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ABSTRACTION AND COMICS FROM A SEMIOTIC POINT OF VIEW

Fred Andersson

One particular question framing this publication caught my immediate attention: “How do comics modify our understanding of the abstract?” (Rommens 2015). Note that this question is not about ‘abstract comics’ specifically, but rather about comics in general. The question invites us to address not only ‘the abstract’ as a Modernist and historically specific phenomenon in visual art and design, but also more general notions of abstraction. This chapter will therefore address ‘abstract comics’ and cognitive abstraction from a semiotic point of view.

ABSTRACTION AND THE SIX FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

What I have in mind can be seen in *Funtus*, a comic drawn by Rolf Sandqvist which appeared in Finnish and Swedish dailies in the fifties and sixties (Figure 1). In this episode, Funtus is surprised because he suddenly faces what seem to be two previous moments of himself after accidentally falling through time and space in the three-panel sequence, the latter always providing the strict material limit of his appearances.

Figure 1 Rolf Sandqvist, strip reproduced in *Nya Argus*, Vol 105 (2012), no 10-11, page 279. © 2015 Tom Sandqvist.

In semiotic and functional terms, this strip evinces the *meta-linguistic* function in communication, i.e., it is drawn in a visual language which refers to itself. The gag is funny because it makes fun of the very semiotic *code* that compels us to accept black lines on paper as borders between different moments and/or places. Simple as it is, the gag thus also presupposes a capacity for conceptual abstraction.

Instead, the word 'abstract' usually refers to the prominence of the *aesthetic* and *expressive* functions. In the functional theory semiotics inherited from the Prague school and Roman Jakobson, the aesthetic function is related to the sign vehicle in communication, or in other words, the 'message' proper (cf. Jakobson 1960, 350-77). It refers to how the communicated meaning is inflected by the way in which an image—or rhetoric in language—is composed. Refining the message *qua* message can even become the main objective of communication.

If we see a black square on a white surface, and if we accept that this is a statement on the universal value of certain shapes, we have by the same token accepted the dominance of the aesthetic function in the reception and understanding of the work. If, on the other hand, we look at Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* and feel that this abstract visual 'rhythm' expresses the unity between nature and humanity allegedly summarised by Pollock himself as "I am nature" (Krasner 1967), then we are dealing with the expressive function.¹ The expressive function is related to the sender of a message and sometimes calls for an emphatic identification with the sender as an individual being with emotions and intentions.

Some works called 'abstract' might also show a prominent *phatic* function, i.e., the sharpened sensitivity and attention at the receiving end. In such cases, the structure of the work is less indicative of a meditative or emphatic attitude, and more akin to the quick decoding of basic colours and shapes which characterises the function of ordinary traffic signs and similar semiotic systems. For example, certain paintings by the American artist Kenneth Noland are similar to shooting targets. They are not used for target practice but elaborate the visual structure of the target in the context of aesthetic appreciation. If such examples are evocative of the inner workings of a visual structure or a creative mind, and sometimes of a reduction of communication to simple signals and responses, it is much harder to find external references in abstract art or to translate its manifestations into verbal messages aimed at rational understanding. Consequently, the remaining functions of *reference* (to things external) and *conation* (adaptation to the receiver) are weak in abstract art. This is no doubt due to certain aesthetic ideologies taking shape during the formative years of abstract art in Europe and the US, as in the art philosophy of Clement Greenberg for instance, which viewed the development of

¹ As Lee Krasner recalls in an interview dated December 14, 1967: "I brought Hofmann to Pollock's studio, as I knew Hofmann, I had studied with him; and I thought he would certainly, you know, dig this. And this is the initial visit that he's confronted with Pollock's work. He said, 'Ach! You work by heart, not from nature.' And Pollock's answer: 'I am nature.'" Transcript from Oral History Interview with Lee Krasner, November 2, 1964–April 11, 1968. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lee-krasner-12507>

Modern painting as a historically necessary reduction of the means of painting to its two-dimensional essence.

To simplify, the tradition of the 'abstract' in visual art can be seen as a highly coded and specialised form of communication—a form in which the aesthetic and expressive functions are so dominant they are now regarded as almost synonymous with abstraction. This is no different in the case of 'abstract comics.' In an equally schematic manner, one can say that the aesthetic and expressive functions are associated with two different and antagonistic tendencies within 'the abstract.' These tendencies can be exemplified by, on the one hand, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* from 1915 (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), and on the other Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* from 1950 (Metropolitan Museum, New York). As a symbol of radical reduction, escaping comparisons with individual expression, external reality, conventional symbolism or utilitarian functions, Malevich's square has become the emblem of an extreme aestheticism approaching absolute anonymity. By contrast, Pollock's free and gestural painting, in which the chirographic traces of every sensory-motoric impulse during the painting process are on display, is seen as a form of art expressive of individual existence.

Against the backdrop of both extremes within a highly specialised field, I now introduce my second case study (Figure 2), a work by the Canadian cartoonist Benoît Joly from 1987, featured in Andrei Molotiu's acclaimed anthology *Abstract Comics* (2009, n.p.). In his search for artists who at some point in their career had made what could be defined as 'abstract comics,' Molotiu found people like Joly and Patrick McDonnell, who, in their student years, had created pages such as this one without always publishing them (Rudnick 2009). What we see here is a mere *placement* of panels, ink blots, small strokes and circles: this structure corresponds to the aesthetic function rather than the expressive. It is evocative of tracks, trails or cinematic movement and zooming. The title of the work is *Parcours* [tracks].

