Defining the Graphic Novel
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Abstract:
Narrative qualities of comics have become better understood with texts and images interweaving while offering different perspectives or focalisations in each image and different strands of texts. While different genres and styles are recognised in comics, a more differentiated approach to the distinct qualities of individual genres in graphic literature is needed if we want to understand and discuss these in their distinct graphic and narrative qualities that constitute their literary qualities, just like we discuss poetry and prose literature, film, and theatre - and their interrelations. The paper looks into the use of the term graphic novel, into attempts to define it in different cultural contexts. The dominating approaches from Franco-Belgian as well as Ango-American comics research are discussed to develop a more substantial definition. The result is more closely related to the verbal novel as comics have diversified into all kinds of narrative genres and forms that can be understood better if they are not seen as some vague forms of graphic novel, but rather as graphic travel writing, documentary, autobiography, soap opera, educational science, etc.

Keywords:
graphic novel
création de bande dessinée
eroman graphique
comics narrative
narrative style
the novel
novella

The label graphic novel is often used for every comic that looks like a book. This approach worked quite well for some time esp. from an US-American perspective, where comics publishing is dominated by magazine-publishing. But the European and Asian situations in comics publishing are very different and the label does make even less sense as albums and quite some manga have always looked like books. The label has no benefit in this context if it does not become much more specific: Other qualities than just the length of a comic or the format of publishing need to be assessed to establish what a graphic novel is - and what is not. For what is a graphic novel, really, if it is not related in some meaningful way to what we know as novel in prose literature?

This paper looks into the usage of the term graphic novel, into attempts to define it, and proposes a definition that is more closely related to the verbal novel, as comics have
diversified into all kinds of narrative genres and forms that can be understood better if they are not seen as novels, but rather as graphic travel writing, documentary, autobiography, soap opera, educational science, etc. A more differentiated approach to the distinct qualities of genres in graphic literature is needed if we want to understand and discuss these in their distinct graphic and narrative qualities, just like we discuss poetry and prose literature, film, and theatre - and their interrelations, too.

**Terms and their uses: Comics, Graphic Novel, Bande Dessinée, Roman Graphique**

The use of the terms *comics* and *graphic novel* follow different traditions in different countries and cultures. Crucial is the difference between use for marketing purposes and to mark substantial differences in form and/or content. For example, in Germany, the term *Graphic Novel* was introduced by comics publishers in a joint effort to widen their customer-base, as "Comics" was considered to hold no prestige as well as having a low-quality reputation in the general public that knows little about recent developments in comics storytelling, themes, genres, etc.

The term and its use are ill-defined and accordingly are used in different ways. Graphic novels are comics according to the generally established definition offered by Ann Miller in continuation from McCloud's wider definition of comics: juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence, with or without text (s. Miller 2007, 75)\(^1\). The speciality of comics in difference to verbal narratives is of course that each picture can offer a different perspective and that textual and pictorial focalisation can contradict or support each other: The reader's perspective on things can be neutral or from whatever figure's position, to switch between these visual points off view is established in film (e.g. in the 180°-routine for filming dialogue) and comics (pointedly e.g. in showing a situation from behind a superhero or in confrontational opposition).

And while quality of graphic literature is no good criterium to divide it into different groups, formal criteria might help to categorise comics in more detail. The question is if graphic novels are a specific genre within comics or rather a finer word for the very same thing is at

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\(^1\) Juxtaposed images are at least two images. They drive the narrative. This is why one image that is put into a text-based narrative sequence is not comics but maybe caricature or other, but not comics.
the heart of the different takes. Already in 2007, Douglas Wolk expressed uneasiness about the all-embracing use of the term:
"Given how long it takes to draw comics, the idea that the 'novel' is the default form for the ones with high aspirations is also pernicious, because it suggests that shorter stories can't be serious." (Wolk 2007, 62)

Our involvement with defining different literary forms and comics genres is of course a sign of our times, too: when Rodolphe Töpffer first showed and later distributed his comics, they were immensely popular and considered a worthwhile entertainment by the establishment and authors of the time, no matter what they theoretically might be. But as comics have become established and differentiated as a part of our media-environment, the need to define to understand them in more detail has been voiced and attempted by many. And, as our realities and media consumption change, so does our understanding of our reading matter.

