

Comic reception revisited. A revision of gender-based reading practices (at school)

Reconsiderar la recepció del còmic. Una revisió de les pràctiques basades en el gènere (a l'escola)

Reconsiderando la recepción del cómic. Una revisión de las prácticas basadas en género (en la escuela)

Carolín Führer. University of Tübingen, Germany. carolin.fuehrer@uni-tuebingen.de.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1459-2364>

Abstract

Comics are often regarded as an optimal medium for learners with reading difficulties. Based on empirical research on reading socialization in school and during leisure time, this article displays that comic books have other educational opportunities to offer.

Instead of making the (re)medialization of gender in comics the starting point of a supposedly boy-specific reading promotion, which (institutionally) reinforces the pictorially depicted gender binarity both on the level of reading practice and on the level of reading content, various practical teaching possibilities are shown to promote gender literacy with comics in education. The article argues for reflection and new non-binary reading education paths that adequately take into account the hybrid mediality of comics and the segment's recent developments in the market (for example in feminist comics).

Key words: comic, gender, critical literacy, media socialization

Resum

Els còmics es consideren sovint com a mitjà per a joves i/o són utilitzats per aprenents amb dificultats de lectura. Tot basant-se en recerca empírica sobre socialització lectora a l'escola i temps d'oci, aquest article mostra que els còmics tenen d'altres oportunitats educatives que oferir.

En lloc de fer la (re)-medialització de les identitats de gènere als còmics el punt de partida d'una suposada promoció de lectura específica per a joves, la qual (institucionalment) intensifica la binarietat del gènere representat, tant a nivell de la pràctica lectora, com a nivell del contingut de la lectura, es mostren diverses possibilitat d'ensenyament pràctic per tal de promoure la literacitat de gènere amb còmics a l'educació. L'article defensa reflexionar-hi al voltant amb aprenents i també al voltant de nous camins educatius de lectures no binàries que prenguen en consideració la medialitat híbrida dels còmics i dels desenvolupaments recents del mercat al segment (com per exemple, els còmics feministes).

Paraules clau: còmic, gènere, medialitat, promoció de la lectura, socialització de la lectura.

Resumen

Los cómics se consideran a menudo un medio para jóvenes y/o son utilizados por aprendices con dificultades de lectura. Basándose en investigación empírica sobre socialización lectora en la escuela y tiempo libre, este artículo muestra que los cómics tienen otras oportunidades educativas que ofrecer.

En lugar de hacer la (re)-medialización de las identidades de género en los cómics el punto de partida de una supuesta promoción de la lectura específica para jóvenes, la cual (institucionalmente) intensifica la binariedad del género representado, tanto a nivel de la práctica lectora, como a nivel del contenido de la lectura, se muestran diversas posibilidades de enseñanza práctica para promover la literacidad de género con cómics en la educación. el artículo defiende reflexionar acerca de este tema con alumnado y acerca de nuevos caminos educativos de lectura no binarias que tomen en consideración la medialidad híbrida de los cómics y de los desarrollos recientes de mercado en el segmento (como por ejemplo, los cómics feministas).

Palabras clave: cómic, género, medialidad, promoción de la lectura, socialización de la lectura.

1. Introduction

In (reading) literacy tests, boys perform worse than girls, even though it is debatable to what extent this is primarily due to the test methods and evaluations (Philipp, 2013). Philipp and Sturm state that it is not possible to clearly prove that boys and girls have different levels of literacy and warn against forcing an overly gender-specific promotion of literacy (Philipp & Sturm, 2011, 88). They emphasize that, with a view to mediation processes, it might be worthwhile to move away from a purely "sex" perspective and focus more on the "gender" character of reading and writing development. The following article aims to start at this point by questioning in what way comics can be said to have a tendency towards a male readership.¹ Thus in section 1, empirical and media-pedagogical findings as well as descriptions based on reader biography of the gender-specific reading of comics in school and free time are presented. Section 2 then takes a look at the subject matter by identifying gender constructions and authorship in comics as a possible starting point for the developments outlined. This leads to the didactic problem of whether and to what extent comics should actually be launched as a suitable subject for inclusive or youth-specific reading promotion. Two fundamental didactic reading questions are connected with this: Is there an "original" male/female interest in reading and how can (and should) reading promotion respond to this: affirmatively or compensatively?

For the use of comics in the classroom, fundamental reading didactic questions arise: Is there a male/female interest in reading them and how can (and should) reading promotion react to this: affirmatively or compensatorily?

¹ This was already strongly argued by Witty, 1941a and b in his surveys of comic book readers; but one also finds these assumptions in current introductions to reading didactics (Garbe, 2020, p. 85).

Against this background, different didactic potentials and consequences of the use of comics in gender-sensitive literacy promotion are discussed in section 3.

2. On the reception of comics in the context of school and leisure worlds of reading media

2.1 On the sex specificity of comic readings

In a recent study (TaMoLi) in Germany and Switzerland², survey data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively from 2,173 students and 116 teachers on texts, motivations and activities in literature classes at lower secondary level. The study showed that students distinguish between what they would like to read at school and what they would like to read in their free time - in other words, there is already a context-related functional differentiation of reading in place.