Just like Sandqvist's *Funtus* strip, it is a comic commenting on drawing comics, but it is not a meta-linguistic joke that breaks the rules of fiction because it contains no fiction to begin with. What it offers is materiality, just like Malevich's painting with the square. Still, there is a different level of abstraction present here, constituted by the reader's habit of reading successive frames as pictures with a continuous rhythm and movement. Making sense of the structure of Joly's work creates an oscillation between seeing it as only ink on paper and as some sequential narrative. Maybe the young Joly was occupied with

finding the simplest and most basic conditions for something to be experienced as a comic or *almost* a comic, conditions I will turn to further on in this essay.

ABSTRACTION AND VISUAL INFORMATION

Whether and how comics can modify our understanding of the abstract could be further advanced if we add different conceptions of what abstraction can mean. When other kinds of images are classified to be retrievable in databases or on the Internet, it is commonplace to base the classification on a taxonomy of image content. One such taxonomy, proposed by British information scientists Briggs, Burford and Eakins, defines nine levels of visual information (2003, 123-61). Of these, four are considered levels of ‘abstraction,’ i.e., levels of content which are not available in the picture but must be abstracted by the viewer against the background of previous knowledge and experience. Consequently, the levels commonly referred to as ‘abstract’ in art criticism—colour, lines, geometrical shapes, and so on—are not abstract according to Briggs, Burford and Eakins. For them, abstraction is a feature of higher levels of the cognitive process, not of the visual object. More basic levels of the cognitive process, such as the perception of depth cues in a picture or the identification of simple semantic units such as ‘house’ and ‘man,’ do not require abstraction in this sense.

Basic visual elements, geometrical elements, depth cues and semantics are instead referred to as “perceptual primitives,” “geometrical primitives,” “visual extension” and “semantic units” (ibid.). In the context of cognitive science, it is a purely logical choice not to regard them as abstract. They are on the contrary quite *concrete* in that they can be apprehended at a glance with little cognitive effort. *Contextual abstraction* requires a capacity for recognising a specific scene from reality or from other images. *Cultural abstraction* is possible if the viewer is familiar with the mythological, historical and other culturally-specific themes in images. *Emotional abstraction* presupposes empathy and an ability to interact with fellow humans, whilst *technical abstraction* can be a highly developed cognitive skill in someone who teaches art, or someone who can name every piece of machinery in images of steel factories for instance. This taxonomy underlines the relevance of the question posed by many artists who called themselves Concretists or Constructivists: Why call a type of art abstract when it could just as well be defined as the most concrete?

Today, even the most elusive products are accessible electronically through systems based on the theories of computer and information

Figure 2 Benoît Joly, “Parcours” in *Abstract Comics*, page [42]. © 2009 Benoît Joly.

science. It is therefore important to take this systemic thinking seriously for understanding the dissemination and reception of visual culture in general. The impact of digital reproduction and retrieval is often discussed in contemporary art criticism and visual culture studies, but rarely in academic art history. It is also interesting that a theoretical framework such as that of Briggs, Burford and Eakins seems to harmonize with Concretist ideas, the latter having become completely marginalized by the general notion of 'abstraction' in visual art.

Still, there may be other reasons for the persistence of the term 'abstract art' than a general confusion concerning the abstract and the concrete. As a matter of fact, even the art which "depicts nothing" may involve abstract content in the sense of Briggs, Burford and Eakins. In interpretations of works similar to Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, an emotional abstraction is often operative, regardless of whether it agrees with the artist's intentions or not. Whenever an artist works with the symbolic function of colours and geometry, cultural abstraction is important. If a work is intended as a visual interpretation of a musical piece for instance, the intention cannot be understood without cultural abstractions concerning the ruling norms in music composition and appreciation. Regarding contextual abstraction, reading comics involves a constant mental construction of imagined contexts whose depicted scenes represent only fragments. What remains of this when 'reading' a page such as Joly's *Parcours* is the capacity for contextual abstraction.

THE ABSTRACTION OF CONTENT VERSUS THE ABSTRACTION OF EXPRESSION

There are many ways in which a phenomenon or a cognitive process can be defined as abstract. To highlight the complexity, I will introduce some additional semiotic concepts and turn to my third example (Figure 3).

It is a spread from Roland Sabatier's *hypergraphic* novel *Gaffe au golf* (1964). Today we speak of graphic novels as a more literary form of comics, but when such novels break the gridded regularity of straightforward narrative, they sometimes approach the *hypergraphies* of Sabatier and other practitioners of Lettrism. The term *hypergraphie* is derived from hypergraphia, which was originally a psychiatric diagnosis applied to patients obsessed with scribbling words and symbols with no apparent sense and with no other objective than the fulfilment of a drive to write. In its most genuine manifestations, Lettrism disposed of all semantic content in poetry—even words. What remained were letters and other signs from varying, decontextualized semiotic systems which were then recombined. This means that what we see on Sabatier's pages is neither a narrative, nor a rebus that should be interpreted according to a hidden code, but a suggestion for the possibility of codes yet to be invented.

Still, the pages are not devoid of content. Certain kinds of content might be absent, but semiotic analysis can account for other kinds. Most semiotic analyses treat the sign as comprising two aspects or sides, united in solidarity, like the two sides of a sheet of paper. These aspects are the *signifiant* and the *signifié*, which is mostly translated as signifier (or 'expression') and signified (or 'content'). I will henceforward refer to them as expression and content, but it must be stressed that the term *expression* should not be confused with the expressive function or with emotional aspects of language. What we see in the speech bubble are shapes reminiscent of letters, written in an inexistent language and hence incomprehensible. Those shapes have no linguistic content. If they had, it would be impossible to view them as mere shapes. They would then turn into readable 'letters,' i.e., they would no longer be apprehended as material shapes but as linguistic signifiers/expressions.