While Will Eisner claimed to have made and published the first graphic novel with *A Contract with God* (1978), the first published graphic novel was in fact Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese* (1967, compilation published in France 1975). While comics show situations and tell stories visually rather than verbally, the medium must not be confused with the genre: comics can be about any subject and be visualised in any style (Talbot 2007: 186 f.). In due consequence, graphic novel can be be understood to be like a literary novel in comics form. That Eisner got away with establishing *A Contract with God* as a graphic novel illustrates primarily Eisner's profound self-marketing abilities: It does not even consist of one longer narrative, but collects four stories with extremely limited interrelations, in literary terms: short stories.

In the Francophone part of Europe, the emphasis with graphic novels is on graphic qualities rather than on their novel characteristics. In this European tradition, the emphasis is not so much on illustrating a narrative, than on finding new ways to narrate visually. In more experimental pieces, the methods of narration, subject matter and content of stories are not easily understood by readers, who are not used to this kind of graphic literature (Baetens 2001, 8). As with the term *comics*, the original meaning and today's use of the term *bande

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2 Whether comics are a medium or a genre depends on intended context and perspective: this paper discusses graphic novels as literary genre, s. more detailed reflections further down.
*dessinée* seem to be distinctly different. But the division between comics series, graphic novel, and *bande dessinée* remains unclear. It has been argued for a division based on complexity or cultural horizon of the individual narration, but this kind of differentiation remains hard to define, as it is impossible to generalise from individual readings of stories and their possible references (s. Dittmar 2011, 24).

The US American use of graphic novel is referring to longer narrations being delivered in images rather than written text, with speech balloons, interspersed with titles (Baetens 2001, 8). For Baetens and Frey, the change from "comics" to "graphic novels" is about changes in authorship and style, format and distribution (Baetens & Frey 2018, 242), but this looks at the redefinition from a more or less exclusively US American perspective, as *bande dessinée* have blended the two domains of comics and graphic novels always, even for readers in the anglosphere as *bd* became established in these parts of the world, too (Baetens & Frey 2018, 241). The French use of graphic novel originally referred to their publication format, not to issues of style and content as these are already dramatically diverse and sometimes rather experimental in the established formats for *bande dessinée*. Usually, the publishers set the distinction by choosing different qualities of paper for these productions resulting in higher retail prices, quite simply.

A translation into French "roman graphiques" and a comparably non-differentiated use of that term has been employed, covering all kinds of literary forms, but has not gained a comparable foothold as *bande dessinée* (shortform: *bd*, or "le bedé") are part of official national culture, there is not the need to introduce more classy terms for comics for grown-ups.³ Also, experiments like *Ouvroir de Bande dessinée Potentielle* by L'Association since 1992 and other related work connect high cultural ambition to *bande dessinée* without taking refuge in a different name for these (for a detailed discussion of the current French position on comics, s. Lungheretti 2019). Accordingly, a clear division between comics albums of the Franco-Belgian tradition and the longer and more complex comics that are considered graphic novels in the anglophone tradition is impossible to maintain.

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³ A French court ruled in 1964 that comics are not necessarily children's literature. In 1967, the Louvre hosted its first exhibition of *bande dessinée*, signalling the cultural recognition of comics (Dittmar 2011b, 175). French publishing of new comics per genre and target audience continues strong with e.g. the historic novel-genre superceding e.g. children's comics, but also Science Fiction and Fantasy for years now (s. Ratier 2016, 6).
Literature is seen by many as based on verbal text and the argument whether graphic novels are to be considered to be literature hinges on this assumed preponderance of the verbal over the visual (Prévost-Levac 2018, 1 f.). This reduction into an opposition between the priority of text or the images leaves out the unmeasured realm of image and text-combinations in the picturebook (s. Gibson 2010). It is almost impossible to always define if the narration is carried by images or words. The crucial difference between the novel and the graphic novels is that this literature is image based, it tells its story visually rather than verbally, inviting readers with each image's quickly recognised para-social content to continue into de-coding the more complex socio-culturally coded content (cf. Berghaus 1986). Each reader is allowed some individual reading order: as the eye reads images in saccadic jumps and as their content is not placed linear like text, there is no prescriptive syntax or reading order for individual images. From these subjective readings of individual images grows the reading of their sequence. It allows each individual reader to develop their understanding of the story based on their own de-coding of the visuals in interrelation to the texts provided with them.