With regard to graphic narrative and gender, the following findings emerge:

rank	Teachers*	Students, gender-mixed*	
	<i>Text selection^a</i>	<i>Free time reading preferences^b</i>	<i>School reading preferences^b</i>
1	d) Political/community criticism (64.8%)	i) SciFi, Fantasy (46.9%)	d) Political/community criticism (25%) i) SciFi, Fantasy (25%)
2	m) Youth problems (29.8%)	j) Adventure (43.1%)	
3	q) Modern novels (28.2%)	h) Crime novels (40.8%)	g) Horror (24.3%)
4	r) Classical literature (24.7%)	a) Comics (40.2%)	h) Crime novels (23.9%)
5	k) Historical (22.2%)	g) Horror (36.6%)	a) Comics (22.6%)
6	n) Poetry (20.8%)	l) Love (30.9%)	m) Youth problems (21.1%)
7	j) Adventure (16.9%)	c) Sports (28.4%)	e) Science, technology (20.3%)
8	f) Nature (10.1%)	o) Drama (23.1%)	k) History (19.9%)
9	l) Love (9.9%)	m) Youth problems (21%)	j) Adventure (19.5%)
10	h) Thrillers (6%)	q) Modern novels (20.9%)	c) Sports (18.6%)
11	i) SciFi, Fantasy (4.7%)	k) Historical (15.7%)	q) Modern novels (18.3%)
12	o) Drama (4.5%)	b) Music or musicians (15%) s) Fairy tales, legends (15%)	p) Biographies (17.8%)
13	g) Horror (1%)		r) Classical literature (16.8%)
14	p) Biographies (0.8%)	e) Natural sciences, technology (13.5%)	b) Music or musicians (16.4%)
15	c) Sports (0.6%)	f) Nature (13.4%)	f) Nature (16.2%)
16	s) Fairy tales, legends (0.6%)	d) Political/community criticism (12%)	o) Drama (14.7%)
17	e) Natural sciences, technology (0.4%)	p) Biographies (11.9%)	s) Fairy tales, legends (13.8%)
18	a) Comics (0.2%)	n) Poems (6.3%)	l) Love (13.1%)

Table 1. Quantitative findings on reading worlds in lower secondary school (Siebenhüner, Depner, Fässler, Kernen, Bertschi-Kaufmann, Böhme & Pieper, 2019, p. 56)

² Results of the study are available at <https://www.literaturunterricht.ch/>.

Within the differentiations between school and leisure reading, comics are one of the few items which rank high among learners in both domains of interest. This is by no means true to the same extent for other texts: The reception of texts that are critical of politics and society ranks first among learners' school preferences, while in the leisure domain they are almost at the bottom of the list. Conversely, topics such as romance and sport occupy top places in the leisure sector, but for school these are not considered as conceivable reading topics. From a gender perspective, it should also be mentioned that

In German-speaking countries there is empirical evidence of a high interest in reading comics among male adolescents, which is, however, hardly considered in school reading practice.

48.5% of secondary school students in the study expressed an interest in comics for leisure time, 28.8% also for school; in both domains of interest, comics come first among male children and adolescents in leisure time and at school (Siebenhüner et al., 2019, p. 1). In contrast, a significant difference can be observed among girls: 32.1% attest to an interest in comics in their leisure time, but only 16.4% at school, which is not that low in relation to the maximum value for reading preferences at school. This is confirmed by older findings which likewise observed a significantly higher interest in comics among boys (Schwippert, Bos, & Lankes, 2004). Of course, the selection of gender-oriented reading cannot be justified solely on the basis of students' interests. Nevertheless, a gender gap can be identified here, which becomes even more pronounced when the selection of teachers with a view to gender-coded literature teaching practices is added for comparison. For, according to the teachers, the interests of the learners represented an essential category in making text selection decisions at the secondary level. However, the findings with reference to formats of graphic storytelling show that teachers do not realize this goal: Compared to all other categories favored by students in leisure time and school, comics rank far behind at 0.2% in text selection (Siebenhüner et al. 2019, 56). This difference may also explain teacher stereotypes about girls reading avidly and boys reading less (Retelsdorf, Schwartz & Asbrock 2015; Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2018): A reading medium that is particularly popular among boys does not find its way into school literature teaching practice; not least because comics may not yet be perceived as (sophisticated) literature.³ With a view to the described increased preference for comics by boys and the intrinsic motivation to read that is developed comparatively earlier among girls (Philipp, 2011, p. 7), this is a serious factor, because the downward trend in reading motivation in the course of reading socialization can hit boys even more severely. Teachers may waste potential at secondary level here, especially in the area of motivation, which can be verified as a categorical difference in reading development.

³ This can possibly also be explained historically, as comics in Germany were in international comparison subject to a pejorative public valuation for a very long time (see Grünewald 2014).

In German-speaking countries, there is empirical evidence of a high interest in reading among male adolescents, which is, however, hardly considered in school reading practice.

2.2 On the limits of gender stereotyping in comic reception

Of course, which comics students and teachers actually have in mind under the term "Comics" is not irrelevant for the significance of the cited study. Nor does this clarify the significance and function of comics in the diverse spectrum of reading and media activities of secondary school students, which is why I would like to further differentiate these preliminary findings in the following. Comics are specifically introduced and selected in the media socialization process by the different instances (family, school, peer), so I think that this can result in gender-specific differences with regard to reading development.

