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# Reception of Comics as a Multimodal Experience – Approaches to (Suitable) Writing Practices in German Secondary Schools

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## Reception of Comics as a Multimodal Experience – Approaches to (Suitable) Writing Practices in German Secondary Schools

**Abstract:** Beyond teaching practices that have treated comics and graphic novels principally as instruments of promoting reading until now, this article points out the multimodality and own aesthetic of this media. It therefore inquires more precisely into what a suitable multimodal aesthetic reception might look like in secondary school, that avoids a technologically determinative functional development and relates reading, writing, and designing to each other operationally.

To this end, (previous) comprehension models for text-picture-integration are brought into focus, with reference to select findings on the research-based didactics of writing. This is supplemented by explorative analyses of how comics are really received in authentic writing lessons. The essay concludes with a combination of these perspectives to offer a point of view on bridging classroom practices and the findings regarding the reception to deal with current possibly neglected aspects of comics.

**Keywords:** multimodal literacy, comic, aesthetic reading, writing practices

### 1. INTRODUCTION: MULTIMODAL LITERATURE IN THE LEARNING CULTURE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL

Developing a visual awareness as part of dealing with digitization is obviously important, just as it seems clear that meanings are not mediated and retained exclusively through either text *or* image, but rather via different (semiotic) modes and/or their interactions.

Learners themselves confirm that images have a positive effect on cognition and motivation in this context, yet they favor written text in learning processes while only taking a cursory look at pictures or not integrating them in a controlled way into their learning processes (Kist, 2016: 379). In addition, often stereotypical notions of “right texts and reading right” exist, whereas learners, especially those in secondary education, frequently perceive only a fraction of

their own literacy to be so (Wiesner 2014). Comics are an interesting object in this context especially because they are “suitable for and compatible with some of the conditions young people live under in contemporary society” (Serantes 2019: 84).

To this end, I begin by bringing (previous) comprehension models for the reception processes of text and picture together and relating them to selected findings on the didactics of writing at different learner levels. The article examines what a suitable aesthetic multimodal reception in secondary school classes might be which avoids an excess of structuralist formulas and an overload of formal interpretation (authors’ preface). First, I will offer an explorative analyses of task processing to the *drüben!* comic in three 8<sup>th</sup>-grade classes. Then, I will reconstruct which reading and learning cultures are visible in the multimodal reception of the secondary school students. The concluding section combines these perspectives into a wholistic, yet differentiated, view on the potential of writing about comics.

## 2. (COMPREHENSION-FOCUSED) THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE RECEPTION OF MULTIMODAL LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

The texts that adolescents encounter today are often multimodal, meaning they incorporate a variety of modes, including visual images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text. Expanding the perspectives students use to make sense of these multimodal texts is an important part of comprehension instruction. (Serafini, 2011: 342)

In the Anglo-American sphere, Frank Serafini pointed out, in relation to multimodal texts, how reading-practice in the classroom has been affected by changes in reading (Serafini 2014). In German literacy education it appears at first glance that cognitive “reading-strategies” are frequently taught with the aim of boosting the comprehension of conventional texts with linear structures or factual texts.

Hence, in addition to the integration and construction of cognitive-linguistic assets into a situation model<sup>1</sup> (see figure 1 after Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983), comprehension models must also take visual pictures that are first translated into mental depictions (*images*) and then into language (see Klemm & Stöckl 2011) into account. Owing to the multimodal surface of graphic literature, the pictures and text (and their combinations) if any must be dealt with regarding their mental reconstruction, since they must be integrated into a situation model (see figure 2) that includes the intermodal relations. They pose their own specific challenges because of the sketched indeterminacy of the pictures and text.

<sup>1</sup> The concept meant here is the mental model that is described in the theory of text comprehension according to Van Dijk und Kintsch (1983) as a representation of text substantially enriched by prior knowledge.

