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On Comprehending Comics, or Little Nemo in the Land of (Meta)Narratology

Postclassical Narratology and Comics[1]

When David Herman, in *Storytelling and The Science of the Mind* (2013), bases his theories concerning the cognitive methods of constructing the narrative world and the storyworld on analysis of various comic book works, he does so in a telling manner. Herman employs comics not to debate their narrative potential and specific methods of constructing the narrative in the comic book medium; instead, he presents panels from *Hulk* to stress his openness to non-literary methods of constructing a story[2]. With that, he places himself in opposition to the kind of classical narratology conceived by Genette, one that rarely moved past a literature-centric approach. He follows scholars such as Barthes or Eco, who from time to time turned towards the medium of comics, stressing its novelty and abnormality[3]. Such an approach allows Herman not to concern himself with the definitions and terms typical in comics studies (e.g., absent from his analysis is, for example, the term "sequencing"). For Herman, the essence of comics is their polysemy, the fact that they have a textual, or more exactly, a linguistic layer, and a visual, or a graphic one[4]. These two modalities, according to Herman, create a verbal narrative and a graphic narrative that together constitute a larger, more complicated main narrative[5]. The essence of comics is thus located in its panels. They are the smallest elements of the medium, in which the two codes converge to constitute the basis of a narrative.

Such a semiotic conception of comics arises from incomplete definitional assumptions. Herman, just as the "Comics" entry in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*[6], follows the semiotic and semiological path, defining comics as a syncretic work, a blend of codes. Although this is obviously a very important element for most comics, it does not constitute their essence. There are comics with no words, so-called "wordless comic books" (e.g., Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*)[7], where narrative is conducted through

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[1] Project funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education as part of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities between 2014 and 2016.

[2] D. Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind*, London 2013.

[3] See: R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text, London* 1984, pp. 32–51, 79–124. U. Eco, *Kant i Dziobak*, trans. B. Baran, Warszawa 2012; U. Eco, *Superman w literaturze masowej: powieść popularna – między retoryką a ideologią*, trans. J. Ugniewska, Warszawa 1996.

[4] D. Herman, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–132.

[5] *Ibidem*, pp. 103–121.

[6] J.C. Ewert, "Comics and Graphic Novel", in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. D. Herman, M. Jahn, M.-L. Ryan, London 2008, pp. 71–73.

[7] S. Tan, *The Arrival*, London 2007.

graphics only. There are also comics that give up images at certain points, leaving only blocks of text written within the panels (for example, this is how the final chapter of Craig Thompson's *Habibi* appears)[8]. Will Eisner noted in the 1980s, while creating the basis for academic comic studies, that the essence of the medium is a string of frames, putting them in a certain sequence[9]. It is in the seriality of pictures that the narrative potential of comics is located, not in the single panel.

The paradox of the approach postulated by Herman is in the fact that the author, concentrating on the matters of cognitive constructs such as the storyworld, instantly makes a jump from the level of the specific medium to the level of the story. The term "graphic narrative" is introduced by Herman in a superficial manner and brings very little to the interpretation, as he quickly starts talking about verbal narrative, thereby reducing comics to a paraliterary medium, through which Herman unconsciously repeats gestures familiar to classical narratology.

Ruptures between the postulates of openness to any media, the building of large transmedial narrative theories, and the details of actual interpretative practice are characteristic not only of Herman, but also of many modern narratologists, such as Marie--Laure Ryan. Ryan's volume, *Narrative across Media,* is a good example of this tendency[10]. The theoretical introduction, written by Ryan herself, is often only casually linked to interpretations of the respective works that appear in the volume. This is also the case in the sections about comic books, such as Jeanne Ewert's chapter on Art Spiegelman's *Maus*[11]. Ewert tackles the issue of technical tools, which Spiegelman used to create his graphic novel, and interprets certain pages from Spiegelman's first volume, *A Survivor's Tale*, by focusing on the way Spiegelman uses the medium of comics to create an individualized graphic narrative. However, Ewert does not consider whether Ryan's "cognitive concept" is justified[12]. Like Herman, Ewert does not use the definitions and tools created in comic books studies.

The application of narratological methodology in writing about graphic works is a relatively novel idea. Authors like Herman do not confront the topic of comic book poetics, which is expanded upon in approaches focused on studying specific attributes of this medium. This perspective actually clashes with the classical, structuralist-semiological methodologies of comics studies. This conflict already appears on the level of approach to specific works. Narratologists treat comics as a way of narrating, they look at graphic novels for structures known to them from other media. Comicsologists, on the other hand, see in graphic novels a separate, specific medium that is incomparable to other methods of constructing messages. This article aims to consider whether it would be possible to create a model of describing graphic works that would unite these two positions:

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[8] C. Thompson, *Habibi*, New York 2011.

[9] W. Eisner, *op. cit.*

[10] *Narrative across Media*, ed. M.-L. Ryan, Nebraska 2004.

