Focalization, the filtering of a story through a consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation, is a fundamental analytical concept in narrative theory. It allows researchers to differentiate between the narration of a story on the one hand and the mental processing of that story by a character—or by the narrator—on the other, thereby providing crucial insights into the representation of consciousness in fiction. Yet focalization remains one of the most problematic and contentious narratological concepts. As testified to by a recent handbook devoted to focalization (Hühn, Schmid, and Schönert), discussions continue to be very much geared toward principled dogmatic questions (such as whether narrators can be focalizers) and typological distinctions, to the detriment of proving the concept’s usefulness for actual analyses. Some of the questions regarding focalization that have not yet been satisfactorily answered include:

(1) The scope of the concept. Even though Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan proposed to include aspects of cognition and judgment as well as of sense perception in the category as early as 1983, there has since been a trend to revert to older concepts of “perspective” (Herman, Basic Elements, “Beyond Voice,” and “Multimodal Storytelling”) and “point of view” (Simpson), both of which are more narrowly concerned with visual perception. Other scholars, while referring to “focalization” rather than “perspective,” have nevertheless spoken out against including “other types of thinking such as cognition and the emotions” in the category, advocating its use for phenomena of sense perception exclusively (Palmer 49; see also Herman and Vervaeck; Margolin; Prince). So far, then, no agreement has been reached as to whether cognition should be included in focalization; whether the concept ought, conversely, to be restricted to instances of (optical) perspectivation; or whether one might resolve these issues by...
drawing a distinction between focalization (the restriction of narrative information) on the one hand and perspective, i.e. point of view, on the other (Niederhoff, “Focalization,” “Perspective”).

(2) A second point of contention concerns the analytical differentiation—central to the structuralist concept of focalization—between “who sees” or “perceives” and “who speaks” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 186). This distinction has been insufficiently justified in structuralism, which often cites the use of Free Indirect Discourse as one of the markers of internal focalization, but overlooks or, at the very least, understates its ambiguous categorization as an aspect of voice rather than of vision or, perhaps, as including aspects of both. In this respect, neither the reversion to older concepts of “perspective” nor proposals to distinguish between different sensual aspects of focalization, such as ocularization and auricularization (Jost; Schlickers), are particularly helpful.

(3) Finally, despite Mieke Bal’s forceful stance for the concept’s usefulness within a visual narratology, relatively little research has been done in this area. Although some narratologists have begun developing theories of film focalization (Deleyto; Horstkotte; Kuhn; Schlickers; Verstraeten), the role of focalization in visual art, in mixed-media installations, and in graphic narratives and comic strips has, with few exceptions (Herman, “Beyond Voice and Vision”), remained unexplored.

The unique combination of word and image in graphic narrative provides fertile ground for an inquiry into these three questions, while simultaneously offering opportunity to demonstrate the concept’s aptness as an analytical tool for multimodal narrative. This article examines some of the terms and conditions of focalization in graphic narratives so as to contribute towards a more rigorous visual narratology. Since “[t]he restless, polysemiotic character of the [comic] form allows for the continual rewriting of its grammar” (Hatfield xiv), graphic narratives provide rich examples for a sustained analysis of visual narrative processes, including those of focalization. Yet although there is growing critical interest in graphic narratives, very few theorists have engaged in narratological analysis. We intend to begin filling in this gap.

More so than illustrated and picture books, graphic narratives rely on an even blending of semiotic modes to convey meaning. The quasi-endless diversity of pictorial styles and techniques begs the question of how visual narrative marks off narration as opposed to focalization, and if this is, indeed, a helpful distinction for the analysis of graphic narratives. It also asks what exactly constitutes a visual focalization. Is it necessary, when examining a narrative that so strongly relies on the visual, to return to optical concepts of perspective? Or can graphic narrative encode cognitive as well as perceptual forms of focalization?

In an attempt to answer these and related questions, we examine the “perspective-marking resources” of graphic narrative (Herman, “Beyond Voice and Vision” 135). At the same time, we suggest that optical perspectivation is only one dimension within a broader category of focalization that also includes aspects of cognition, ideological orientation, and judgment. We will therefore speak of “focalization-marking resources” in what follows. Through a close reading of three well-known graphic narratives—Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, Art Spiegelman’s Maus, and Alan Moore’s Watchmen—we seek to illuminate differences between focalization, a narratological
concept whose main relevance lies in its potential to distinguish between the processing activities of an agent and the voice of the narrator articulating that filtering, and visual perspective, a technical concept without an explicitly narrative function.

Our analyses highlight the necessity of identifying medium-specific discourse markers signaling focalization. These focalization-marking resources are ones that indicate the aspectuality (Palmer) of a subjective filtering mind. Thus, we move away from positing an opposition between cognition and perspective to propose a conception of focalization as a cognitive operation related to aspectuality that subsumes the narrower optical view of focalization. As we understand it, aspectual filtering includes cognitive as well as perceptual processes so that focalization is distinct from (and irreducible to) optical perspectivation. In what follows, we will first develop this model in more detail, based on a critique of existing structuralist and cognitive theories of focalization, to then discuss our three stylistically varied examples, identifying some of the necessary conditions for focalization to become an analytically productive category in graphic narrative.

STRUCTURALIST MODELS OF FOCALIZATION: GENETTE AND BAL

When Gérard Genette first introduced the term “focalization” in his Narrative Discourse, he offered two explanations for it that not only conflict with each other, but also contain internal inconsistencies concerning focalization’s relation to vision. In his first, and better-known, definition, Genette proposed to unravel the traditional grouping together of “voice” and “mood” under the umbrella term “point of view.” To distinguish between voice and mood, Genette presented two questions: “who speaks,” indicating narration, and “who sees” or “perceives,” indicating focalization (186). His distinction strongly suggests a reliance on vision or, at the very least, the visual as the defining criterion for focalization. When he attempted to refine the concept, however, Genette explicitly stated his wish to “avoid the too specifically visual connotations” that had informed previous discussions on point of view (189). With this statement, he planted a serious seed of doubt into how dependent focalization is on vision and all that is related to the visual.

In his second definition, Genette moves even further away from the visual. He describes three different types of focalization—zero, internal, and external—based on the degree of knowledge separating the narrator from the characters and not on his initial distinction between “who sees” and “who speaks” (ibid.). This typology relies on a completely different model of focalization—one in which the visual holds no place. Moreover, Genette’s second model is not concerned with the intradiegetic source of focalization, but with the filtering of information at the extradiegetic level.9

Throughout Narrative Discourse, Genette wavers between defining focalization in terms of focus of vision and of restriction of access to information. Ultimately, however, his understanding of focalization centers on degrees of narratorial information, with zero focalization providing the narrator with unrestricted access to information, internal focalization restricting the narrator’s access to information provided
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by one or several focal characters, and external focalization restricting the narrator’s access to the external information available to an uninvolved bystander. Responding to his critics in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette asserts: “So by focalization I certainly mean a restriction of ‘field’—actually, that is, a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience” (74). As the reference to omniscience indicates, Genette’s primary concern is not with the focalizing but with the narrating agent; indeed, he explains that “if focalizer applied to anyone, it could only be the person who focalizes the narrative—that is, the narrator” (73; emphasis original).

When Bal began working on narratology in the late 1970s, however, she took up Genette’s first model with its emphasis on the source of focalization as well as its differentiation from narration based on visual processes (*Narratologie*). The basis for Bal’s concept of focalization is her distinction between three narrative layers—story, fabula, and text—each associated with or, indeed, generated by a distinct narrative agent (*Narratology* 18). Situated at the fabula level where the story’s raw events are processed before being mediated by a narrator, Bal’s “focalizor” is responsible for the “represented ‘colouring’” of a narrative (ibid.). This coloring is both active and relational as it involves the connection between a subject, the “focalizer,” and a “focalized object.” As she conceives it, “[f]ocalization is, then, the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen, perceived’” (145–46).