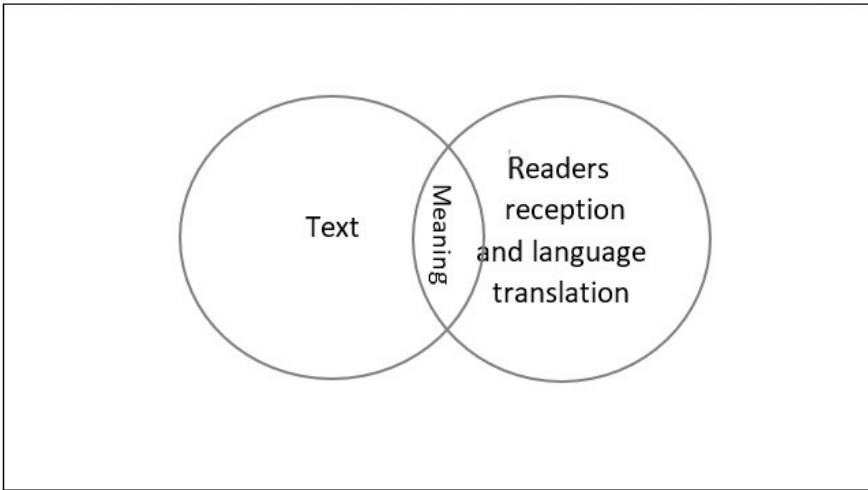


Figure 1. Indeterminacy locations in written text

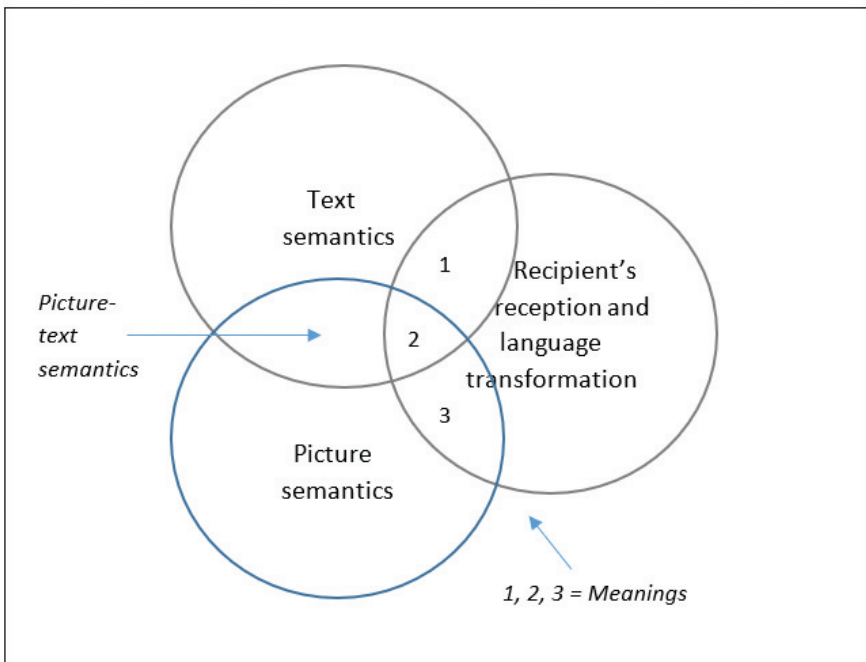


Figure 2. Indeterminacy locations in multimodal text

This model may result in the demand that the recipient “tolerates” inconsistencies and indeterminacies more heuristically and equilibrates them during the reading process, since a sliding scale must be assumed in which the discursive (e.g., in the form of concepts) and the iconic (e.g., in the preattentive processing of pictures) are at opposite ends and variously proportioned ratios of both (Krämer 2011: 95).

An aesthetic reception of literature is linked to a strong interaction of cognition, emotion, and evaluation (Führer 2019). In the case of aesthetic reception of multimodal literature this is linked to a strong interaction of (prior) knowledge, individual understanding of text and picture and their relationships, and value judgements (Führer & Lang 2017), for which hardly any pertinent teaching know-how is available to date.