[11] J. Ewert, *Art Spiegelman's Maus and the Graphic Narrative*, pp. 178–194.

[12] M.-L. Ryan, "Introduction", in: *Narrative across Media*, pp. 1–40.

synthesizing the ideas postulated in transmedial narratology (heralded by Herman, Ryan and Wolf) with a typological approach to interpreting comics.

Comic Book Studies

Comic book studies have begun to develop relatively late compared to, for example, film studies. The earliest critical texts appeared in the United States in the 1950s and were supposed to discredit comics as an art form. In 1954 Frederick Wertham published a pamphlet entitled, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which presented comics as a medium promoting functional illiteracy among children and coaxing people into crime and homosexuality[13]. This pamphlet made Wertham a popular comic book specialist. His theses have contributed to the dissemination of the opinion that comics are something harmful, trivial and unworthy of academic attention, which contributed to a delay in the development of the field at universities around the world. Hence there is still a distinct aura of innovation that follows any text analysing comics.

In the 1970s this aura of anxiety surrounded the theories of Barthes and Eco[14], but up until this day it still has not disappeared, as showcased by numerous recent articles, such as those by Jenkins[15] and Herman. Comic book studies partly entered academia in the 1980s, mostly due to Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*[16]. Eisner is one of the most recognized American comic book artists, and contributed to the development of the medium by, for example, popularising in the 1960s and 1970s the term "graphic novel" – comics that tell one story and are published in one volume, instead of in separate issues. Eisner himself created outstanding graphic novels about the life of New York Jews (e.g., *A Contract with God*[17]; *New York: The Big City*[18]).

Comics and Sequential Art is first and foremost a textbook for creating comics, written as a guidebook, in which the old master shares his tricks of the trade. Nevertheless, Eisner kept his critical distance, which allowed him to touch upon issues such as the definition of comics and methods of creating narrative through the comic book medium. He was the first to suggest that there can be no comics or graphic narrative without a sequence of pictures[19]. He noted that a single panel has much less narrative potential than a few panels arranged together.

Eisner's approach to constructing plot in comics consisted mainly of describing methods that he himself used in his own works, and in this way the artist pondered the question of how one could use a few panels to show the passage of time and how to use graphic narrative to change the rhythm of the conducted tale. Thus, Eisner's

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[13] F. Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Delhi 2004.

[14] U. Eco, *op cit.*, R. Barthes, *op. cit.*

[15] H. Jenkins, *Introduction: Should we Discipline the Reading of Comics* [in:] *Critical Approaches to Comics*, ed. M. J. Smith, R. Duncan, London 2011, pp. 1–14.

[16] W. Eisner, *op. cit.*

[17] W. Eisner, *A Contract with God*, 1978.

[18] *Idem, New York: The Big City*, 1986.

[19] *Idem, Comics…, op. cit.*, pp. 10–38.

approach is technical, focused on the mechanics of a specific narrative sequence rather than upon methods of constructing narratives in the comic book medium. Nevertheless, it was his book that laid the foundation for contemporary academic comic book studies, especially in English-speaking countries. Furthermore, Eisner's technical, method-focused perspective was in harmony with the semiological approach that started to emerge in France in the late 1950s.

Since that time academic reflection on the comic book medium has been introduced into the French universities. The main representative of this tendency is Thierry Groensteen, author of the 1999 book, *The System of Comics*, in which he sums up his reflections of comics and its methodology[20]. Groensteen presents an approach based on the semiological theories of the 1960s and 1970s. His main interest is the way in which meaning is constructed in comics[21], and that is why he focuses mainly on the smallest meaningful units of comics. Groensteen carefully describes elements such as speech bubbles, onomatopoeia, and the various iconic signs present in panels. He attempts to create a "visual language" of the comic book medium[22].

In Groensteen's view, a comic book's content consists of the systemic interweaving of its smallest elements. His analysis is not interested in the content. His main goal is to create a poetics of comics, not to debate how individual elements create a system that allows the artist to tell a story. The category of narrative appears in *The System of Comics* only as a side note, mainly in the context of a narrative situation and the necessity of answering the question of who is speaking.

Indeed, Groensteen assumes that the system he describes is dynamic, he even speaks of "producing the meaning". However, just as Eisner, he is interested in bringing attention to functional elements, and he gives little attention to the ways of connecting them together. Some French comic book scholars became envious of the status of film and television studies (as a separate research field) and decided to create something from scratch, thereby distancing themselves from narratology, literature and cultural studies.

In recent years, semiological studies at French universities have entrenched themselves, which has allowed Groensteen to expand upon his theses. In 2011, he released another text, *Comics and Narration*[23]. However, despite the title, the author does not move from a semiological to a narratological perspective. The narrative theories that he evokes are still the classic French theses in the spirit of Genette. Groensteen does not insist that the medium of comics uses a specific kind of narrative, a specifically graphic form of narrative. Instead, he deems the narrative in comics to be connected only to the text. The scholar contrasts it with a monstration, telling a story through showing it[24]. According to him, it is an ontological term different from narrative and typical

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[20] T. Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. B. Beaty, N. Nguyen, Jackson 2007.