Almost all of Bal’s many definitions of focalization refer to vision in some form or other. Indeed, she seems to want to literalize the metaphorical references to vision in pre-Genettean conceptualizations of narrative perspective so as to then argue for the centrality of the focalization category to a visual narratology. For it is in the course of her discussion of focalization that Bal conspicuously introduces a visual text to the study of narrative, the seventh-century Indian bas-relief *Arjuna’s Penance* (*Narratology* 147–49). The discussion of this image then functions as a relay that enables her to follow her analysis of focalization with a chapter detailing the possibility of a visual narratology. For Bal, focalization is not only the stepping stone to ease in some elements of a visual narratology, but, most importantly, it is also a central element—indeed, *the* central element—in a vision-based narratology (165–66). She envisions a visual narratology that extends to three types of narratives: visual images, film (which she proposes to analyze in comparison with literature), and literary narratives (166). However, this highly selective list of possible objects of study suggests that, for Bal, visual narratology is mostly concerned with literary narrative and its relation to visualization (after all, two of her three categories explicitly mention literature) and not with the intrinsic and distinct focalization-marking resources of visual media.

Although Bal’s suggestion for a visual narratology is attractive, her categories remain too closely tied to literary narrative to account for the medium-specific focalization markers in graphic narrative. This becomes disappointingy obvious in the five points outlined in her “visual narratology in a nutshell” section, where she repeatedly claims that the categories she has developed in relation to literary texts can be directly transferred to the visual domain (166–67). For narratology to make a theoretical contribution to visual and multimodal narrative, however, it must avoid such a facile hijacking of terms and concepts. Instead, a visual narratology needs to ask how the
visual as a distinct representational system encodes, in its own terms, the processes that are central to all narrative, that is, narration and focalization.

FOCALIZING FOCALIZATION

If focalization is to hold any weight as a trans-medial category, it needs to be more inclusive than merely technical concepts of optical perspective, and a sharp analytical distinction has to be made between focalization and narration. In any narratological analysis of visual art, the temptation is large to identify focalization with optical perspectivation. However, when this occurs, focalization risks becoming a mere surface description that does not account for the processing of narrative deep structures in the act of reception (crucial, to our minds) and thus ceases to be engaged in the meaning-making processes of narrative. This happens when Bal, in an earlier edition of *Narratology*, reads the gazes circulating within Ken Aptekar’s artwork *I’m Six Years Old and Hiding behind My Hands* as instances of focalization (163). Her focus on the ordering of various gazes overlooks how the fabula is subjectively inflected by the focalizers, despite the centrality of subjective inflection to her focalization theory. Completely side-stepping focalization’s interpretive function, Bal’s oversight reduces focalization to a purely spatial or perspectival category. As Niederhoff remarks, Bal (here as well as otherwise) “reduces the analysis of focalization to a paraphrase of narrative content, to identifying acts of perception” (“Focalization” 119).

Moreover, Bal offers no explanation as to why the gazes in Aptekar’s piece should be considered instances of focalization and not narratorial statements. This theoretical omission becomes particularly problematic given that she does not address narratorial agency in still images. Because our focus on sequential, multimodal texts allows us to bypass the question of whether or not a visual image can narrate,11 we are able to better establish the conditions necessary for focalization to serve as an analytically productive category in the visual domain. It is our contention, then, that focalization has to be signaled by distinctly subjective discourse markers in all texts, including visual and multimodal ones, so as to partake in the processing of a story’s raw material.

In arguing for subjective inflection as a criterion for focalization, we take our departure from developments within a cognitive narratology, especially as proposed by Manfred Jahn (“Windows of Focalization”; “Mechanics of Focalization”; “Focalization”), David Herman (*Story Logic*; “Beyond Voice”), Meister and Schönert, and Alan Palmer. To account for the cognitive and perceptual aspects of focalization, Jahn has introduced the model of “windows of focalization.” Emphasizing that narrative texts contain cues that enable readers to imaginatively transfer into the storyworld, Jahn theorizes focalization as a “window” through which objects and events are presented as seen, perceived, or conceptualized from a specific deictic center or focal character.12 Even though many of his terms—such as “window” and “perspective”—remain tied to the visual domain, Jahn’s concept of focalization is actually a broad one and incorporates all kinds of mental workings of characters, including their perceptual, but also their ideological and moral orientation (“Windows of Focalization” 244).13

This inclusive conception of focalization, where both the perceptual as well as cognitive processing of focalizers are considered, is closely related to what Herman
has described as the *qualia* (*Basic Elements*) and Palmer as the *aspectuality* of a character’s subjective experience. Our misgivings about the privileging of an optical perspective model notwithstanding, we concur with Herman that “the study of narrative perspective concerns how vantage-points on situations and events in the storyworld are encoded in narrative discourse and interpreted as such during narrative processing” (“Beyond Voice” 122). Two distinct kinds of vantage points can be embedded in narrative: a personal one associated with a character and an impersonal one associated with the narrator. That is, even though it is premised on the subjective filtering of characters’ or narrators’ minds, focalization operates at the discourse level, since it is here that textual signals cue the reader to reconstruct the storyworld under the aspectuality of a specific fictional mind. Indeed, for signals of focalization to be registered by readers, there has to exist an aspectuality-neutral background against which the subjective inflection is introduced. This is why, in visual texts, sequentiality is a necessary condition for character focalization to become perceptible and, thus, meaningful.

Following Jahn (“Windows of Focalization” 256), we therefore operate with a binary typology of focalization that sets off the subjective inflection of *character-bound focalization* against a more neutral *narratorial* one. Distinguishing between character-bound and narratorial focalization offers strong arguments for preserving focalization as a central category of narratological analysis, rather than erasing it in favor of a broader consideration of consciousness presentation in fiction, as per Palmer’s suggestion. As Jahn’s model indicates, focalization, while predominantly associated with the presentation of consciousness, does not have to be so. Narratorial focalization in particular is neither necessarily nor exclusively concerned with consciousness presentation, but with the filtering of all events and existents in the storyworld. Conversely, consciousness presentation does not necessarily presuppose character focalization: Dorrit Cohn’s category of “psycho-narration” presents the character’s consciousness, but is narratorially focalized. The ideological and moral evaluation associated with focalization proceeds from the narrator and not from the character whose consciousness we are seeing. Even if focalization is primarily (but not exclusively!) associated with consciousness presentation, the focalizer does not have to coincide with the consciousness being presented.

Understood to account for an aspectually tinged discourse, then, our category of focalization necessarily includes matters of voice and style. The following three analyses highlight three ways in which focalization may be signaled in graphic narrative: through shifts in visual vocabulary, through repetition and shading, and through multi-stage braiding of identical visual material.

**SHIFTS IN VISUAL VOCABULARY IN PERSEPOLIS**

How does our model of focalization contribute to the analysis of graphic narratives and thus work towards a visual or multimodal narratology? In a recent article, Herman examines Daniel Clowes’ graphic novel *Ghost World* in terms of a “temporally structured representation consisting of shifting figure-ground alignments, changes in the vantage-point or location of the perspective point within the referent scene, and
alterations in perspectival mode and direction of viewing” (“Beyond Voice” 135). Indeed, since graphic narratives are such a dominantly visual medium (cf. Groensteen 3), it is tempting to work from an optical understanding of focalization. A strict focus on viewing and optical perspective, however, undermines the many creative ways in which graphic narrative may visually encode the aspectuality of characters’ experience, including, among other things, the use of a particular visual style associated with a character (Mikkonen). While focalization in graphic narrative may thus be associated with the choice of a specific spatio-temporal vantage point on events and existents, especially in a realist visual style, this is by no means the only focalization-marking resource available to graphic narrative. Not least of all, a concentration on the perspectival construction of the visual neglects the second modal level of graphic narrative, that is, its verbal track. Aside from the as yet comparatively rare case of *sans paroles*, in graphic narrative both narration and focalization operate on two modal tracks simultaneously, and this may create gaps, lags, and tensions to a degree that is not available within the monomodal, linguistic narratives for whose analysis narrative theory was first conceived.