It has to be remembered that comics that are not translated remain subject to limited reception because of language-barriers even though some pictorial content might be generally understandable. As with all literature, comics that include written texts depend on some knowledge of the written language - and beyond that, some knowledge is needed of the culture encoded in that language and the pictures, too: The cultural meaning of behaviour in specific contexts needs to be explained for those who do not have that socio-cultural knowledge. Words usually are used in storytelling for more than just their denotated meanings but are used in contexts - and that is true for wordless images, too: if depictions are not read in reference to their assumed cultural frames, they remain rather archaic, with their representative function extremely restricted. As with all comics in which text provides important aspects of the story, the need for readers to understand the written language remains true: reading for example Asterix in the French original without understanding included word play and double meanings reduces the story to its pictorial narrative only, and that can become dull rather quickly.

According to Baetens and Frey, the graphic novel entered the literary field because of the given establishment and dominance of the novel in literature, because of the shift to more book-like publishing formats for comics that fit bookstores and libraries better, and the assumption that the primary objective of graphic novels is storytelling (Baetens & Frey 2018,
A "family resemblance" with the novel results from the combination of these three aspects, not at least as the graphic novel shares a wide range of techniques and tactics with the novel (ibid.). One could argue though, that the album and bande dessinée have offered other formats, larger stories closely related to novel narratives. Also, the tradition of the auteur-comic is disregarded in this explanation, even though it is most at home here. To differentiate between fictional novels and non-fictional narrations, Hillary Chute suggests to use graphic novel for the first and graphic narrative for the latter (Chute 2008, 453).

**Attempts at defining the prose novel, prose novella and their graphic equivalents**

The novel is constantly developed into new forms that can be differentiated according to different aspects and qualities (tone/mood, form, themes and personnel, narrative situation, readers, artistic ambition, etc.), while these criteria overlap in each individual case - no one-dimensional structure can fittingly describe novels (s. v. Wilpert 2001, 698):

> "unterschiedliche Zielsetzungen und Leserwartungen, Themen und Stoffe, Stilarten und Erzählstrukturen bedingen die außerordentliche Vielfalt der Romanliteratur als der am weistesten gefaßten Gattung und machen eine befriedigende Aufteilung in einzelne Arten ebenso unmöglich, wie sie sie erfordern." (v. Wilpert 2001, 697)

Or, as J.A. Cuddon summarised it:

> "No other literary form has proved so pliable and adaptable to a seemingly endless variety of topics and themes." (Cuddon 1991, 600)

In some areas, the recent development of novels in response to challenges put forward by film and, more recently, by trans-medial storytelling has shifted focus on more action driven storytelling rather than on the text as narration (Baetens & Frey 2018, 246). But other areas of what is considered a novel have not followed this change. Also, the reader's active role in individually reading a novel, the immersion possible in verbal narrative needs to be remembered. The diversification of media brings with it a diversification of involvement of readership and usership, but it does not root out any particular style nor form of consumption.

It seems that the only factor that is agreed on with novels is that they are long narrative prose-texts with usually fictional content (but fact-based novels are not unusual, as historical novels or e.g. *Tatsachenroman* illustrate). Some theories go so far as to leave almost everything negotiable in definitions but text length, while allowing for exemptions even on that factor:
"... a wide variety of writings whose only common attribute is that they are extended pieces of prose fiction... the length varies greatly... there seem to be fewer and fewer rules, but it would probably be generally agreed that, in contemporary practice, a novel will be between 60-70,000 words and, say, 200,000." (Cuddon 1991, 599)

If novels generally tend to be narrative prose-texts with usually fictional content of a certain minimal length, graphic novels could be defined as long fictional narrations in juxtaposed images that drive the narrative, with or without the help of text. As drawing comics takes quite some time, there would not be all that many graphic novels, then. But rather more comics equivalent to shorter prose-forms as the novella or the short story:

The Novella as sub-form to the novel is missing from the anglo-american catalogue but could be used to distinguish short novels and long short stories. It is characterised by more straightened action and its closed narrative form, while it is closely related to the novel as well as the short story, and the anecdote. Strictly speaking, novellas are "restricted to a single event, situation or conflict, which produces an element of suspense and leads to an unexpected turning point (Wendepunkt) so that that the conclusion surprises even while it is a logical outcome. Many Novellen contain a concrete symbol which is the steady point, as it were, at the heart of the narrative." (Cuddon 191, 641 ff.)