Even without the possibility of linguistic signs, we can still recognise signs here—but these are different kinds of signs. One recurring shape is similar to that of a keyhole. This is then a *pictorial sign*, i.e., a sign that depicts. Some shapes are neither legible, nor recognisable as pictorial signs, but still *describable* as for example triangles and squares. These elements are referred to as *plastic signs*, i.e., signs of colour and shape. The term 'pictorial' may seem strange for francophone readers used to the established dichotomy of *signes icôniques* and *signes plastiques*. However, if we use the terms 'icon' and 'iconic' in C. S. Peirce's

Figure 3 Roland Sabatier, *Gaffe au Golf*, pages 26–27. © 1979 Roland Sabatier.

sense, both pictorial and plastic signs are to be considered iconic. A more precise but cumbersome terminology would lead us to speak of ‘pictorial iconic signs’ and ‘plastic iconic signs.’ Depending on their context and their appearance in different kinds of sign systems, pictorial and plastic signs may also function as indexical signs, but never as symbolic signs.

Both pictorial and plastic signs have an expression side and a content side, respectively. This simply means that an object in a picture is not the real object but a representation of the object, and that any drawn or painted circle is not *the* circle (as an idea or a cognition) but an attempt to represent it. The difference between perceived optical information and systematic visual concepts can be compared to the difference between sounds and phonemes: “Between the typical shape and the perceived shape, the typical colour and the perceived colour, the typical object (which could be further defined as icon) and the perceived object, there is the same relationship as that between the phoneme and all the sounds which might be associated with it” (Groupe μ 1992, 97; my translation).²

This division between the expression side and the content side of both pictorial and plastic signs is important for the semiotic analysis of abstraction in pictures. On the left page in Sabatier’s spread we see a lot of pictures. They are organised as a table, almost as if the page were taken from a comic with the famous standard ‘waffle-iron grid’ layout. Not all pictures in the table contain pictorial and plastic signs—we can also see French words, cuneiform Mesopotamian script, musical notation, Morse code and alphanumeric braille. In the middle of the third row is the braille sign for ‘W.’ The four Morse signs in the previous panel stand for “ANMI,” which does not make any sense. The pictorial signs are simplified when they resemble *pictographs* or even traffic signs. Obviously, the table is a text message in which both linguistic, musical, numerical and visual *écriture* is used.

That an image is turned into a simplified pictograph and used in visual writing implies abstraction. However, it does not refer to ‘abstraction’ in the sense of pictorial signs being dispensed of in favour of plastic signs, as in most accounts of ‘abstract art.’ Rather, the abstraction of pictographs must be thought of as mentally climbing a semantic ladder—from the more specific to the more general. The ‘ladder’ is ‘semantic’ because the place where this ‘climbing’ takes place concerns the content of the pictorial sign (the signified). Impersonality and generality result from this abstraction, leaving little space for the individual stylistic traits and connotations that belong to the expression side of the sign. In plastic signs, achieving geometrical refinement and purity is likewise a result of climbing the semantic ladder. For example, the general idea of a circle is very different from the crude and therefore individual circles we see in Figure 2, or later on in Figure 9 (Roberto Altmann). In the most uncompromising instances of geometrical art,

2 “Entre une forme type et la forme perçue, la couleur type et la couleur perçue, l’objet type (qui sera plus loin défini comme icône) et l’objet perçue, il y a donc le même rapport qu’entre le phonème et tous les sons qui peuvent lui être associés.”

as in Figure 8 (Mark Gonyea), the plastic sign is almost identical to its geometrical content. About such signs, C.S. Peirce observed that the similarity (i.e. *iconic relationship*) between them and their ideal models in geometry is so close that they are “almost instances” of the models (Peirce 1998, 13). Here, the expression side of the sign has very little salience, and there are very few traces of any individual style.

This analysis adds a qualification to the two antagonistic tendencies of ‘abstract art.’ In a work like Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm*, the attentive viewer may identify plastic signs, but they are imprecise and circumstantial. Abstract expressionism as practiced by Pollock and his fellow Americans (and André Masson before them), stresses the material process of painting and the global or ‘overall’ organisation of a surface. If this is abstraction, it does not occur at the content side, as the works lack clear pictorial or plastic content. The expression side is salient. If a Lettrist creates illegible letters that still look like letters, the abstract expressionist creates unrecognisable visual structures that still look like pictures. Such works challenge the viewer to recognise things which are not clearly there but which might be there. As an act of abstraction, this effort to recognise the unrecognisable takes place at the expression side of a phenomenon that oscillates between signification and brute materiality.

The phenomenon qua phenomenon occurs as a result of the confrontation between the abstract pattern and the individual spectator. Paradoxically, when the spectator is unable to see anything but mere matter—and when the phenomenon lacks signification for this individual mind—the perceived visual pattern never reaches the semiotic status of an expression/*signifiant*. Compare this to Joly’s page (Figure 2), where semiotic stability is secured by the drawn frames and their conventional status as signs of spatiotemporal division. However, the blotches and markings enclosed within the frames are more readily interpreted as cut-outs or zoomed-in details of arbitrary gestures with ink, brush and pen on a surface, lacking consistent signification. To imagine some kind of consistency or even narrative in accordance with the title *Parcours* would be to mentally reconstruct a path and a rhythm in the process of making these material traces—to read the page as a document of the creation of patterns which might (or might not) function semiotically as expressions/*signifiants*.

If this imaginative act consists in trying to abstract a larger context or a continuous series of events from a collection of material fragments, it is both an act of mental abstraction and an act in which we remain pre-occupied with the expression side or *signifiants* of semiotic processes. Compare such works and imaginative acts with Malevich’s square or

works by El Lissitzky (Figure 6) and Mark Gonyea (Figure 8) where plastic signs and their content are immediately present for the spectator. The difference shows that the common notion of ‘abstract art’ confuses two completely opposite kinds of abstraction: on the one hand abstraction as the abstract or ‘typical’ content of plastic signs, and on the other abstraction associated with an intensified salience of the expression/*signifiant*, conveniently indicated by the established art historical term abstract expressionism.