In multimodal literature with its combination of written text and images, gaps, ambiguities, and/or divergences within or between text and images arise that always entail a “subjective ordering” and validation on the part of the recipient. The dynamic text-picture representation here conditions viewing patterns that take the semantic openness of the text *and* the visual image into account. Reading comics emerges for young people as a “sophisticated practice that shares elements with other media practices, but has unique characteristics” (Serantes 2019: 84) also. Comic readers must create their own narrative references like those for comic-specific sequences of pictures, the gaps in the free spaces between, etc. (Schüwer 2008). These multiple references can be simplified through cognitive deductive operations – Cohn describes this as “the visual narrative structure” (Cohn 2013: 416):

A graphic structure gives information about lines and shapes that are linked to meanings about objects and events at the level of the individual panel. The graphic structure also connects to a spatial structure that encodes the spatial components of these meanings, from which the reader constructs an environment in which they are situated. The narrative structure orders this information into a particular pacing, from which a reader can extract a sequence’s meaning – both the objects that appear across panels and the events they engage in.

The comic-specific signals, as part of the narrative structure, organize the meaning into an expressible form. Pictograms, typographies, the contour lines of thought and speech bubbles, as well as the arrangement and borders of the individual panels can strongly prestructure the reading (Führer 2016). (Post-modern) comics in particular contain offers of polyvalent reading and viewing written not only into their text but also into their pictures. Importantly, in this case the event structure calls on for instance, a huge knowledge of cultural conventions or experienced references for the images and texts. If they are not stored in the (iconic) memory, the non-visible of the *image* (the notion or imagination) contributes decisively to the meaning (Dehn 2008). The event structure must be ‘filled in’ from anthropological conditions, literary experiences, and the imagination.

The elaboration of the comprehension of the text and picture and between them must be accompanied by epistemic validation processes. Reading and writing assignments on multimodal literature such as comics should nevertheless be designed especially sensibly in terms of picture, language, experience, and/or cognition. In this context, the question poses itself whether and how to

mediate a flexibility of cognition that supports a general understanding of narrative structure and imaginative reception of the event structure.

### 3. CHALLENGES OF WRITING: RECEPTION OF COMICS BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

#### 3.1. SELECTED RESEARCH CONTEXTS FOR MULTIMODAL RECEPTION IN SCHOOL

Writing activities in connection with text within the teaching of German language and literature have a far more extensive (empirical) research base than pictures for the same purpose (Abraham, 2014: 99). Dehn has made intensive efforts here to account for the connection between writing and pictures (e.g., Dehn et al. 2004; Dehn 2008) and, following concepts by Hurrelmann (1994) and Wieler (1997), has advocated literacy education that integrates picture and text. Research on this topic has been intensified with respect to the picture book in elementary and primary education (overview in Preußner, 2015), whereas the exploration of reception processes naturally still reveals many desiderata (e.g., Dichtl 2017; Volz & Scherer 2016; Scherer, Volz & Wiprächtiger-Geppert 2014; Abraham & Knopf 2014; Sabisch & Kruse 2013; Klenz & Jantzen 2013). Especially from the perspective of (interdisciplinary) literature and art teaching, the role that ideation and language plays in relation to picture and text is currently being investigated in the context of literary-aesthetic education (Abraham & Glas 2015a; 2015b; Abraham & Sowa 2016; Glas et al. 2016). An in-depth reflection on the use of text-picture combinations in teaching writing in secondary education is lacking at present; however, attempts to research writing activities in connection with pictures are under way (Fix & Melenk 2000; Uhlig, Lieber & Pieper 2019). Writing about pictures frequently is tied to narrative forms of writing; respective research and teaching is concentrated in the area of primary education (Pohl, 2017: 98); explaining why correspondent research is a desiderata for secondary education. Becker (2011), for example, has shown in the case of classic picture stories that the totality of the pictures and their sequencing cannot be assimilated immediately into the unidimensional perspective of language and its temporal succession. In a pilot study with secondary school students, Otto (cited from Abraham 2014) showed that younger students tend to disengage from the picture and that only in 10<sup>th</sup> grade are a few impulses from the pictorial source material integrated successfully into writing. Leser (2016: 407) stresses that writing based on pictures does not often succeed in concretizing a deeper comprehension of the picture; further, that the (creative) writing about pictures that is well-established in literature classes is, for the most part, free association writing.

In the following section, using qualitatively reconstructed written documents on comics, I will therefore describe how multimodal literature could

be shaped in the classroom and investigate relations from classroom output to reading attitudes and text-form anticipations.