And while the novella is not established in anglo-american usage, the concept is understandable enough to be used to mark the difference of a work from novel-character: for example the label "picture novella" was used for the marketing of Seth's Clyde Fans Book One (2004).

The novel has been established as highly diverse literary form for a long time already, but still new ways of telling stories are found again and again. Graphic novels come into their own much later and provide narrations for a much more picture based times. Primarily, they reach out to contemporary audiences in the specific living conditions: All changes and developments in novels as well as in graphic novels test and develop the possibilities of narrating in text and/or images. Living conditions have changed, visual pictorial storytelling has been developed, most media by now are image based. Comics add their particular narrative potential to what the novel has done: they use images and possibly texts to tell their stories in a highly diversified or individualised variety of styles and voices. Sequences of
images show and tell, delivering narratives in all kinds of genres the novel had helped to establish.

Some consider the graphic novel to be a remediation of the novel as it appropriates, remediates, and hybridises the previously prose novel (Baetens & Frey 2018, 239). Interestingly, they consider the prose novel a medium rather than a literary genre or form that could be divided into its many sub-genres. In the same vein, Caroline Prévost-Levac considers graphic novels not a genre within literature but a separate medium (Prévost-Levac 2018, 1 f.), thus shifting the demands towards this form of narration quite considerably to be substantially independent. As there is an abundance of definitions of medium, further details are needed to contextualise that proposition further. For a detailed description and contextualisation of medium in communication and media science rf. Mock 2006. In this matter, it is necessary to remember the difference in perspective and focus: if comics, bd, graphic novels, are looked at as a medium, their properties and functions in comparison of communicative channels become crucial, while the focus is on graphical and textual qualities, on narrative qualities, if we look into comics as literature(s). To conclude this point by continuing from the observation of the influences of painting and film on the comics (Christiansen 2000; Gibson 2010; Horstkotte 2013; et al.): Comics are a graphic medium alongside film, photography, etc. and a literary genre at the same time.

But even if we limit the debate like this, it has to be noted that graphic novels are not necessarily novels but more generally graphic narrations that correspond to other literary forms in the current use of the term. Duly, Monika Schmitz-Emans suggests to attribute them accordingly to established genres, to do justice to formal and topical aspects as well as narrative detail in graphic literature, indiscriminate of these being novels, novellas, short stories, essays or other: She proposes a major division into 'realistic' genres (containing auto/biography, historiography, reports, travel writing), historical novels, and on the other hand 'fantastic' genres (fantasy, gothic literature, science fiction) (Schmitz-Emans 2013, 393-397). Her suggestion to look into graphic adaptations of verbal literature as a separate class (Schmitz-Emans 2013, 397 ff.) allows to separate auteur-comics from team efforts or studio productions. While documentary comics might be part of the 'realistic' group, they could belong into others as well, depending on their individual content. A similar differentiation of comics-genres and even sections in publishing is suggested by Lungheretti in which similar genres are defined: the graphic novel in the stricter sense separated from adaptions of
written/verbal literature, then: autobiography and biography, reportage/documentary, essay, didactic/information. Also, a separate group of comics for juveniles (maybe best read as "young adults") is suggested and a separate entry for hybrid forms that are not fitting any of the previous forms is suggested (Lungheretti 2019, 18 ff.).

This adaptation of the term indicates that the graphic novel has been globalised in the process of its establishment as literature, globalising styles, themes, authors and illustrations in the process (Baetens & Frey 2018, 239 and 241 f.). While Baetens and Frey argue that the globalisation of the graphic novel is in part limited to the anglophone parts of the world (Baetens & Frey 2018, 239 and 241 f.), and while that argument could be continued into reflections on US American cultural imperialism or hegemony, these processes are not that one-directional: While these influences must not be underestimated, globalisation of comics is more multi-directional. For example the influence of shōnen manga on the style of Western comics narrations since the early 1990s is evident: Manga styles have been globalised and appropriated as have features from Franco-Belgian, US and other comics cultures. Baru's *L'autoroute du soleil* might suffice as the classic example for these processes, intended to introduce Japanese readers to French comics it in turn introduced French audiences to manga-specific visual storytelling (Dittmar 2011b, 177).

