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Comics:

The Underappreciated and Underdeveloped Art

A Thesis Presented

by

Matt Taylor Hirst

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This thesis will specifically focus on the mode of expression in comic books rather than the content. It will be more concerned with questions of how people read comics than why they read comics. The questions of how people read comics can most productively be handled with semiotics, the branch of the philosophy of language that deals with signs. So far, this is just following in the footsteps of two pioneers in the field of semiotics. Both Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes have spent some time examining the nature of comics as a medium. The benefit of examining comics from the standpoint of semiotics is mutual. The benefit for semiotics comes from examining how comic books have a very systematic grammar for something that lies between showing and telling. This position itself is not unique; all literature has a tension between showing (mimesis) and telling (diegesis). What is interesting about comics is the presence of a grammar that partially determines this relationship. Comics provide an object of study that allows semiotics to move away from a primarily language based model without losing all of the complexity that is associated with languages.

What comics have to gain is twofold. There is room for further understanding of the capabilities of comics. That is to say, a semiotic understanding may help develop comics as an art form. Here again, this thesis will find itself standing on the backs of giants. Will Eisner, Scott McCloud and Robert C. Harvey have set up a solid foundation for examining comics as the product of mastery over a complex grammar. The establishing of academic and medium specific vocabularies and methodologies is not the final answer for comics' development into a high art form. It is neither the same thing as a body of talented and innovative creators and critics nor is it a substitute for them. The point that this thesis shares with those theorists that came before it is, that establishing such a vocabulary and methodology will raise the bar of the discussion of comics' merits.

The next thing comics have to gain is the understanding of how they relate to other forms of expression. A semiotic understanding may help to appreciate how comics, as a form of graphic storytelling, relate to our understanding of the world. This ties into a classical dispute in philosophy that will be raised but not resolved. In Kant's metaphysics, a set of relational categories function as axioms for the understanding of space and time. Each category is associated with a form of propositional logic and subsequently to language itself. This thesis will not resolve how Kant can or should be related to the philosophy of language. Rather this thesis will explore how comics, as an extra-linguistic system for expressing narrative space and time, are and are not categorically rule governed.

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Introduction:

Mission and Methodology

This thesis will be devoted to comic books. For the most part the primary goal of comics is aesthetic, but comics also are communicative phenomenon with extremely complex interpretative structures. The question then is how thoroughly these interpretative structures lend themselves to exposition. For the most part systems of expression are designed to be self-concealing. Comics' conventions are no exception to this rule of self-concealment. The comics' words and images are meant to be subsumed into the narrative. This project of uncovering of the self-concealing alone would be ambitious. Nevertheless, due to the nature of comics as medium where static images and prose interact, there will be a lot of potential applications and implications of these interpretative structures.

The aim of the first chapter will be to try to get to an exhaustive understanding of how comics function as expressive phenomena. The mission is to simply get to where we can discuss a new critical discourse on comics as a medium. Generally this can be expressed as understanding how a narrative is communicated through comics rather than understanding what narratives are communicated through comics. The relationship between expression and content can also be approximated by the relationship between signifier and signified. As far as a sign can be understood as the interaction between signifier and signified, it will serve as a good starting point in examining expression and

content. In order for a signifier to adequately transmit a signified there must be a shared semi-permanent code in place. A code is a way of anticipating information that makes a set of expression or phenomenon intelligible. The inability for the same content to be conveyed in a different expressive medium—that is to say the failure of adaptation—points us to what are the primary codes governing expression in comics. There is something unique about how expression is transmitted in comics. The goal here is to define it by finding out how more general codes of expression both do and do not account for the semiosis that happens when someone gleans a narrative out of a comic book. Kant plays a double role in this search for these governing codes. In that this is a search for the codes that are the prior conditions for expression in comics this thesis will borrow from Kant's transcendental methodology. Kant distinguishes between examining how “our cognition must conform to objects” and how “objects must conform to our cognition.”¹ The question of how “objects must conform to our cognition” provides far more methodological traction. Instead of examining what would make an observation 'real' the question becomes—given an observation what are its preconditions? The short answer is always sensation and concepts. Kant is not interested in how objects are in themselves, rather he is interested in how objects are for us (the conscious). 'Reality' without interpretations contains no more facts in itself than sensation without intuitions. In this sense Kant is extremely helpful as far as he is engaging in a proto-semiotics, but Kant's own transcendently derived schematism will also be helpful once appropriated to understand one of the major codes that governs narrative expression in comics. There are sharp parallels between how comics convey narrative time and the Kantian model for the a prior conditions for the perception of causation. Kantian categories will serve as the first step in the decoding of comics into narrative time. Along with this will be a survey of a few theories of how images and text work together. This will primarily be based on a few essays by Roland Barthes. The final categorical attempt to locate a code will be drawn from the professional lexicon of comic book writers and illustrators. This process of

¹Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Hackett: 1996). (Bxvi)

narrowing down the codes of the semiosis that govern comic book expression will be the primary method of chapter one.

Chapter one's tightening of the levels of codes that govern semiosis will be abandoned in chapter two. The method of refinement will be abandoned in favor of a process of teasing out unique aspects of comics that will be glossed over in chapter one. Part one of chapter two will tentatively venture into the ethical realm. Tentatively because at best the conflation of the aesthetic and the ethical is on shaky ground, and at worst it is insensitive and irresponsible. Narrative is a pervasive human interpretation structure that always contains some nod to aesthetic sensibilities. On the epistemic level, narrative can be very effective in coming to terms with things that are hard to propositionally interpret. This reductive function of narrative can run into trouble on the ethical level. Part two will take a second look at another phenomenon in chapter one. In chapter one comic books will be looked at as the product of a unified semiosis. Part two will look at how the unity of the page can work against the unity of the semiosis. Part three will pick up on an observation that will be transcendental problematized in chapter one. The concept of the 'panel' is the most atomic term in the professional lexicon of comic creators. While the panel serves as a snapshot of narrative time, it is also the point that narrative time folds out of and within. In part three this thesis will take a closer look at how this happens beyond chapter one's narrower sense of closure and relay. All of chapter two will be picking up the strands that hang from the observations that will be woven into a semiotic code for comics. Part four of chapter two will just look at where these loose strands tangle. In many ways it will be a literature review of those theorists that strongly influenced this thesis but whose work does not fit tightly into the overall schema of the work.

The conclusion will serve as an opportunity to examine how all of the elements that go into comics as a communicative phenomenon can be arranged off the page. This will create a space to examine ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics. It will also allow for some speculation on how comics do or at least can overlap and inform these philosophic sub-disciplines.

Chapter 1 A Kantian Machine:

Grammar of Space Grammar of Time

Part I Towards the Relational Specific Semiotics of Comics

The goal of this chapter is to determine the specific semiotic processes that are the prior condition for the composition and comprehension of comics. Eco defines specific semiotics as that which is “or aims at being, the ‘grammar’ of a particular sign system, and [a semiotic model] proves successful insofar as it describes a given field of communicative phenomena as ruled by a system of signification.”² A specific semiotics has to be understood antithetically to linguistics theory. While a specific semiotic can entail forms of semantic and philological discussion, it is notably different from linguistics. The bracketing of the encoding and decoding of a given semiosis as a communicative phenomenon allows semiotics a greater methodological latitude than traditional linguistics. This latitude is most apparent in what qualifies as potential objects for semiological examination. Everything from phone etiquette to the behavior at sporting events becomes a potential semiotic object. For this first chapter, I specifically have Eco’s distinction between general and specific semiotics in mind. He points out that the obstacle that face a general theory semiotics cannot be overcome by the mere fact “that language is a system

²Umberto Eco. *Semiotics and the philosophy of language*. (Indiana UP: 1984). pp. 5

comparable to writing, symbolic rites, deaf-mute alphabets, military signals, and so on.”³ A general semiotics is based on the hypothesis that all human activities can be understood as sign structures operating under something like a homogeneous grammar. Structuralism’s approach to general semiotics is largely based on the hypothesis of a universally interchangeable sign structure. I suspect the longevity of structuralism as a pervasive theory lies more with what at first seems like its unlimited applicability than its testability. Despite the problems with structuralism the history of challenging its universality produced some specific semiotic approaches that will be discussed latter in the thesis. C.S. Peirce—unlike French structuralist—proposed a general semiotics on a neo-Kantian foundation. He writes, “The unity to which the understanding reduces impressions is the unity of a proposition.”⁴ Peirce’s claim is grounded on the proposition that apperception is rule governed and that those rules form a semiotic grammar that is applicable to all phenomena. This starts to hint at problematic metaphysical assumptions with general semiotics. For now, it is sufficient to say that the relatively un-explored semiosis of comics deserves specific attention prior to any generalizations.

Expression and Content as Functives

Eco rejects the category of ‘sign’ as independent objects. Rather he favors a methodology that examines semiosis as a process that creates sign functions. Eco writes,

A sign function is realized when two *functives* (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation; the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign-function. Thus signs are the provisional result of which establish *transitory* correlations of elements, each of these

³Ibid. pp. 6

⁴Charles Sanders Peirce. “On a New List of Categories,” in *Peirce on Signs*. ed. James Hoopes (U of North Carolina P: 1991). pp. 24

elements being entitled to enter—under given coded circumstances—into another correlation and thus form new signs.⁵

In other words, one has a sign when an expression is taken as signing content as signified, but both are only functionives and can be part of other correlative relations (signs). A functionive that operates as an expression under one set of coding rules can operate as content in another. The sign functions that operate on the comic page must be teased out in order to establish what constitutes a sign in the semiosis of comic book literature. Because this chapter specifically refers to what the conditions are for something to undergo this semiosis we are looking for the relational rules that govern sign interactions and not a general theory of the sign. The mass dissemination and codification of newspaper comics as a medium is largely responsible for the ‘pre-cast’ system for the ‘correlations of (comic) elements.’ Eco describes these processes in a short essay on Milton Caniff’s *Steve Canyon*.*

(In *A Reading of Steve Cannon*, he describes the comic strip as a) highly stylized language, with precisely drawn boundaries. The critic’s task, therefore, is to follow the author through the strip to pick out the ‘mode’ in which he has pre-cast his message. Next we can attempt to decode his message paying special attention to its structure, trying to detect its signs and the relation between these signs in reference to a given code. For the author proceeds in strict adherence to this code, and works on the assumption that it is familiar to his readers.⁶

Eco’s essay makes a strong case that the comic book mode of assigning sign functions should be methodologically prior to “any discussion of intrinsic merit” of a given work.⁷

This in itself does not make comics a privileged form of text. All communicative

⁵Umberto Eco. *A Theory of Semiotics*. (Midland Book: 1979). pp. 49

*This essay predated his 1967-1968 work that would form the foundation for his groundbreaking *A Theory of Semiotics*

⁶Umberto Eco. “A Reading of Steve Canyon,” in *Comic Iconoclasm*. trans. Bruce Merry, ed. Sheena Wagstaff. (ICA: 1987). pp. 21

⁷Ibid. pp. 25

phenomena have expression and content and many critical approaches favor expression over content when discussing sign functions in narrative art.

Expression and Content in Media

The communicative weight of each function may be disproportionate in a given phenomenon. A good gauge for the strength of the correlation between the content and expressive elements in any given work of narrative art is the extent it leads itself to summation and adaptation. The avant-garde has opened up a greater acceptance that a work's content may be its expression. This has been true for the traditionally narrative arts as well as the plastic and performing arts. It may be as appropriate to talk about the writerly character of Joyce's work as it is to talk of the painterly quality of Van Gogh's work. What makes these works so resistant to summation—that is to say what makes it difficult to convey content abstracted from original expression—is that their mode of expression is so linked to the aesthetic content of the given work. Actually, only a small portion of comics printed to date strive to make their mode of expression indispensable to their content. The value of the few works that do is one of many reasons why the increasing acceptance of comics as legitimate forms of literary and artistic expressions is of academic value. Yet, the existences of these works does not tell us much about the methodology comic book studies should adopt if it wants to be generally applicable. Eco's work indicates that the syntax of the comic mode of expression will play a large role in what will be a more inclusive methodology. The rationale behind his prioritizing the grammatical functions of comic strip's expression (specifically *Steve Canyon*) is not that the comic author's intentionality of expression.

Rather, it is the cultural modes of intentional expression that go into the coding and decoding the layers of textual meaning that serve as the impetus behind Eco's methodological approach. The complexity of communicative phenomenon in which the typographical and graphical interchange makes the mode of expression the primary object of study. This is of extreme relevance because as Barthes notes, "it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon."⁸

Juxtaposition

While comics do constitute a 'highly stylized language,' I will argue that the syntax that follows from their definitive proprieties is—on the surface-- very simple. Will Eisner, who contributed a substantial body of work integral to the elevation of comics to an art form and who recognized the status of comics as a legitimate object of scholasticism, defined comics as a species of the genus Sequential Art. Neal Gaiman recently described Eisner as "a man who thought that comics were an art form, and who was proved right—but who might not have been quite so right if he had not built such a solid body of work, both in *The Spirit* and in the work he did from 1976 until his death, and if he had not taught and inspired along the way."⁹ In *The Spirit*, Eisner eventually out did the best of his contemporaries, but as newspaper cartoonist he probably thought of himself as a professional who brought artistic sensibility to what was a factory style business of entertainment. In 1976 when Eisner returned to comics with a brilliant and

⁸Roland Barthes. "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image Music Text*. trans. Stephen Heath. (Noonday: 1977). pp. 38

⁹ Neil Gaiman. "Introduction," in Will Eisner's *The Best of The Spirit*. (DC: 2005). pp. 8

intimate collection called *A Contract with God*, the major distinction between it and his early work was that it was not “directed consciously at the average intelligence” of a pre-set readership.¹⁰ In his groundbreaking *Understanding Comics*, McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence.”¹¹

Juxtaposition is what differentiates comics from other forms of Sequential Art. I will use the label *frame* to cover the simple syntactical differentiation that is central to the process of semiosis of comics. Without differentiation there can be no sequences and without the differentiation of the frame there can be no juxtaposition.