Studies by the Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (Media Education Research Association Southwest) show, that comics already play an important role in children's media structures, comic book heroes and characters are even identified as possible "idols" by six- to twelve-year-olds of both sexes (MPFS, 2018, p. 21). In this context it is noteworthy that among children of this age group, *Greg's Diary* by Jeff Kinney has been the most frequently read book for years (MPFS, 2018).⁴ However, this phenomenon cannot only be explained by the medium itself, but seems to be much more justifiable in terms of the anti-heroic presentation of characters and the associated different forms of identificatory reading as well as serial storytelling.⁵ The media educator Claudia Wegener emphasizes the importance of comics in children's media socialization, especially with a view to the phenomena of convergence: literary models, film adaptations and computer games are often closely connected (Wegener, 2018, p. 156). Furthermore, comics are also part of the socio-spatial structure of media socialization in the 'socio-ecological center (parental home, school...), as well as in the periphery. Thus, in addition to serial popular phenomena such as *Greg's diary*, *Asterix* and *Tintin ComicCon* and the fan culture around mangas are also part of a diverse media-ecological and socio-spatial localization (Wegener, 2018, p. 160). Wegener assumes that the individual (and thus also gender-specific) use of comics "[...] is determined by the interpretation that adolescents themselves experience and develop in the course of their socialization, but on the other hand also by the intention with which comics are inserted into the respective spaces of growing up" (Wegener, 2018, p. 161). Among other things, she focuses on the fact that there are generation-specific media practice cultures which, in the parents' generation (and thus in the media ecology center), span a range of comic media

⁴ Unfortunately, in the JIM study on the 12-19 age group (in contrast to previous years), reading preferences are no longer differentiated; the study only refers to questions about analogue and digital reading, which do not appear to be meaningful for comics, as they are easily accessible in both formats.

⁵ It should be noted at this point, that the hero is not just an "average" 11–14-year-old, but a male character.

educations from protective and nurturing to aesthetic-culture-oriented, critical-emancipatory to subject- and action-oriented (Tulodziecki 2018, p. 186), which then have a co-constructive effect on the reception of comics. This socio-spatial location in childhood and adolescence appears essential with regard to comic reception (similarly Grünewald 2014) and also determines gender-related reading practices. Parental stereotypes of reading and reading practices have been shown to play an important role here (Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2019). Cedeira Serantes (2019), who conducted 17 "in-depth interviews" with teens and young adults who would describe themselves as "readers of comics for pleasure," also emphasizes the function of comics as a link in the media landscape in which young people move:

Comics reading emerges as a sophisticated practice that shares elements with other media practices but that also has unique characteristics that make it especially suitable for and compatible with some of the conditions young people live under in contemporary society. The participants [of the study, CF] describe a complex medium that challenges and comforts them, that is accessible but is also intricate and that deserves time and attention; [...] This media landscape creates more possibilities for readers to experience a text, to create meaning and memories, and to study why and how each technology and narrative is integrated and experienced. (Cedeira Serantes, 2019, S. 85)

What seems to be decisive is the co-construction of socio-spatial localizations in media socialization. Therefore, gender-specific definitions are constituted by the subjectivation (following Butler, 1997) of media biographical development.

2.3 Subject and subjectivation: media-relatedness of gender-based reading socialization

Within the framework of reception studies on comics (among others Hofmann & Führer, 2017; Führer, 2020 a; Führer, 2020 b) I have therefore repeatedly asked primary and secondary school students as well as university students to produce autobiographical texts that also describe their relationship to comics. In the following I present two of these self-descriptions at crucial transitions in schooling (and reading socialization) - from primary to secondary school and from lower secondary school to upper secondary school - in order to be able to specify and entangle the preceding remarks in the form of a subject analysis. The cases condense observations that can be made comparatively by going through the developmental trajectories of reading biographies. They do not claim to be statistically representative, they are oriented towards the subjectivation research (Geimer, Amling & Bosančić, 2019) in the paradigms of interpretative social research (Rosenthal, 2018) and biographical research (e.g. Garbe, 1993; Graf, 2007). The examples help to understand the relation or the tension between normative media orders (and more or less hegemonic subject norms) and the habitus of the actors.

Erik, a student in a grade 4 class in transition (2nd semester) to secondary school (gymnasialer Bildungsweg), writes about his experiences with graphic narratives:

I don't read comics that often, I read more books. [I read comics, CF] Sometimes when I'm bored. I used to look at books when I was a child and not at comics. Currently I don't read that many comics. The only comics I like are The Fantastic Four.⁶

What is interesting about this statement, is the categorical distinction between comics and books, which is often found in this age group. On the one hand, this may show the idea that comics are in booklet form (or digital?). On the other hand, these statements also indicate how few genres are present in this phase of reading socialization. At this age, reading biographies are strongly constituted by media forms, less by genres which function trans medially and could allow more precise indications of preferences. Erik is no comic reader for passion, but he does not fundamentally reject comics. The comic series explicitly named by Erik, *Fantastic Four* was first published in 1961. It initiated the now famous Marvel Universe. The connection to a media network (here in the form of films from the Marvel universe) and seriality appear in the data material as a media habitus that favors comic reception.

