to be interrupted as soon as it hears a noise that might suggest a predator, and so on (Serres 1980). By turning on its head the idea of mediation that casts the medium in the middle between addresser and addressee, or sign and signified, Serres captures the constant potential for confusion inextricably linked to the transparent function of media. The cartoon coming between the graphic depiction of a character and the represented person, the third space of the mouse nesting inside the cartoonish aesthetics, the racist underpinnings nested yet inside the imagery of the mouse, all demonstrate the inescapability of the parasitic imagery that endlessly infests the comic's panels.

### **A Challenge for Factual Comics**

A factual comic, then, is challenged to deal with the inexorably parasitic imagination elicited by the interpretative drift nesting in the cartoon. Once again, it would be a misunderstanding to think of their connection as immutable or essential: There is nothing about the cartoon that has to resist factuality, and nothing about factuality that abhors cartoonish pictures. On the contrary, factual comics are perhaps most successful when they are fully aware of and employ the divergences from linear signification offered by the tertiary contents of the cartoon.

Spiegelman's *MAUS* does this masterfully. In a different but nonetheless effective way, Joe Sacco's depiction of himself and others as cartoonish overstatements of their perceived physiognomy tackles the question of ethnic groups and racial stereotypes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on which he reports. Can a Palestinian or a Jew be recognized? By whom and by what? And whose side is Sacco on? Sacco's cartoons avoid answering these questions not by eluding them altogether, but by constantly drawing attention to their controversial categories.

Nick Sousanis presents a different kind of factual comic in his *Unflattening*. Rather than a biographic or documentary piece, his is mainly a philosophical reflection upon various schemata of thought and the possibility to open and transcend them.

While there are hardly any individual characters so firmly connected to his topic that they can be represented as if by necessity, and so the parasitic aesthetics of the cartoon cannot interrupt any otherwise seemingly realistic point of reference, the pages are nonetheless filled with scenes and characters, each taking different but effective advantage of the freedoms of the cartoon drawing. For instance, in the rigidity of collectivist and totalitarian dogmatic thought, each individual appears de-individualised by the kind of complete visual identity with every other person that can only be plausibly presented within the vagueness of cartoonish reductions. In another passage, the fungible appearance of a butterfly that is at once animal, interlocutor, and a dancer with a highly developed individual grace, exploits the potential of the cartoon. In each of these cases, the parasitic tertiary significations affordable to the cartoon and the seemingly anti-factual drift that connects to them are inverted and used productively to reference the real object of the discourse with even greater precision and a richer depiction.

It seems to me that there is one opposite approach to this treatment of factuality in comics. McCloud's sequence with the jug at first implies that the written script that accompanies the images serves a transparent and lucid reference. The pictures would then become images transporting metaphors, or objects discussed in the discourse, and merely presented as static stills for the gaze of the speaker and their audience. McCloud immediately ruptures this impression with his cartoonish engagement as his avatar drinks the inkish 'content' of the medium's 'container'. The cartoon, in that sequence, is always already there, it precedes any purely lingual abstraction (which would itself merely offer the illusion of transparent signification anyway). It is when the text of a factual discourse precedes the image either logically or, in the case of several productions chronologically as well, that the pictures may be reduced to mere illustrations. Rather than being engaged in the dynamic of their sequence and alive with the readers' own singular individuation through the cartoon, they remain isolated, dependent upon individual written phrases whose meaning they repeat more than they rely on each other. They are the opposite of what Barthes called a 'relais': Neither do they have the relais' symmetrical relationship between picture and text, nor do they offer what he called 'anchors' in which elements from one code settle otherwise underdetermined elements from another (Barthes 1964).

If there is a normative suggestion that may follow from what was mainly intended as a descriptive account of factuality and one of its most striking devices in comics, it should perhaps be this: A comic artist is challenged to make conscious decisions about what to show. If we find that the text suffices, the comic is not needed. If the

cartoonish power of the comics' panels is either suspect or ignored, the subversive potential of the comic can turn against a factual intent through unmanaged fictional drift. Those factual comics excel that realize the non-realism, anti-representative nature of the cartoon as a freedom that can be exploited to full effect, and decide to make specific use of it as each case demands.

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