**Narrative style in graphic novels**

Just as we like to read some authors to enjoy their particular use of language, their voice, we relate to some graphic styles more than to others, we relate to the way somebody pictured their particular view or reading of the world (s. for example: Berger 1972, 10). This is valid as much for sequential pictures as it is for individual pictures: On the pictorial plane comics are built from graphic representations that mark the distinct individuality of the auteur and/or graphic artist. Their view is expressed in the execution of each image and page design (size and placement of panels on each page): "its 'graphiation', that is, the presence, within the very act of storytelling, of its maker" (Marion 1993 after Baetens 2001b, 146-150).

There is plenty of artistic voice, of individual expression in particular line work, the ductus with brushes, use of colours or balancing of black and white, very diverse treatments of

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4 As a consequence, the use of "bande dessinée" as defining term for all comics from francophone countries has become as pointless as using "manga" to refer to contemporary Japanese comics only.
figures, objects, places that can be reduced to the most crucial markers, as in caricature, or full of details and shades that add information and atmosphere.

The full bandwidth from photorealistic to rough caricature, from academic drawing styles to *ligne crade* ("ugly line", s. Morgan 2011, 145; comp. to "rough wave" in Wolk 2007, 365-71), is employed to show narratives in all kinds of genres and modes with their distinct conventions regarding the proportions in figures etc (e.g. funny style, semi-funny, adventure, and super-hero style). These can get blended and switched, as well. Whatever comic we read, it is dominated by its visual style:

"The most significant fact about comics is [...] they are *drawn*. That means that what they show are things and people, real or imagined, moving in space and changing over time, as transformed through somebody's eye and hand." (Wolk 2007, 118)

Deliberate decisions in regards to how themes are negotiated, narrations structured, and how they are specified and represented are intended to appeal to and be recognisable for intended readers. Sub-cultural references and style-preferences are crucial in this. While we are used to reading and interpreting texts as possibly multi-layered in their references and positions, the reading and interpreting of pictures and sequential images is not generally understood to do the very same thing. Ways of referring to and hinting at themes, incidents, actions in comics can be as layered, for the pictorial plane can combine elements from all kinds of visual codes while accompanying text can interpret, weaken or support pictorial messages. While images propose specificity, words easily refer to complex and abstract concepts. Images and texts combined allow for multi-layered references and negotiations of meanings. Accordingly, comics can negotiate issues that are considered important but restricted by cultural or legal restrictions or taboos, if they are executed carefully.

The graphic novel tells stories according to its own medial / formal capacity and potential, it does not mimic the prose-novel, ideally, but transplants novel-typical narrations into image-based stories. In the words of Baetens and Frey, it negotiates the hybridity of text and images (Baetens & Frey 2018, 248). In the restricted space of this paper it has to suffice to point to the extensive work on montage and narration in comics (e.g. in: Miller and Beaty 2014, in: Brunken and Giesa 2013, etc.), the importance of page layout for the creation of narrative style and moods, of the interlacing synchronicity of images per page/double-page and the sequence the reading-process constructs from these and so on (e.g. Miller 2007, Dittmar 2011,
Horstkotte 2013, et al.). While texts in comics are usually very restricted and short (or can be absent fully), the pictorial content provides the narration - the images narrate and show (Gombrich 2002, 110).

While typographic design of a text is contributing to the creation of narrative atmosphere, this adds to the visual content. The pictures in a comic provide the crucial narrative. These pictorial representations are read in regards to para-social as well as socio-culturally codes (s. Berghaus 1986): Like verbal descriptions in text, sequential images leave much to the imagination of the reader, but in a very different way. Images can easily be specific about moods and actions, but reference to abstract concepts are more complicated to make: for example, the meaning of body language or facial expressions is rather easy to read, but ethics and beliefs, ideals and experiences need to be narrated as they cannot be simply included in one image, in most visual styles. Information graphics have come quite far, but do not fit into the narrative styles most fictional comics. The most common solution to this problem is to use texts to add references to issues not depicted in comics to make these even more distinct. Additional references to issues outside of the comics narration itself can be added, aspects of meaning and extra nuances can unobtrusively be woven into the negotiations on the pictorial plane. The logic of a comics' pictorial narrative that would not become apparent from the images alone gets fixed to some extend by textual references.