A narratology geared towards graphic narrative necessarily has to account for a number of semiotic features that distinguish comics from still or moving images on the one hand and verbal narrative on the other. Besides multimodality, these include (1) the encoding of time in space, or what Thierry Groensteen has called the “spatiotopia” of graphic narrative’s semiotic system (23); (2) the structuring of this time-in-space through frames and gutters, which means that the gaps that are integral to every narrative (Iser) are more self-consciously exposed in comics than in other media environments (McCloud); and (3) the “braiding” (Groensteen 146) of graphic narrative that puts every panel in a potential, if not actual, relation with every other, leading to a densification of detail. The relations between individual panels can be of an iconic as well as a rhetorical nature, and this results in a semantic overdetermination. A single panel only acquires meaning in a sequence, but it is always part of multiple sequences of varying length, leading to different degrees of braiding, from the triad of preceding, current, and following panel in classic nine-panel layouts through the “hyperframe” of an entire page and up to the increasingly inclusive systems of panel proliferation such as the “multiframe” and the “multistage multiframe” (Groensteen 30; cf. Hatfield 48). To be sure, in (monomodal) verbal narratives, too, instances of focalization have to be read in context, or rather by virtue of their relations to the surrounding co-text. However, while instances of “hermeneutic composability” (to use the terms of Jerome Bruner) in literary prose follow a linear pattern and rely on the grammar of natural language, graphic narrative is characterized by the “iconic solidarity” (Groensteen 6) of co-present images. The pages and double pages of graphic narrative are not only composed out of their constituent parts (frames and strips), but also form a higher unit of semiotic organization.

In this context, the concept of “braiding” describes a “model of organization that is not that of the strip nor that of the chain, but that of the network” (Groensteen 146). Braiding accounts for the medium-specific nature of part-whole interaction in graphic narrative by highlighting the plurivectoriality of work-internal iconic references. These references lead to both a densification of detail and the multidirectional-
ity of graphic narrative’s reception. Charging layout with meaning, braiding suggests a repetition that folds in on what precedes it, forcing readers to re-evaluate previous certainties. Groensteen specifically develops the concept in order to integrate the two dimensions of graphic narrative’s spatial composition and the temporality of its reading (147), thus solidifying its place as an important building block in the cognitive model of comics narratology that we develop below. Two points related to braiding particularly interest us in this article: the role of iconic repetition—both identical repetition of entire frames and repetition-with-a-difference—and the potential of iconic solidarity to function as a focalization-marking device.

We discuss the implications of visual repetition and of braiding for focalization in graphic narrative in our analyses of _Maus_ and _Watchmen_, below. First, however, we turn to Marjane Satrapi’s _Persepolis_ to focus on the spatio-topical organization of graphic narrative and the implications it holds for our model of focalization. _Persepolis_ relies on black and white cartooning in what some critics have described as a naïve or “minimal” style of drawing (Davis 271) to convey the author’s childhood experiences growing up in Iran in the midst of the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. The seeming simplicity of the drawings, however, is deceptive, as many of the panels contain intertextual allusions or other indicators of an experientiality that is more mature than that of the young girl depicted throughout the first of the two volumes. The protagonist’s confusions, interpretive difficulties, and mental turmoil are signaled both verbally and visually throughout the graphic narrative. Although undoubtedly indicating focalization, it is not always immediately obvious whether the mental processing originates within the experiencing or the narrating-I, whether it constitutes a character-bound or a narratorial focalization. At least in part, this ambiguity results from its non-realist, cartoony style that largely eschews perspectival construction in favor of two-dimensional surface impressions, thereby challenging assumptions about the primacy of optical perspectivation in visual focalization.

Rather than relying on the perspectival construction of panels to individuate sources of focalization, Satrapi often uses visual metaphor and symbolism to indicate an aspectuality that is not always easily attributable to a specific character. A particularly noteworthy instance of this technique occurs in a panel sequence in which the Satrapi family engages in a political discussion about the situation in Iran after the Shah’s leaving the country (1:43). As the discussion fizzles out, Satrapi introduces a panel in which the family is framed by a highly stylized symbol of the devil in the shape of a snake (Figure 1). This visual frame contrasts completely with the mother’s verbal assertion, in a speech balloon, that the devil—by which she means the Shah and all that he represents—has left. What it indicates, instead, is that the devil is still right there and indeed envelopes the family’s entire existence. In fact, in the space of a few weeks, the fundamentalists will seize power; recently released political prisoners will be re-imprisoned, tortured, and executed; and Iran will become embroiled in a bloody war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

The panel is uncharacteristic in its visual depiction of the political situation as the use of symbol through framing does not occur anywhere else in _Persepolis_. This shift in visual vocabulary indicates a subjective inflection of the narrative and thus focalization, which can only be appreciated and judged in the context of a sequence
of panels, as it is the pairing of stylistically diverse panels that cues the reader to construe the unusual snake frame in terms of focalization. Within the overall graphic minimalist style of *Persepolis*, the introduction of the symbolic snake figure, with its cross-cultural intertextual references to the Genesis story in the Hebrew Bible and the identification of snake and devil in Revelation 12:9 as well as to the Islamic and Zoroastrian traditions, entices readers to work through its narrative implications.

The focalization concept is helpful in resolving the inherent tension between the use of the snake as a framing device and the group portrait it envelopes, which bears no overt relation to that frame and whose figures do not acknowledge its presence. Certainly, the snake symbol constitutes an interpretation of the political situation in Iran and thus marks off the aspectuality under which this situation is considered. But whose aspectuality is that? How is the temporal relation between the snake frame and the family encircled within it—understood as two distinct utterances of the visual narrator—to be (re-)constructed? And where does the narrative authority behind this visual statement lie? On the one hand, the snake may be read as expressing political and historical analysis and judgment, thus betraying subsequent knowledge of political developments and a retrospective analysis of the situation. It would then serve to expose the overall perspective of the visual as well as of the verbal narrative as that of a more mature narrating-I, rather than that of the young experiencing-I, thereby constituting an effect of narratorial focalization that touches on the concept’s cognitive aspects. On the other hand, the snake could also be expressive of Marjane’s struggles to understand the complexity of the situation and her questioning of her parents’ interpretation. That Marjane—the experiencing-I—takes up an aspectual vantage point

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*Fig. 1. Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* 1:43*
on the parental discussion she overhears is suggested by her tense facial expression: she furrows her brows, arms on her waist, while her parents seem relaxed and serene. When thus understood as a character-bound focalization, the snake expresses the young girl’s lingering doubt as to whether the devil has really left.

Ultimately, however, the hypothesis of a narratorial focalization seems to be a stronger match with the details of the text than that of an experiencing-I. Above all, the narrating-I hypothesis accounts much better for the choice of the snake itself as a symbol for the Shah. The narrating-I is mature, experienced, and knowledgeable enough to choose the snake symbol and be aware of its various symbolic meanings. From this consideration, we conclude that focalization is a category that almost always invites the reader’s inferential activities, and the outcome of those activities can vary along a spectrum from strongly textually guided determinate conclusions to much less guided, more ambiguous ones.

However, we would like to emphasize that regardless of specific interpretive choices, the reading of this sequence significantly depends upon whether we attribute focalization to the character or to the narrator because of their different degrees of authority and foresight. While attribution to the character refracts the storyworld through the protagonist’s mental life (which is rich, but limited in foresight), an interpretation of the snake as narratorial focalization assigns a more authoritative epistemic status to the symbol as it introduces an element of plot foreshadowing. Because of the medium-specific encoding of time-in-space in graphic narrative, it is not possible to pinpoint the temporal relation between frame and embedded panel with any degree of certainty, and it is this temporal ambivalence that ultimately precludes attempts to render unambiguous its epistemic status and thus determine with certainty the origin of focalization. Despite the uncertain attribution of the snake symbol, however, its aspectuality is indicative of a focalization that is irreducible to optical perspectivation because it necessarily includes cognitive elements.