Juxtaposition Across Media

The term Sequential Art can also cover all manner of multi media, but what is noteworthy is that the screen as *frame* limits the scope of sequence to a set of a posteriori reflections. In cinema the sequence is imposed after the fact of shooting by the editor and after the fact of viewing by the critic. Tony Schwartz describes this cinematic vanishing point and contrasts it with print material.

A spoken word never exists in time. It exists only as a series of vibrations. A television picture never exists on the tube. It exists only as a construct of moving light dots. The brain puts together the products of seeing and hearing television, and this process takes place at a phenomenal speed. It is true that a person also assembles in his brain the words that he reads, but those words always stay on the page to be viewed.¹²

The phenomenal speed of the sequences of the moving image strives to become indistinguishable from the speed of phenomenal time. There is technological history of the attempt to run static images at a speed surpassing neurological recognition. This

¹⁰“A Reading of Steve Canyon.” pp. 25

¹¹Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics*. (Harper Perennial: 1994). pp. 9

¹²Tony Schwartz. *Media: The Second God*. (Anchor: 1983). pp. 13

cultural endeavor has become so ingrained that Barthes claims that “[t]he film can no longer be seen as animated photographs: the having-been-there gives way before a being-there of the thing”¹³ If there is a sort of being-there for comic reader it will be ‘assembled in the brain’ as Schwartz might put. But it remains on the page and is assembled within a syntax of juxtaposition.

Hegelian Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition alone is all that is necessary to trigger the synthesis for this semiosis and this is in keeping with a Hegelian model of synthesis. To make this clearer, I want to propose a critical experiment. Start by

taking two adjacent panels in any comic strip, flatten all potentially analogical or contradictory interpretations of each panel into straightforward propositions. For example the first two panels of figure 1 can be reductively formulated as 1} Panel



Figure 1: Scott McCloud. *Carl Comics*. (From an on-line reprint controls of the original strip published on page 84 of *Understanding Comics* . (July, 1998))

A is an image of someone contemplating having a drink while driving, and 2} Panel B is an image of someone’s gravestone.

<http://scottmcccloud.com/comics/carl/index.html>

Automatically, we have a digital code at hand that can be formulated as $(A \neq B)$. ‘ \neq ’ is a third proposition entailing any and all relational concepts between A and B. These relational concepts would automatically (but not necessarily consciously) be applied by the comic book literate viewer. The code that produces ‘ \neq ’ as a third proposition can be transcendently deduced by the question; what conditions for B can be found in A and

¹³“Rhetoric of the Image.” pp. 45

how does the reading of A direct the reading of B? The categories that go into the decoding of '≠' are phenomenological categories. Most successful comic artists' processes of panelization are the product of conscious phenomenological examination. Eisner writes, "[t]he artist, to be successful on this non-verbal level, must take into consideration both the commonality of human experience and the phenomenon of our perception of it, which seems to consist of frames or episodes."¹⁴ Eisner uses expectation of gravity as an example. If we see someone tripping in one panel and on the ground in the next our expectations of gravity fill in the rest.

The Philosophical Problem of Closure

Juxtaposition is a wide-ranging theoretical tool when examining sequential art. David Carrier reflects on the power juxtaposition has over his tour of the newly rehung museum claims that "(m)useums like a comic strip, can be treated as sequences of images that thus constitute a narrative. In choosing the sequence in which art is to be viewed the curator constructs an implicit art-historical narrative."¹⁵ When an image is juxtaposed with another image or text there are many processes of synthesis that enable a third message. Further, this third message goes beyond the elements in the juxtaposed images taken out of context. McCloud labels particularly strong forms of synthesis 'closure.' With closure the space between panels—professionally called the Gutter—qualifies as a form of punctuation in the comic syntax. McCloud writes: "Here in the

¹⁴Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles & Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form: Expanded to Include Print & Digital*. (Poorhouse P: 2005) (reprint of the 1990 expand edition of the 1985 original). pp. 38

¹⁵Carrier, David. "The Image Sequence; or, Moving Modernist Pictures," in *The Aesthetics of Comics*. (Penn State: 2000). pp. 47

limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there!”¹⁶ McCloud’s claim about the gutter refers to the fact that there is a pause between panels, whether it occupies a physical space or the panels are flush or bleed together. The questions are; what is the experiential context that allows for the jumping of gutter to form “a single idea,” and is it necessarily produced with the juxtaposition of any two images? Kant famously argues that the conceptual requires sensations and intuitions. Further, intuitions provide “a certain form for ordering” of the matter taken from sensations.¹⁷ For Kant, the primary form of intuition is time; “all our cognitions are yet subject ultimately to the formal condition of inner sense, i.e., to time. In time they [presentations as such] must one and all be ordered, connected and brought into relations.”¹⁸

Apperception

Time is necessarily formative because in order to perceive an appearance in time there must be some type of retention of sensations from one moment to the next. This retention is accomplished by connecting sensations of the present moment with the sensations of the preceding moment.¹⁹ The synthesis of recognition in the concept shows the necessity of a single unified a priori consciousness that is called the transcendental apperception.²⁰ The unity of apperception does not have a lot of bearing at this point in

¹⁶*Understanding Comics*. pp. 66-67

¹⁷I. Kant. (A 86, B 118)

¹⁸*Ibid.* (A 99)

¹⁹*Ibid.* (A 102)

²⁰*Ibid.* (A 107)

the discussion but Kant's point can be related to McCloud's observation that the “*imagination* [that] takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.”²¹ The two are related if McCloud's imagination is also applying similar relational categories to itself. This is in contrast to what Schwartz seems to imply. Putting aside Schwartz' philosophically unquestioned notion of 'brain' as an empirical source of continuous self-knowledge, there is an interesting comparison between the phenomenological ordering, connecting and relating and Schwartz' assembling of “the products of seeing and hearing.”²² Schwartz set up the distinction between assemblage that happens at a mostly unconscious speed and assemblage of lines of written words. This is problematic but not necessarily inaccurate analogy. Christof Koch provides a question that would resolve one dimension of the similarity between reading and viewing, e.g. “is perception discrete or continuous?”²³ Koch is introducing two dialectically opposed hypotheses that have come out of the neurological study of the perception of time. The fact that there is a smallest amount of time that is necessary for perception does not in itself make a case for a discrete model of perception. What is telling is there is a middle speed where things like spatial relations are perceived and motion between two extremely short visual stimuli is falsely inferred. Beyond the skepticism this raises in the continuous model of perception, there are also cases of neurological distress resulting in episodic perception called “cinematic vision.”²⁴ To

²¹*Understanding Comics*. pp. 66-67. My italics.

²²Tony Schwartz. pp. 13

²³Christof Koch. “Chapter 15: On time and Consciousness,” in *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurobiological Approach*. (Roberts & Co: 2004). pp. 264-268

²⁴*Ibid*. pp. 266

relate this back to Schwartz, if the discrete model of perception is accurate then the differences between the synthesis of text and that of film is limited to the linearity of the latter and the consciousness of the former. For Kant perception is and must be continuous—there are no gaps in phenomenological space in time—the reasons for this necessity is the discrete nature of apperception. He claims discrete assemblage is universal because it is prior to consciousness and is largely an unconscious process. Comics have clearly discrete nature for juxtaposition but they are capable of conveying a continuous narrative.

Part II

Relational Categories, Panel Transitions, Rhetorical use of Images and Word Picture Combinations

We have a very specific semiotic structure. We are not looking at signs as referential structure or as structures of general differentiation, rather we are looking at the structures that govern how signs relate to each other in the established syntax of comics. So far, the strongest rule that governs these relations is a Hegelian reading of McCloud's concept of closure. The problem is that this is both far too general and is resistant to greater logical systematization. McCloud offers a categorical list of panel transitions and word picture combinations. These alone lack philosophical necessity—this is especially true for panel transitions—because they are defined by the nature of both frames. Synthesis requires a third term in the form of an axiom or governing principle. Rather than inductively working from McCloud's categories, I will turn to those categories provided by Kant and Barthes to isolate the relational properties.

The Relational Categories

Kant claims that there are only four classes of categories derived from the intuitions of space and time. Each class contains three categories; two that are in diametric opposition and a third that is derived from their dialectical resolution. We are only concerned with his relational categories. The relational categories are 1} inherence and subsistence, 2} causality and dependence, and 3} community. They are respectively connected to durational, successive and simultaneous time determinations. For an object to have both durational and successive time determinations it must have a simultaneous time determination. The relational categories are linked to the categorical, hypothetical and disjunctive judgments. At best these syllogistic judgments convey only validity. What Kant is looking for is necessity. It will be the form of time that bridges this gap between validity and necessity. “(A) transcendental time determination is homogeneous with the *category*... insofar as time determination is *universal* and rests on an a priori rule. But it is homogeneous with *appearance*, on the other hand, insofar as every empirical presentation of the manifold contains *time*.”²⁵ Time’s ability to straddle both the forms of Reason and the forms of appearances makes it the “third something that is the medium of synthetic judgments.”²⁶ This application of the categories as categories of the time determinations of presentations are called schemata. The relational schemata pertain to substances, causes and community. They are dynamic in that they “are directed to the existences of...these objects being referred either to each other or to the understanding” and not

²⁵I. Kant. (A 138-139, B177-178)

²⁶Ibid. (A 155, B194)

mathematically “directed to objects of intuition.”²⁷ In practices certainty is discursive but what sets them apart from the mere validity of the syllogism is the connection to the intuition of time. This connection allows for a regulative use of the relational schemata.

The schema of substances allows for the manifold of perception to be unified to allow for the cogitation of objects as subsisting over a duration. If we take the classic categorical syllogism about Socrates being a man, it is the category of inherence and subsistence that allows for the concept that the Socrates who is a man is also the Socrates that is mortal. The category is relational of the same to the same over time. This a prior relational category is analogous to a necessary function in the syntax of comics where a page might have nine illustrations of Bob. If each individual illustration is not predicated on a 'Bob' that subsists outside of the frame then the comic becomes unintelligible. Thus the first relational category is the prior condition for the intelligibility of comics regardless of whether it is an a prior category or not.

The schema of cause allows for the manifold of perception to be unified to allow for objects to be cognized as caused and dependent. Kant is both one of the most radical philosophers of cause and effect and the most staid. He claims, like the determinists, that everything in perception has a cause and that this cause is both material and rule governed. Yet, for Kant, this is not an ontologically justified claim. The necessary continuity of perception grounded in apperception excludes perception without something that precedes it. In order to be perceived any intuition must be coupled with a time determination that is

²⁷Ibid. (B110)

acquired by its relations. For Kant, time itself is only an intuition and cannot produce time determinations. Time determinations are made by how objects conform to relational concepts. Kant is staid because—in this sense—the head does cause the tail. Yet, this broad sense of causality provides the necessity to succession and irreversibility that are the only terms of validity in hypothetical syllogism. A hypothetical syllogism only provides validity and gains credibility through the repetition of testing; classically this left the door open to Hume style skepticism. Kant provided the underlining necessity that allows for the discursive (not dogmatic) application of cause and effect. Kant shows that the statement, if there is a red sky sailors will delight, is only intelligible within the framework of succession and dependence. Similarly, the idea that there is succession and causation between two adjacent comic book panels is even less necessary. By definition these juxtaposed images do not succeed one another in time only in space. It is something like a schema of causal time determinations that make comics intelligible enough to maintain a continuous narrative. McCloud did a survey of western comics and found that the panel transitions that rely on hypothetical relations are the most common.*

For the rest of this chapter I will assume that when a categorical and/or hypothetical relationship exists between two frames it operates as Kant describes. The schema of community, allows for the manifold of perception to be unified to allow for objects to be cognized as coexisting in a web of simultaneous relations. “In our mind all appearance, as contained in a possible experience, must stand in community (communio) of apperception; and insofar as objects are to be presented as connected inasmuch as they

*Specifically, categories two and three in figure 2. Although, the less common category one is also in the hypothetical mode.

exist simultaneously, they must reciprocally determine each other's position in one time and thereby make up a whole."²⁸ This reciprocal determination is a condition for the perception of objects existing simultaneous on a continuous plane. Its syllogistic parallel is the disjunction, and is the ground for the universal applicability of logic. Rather than relying on a single subject (categorical) or a single relational chain (hypothetical), disjunction syllogism allow for the interactions between any two propositions. Under the category of community the expressive mode of comics is normally at odds with its content. In the frames of Bob the images are not meant to be read as contemporaneous. When there is speech or motion represent within a given frame the frame is meant to be read as a succession rather than an illustration of contemporaneous objects and events. There are exceptions to these rules but they rely on the exceptional relational properties of multiple frames that constitute a page or entire body of work.

Panel Transitions

McCloud talks of panel to panel transitions and divides them into six relational categories (see fig. 2).²⁹ 1} In movement-to-movement transitions the same figure is illustrated at different stages of the same action in each frame. 2} In action-to-action transitions the same figure is illustrated performing different but successive actions in each frame. To look at them from the propositional model there is no change in subject between panel A and B in both movement-to-movement and action-to-action transitions. In movement-to-movement transitions the verb is continued from panel A to B, while the new panel represents a new verb in action-to-action transitions. 3} In subject-to-subject

²⁸Ibid. (A 214, B 261)

²⁹*Understanding Comics*. pp. 74-80

transitions each frame illustrates different figures in the same scene but at successive times. Both the subject and verb change in subject-to-subject transitions but there is some sense of continuity of scene. This is not as jarring as it may sound and is pivotal in modern film editing where a scene may cut between dozens of shots including shots (like head shots) with very few clues to continuity.