According to Tom Shippey, the objective of reading can be divided into reading for plot and reading for words to enjoy the narrative qualities used to create figures, places, and tell what is happening to these. While reading for plot is focused on story development, the latter stands for the sum of applied register, tone, connotation and the narrator's capability of expression evidenced in a text that expresses a distinct description or perspective on the development of the story told (s. Shippey 2003, esp. pp. 28 f. and 45 f.). This relates well to the qualities of the components of narrative, as well in images as texts: The language, registers, structure, references and intertextual connections of the discourse allow for the causality of the plot to show, for the expression and development of the story, of its figures, settings, and actions. These factors together make readers discover significant themes and negotiations over values and ideas being developed (s. Stephens 2010, 52-55).

Parallel to the reading for words according to Shippey, we can formulate a reading for pictorial information that doubles up the expressive qualities of a narration in the detailing of
moment, tone, style, and mood in each image and how these are adding up to plot and story - possibly in their combination with words, but not necessarily, as not all comics need verbal text to succeed. In this context, a reminder might be allowed, for every literary novel can be narrated as a comic, but the formal structure and visual preference of comics does of course influence the representation of everything. And while comics-adaptations of prose-novels can be worthwhile, graphic novels come into their own when allowed to tell their story conceived as narratives in images and texts, and not as careful re-tellings of narrative prose texts as the design of images and pages does come in the style of their particular creator: "what they show are things and people, real or imagined, moving in space and changing over time, as transformed through somebody's eye and hand." (Wolk 2007, 118)

Individual compositorial decisions that are visible in each image and each page, executed in a distinct drawing style using specific tools, define each comic's expression and voice. If not limited by extremely detailed rules that safeguard uniform design in large productions (like e.g. Disney comics), all graphical aspects of a comic can be used for artistic expression as well as for individual ways to create narrative development, place and interweave images on a page and beyond. Individual narrative styles become not only recognisable but also reasons for reading the newest work by individual graphic novelists: Their ductus, or linework that creates figures and places in each image or their specific way to compose intricate pages as visual units within the larger narrative are reason enough to read their next comic. They are recognisable and allow the reader to re-connect with their distinct storytelling: How is Birgit Weyhe putting words against images here, how is Posy Simmonds developing that figure?

As with developments in the verbal novel, developments in the field of graphic narrations are subject to trends, fashions, and cultural change, too: The distinction between different generations and their adoption of new / foreign graphic and narrative styles exemplifies this well, while for example older European comics readers often still do not relate to manga younger audiences have taken to these en masse and have appropriated diverse manga styles for their comics productions, too.

**Criteria for defining the novel and the graphic novel**

Different criteria have been put forward to allow for the definition of literary forms and genres but are subject to change: comics had to be humoristic to be comics first, just as their
name indicates, but for some time now, non-funny comics are firmly established as comics, too.

The need for a narrative as crucial aspect for a comic to be a graphic novel is summarised by Prévost-Levac (Prévost-Levac 2018, mainly 32-36). She lists and discusses criteria and their implications, but the problem remains that for all criteria for narrative there are examples of novels as well as graphic novels that do not comply but still are understood generally to belong to the field of novel / graphic novel. The problem is that examples for "good" and novel-like comics that are referred to in the debate are those that vary established narrative patterns and add new perspectives or references to the form, they widen the narrative routines introduced and "emulate the way textual literature structures narrative." (Prévost-Levac 2018, 53)

There are many different lists of criteria brought forward to define the graphic novel as a novel. Length of text is the only criterium remaining in Cuddon's slightly desperate attempt to define the novel despite all variation and change (s.a.). But length of text cannot qualify anything but the word count: It seems prudent to insist that the length of a novel is set by the need to tell it best and not to meet some expectation of text length independent of that text's content. Literary ambition and aesthetic criteria are interwoven with questions about the number of characters involved, complexity of narration, reader involvement, etc. But none of these is defining or true for all prose novels, either. Wordless graphic novels have proven again and again that the genre is not even depending on the use of written text (s. Prévost-Levac 2018, Beronä 2001, et al.). Would narrative and illustrative graphic qualities be considered part of literary ambition in these cases? And what criterial would be applicable then? Again, some readers of prose novels revel in the author's cleverness and word-play, on lexicon and its use, while others read for the experience of convincing narrators' voices and social settings in distinct registers, etc.