[21] *Ibidem*, pp. 1–7.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

[23] T. Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, trans. A. Miller, Jackson 2013.

[24] *Ibidem*, pp. 84–86.

of various media using visual signs[25]. In *Comics and Narration,* Groensteen again fo-
cuses on technical methods of constructing a narrative in comics, describing issues such
as abstract comics[26], the way in which frames are placed on a page as a figure of speech
counterpart[27], ways in which the narrator can exist[28], as well as various speaking subjects
in comics[29].

Karin Kukkonen, in her *Contemporary Comics Storytelling,* criticises Groensteen, de-
monstrating that even in *Comics and Narration* Groensteen is not interested in the comic
book medium as a tool to tell a story[30]. In her opinion, the French scholar's theories
cause the pragmatic aspect of comics reading to become ambivalent. The system po-
stulated by Groensteen contains only a few selectively treated aspects of narrative and
subjectivity[31]. As an alternative, Kukkonen proposes a theory close to what was discus-
sed in the first part of this article. Describing comics, the author uses the latest cognitive
theories and the achievements of post-classical narratology, criticising the semiological
concept of comicsological poetics[32]. She starts from a pragmatic perspective, focused
on the act of reading and the ways in which different meaningful levels of comics co-
operate with each other, allowing the reader to create a mental picture of a narrative
in the process of the integration and construction of understanding[33]. In place of a se-
miotic process of coding and decoding, Kukkonen postulates treating the comic book
medium as full of textual effects – clues and ambiguous places that serve as interfaces
that allow for the cognitive processes of our brains to create fiction[34]. Such a perspec-
tive means that, although Kukkonen is aware that, in comics, narrative is created thro-
ugh many different codes on various levels of modality, she is not interested in formal
matters. In her analysis, she purposefully omits elements of comics such as the shape
of frames, various applications of fonts and how they influence the narrative being con-
ducted. Instead, she focuses on the level of analysis that directly relates to the stories and
the characters[35].

Kukkonen's approach in *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* strongly resembles
the one presented by Herman, even though Kukkonen has a better understanding

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[25] Although Groensteen stresses the difference between monstration and narrative, it seems that this dycho tomy
is not much different from the classic narratological division into diegesis and mimesis. As Steven Sourdiacourt
notes in his article *Tying ends together: surface and storyworld in comics*, these terms are much better suited to
describing the dynamics of building narrative in comics. See: S. Sourdiacourt, *Image & Narrative #8: Tying ends
together: surface and storyworld in comics*, http://comicsforum.org/2012/12/27/image-narrative-8-tying-ends-
together-surface-and-storyworld-in-comics-by-steven-surdiacourt/ [access: 10.09.2015].
See also: S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell 1978.
[26] T. Groensteen, *Comics…, op. cit.*, p. 9.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 79.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 121.
[30] K. Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, Nebraska 2013, p. 37.
[31] *Ibidem.*
[32] *Ibidem*, pp. 5–10.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 21.
[34] *Ibidem*, pp. 21–24.
[35] *Ibidem*, pp. 5–10, 25–34.

of the medium and – when needed – she makes use of her knowledge. Nevertheless, she generalises the model of reading she created and stretches it to cover all the comic book works. In the works selected for analysis, such as Alan Moore's *Tom Strong*[36], she directs her attention towards the games taking place on the plot level and in various textual activities, at the same time ignoring the fact that experiments on a formal level influence the narrative. That is why her postulates from *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, which connect the transmedial narrative perspective with a comic book medium-oriented approach (despite their attractiveness as the most modern out of the theories discussed here), should be supplemented with a formal aspect.

Kukkonen's theory is dynamic, so Groensteen's static project of methods of producing meanings in comics does not suit it. In this context, Charles Hatfield's proposition from *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*[37] seems quite interesting. In the second chapter, entitled "The Art of Tensions: The Otherness of Comics Reading", Hatfield describes the narrative in comics as a product of tensions between different codes and modalities, integrated by the reader during the act of reading[38]. Just as Kukkonen's, his approach is pragmatic and reading-practice oriented. However, unlike Kukkonen, Hatfield tries to remember about the elements that take part in the production of meanings in the comic book medium. Because of that, *Alternative Comics* lacks the wider perspective of comics narrative that makes it possible to consider them as a transmedial phenomenon.

It seems that proposing a model that encompasses Hatfield's and Kukkonen's projects would allow the integration of two perspectives that up until now have been strictly divided in contemporary academic practice – an approach rooted in post-classical narratology, especially its transmedial variety with its formal specificity, typical tools and poetics.