REPETITION AND SHADING IN MAUS

Unlike Satrapi’s Persepolis, Spiegelman’s Maus—a two-volume graphic rendition of the author’s engagement with his father’s Holocaust survival and its narrative—encompasses two temporal levels as well as two narrators and therefore calls for a more nuanced model of multimodal narration and focalization. World War Two Poland exists side by side, indeed often in alternating panels, with 1980s New York, as the narrative shifts back and forth between the intradiegetic story of Vladek’s survival and his extradiegetic interviews with Artie as the latter composes the text that purportedly makes up Maus.18 While Vladek functions as the intradiegetic verbal narrator, Artie is both the extradiegetic verbal narrator (in text boxes) of the 1980s storyline and the visual narrator—i.e., drawer—of the extra- and intradiegetic narratives. On the intradiegetic level, set in 1940s Poland, we are thus confronted with two narrative “voices”: Vladek’s verbal narrative, personalized through his persistent Polish accent, combines with Artie’s visual rendering of Vladek’s story, also personalized through the provocative choice of animal metaphors. (As is well known, Jews in Maus are
drawn as anthropomorphic characters but with mice heads, Poles as pigs, Germans as cats, Americans as dogs and so forth.)

Due to this intricate meshing of narrative voices, the familiar problem of distinguishing between character-bound and narratorial focalization in graphic narrative (or, in the case of graphic memoir, between the focalization of an experiencing-I and that of a narrating-I) reaches a new level of complexity. How do we account for instances of focalization when the subjective filtering of the story’s raw material may come from two distinct sources operating on multiple temporal levels and, in addition, is mediated by verbal as well as visual narrators who are actively engaged with the story’s telling within the storyworld? How can focalization be marked off in this particular graphic context, and how does it affect the story’s interpretation?

Disambiguating the source of focalization, as well as its relation to narration, proves to be a tough nut in a three-panel series relating the destiny of one of Vladek’s fellow prisoners in Auschwitz (2:50). The triad of panels self-consciously addresses Mauss’s complex interweaving of narrative voices and moods. The episode is introduced in the context of Vladek’s intradiegetic narrative of the endless roll calls in Auschwitz. The page opens with two panels that span its width depicting long, tiny rows of prisoners. Whereas the first illustrates the anonymity that the roll calls imposed
on prisoners, the second is slightly taller so that individual faces—some mice, some pigs—become discernible. One prisoner stands out: an old mouse/man imploring the guards, “I don't belong here with all these Yids and Polacks! I'm a German like you!” (Figure 2; emphasis original).

The symmetrical pair of panels comprising the next row visually expresses doubt about the old man's identity. The first is a close-up of the protesting character's head and upper body roughly down to his waist. In the context of the page—and let us remember that Spiegelman drew each page individually and to size—the unusually large square format of this and the next panel attracts attention and serves to individualize the character by opposing him to the long rows of mice and some pigs in the two introductory panels. The right-hand panel of the pair introduces a drastic change in visual representation, replacing the old prisoner's mouse head with a cat head and heavily shading over his portrait. Moreover, the second portrait is visually embedded within the 1980s New York communication between Vladek and Artie, who are represented at the bottom and slightly outside of the panel. While the first mouse image contained a speech balloon emanating from the old man (“I have medals from the Kaiser. My son is a German soldier!”), the second superimposes an identical intradiegetic speech balloon with an extradiegetic one proceeding from Artie, who raises the problem of ethnic identification by asking Vladek, “Was he really a German?” (emphasis original). The close pairing of these two images exposes the shortcomings of the animal imagery, which does not account for the complexities informing identity, such as that of an assimilated German Jew. The following, closing panel of the page visually asserts Vladek's final statement that “for the Germans, this guy was Jewish” by showing him as a mouse being clubbed to death by a cat camp guard. This panel's visual track, when considered in conjunction with Vladek's verbal comments, makes it very clear that identity in that situation is not open to negotiation.

Analyzing this panel sequence in terms of narrative mediation and focal filtering helps clarify the semantic status of these images and also sheds further light on the viability of distinguishing between narratorial and character-bound focalization in graphic narrative. Moreover, the surprising shift from mouse to cat and back again invites an investigation into the aptness and reliability of Artie's visual narration vis-à-vis Vladek's verbal telling. The visual similarity of the two panels, combined with the substitution of one animal metaphor for another, as well as the narrative embedding of that substitution in the interlocutory situation between Artie and Vladek, all raise the question of what status these images have within the storyworld, and, consequently, who focalizes the two panels. Vladek's assertion, at the bottom of the second panel, that he does not know and ultimately does not care about the prisoner's identity (because it is inconsequential) suggests that it is Artie, the visual narrator in the 1980s, who hesitates between two possibilities for visual representation. In other words, Artie openly questions how to visually narrate Vladek's embedded story in light of the old prisoner's unresolved identity, and the shading in the second panel is indicative of his lingering doubts. The shading technique, then, encodes the aspectuality under which Artie considers the old man, which is one of doubt and reservation towards Vladek's vantage point on his identity and, by extension, on its significance for the overall narrative. Moreover, it also serves to indicate the second image's unreal status.
The shading cues readers to construct the second image as inflected by Artie's focalization of a mental focal object: the unverified hypothetical proposition that the old man's dominant identity was that of a German rather than a Jew. Not a shift in visual vocabulary, then, but a jarring contrast between two incompatible visual metaphors for the same character combined with the self-conscious narrative embedding of the second panel within Artie and Vladek's conversation serve as focalization-marking resources here. Assessing the pair's status in terms of narratorial versus character focalization once more crucially depends on the images' embedding within a sequence as well as on the gaps between discreet frames; but it also involves a fuller consideration of possible tensions between the visual and verbal modal tracks. Needless to say, however, the reading that we propose ultimately constitutes an interpretive decision for which no hard and fast criteria can be established.

The layering of narrative and focal instances in Maus across two semiotic modes raises questions of narrative authority as well as visual and verbal coherence, two fundamental questions of all narrative, particularly if the shift in imagery and thus, in focalization, is read as an indicator of narrative uncertainty. By shift in focalization, we mean to say that the external, narratorial focalization of the first mouse image turns into an internal focalization of Artie the character with the second cat image. In short, two things happen between the mouse and cat image. Firstly, while the mouse is a visible focalized object, the cat, because of its being a hypothetical proposition, is an invisible one. Secondly, although the focalizer of the two images is personally identical—Artie—he functions on different levels for each image. In the first one, he is an external, narratorial focalizer detailing what Vladek relates of this 1940s experience in Auschwitz. In the second, he is an internal, character-bound focalizer considering the hypothesis that the old man is a German and thus processing in the present (i.e., 1980s New York) what he has learned from Vladek by imagining an alternative animal metaphor. What the sequence illustrates, then, is the interplay between Artie's interest in pinning down the identity of the old man and Vladek's insistence that his identity does not matter. Moreover, since the shift is linked to Artie's interpretation of Vladek's story, which is the story we are reading, in the second panel Artie is in our seat: his uncertainty mirrors ours. In short, Artie is processing Vladek's story, and processing is where focalization takes place, not narration (which has already been processed).