### 3.2. QUALITATIVE RECONSTRUCTIONS OF MULTIMODAL (AESTHETIC) RECEPTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Beside the research project “Erzählen in Texten und Bildern – Graphic Novels im Deutschunterricht” [*Storytelling Through Texts and Pictures – Graphic Novels in German Class*] (among others, Hoffmann 2015; Hoffmann & Führer 2017), written follow-up activities for Simon Schwartz’ comic book *drüben!* were reconstructed from a teaching series in three 8<sup>th</sup>-grade high-school classes in the state of Saxony. The writing assignments given by the teachers of the topic mostly concentrated on analytical as well as action- and production-oriented tasks that frequently were either remarkably ambitious or minimally organized and complex. Following the collective reading of the *drüben!* comic, one of the three teachers handed out the assignment to make a diagram of the story’s chronological sequence. Per the teacher, the assignment was conceived as a companion exercise to develop an “overall understanding”, of the story since the comic itself does not tell it chronologically, but in a complex story line spanning three generations and told with numerous flashbacks. The assigned structure diagram requires narrative writing (and designing) in a text-and-picture format and thus follows the established form for literature classes from the outset.<sup>2</sup> No structural prompts were given as to the text-picture ratio or the like and the teacher also dispensed with a prototypical collective development of an initial example for the timeline or any template for designing a suitable structural diagram.

The documents produced in this way by the adolescents (n=28) then were subjected to a documentary analysis (Rupp 1999) guided by an interpretative paradigm for diagrammatic theories (Krämer 2011) and didactic concepts by Dehn et. al (2011) as well as by Rosenblatt (1978) were expanded to include multimodal references (see table 1). From this sample, I did a field-based work that, following Kelle and Kluge (2010), identified three realistic-typical cases, which can only be expounded briefly here. In the analyses conducted for this purpose, the focus was on the qualitative-reconstructive determination of the solution design in the framework of the assigned task; following Neumann (2007), it would even be feasible to draw inferences from text products about the writing skills underpinning them.

<sup>2</sup> In the area of teaching literature, the potentials of the structural picture have been described as cognitive tools in the literary comprehension process (Köster 2004) – as it is used here – as well as a conceptual scaffold for text creation (Wrobel 2014) – as it could continue to be used. Art teaching investigates this approach in the context of methodological visualization processes as well as of reflection on, and critique of, form (Zumbansen 2013).

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Codes / categorization</b>
<b>Reception attitude</b>	Richness of pictorial and written parts	Substantial, average, below average
	Discursive continuum (based on Krämer 2011)	Iconic and symbolic mode
	Referentiality	Generative, reproductive, incongruent
	Responsivity (based on Rosenblatt 1978)	Aesthetic stance, efferent stance, mixed stance
<b>Text-picture forms</b> (expanded from Dehn et al. 2011)	Literal parts	Standard and autonomous use of pictorial, written, and text(type) instruments
	Literary parts	Imaginative, subjectively involved and/or intertextual transformation of text and picture

Table 1. Codes used in the documentary analysis of the structure diagram

Since this task – in contrast to a conventional writing tasks – offers opportunities for ensuring understanding with the aid of pictures, the first step in analyzing each reception attitude is to quantify the comprehensiveness (as rich, average, or below average) of its pictorial and written parts. In another step, the qualitative dimensions of the picture and writing production are explored with more precision: Firstly, with respect to the previously mentioned convergence with poles of the discursive (based on Krämer 2011), and secondly, relative to the referentiality of the learner-produced outputs. The former relates to the reactions of the pupils to the picture-text offerings: hence, the visible differentiation between medium and what is depicted is indicated through the “iconic mode”, while the “symbolic mode,” on the other hand, marks the possibility of leveling this differentiated reception of pictures. Specifically, this means here that if the learners receive the pictures as reality, they have a symbolic way of reading. In this reading style, looking at pictures is not an aesthetic stance per se (ibid: 11). For the encounter with pictures in this dimension has “Widerfahrnischarakter” for the recipients despite their awareness of the differences between the picture (or icon) and what is depicted (ibid: 16).