Compilation of Kukkonen's and Hatfield's Models

Both Kukkonen and Hatfield assume that, unlike the viewing of a film, where the recipient's participation is more passive, comics are being read[39]. Thus, the act of decoding and interpreting comics brings this medium closer to literature[40]. However, reading comics requires the reader to function on a few different levels, which is not the case with a literary text, which usually operates only on one level of code[41]. The role of the reader is to connect all the meaningful elements, decide through their

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[36] A. Moore, P. Hogan, G. Johns, *Tom Strong Collection Edition*, vol. 1–4, La Jolla 2004. See also: K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–126.

[37] C. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Jackson 2005.

[38] *Ibidem*, pp. 32–67.

[39] Hatfield references Scott McCloud's division info a perceived and received information, stressing that in the former category an active participation of the recipient is required, while in the latter information is given directly. See: Hatfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36 and S. McCloud, *Zrozumieć komiks*, trans. M. Błażejczyk, Warszawa 2015, pp. 7–8.

[40] See: C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 36.; K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

context which are dominating and allow the construction of a coherent mental model of the events that create a story together[42]. The author of *Alternative Comics*, just as the Kukkonen, asserts that these processes happen on a precognitive level and are often unconscious[43]. This is why, in order to understand the mechanism of creating a narrative, we need to split it into individual stages, which will allow us to grasp Hatfield's "otherness of comic reading".

The theoretical proposals of *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* have been worked out through reading and analysing Milton Caniff's comics *Steve Canyon*, created from the 1940s until the 1980s[44]. It is a simple adventure comic, where it would be difficult to search for the formal consciousness of the author. The description of a pragmatic act of reading allows Kukkonen to include the context of various cognitive, narratological, comicsological and literary theories, which helped her to create 6 basic theses about comics narrative:

> 1. As with any other narrative, readers pick up clues from comics texts, draw inferences from them, and create mental models of the events and character relations.
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> 2. Clues in comics can be verbal, visual, or based on the sequence of panels and their arrangement on the page. Panels can be read out of order and in order, thereby prefiguring inferences or reminding readers of double meanings.
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> 3. Readers aim to construct a coherent mental model. They connect individual panels through inferences but do not imagine in detail what happens between them.
>
> 4. Readers coming to the page of a comic for the first time have a vague impression of the entire page and trace various possible paths across it. For Western readers, the left-right, top-bottom sequence of the panels is the most obvious order in which the images and words come into focus, but repeated objects, the arrangement and direction of the speech bubbles, and striking compositional lines across the page can suggest alternative gaze paths.
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> 5. Even though there is rarely a discernible narrator in comics – with the significant exception of first-person autobiographical comics, of course–the way in which the clues are arranged, and thereby steer readers' meaning-making, constitutes a rhetoric of comics.
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> 6. Readers ascribe intentions to characters and track their embedded layers of knowledge. This leads to the creation

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[42] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[43] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–67.

[44] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–38.

of fictional minds, experientiality, and moral evaluations. It also complicates the mental model that is constructed of the story-world as a whole[45].

The assertions included in *Alternative Comics* apply to dynamic tensions, which can appear between the clues, out of which the comic narrative is built. They supplement Kukkonen's theses two, three and four. Hatfield distinguishes four levels where these tensions appear, which the leader has to face in the process of reading comics: "...four tensions that are fundamental to the art form: between codes of signification; between the single image and the image-in-series; between narrative sequence and page surface; and, more broadly, between reading-as-experience and the text as material object"[46].

First Level – Codes of Signification

Hatfield's first level involves phenomena that take place during the reading of a single frame. They are mostly tensions between verbal and visual clues. Unlike Eco and Groensteen's semiotic school, Kukkonen notes that the medium of comics does not have a strongly codified visual language[47]. An example she gives is the speech "bubble" – the place where statements made by characters appear. According to her it is a simple conceptual metaphor, easy to understand even for an incompetent recipient[48]. According to the author of *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, the essential tool for reading comics at this level is the awareness of context[49]. This means that text does not exist independently from the visuals and they are not two parallel systems of codes, decoded separately. Hatfield notes that comics constantly destabilise the differentiation between respective signal systems. The textual and the visual layers cooperate to, for example, expand the area of meaning, illustrate, complicate, contradict, or introduce irony[50].

Readers builds their initial basic mental pictures and hypotheses about how the narrative will unfold based on the single frame level. It happens through noticing the tension on one hand, and the icono-linguistic unity on the other[51]. The inference is quite simple and is based mainly on identification of the acting subject and the narrative situation that the subject finds itself in. Sometimes comics also have elements such as onomatopoeia or a certain shape to the typography of phrases that the reader needs to identify, put in an appropriate context and write into their mental model.

Panels where the discord between picture and text is so large that it is difficult to specify their relations and create coherent hypotheses regarding the storyworld, can create problems during reading. Such panels have a much smaller narrative potential and require more hypotheses, which is the reason why the created mental picture is less

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[45] *Ibidem*, pp. 35–36.
[46] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[47] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 20.
[49] *Ibidem, op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.
[50] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
[51] See: J. Szyłak, *Poetyka*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–14.

coherent and it only stabilises after being arranged with the rest of the sequence, allowing a coherent narrative to emerge.