TRIADIC MODELS OF VISUAL ABSTRACTION

For another account of abstraction in pictorial and plastic signs, especially in comics, I now turn to an image taken from Scott McCloud’s work *Understanding Comics* (McCloud 1993, 51; Figure 4). Incidentally, this must be one of the most meta-linguistic works existing in comics—a theory of comics as a comic.

The image is a simplified version of a collage filling the next spread in the book (cf. McCloud 1993, 52-3). In the collage, McCloud has taken drawn faces from different comics and classified them in systematic rows, showing combinations of different degrees of generality and de-figuration along separate axes. The simplified version visualises McCloud’s idea that pictures and shapes and letters are images, albeit differentiated along the three axes of his triangle.

In the bottom left corner, we see a realistic picture of a face, and at the bottom right corner we see the word “FACE.” A simplified, pictographic face is shown as the last

pictorial step before linguistic generality. At the apex of the triangle we see elements of The Picture Plane—i.e. what I refer to as plastic signs. Wittily, McCloud abstracted the drawing in the previous panels of himself as a comic figure, walking the ‘stairs’ towards the apex, until nothing remains of him except the three shapes there. The black square represents his black hair, the white circle his white face, the checked triangle his characteristic checked jacket. Representing the narrator, the three shapes speak, telling us that “This is the realm of the art *object*, the picture *plane*, where shapes, lines and colours can be *themselves* and not pretend *otherwise*” (McCloud 1993, 51; emphasis in original).

As the shapes actually ‘pretend’ to be McCloud and speak, the message is ambiguous, which is not the only ambiguity in the diagram. McCloud never explains to what extent letters and language may also undergo transformations along the right axis between “language” and “picture” to become pure shapes on the picture plane. Maybe Sabatier’s image (Figure 3) provides a key to the answer. We may also ask whether the ‘realistic’ picture in the ‘reality’ corner is supposed to be a realistic picture or reality. As we can see, the word “FACE” at the opposite corner represents language itself. The faces along the axis between “reality” and “picture” represent an increasing degree of what art historians tend to describe as ‘formal abstraction.’ Nevertheless, what does this formal abstraction mean?

We can see that the faces become more and more sketchy and hard to recognize; they are ‘abstracted’ in a ‘cubist’ or ‘planar’ fashion. This means a loss of individual detail, not that different from the ‘conceptual abstraction’ along the bottom axis which ends with the word “FACE.” Obviously, the ‘abstraction’ along the Reality-Picture axis involves both a ‘conceptual abstraction’ resulting in a generalization of pictorial content and a ‘formal abstraction’ in which pictorial signs are gradually dissolved into a multitude of plastic signs. Thus, the ‘formal abstraction’ here implies both a simplified pictorial content and a complication of the pictorial expression. It seems that these ambiguities could have been avoided if McCloud had developed separate models for pictorial, plastic and linguistic signs.

Information scientist Alan D. Manning wrote a favourable review of *Understanding Comics*, claiming that McCloud’s triad *language, reality, picture plane* could be regarded as equivalent to one of the trichotomies on which C. S. Peirce based his semiotic theories (Manning 1998, 66-9). The trichotomy in question is that between *types, tokens* and *tones* (also called *qualisigns*). Peirce’s type, token and tone can be regarded as three different ways in which a *signifiant* or expression can manifest itself within the commonplace *signifiant-signifié* distinction, thus only

Figure 4 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, page 51. © 1993 Scott McCloud and HarperCollins Publishers.

bearing on the expression plane of signs. However, I believe that Manning's comparison is a misreading of McCloud's theory: the latter is intuitive and does not have the ambition to provide a rigorous semiotic model.

Peirce's scientific theory of the sign is a part of his larger philosophical system and is often referred to as his *doctrine* of signs. It shows great subtlety, part of which seems to have escaped Manning's attention. This is not to say that Manning's equation of the language corner of McCloud's triangle to Peirce's type has no validity. According to Peirce's doctrine, the expression side of the sign (be it a type, a token or a tone) is determined by the generality of the content which the sign is intended to express. If the content is very general, the expression will also be general. It will be a type. As an expression, the neutral 'smiley' sign in McCloud's language corner is a type. However, the shapes on the picture plane, which according to Manning would be examples of tones or qualisigns, are also types in Peirce's sense. They are plastic types, expressing the content of concepts in geometry.

Peirce summed up what he had in mind when he identified certain elements as tones or qualisigns in this succinct definition: "a Qualisign is any quality in so far as it is a sign" (Peirce 1998, 294). This becomes evident if we consider the colour red and all the things it can signify in culture and ideology. However, not every perceived or sensed quality is a sign as there must be a content the quality can express. The quality need not be immediately visible or audible; it suffices that the mere idea of 'red' signifies 'socialism' or 'love' in a process of inner reasoning. This is also the main reason for its difference with other kinds of expressions in the Peircean model. The 'tone' is an expression which need not be realised to exist. This makes it distinct from the 'token' (also called *sin-sign*) which exists *only* if it is realised—think for example of a footprint or an arrow signifying a direction (Peirce 1998, 294; 296; 483; 488). When Alan D. Manning and Nicole Amare equate McCloud's picture plane to Peirce's tones, calling them "decoratives," they disregard both the immaterial character of the Peircean tone and the primacy of content for its status as a sign (Amare and Manning 2013, 9; 27-59; cf. Peirce 1998, 296).

