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Through Word or Image: How Figural Iconic Solidarity Builds Characters and Drives Narrativity in Comics

All but the briefest or most experimental of narratives present at least one character whose activities and experiences are followed over time. Such an individual will thus be brought to the audience's attention repeatedly. In fiction, for instance, multiple sentences will contain noun phrases – typically a combination of proper nouns (e.g. "Lisbeth"), pronouns ("she"), and descriptive phrases ("the girl with the dragon tattoo") all of which are understood to refer to the *same* entity as they move through the storyworld, acting and being acted upon. By comparison, in many comics narratives, the work of establishing a character's ongoing presence is instead accomplished by means of images. Of course, most comics also provide text elements such as speech balloons and captions, but embodied (drawn) characters within the panels are central focus points for the comics reader and typically bear much of the narrative load.

In this paper we compare the affordances of word and image, introducing the concept of Figural Iconic Solidarity (FIS). By means of FIS, the comics reader identifies narratively salient visual elements that enable narrative continuity and cohesion, just as repeated linguistic references do in prose literature. By "figure" we mean any continuing visual element, or a recurring iconic motif, which usually involves a character (but sometimes a thing, place, or setting). We argue that FIS fills a gap in comics theory: much attention has indeed been given to the composition and structure of visual content, but relatively little has been focused directly on the core visual mechanisms for establishing narrative continuity. The concepts of (co–) reference and semantic compositionality have been central to linguistic theory for decades and more, but, alas, though the interpretation of comics images requires the very same concepts, the linguistic solutions cannot be imported directly: images are not words; panels are not phrases. This problem has scarcely been touched although it has been recognized by some (Groensteen sidesteps the issue; Cohn resolves it ingeniously but, we believe, inaccurately).

The concept of FIS is, in part, a critical modification of Thierry Groensteen's notions of iconic solidarity and redundancy, while it also draws from other approaches in Comics and Film Studies and linguistics, including in particular the characters' connectivity – function in Kai Mikkonen's *Narratology of Comic Art*, Ulrich Krafft's setting function of signs (*Setzung*), and Murray Smith's notion of *recognition* in his model of how spectators construct fictional characters in films. Related notions include Neil Cohn's "continuity constraint" and Chiao – I Tseng's "cohesive chain". In our talk we will draw examples from David Prudhomme and Pascal Rabaté's *Vive la marée !*, also Chris Ware, Robert Crumb ("A Short History of America"), and certain well – known optical illusions.

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