I would like to discuss Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* as an example of narrative-building at this level. The comics in question – one of the first masterpieces of graphic narrative – was released weekly in *New York Herald* between 1905 and 1911. McCay perfected and reached a level of artistic mastery within the fledging comic book medium, developing a distinctive graphic style that clearly referenced the aesthetics of Art Nouveau. Moreover, many devices that have become canonical in comics appeared for the first time in *Little Nemo*.

The hero of McCay's comics is Nemo, a young boy chosen by Morpheus, the dream king, to be a companion for his daughter. Nemo attempts to reach the princess and goes to a dream world, where he has many surrealistic, and often dangerous adventures. Many of the situations in which Nemo takes part end in a catastrophe that might result in his death if he were unable to wake-up at the last moment. Every episode of the comics finishes with a similar frame – a picture of the hero, suddenly awake in his bed.

Winsor McCay's comics usually do not build interesting tensions on the single frame level. Text is used mainly to explain or describe what is happening in the picture. Most often these are the exclamations of the main character, surprised by things he encounters in Morpheus' fantastic land. Nevertheless, the frame picturing Nemo's awakening is an interesting narrative trick. The hero wakes up from the nightmares by himself, scared, or his dream is cut short by his parents, reminding him that is it time to get up. For example, in the September 22, 1907 episode[52], we see the main character waking up screaming that he's been lost. The speech bubble directed outside the frame shows his mother's answer, trying to calm the boy down and telling him to go back to sleep. The first thing the reader needs to do is identify the bubble, the end of which points outside the frame, as his mother's statement. Creating a mental picture requires the comics reader to take into consideration the subjectivity of both characters, despite the fact that one of them has not been shown in the picture. The second thing is realizing that we have "jumped" from dream to reality. This effect is initially built on a visual level. The recipient is no longer reading fantastical frames that depict the boy's dreams. Instead the reader can see a bed and the hero in his pyjamas. The text spoken by the boy's mother is another signal for the reader that the events of this frame are happening outside the dream. However, Nemo himself is not aware of that. He is screaming because he thinks he is still in Morpheus' kingdom. The tension of the narrative situation in this frame is based on the conflict between the layers of the depicted world. The recipient needs to project the state of knowledge of the main character to understand Nemo's uncertainty regarding the question of which world he currently resides in. The tensions between the text spoken by the hero and his mother's answer, and between the picture and the textual layer, cause what Kukkonen has described in the sixth point

[52] W. McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland", *New York Herald*, 22.09.1907.

of her model. The reader constructs a model of the main character's fictional mind, which brings ontological uncertainty into the narrative. The line between dream and reality is blurred.

McCay uses this trick very often. As I have pointed out before, every episode of little Nemo's adventures ends with Nemo waking up. Sometimes the character is aware of that, but there are stories where he does not have this knowledge. A single frame where the bed appears is thus supposed to anchor the character outside of the dream land, undermining the events depicted in the previous sequence. On the other hand, it also introduces the uncertainty, forces the character to question what he holds true.

Second Level – Sequence

The main processes that create the narrative in comics happen on another level of tensions – a single frame juxtaposed within a sequence of frames. This is where, according to Kukkonen, the main process of inference happens, which connects respective temporal instances depicted on the panels into a picture of change and a development of the storyworld. Kukkonen assumes, in contrast to Hatfield, that readers do not create detailed pictures of everything that happened between one frame and another. As an alternative to the concept of filling in the underspecified places[53], Hatfield proposes a system of feedback based on verification of subsequent hypotheses about the storyworld and creating new ones that include the gained knowledge[54]. The frame sequences are also responsible for the graphic representation of passing time. This level mainly decides the tempo and rhythm of the story[55].

Scott McCloud (American comic artist and theorist), in his book *Understanding Comics*[56], distinguishes several ways in which frames can be connected to each other. They are: moment-to-moment (splitting one action and showing it in a few frames); action-to-action (depiction of a few subsequent actions by the hero); subject-to-subject (depiction of different characters doing different things); scene-to-scene (a transition signalising a jump in time or place); aspect-to-aspect (depiction of the same action from different perspectives); non-sequitur (no connection between the frames)[57].

In Kukkonen's perspective, almost every type of transition postulated by McCloud contributes to the extension of a mental image and to the discursive space that is the storyworld. Only the last class could cause any problems, mainly because of how vaguely it is defined by McCloud. In this kind of transition, the recipient needs to correctly reconstruct the context, without verifying the mental model with subsequent hypotheses about the changes.

Playing with frame sequence is often used by McCay in Nemo stories as a narrative dominant. In his construction of the dream world, McCay relies mainly on creating

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[53] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 41.

[54] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–27.

[55] For more on time in comics see: D. Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, New York 2007, pp. 118–134.