4} In scene-to-scene transitions adjacent frames depict different narrative locations that may or may not contain the same figure at vastly different times. The panels can be successive, regressive or contemporaneous. Scene-to-scene transitions may have no propositional continuity between each other

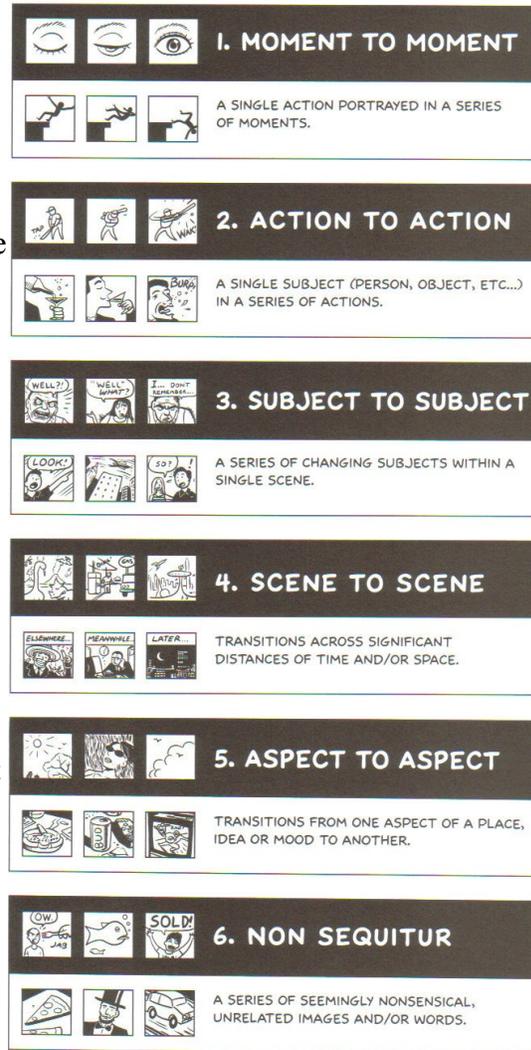


Figure 2: Scott McCloud. *Making Comics: Telling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. (Harper: 2006). pp.15

but each panel has more contextual transitional relationship to the panels on the other sides of the juxtaposition. The panels may also have the same subject/s but at vastly different times or localities.

5} In aspect-to-aspect transitions adjacent frames depict different figures contemporaneously in the same scene. Aspect-to-aspect transitions are the hardest to formulate as propositions. They carry a lot of emotive and analogical meaning and propositionally they are almost identical to subject-to-subject transitions.

Like subject-to-subject transitions they maintain a continuity of scene in the form “of place, idea or mood,” but the subjects of each panel tend to be more passive than active.³⁰

So there is a minimal sense of time passing. For example a panel of an unmade bed

followed by one of rain on a roof followed by one of a tee pot. 6} Non-sequitur transitions is the sixth

transition but it is of note that there needs to be more than two panels to establish that it is not a scene-to-

scene transition. Non-sequitur differs from aspect-to-

aspect in one way that also excludes the strict logic of propositions. There is a narrative

continuity of aspect-to-aspect transitions that is much more accessible. The example of an

aspect-to-aspect transition above lends itself to a narrative of a laid back rainy day spent

drinking tea or cocoa. A non-sequitur transition from a panel depicting a lungfish

followed by the word green in red letters followed by a diagram of the pituitary gland may

have a narrative but it would be a stretch.



Figure 3: Movement to Movement.
Making Comics. pp. 16

The Use of Relational Categories in Panel Transitions

We can now examine how well Kant's relational categories account for the mediation that provides closure in panel transitions. 1} There are two almost identical images in movement-to-movement panels (see fig. 3). Both images have to be read as being predicated on a figure that subsists while engaging in a single action. But the temporal proximity of the two images means the actual reliance on a categorical

³⁰Scott McCloud. *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. (Harper: 2006). pp. 15

understanding of inherence and subsistence is muted. Similarly, it requires very little effort on the part of the imagination to understand that the completion of an action is dependent on the start of that action. Succession is so important to the definition of movement-to-movement transitions that there is the absolute minimal sense of community. 2} Subsistence and dependence (see fig. 4) are only slightly more important in action-to-action panels than movement-to-movement panels. Because each panel represents a discrete action rather than being a moment in a single action, these panels have an interior temporality in which an action can be undertaken and completed. Because of this, there is a larger need for an awareness of the subsistence of the space in which the action occurs in and a slightly more refined sense of community. 3} Subject-to-subject transitions have a lot of inferred subsistence (see fig. 5). We assume that the figure in the first panel remains active off frame in the second panel. Behavior in the second panel is intelligible

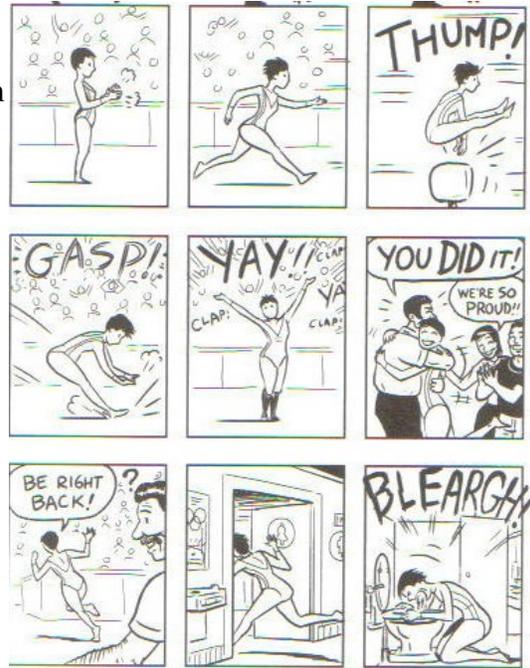


Figure 4: Action to Action. *Making Comics*. pp. 16

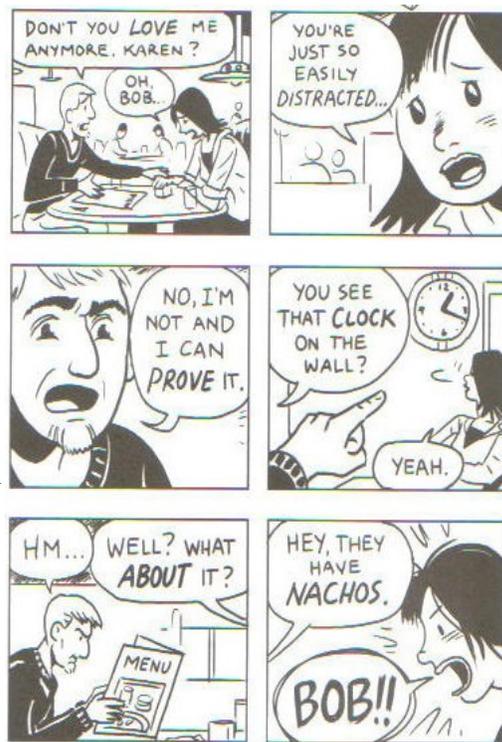


Figure 5: Subject to Subject. *Making Comics*. pp. 16

because it is either generally or totally dependent on the concept of this subsistence.

Subsequently, there is a strong sense of narrative community. This may be indicated by shared elements of mise-en-scène or just induced from causal elements. 4} Scene to scene transitions may or may not have causal relationships (see fig. 6). The second panel is not necessarily subsequent to the first, it may also occur contemporaneously or in a flashback. If it is narratively or subjectively subsequent there are three possible causal relationships; the events of one panel may directly cause the other, a character's actions or intentions may single the change of locality, or there may be a thematic link.

When applicable, the category of inherence and subsistence is the strangest in scene-to-scene transitions. When a character appears in one scene and disappears merely to reappear in another scene at a different time, we have to ask what merits representation and what should be allowed to subsist out of



Figure 6: Scene to Scene. *Making Comics*. pp.16

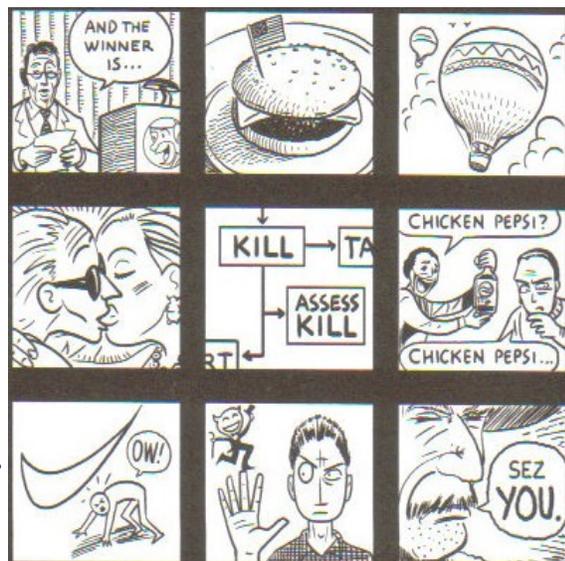


Figure 7: Non-Sequiter. *Making Comics*. pp.16

sight? While the category of community does not answer this, the fact that its function is so structurally similar in scene-to-scene transitions as in non-sequitur transitions shows the need for a fourth term. I would suggest that this

fourth term is narrative sensibilities. 6} An absolute non-sequitur (see fig. 7) will have neither characters nor themes in common while a scene to scene transitions may have some in common, but in both cases we have a panel that is highly contextually dependent followed by a panel that will have to be examined in relation to the subsequent panels for its context. 5} Aspect-to-aspect transitions have very little sense of time so they have no need of causality or dependence (see fig. 8). There is a sense of



Figure 8: Aspect to Aspect. *Making Comics*. pp. 16

community in that there is a very strong sense of a narrative spaces but with no causality it is a very static sense of space. What makes aspect-to-aspect transitions interesting is what subsists. The scene itself subsists as that which all aspect panels are predicated on.

	Inherence & subsistence	Causality & dependence	Community
Movement to Movement	Weak	Weak	Negligible
Action to Action	Weak	Moderate	Moderate
Subject to Subject	Necessarily Inferred	Strong	Strong or Necessarily Inferred
Scene to Scene	Varies	Possible	???
Aspect to Aspect	Scene	NA	Weak
Non-sequitur	NA	NA	???

Table 1: Relational Categories in Panel Transitions

Rhetoric of Images

Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* is an early attempt at establishing a semiotic code that can account for messages that rely on the juxtaposition of words and pictures. As the title indicates, it is an attempt to establish a semiotic code for expressive use of visual images. While an image has quantitative differences from what it mimetically images, there is only limited semiotic complexity of this type of correlation and nothing that could constitute the rhetorical function of images. At this mimetic level the image only has semiotic function of an analogy to what it images. Barthes challenges us to explore the possibility of an analogical code that could be as complex and rigorous as traditional digital linguistic models. Languages with phonetic alphabets have at their heart extremely sophisticated digital codes. Here digital merely means that the referential functions are governed by a quantitative nonrepresentational code. In this essay, Barthes almost uses analog as a synonym for 'image of.' There are—of course—non-visual analogies, but Barthes is pointing out that as images and language are juxtaposed to a greater extent in media, the reading of photograph as a Peircian index of the photographed will be less helpful. For Barthes, whenever the graphic and typographic intersect, there are three messages; linguistic, coded iconic, and non-coded iconic.³¹ Barthes makes the claim that non-coded iconic message is denotative and coded iconic message is connotative in that one needs the non-coded iconic message to get the coded iconic message but not the inverse. The code of the coded iconic messages is both analogical and digital. Barthes identifies two processes that can govern the linguistic

³¹“Rhetoric of the Image.” pg. 36. He specifically is referring to the photographic image .

coding of the iconic message. “When the text has the diegetic value of *relay*, the information is more costly, requiring the learning of a digital code (the system of language); when it has a substitute value (*anchorage*, control), it is the image which detains the informational charge and, the image being analogical, the information is then 'lazier'.”³² Anchorage can substitute one possible message conveyed by an image for another; either by *directing* the viewer’s attention to the ideological interpretation that is desired or by dispatching undesired interpretations. The dispatching of meaning tends to be subtle, for reasons that point to the tension between meanings that are absorbed analogically and meaning that are absorbed digitally. The disjunctive negation of purely digital dispatching ($[A \vee B] \cdot [-A] \cap [B]$) is not subtle at all. *Anchorage* allows for subtlety in what is structurally a dictatorial process. Relay is where the message of the illustrative and linguistic elements is only realized in the broader context of a narrative. Unlike an anchored message that is both ground in and confirmed by the image, the diegesis of the relayed message has to be gathered up and synthesized by at least one digital code.

Categories of Word Picture Interactions

McCloud provides a list of seven word/picture interactions (see fig. 9). His description is in keeping with Bathes concept of anchorage, but he makes a point that even some of the most basic comic book devices go beyond any assumption of word/picture duality. For the sake of clarity I have kept my numbering of McCloud’s categories identical to his in the thesis and in my charts. Logistically it has not always been the clearest or most telling way to address some aspects. So please excuse me if I jump around. You can refer to figure nine for clarification. 2} Text in picture specific

³²Ibid. pp. 41. My Itallics.

IN *UNDERSTANDING COMICS*, I IDENTIFIED A FEW DISTINCT CATEGORIES OF WORD/PICTURE COMBINATIONS.*

1. WORD-SPECIFIC
WORDS PROVIDING ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW, WHILE THE PICTURES ILLUSTRATE ASPECTS OF THE SCENE BEING DESCRIBED.

2. PICTURE-SPECIFIC
PICTURES PROVIDING ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW, WHILE THE WORDS ACCENTUATE ASPECTS OF THE SCENE BEING SHOWN.

3. DUO-SPECIFIC
WORDS AND PICTURES BOTH SENDING ROUGHLY THE SAME MESSAGE.

4. INTERSECTING
WORDS AND PICTURES WORKING TOGETHER IN SOME RESPECTS WHILE ALSO CONTRIBUTING INFORMATION INDEPENDENTLY.

5. INTERDEPENDENT
WORDS AND PICTURES COMBINING TO CONVEY AN IDEA THAT NEITHER WOULD CONVEY ALONE.

6. PARALLEL
WORDS AND PICTURES FOLLOWING SEEMINGLY DIFFERENT PATHS WITHOUT INTERSECTING.

7. MONTAGE
WORDS AND PICTURES COMBINED PICTORIALY.

IT MIGHT HELP TO THINK OF THESE SEVEN CATEGORIES DIAGRAMMATICALLY.

