Comics an der Grenze

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SUB/VERSIONEN VON FORM UND INHALT

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On the Nature of the Boundary in Comics Memoir: The Case of *March*

Abstract | This essay on the nature of the boundary of the comics form is an analysis of US Congressman John Lewis's autobiography *March*, which recounts his early days as a civil rights leader and is in the form of a comic or »graphic novel«. A few key examples are examined in which normally distinct images and textual elements blend together thereby bringing into question the nature of the boundary in a more general sense as it functions in the comics. Some of the formal elements of the graphic novel analyzed by the essay include its symbolic composition, arrangement of panels and images, treatment of light and dark areas, deployment of racialized icons, and blurring of temporalities and history.

Zusammenfassung | Dieser Aufsatz über die Natur der Grenze im Medienformat »Comic« analysiert die Autobiographie des US-Kongressabgeordneten John Lewis, *March*, die seine frühen Tage als Bürgerrechtler in Form eines Comics (»Graphic Novel«) erzählt. Anhand einiger prominenter Beispiele, in denen normalerweise räumlich getrennte Bild- und Textelemente des Comics verschmelzen, wird auf allgemeinerer Ebene das Wesen der Grenze im Comic erörtert. Es werden verschiedene formale Elemente der Graphic Novel untersucht, z.B. ihre symbolische Komposition, das Arrangement von Panels und Bildern, die Behandlung von hellen und dunklen Bereichen sowie der Einsatz von ethnischen Symbolen und das Verschwimmen von Zeitlichkeiten und Geschichte.

As it often happens in scholarship, one undertakes a project whose specific key terms catalyze new insights into the broader subject of study. In this case, the term in question is »boundary.« What constitutes a boundary in the comics? How is a boundary different from other formal or diacritical marks such as a line? And when we use the term, do we not mean the same thing as limit, edge, or line? Aside from the racial and cultural histories circulating around a text like *March*, a two-volume graphic memoir of African American Civil Rights icon John Lewis,[1] we must indeed take up the misleadingly simple matter of defining the text's »boundaries.« There are many and each one prompts us to consider a new question. For instance,

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1 | John Lewis: *March. Book 1*. Marietta 2013.

where does the African American autobiographer's influence begin (and end) relative to that of his ghost writer Andrew Aydin? What is the boundary between them and the illustrator, white artist Nate Powell? How does the history written of and indeed experienced by Lewis in the past brush up against the urgencies of the present? What are or should be the boundaries established between the Civil Rights Movement and #blacklivesmatter? All of these efforts of boundary making, crossing, and re-crossing are invariably required of us if we are to understand this particular graphic novel, its stakes and contexts. But the formal concerns of the book are no less complex or culturally implicated. Reading the comic structure of *March* (or any comic really) in order to produce a coherent story from disparate elements leads us to examine the nature of the comics page and the spaces it occupies and lays claim to. Thus, while the particulars of my eventual questioning shall interrogate *March*'s embedded title page for its boundaries, to get there we must first settle the unfinished business of taxonomy.

So, let us risk a venial redundancy in order to ask once again: just what is a *boundary*? What do I mean by the term when applying it to the comics form? I see no reason why we should not start with a definition capacious enough to include the topical as well as the structural, as does Mark Currie in his definition of boundary as »a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject.«[2] But neither do I mean to intend some set of narrative effects or implications merely in my use of the term, since the comics as a primarily pictorial narrative art make use of functional boundaries all the time. We can itemize a range of them in this two-page spread from *March* (fig.1).

On prominent display is the supreme boundary of the comics form, the give-and-take tension of the verbal and the visual. Corollary tensions at play in this spread include those of symbolic and representational forms of expression, icons and indexes, and light and shadow. We could go on, but the point is that the page works by demanding that viewers recognize its formal properties and their routine transposition into divisions. Opposites are set apart at a glance. All that is not lettering is just as obviously distinct from its opposite as everything above the stark horizon is set apart from everything below it. An initial principle of dyadic or strict, two-part division seems to govern the design of this spread, manifesting a visual scree on boundary. All of that may be true until we look more closely, less programmatically, with more attention to unexpected anomalies and suddenly we notice how arbitrary our dueling boundaries turn out to be.