To identify the creative and interpretive processes manifest in 'abstract art' and 'abstract comics,' I believe Peirce's concepts are indispensable. The difference between a structure with only vague areas of transparent colour and one with *eidetic* shapes is encapsulated in the distinction between tone (as in an aural tone) and type. As for the token, any visual structure can have shapes whose placement and direction make us follow certain paths and make certain inferences. They thus function as tokens as they only function in a specific context and position. The most obvious example in comics is the speech balloon, instantly connecting thoughts and words to their source. When the blots and strokes in Figure 2 compel us to recognize them as foot tracks they also function as tokens.

The only sign among the three categories that can be transformed and 'abstracted' in the way visualised by McCloud is the type. There are, however, important differences

between types that are plastic signs and those that are pictorial signs. Plastic signs “have no referent by definition” (Groupe μ 1995, 584): they have no reality to refer to. Plastic signs simply do not conform to the triadic model in McCloud’s drawing, which is valid for pictorial signs, but only with the important modifications in Figure 5, the latter illustrating the *signe icônique* as put forward by Groupe μ (1992, 136).³

Instead of McCloud’s picture plane, we find the *type* at the apex of the triangle. As clarified by the inscribed arrows and terms in Figure 5, the type is recognised [*reconnaissance*] in the visual stimuli provided by the *signifiant* at the bottom right corner. It is stabilised [*stabilisation*] in relation to the *réfèrent* at the bottom left corner as it conforms to the visual appearance of certain objects in reality. The *signifiant* can however be more or less conceptually abstract or language-like, and therefore the axis between *réfèrent* and *signifiant* is one of *transformation*. This corresponds to the equivalent axis in McCloud’s scheme. However, it makes no sense to imagine iconic signs (or the special kind of iconic signs called pictorial signs) as being closer to types than others, since types are the same in all signs conforming to them. This is indicated by the arrows and terms to the left and right in the diagram, signalling that both the type-*réfèrent* and the type-*signifiant* relationship is one of *conformité*. Imagine, for example, the difference between a portrait of a ‘real’ person and a simplified ‘smiley’ sign, as in McCloud’s diagram. Although different, they both belong to the same category because both contain the type ‘human face.’

My sixth example, though it features colour, has a palette restricted to red, grey, black and white, due to technical limitations and the subject of the narrative. The work might be one of the earliest examples of ‘ab-

3 Incidentally, the use by Groupe μ and most francophone authors of the term ‘icon’ or *icône* as synonymous with depiction is problematic from a Peircean perspective, as an iconic sign in Peirce’s sense need not be representational or even visual. I therefore prefer to view Groupe μ ’s diagram in Figure 5 as a demonstration of the special kind of iconic signs dubbed ‘pictorial signs.’

Figure 5
Groupe μ ,
*Traité du Signe
Visuel*, page 136.
© 1993 Seuil.

stract comics:’ El Lissitzky’s story about two squares, *Pro dva kvadrata. Suprematicheskii skaz v 6-ti postroikakh* (*Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions*)—the constructions referring to the number of pages—made at UNOVIS in Vitebsk, and later printed by *Skythen Verlag* in Berlin in 1922.

The thin but wide booklet, printed on twelve sheets in 28 x 22,3 cm quarto, starts with a dedication “to all children” and continues with a typographical poem stating “DO NOT READ / TAKE / PAPER, BEAMS, WOOD / FOLD, PAINT, BUILD” (Lissitzky 1990). In letters and shapes, the six “constructions” then tell the story of

one Red and one Black square which “fly to Earth” where they meet a “black anxiety.” They smash the black anxiety. Next, Black is intact but Red is deconstructed, and “RED IS STRONGLY BUILT UPON BLACK.” Last, Red has been reborn as a square and Circle/Earth has absorbed the colour Black, whilst a new Black square has appeared in outer Space: “HERE / IT ENDS / AND CONTINUES.” Figure 6 shows the second “construction” in which the Squares fly to Circle/Earth which is still Red but features Construction/Society is Black, White and Grey. In the last two “constructions,” Society turns Red and White. All colours and shapes have political meanings, conveyed to children together with the simple verbal elements.

Molotiu mentions Lissitzky’s work in his introduction to the anthology *Abstract Comics* (Molotiu 2009, n.p.). Its “constructivism” is at least partly in accordance with Molotiu’s principal definition that “abstract comics can be defined as sequential art consisting exclusively of abstract imagery” (ibid.). However, Molotiu both expands and restricts his definition, complicating it significantly. It is not entirely clear what he has in mind when he uses the terms “sequential art” and “abstract imagery.” According to Will Eisner’s and Scott McCloud’s well-established definitions, a sequential work of art is a series of pictures in which each new picture contains elements from previous pictures in such a manner that a story can be inferred. Thus defined, sequential artworks cannot be abstract comics in Molotiu’s sense, because he also imposes the restriction that elements must “not cohere into a narrative or even into a unified narrative space” (ibid.). Yet, he clearly seems to think that a work can have a sequential character without being narrative, which would differentiate abstract comics from abstract art:

While in painting the term [abstract] applies to the lack of representational objects in favor of an emphasis on form, we can say that in comics it additionally applies to the lack of a narrative excuse to string panels together, in favor of an increased emphasis on the formal elements of comics that, even in the absence of a (verbal) story, can create a feeling of sequential drive, the sheer rhythm of a narrative or the rise and fall of a story arc (ibid.).