Indeed, even though the 1940s intradiegetic story is Vladek's, the attitudes with which it is viewed in the visual track are almost exclusively Artie's in the 1980s, making Artie, on the visual track, the dominant external focalizer of Vladek's tale. Verbally, however, the main focalizer is Vladek, albeit Vladek in the present. He, too, then, is an external focalizer to the story of his younger self. The page under discussion exemplifies the interaction between these two external focalizers—one for the visual track, the other for the verbal one—and indicates some consequences that this doubling up of focalization may have for issues of narrative authority. Vladek's brisk "Who knows" in response to Artie's question whether or not the prisoner was German, followed by the two (verbal) versions of how that prisoner might have been killed, indicates that Vladek's attitude towards the old man's identity is one of inconsequence. In his view, it does not change anything in the story.
Ultimately, the old man’s real identity does not change anything on the visual track either. By the end of the page, Vladek’s stance inflects Artie’s focalization because in the closing panel Artie returns to the mouse metaphor to depict the prisoner’s death. It is precisely this return to the un-shaded mouse image that exposes the cat in the middle panel as an effect of focalization because it retains a status of non-actualized possibility. The visual switch is in stark contrast to Vladek’s stance that, unlike Artie’s, never wavers. The focalizers’ differing attitudes—Vladek’s firm in its conviction and Artie’s fraught with uncertainty—seriously places Valdek’s authority into question.

MULTI-STAGE BRAIDING IN WATCHMEN

A far more complex example of visual repetition is found in the multi-authored graphic novel Watchmen, written by Alan Moore, illustrated and lettered by Dave Gibbons, and colored by John Higgins. In accounting for this complexity, we refer to Groensteen’s braiding concept to discuss the function of higher-level repetition and repetition-with-a-difference for signaling (shifts in) focalization. Unlike Persepolis and Maus, Watchmen is mediated by a covert heterodiegetic narrator, thus allowing our discussion to revolve around the possible distinction between a covert narratorial focalization and one that is character bound.

Watchmen is an intertextually sophisticated play on the superhero comic genre that tells a dark apocalyptic story of the need to save mankind from itself. The story unfolds in a parallel universe in which the US won the Vietnam war, Nixon gets re-elected twice, and the Soviets do not invade Afghanistan until 1985, six years later than in reality. While the main plotline is set in 1985 New York, there are frequent flashbacks to the 1940s and 1960s that are crucial to the progression of the main plotline because they betray the characters’ identities, fears, desires, and hidden motivations. Although the remembered content is located in the past, its recollection unfolds in the present, crucially involving interpretive as well as constructive processes. As such, memories, theorized by Bal as important aspects of focalization (Narratology 150–51), are always tinged with the recollector’s aspectuality.

We argue that focalization provides crucial links between a first narrative and analepses, outlining some visual focalization-marking resources that are available for this linking in graphic narrative. In his theory of narrative order, Genette had not only attempted to pinpoint and measure the various narrative anachronies, but he also categorized the possible relations between different temporal layers in terms of “subjective and objective retrospections, subjective and objective anticipations, and simple returns to each of these two positions,” specifying that the distinction between subjective and objective anachronies is not (only) a matter of temporality but one of mood, that is, of focalization (Narrative Discourse 39). An understanding of focalization as a cueing mechanism for readerly reconstructions of narrative aspectuality and its sources helps to even better explain how anachronies are linked to a first narrative. Such an explanation is urgently needed when studying Watchmen, whose narrative unpredictably jumps from anachrony to anachrony, often alternating between first narrative frames and ones relating an analepsis without, however, providing explicit
guidance as to the temporal relationship between panels and panel sequences, or to the ways in which the past is (subjectively or objectively) accessed.

Graphic narrative's progression in discrete frames offers a unique opportunity for an increased and speedy use of anachronies that is fully exploited in Watchmen. Although anachronies in graphic narrative can be difficult to pinpoint, as the visual track often offers no hard evidence of temporal relations such as grammatical pronouns (that enable a distinction between subjective and objective anachronies), verbal tense, or temporal adverbs, the ways in which individual panels are embedded within sequences of varying length may help clarify their status within the narrative. Not only do two or more sequences of panels relating different subplots often alternate in the course of a strip or page in Watchmen, but entire sequences of panels are repeated across page and chapter borders, making the operations of braiding crucial to understanding Watchmen's narrative structure and readerly reception.

Unlike purely text-internal structures such as page layout, “braiding deploys itself simultaneously in two dimensions, requiring them to collaborate with each other: synchronically, that of the co-presence of panels on the surface of the same page; and diachronically, that of the reading, which recognizes in each new term of a series a recollection or an echo of an anterior term” (Groensteen 147). Since braiding operates at several levels simultaneously, a panel may become part of multiple sequences of varying length, reaching from the triad of preceding, current, and subsequent panel up to the multistage multiframe of an entire graphic narrative. Watchmen's reliance on multiple intradiegetic narrators and focalizers who often mediate similar or even identical visual material makes braiding particularly pertinent to an analysis of focalization. One striking example of this repetition technique concerns the sequence of panels detailing the murder of Edward (Eddie) Blake, aka “The Comedian.” This event, which sets the entire narrative in motion, is depicted no less than three times in a similar (but not identical) sequence of almost monochromatic, intensely red visual images. These three multi-panel sequence repetitions-with-a-difference are subject to braiding across the distance of a multistage multiframe; that is, they refer to each other across multiple pages and, indeed, chapters, establishing a citation effect (Groensteen 148). Although the content and visual style of the sequence remain for the most part unaltered, neither is perfectly duplicated. And although the context changes drastically, a change in the orientation of reading—from a linear to a trans-linear and plurivectoral reading—is activated by (1) braiding's signaling of the sequence as semantically overdetermined and (2) by braiding's densification of certain details repeated within or added to individual repetitions.

The repetition and variation that characterize braiding ensure that one multi-panel sequence does not substitute or override the narrative significance of another. Instead, with every repetition, the relation of complimentarity between the sequences is further extended. Braiding poses a challenge for readers wishing to determine not only what in the sequence is a significant repetition and what is a significant variation, but also why these significant repetitions and variations are meaningful within a given multi-panel sequence as well as in the overall narrative. In this way, braiding not only demands that readers ask who is focalizing crucial information concerning Blake's murder each time the sequence is presented, but it also forces them to
constantly reassess previously accepted information and thus to realign themselves within the storyworld with each newly focalized sequence.

While the visual track of the three repetitions constitutes a recurring analepsis, their different verbal tracks form part of the main plotline in which each repetition is embedded. More than anything else, it is this temporal disjunction between visual and verbal tracks that strongly suggests the presence of three different focalizers whose mental processing refracts the sequence’s events. This multiplicity of viewpoints introduces uncertainty into the narrative, thereby privileging the reader’s cognition: what really happened to Blake, and whose version of events are we to believe? These questions are pressing as the interpretation of *Watchmen* hinges on the identity (and motive) of Blake’s murderer, which is revealed only when the murder sequence appears for the third time. Moreover, only the third repetition explicitly identifies the focalizer; the first two versions understate both the identity of each focalizer and his or her specific involvement in the focalized events, thereby requiring readers to infer crucial information from the context.

A closer look at each of the three recurrences allows us to clarify our two main points regarding the crucial role of braiding and the resulting privileging of readerly cognition. The red murder sequence is first introduced towards the beginning of chapter 1 during a police investigation into Blake’s murder (Chapter 1:2–3). Eight panels showing two police detectives inspecting Blake’s ravaged apartment alternate with the red murder sequence, with the detectives’ dialogue in text boxes carrying over into the red panels in a kind of verbal-visual enjambment. Both the coloring of the panels and the incongruent (groups of) characters that populate them immediately suggest that interwoven sequences belong to distinct narrative frames. Because the first narrative relates an ongoing police investigation into a murder, it seems safe to assume that the red sequence, which details just such a murder, constitutes a narrative analepsis relating the specifics of the crime. Indeed, that the dialogue of the first narrative spills into the red sequence seems to confirm this conclusion, as the visual track often illustrates the dialogue. For instance, a text box in the first panel reads, “… which means that the occupant was *home* when it happened” (Chapter 1:2; emphasis original) and the panel shows the occupant, i.e., Blake, sitting in front of the TV, half-turning to see someone kicking in the apartment door.