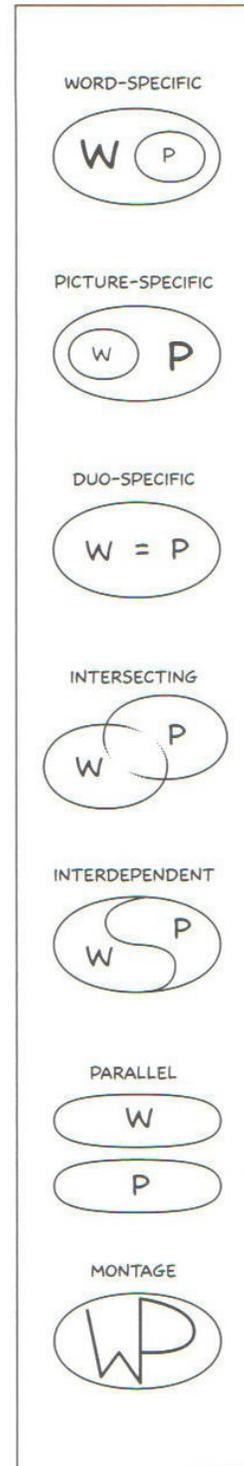


Figure 9: *Making Comics*. pp. 130

interactions have the bare minimum of semantic weight. The words are generally redundant reiterating only a small portion of the frame's meaning.* 1} Alternatively, I would argue that word specific interactions are much more interesting from a semiotic standpoint. While the illustration only provides a small portion of the frame's meaning, the partial confirmation of diegesis through mimesis is a powerful tool. The practice of stage magic offers the best illustration. The magician's banter conveys a lot of information including the prior disclosure of the effect of the trick. The execution of the trick provides the 'show' to his or her 'tell' but it also contextualizes the propositional—and false—causal explanation. This is the dictatorial power of newspaper photography. A parallel can also be found in literature. Regardless of the strength of a story's premise and eloquence of narration, something will be lacking if the author is unable to mimetically capture a range of voices. 3} This tension between diegesis and mimesis may explain why duo-specific interactions seem so awkward. Alternatively, it may just be a culturally conditioned reaction because, as children books' audiences become more advanced, the books tend to move away from duo-specific interactions. That being said, the fact that the same message has to be told and shown seems to signal a lack of trust in the readers. 4} Frames with intersecting interactions have two messages that overlap and are ground on some point of intersection. It conveys two messages about a shared object. I will be brief on this and the next category because I feel a discussion of anchorage and relay will be the most useful tool for understanding them. 5} Interdependent interactions only have a single message that is unintelligible if either the reference structure of the pictures or of the words is taken in isolation. 6} The words and the pictures convey different messages in parallel interactions. In the weak form of parallel interactions these messages are not necessarily non-sequiturs. The textual message in the frame may be a continuation of the prior frame and the illustration may contextualize the subsequent frame without any intra-panel interaction. What makes the two messages incompatible will be harder to classify. Once again I will have to defer to narrative sensibilities. 7} Finally, montage interactions are what almost make

*Numbering corresponds to figure 9.

McCloud's categories philosophically self-sufficient. In a montage interaction the distinction between diegesis and mimesis, as well as the distinction between digital and analogical, collapses. Typographic elements are used as overt structural elements (see fig. 10). The text may be a very intentional compositional element that draws and directs the reader's path through all of the graphic elements. They may be textual elements of the mise-en-scène. For example the use of street and store signs as narration. Finally, they may exist on a structural/graphic plain that allows the interaction of other purely illustrative elements. Eisner is famous for splash pages where rain runs off titles or characters ascend titles like a staircase. Beyond the structural, typography can convey an emotive message. An obvious example is larger jagged lettering conveying a sense of intensity but a more subtle example is lettering with no calligraphic embellishments grouped in the center of a word balloon that is much to larger for the text. This latter gives a sense of mumbling and a desperate attempt to make oneself unobtrusive. All of this is conveyed without recourse to the phonetic mimetic conventions like 'ere' and 'um.' It can subsequently be used to highlight the nuanced distinction between self-effacement and uncertainty. Looking at the previous six categories through the prism of this last category raises the question of whether we need a unique third term (relay or anchorage) to facilitate synthesis of the graphic and typographic. Nevertheless, we are looking at relations inside the panel that were treated as an semi-atomic structure in panel transition so a shift in methodology will help keep these levels of framing separate. Beyond the fact that Barthes is explicitly discussing the graphic and typographic, he also moves us closer to the realm of narrative within the field of semiotics.



Drawing 10: Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles & Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form: Expanded to Include Print & Digital.* (Poorhouse P: 2005). pp.10

Rhetorical Functions of the Categories of Word Picture Interactions

Because of the potential interchangeability of the graphic and typographic it is appropriate to talk about how an image anchors elements in the text. It would be

arduous for me to discuss the rhetorical effect of the text on the illustration and then the image's effect on the text in each category.

If you want to keep track you can skip ahead to the chart at the end of this section. 1} Word specific juxtaposition technically offers a



Drawing 11: Word-Specific. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 153

is usually the illustration that *directs* the reading of the text similar to how tone, emphasis and gesture affect the reading of a line in a play. The entire weight of the diegesis is in the description. 2} Picture specific

juxtaposition is identified by the minimal amount of *anchorage* needed or provided by the text (see



Figure 12: Picture Specific. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 153

fig. 12). The words tend to be juxtaposed to the illustration by the overlay of short

word balloons or free floating text. 3} The text in duo-specific juxtaposition merely confirms the most straightforward reading of the illustration (see fig. 13). So the only semantic content of the *anchorage* comes from the *dispatching* of what would be counter intuitive



Drawing 13: Duo-Specific. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 153

interpretations. This is one of two categories of word/picture combinations where there is no internal narrative *relay*. 4} Like the previous three categories, the intersecting (additive) juxtaposition category entails a little semantic redundancy (see fig. 14). While there is some shared reference to the same meaning, there must a second set of meanings that are not shared. Here we have both anchorage and relay operating in the same panel. The *anchorage* is somewhat muted, relying primarily on the fact that neither

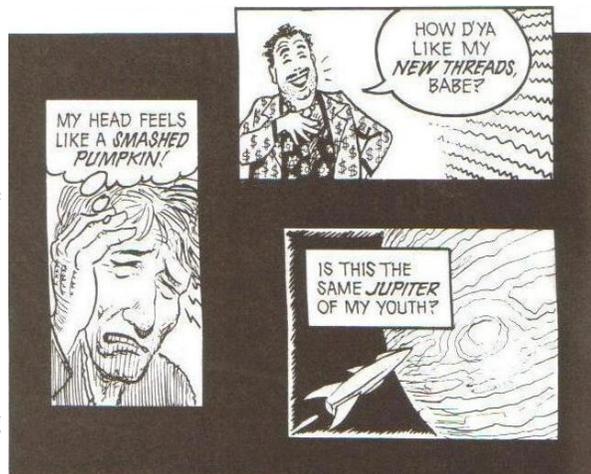


Figure 14: Intersecting (additive). *Understanding Comics*. pp. 154

message exhausts the shared object so both messages are still open. In the juxtaposition there is a mutual *dispatching* of some of this openness. But there is also mutual *relaying* in that it is realized in the frame's overall narrative of the shared object. 5}

Interdependent juxtaposition is the strongest sense of internal narrative *relay* (see fig.

15). It is very easy to read interdependent juxtaposition as a narrative because it provides a single message that entails diegesis, graphic and/or phonic mimesis. There is a strong sense of this type of single frame narrative in a lot of Lichtenstein's most famous work.



Figure 15: Interdependent. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 155

be an extremely odd narrative in light of how there are two elements that are in competition for the status of being the beginning and/or the ending. Does the narrative start with text and find resolution in the image or the other way around? Both are possible and some works lean one way or the other. Unsurprisingly, Lichtenstein's work tends to favor the pictorial elements to draw the audience into the narrative. The process of *relay* is the motion of contextualizing a set of disparate elements aimed at transforming the same message into a single narrative. 6} The relational qualities of parallel juxtaposition—like non-sequitur panel transitions—are hard to pin down (see

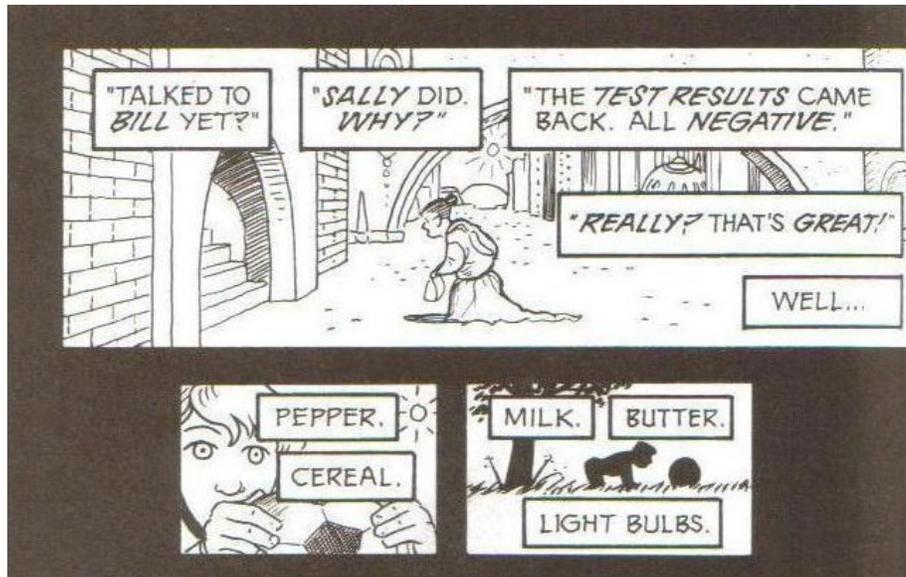


Figure 16: Parallel. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 154

fig. 16). Both raise the question of what is the upper limit of incongruity for closure and for *anchorage*. There is an overabundance of *relay* in the weak form of parallel interactions but there is apparently none in the examples of parallel interactions in figures 16 and 17. Chris Ware's *Thrilling Adventure Stories* (fig. 17) is one of longest comic stories to experiment with prolonged parallel interactions. Ware extends a first person past tense narration of a child's confusion in the face of an adult's world over six pages and 53 panels of a sustained stylized nod to the costumed crime fighter comics of the fifties and sixties. The narration spills over from captions to balloons and even montage elements with little apparent regard for illustrative context. We have two extended and parallel messages in the form of two narratives. If one looks for *anchorage* the syntactical function of the short story and the comic book make both messages unintelligible. What is amazing about the pieces is that the repetitive juxtaposition creates a form of *relay* in the form of an indictment against the culture that

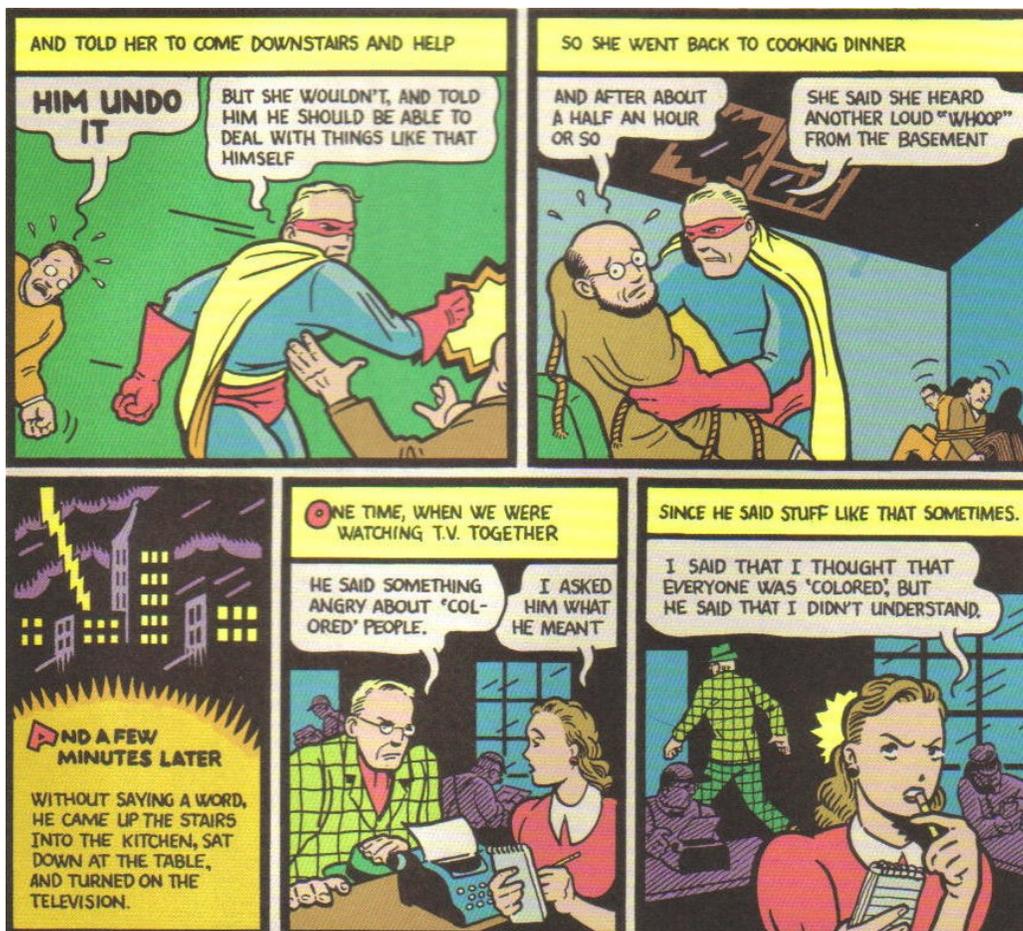


Figure 17: Chris Ware. "Thrilling Adventure Stories," in *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, & True Stories*. ed. Ivan Brunetti. (Yale UP: 2006 First Published as a strip). pp. 365

young boys encountered in the fifties and sixties. I would argue that its subtlety allows it to avoid being didactic or a creepier form of propaganda associated with advertisements. 7} Montage Juxtaposition mainly entails *anchorage*; few examples of relay are emotive and phonic. Even here it is primarily *anchorage* functions at work (see fig. 10 &18).