Ava, an 11th grade student at a general education high school (Allgemeinbildendes Gymnasium) writes:

For many young people, comics are part of everyday life, but I am not one of them. I do like to read in my free time, but I never read comics. However, if you look at the basic structure of a comic, i.e. pictures with text, or rather action is depicted in pictures, I have to say that I have read one kind of comic in my life, and that is picture books. When I was younger I used to look at them with my family and they would read them to me. Later I read "Greg's Diary", and I also know comics like "anime" and "mangas", but I haven't read them. Until now, I haven't really been able to get excited about comics. Nowadays, however, more and more comics are being made into films, such as Superman or Riverdale, of which I also watch the film version.⁷

⁶ Original text in German: Ich lese nicht so oft Comics sondern mehr Bücher. [Ich lese Comics, Author] Manchmal wenn mir langweilig ist. Ich habe mir Bücher als Kind angeschaut und keine Comics. Aktuell lese ich nicht so viele Comics. Die einzigen Comics, die ich mag, sind die von den Fantastischen Vier.

⁷ Original text in German: Comics gehören für viele Jugendliche zum Alltag, doch ich bin keiner davon. In meiner Freizeit lese ich zwar gerne, aber ich lese nie Comics. Wenn man jedoch den Grundaufbau eines Comics, also Bilder mit Text, bzw. die Handlung wird in Bildern wiedergegeben, betrachtet, so muss ich sagen, dass ich in meinem Leben doch schon eine Art Comic gelesen habe nämlich Bilderbücher. Diese habe ich als ich jünger war zusammen mit meiner Familie angeguckt und mir wurde daraus vorgelesen. Später habe ich mal „Gregs Tagebuch“ gelesen, und ich kenne auch Comics wie „Anime“ und „Mangas“, die ich allerdings nicht gelesen

The fact that Ava does not like reading comics tends to fit into the dichotomous picture of the gender distribution norms of comic readers (TaMoLi). Ava's reflection on her non-interest in comics should be emphasized: She says she has references to graphic narration about reading situations she experienced as a child and she "knows" comics and their film adaptations. The widespread use of certain comic content in other media shows how normative media orders also break through gender binary of comic reception.

Theses that comics have the potential to encourage boys in the course of reading development because they are close to a world of reception that is less oriented towards realism (empirically studied

Subjective preferences for graphic narrative are characterised by a variety of functions in the media and reading socialisation process, the transmediality of comics, and references to and effects of seriality. This orientation can be favoured by genre-related strong emotional activations due to the psychosemiotics of comics

by Andringa 2004, among others) or that they even accommodate boys' lower reading abilities cannot be condensed as a hegemonic subjective norm on the basis of quantitative and qualitative research I have examined so far. Subjective preferences for graphic narration are characterized by a variety of functions in media and reading socialisation process, transmedial references and effects of seriality. Genre-specific high emotional and in part subjective activations caused by

the psychosemiotics of comics (e.g. funnies, superheroes, mangas)⁸ can favor this alignment.

Since comics are not only processed in the context of cultural norms in media socialization, but are also bound to the media themselves, gender-specific differences also result from these norms. For this reason, in addition to the reception-related disposition, the medium of comics itself will now be examined more closely. For this purpose, the gender concepts negotiated in them will be presented and it is discussed what this means for the acquisition of gender and media literacy.

3. (Re-)Medialization of Gender in Comics and Graphic Novels

By now, the strong gendering of the medium of comics and its represented content has been intensively addressed in comic research (Sina, 2016; Aldama, 2020). Selected aspects are now used to discuss the strong gendering of the medium of comics and its depicted content.

habe, aber bis jetzt konnte ich mich leider noch nicht wirklich für Comics begeistern. Heutzutage werden aber auch immer mehr Comics verfilmt, wie z.B. Superman oder Riverdale, deren Verfilmung ich auch schaue.

⁸ The latter observation has already led to the fact that these genres are also evaluated as fruitful for bibliotherapeutic approaches (Oskamp, 2017). Packard (2006) explains the affective meaning of comics in this way: a moment of the reader's self-awareness at the moment of reading is simultaneously attributed to the character depicted.

With regard to the action comics with superheroes frequently mentioned by the students in the reading biographies (and not only for these), a distinction must be made between pictorial representation and social reality in the processes of representation.

[...] Representations of the woman often serve as a mirror and projection surface for the man who creates them. As a dream image, imagined fantasy, fetish, cover memories, these representations vicariously express his power, his creativity and his cultural products. This means, however, that as a representational image, the woman is present; as a represented subject and producer, she is absent.⁹

Especially action and superhero comics are made by male comic artists (!) who specifically target stereotypical overdrawn because it is part of the genre-specific gendering of visual languages in comics:

Everyone knows that it is girly to prefer sentimental, communication-based comics [,] and that it is macho to like action comics with superheroes and aliens. In terms of visual language, comics for boys prefer to depict movement, while comics for girls focus on emotions.¹⁰

Packard et al. (2019) further highlight in their monograph on comic analysis that the gender category must always be considered in dialogue with other structural categories of comic production, reception and aesthetics (Packard et al., 2019). They illustrate this pointedly with a comic strip by Hochstädter (Figure 1) (p. 155 ff.):



Figure 1. Comic strip by Hochstädter (2010, p. 70, cited in Packard et al., 2019, p. 155).

⁹ Original text in German: “[...] Repräsentationen von der Frau dienen hier oft als Spiegel und Projektionsfläche für den sie erschaffenden Mann. Als Traumbild, imaginierte Phantasie, Fetisch, Deckerinnerungen bringen diese Repräsentationen seine Macht, seine Kreativität und seine Kulturprodukte stellvertretend zum Ausdruck. Das bedeutet nun aber, als Repräsentationsbild ist die Frau anwesend, als repräsentiertes Subjekt und Produzentin ist sie abwesend” (Sina, 2016, p. 72).