The complexity of the narration and the use of narrative elements that are typical for the literary novel have been promoted as distinctive. But as literary novels are not only quite diverse in forms, styles, and scope, the elements asked for have to be understood in general terms or looked into in much more detail. Also, it needs to be remembered that complexity in visual narratives is different for different readers, not at least due to individual reading experiences and style preferences. Just to create a visually pleasing sequence, shifts of
perspective between each image are possible. There is potential for high visual complexity in rather simple comics narrations because images and texts can be used as complementary or contradictory to each other, they can refer to external as well as internal issues while decoding their socio-cultural references depends on readers' individual knowledge. Prévost-Levac concludes that complexity can indeed be "brought about by a tight-knit collaboration between image and text, or predominantly introduced through the image" (Prévost-Levac 2018, 76). In that instance separating complexity into four criteria: "seriousness of subject matter, multiplicity of storylines, character interiority and reader involvement" (ibid.). But it seems that this catalogue does not fare better than Cuddon's retreat to text length: must the subject matter of a novel be serious or did post-modern irony put paid to that? A multiplicity of storylines is not necessary, as quite some novels show, and depending on the narrator, not even character interiority seems to be a must in novels.

On the criterium of reader involvement we can apply research into consumption of other media: Involvement or immersion are due to readers' individual intensity of engagement with particular media and media content. While one can certainly get lost in a good book, computer-based storytelling worlds are currently discussed more prominently in this regard, but nobody considers them novel-like because of this.

While it was generally argued that collecting all parts of a comics-series in one more substantial volume would not turn the content into a graphic novel, this argument based on publishing form cannot be maintained. Whether a graphic novel is published in serialised form, instalments, or in one volume is not relevant: as the novel before it, the graphic novel can be serialised: instead the term and narrative concept of the graphic novel became established in serialised publications, not in book-length comics, first. Specific qualities in narration make them graphic novels, not the original publishing format (Freedman 2011, 38 f.).

**Conclusion**

To conclude this paper, I'd like to suggest that all criteria for the definition of the prose novel that were brought forward can be applied on the graphic novel as a literary genre as well. A combination of criteria for form and content is needed, even though they are not all applicable always: In the prose as well as the graphic novel, these criteria are contested to varying degrees but allow to differentiate literary genres from each other and reflect on the qualities of
these genres. And as always, some qualities of a text make it matter to individual readers, the factors that invite the reader to relate and get involved or even immersed are subjective and can hardly be generalised.

The crucial difference between graphic and prose novels is length, it seems hardly applicable to graphic literature as formal quality, though: Massive page amounts do not automatically make for longer or more involved reading, as visual detail and graphic style are much more important for narrative detail and reading experience. Instead, I propose to define narrative quality in graphic novels by combining aspects of textual quality with aspects of pictorial quality while adding Serge Le Tendre's criteria for quality in the *merveille*-genre⁵:

While the plot defines causalities in what is happening, narrative quality is defined by the sum of applied register, tone, connotation and the narrator's capability of expression in the development of the story expressed through images and texts. In this, each image contributes to telling the story so that it results in a complete narrative entity - in difference to generating additional nice images for visual effect only.

**Sources:**


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⁵ Serge Le Tendre defines *Merveille* in difference or opposition to *Fantasy*, with the first focusing on emotions (incl. suspense) while the latter is about muscle-driven action (Le Tendre in Affolter 1989, 86 u. 93).


URL: https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Actualites/La-bande-dessinee-nouvelle-frontiere-artistique-et-culturelle


Referred to as example:
Baru: L’autoroute du soleil.
Pratt, Hugo: Corto Maltese.

Mentioned only:
Asterix
Spiegelman: Maus
Satrapi: Persepolis