Who, then, focalizes these images? Either the red panels constitute straightforward flashbacks in which *Watchmen*’s covert narrator communicates to his readers what really happened—unbeknownst to the detectives in the first narrative. Or the red panels indicate the filtering mind of the two detectives who are teasing out the murder details. Are readers thus faced with a narratorial or with a character focalization? And what specific focalization-marking resources fuel this interpretive decision? We argue that the introduction of a verbal-visual enjambment that crosses the different narrative’s temporal and, at times, spatial boundaries brings readers to ask whose aspectuality filters the visual information contained in the (repeated) red panel sequence.

That each red panel corresponds to a question or a speculation raised by one or both of the detectives strongly indicates that the red sequence is affected by the detectives’ aspectuality. For instance, following the question “How did he go outta the
window?” and the speculation that “maybe he tripped against it,” the more probable scenario comes in the form of a text box included in a red panel depicting a beaten Blake being carried towards a window: “I think you’d have to be thrown.” However, although the red panels largely confirm what the two detectives suspect, some of the dialogue appears to be in an ironic tension to the panels’ visual content. This is particularly true of the final panel that shows Blake's deadly fall accompanied by an elevator operator’s response, “ground floor comin’ up,” to the detective’s request to be taken to the ground floor. The disjunction between the verbal and the visual suggests that the narrative here provides information about a past event while simultaneously ironically confronting that information with the two detectives’ banter, revealing some of it as apt, some as mistaken, and some as irrelevant or inappropriate to the situation.

We cannot but conclude, then, that the sequence must be doubly focalized: at once by the detectives whose conclusions are shown and by a covert narrator whose ironic stance taints the incongruent interplay between dialogue and visuals in the final panels. Hence, the images can be read on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand, the panels can be understood as representative of the subjective filtering mind of the two detectives whose mental processing of the crime scene information is presented verbally in their dialogue exchange and visually in the red murder sequence. Because the detectives can only speculate about the murder, this would constitute neither an objective nor a subjective retrospection, but rather a hypothetical presentation of events. Thus understood, the detectives are the collective character focalizers of the red murder sequence, and the red shading serves as a focalization-marking resource indicating their mental processing. At the same time, however, the disjunction between the visual and verbal track in the sequence’s final panels suggests that such a fallible character-bound focalization is embedded within an ironic narratorial focalization both of the murder and of the detectives’ processing of it. Watchmen’s narrative thus reveals itself early on as a highly sophisticated play with different levels of focalization based on different degrees of knowledge and foresight that constantly unsettles readers’ attempts to assess who knows what about whom.

This self-conscious play extends into the second presentation of the murder sequence. This time, the sequence is contextualized within Blake’s funeral in a three-page layout that opens with a large panel showing a masked character, the mysterious Rorschach, entering the cemetery and walking towards a tombstone marked Edward Morgan Blake (Chapter 2:26–28). Rorschach’s intradiegetic diary entries, visually distinguished from extradiegetic narratorial comments throughout Watchmen by their distinctive lettering and yellow background, are here placed within both the cemetery and the red murder sequence panels. Their intrusion into the murder sequence, with little or no disruption in their verbal telling, reframes the familiar sequence in Rorschach’s paranoid, violent, and absolute worldview, leading to a re-lexicalization of the repeated panels. Moreover, the change in the verbal track, but not in visual content, signals a shift in character focalization from the collectively focalizing police team in the first chapter to Rorschach’s cognitive processing in the second. The lower degree of color distinction between the murder sequence and its alternating frame also emphasizes this filtering of information through Rorschach. In fact, after the first panel of the murder sequence, the alternating panels of the main plotline use a similar
shade of red to show Rorschach’s memories of events in the 1940s, making it difficult to grasp the temporal disjunction between the alternating series of panels. Both the sequence’s repetition and its blending with the surrounding co-text, then, serve to express Rorschach’s pessimistic view of the world and human nature as unchanging and unchangeable.

Although the first five red images are exactly the same as those in the first murder sequence, the sixth one depicting Blake draped over the murderer’s shoulder just before he is thrown through the window is omitted. Given Rorschach’s black-and-white approach to crime, this detail may simply be too obvious for him to reflect upon or, given his determination to capture Blake’s murderer, he may already have a particular suspect in mind. The large panel at the bottom of the page portraying Blake falling out of the window is faithfully reproduced: its size, shape, position, and graphic detail are identical to those of the first murder sequence. Unexpectedly, however, on the last page of the second three-page sequence, the optical perspective on the falling man changes: the fall was presented from above the first time, but the second time the angle of vision is below. To account for this subtle but noteworthy difference, readers may well conclude that Rorschach, who wandered the streets as the murder was taking place—he actually walks past the detectives as they leave Blake’s apartment building on the last page of the first three-page murder sequence (Chapter 1:4)—could have witnessed the falling man. The final panels, then, would no longer be speculation, but rather recollections of something seen, thus rendering the previous panels the visual equivalent of Rorschach’s efforts to unravel what took place immediately preceding Blake’s fall. This evolving interpretation, however, is truncated with the next panel, a close-up image of Blake still alive just before he hits the ground. The falling glass and Blake’s proximity to whoever would be looking up at him make it unlikely that this is a mimetic rendering of an eyewitnesses’ angle of vision. Once again, matters of focalization force readers to continuously adjust their understanding of the storyworld, here guided in their reconstruction by Rorschach’s aspectuality.

By the end of the sequence, the temporal relationship between the murder sequence and Rorschach’s nightly visit to the cemetery is significantly unclear. Is Rorschach remembering, imagining, or speculating on Blake’s fall? Uncertainty abounds since the murder sequence concludes with a monochromatically red panel that could be either an extreme close-up of the red roses by Blake’s tombstone or a recollection of the blood stain on the pavement that introduced *Watchmen* and Blake’s murder. What remains certain is that the focalizing agent filtering the red panel sequence has now changed: it is Rorschach. Nonetheless, the status of these repeated images is even more ambiguous than in the first instance and not only because they are familiar. While the first occurrence strongly suggests that the panels show the detectives’ imaginings, readers are now beginning to wonder whether Rorschach, too, is imagining the murder or whether he is actually remembering it, either because he is the murderer or because he is a witness to the crime. Needless to say, this has crucial consequences for readers’ emotional investment.

The third time the sequence is reproduced towards the end of *Watchmen*, the red images accompany the confession of the murderer, Veidt, who explains why he needed to kill Blake. Veidt’s grand scheme to “trick the world” into uniting comes
to light both in his speech bubbles included in the (alternating panels of the) main plotline as well as in text boxes that intrude upon the red murder sequence (Chapter 11:24–26). As in the previous sequences, the verbal track often coincides with the visual one, but also occasionally clashes with it as ironic tensions arise between them. For instance, when Veidt recounts Blake’s discovery of the uncharted island where Veidt’s apocalyptic plan was materializing, he emphasizes that “what [Blake] found must have come as a terrible blow.” The accompanying red image is of Blake smashing against the wall after having received a terrible blow from the murderer’s fist (Chapter 11:24).

The first five images showing the initial stages of the attack on Blake are once again identical to those in the previous two murder sequences. A shift occurs, as before, with the sixth panel. Whereas in the first sequence this panel showed Blake draped over an unidentifiable murderer’s shoulders (thus betraying the uncertainty of the detectives) (Figure 3) and in the second sequence it was altogether absent (so to reflect Rorschach’s black-and-white approach to life), here, where the murder mystery is solved and the murderer’s identity is no longer in question, the panel is of Veidt in the act of killing Blake, thus firmly grounding the murder sequence not in speculation, but in actual fact (Figure 4). This important panel powerfully visualizes Veidt’s conviction that “humanity’s fate rested safely in my hands” (Chapter 11:26). Veidt, then, is the character focalizer within the context of this third murder sequence, but his focalization is once more embedded within that of a covert narrator whose subjective processing of information taints the lags and tensions between the visual and the verbal track.