¹⁰ Original text in German: “Jede_r weiß, dass es girly ist, sentimentale, kommunikationsbasierte Comics zu bevorzugen[,] und dass es macho ist, Actioncomics mit Superheld_innen und Aliens toll zu finden. Im Hinblick auf die visuelle Sprache werden in Comics für Buben bevorzugt Bewegung dargestellt, während Comics für Mädchen sich auf Gefühle konzentrieren” (Martindale 2011, p. 342 cit. after Packard et al. 2019, p. 157).

In Hochstädter's comic strip, the constitutive interrelationship between gender and genre is thematized and ironized: The way the characters' clothes change from panel to panel changes not only the typification of the characters, but also their respective genre assignment and the stereotypical gender roles associated with it. In the Western, adventure and science fiction genres, conventional dichotomies of gender are restaged in the visual language (and produced in the sense of genre-specific addressing).

There is a binary organized repetition of gender-coded, conventionalized bodies and cultural characteristics (clothing, etc.): While the male figure is drawn with a prominent angular face, an Adam's apple, short hair, stubble and broad muscular shoulders, the figure on the left is marked as female with the help of long hair, cleavage, soft round facial features and narrow shoulders. In the second panel, the figures are assigned to a definite gender not only by their anatomical features, but also by their clothing and headgear within the binary heterosexual matrix, etc. (Packard et al., 2019, p. 156)¹¹

The performativity of gender orders is emphasized by the repetition of the figure arrangement, the typography or even the relationship between image and text. Thus, the invariability of the role attributions or the image statement is further emphasized by the fact that it is stereotypically the female connoted figure that addresses the male counterpart.

Packard et al. (2019) point out that there are cultural variations, for example in manga, in which gendered addresses are already produced qua genre (Packard et al., 2019, p. 157).

On the one hand, the mediated gendering of comics may explain gender-specific reading interests, but on the other hand, it is also a potential starting point for media awareness regarding gender.

4. From "boys' reading promotion" to gender literacy

Instead of making the (re)medialization of gender identities in comics the starting point of a supposedly boy-specific reading promotion, and thus to (institutionally) reinforce the pictorially represented binary on both the level of reading practice as well as on the level of reading content, the following approaches present alternative ways of reading didactics within and outside of school settings. In the

¹¹ The first panels are only listed as examples to specify the context. One could make similar observations by analogy for panels 3 and 4. For example, in panel 4 it is Ellen Ripley from the Alien film series who is shaved bald in order to shield her from the male gaze (and here, very specifically, from potential rape) in the men's prison. In this respect, the conventional dichotomy remains intact.

following the focus lies on gender-sensitive as well as gender-neutral approaches to reception of comics in the classroom (instead of a gender-specific approach).

4.1 Re- and deconstructions of (re-)mediated gender

In gender-sensitive reading didactics, comics and graphic novels exemplarily allow conventionally "established norms" and stereotypes in media to become visible and to be questioned accordingly (Sina, 2016, p. 81). For example, if one examines comics of adolescence, which deals conventionally with young people's search for identity, one can re- and deconstruct the comic-specific interweaving of gender and mediality already in covers of current coming-of-age comics (fig.2). In the following, this will be exemplified by two graphic novels, which in their marketing and layout certainly claim to have aesthetic pretensions. Boulet and Bagiu's *Blank Slate* is about a young woman who has lost her identity along with her memory. In the comic, which is kept close to reality, only basic everyday problems (relatives, friends, work, housing, past) are discussed as questions of identification. In *Vacuum* by Lukas Jüliger, on the other hand, it is a young man who experiences the intrusion of the radically indeterminate, even uncanny into his world. In the work, which oscillates on the edge of the fantastic, non-identity is negotiated not so much in a life-world dimension as in an anthropological one. There are questions of love, death, normality and madness as well as evil that form the horizon of the adolescent development of (non-)identity. A gender-sensitive deconstruction can be achieved for example through discussions about the cover (who would read this or that comic and for what reasons) or by analyzing the cover according to predefined criteria on the gender-specific contexts of visual language, genre and character performances in the (implied) fictional universe. It should be noted that communication about the stereotypical text/image performances will only be possible with appropriately developed reception skills for text and image as well as appropriately developed meta-reflexive skills.

Instead of a performative consolidation of gender norms in comic in literary education, it is worthwhile to instruct gender-reconstructive and deconstructive processes of comic reflection as well as diversity-oriented comic reading.



With regard to gender-sensitive reading didactics, it must be taken into consideration that publishers and cartoonists address gender constructs as a precondition on the part of the recipient under which these comics are read, and thus also overdraw them in the sense of the development-specific need for orientation in this phase. The outlined re- and deconstructing analyses of stereotypical or even binarity-hypertrophying comic worlds must not lead to exclusion effects regarding certain gender constructions in the classroom. Thus, with regard to the self-reflection (and cognitive maturation) of young people, it must be asked whether the addressing of these comics does not lead to (socially manufactured and emotional) binary decisions in reading culture instead of enabling diversity in (genre-specific) reading development.