Because of Molotiu’s restrictions, El Lissitzky’s story about two squares cannot be an abstract comic in this sense. Not only because it clearly tells a story with an ideological message, but also because of Molotiu’s additional stipulation that “[w]hat does not fit under this definition are comics that tell straightforward stories in captions and speech balloons while abstracting their imagery into vaguely human shapes, or even into triangles and squares” (ibid.). On the other hand, he does accept comics with “some representational elements,” as long as they “do not cohere into a narrative” (ibid.). Apart from showing historical

Figure 6 El Lissitzky, *Pro dva kvadrata*, sheet 5. © 1922 Skythen Verlag. © 1990 Artists Bookworks.

affinity with the work of artists like El Lissitzky, Kurt Kranz and even Willem de Kooning, Molotiu considers abstract comics as “a genre without a proper tradition” which did not begin until 1968 with a page that was already an amusing parody of the genre (ibid.). The latter is Robert Crumb’s “Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics” (extract in Figure 7), first printed in *Zap Comix* in 1968, which opens the anthology *Abstract Comics*. Crumb’s parody is an emblem of the general attitude towards ‘abstract art’ in popular culture and society at large.

Because of the vagueness of the term ‘abstract,’ many artists have instead chosen labels such as the Russian *Konstruktivism* and/or *Suprematism* (El Lissitzky et al.), the French *Art concret* (van Doesburg et al.), or the Dutch *Nieuwe Beelding* (Mondrian and *De Stijl*). In the sixties, the art world was abuzz with the *Minimalism* of a new generation of American artists who were ‘hardcore’ in their preference for geometry and a systematic approach. As opposed to this new generation, the older artists saw their *constructivism* not only as the construction of a new kind of art, but also of a new kind of design, architecture, city and society: in short, a new way of life.

In art history, it is virtually impossible to maintain clear and straightforward distinctions between abstract, concrete and constructivist art because these terms were used by various artists in different contexts and with widely divergent aims. The *Konstruktivism* of El Lissitzky and his Soviet comrades should not be confused with the *Arte Constructivo* or *Universalismo Constructivo* developed by Joaquín Torres-García in Paris and Montevideo at roughly the same time. The *concrete* idea that a modern work of art should neither represent, nor signify or tell, but *create* a visual sensibility does not chime with today’s sensibilities because it wants to ban all aspects not pertaining to visual and spatial design. This also relates to a highly utilitarian view of the role of art in society, which, incidentally, caused the schism between two groups of artists in Paris during the Spring of 1930, one side known as *Cercle et Carré* and the other as *Art concret*, associated with Torres-García and Theo van Doesburg, respectively.

Initially, van Doesburg and Torres-García had tried to gather all radical, non-figurative tendencies in art. However, talks broke down due to ideological differences that had surfaced much earlier in van Doesburg’s conflict with his former *De Stijl* friend, Piet Mondrian. Compared to artists like Mondrian and Torres-García and critics like Michel Seuphor, van Doesburg wanted an extremely rationalist and even mathematical program for art and education. In protest, the majority of non-figurative artists joined Mondrian, Seuphor and Torres-García in *Cercle et Carré*, and participated in the exhibition with the same name at Galérie 23 during April and May 1930. Only four artists (Carlsund, Hélión, Tutundijan and Wantz) joined van Doesburg and signed the uncompromising *Art concret* manifesto deriding the exhibition. The manifesto was published in the first and only issue of the journal *Art concret* (April 1930) and comprised only six short paragraphs, aimed specifically at the mysticism van Doesburg observed in the work and theories of Kandinsky, Mondrian and other *Cercle et Carré* artists. The second and fifth paragraphs are crystal clear: a

Figure 7 Robert Crumb, “Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics,” excerpt from *Abstract Comics*. © 2009 Fantagraphics.

concrete work of art must be executed mechanically according to a preconceived plan, while it can leave no room for what a semiotician would call the expressive function:

1) The work of art should be entirely conceived and formulated in the mind before its execution. It should retain nothing of the formal observations from nature, nor any sensuality, nor any sentimentality. We want to exclude the lyricism, the dramatism, the symbolism, etc. (...) 5) The technical means should be mechanical, in other words exact, anti-impressionistic (quoted in Doesburg et al. 1930, n.p.; my translation).

However, this sectarian stance was hard to maintain. The *Cercle et Carré* and the *Art concret* groups soon dispersed, and members from both groups later joined the more inclusive *Abstraction-Création* group uniting artists with a program centred around *abstraction, création* and *art non figuratif*. As the original statement of 1932 released by the organising committee of *Abstraction-Création* in 1932 states:

we have chosen these words as names for our group and for our activities, because we have found no others which are less obscure or less controversial. the collection of reproductions in this book can serve as a definition of these terms. we are not committed to them in other respects.

non-figuration a purely plastic culture which excludes every element of explication, anecdote, literature, naturalism, etc...

abstraction, because certain artists have come to the concept of non-figuration by the progressive abstraction of forms from nature.

creation, because other artists have attained non-figuration direct, purely via geometry, or by the exclusive use of elements commonly called abstract such as circles, planes, bars, lines, etc... (quoted in Harrison and Wood 1992, 357-58).

Here, the term “creation” is reserved for the more radically non-figurative works, and the writers acknowledge that purely plastic elements are often referred to as ‘abstract’ in common parlance. Obviously, the distinction between mere abstraction and works which are genuinely *creative* was important for the group.

In *Abstract Comics*, Molotiu pays little attention to such distinctions. While writing that abstract comics should consist “exclusively of abstract imagery” (Molotiu 2009, n.p.) he later refers not only to non-figurative art but also to pictures with abstracted or fragmentary traces of figuration, which are hence *not* non-figurative. The contributions by Derek Badman and Gary Panter for instance are a case in point. However, Molotiu secures a safe exit for himself by writing that “the use of ‘abstract’ here is specific to the medium of comics, and only partly overlaps with the way it is used in other fine arts” (ibid.).

THE CONDITIONS OF SEQUENTIALITY

If abstract comics are indeed comics, and if we accept Molotiu’s restrictions that neither narrative nor verbal elements can be included in an abstract comic, then we must also accept that the condition which Molotiu terms “narrative space” (Molotiu 2009, n.p.)

cannot be a necessary one for the definition of comics. But what are these conditions?