The ‘referentiality’-item refers to the representation of linguistic or pictorial patterns of the medium of reception in the learner’s output: such references to the object of reception can be generative, reproductive, or incongruent. The reading stances during reception are also connected with this, hence, according to Rosenblatt (1978), reading and writing events characterize a “mainly efferent or aesthetic stance”, while strongly reproductive writing and designing in this context could point to a more task-oriented (= efferent stance) than an experiential way of reading. Dehn’s concept of literalness and literariness also correlates with this (Dehn et al. 2011: 42); thus, depending on the recon-



structured reception-stances, clear differences are evident in the linguistic-pictorial-literary patterns of the students. Even though literality and literariness assuredly are interrelated, the literal parts of a standard translation of written, pictorial, and text instruments and the “literary” parts, which point to (see *ibid.*) a cultural framework of imagination, still take up varying amounts of space in the learner outputs.

Case 1 (as illustrated in figure 3) is distinguished by an average richness in pictorial-literal parts as well as by rich writing parts. The content of the structural diagram is congruent with the received text; there are few iconic elements (e.g., wedding rings for marriage, heart for parents) while illustrative pictorial aspects that point to the greatest possible symbolic mode of reception predominate. With respect to referentiality, we can speak of generative structural diagrams since a coherent mental model of the comic book’s overall organization was constructed; hence, for example, it succeeded in integrating the time-lapses and changes of perspective in a chronology of key scenes. Moreover, the function of graphic structural diagrams, that of hierarchizing knowledge (in this case of the narrative), is incorporated. In the text-picture forms, the multimodal form of the original medium is adopted literally; however, the writing context is especially recognizable regarding literariness, the picture context less so. Finally, with regard to the “response” (after Rosenblatt), this may well be called a mixed form, because both task-oriented and experiential reading stances can be detected.

The second case (see figure 4) has a below-average share of pictures and is of average richness in the writing parts. The reception mode appears to be exclusively symbolic – for instance, there is no evidence of a deeper reflection on the pictures; moreover, the lack of these in the own depiction testifies conversely to a reception of pictures that equates to “truly looking at” them (in German: “Angeblicktwerden” Krautz 2016: 738). The type of referentiality can be evaluated as reproductive, since the sequence of the story is reproduced with its syntax but without any chronologically organizing elements emerging. This mode of reproduction frequently references emotional and/or biographically significant events from the perspective of a specific (identification) figure in the comic, so that elements of an “aesthetic stance” seem to surface regarding the response to the original medium. According to Rosenblatt, this corresponds to all those reading stances who focus on the sensory perception of emotions, intuitions, notions, and ideas (more abstract thought processes, but which are felt to be important or disturbing or which call for a personal objection are equally conceivable here.)

Case 3 (see figure 5) is categorized as having a below-average richness in both the picture and writing parts; however, text and picture are related to each other in a legend, with pictures integrated as instructional pictures, so that we can without question call it an iconic mode. While this type’s referentiality is generative on the one hand, given its high degree of operationalization (hence, necessary reflection) of the information in the medium of reception, on the