4.2 Initiate gender literacy through media: Feminist Comics and gender binarity reflections

However, there are also examples in these binary constructed comics that explicitly deal with gender, identity (and sexuality), especially on the part of female comic artists, whose numbers have increased significantly in recent decades. *Girlsplaining* by Katja Klengel, for example, is deliberately kept in pink, stylistically quotes Sailor Moon comics by Naoko Takeuchi and deals with questions of the social and cultural symbolism of “the feminine” from the perspective of an adolescent. The text asks questions about the female sex in unavoidably funny everyday situations, including why vulva, menstruation and

other topics are not discussed and are tabooed in daily life. This kind of graphic narrations are mostly funny and entertaining for a specific group of female addressees, but does not penetrate deeper questions, although these may arise in follow-up communication. More unconventional are autobiographical graphic novels like Ulli Lust's *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life* and *How I Tried to Become a Good Person* in which structure and coloring are also important narrative devices. Particularly her visualizations of bodies and sexuality are drastic and radical in their explicitness because bodies often become allegories within their fictional universe. By focusing on these modes of representation, mimetic readings, i.e. readings that understand the characters as images of reality (Gymnich, 2010, p. 256) - despite or precisely because of their autofictional narration - could be increasingly prevented and stereotypical patterns of perception or attribution could be broken in favor of diverse readings. These and other feminist comics such as *The Elephant in the Room*, *Fruit of Knowledge*, *Busengewunder* or the science fiction series *Bitch Planet* enable gender sensitization. However, in order not to be exclusionary (for the male readers) qua content again, this could be only *one* possibility among others, to do genre-contrastive-analytical work or to initiate more diverse perspectives on sex and gender by means of production-oriented tasks.

Finally, there is also a growing market of genres in the comics segment that use the potentials of comics to dissolve gender binaries more explicitly (Eckhoff- Heindl & Sina, 2020) and renegotiate gender identity both in the fictional universe and in their mediality. In his autobiographical graphic novel *Hexenblut* (Witch's Blood), for example, Suskas Lötzerich talks humorously, openly and straightforwardly about his wild youth as a punk, the injuries that life can inflict on transsexual people like him, and above all about his search for his very own sexual identity.

4.3 Stimulating fiction reflection: On comic-specific reality construction

One didactically gender neutral, identity-oriented way is to use the hybrid mediality of image and text elements in comics, which has the potential to "shake up" binary oppositions such as man/woman (Sina, 2016, p. 76.), as a basis for the examination of gender-related concepts of roles, and thus to offer a gender-diverse approach to this medium for all learners - literal, literary and cultural.

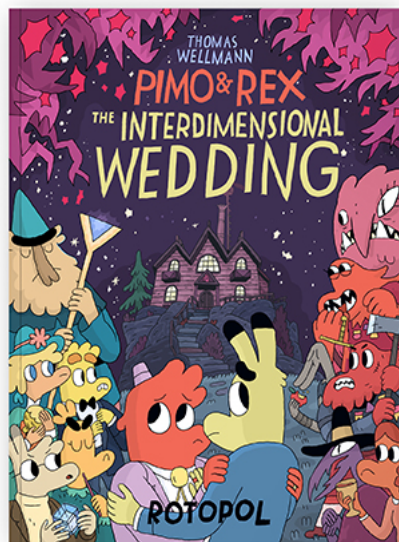


Figure 3. Cover for the sequel to the successful debut *Pimo and Rex*

Comics such as *Pimo and Rex* (Fig. 3), for instance, have cartoon protagonists who are supposed to be human beings; however, it is ultimately entirely up to the recipients how they imagine the fictional actors (and their perceptibility to their fictional contemporaries). If it is true that Pimo and Rex are not dogs, then the cartooned pictorial objects conceal their referential meaning twice over: not only that they can hardly be pinned down to a specific appearance and gender. Conversely, they show many things that do not belong to the creatures depicted in this way within the depicted world: all the characteristics that belong to dogs and thus lie more in the third symbolic space (Wilde, 2021). In contrast to a naturalizing reading that always assumes the representation of a world in fantastic, abstracted and overdrawn cartoon images that largely corresponds to ours, at least in its perceptibility, it is also possible to argue the opposite:

For the fantastic worlds of comics, manga and animation not only locally break with regularities - for example, when Rex finally leads his fiancé Leopold down the aisle or individual characters develop superhero powers - but also exhibit a particular visual ontology on a global level. After all, when it comes to cartooned animal beings and their gender, we can never be quite sure: 'Are these humanized animals or animalized humans?'

A detachment of depicted cartoon worlds from all claims of lifeworld reality and gender identities is particular to manga and anime discourse, which plays a significant role for young fan cultures, also argumentatively justifiable (Wilde, 2021). For although figurative abstraction continually invites identification (McCloud, 1994, p. 36), the pictorial plane simultaneously introduces the artificial and self-referential aesthetics of gender (Sina, 2016, p. 51).

5. Conclusion and perspective

The article was able to show that the reception of comics is gender-specific but should be addressed differently in reading didactics. Instead of a performative consolidation, it is worthwhile to instruct gender-reconstructive and deconstructive processes of media reflection as well as diversity-oriented reading and literature teaching that either accentuates different multimodal reception skills or reading engagement and text involvement through an appropriate choice of media with image-text openness or an explicit reflection.