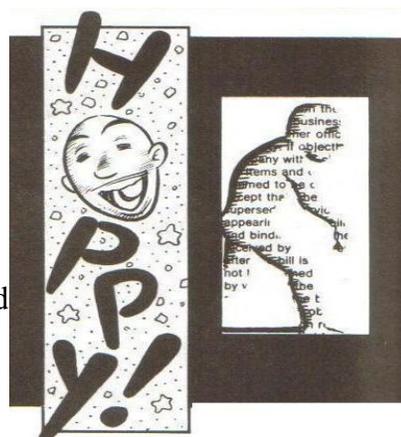


Figure 18: Montage. *Understanding Comics*. pp. 154

WORDS	a) Directing Anchorage	b) Dispatching Anchorage	c) Relay
1) Word-Specific	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
2) Picture-Specific	Minimal	None	Minimal
3) Duo-Specific	None	Negligible	None
4) Intersecting	Weak	Strong	Strong
5) Interdependent	Strong	Strong	Strong
6) Parallel	None	None	???
7) Montage	Strong	Strong	Weak
PICTURES	d) Directing Anchorage	e) Dispatching Anchorage	f) Relay
1) Word-Specific	Some possible	Negligible	Negligible
2) Picture-Specific	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
3) Duo-Specific	Negligible	Negligible	None
4) Intersecting	Weak	Strong	Strong
5) Interdependent	Strong	Strong	Strong
6) Parallel	None	None	???
7) Montage	Some possible	Strong	Weak

Table 2: Categories of Word Picture Interactions

Part III

The Framing Mechanics of Panels, Tiers, Pages, Balloons, Captions and Collage

The rest of this chapter will confine itself to the mechanics of the medium. These mechanics—like all graphic narrative practices—are already invested into some spatial/temporal speculation. The discipline of graphic storytelling and years of comic book literacy may naturalize some counter intuitive practices that are part and parcel of comic book’s inner workings. In the forward to *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner reflects on his years of teaching. He makes a comment to the effect that, “As I began to dismantle the complex components, addressed the elements hitherto regarded as ‘instinctive,’ and tried to examine the parameters of this art form, I found that I was involved with an ‘art of communication’ more than simply an application of art.”³³ When this process of dismantling “the complex components” is undertaken, six elements come to the foreground as syntactical devices or communicative parameters.

³³*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 6

1. Panel (Box, or Frame)—A box which contains a given scene.
2. Tier—Row of panels (left to right) on page.
3. Page—A leaf of the publication or total area of work.
4. Balloons—The container of the text-dialogue spoken by a character.³⁴
5. The Caption—Panels of text only.
6. Montage—Unbound text

Each element constitutes a framing device in its own right. Consequently, the whole syntactical structure is shot through with juxtaposition and relational functions.

Panel—A box which contains a given scene. Also know as the Box or Frame.

The panel is at the very core of what makes something a comic book, comic strip or photo novel. Mario Saraceni writes, “Usually, panels display single instants of action or ‘stills’ and, although they are actually much more varied. It is in fact very rare for a panel to represent only an instant of the story.”³⁵ The absence of the instant or moment will not be fully discussed until we balloons. Nevertheless, the tension between the apparently instantaneous nature of the static panel and the panel synthesized by reading (with all of its temporal oddness) will be an essential dialectical tension of this thesis. Eisner also touches upon time as something intrinsic to the comic panel, “in the modern comic strip or comic book, the device most fundamental to the transmission of timing is the panel or frame or box. These lines drawn around the depiction of a scene, which act as a containment of the action or segment of action, have as one of their functions the task of separating or parsing the total statement.”³⁶ To flesh this out we must define the panel negatively in terms of other types of framed narrative art. On the one hand, what sets the comic book apart from moving media (cinema, animation, video games, etc.) is that the

³⁴Ibid. pp. 163. I used Eisner definitions for everything except caption and montage.

³⁵Mario Saraceni. *The Language of Comics*. (Rutledge 2003). pp. 6

³⁶*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 28

panel an autonomous and intentionally limited pseudo-instance of narrative and causal sequences. Motion media can be art in sequence, but the framed instances are meant to be sub-consciously absorbed in a stream. The definition that emerges is that the comic book panel is an autonomous—bordered or not—pseudo-instance in a sequence of other pseudo-instances. A strip of film held in the hand rather than viewed at 24 frames per second, would qualify as an extremely redundant comic strip. A slide show also has ‘autonomous instance in a sequence of other instances.’ Here again we have a chance at sharpening our definition. What disqualifies the slide show of framed autonomous instances is that they are presented one at a time so any juxtaposition happens after the fact. McCloud makes the claim that digital comicx that are presented one frame at a time destroy “the very fabric of comics’ core identity.”³⁷ The definition that now stands is that **the comic book panel is an autonomous pseudo-instance in a physically juxtaposed sequence of other pseudo-instance.**

Now with a working, negatively generated definition we should turn to some of the positive exploration of the ‘panel.’ Eisner’s notion of “encapsulation” is highly productive. “To deal with the *capture* or encapsulation of these events in the flow of the narrative, they must be broken up into sequenced segments. These segments are called panels or frames. They do not correspond exactly to cinematic frames. They are part of the creative process, rather than a result of the technology.”³⁸ The most basic distinction between the cinematic and comic frames is that the comic frames are more flexible while only what is framed by the cinematic frame moves. Each comic panel can vary in sizes in

³⁷Scott McCloud. *Reinventing Comics*. (Pardox Press: 2000). pp. 215

³⁸*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 38

shape. Eisner points out that encapsulation allows panels to “express the passage of time, the framing of a series of images moving through space undertakes the containment of thoughts, ideas, actions and location or site.”³⁹ What the panel encapsulates is not an attempt at a simple temporal movement. Rather, there are multiple intersecting moments of narrative in a single panel. The single panel can attempt to contain and frame; narrative themes, historical commentary, iconography and characterization. Any and all can be present in the same panel and have different spatial/temporal relations to the panels that are immediately adjacent to it.

Eisner seems to associate mastery of the skills of comic book encapsulation with phenomenological examination. This ties into McCloud’s claim that, “[t]he panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided.”⁴⁰ The extent that Eisner is correct that comic technê relies on “the commonality of human experience,” speaks to a generalization of human expectation. The ‘general’ part of the ‘indicator’ could refer to the fact that it is not a hard and fast scientific system of indication. There are rules of thumb about how the shape and size of panels effect the perception of the temporality of the panel but not unquestionable rules of psychology or neurology.

Relational Categories in Panels

Now that we have defined the most atomic spatial syntactical devices—the panel—as a physically juxtaposed pseudo-instance, we can now plug it back into relational categories to get a better understanding of the processes of synthesis. I will move through the single panel implications of McCloud's transitions to examine the relational properties.

³⁹Ibid. pp. 38

⁴⁰*Understanding Comics*. pp. 99

1} As far as a panel is contextualized as an instant in a movement there is very little engagement of the relational categories. It has strong parallel with a single frame in a strip of film. What is intriguing is the way it structurally downplays community relations. Its definitive repetition of subject and verb has

a way of portraying an overtly linear, subjective sense of space. That is to say, space is viewed as the arena in which an



Figure 19: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp.106

2} actor determinately actualizes actions. The single action-to-action panel has a slightly different causal relationship but once again it is the category of community that is the most elusive in these pseudo-instances. Here a single frame has to stand in for a whole array of movements in an action (see fig. 19).

This seems anti-communal in a very real collapsing of narrative space. But in its direct static spatial representation of a single temporal event we have a signification of a community of temporal events. There are relatively few spatial communal relations in the sign and in the signed narrative spaces but we have a relatively open—compared to movement-to-movement panels—sense of signed narrative time. 3} If any of the five latter subject-to-subject panels in figure 5 are examined independently it becomes apparent how much of their meaning is dependent on the prior panel. That something subsists outside of the panel that provokes the action must be interfered. Similarly, there is a need for panel to relate to a community of interaction in the form of a scene. This is true even when there are no clues to anchor the image to the scene, like panel three. 4} A single panel of a scene-to-scene transition is disembodied. The only thing that separates it from

6} non-sequitur is the anticipation of contextualization. 5} A single aspect-to-aspect panel, like a scene-to-scene panel, has a community of interaction in the form of a scene that must be interfered. What is intriguing about the panelization of aspect-to-aspect frames is how anti-subjective they are. The narrative space is not for actualization of a character's will. Rather it is an expansion of 'place, idea and/or mode.'

Tier—Row of panels (read left to right) on page.

I would argue that any two panels could be schematized into McCloud's categories. His Panel-to-Panel Transitions are not the end all to understanding Sequential Art or Comics. McCloud admits that the schema that applies to the transitions between two adjacent panels in a tier of three or more panels is not the only—or even most significant—transitory factor at work. The role of the establishing panel (or cinematic establishing shot) is a mundane example of such a transitory factor. When we see a series of shots of two men apparently holding a conversation, montage theory tells us that it is the nature of shot transitions that allow us to suspend the reality that each actor is talking to a film crew. Instead we have the image of two men talking to each other when in fact they may never have been present together on the film set. In this case the transitions are sequential, that is to say shot three is associated with shot four. The establishing shot provides the physical background for all the shots that follow it. So, while it is shot three that tells the viewer who the man in shot four is talking too, it is the establishing shot that tells us that he is also looking in the direction of the bar. McCloud writes, “the effective of [a comics' establishing panel] can linger throughout a page.”⁴¹ How the six types of

⁴¹*Making Comics*. pp. 165

Panel-to-Panel
Transitions
relate to the
ratio of overall
number of
panels, the panel
size and panel



Figure 20: Scott McCloud. Carl Comics.

configuration is one of the most important transitory factors. McCloud writes, “the art of comics is as subtractive as it is additive.”⁴² His Carl Comics (see fig. 20), highlight the process of panelization.⁴³ The first tear of figure 20 may be all the information necessary for the overall narrative. On the other hand the distinction that lead to the choice between tiers two and three is largely based on how duration and focus will affect the tempo of the larger narrative. Panel transitions take on the role of fleshing out of narrative. This process of selecting and laying out panels has an enormous affect on the narrative tempo.

Narrative may also have an effect on the application of categorical relations. In both of his theoretical works, Eisner devotes a lot of time establishing the parallel between panelization and musical scoring.

The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then become more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the ‘rate’ of elapsed time in its narrowest sense.⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid. pp. 85

⁴³Also see <http://scottmccloud.com/comics/carl/index.html> for all the Carl comics.

⁴⁴*Comics and Sequential Art.* pp. 30

Figure 21 is comprised entirely of action-to-action panels.⁴⁵ The four panels of this tier present an aesthetic paradox that is unique to comics. We have a mobile character that



Figure 21: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 36
seems increasingly confined—even caged—by the long narrow frames. This seems like the classic cinematic technique from film noir that obviously did inform Eisner's composition. But the synthesis that enables the subsistence of the character in motion would entail a very dynamic and open view of the narrative space of the hall. We have three potential messages; we have four figures that are caged by the four frames and elements of scenery, we have the purely syntactical magic window model where each panel shows us a glimpse of a character proceeding through a spatially dynamic world, and we have the syntactical/narrative reading of an action. What is important is that the second message (a dynamic window into unbounded space) is almost antithetical to the first (an image frozen by the viewer, confined by compositions). We seem to need the third message (that these are action panels) prior to the exhaustive reception of the first two, and this third message goes beyond the merely Kantian senses of relational

⁴⁵Although the transition between panels four and five is arguably a subject to subject transition because subject in the foreground and background reverse roles.

categories. To put that differently, in order to see the frame as a caging device, we have to understand it as an impediment to an action and in order to see the figures as a self-identical character, we have to synthesize them under the category of 'actor.' Part of what clues this as an action panel is that prior to second panel we have been drawn into a subject engaged in action (escape and obfuscation) within a conflicted space (visible and hidden). The repetition enforces this reading of space closing in building to a crescendo in the last panel. It also serves as an example of how panel transitions can be used to establish a cumulative effect.

Page—A leaf of the publication or total area of work.

Eisner's definition is vague, and this vagueness helps its general applicability to web-comics. McCloud has devoted a lot of time to the fact that the constraints of print are not the same as the constraints of comics. As vague as "total area of work" is, this notion of page is essential to juxtaposition. The definition of page as 'work area' should be expanded to mean **area of juxtaposition limited by size of co-temporal presentable area (leaf, tier of funny section of a paper, web-page, stone obelisk, etc.)**. The page also serves as a useful methodological designation. Eisner writes, "[I]n comics, there are actually two 'frames' in this sense: the total page on which there are any number of any panels and the panel itself, within which the narrative unfolds."⁴⁶

George Legrady makes the claim that "the comic format consists of a sequence of frames organized on the page either in a linear or modular fashion."⁴⁷ To some extent

⁴⁶*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 41

⁴⁷George Legrady. "Modular Structure and Image/Text Sequences: Comics an Interactive Media," in *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*. ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. (Museum Tusulanum: 2000). pp. 80

the distinction between a linear or modular style lies in reading style. If one proceeds from frame to frame the comic can pull the reader into a linear mode like many other forms of narrative. Yet, the frame has other grammatical functions. One where each frame would “also function as a branching or connecting node for additional narrative layers that might run parallel to the main sequence in which the frame are ordered.”⁴⁸

Legrady first credits the distinction between whether a frame is interpreted modularly or linearly to the function of “standard comics devices [like when one panel bleeds into another shattering] the illusion of the comic frame as the window through which the story occurs.”⁴⁹ Modular Information Structures (MIS) are hyper textual structures of the imaginary space like personal computer’s ‘desktop.’ What intrigues Legrady is how these MIS are marked by their “non-linear interaction” based on the potential for “the viewer to arbitrarily access elements” of the network or narrative.⁵⁰ The connection between comics and computer interface offers the following set of shared semiotic categories; “[f]ragmentation, sampling, quick reading, frame-by-frame communication, [and] serial offerings.”⁵¹ Legrady is offering a potentially alternative form of spectator “as someone who actively constructs the narrative through the assembling of fragmented or modular information elements.”⁵² This became the norm in comic literacy with the advent of comic books with original work created for bound material.