Thierry Groensteen must be credited for having advanced the analysis of comics as a semiotic system, focusing on other criteria than narrative ones. In Groensteen's perspective, comics are a system for dividing and organising two-dimensional space. Seen as a system, comics generate effects of rhythm and order, giving rise to the spatiotemporal relationships which we infer when we read the elements of a layout as images in a sequence (cf. Groensteen 2007, 24-57). Instead of limiting the definition of comics to cases with a manifest narrative, we may then look at formal conditions which exist before a narrative is realised or apprehended. We may refer to these conditions as *quasi-narrative* or *infra-narrative*.

The term *infra-narrative* is Groensteen's, as defined in *Bande dessinée et narration* (Groensteen 2013, 17), where he identifies five sub-categories of *infra-narrativity*, two of which are akin to Scott McCloud's categories *aspect to aspect* and *non sequitur* (McCloud 1993, 72-9). Robert Crumb's page (Figure 7) is essentially a parody of *non sequitur* comics, or what Groensteen terms *amalgame*. In *aspect to aspect* sequences, the panels show successive parts or details of the same object or environment without forming a narrative. For Groensteen this corresponds to his term *décomposition*. In the category he calls *inventaire* [inventory], the pictures are not random but united by a thematic appeal to amuse or inform. In the 19th century, this could be found in the *macédoines* of European cartoonists and in Katsushika Hokusai's *manga* albums.

The categories of *inflection* and *seriation* are closely related and both suggest that pictures are repeated in a regular manner. In *seriation*, the pictures are identical replicas, and this creates a 'wallpaper effect.' *Inflection* adds changes either at the content side or at the expression side of the pictorial sign. Changes at the expression side may involve alterations of colour and/or contrast, as famously exemplified in Warhol's *Marilyn* and *Electric Chair* series. *Inflection* and *seriation* are akin to *serial composition*, which exists not only in visual art but also in music and poetry. In visual constructivism and avant-garde music, serialism involves the repetition and variation of a constellation or module, often resulting in replacements and other manipulations of elements in the work. We can see this in constructivist works such as Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1924), which is one of the earliest examples of 'abstract cinema,' composed in analogy with the *sonata* form in music (Edlund and Werner 1997, 59-91). If presented as sequences of film stills, works by Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann and others would be similar to some of Kurt Kranz's experiments in graphic design at

the Bauhaus school in the thirties—experiments which Andrei Molotiu counts among the early precursors of ‘abstract comics.’

For a more recent and somewhat different example of serial methods in visual composition, we now turn to a ‘story poster’ by Mark Gonyea, who is also a cartoonist (Figure 8). Gonyea’s ‘story posters’ are playful and instructive visualisations of various kinds of knowledge, and he sells them cheaply online. This example is a brilliant demonstration of numbers and counting, probably well-suited as a teaching aid for schoolchildren with learning problems. The ‘objects’ visible within the ‘frames’ are not depicted objects as in pictorial signs, but the mathematical objects of geometry. The meaning of natural numbers from 1 to 100 is made concrete and visible by means of the number of circles.

One of the most obvious parallels between Gonyea’s poster and the constructivist/concretist art of Eggeling, Kranz and their contemporaries is that it has no connection whatsoever to external reality or pictorial signs. Constructivist visual composition is closer to mathematical problem-solving and the analytics of digital image manipulation. It has a bearing on the selection and manipulation of a selected number of parameters such as shape, size, orientation, position, hue, brightness, saturation and so on. To execute all possible combinations of a limited number of elements or parameters is in effect a *permutation* in the strict sense of the term. In Gonyea’s poster, some parameters are constant—all shapes are circles and almost all arrangements are symmetrical (except for the one representing the number eleven). The variable parameters are size and number—the numerical variation being strictly linear, from one to a hundred (or from one hundred to one, if the poster is viewed upside-down).

Molotiu’s *Abstract Comics* also features works by Gonyea. Although clearly constructivist in style, they are different from Figure 8 in that they are in colour and more reminiscent of the art and methods of Josef Albers. As a visual artist and educator, Albers became famous for his works on the theme “Homage to the Square,” all based on the same constructive grid with the square as its unifying principle. The division of the painted surface thus being constant, the serialism of these works consists in the artist’s variation of colour combinations and his almost scientific study of how different colours influence one another. Similarly, the works by Gonyea in *Abstract Comics* experiment with the colour variations of a ‘squares within squares’ structure which is serially repeated, magnified and reduced, with the variations looking like the panels of a comic page (Molotiu 2009, n.p.).

When viewing these works in Molotiu’s anthology, one might be tempted to accept them as exceptionally pure manifestations of what

Figure 8 Mark Gonyea, *One to One Hundred Circles*, poster. © 2015 Mark Gonyea (www.storyposters.com).

he dubs the “feeling of sequential drive, the sheer rhythm of a narrative” (ibid.) in abstract comics. But is the “drive” which Molotiu speaks of really a sequential one? Is it not merely serial, as in the serial principle of constructivist art? Indeed, I maintain that Groensteen’s five categories of infra-narrativity—with the categories of seriation and inflection akin to serial composition—help explain crucial differences between the works by Gonyea and all the other ‘comics’ I have discussed thus far (keeping in mind that Groensteen does not refer to abstract or constructivist art in his examples of seriation and inflection).