6. References

Primary literature

- Bagieu, P. (2013). *Wie ein leeres Blatt* (Boulet, Illus.). Hamburg: Carlsen. [Bagieu, P. (2016). *Blank Slate* (Boulet, Illus.). Delcourt.]
- DeConnick, K.S. & Wilson IV, R. (2015, 2017). *Bitch Planet*, vol. 1 & 2 (T. Soma, V. De Landro, Illus.). Image Comics.
- Frühbeis, L. (2020). *Busengewunder. Feministische Kolumnen*. Hamburg: Carlsen.
- Jüliger, L. (2013). *Vakuum*. Reprodukt.
- Kinney, J. (2007 ff.). *Gregs Tagebuch*. Baumhaus. [Kinney, J. (2007ff.). *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. London: Penguin Books.]
- Klengel, K. (2018). *Girlsplaining*. Reprodukt. [Klengel, K. (2021). *Girlsplaining*. Boom Entertainment.]
- Lötzerich, S. (2014). *Hexenblut*. Wien: Luftschacht.
- Lust, U. (2009). *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens*. Avant. [Lust, U. (2013). *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.]
- Lust, U. (2017). *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu werden*. Suhrkamp. [Lust, U. (2019). *How I Tried To Be A Good Person*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.]
- Spring (Hg.) (2016). *The elephant in the Room - Sonderausgabe made in India*. Spring, 13. [Spring Collective (2018). *The Elephant in the Room – Women Draw Their World*. New Dehli: Zubaan.]
- Strömquist, L. (2017). *Vom Ursprung der Welt*. Avant. [Strömquist, L. (2018). *Fruit of Knowledge*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.]
- Wellmann, T. (2013, 2016). *Pimo & Rex*. Rotopol. [Wellmann, T. (2013, 2016). *Pimo & Rex*. London: Blank Slate Books.]

Secondary literature

- Aldama, F.L. (Ed.) (2020). *The routledge companion to gender and sexuality in comic book studies*. Routledge.
- Andringa, E. (2004). The interface between fiction and life: Patterns of identification in reading autobiographies. *Poetics Today*, 25(2), 205-240.

- Brendel-Perpina, I., Heiser, I., & König, N. (2020). *Literaturunterricht gendersensibel planen. Grundlagen – Methoden – Unterrichtsvorschläge*. Klett.
- Cedeira Serantes, L. (2019). *Young People, Comics and Reading: Exploring a Complex Reading Experience*. Cambridge UP.
- Cohn, N., Taylor, R., & Pederson, K. (2017). A picture is worth more words over time: Multimodality and narrative structure across eight decades of american superhero comics. *Multimodal Communication*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1515/mc-2017-0003>
- Butler, J. (2020). *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*. Suhrkamp. (21st ed., orig. 1991)
- Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press.
- Eckhoff-Heindl, N. & Sina, V. (2020). *Spaces between; Gender, diversity and identity in comics*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Führer, C. (2020 a). *Reception of comics as multimodal experience: Approaches to (suitable) writing practices in German secondary schools*. Filoteknos, 10. Reading – Experiences – Emotions. Literature for Children's and Young Adults – Theory and Practice of Reception, 404-416. doi: 10.23817/filotek.10-29
- Führer, C. (2020 b). Grafisches Erzählen zwischen subjektiver Involviertheit und genauer Text-Bildwahrnehmung. Zur Rekonstruktion von Rezeptionsherausforderungen im Schreibunterricht der Sekundarstufen. *Medien im Deutschunterricht* 2, 1-21. doi:10.18716/OJS/MIDU/2020.2.9
- Garbe, C. (Ed.) (1993). *Frauen lesen: Untersuchungen und Fallgeschichten zur "weiblichen Lektürepraxis" und zur literarischen Sozialisation von Studentinnen*. Literatur & Erfahrung.
- Garbe, C. (2020). *Lesekompetenz fördern*. Reclam.
- Geimer, A., Amling, S. & Bosančić, S. (2019). *Subjekt und Subjektivierung – Empirische und theoretische Perspektiven auf Subjektivierungsprozesse*. Springer
- Graf, W. (2007). *Lesegenese in Kindheit und Jugend: Einführung in die literarische Sozialisation*. Schneider Hohengehren.
- Grünewald, D. (2014). Zur Comicrezeption in Deutschland. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 33–34 (64), 42–48.
- Gymnich, M. (2010). Methoden der feministischen Literaturwissenschaft und der Gender Studies. In V. Nünning & A. Nünning (Eds.), *Methoden der literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Textanalyse: Ansätze – Grundlagen – Modellanalysen* (pp. 251–269). Metzler.
- Hoffmann, J. & Führer, C. (2017). Zum didaktischen Potenzial von Graphic Novels. In D. Scherf (Ed.) *Inszenierungen literalen Lernens: Kulturelle Anforderungen und individueller Kompetenzerwerb* (S. 192–205). Schneider Hohengehren.
- McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: A kitchen sink book*. Harper Collins.
- MPFS Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (2018). KIM-Studie 2018. Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang. 6- bis 13-Jähriger. <https://www.mpfs.de/studien/kim-studie/2018/>
- Muntoni, F. & Retelsdorf, J. (2018). Gender-specific teacher expectations in reading: The role of teachers' gender stereotypes. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 54, 212–220.
- Muntoni, F. & Retelsdorf, J. (2019). At their children's expense: How parents' gender stereotypes affect their children's reading outcomes. *Learning and Instruction*, 60, 95–103.
- Oskamp, U. (2017). *Bibliotherapeutische Arbeit mit Comics: Zur narrativen Funktion von Bild-Text-Gefügen im Religionsunterricht der Grundschule*. LIT.
- Packard, S. (2006). *Anatomie des Comics. Psychosemiotische Medienanalyse*. Wallstein.
- Packard, S., Rauscher, A., Sina, V., Thon, J.N., Wilde, L.R.A. & J. Wildfeuer (2019). *Comicanalyse: Eine Einführung*. Metzler.