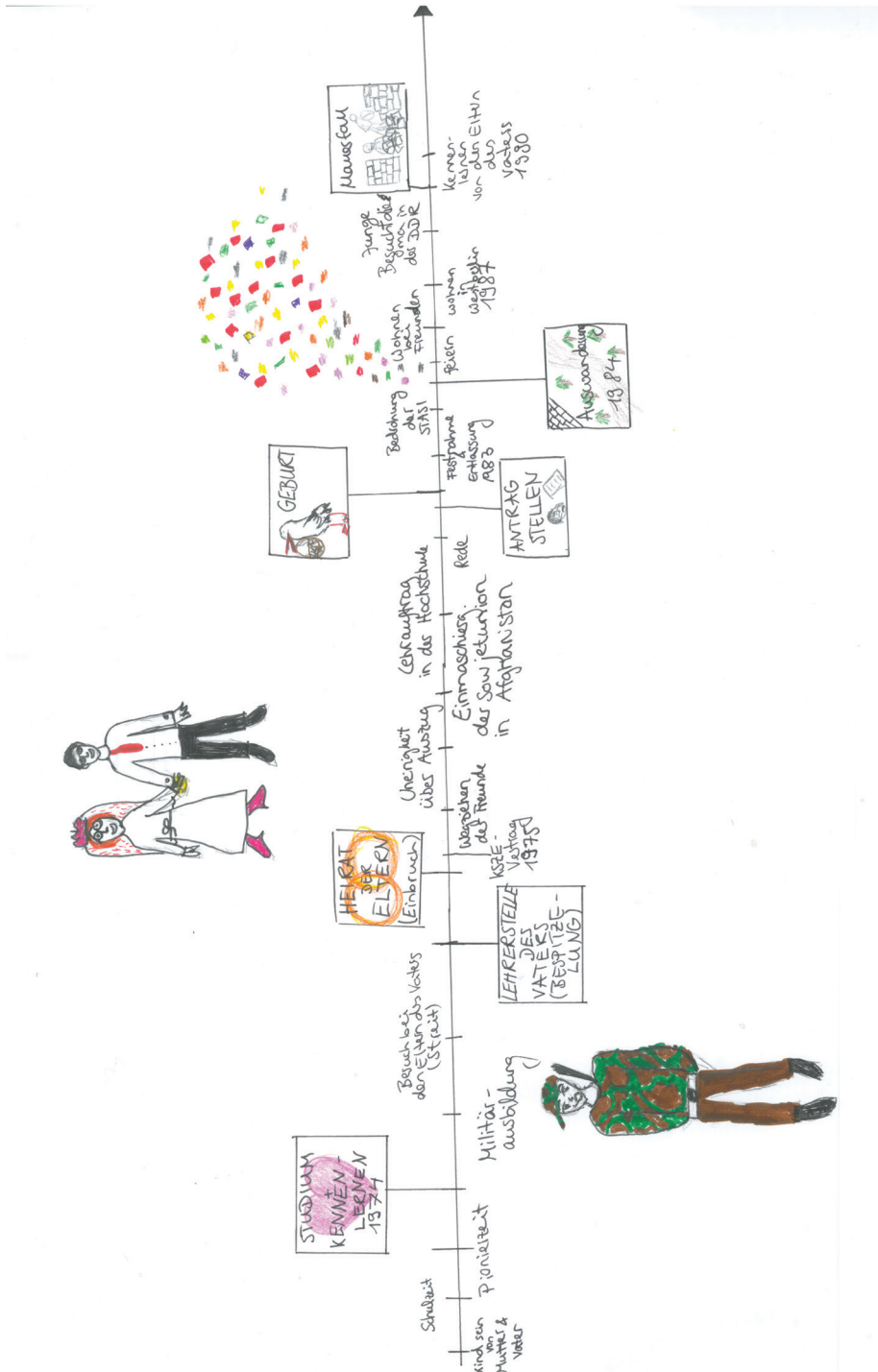


Figure 3

*Chronologische Zeitordnung Graphik-Vord.: „drüben!“*

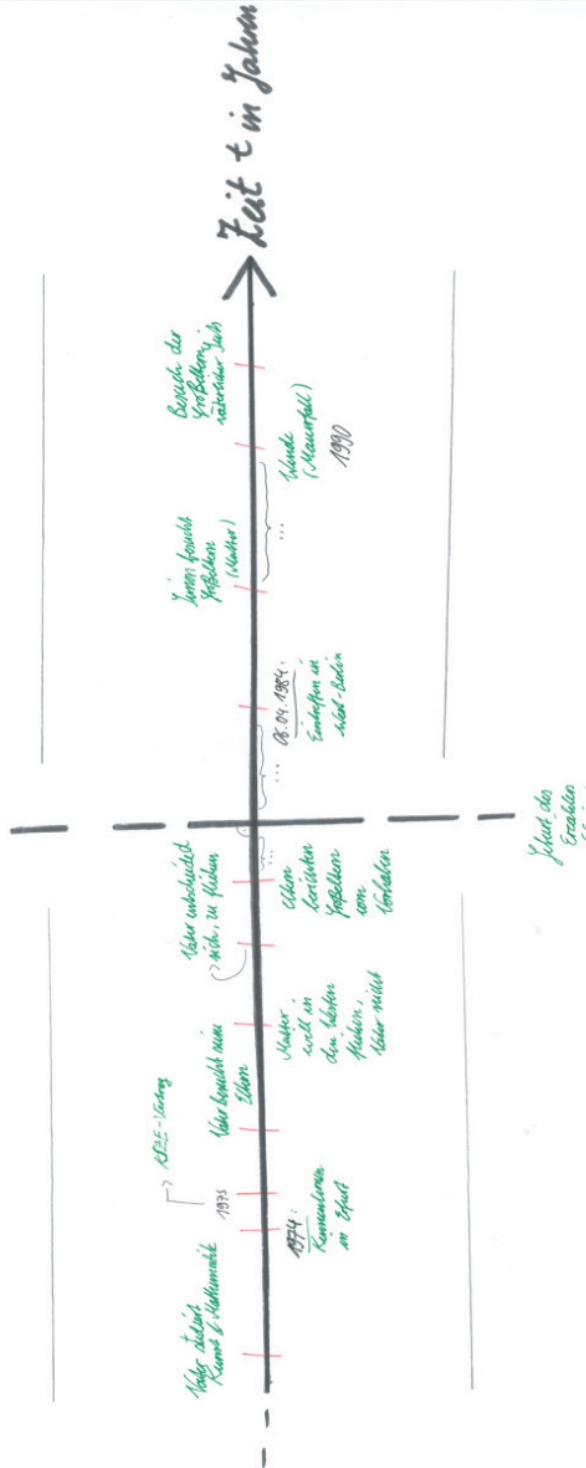


Figure 4



Figure 5

other hand, when it comes to the output sequences, it is not congruent due to the functionalization (but this still does not say anything about its adequacy). Regarding the “response”, in the follow-up output the emphasis is therefore on structural reconstructable and factual (informational) aspects. According to Dehn et al., 2011 we see a literal fluency, but obviously no kind of literariness in the structure diagram.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Comics are a complex medium that challenge and comfort adolescent readers and it is the reading material that combines [young peoples] “reading for pleasure choices [...] from challenging and complex readings to satisfying and enjoyable texts” (Serantes 2019: 85).

The typology shows how – in a complex, yet minimally guided multimodal writing and designing task – the processing of specific picture-text-formats is shaped individually as a function of the respective (also extra-scholastic) socially conditioned approaches of reception and the text(-picture)-form expectations of the learners. In each case, a multidimensional medial solution but also a variegated understanding was arrived at, which constituted itself in all three cases: 1) through a written, although not always pictorial, part, and 2) along a continuum between “aesthetic stance” and “efferent stance” according to Rosenblatt (1978). Compared to an “aesthetic stance”, there were strongly expressed elements of an “efferent stance”, “in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be carried away or retained after the reading” (Rosenblatt 1988: 7). The traces of literariness, which suggested subjective involvement with the object through imagination and transformations of text and picture (see Dehn 2011: 45), stood in a strikingly close relationship here with reading practices that tended to be experiential (=aesthetic stance).