[This] presented a landscape of tiny cul-de-sacs, asking readers to leap to new paths every few panels based on complex protocol...A protocol imported from the right and down tradition of the written word. When the “cave wall” of the page came to an end, readers learned to simply move on to the

⁴⁸Ibid. pp. 81

⁴⁹Ibid. pp. 81

⁵⁰Ibid. pp. 81, 83

⁵¹Ibid. pp. 80

⁵²Ibid. pp. 83

next one. Print subverted space, folding it upon itself, allowing stories to grow to any length without relying on fraying cloth or crumbling stone.⁵³

As complex and intimidating as these protocols can be (see figures 22 & 23), it was the only way to accommodate exploration of the limits of panel layout within material

constraints of the printed page. I

am personally attached to the

complex protocols that have

come out of the conventions for

dealing with the limits of print.

These conventions allow for

dialectical movement between

layout and juxtaposition.

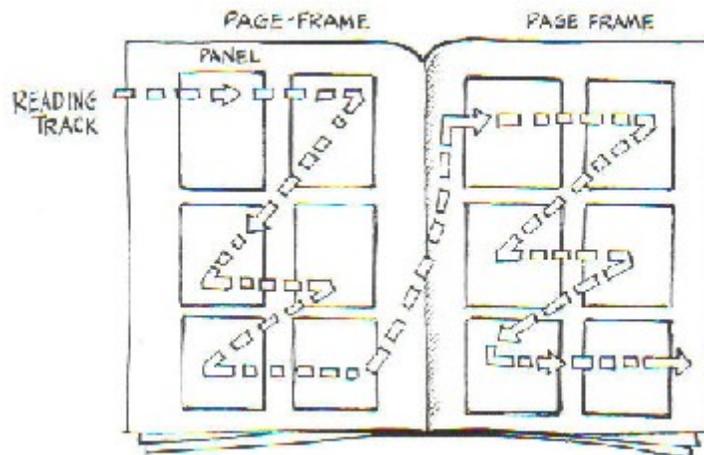


Figure 22: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 41

The Caption—Panels of text only.

Now that we have moved to the specific mechanics of the medium we need to reevaluate the intersection of text and illustration. *Anchorage* and *Relay* will be as valuable a tool for navigating the syntactical webs typographical protocols as the relational properties of juxtaposition severed for panelization. Saraceni makes the claim; “The most important characteristics of comics are: employment of both words and picture; text organized into sequential units, graphically separated from each other.”⁵⁴ I would challenge the claim that words are essential to comic, but they do add another—perhaps greater—dimension to semiotic comic book theory.

⁵³*Reinventing Comics*. pp. 220

⁵⁴Mario Saraceni. pp. 4

Saraceni writes:
 “Unlike the balloon, the caption is not positioned inside the panel, but is always a separate entity, often on the top of the panel, but sometimes at the bottom on the left

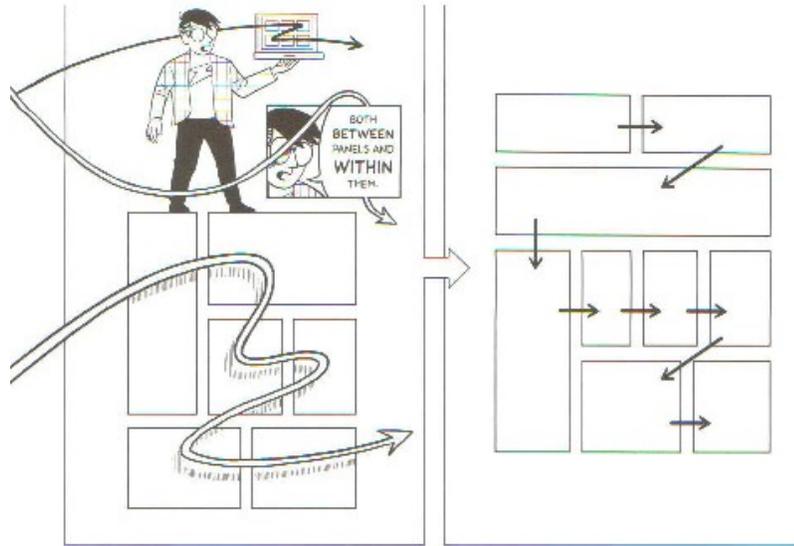


Figure 23: *Making Comics*. pp. 32

side.”⁵⁵ Unlike, the words of balloons that are juxtaposed in the space that overlays the illustrations, the words of the caption are juxtaposed in an adjacent manner, like most of the elements discussed up to this point. Captions are mainly used for contextualization. This is epitomized by the overdone convention ‘meanwhile back at the ranch.’ But as McCloud points out, “(s)imply captioning an otherwise silent panel can even hold a single moment.”⁵⁶ This is most apparent in interdependent and parallel juxtapositions. These juxtapositions add tempo that is dialectically opposed to the ‘photographic/still-life’ impulse. At face value the distinction between graphic and typographic does not justify this dialectical opposition.

Balloons—The container of the text-dialogue spoken by a character

The balloon in all of its manifestations is one facet of comics that is most identified with the medium. Their inclusion in the paintings of Lichtenstein has a visceral association with comics. But, as stated, I do not accept the necessity or naturalness of their use in

⁵⁵Mario Saraceni. pp. 10

⁵⁶Ibid. pp. 98

comics. Instead let us treat them as functives that have a prior procedural code as a condition. The goal then, is to examine the semisois to get at this code.

The balloon is a *desperation device*. It attempts to *capture and make visible an ethereal element*: sound. The arrangement of balloons which surround speech—their position with relation to each other, or to the action, or their position with respect to the speaker, *contribute to the measurement of time*. They are disciplinary in that they demand cooperation from the reader. A major requirement is that they be read in prescribed sequence in order to know who speaks first. They address our *subliminal understanding of the duration of speech*. Balloons are read following the same conventions as text (i.e: left-to-right and top-to-bottom in western countries) and in relation to the position of the speaker.⁵⁷

The Balloon as a ‘desperation device’ is one of the most memorable of Eisner’s observations. The conventions of the balloon add yet another encapsulating frame in a structure of encapsulation. The prescribed order of dialogue has its own media specific visual literacy beyond what it shares with page protocol. In the last hundred years,

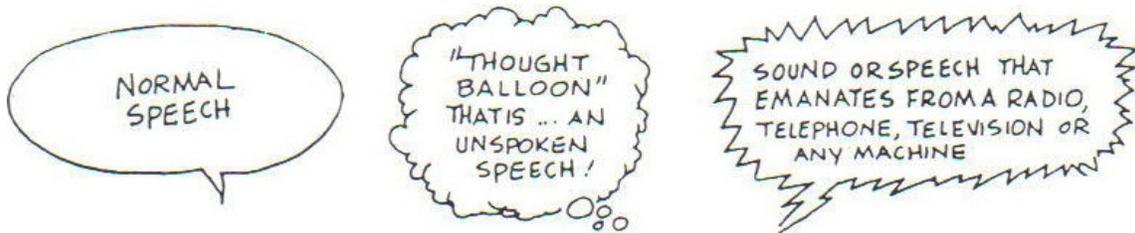


Figure 24: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 27

speech balloons, thought balloons and balloons depicting “sound or speech that emanates from a radio, telephone, television or any machine” have all been stylized (see fig. 24).⁵⁸ That said, there is more than one way to provide dialogue in silent media.

Caption cards worked as this type of desperation device for silent motion picture and even some early comic strips like *Prince Valiant*. Balloons have a powerful disjunctive property that is unique to the medium. Eisner is correct that it is an encapsulation of an ethereal element but it is the element of speech and not mere sound. The thought

⁵⁷*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 26. My italics.

⁵⁸*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 27

balloon and the jagged radio balloon illustrate the two extreme poles that differentiate encapsulation of speech acts from that of mere sound. Thought balloons do not represent sound but they do represent a mode of thought that is indicative of problems that arise out of the philosophy of language. A private language is a contradiction in terms. On reflection a lot of my surface conciseness is formulated in terms of language. This clearly is a cultural code and in many ways this level of conciseness is just this communal process of encoding. The thought balloon is a communicative convention for the referring to conciseness as a communicative phenomenon. David Carrier takes this a step further writing, “[t]he balloon, like Descartes's pineal gland, thus links things in two different worlds; we spectators are set apart from the depicted characters, as is the mind from the body.”⁵⁹ The radio balloon at first glance seems entirely different. One thing that I have left out of the discussion of the disjunctive property of the balloon is how they entail a distinguishing of foreground from background. Obviously one rarely hears speech in an auditory vacuum. From personal experiences sounds of speech in my native language are easier to distinguish than most background noise and harder to block out. This can create the illusion that it is the primary sonic event and in turn makes it easier to assign it to an agent. It seems natural to assign dialogue to the image of people on a screen, but the noise is not coming from the screen and the dialogue may have been added after the shooting of the image. The balloon distinguishes sound

⁵⁹David Carrier. “The Speech Balloon; or, the Problem of Representing Other Minds,” in *The Aesthetics of Comics*. (Penn State: 2000) pp. 30

emitted from mouths and machines as being in the auditory foreground* because of its association with a causal agent.

In examining the idea of 'typographic agency' we should look at lettering. By typographic agency I am referring to the a very common phenomenon of written mimetic dialog that exists in all non-first person prose. Part of the semiosis is to ascribe the text on the page to a speaking agent.

In almost all corporately produced comics, calligraphers tend to be employed and credited in addition to writers, pencilers and inkers. On the aesthetic importance of the calligrapher Eisner writes; “[a] hand-lettered balloon conveys personality that is quite different from that of a typeset letter. It also has an effect on sound and style of speaking.”⁶⁰ From a semiotic perspective Saraceni observes that “we tend to associate handwriting with human agency.”⁶¹ This idea of agency is also applicable to the stylization commonly called balloon ‘tails’ (the lines that point from text to characters). There are multiple complex convention and semi-conventions

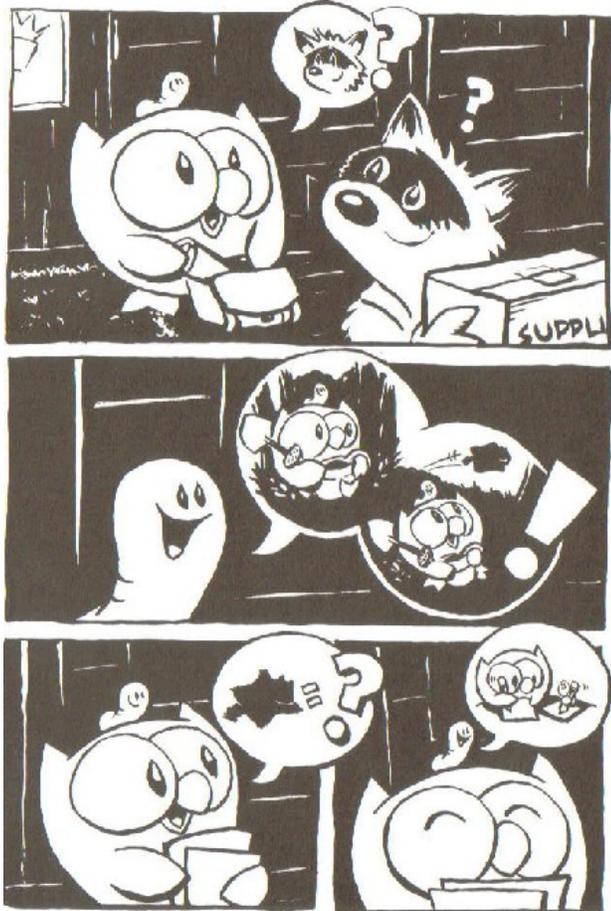


Figure 25: Andy Runton. *Owly: Flying Lessons*. (Top Shelf: 2005). pp. 22

*Note that convention always places them on the edges of the foreground.

⁶⁰*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 27

⁶¹Mario Saraceni. pp. 21

that govern word balloons. Also of note is that the inside of balloons are not limited to text, these pictorial images complicate the idea of agency. When balloons link the pictorial to the pictorial they are in fact nothing other than a spatial map of agency (see fig. 25). That is to say the illustration of the worm in the word balloon is predicated to an assumed agency of the worm that the balloon's tail points at.

Perhaps the greatest effect word balloons have is that of tempo. “Just as pictures and the intervals between them create the illusion of time through closure, words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time—sound.”⁶² Readers tend to spend more time processing panels with text than those without text. Word balloons’ contribution ‘to the measurement of time’ cannot be underestimated, “because comic panels typically contain pieces of dialogue that are longer than the duration of a camera shot.”⁶³ Word balloons provide a syntactical temporalization of categorical relation within a single panel. While the category of subsistence is important to the maintaining of identity as a point of assemblage, the word balloon's reference to a localized speech act offers syntactical clues to temporalization. The familiarity with the time that speech unfolds means that panel with word balloons mimetically convey time. Balloons do more than just contextualize, they add tempo that is dialectically opposed to the photographic/still-life impulse to read static images as moments.

The idea of tempo starts with the creator's understanding of the time a reader will spend on each panel. This largely breaks down to three factors; graphics and design (what

⁶²*Understanding Comics*. pp. 95

⁶³Saracweni. pp. 7

goes in the panel), panel shape and size, and finally the written words. As a writer Alan Moore reflects on the last. “A panel containing the standard 35 words of dialogue will maybe take seven to eight seconds to read... (a) simple graphic image without any caption or dialogue will maybe take three seconds. If you read a few comics with the pacing in mind you soon get a workable intuition for how long the reader will spend on each picture.”⁶⁴ When laying out pages Moore, like Eisner, almost writes the score to the narrative by spacing out beats with 7-8:3 seconds ratio in mind. The experienced comic creator also plays the role of composer focusing on the rhythmic element of the narrative.