[56] S. McCloud, *op. cit.*

[57] *Ibidem*, pp.70–82.

a feeling of weirdness within the depicted world. He often elicits this by using exotic elements or depicting fantastic constructs. In one of the adventures, the legs of Nemo's bed start to grow. The main character often changes his own size, either by getting smaller, or by becoming a giant. McCay does not present these transformations instantly, frame-to-frame. In lieu of that, the transformation is gradual and takes up a lot of frames. This is the case in the January 13, 1907 adventure[58], where Nemo finds himself in a mysterious forest. His companions start to chase each other around a tree, which gradually transforms into a rhino. The transformation takes place between frames two and five. In McCloud's typology, this means that one process has been dispensed into a few stages, and the frames are in a moment-to-moment relation to each other. The frames in this episode of *Little Nemo* mainly make use of the tension between the foreground and background. At the beginning, it seems that the main theme of the story will be the chase around the tree. This hypothesis is discredited in the fourth frame, when the tree's deformation becomes apparent. At this moment, the recipient's sight is directed towards the background in order to verify their suspicions concerning the change taking place. The mental picture showing a metamorphosis is confirmed in the fourth frame, when the heroes notice it as well.

On the narrative level, the author constructs a picture of a world where the form of all objects is fluid and transformation is possible. This creates a vision of a dream world as a fantastic space, and the gradual depiction of the transformation process multiplies the feeling of weirdness. Nemo's adventures in Morpheus's world are in stark contrast to the waking world, which is, as always, present in the moment when the little boy awakens in his bed in frame seven.

Third Level – Page

In the process of constructing and integrating the respective frames and deciding which ones are more important and influence story the most, the method of the placement of the panels on the page and the relationship between the sequence and the page surface can prove helpful. Kukkonen notes that each act of reading comics starts from a look at the entire page. This is a peculiar characteristic of this medium[59]. According to Kukkonen, it allows the reader to determine the sequence the key events, which then, during the detailed frame-by-frame sequence, are placed in context and enter the process of creating and verifying the hypotheses. However, the physical placement of the frames on the page does not have to come down to only one, key element. Sometimes a series of panels is distributed in such a way that some of them are smaller, while some are bigger and draw the attention of the reader. In this case, the reader not only creates hypotheses about every possible development of narrative, but also constructs a narrative framework responsible for the dynamics of the story being told[60]. Piling up

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[58] W. McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland", *New York Herald*, 13.01.1907.

[59] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[60] For more on the dynamics and rhythm of comics narrative see: T. Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Jackson 2013, pp. 139–158.

a few smaller frames can mean that the pace of the plot will rise, while large, panoramic frames that take up half the page will cause the action to slow down, which will allow the artist to fully describe the space in the depicted world where the characters act. The first viewing allows the reader to determine a way of verifying the initial hypotheses about the framework and the dynamics of the narrative. Only after a while, when the reader focuses on individual frames, do they start to notice the tensions that exist inside of the panels, and the relations between the elements of the sequence. After getting acquainted with the series and, thereby, verifying of earlier hypotheses, the reader then goes back to the general perception of the page and makes a final confirmation of their presuppositions.

This mechanism is slightly more complicated in the case of cyber- and webcomics, which have gained popularity with the rise of the Internet. In this case, the surface of the page (or, to be more exact – a graphic file in which the comics is saved) is additionally constricted by the size of the screen that the recipient is viewing the work on. Because of this, most webcomics authors decide to restrict the story to just a few frames, so that the reader can have direct contact with the whole. This way, the mechanism of building hypotheses based on the whole and verifying them in the course of the sequence is maintained. However, there are webcomics which have a size larger than the size of a typical computer screen, which forces the reader to scroll the picture to learn the whole story. In such cases the process of initial hypothesis-building is suspended and restricted only to the part of the page that is directly shown. Verification and the building of subsequent hypotheses happen in the course of reading subsequent parts of the page. This means that another important meaningful element comes between the sequence of frames and the page – the computer screen sequence. In some cases, the recipients can zoom out from the image, which allows them to have access to the whole, but this is not always possible and conditioned by the presentational framework of the webpage in question[61]. The process of hypothesis-building and verifying thus becomes torn and partial[62].

Hatfield also notes that the function of the placement of frames on a page, either in traditional comics, or in the internet ones, is not constrained to building casual relations between respective temporal moments depicted in individual panels. The page becomes a design element, making it possible to introduce complicated metaphorical relations into the narrative[63]. The easiest trick is to use a symmetry that allows the creation of parallels or the sketching of complicated relations between casually connected events. Another popular trick is to superimpose one frame on another, which can create an impression of events happening simultaneously[64].

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[61] R. Drozdowski, *Zdjęcia w sieci. Kierunkująca i na-znaczająca rama prezentacyjna Internetu* [in:] *Obrazy w sieci. Socjologia i antropologia ikonosfery Internetu,* ed. T. Ferenc i K. Olechnicki, Toruń 2008, pp. 17–31.

[62] For more on comics creation in the new media and the restriction of the page construction see: S. McCloud, *Reinventing Comics. How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, Chicago 2000.