Thanks to the reflective properties of water, the illustrator Nate Powell has put some of the symbolic earmarks of the sky – the clouds – down on the ground

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2 | Mark Currie: »Introduction,« in: Mark Currie (Ed.): *Metafiction*. New York: Longman, 1995, pp. 1–18, p. 2.
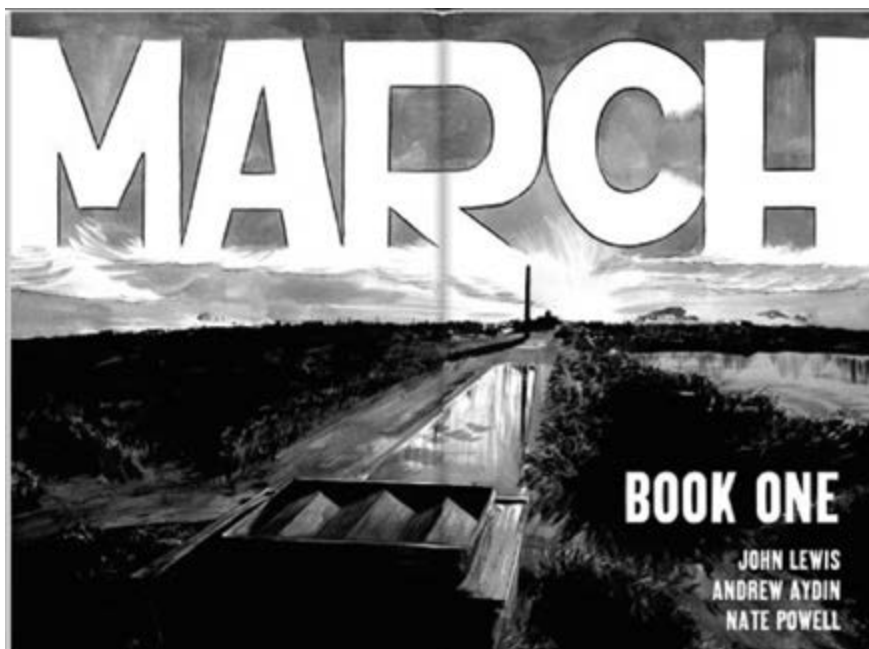
Fig. 1 *March* opening spread

and even the supposed separation of letter and visual background breaks down if we attend to the unbounded footer edges of the titular lettering in *March*. Notice how the lower stems of each letter dissolves? What is created by that dissolving is a localizable absence of boundary. Where one would normally expect a barrier a sudden openness appears instead, which allows for the absorption of the letter into the representational domain of the figure. The lower staves of the »M,« for example, literally bleed into cloud and sky.

Because the image is an embedded two-page spread, it upholds another binary between seriality and singularity (and here we begin to see more how even the formal mechanics of the text put pressure on the cultural and racial contexts that only seemingly surround it). This is not a page made up of many self-contained panels, as is the case in most other pages of the text. Here, we are presented not with the serial but with the singular. Our decoding process here need not be determined by the serial transposition of multiple panels into a narrative coherence as it is elsewhere in *March*. Here, we are left to view the scene (and perhaps our own seeing and reading) in a suspended state of timelessness endemic to stand-alone images like this one (and to classical paintings or photographs). The effect is an emphasis on singularity and time, giving the impression that *March* will take as its titular concern the experience of one exceptional man who made history, marching against its grain so to speak. And yet, even as Lewis is proposed by this effect

Fig. 2 John Lewis not as singular but as one in a series of great speech makers during the iconic March on Washington

to be a type of paradigm, the fact that this page only stands on its own within an otherwise bound collection of other pages and images reinforces its intertextual dependence. Lewis is not paradigm but syntagm; neither singular nor stand-alone but a serial unit of a larger syntax that gives him and his experiences meaning.

As the only living member of that legendary group of Civil Rights leaders who spoke during the 1963 March on Washington, John Lewis received widespread acclaim for the 2013 publication of his autobiography. *March* narrates a success story of black Christian vocation, as the farm-raised young minister ascends to national prominence in the bleak shadows of Jim Crow segregation. Never simply saccharine, but in no way cynical, the ideological underpinnings of the narrative fuse at key moments with the book's visual strategies to convey an exceptional life amidst the volatile backdrop of a larger history. That backdrop should be familiar to us. It is a history that coincides all-too viciously perhaps with this mess we call the present, the police shootings, the marches, the memorials, and the battles over the iconographic capacity of symbols to convoke history, hatred, and heritage.

The problem for Lewis as autobiographer (not so different from ours) is to figure out a way to tell such a story, which is to say, his history. If it is to signify as personal, Lewis's story must risk specificities disastrously incongruous with the essence of the Civil Rights movement. We know that movement, after all, as it has been distilled in countless narratives, photographs, and films that perpetuate its milieu and character for us as texts. Lewis's story must be particular enough to be personal, but sufficiently legible as that standard sort of history as well, so it is

Fig. 3 Protest on Edmund Pettis Bridge from beginning of *March*

therefore beholden to established media constructs. Once that balance has been struck between the personal and the public, there is still a politics of style to be negotiated. How can a graphic novel rekindle a time through a language of images that has been racially inflected by distortion and miniaturization? One method, as it turns out, involves an intense suspicion for logos as a boundary that can and perhaps ought to be crossed.