Comic Book Literacy

Comic book literacy really doesn't seem to have one concrete definition and is probably best understood in context. “Some have suggested that there are a growing number of ‘comics illiterates’; *people unable to follow comics’ unique visual language*. And indeed, many comics feature layouts seemingly designed to baffle newcomers. Yet, stripped of its stylistic excesses comics [McCloud includes a picture of airline safety instruction are] renowned for [their] near universal accessibility.”⁶⁵ With the end of part

three, we have examined everything that is essential to comic books from the standpoint of convention. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to follow how comic book potential has been realized as we try to piece together

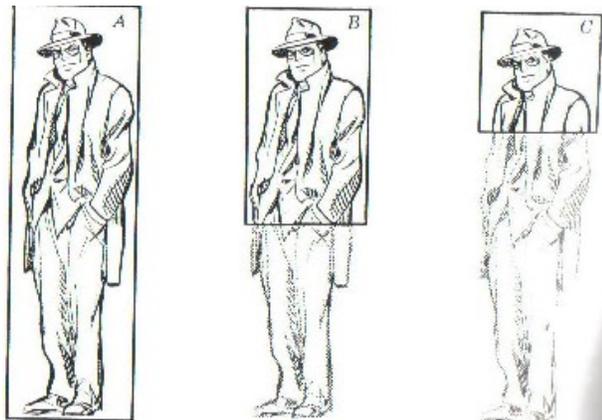


Figure 26: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 22

⁶⁴Alan Moore. *Alan Moore's Writing for Comics Volume 1*. (Avatar: 2003). pp. 18

⁶⁵*Reinventing Comics*. pp. 84-85. My italics.

what its further potential is. With this notation of comic book illiteracy, the conventions and protocols become so specialized that they may be a barrier to the future of comics. Yet, comic book literacy is also tied to visual literacy. Eisner reflects that, “[t]he understanding of the reader’s visual literacy, however, is an intellectual matter. A very simple example of this is shown in the panelization of a single figure.”⁶⁶ Here visual literacy is meant to apply to the reader’s ability to maintain closure with the part of the figure (as well as the world of the narrative) that is neither illustrated nor bounded by the panel (see fig. 26).

Closure in its more general sense means the “phenomenon of observing the part but perceiving the whole.”⁶⁷ There is some element of closure in all panel transitions. In fact the major distinction between movement-to-movement and action-to-action is that, unlike the latter the former will be perceived as animation at 24 panels per second. Saraceni’s linguistic analysis starts to be really helpful when we start to explore closure beyond the movement-to-movement transition. “The perception of series of panels or sentences unified texts is called coherence. While cohesion is a property of the text itself, coherence has to do with reader’s interpretation.”⁶⁸ With the exception of ‘non-sequiturs’ all six of McCloud’s transitions do not exclude cohesive elements. Movement-to-movement transitions, that is to say panels with same figures in different configuration, certainly have cohesive elements. Of the three most common American and European transitions, the scene-to-scene transitions require the most coherence. I think part of the

⁶⁶*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 42

⁶⁷*Understanding Comics*. pp. 63

⁶⁸Mario Saraceni. pp. 45

difficulty in systematically expressing the distinction between scene-to-scene from subject-to-subject is that it is only the coherence elements that separate scene-to-scene from subject-to-subject. Film encounters a similar difficulty that is conventionally overcome by the ‘establishing shot. Alan Moore claimed that in order to ease to the coherences of ‘scene-to-scene’ panel transition, the writer should aim for a hypnotic state in the reader then,* “you carry them away up the back alleys of your narrative and when they are hopelessly lost within the story, having surrendered themselves to it, you do terrible violence with a softball bat and then lead them whimpering to the exit on the last page.”⁶⁹ The difficulties in maintaining narrative from scene-to-scene transitions are largely tied to the reader’s ability to maintain coherence. McCloud claims that relying on just aspect-to-aspect, “[w]ith a high degree of closure, your mind [can take fragments and construct] an entire scene out of those fragments”(see fig. 26)⁷⁰ With less pressure to have a causal time-line there is something poetic about the synthesis of aspect-to-aspect panels. The syntheses of words and illustration may be even less of a straight forward dialectical relationship in light of how all illustration, images and text are part of the language that can form a unified graphic narrative.⁷¹

Conclusion of Chapter One

To review, chapter one starts with the most general questions of how any expression can be understood outside of its specific content. This analysis led to an examination of the prior conditions for expression. The insight that juxtaposition is very

*He latter backed off from the universality of the claim.

⁶⁹Alan Moore. pp. 16-17

⁷⁰*Understanding Comics*. pp. 89

⁷¹*Ibid.* pp. 47

dialectical did not take us far enough toward the specification of comic book expression. This was a failure to understand it as a separate medium or as a versatile medium. In part two we explored the parallels between relational categories and McCloud's categories. The relational category of community and the potential use of word/picture interactions in comics seem to go beyond the scope of the more general schematism. In part three the analysis went back to juxtaposition only stressing a professional lexicon to determine what is being juxtaposed. This allowed us to pick up a few of the odder medium specific relational categories.

At the end of chapter one a medium governed by a semiotic code capable of conveying a very complex digital message has been identified. Further this is conveyed simply in terms of multi-leveled binary oppositions. Let's take the time to work this simple formulation back through the parts of the chapter. The simple binary oppositions have been relabeled throughout this chapter; diegesis/mimesis, image/text, panel to panel, closure, synthesis. The multileveled nature is from the sheer number of binary oppositions that exist on the page or even in two panels. The codes that govern these binary oppositions are not necessarily binary.

The codes discussed in this chapter are digital, in that they are finite (numerable) and predominantly propositional (subject to truth function). For example, McCloud's categories of panel transitions provide a kind of grammatical necessity if we flatten the semantic content of panels to a propositional model. I have argued that this necessity can be explained by the assumption that panelization is the process of portraying the minimum amount of information for the application of relational concepts. The complexity comes

into the types of propositions accommodated by these digital codes. Beyond the sheer complexities of orthodox storytelling, these codes provide enough flexibility to allow non-sequitur panel translations and parallel word/picture into the set of viable expression. Yet, there are three problems with these digital codes. They are mostly locked into a propositional model. On some level this is almost the same thing as the claim that they are the product of binary oppositions. Nevertheless there is a sense that these codes are made intelligible by grammatical classifications (nouns, verbs, subjects, object, etc.). These codes failed to provide the foundation for modular reading of the page that is not a mis-reading. While chapter one's digital codes allow for stacked and overlapping interactions they still have to be more or less linearly sequential. Finally, these codes may not be best for getting at analogical or highly stylized modes of the narrative.

Chapter 2 Cognitive Role of Narratives:

Transparent Unity and Obtuse Fractures

Part I Narratives as Phenomenology

The cognitive role of narrative becomes structurally important when looking at the question of whether closure is necessarily a product of the presentation of juxtaposed images. Carrier challenges McCloud's case for strong inclusive closure taking it as a starting point.

[McCloud's claim that] no matter how dissimilar two successive images seem, “a relationship of some sort will inevitably develop.” Narrowly he is correct, his account is misleading as a general characterization of this synthesis, or what may be called closure. Occasionally a comic may use such juxtapositions, but in practices no narrative could develop unless most of the transitions were relatively straightforward. Pierre Couperie describes “the acceptable margin of elapsed time between two pictures...if they are to form a narrative continuity.” Comics are like realistic novels: a few odd transitions are possible only because we are accustomed to reading the body of the text as a straightforward narrative.⁷²

Saraceni makes a connection between this and the general field of Linguistics. “The gutter is similar to the space that divides one sentence from the next: there is always a certain amount of information that is missing from the narrative and the readers have to provide it for themselves.”⁷³ That the stylization of the space between panels offers a form of basic grammar of narrative makes it an ideal starting point.

⁷²“The Image Sequence; or, Moving Modernist Pictures.” pp. 52-53

⁷³Mario Saraceni. pp. 9

Narrative Causality

Rather than just looking at narratives as a soft form of phenomenological interpretation, comics offer us a set of structures of narrative interpretation. By a soft form of phenomenological interpretation I mean that narratives offer a methodology for answering the question “how was your day?” that does not actually take a day to convey. That said, narratives do offer a liberal and inclusive—if not soft—interpretation of time. Narratives are essentially temporal. Narratives may be more temporal than phenomenological time in so far as beginning, middle and end are inevitable critical categories of narrative. Real life rarely provides such categories. As far as Kantian categories synthesize a totality out of the manifold of sensation, their a priori nature does not lend itself to the need for tidy events. The use of narrative seems to apply some need for such structures.

The Hero

How does someone exist in time as a hero? The prior condition for the hero's existences (conception, material constraints, childhood, etc.) are not necessarily essential to her function in the narrative. Generally she is present at or near the start of the narrative, but this in itself does not constitute the role of hero. Embedded narrators, such as chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, occupy the same originator local as the hero without necessarily being a hero. The definition of 'hero' I prefer is **the character or characters who are the active center of all or most narrative events**. These actions can be before, after or during the event. The actions can be consciously, unconsciously actively, reactively or obstructively undertaken. I will use the term 'super-

hero' to refer to what is closer to the Homeric sense of 'hero.' Three things define a 'super-hero' narrative. 1} The super-hero has a stronger investment in the narrative events. The arch of the narrative becomes a type of quest and is tied up in the hero's identity. 2} The super-hero has special or narratively relevant abilities, for example, Sherlock Holmes, Superman, etc. These abilities do not have to be extraordinary. They can be ordinary abilities in extraordinary circumstances, for example *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, etc. 3} These abilities and quests intersect at some point in the form of something like a deus ex machina. Narrative causality seems to dictate that no one can come across a magic ring or lantern without it coming into play in the grand scheme of events. Both forms of 'heroism' have to be juxtaposed with three senses of anti-hero. 1} Anti-hero may refer to a main character who does not reflect heroic 'virtues'. This has been the traditional role of the 'clown,' for example Don Quixote, Marx Brothers, Shaggy & Scooby, etc. This type of anti-hero's vices may even make them unlikable or the object of ridicule. Nevertheless, they tend to be actively in the center of all the narrative events. 2} The anti-hero may refer to someone who may be outright villainous. There is a type of story that tends to be shelved with horror including *Hanibal* and most of what Anne Rice has written. These are just super-hero narratives where the quest is for goals that are generally morally abhorrent. 3} The final type of anti-hero is the character who is largely passive. This passivity may in fact be product of the realization that events do not revolve around them. The decision may also be a reaction to the lack of a higher essences that drive them to undergo a quest. Classic examples are Dostoyevsky's underground man, Bartleby the scrivener and Meursault from *The Strange*.

This final type of anti-hero is the only model that breaks the structure of the hero and super-hero narrative. The ethical problem I have with the hero model of interpretation is its moves towards egotism or solipsism. This is a serious concern if one looks at the scope of narrative in every day life. We tell stories of how our day went, how experiments were conducted, why someone is or is not guilty of crime, how humans fit into the cosmos, how our respective nations/races fit into history and what our individual purpose in life is. Everything in a hero narrative including background characters tends to be predicated on either the aid or impediment they offer the main characters. Further, with the exception of the second type of anti-hero, the hero narrative makes it easy to classify impeding characters as evil. At best this is a reductive way to deal with the manifold of living world, at worst this is objectifying.

Heroes in Comics

Because the continuity of comic narratives relies on elaborate syntheses, there is a tendency to use characters with overdetermined identities. I am arguing this comes directly out of the tension between the character and each illustration which instantiates that character. On a practical level each illustration has to be an overly determinant signifier of the character so that recognition is fast enough for closure. The last thing the illustrator wants is the reader to have to think about whether the figure in panel one is the same character as the figure in panel three. The easy way to overcome this is having characters with very strong graphic essences. The nature of generationally serialized comics has been a slew of characters who have been wearing the same outfits and spouting the same catch phrase for decades. This allows a character like Charlie Brown or

the Hulk to jump to the perceptual foreground of any panel. This also makes it hard to tell a story that isn't about some type of hero.

Hero Narratives as Art and Entertainment

While it is exceptionally bad form to make you go through this section on heroes only to conclude with a warning that it all has to be taken with a grain of salt, I am afraid that is what I must do. This section has treated hero narratives as if they were ethical stances and there is both a practical and theoretical problem with this. What it allowed me to do was to keep up the momentum of the thought experiment that does follow from the very real phenomenological uses of narrative. The practical problem is that most narratives are hero narratives. Going back to Homer and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, it appears hero narratives have always been a major part of storytelling. I love hero narratives and would never claim that people who are only interested in hero narratives are ethically challenged. Nor do I want to be accused of reiterating Fredric Wertham's thesis in *Seduction of the Innocence*. A lot comes down to reading styles. A broader sense of 'Fundamentalism' is not limited to a group of American readers of English translation of predominantly secondhand Semitic accounts of history. There are people who recognize a narrative as fiction but still assume that they can graft themselves into the role of the hero. Many interpreters of *Turner Diaries* formed one particularly unfortunate example from the 20th century. McCloud talks about a phenomenon called masking. "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit."⁷⁴ This is not limited to cartooning. It also goes into the selection of actors with

⁷⁴*Understanding Comics*. pp. 36

generic symmetrical appearances and the creation of literary characters identified by adjectives that readers would most like to assume about themselves. From a theoretical standpoint we probably do not want to exclude something from the category of art simply because it has an unfeasible ethical outlook. Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, the Sergio Leone/Eastwood trilogy, and Frank Miller's *Sin City* are objectifying super-hero narratives about characters who are themselves prone to treat or turn other characters to objects. In my opinion what makes the first four great films and Miller's graphic novels successful is that the aesthetic sensibilities are very appropriate to the subject matter. The purpose of looking at hero-less comics is to underscore their potential to create a unique type of non-didactic ethical narrative.

Part II

The Exploding Page

In chapter one I introduced Legrady's concept of the comic page as a Modular Information Structure (MIS). MIS is useful in the context of the page as a kind of syntactical super frame among other frames. The problem was that the weak sense of MIS only served as a form of placeholder that located the page as being both inside and outside of the narrative space. Other than that it was pretty extraneous in chapter one because story seemed to be deterministically driven by relational properties. I now will expand this notion of page to include something that potentially has the high level of selectivity that one associates with computer MIS.

Border—The outline of the panel.

Borders do not quite operate in the space of the panel or page. The border is not essential to the concept of comic book composition. A lot of Eisner's latter work almost



Figure 27: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 24
does away with clearly demarcated borders (see fig. 27). The function of the border for the critic is helpful in the same way that it is helpful in its practical use in comic book composition. Borders help the critics, readers or writers define and demarcate panels. Potentially it has other effects.