Both seriation and inflection are based on the repetition of elements, with inflection adding a variation which can occur at the expression side, the content side, or both. When changes only occur at the expression side, the perceived object (i.e., the pictorial content) remains the same: Marilyn is seen in different colours, but she is still Marilyn. Changes at the content side affect the perceived object, which is altered in ways that change its essence. A living man can turn into a statue, and a human character may suddenly appear with an animal’s head. We may likewise regard the serialism of Gonyea (Figure 8) as a case of inflection, albeit not of pictorial signs but of plastic/geometrical signs. The series involves a constant repetition of the same geometrical object—the circle—and the inflection is visible as the linear progression of the number of circles and the inventiveness of the patterns formed. This process only concerns the mathematical content side of the work, whilst the expression side remains unchanged as it consistently shows the same neutral contrast between black and white. By contrast, the serial works by Albers evince no variations in geometrical structure, and the inflection solely concerns the colours. To some extent, the same could be said of Gonyea’s contributions to *Abstract Comics*.

If we compare this work to those of Joly (Figure 2), Sabatier (Figure 3) and Crumb (Figure 7), we notice that none of these engage the systematic and serial methods of Gonyea or Albers. There is no consistent repetition of motives; consequently, there is no inflection. Nor do we see the ‘wallpaper effect’ Groensteen associates with pure seriation. The thematic consistency which he observes in the inventory is probably present in the ‘table’ at the left side of Sabatier’s spread (Figure 3), at least if we regard it as a kind of inventory of signs. The successive aspects of the same object or environment implied by Groensteen’s term *décomposition* are absent in both Sabatier and Crumb, and in Joly’s work it is present only in a metaphorical sense. Of Groensteen’s five categories of infra-narrativity, *amalgame* (or *non sequitur*) is the one that most fittingly describes the works by Joly, Sabatier and Crumb.

Concerning the (overly?) common notion of comics as ‘sequential art,’ Groensteen advocates a more unbiased definition of comics and a stricter delimitation of the realm of sequentiality. He does not regard the infra-narrative alternatives as narrative sequences in a proper sense. This becomes clear from his distinction between three additional general categories which, as he emphasizes, should not be confused: the *sequence*, the *series* and the *suite* (Groensteen 2007, 146). We speak of a sequence when a visual area is subdivided and filled with images which are sufficiently related to create a *syntagm* and

a reading experience. A series is only a succession of images governed by a theme or a principle, as an inventory or an inflection. A suite, finally, has no apparent consistency or order. It seems to be synonymous with *amalgame*. If we accept these premises, it would follow that in all their diversity, Joly's, Sabatier's, Crumb's and Gonyea's works may all be called art or even comics, but do not qualify as 'sequential art.'

ABSTRACTION AS COMEDY

To conclude I return to the *comical* aspect of comics with which I began, Rolf Sandqvist's *Funtus*. That modern comics originated in the 'funnies' of newspapers and satirical magazines is easily forgotten when discussing such unfamiliar topics as 'abstract comics.' This is the light-hearted play with words, images and situations which we find in very simple examples such as this extract from a work by Roberto Altmann⁴ who participated in the Lettrist movement in the sixties and organised artistic events in his Liechtenstein hometown Vaduz. In 1967 he finished a manuscript with the title *Geste hypergraphique*, which could be translated as either 'hypergraphic gesture' or 'hypergraphic play.'⁵ The page (Figure 9) is taken from a thirteen-page excerpt in the Cuban journal *Signos* (Altmann 1970, 241). What can be deduced from the 'hypergraphic language' of this excerpt is a story of a feudal society whose inhabitants assume various kinds of funny shapes depending on mood and identity, and where an extra-terrestrial language is spoken. Human semiotic debris like question marks, numbers, stars, arrows, musical notes, astrological symbols, logotypes, chemical formulae and a-semantic exclamations like "EHÖ" are still recognisable.

What seems to take place are lively debates, or perhaps even a political revolution or civil war. Ideas and feelings sometimes float around in an amorphous mud of curved lines and shapes, now and then coagulating into symbols and letter-like forms that disturb the debates. One could just as well say that we see semiotic *tones* (in the Peircean sense) coagulating into types. On the title page, a disc or ball formed by this 'emotional mud' seems to be carried as a tribute to the King. As grotesque as Altmann's pages are, they still fit the idea of comic theatre implied by the French word *geste* in the title *Geste hypergraphique*. The

4 Not to be confused with film director Robert Altman.

5 At least two editions of *Geste Hypergraphique* can be found in library catalogues. One has 87 pages and was published in Vaduz (Centre internationale de creation, 1968). The other has 91-92 pages and is published in Paris (Bouffant, 1967). Both editions are rare. Copies of the Paris edition can however be found at *Bibliothèque Kandinsky* and *Bibliothèque Nationale*. One copy was sold at the Kahn-Dumoussset auction in Paris in April 2014 for 250 Euros.

word *geste* therefore does not refer to a merely random gesture, but to the notion of theatrical performance, here realized in the medium of pictorial and typographic hypergraphia. There might even be an interesting parallel between this *geste* and Alfred Jarry's absurd *Ubu Roi* plays.⁶

That Altmann's *Geste hypergraphique* is not an abstract comic according to Molotiu's definition is evident, because it clearly tells a story in a narrative space. However, if taken seriously, Molotiu's restrictions would exclude many genuinely funny abstract comics—and in fact even some comics printed in his own anthology. I am thinking in particular of Ibn al Rabin's, Andy Bleck's, Mike Getsiv's and Lewis Trondheim's contributions, which clearly have narrative and/or meta-linguistic elements. It seems that in practice, not even Molotiu is able to reject the importance of narrative as a defining characteristic of comics, *including* so-called 'abstract' comics.

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Figure 9 Roberto Altmann, from "Zr + 4HCl → ZrCl4 + 2H2, U + 3Fe2 → UF6" in *Revista Signos*, Vol. 1, page 241. © 1970 Revista Signos.

⁶ A direct connection is not wholly unlikely considering Jarry's role as the founding father of the mock science *pataphysics*, and the fact that many avant-garde artists and poets active in Paris were honoured members of the Collège de 'Pataphysique.

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