[63] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[64] *Ibidem*, pp. 64–66.

Conscious design of the panels is a very important element used in *Little Nemo*. In the February 2, 1908 episode[65], the heroes are trying to escape a mirrored hall, which they entered the previous week. As Kukkonen notes, the first look at the entire picture helps with deciding potential paths that the reader's gaze can follow. In this case, it can create confusion and dismay. It is difficult to tell whether the comics sequence should be read horizontally or vertically. As these are only the beginnings of the medium and McCay did not yet believe in the competence of his readers, he numbered each frame in order to make navigating the comics easier. This allows the reader to confirm that they are supposed to be reading vertically. The panels were constructed to be bigger in the top row and gradually smaller in the bottom row. This suggests that frames 4 and 5, as the largest, are also the most important. During the first look, the reader can hypothesise that the tension in this episode of *Little Nemo* will gradually become stronger and that its culmination will happen in the central, largest panels. Furthermore, it is easy to notice the constant panel (this time – the eighth one), which ends each episode and attests to the fact that no matter what adventures the title character goes through, he will end up safe and sound, awake in his own bed.

In this particular episode of McCay's comics, we find out that the mirrored hall in which the characters find themselves displays some incredible qualities. Their bodies begin to grotesquely change, which is pictured both in their reflections and on the physical plane. Nemo, in the moment when he realises what processes he is undergoing, starts to feel physical afflictions caused by the manipulations of his physiognomy. At this point, the characters begin to experience fear. This happens exactly in the middle of the page, between the fourth and the fifth panels. When considering the design of the page in this particular episode, we see that it was not only supposed to stress an important moment in the fifth panel. Just as in the previous example, all of the panels are connected – to use McCloud's typology – moment-to-moment, presenting subsequent stages of the grotesque metamorphoses. However, the fact that these transformations concern the heroes themselves causes the mood of the story to diametrically change mid-episode. Frames one to four seem to tell a story of a joke, surprising yet safe adventures. Starting with the fifth frame, the heroes begin to experience fear, which is also stressed by the fact that the size of the panels is getting smaller. The author manages to convey with formal means an increasing sense of claustrophobia.

In this episode of *Little Nemo,* McCay uses formal means to accentuate what is happening on the plot level. The page is designed symmetrically, so that it will contrast even more with the change in work's atmosphere in the middle. The already-mentioned weirdness and ontological fluidity that characterises the depicted world, creeps into the visual method of constructing the message here. It should be acknowledged during the verification of the mental image. Dynamic changes of panels allow to conclude that at the end heroes feel increasingly more trapped and scared. It turns out that the dream world can interfere with the corporeality of the characters.

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[65] W. McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland", *New York Herald*, 02.02.1908.

Fourth Level – Materiality of Comics

The last level that Hatfield writes about, but Kukkonen fails to note in her propositions, is the materiality of comics. In other words, comics is an object. This may concern the treatment of elements within the comic book code (page, text in frames, boundaries of the frames, etc.) on one hand, and the form of the comics itself, as an object – on the other. Tensions between the content of the comics and its material aspect are rarely thematized in the construction of mental models. This type of attention is usually reserved for experimental comics, released for example as a roll of toilet paper or as a deck of cards.

However, these tensions can also appear in more mainstream graphic novels. Usually they take the shape of a postmodern game that forces the reader to write themselves, not only mentally but also physically, into the storyworld (i.e., to become one of the subjects of the narrative). The best known modern author using this aspect of the comic book medium is Chris Ware. For the comic-style cover of the *The New Yorker,* 2006 Thanksgiving edition, Ware decided to divide the run and print different versions of the covers. Each of them was part of a bigger narrative, which forced a reader who wanted to learn the whole story to buy several copies of the magazine. A similar method was used in the 17th issue of the comics *The Unwritten* released by DC in form of a gamebook[66]. The reader receives an option to co-create the story by choosing between different options of story development and jumping to an appropriate page. In this case, the recipient finds themselves faced with the necessity to project potential solutions and pick the best one. The authors of *The Unwritten* decided to forego a linear plot, told page by page. This time, the physical act of turning pages becomes an element of a narrative and a proof of decisions made by the recipient – who turns out to be one of the subjects causing change to occur within the narrative.

McCay never moved this far in experimentation with the comic book form, but he often used the trick Hatfield describes as "treating text as an object"[67]. In the December 1, 1907 episode of *Little Nemo* the heroes are going to a banquet organised by Morpheus. Unfortunately, it turns out that they are late and the dining room is already closed, and so, hungry and desperate, they decide to eat the letters from the comics title. In order to reach the letters, they also break one of the boundaries of the frame. It turns out that this time the conventional signs, which usually are not part of the comics content, become physical objects that can be used in the narrative. It also seems that the fictional heroes gain a measure of self-consciousness, because at one point Nemo states that the author will not like them destroying his work.