- Philipp, M. (2011). Lesen und Geschlecht 2.0: Fünf empirisch beobachtbare Achsen der Differenz erneut betrachtet. *Leseforum Schweiz*, 11(1). http://www.leseforum.ch/myUploadData/files/2011_1_Philipp.pdf/ Accessed 16.4.2020.
- Philipp, Maik (2013). Die feinen Unterschiede. Ein Forschungsüberblick zum Zusammenhang von Geschlecht und Lesemotivationen sowie -verstehen. In Lundt, Bea; Tholen, Toni (Eds.), „Geschlecht“ in der Lehramtsausbildung. Die Beispiele Geschichte und Deutsch. ,(pp. 297–321.) Lit.
- Philipp, M. (2011). *Lesesozialisation in Kindheit und Jugend: Lesemotivation, Leseverhalten und Lesekompetenz in Familie, Schule und Peer-Beziehungen*. Kohlhammer.
- Philipp, M. & Sturm, A. (2011). Literalität und Geschlecht: Zum subjektiv wahrgenommenen und in Leistungstests ermittelten schriftsprachlichen Leistungsvermögen von Jungen und Mädchen. *Didaktik Deutsch*, 16(31), 68-95.
- Retelsdorf, J., Schwartz, K. & Asbrock, F. (2015). „Michael can’t read!“ Teachers’ gender stereotypes and boys’ reading self-concept. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 107, 186–194.
- Rosenthal, G. (2018). *Interpretive Social Research. An Introduction*. Universitätsverlag.
- Schilcher, A. (2010). Geschlechterdifferenzierung im Literaturunterricht. In V. Frederking, H.-W. Huneke, A. Krommer & C. Meier (Eds.), *Taschenbuch des Deutschunterrichts. Literatur- und Mediendidaktik*. (2nd ed.). (pp. 366-385). Schneider Hohengehren.
- Schilcher, A. (2016). Letztendlich sind wir dem Universum egal: Identitätskonstruktionen jenseits von Geschlecht und Gender. In K. Müller, Karla, J.-O. Decker, H. Kraus, Hans, & A. Schilcher (Eds.), *Genderkompetenz mit Kinder- und Jugendliteratur entwickeln: Grundlagen – Analysen – Modelle* (pp.175-193). Schneider Hohengehren.
- Schreier, M. & Odag, Ö. (2004). Genuss und Distanz: Geschlechterspezifische Kompetenzen beim Umgang mit Realität(en) und Fiktion(en). *SPIEL* (1), 94-115.
- Schwippert, K., Bos, W., & Lankes, E.-M. (2004). Lesen Mädchen anders? *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 7(2), 219-234.
- Siebenhüner, S., Depner, S., Fässler, D., Kernen, N., Bertschi-Kaufmann, A., Böhme, K. & I. Pieper (2019). Unterrichtstextauswahl und schülerseitige Leseinteressen in der Sekundarstufe I: Ergebnisse aus der binationalen Studie TAMoLi. *Didaktik Deutsch* 47, 44–64.
- Sina, V. (2016). *Comic – Film – Gender: Zur (Re-)Medialisierung von Geschlecht im Comicfilm*. Transcript.
- Tilley, C.L. & Weiner, R.G. (2017). Teaching and learning with comics. In F. Bramlett, R.T. Cook, & A. Meskin (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (pp. 358–366). Routledge.
- Thon, J.-N. (2016). *Transmedial narratology and contemporary media culture*. U of Nebraska P. Tulodziecki, G. (2018). Medienpädagogik und Comics. In C. Dallmann, A. Hartung, A. Aigner & K.-T. Buchele (Eds.), *Comics. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven aus Theorie und Praxis auf ein Stiefkind der Medienpädagogik* (pp. 183–200). Kopaed.
- Wegener, C. (2018). Comics im sozialökologischen (Forschungs-)Feld – eine sozialräumliche Verankerung. In C. Dallmann, A. Hartung, A. Aigner & K.-T. Buchele (Eds.), *Comics. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven aus Theorie und Praxis auf ein Stiefkind der Medienpädagogik* (pp. 153–166). kopaed.
- Wilde, L.R.A. (2021). Die ‚Cartoon‘-Bildlichkeit von Comic, Manga und Animation: Referential meaning, dritter Zeichenraum, heuristischer Zweifel. In M. Kern (Eds.), *Visuelle Skepsis: Wie Bilder zweifeln (Studien aus dem Warburg-Haus)* DeGruyter i.E.
- Witty, P. (1941a). Children’s interest in reading the comics. *The Journal of Experimental Education* 10(2), 100–104.
- Witty, P. (1941b). Reading the comics: A comparative study. *The Journal of Experimental Education* 10(2), 105–109.

Wrobel, D. (2017). Comics/Graphic novels. In J. Baurmann, C. Kammler, & A. Müller (Eds.), *Handbuch Deutschunterricht* (pp. 226–229). Klett.

How to cite this paper:

Führer, C. (2021). Comic reception revisited. A revision of gender-based reading practices at school. *Journal of Literary Education*, (5), 94-111.
<https://doi.org/10.7203/JLE.5.20840>