The narrative structure of *March* presents John Lewis as messianic or, as Wilson Jeremiah Moses might have put it, »as having a manifest destiny or a God-given role to assert the providential goals of history«.[3] That the opening alludes to the deluge further links Lewis's story to its eschatological templates in the Bible. And given the state of current and recent events inducing a veritable flooding of history, *March* seems appropriately ambivalent about the ›great man‹ model of history that it inevitably relies upon. *March* predicates a series of events on one level to be best comprehended from an individual perspective while at another level, assuming a viewer-reader able to stand before a panoply of images with the desire to make something meaningful out of the surplus of pictures. *March* wants

3 | Wilson Jeremiah Moses: *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. University Park 1982, p.4.

a reader-viewer, in other words, who must simultaneously recognize these profuse and escalating images as a grid. Throughout *March*, recognizing the grid becomes a kind of ontological exercise in treading the flooding waters of history.

Other histories resonate here as well. There is the classic narrative within the black narrative tradition of uplift, of moving up from slavery to Civil Rights and ultimately, to Obama's election—an event that operates as a narratival lightening rod in *March*, which extends even as it closes the circuit of that historical relation between slavery and freedom. With Obama as an end point, Lewis may remain an icon of electric conductivity as it were, arcing from Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr. to comprise a set of relations that become the larger grid of representable black America. The book cannot escape the hagiographic when imaging Obama at the end of a story that begins with inscrutable police violence against peaceable black protesters, whose only crime seems to be the desire for a civic voice, to be heard by power.

The book therefore closes on a note of optimism, of narrative and affective simplicity. The problem at the beginning, of there being no voice loud or legible enough, is solved by the end. Whose American voice speaks louder than that of our black president?

History is progressive in this formulation, primarily linear though recursively so, and it is also optimistic in a conservative way, perhaps even a radically conservative way. Social problems are to be solved by the official political system. We see this logic best represented in the opening embedded title page that comes after the riot. In addition to the temporality of the page turn, this spread also invokes the temporality of its symbology. The time of the foreground, the top of Lincoln's monument, conjures the nineteenth-century past, whose historical parameters of slavery and freedom become little more than the broken skiff or dingy on our reflecting pool journey towards the more auspicious temporality of the Washington monument and its corresponding ideologies of individualism, political centrism, and trust in the state. Or maybe the pictorial urgencies of the figure are best described as a *place* there in the brilliant middle of this tableau where figure and symbol, monument and moment, break down. Indeed, the verticality of the monument enters into the domain of the letter in this opening title page spread, becoming the cross-staff on the R of »March« as if to designate the narrative as the *prescription* (as in Rx) to heal America's historical racial wounds.

Whatever else temporally, the spread tells us that it is only away from these ends and edges of history—and away from the boundary of the present—where our actualization may occur. It is there, towards the interior of the book, the picture, the story—after the page-turn and our entry into the narrative history—that we experience graphic enlightenment, the viewing equivalent of that boundary-defying shining sun.

Fig. 4   Lewis's Office like a Comics Grid

And yet, *March*'s linear history is also circular. Rather than creating paradox, that seeming contradiction reveals how our conception of past experience depends upon circularity, recursivity, even simultaneity. All of these terms name constructs for thinking and viewing history as a scopic totalization. Comics enthusiasts know this lesson well. Consider for example, Jon Osterman's experience of temporality in Alan Moore's classic anti-superhero graphic novel *Watchmen*.[4] Osterman is the scientist who becomes Dr. Manhattan, the story's only true super-powered human whose simultaneous apperception of the universe permits him a multifaceted yet totalizing view on events not unlike the one offered to any comics viewer (as in the view of Ozymandias's panoptic, monitor-filled control room). Vigilantes, villains, fascists, and nucleated monsters are brought into strange alignment with the person looking upon the distortive representations of the comics grid so that all positions are implicated and compromised in the end, a horrible world »peace« brought about by the sacrificial killing of thousands and heralding a new era in false-cons-

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4 | Dave Gibbons / Alan Moore: *Watchmen*. New York 1986 f.

ciousness. I'm not saying we can read the same interpretation in *March*, only that we can discern a similar paradigm of formal simultaneity, which forecloses any simple or linear notion of history as either monolith or myth of progress. Indeed, at even the few glances I've given you of *March*, you might have already noticed how it thematizes history as a type of fluidity and flooding, a set of repertoires and practices and events that seep through like a river, to be bridged or paddled across or to drown in—any of these options are available to the reader-viewer of *March*.