Fig. 3. Alan Moore, et al., Watchmen
Chapter 1:3

Fig. 4. Moore, Alan et al. Watchmen
Chapter 11:26
The final panel of the red murder sequence is the familiar one showing Blake going through the window. Tellingly, it has been significantly reduced in size and does not occupy the central, semantically charged position at the bottom of the page that it did in the two previous sequences. Its reduced size indicates Veidt's emotional disengagement from the murder he is committing, as is further suggested by the abundance of text boxes that partly obscure the image and reduce its visual impact. When filtered through Veidt's aspectuality, then, the murder itself becomes secondary to his overall scheme. Indeed, the large panel at the bottom of the page returns to the current situation in the streets where Veidt’s intended mass panic is beginning to orchestrate itself. Although the optical perspective in all three sequences is that of the murderer—Veidt—it is only in the third and final sequence that Veidt is the character focalizer.

To extend the sequence across different contexts and different focalizing agents is to force readers to move unsteadily between differing vantage points on the murder scene, unsure as to where the correct or, at the very least, soundest evaluation of these events lies. Questions of narratorial trustworthiness and reliability are here tied up in issues of focalization. When the sequence is first introduced, the two detectives are speculating as to how the murder unfolded, constructing, in turn, an invisible, hypothetical focal object. In the second instance, Rorschach’s status as witness or murderer is uncertain, and readers hesitate as to whether or not the red images portray what Rorschach witnessed firsthand. Their uncertainty is partly dissipated with the final panels showing Blake’s fall, only to be rekindled with the red monochrome panel that closes the three-page layout. By contrast, with Veidt there is no doubt that actual memory guides the visual depiction of Blake’s murder, albeit the memory of a highly untrustworthy murdering maniac with grandiose delusions. The final red murder sequence is the most reliable because it evokes the aspectuality of the only character who was present at the crime scene, but this reliability is relative rather than absolute.

Our analysis of Watchmen has highlighted the minute differences that are introduced each time the murder sequence is repeated and discussed how these variations shed light on the mutual embedding of narratorial and character focalization. Although the overall sameness of (most of) these panels deserves further analysis, perhaps by considering an additional layer of narrative agency in the shape of the implied author concept, we have adopted a constructivist focus (and not a rhetorical one) to emphasize the concrete ways in which actual readers respond to textual cues such as focalization markers. Thus, our reading has stressed aesthetic ambivalence, different reading options, and the role of focalization as an interpretive category. We have discussed the ironic tension between narratorial and character focalization each time the sequence recurs, which in Watchmen is broadcast through the visual-verbal enjambments that create a jarring reading effect. The question of who imagines or remembers—i.e. who focalizes—is key to understanding the recurring murder sequence and its influential role within Watchmen’s storyworld. Of course, other analytical parameters add to the meaning of each sequence, such as the panel arrangement, layout, use of color, drawing style, and the degree of contrast with the alternating panels. However, if readers fail to ask who focalizes each of the repetitions, then a crucial dimension of the story is lost on them. Focalization is the narrative tool that makes it
possible for readers to experience what the storyworld is and feels like, thus ensuring their engagement with it. In fact, it is not by chance that the murder sequence, and not another event, is repeated in a different context throughout *Watchmen*.

**FOCALIZATION AND NARRATIVE SITUATIONS IN GRAPHIC NARRATIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES**

Just like literary prose fiction, graphic narrative relies on a narrator as well as one or several focalizers who together produce the text that we read and look at. However, due to its multimodality, both the narrative mediation and the focal filtering of the story tend to be more complexly structured than is the case in the monomodal, literary prose narratives for which narratological tools and concepts were first designed. At first sight, things seem simple enough. While the narrator of a graphic novel may, in principle, be either a character or a mediator who is not a character, the filtering of the focalizer may similarly proceed either from a character source or be located outside of any character and thus lie with the narrator. On such a basic level, then, the concepts of narration and focalization as they were first designed by Gérard Genette and further refined by Mieke Bal, Manfred Jahn, and others appear well suited to study graphic narrative. Indeed, differentiating between narration and focalization when analyzing graphic narrative can be highly productive because it allows for the crucial distinction between one or several characters’ experientiality of events and existents on the one hand and the narrator’s reporting of them on the other. Due to the different degrees of narrative authority and foresight involved, this distinction is particularly pertinent in cases where an impersonal narrator embeds the focal filtering of one or several characters.

A close reading of our three sample texts, however, has shown that graphic narrative’s combination of a visual and a verbal track may considerably complicate the possible permutations of narration and focalization. Like their precursors in literary prose fiction, graphic memoirs, represented in our article by Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (other examples include David B.’s *Epileptic*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, and *Blankets* by Craig Thompson), are related by an autodiegetic narrator. However, in graphic narrative, the autodiegetic narrator not only mediates the verbal track (by way of extradiegetic comments in text boxes), but usually also draws the visual track. Therefore, graphic memoir may introduce gaps and lags not only between the experientiality of the experiencing-I and its retrospective reconstruction by a narrating-I, which is necessarily tinged by the aspectuality of the latter, but also between the two semiotic tracks. Although aspectuality and hence focal filtering can be detected, it cannot always be unambiguously ascribed either to the experiencing-I or the narrating-I, even though these two options would result in divergent interpretations of the narrative.

That focalization in multimodal narrative is thus an incredibly ambiguous category is fully exploited in *Watchmen*, a graphic narrative that like Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York* and Jon J. Muth’s *M* combines a covert impersonal narrator with one or several focal filters to destabilize both narrative order and authority. Through the
use of braiding, the pattern of references between panels across sequences of various degrees that links a graphic narrative and its reception, identical visual material can become associated with different focal filters and thus serve to evoke quite distinct aspectualities. Besides illustrating the futility of the optical perspectivation approach to focalization in graphic narrative, this example also highlights once more that focalization is a relational operation that involves a focalizer and a focal object: the object, in *Watchmen*, is the same each time the red murder sequence recurs, but the focalizer is a different one with every repetition.

A combination of both narrative situations is presented in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which is probably the most intricately structured of our three examples. *Maus* employs not one, but two character narrators, only one of whom—Artie—operates on both modal tracks, while Vladek’s second-order verbal narrative is always embedded within Artie’s visual mediation. *Maus* presents two stories, mediated by two narrators on two semiotic tracks, which can be potentially focalized by two character focalizers as well as by a narratorial focalizer. In other words, Artie can present as either a character or a narratorial focalizer, two hierarchically differentiated possibilities for focalization that play out in the mouse-cat-mouse sequence.

To reiterate, focalization is a pivotal concept for a visual or multimodal narratology in so far as it directs meaning and opens up the possibility for variance in meaning and mood. In order for focalization to become an analytically productive category, however, it needs to be more inclusive than mere perspectivation. The focalization-marking resources of graphic narrative that we have identified include eyeline match, which indicates character focalization and serves as an instance of optical perspectivation, but also shifts in visual vocabulary, for instance the introduction of uncommon symbols and framing devices that are incongruent in their sequential context. The latter encode a more broadly conceived aspectuality that is not reducible to sense perception but includes aspects of cognition and judgment. Aspectuality, then, is our main criterion for what constitutes focalization, making the scope and focus of our focalization concept significantly wider than that of either Genette or Bal.