Thereby, McCay writes himself and his role as an author into the presented world, becoming an equal hero of the story. Something similar can happen to the material form of comics as well. All of its elements can be entered into the presented world. It turns out that the author of *Little Nemo* builds a complicated metafiction, where the dream logic

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[66] M. Carrey, P. Gross, *The Unwritten*, no. 17, Burbank 2010.
[67] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

allows for movement beyond the traditional narrative structure, stressing the ontological fluidity of the worlds.

Describing different kinds of metafiction in comics, Kukkonen states that this is a classic form of using *metalepsis* in comics[68]. It is made apparent in this medium through stressing the ways in which the characters are drawn and the ways that the imaginary space in which they move is restricted by the frames. McCay was the first author in the history of graphic narrative to notice the possibilities of using such tricks. However, in *Little Nemo* they are not only formal games, as they directly influence the narrative and complicate the construction of a storyworld. They play the role of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "ontological *metalepsis*"[69]. The narrative in Nemo's adventures is created upon the feeling of uncertainty concerning the state of the respective beings. McCay creates tension between the fictional dream world and the everyday life of the characters, as well as between fiction itself and the reality outside of the text. In the above examples, in order to achieve this effect, the author of *Little Nemo* uses all the modality levels that appear in the comic book medium. McCay's methods of introducing uncertainty and blurring the lines between fictions are written into every level of reading. They appear in the space of a single frame and they also exist when metaphors are rendered in sequences. Narrativity is written directly into the shape of the panels and their placement on page, and, finally, it is built through the very materiality of the comic book work.

Conclusions

Analysis of Winsor McCay's comics proves that the conflict between narratological and semiological approaches to the comic book are superficial. The lines between these disciplines get blurred in the act of reading. Attempts to create a visual language system that describes the specificity of the comic book medium, approach championed by Thierry Groensteen, at some point needs to move to the level of the story told in the specific comic book work. Similar propositions by Herman need to be supplemented by a consciousness of the form specific to the comic book medium. The models of reading comics presented in *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* and *Alternative Comics* seem complementary. Indeed, both Hatfield and Kukkonen note that the reception of comics requires very specific competences and the ability to simultaneously operate on many levels of meaning[70].

The model postulated in this article reminds the critic how complicated and dynamic the process of reading comics is. When it becomes the formal dominant of the work, it has a direct effect on the ways in which hypotheses are constructed about the storyworld and mental images of the respective events, heroes and situations take shape. From this perspective, the comic book medium can be described as a multimodal work. In his article "Multimodal Storytelling and Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives",

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[68] K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[69] M.-L. Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines", *Semiotica*, 2004, no 150 (1), pp. 439–469.

[70] C. Hatfield, *op. cit.*, p. 67; K. Kukkonen, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

Herman points towards the relations between studies of various modalities, narratological and transmedial approaches, especially in the context of graphic narratives[71]. He stresses that despite the transmedial character of pictureworld, it is to some point determined by the semiotic environment characteristic for the given method of constructing a message, the modality. Herman focuses on the visual and verbal layers of comics[72]. Nevertheless, as Ruth Page notes, multimodality implies the existence of other, less obvious semiotic channels, which despite being pushed into the background during reading, directly influence the final shape of a narrative in the given work[73]. This research perspective allows the critic to configure the question of the materiality (and, on the other hand, the digitality) of the comic book medium into the wider context of how various communication channels function in their social reception. Furthermore, it suggests a conception of the act of reading a graphic narrative as a pragmatic socio--cultural reception[74].

This pragmatic aspect of the described model makes it possible to move from the static method of atomising the comics code (typical of classical narratology), to an exploration of which elements go into relations with others and how they become clues or patterns which are used by the reader during the construction of the narrative. This model also brings comic reading studies closer to the area of empirical research. Cognitive linguists such as Neil Cohn, Martin Paczynski and others, have done significant work in evaluating the processes that occur within the human brain during the reading of a comic[75]. They have used tools such as eye-tracking to extend this area of research. However, because they approach comics from a linguistic perspective, they do not always ask the necessary narratological questions.

Despite these current deficits in the field, it seems likely that empirical research can be of great use in the future of literary studies. Such a synthesis would expand the critic's knowledge of the ways in which a reader experiences comics and the mechanisms through which they decode individual elements, comprehend tensions and modalities, and interpret a coherent, cognitive construct.

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[71] D. Herman, "Multimodal Storytelling and Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives", in: *Telling Stories: Language, Narrative and Social Life*, ed. D. Schiffrin, A. De Fina, A. Nylund, Washington 2010, pp. 195–208.
[72] *Ibidem*. p. 196.
[73] R. Page, *Introduction,* in: *New perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, ed. R. Page, New York 2010, pp. 4–5.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[75] N. Cohn, M. Paczynski, R. Jackendoff, P.J. Holcomb, G.R. Kuperberg, "(Pea)nuts and Bolts of Visual Narrative: Structure and Meaning in Sequential Image Comprehension", *Cognitive Psychology*, 2012, no 65, pp. 1–38.