These analyses indicate that multimodal literature is hardly regarded as a demanding (aesthetic) learning challenge or as space for (poetical) self-realization/reflection by the secondary school students. The school’s authority here seems to be formative and still influential in modeling one-sided conceptual written language and cognitive (information-oriented) skills as a value. Regarding the reception of comics in secondary education, the learner’s multimodal media socialization ought to be acknowledged and taken into account more intensively towards a discursive transfer into the lesson as well as factoring in their diverse (media conditioned) emotional and media literacy experiences.

Postmodern comics and graphic novels hold out the promise for developing a strong heuristic sensitivity in the reader along with the formalizable operations of text-picture comprehension. For one, pictorial indeterminacies can never be made to correspond completely with language and its own uncertain-

ties (similarly Schneider 2019), and, for another, the interweaving of picture and writing always makes an elaboration necessary which offers experiential opportunities for receiving these media (see section 2 on value judgement in multimodal reception). Additionally, what is needed in the engagement with comics and graphic novels are (more) diverse approaches to reception processes that enable an orientation towards both a cognitive competence for the narrative structure of comics and the event structure as a flexible element of comprehension situated between cultural conventions and individual “response”.

Only then can a stronger link be established with the (already existing) various multimodal aesthetic learning cultures in primary education (e.g., Kruse 2016; Hoffmann 2015), in which reading, seeing, listening, writing, and designing in connection with media reception can already be thought about jointly and also modelled as self-aware experience (for primary education, e.g., Kohl & Ritter 2010).

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