In an astute reading of lyrics from James Baldwin to Ice Cube, Allen Dwight Callahan connects the trope of the flood to a politics of violence: »In traditions of the African-American vernacular, the rainbow is not so much promise as threat. The violence of the deluge is invoked against the violence of the present world order: the violence of human beings is overcome by the violence of God.«[5] The flood discourse of *March,* therefore, suggests how swimming (and marching) against the retributive floodwaters is the only viable response to racist violence.

When Lewis goes to his office, a mother in town for Obama's inauguration arrives unexpectedly with her two sons, Jacob and Esau (their names furthering the book's union of eschatology and biography). After mistaking the solicitous Lewis for an aide, the mother expresses her desire for »my boys to see their history.«[6] Her utterance also transfers that desire to the image of Lewis, which must convey not only his person but also a literal impersonation of Civil Rights history. The good congressman immediately consents, inviting the conspicuously single mother and her sons into an office whose walls teem with photographic snapshots of Lewis embodying history. Significantly, his walls resemble a comics page, gridded with rectangular image-frames, each one bordered by gutters.

Even so, the page that transmutes Lewis's wall of history into a comics-like photomontage never gives clarity to the photos. They are scrumbled and as loosely sketched as his earlier reflection in the mirror. Although Lewis begins to attach momentous captions to them—»Here I am when I was 23 years old, meeting with President Kennedy«[7]—the page places greater visual stress on the paddle or oar that he removes from its mount among the photos. The oar participates in a Biblical discourse of the flood by not being spoken of at all. We surmise the symbolic importance of it by virtue of its unmentionability. Evident but unspoken the oar waylays the focus of the photographs in a manner not unlike the indecipherable speeches found throughout *March*.

In fact, the first example we get of a speech bubble we cannot read comes in the first narrative panel on the dedication page. We cannot know what is being

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5 | Allen Dwight Callahan: *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. New Haven 2006, p. 197.

6 | Lewis: *March*, p. 18.

7 | ibd., p. 19.

said here until we turn the page. This page-turning form of knowing conveys so much. It articulates the book's underlying logic of history. We cannot know what is said or seen in the here and now. Knowledge comes only after achieving a certain distance, after crossing over or turning the page. A conservative view of epistemology, to be sure, but luckily—and true to its contradictory form—*March* offers other models of knowledge and history too. As a young boy, Lewis is able to commune with the chickens of his poor family's farm, making them his first flock and seeing them as human. He eats chickens while visiting relatives up North but confers not just humanity to them at home but sanctity. The animal, non-funny animal eyes of these chickens to whom Lewis ministers are shown in a panel close-up, indicating an ironic absence of decipherable affect in contrast to his humanization of them. They remain animals to us. Only Lewis might see what is actually in this picture of the chicken's eyes therefore. Just as it is only Lewis who has the capacity to oar across the swampy reflecting pool of history, or else it is only he who can read the title of that two-page spread as the imperative it always implies. March! Only he has the ability to march or walk on those waters.

However supernaturally inflected, Lewis's eventual successes at overturning Alabama segregation are shown to derive from a politics of super-species kinship. *March*'s strangely protracted detour through the chickens that come home to ethically roost also furnishes an origin story for the crusader Lewis is destined to become. The chickens are as unlikely as slaves in their role as the starting place for an historic triumph against oppression. And in an American context, few registers are as evocative for telling such a story as the rags-to-riches discourse that the chickens summon. Up from chickens a great man wends his way toward greater sympathies. But it is importantly through them that he receives his blessed calling, a vocation of improbable spiritual kinship. It is from the doomed but sympathetic chickens of Pike County Alabama that *March* intensifies its plot arc, Lewis's providential rise from his meeting with Dr. King in Montgomery in 1958 to his lunch-counter protests in Nashville that victoriously close the book: »at 3:15 on May 10, 1960, those six downtown Nashville stores served food to black customers for the first time in the city's history.«[8] Without them Lewis's history would be less legible as a simultaneously sacred one. For like Dr. Manhattan, we might assume, John Lewis may be somewhere always divinely experiencing the triumph of that exact moment of calendrical clock time as an eternally unfolding present, and thereby flooding even the most ossifying evidence of racist hatred's obdurate persistence into the present with an idyll of temporal co-presence.

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8 | ibd., p. 120.

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