At the same time, we depart from structuralist concepts of focalization by considering focalization in multimodal narrative as a largely interpretive category that links a text and its reception. Consequently, focalization is impossible to pinpoint once and for all as a reader’s processing of focalization evolves over the course of a reading. The focalization-marking resources that we have identified serve to cue readers to imaginatively transfer to the storyworld by constructing what Alan Palmer would call an “embedded narrative,” that is, the way in which the story is experienced by one particular character and thus under that character’s aspectuality. In spite of Bal’s arguments for a first-, second-, and third-person voice in visual narrative (*Quoting Caravaggio* 177–79), however, in the absence of linguistic pointers, visual content in multimodal narrative is not marked with grammatical pronouns and thus cannot be attributed to a specific person with any degree of certainty. Similarly, the visual track in multimodal narrative is not in and of itself temporally marked, and so all attributions are interpretive much more so than in linguistic narrative. These conclusions suggest once more that, in order for narratology to become a valid methodology for non-linguistic and multimodal media, central concepts taken from classical narratol-
ogy—such as narration and focalization—have to be adapted to fit the needs of narrative in each medium and to thus account for their distinct processes of signification.

Our preliminary findings suggest at least three important avenues for further research on focalization. First, in the field of graphic narrative, a wider survey of texts is called for, which would lead to a more detailed and exhaustive catalogue of focalization-marking resources that could serve as a sound textual base for moving focalization theory away from the perspectivation model and developing more closely the model of aspectuality. Moreover, the links between focalization and reliability, which we have hinted at throughout this article, deserve further exploration. Reliability has been discussed almost exclusively in relation to narration, but our analysis of Watchmen suggests that there also exists an unreliable focalization or that, at the very least, focalization may crucially contribute to an unreliable narrative voice.

Second, some of the newer research on film focalization (e.g., Verstraeten) suffers from a similar limitation to merely technical models of optical perspectivation that do not sufficiently address the many varied ways that multimodal texts may encode focalization. We would therefore welcome work on film focalization that considers focalization-marking resources that encode a more broadly conceived aspectuality not limited to perspectivation and eyeline match.

Third, a reassessment of focalization in literary prose narrative is also called for. Our analyses have highlighted the crucial role of visual styles in encoding shifts in focalization. We suspect that narrative voice and style may similarly contribute towards encoding focalization in literary narrative. If this suspicion can be supported by textual evidence, then Genette’s first concept of focalization, with its neat distinction between voice and vision, as well as the models of Bal and Jahn that are based on it, would have to be revised towards a new model of literary focalization that pays closer attention, for instance, to the double voicing in Free Indirect Discourse. Conversely, we wonder if the concept of FID might not be helpful in better understanding the messy entwining of perception, aspectuality, and enunciation in sections of graphic narrative such as the red murder sequence in Watchmen. But that is a matter for a different article.
ENDNOTES

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2. Cf. Burkhard Niederhoff’s critique of Herman’s use of focalization in an earlier article (“Focalization” 120).

3. One narratologist who consistently uses the term “perspective” is Wolf Schmid. However, Schmid’s perspective, defined as the “complex of internal and external factors governing the capturing and representation of a fabula” (“der von inneren und äußeren Faktoren gebildete Komplex von Bedingungen für das Erfassen und Darstellen eines Geschehens”) (Elemente der Narratologie 125), comprises spatial, ideological and temporal as well as perceptual orientation and is thus much more inclusive than Herman’s use of the same concept.

4. Conversely, see Burkhard Niederhoff’s vociferous criticism of the “reinterpretation of focalization in terms of point of view” and of the “continuing influence of the point-of-view paradigm” (“Focalization” 118). Similarly, Monika Fludernik asserts that “the perceptional metaphor has been a red herring. The crucial issue is that of the presentation of consciousness, and all visual and perceptual parameters are subordinate to this basic parameter” (346).

5. A similar point is raised by Jan-Christoph Meister and Jörg Schönert.

6. In a recent conference paper, Kai Mikkonen states similar misgivings about the limitations of Herman’s concept of perspectivation. We would like to express our gratitude to Kai for sharing this unpublished work with us.

7. See, for example, contributions in the field by Jan Baetens (The Graphic Novel, “Graphic Novels”), Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, Thierry Groensteen, Philippe Marion, and Robin Varnum and Christine T. Gibbons. In addition, English Language Notes and Substance have devoted special issues to graphic narratives, and Routledge has recently launched a Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, joining European Comic Art and International Journal of Comic Art as one of the few refereed journals devoted to comics.

8. See, however, contributions by David Herman (“Beyond Voice and Vision, “ “Multimodal Storytelling”), Karin Kukkonen, and Julia Round, as well as Patrick O’Neill’s short consideration of focalization in Ben Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes in his Fictions of Discourse.

9. A similar point was raised by Henrik Skov Nielsen in his paper at the 2010 ISSN conference; we thank Henrik for making this work available to us. James Phelan, who also notes the inconsistencies in Genette’s system, suggests that “Genette would have done better . . . by working out a typology of possible relations between speaker and perceiver” (111).

10. Unless noted specifically otherwise, references are to the latest, third edition of Bal’s Narratology.

11. Bal considers this question futile (Narratology 226). Theorists who argue that images narrate include Emma Kafalenos, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Wendy Steiner. Werner Wolf argues for a lower degree of narrativity in visual images.

12. For a similar understanding of focalization, see Patrick O’Neill who concludes, “Who sees?” should therefore be understood as potentially meaning ‘Who perceives, conceives, assumes, understands, desires, remembers, dreams?’ and so on. Each of these visions will have its separate implications for the kind of focalizer employed—and for the kind of reading we feel appropriate” (87).

13. Without direct reference to Bal and despite his broader concept of focalization, Jahn adopts several central tenets of her model, especially the distinction between focalizer and focal object,
as well as that between a character-bound or, as Jahn says, reflector-based focalization and an external, narratorial one (“Windows of Focalization”).

14. Cf. James Phelan, who argues that “as the narrator reports, the narrator cannot help but simultaneously function as a set of lenses through which the audience perceives the story world,” whereas “when the narration leaves the narrator’s perspective for a character’s, then the focalization shifts; the audience doffs the narrator’s lenses and dons the character’s” (115–16).

15. The identification of snake and devil is less explicit in Islam than in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, five Hadiths of the Sunnah mention snakes as deadly enemies: Sahih Muslim no. 210, 4139, 4140, 4148 and 4477.

16. In Zoroastrianism, the ancient dualistic Iranian religion, snakes are one of the animal species associated with the evil Ahriman and are said to dwell in hell. Cf. Philippe Gignoux.

17. Will Eisner makes the similar observation that “in comics, as in film, symbolic objects not only narrate but heighten the emotional reaction of the reader” (16).

18. Artie refers to the character within Maus in opposition to Art Spiegelman who is the real-life author of the two volumes.

19. The use of animal metaphor in Maus has been discussed extensively. See, for instance, Huyssen. For a reading of the animal imagery within the history of American racism, see Loman.

20. The inadequacy of animal metaphors is a frequently discussed topic in research on Maus and indeed it is also problematized within the novel itself. The most popular example cited in relation to the animal metaphor is when Artie dons a mouse mask just before visiting Pavel, his psychiatrist (2:41–43). Attention is drawn to the fact that Artie is a fully-figured human being, thus raising for explicit consideration whether the mouse imagery is too essentialist and, hence, reductive to cover all aspects of Jewish identity, which also includes elements of hybridity, self-identification and self-fashioning. Theorists who have examined questions of identity in Maus include Brown, Hirsch (17–40), and Hutcheon.

21. Doubt about what animal metaphor to use to narrate complex ethnic identities is overtly addressed by Artie the visual narrator at the beginning of the second volume of Maus. He is shown holding his sketch pad, with its drawings of various animals visible, discussing with his wife Françoise how he should represent her (2:11). A more subtle example of the visual narration of complex (because hybrid) identity is the representation of mouse-cat children to show the offspring of a Jewish man and a German woman (2:131).


23. A variation of autodiegetic narrative is introduced in graphic journalism. See, for example, Joe Sacco’s Palestine and Guy Delille’s Pyongyang.

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Focalization in Graphic Narrative


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