[Eisner writes,] In addition to its primary function as a frame in which to place objects and actions, the panel border itself *can be used as part of the non-verbal ‘language’ of sequential art*. For example, rectangular panels with straight edged borders, unless the verbal portion of the narrative contradicts this, usually are meant to imply that the actions contained therein are set in the present tense. The flashback (a change in tense or shift in time) is often indicated by altering the line which make up the frame. The wavy edged or scalloped panel border is the most common past tense indicator. *While there is no universally agreed upon convention for expressing tense through the outline of the frame, the ‘character’ of the line—as in the case of sound, emotion or thought—create a hieroglyphic.*⁷⁵

The shape of panels that do not have the sharp black borders can approximate these effects (for example panels 1-9 of figure 27). In Eisner words, the border acts as a “narrative device.” He gives six examples of how borders work as separate entities to panels. For this paper four of the six stand out more.

- 1) The jagged outline implies an emotionally explosive action. It conveys a state of tension and is related to crisp crackle associated with radio or telephonic transmission of sound.
- 2) The illusion of power and threat is displayed by allowing the actor to burst out of the confines of the panel. Since the panel border is assumed to be inviolate in a comic page this adds to the sense of unleashed action.
- 3) The absence of a panel outline is designed to convey unlimited pace. It provides a sense of serenity and supports the narrative by contributing atmosphere to the narrative.
- 4) The border can be a frame within the narrative as well as framing the narrative. For example, the panel here is actually the doorway. It tells the reader that the actor is confined in a small area within a wider one—the building. It narrates this visually. (See Figures 28)⁷⁶

Each of these four work as narrative devices to emphasize and exaggerate the autonomous panel, and as narrative devices that exaggerate the multi-layered encapsulation. There are also cumulative effects of the

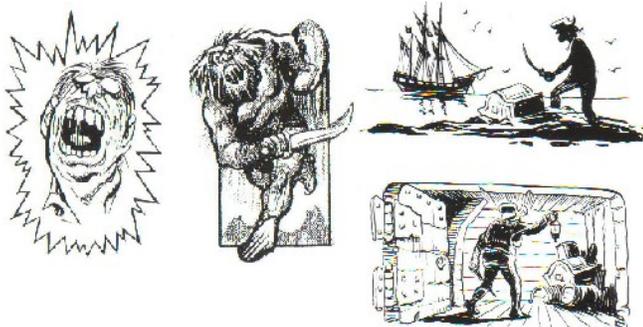


Figure 28: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 46-46

presences or absences borders. These cumulative effects will be discussed with the ‘Gutter.’

⁷⁵*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 44. My italics.

⁷⁶*Ibid*. pp. 46-47

Gutter—The space between panels.

The gutter in its strictest sense means the ‘space between panels or borders.’ This narrow notion of gutter will be helpful in transferring the effect of panel sizes and border shape to the page format. The gutter refers to the fact that there is a pause between panels, whether it occupies a physical space or the panels are flush or bleed together (see fig. 27). Reflect back to Saraceni’s observation that “[t]he gutter is similar to the space that divides one sentence from the next.”⁷⁷ On the one hand there is this sort of skip from panel to panel in which borders act like punctuation. Like periods, exclamation marks and question marks there is a sense that most of the border effects that Eisner discusses are simply redundancies to add emphasis. The draftsman can apply them very formulaically or dispense with them all together. On the other hand, border effects are much more versatile if taken as cumulative effect on a page especially if pane shape is included. To demonstrate this, turn to an early page of Jack Kirby's work (see fig. 29). It is a good example because while—just out of Eisner's studio—Kirby's panelization is still somewhat derivative and rough. His intent stands out more, so my reading will be less subjective than if I had selected a more current avant-guard illustrator at the top of his or her game. I will tackle some of these more mature or experimental works latter.

Three localities occupy the six panels. The linear (left to right, top to bottom) relational reading of the page goes as follows. The transition between panel 1 and 2 is an action-to-action transition. This is justified by the repeated figure. Along with this is the shared stylization of music and continues a monologue. The stylized panel shape/border

⁷⁷Mario Saraceni. pp. 9

jarringly punctuates the action in panel 1. The transition between panels 2 and 3 is also an action-to-action transition although the shift in color scheme and the caption make it look like a traditional scene-to-scene transition. The explosive panel bleed is



Figure 29: Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. *Captain America: The Classic Years, Volume 2*. (Marvel Comics: 2000)

punctuation. The transition between panel 3 and 4 is a scene-to-scene transition. The scalped border and red lettering conveys intensity that is proportionally less than that between panels one and two. Also, the circular shape of the panel makes it parenthetical to the rest of the page. The transition between panel 4 and 5 is a scene-to-scene transition. Panel 5 is contextualized by the caption and connected to panel 4 by the continued dialogue (now in a stylized balloon). The transition between panel 5 and 6 is an action to action transition. Note that the 'camera' has violated the 180 degree rule. This cinematic no-no must be weighed against the comic book convention of placing the first character to speak in the left of the panel.

Turning away from a linear relational reading, the page as an aesthetics total presents themes, tone, conflict and relief. In other words, a non-linear reading of the page also signifies a narrative in much the same as classical painting does. One alternative to the linear model that occurred to me was how each panel related to panel 3. When I first read this page I read it clockwise

circling into panel 3. These are not the only two models but

there are some themes that seems to be present even in a brief scan. All but the last panel

is thematically linked by radio images and depictions of radio 'sounds.' These 'sounds' that unite the scenes are not

themselves uniform. The graphic wave of noise in panel 1 becomes even more pictorial

with the addition of a spectral violin in panel 2. The rounded

word balloon of the man speaking into the microphone in panel 4 becomes jagged in panel 5. The microphone cord dangles out of panel 4 pointing to panel 6. Also the explosion of panel 3 bleeds into panel 4, while obliterating the top border of panel 5. The affect is that

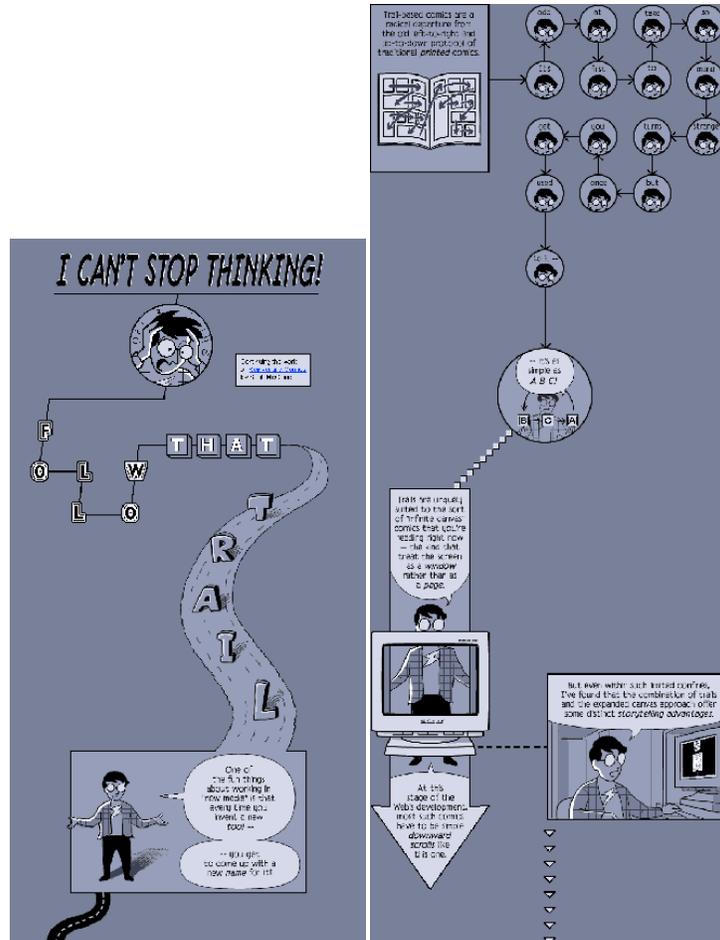


Figure 30: Figure 4 (2 page segments above and right): Scott McCloud. *I Can't Stop Thinking! #4* (Fall/Winter 2000) <http://scottmccloud.com/comics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html>

the narrative aspects of both panels 3 and 4 have different visible transitory effects on panel 5. Even though they are set in two different locations they physically loom over panel 5 and invade its boundaries.

Trails—Graphic lines connecting panels.

In web-comics the ‘protocols’ can be as or more physical than gutters are in print comics. McCloud calls these directing lines “trails”(see fig. 30).⁷⁸ A lot of web-comics take advantage of very long or very wide pages through which the reader scrolls. If the on-line comic creators use this format with a traditional gutter and border structure the net result is just an extremely long comic strip. Trails allow for panels to float in the page and have much more dynamic juxtaposition. These advantages of trails highlight what has to be the most understated narrative potential of comics as a medium.

Provisionally I would call this potential 'multi-layered non-hierarchical synchronized narration.' The first layer we addressed in chapter one was with the discussion of how both the illustrative and textual elements of comics have diegetic and mimetic functions. Chris Ware's *I Guess* (fig. 17) is a great example of this first layer of synchronized narration but all comics—excluding those that rely on duo-specific interactions exclusively—have some amount of parallel narration. I made the strong claim that this narrative potential of the medium are understated. Nevertheless, McCloud is not the only comic theorist to draw attention to this potential whose use—while not ubiquitous—goes far beyond experimental comics. This technique has been part of comic creators' pallet from the start of the medium. The fact that there is not a theoretical

⁷⁸Scott McCloud. *I Can't Stop Thinking! #4*. (scottmccloud.com Fall/Winter: 2000)
<http://scottmccloud.com/comics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html>

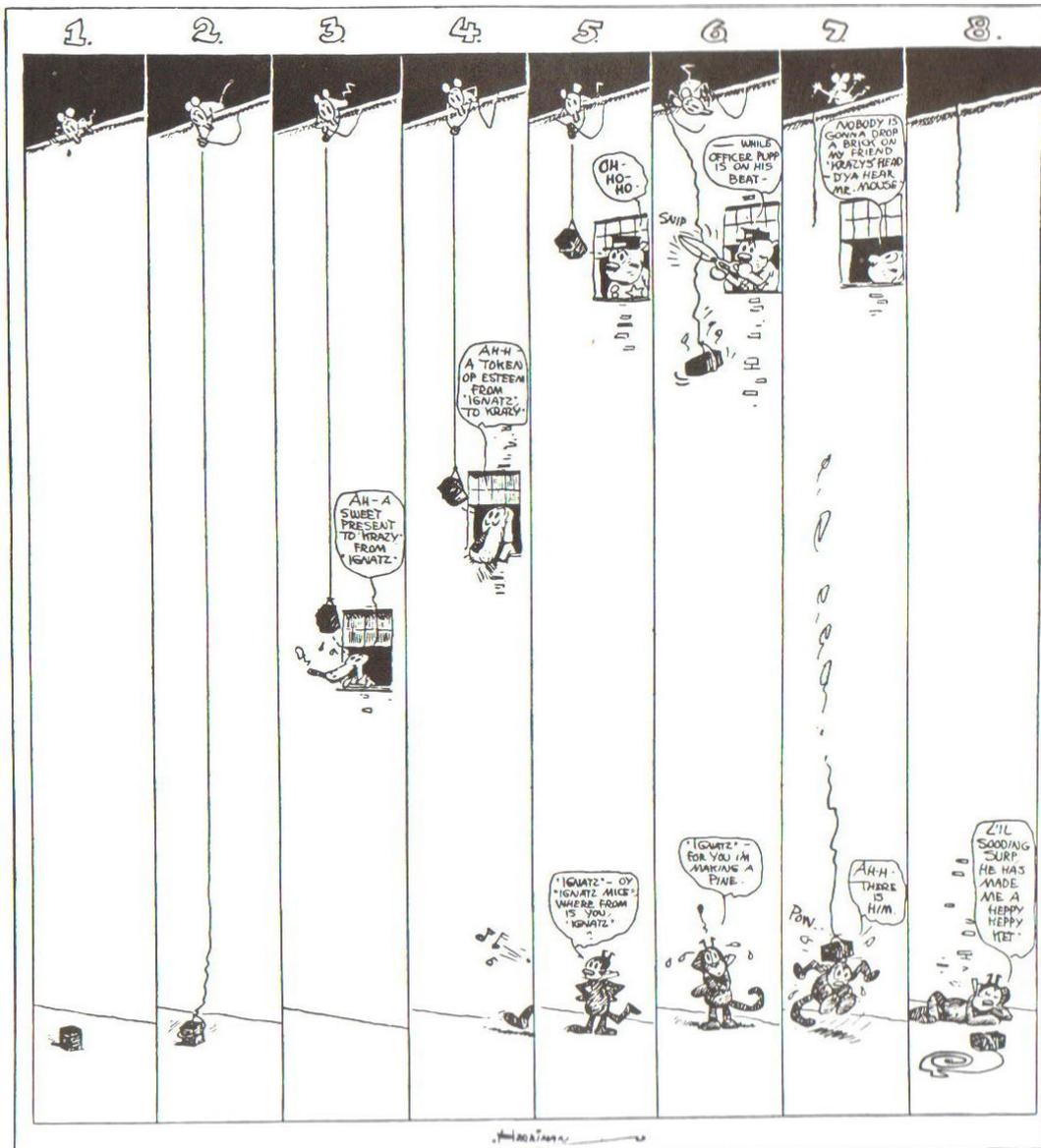


Figure 31: George Herriman. *Krazy Kat*. (October 10th, 1920) Reprinted in Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. (UP Mississippi: 1996). pp. 174

framework for critiquing this unique but old narrative tool is indicative of the understatement. Robert C. Harvey devotes about a page of text discussing a page from Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (see fig. 31). “Although film could give us the same story, it cannot give it to us with the same senses of simultaneity. [...] Even though film can capture images and actions simultaneously, it can not narrow our focus sufficiently to emphasize

only essential elements of the story as the layout of this page does.”⁷⁹ In order to get the gag, the reader must get that each panel of this Herriman strip has three distinct parallel narratives that intersect by the motion of the brick. A film could only capture this one action at a time.

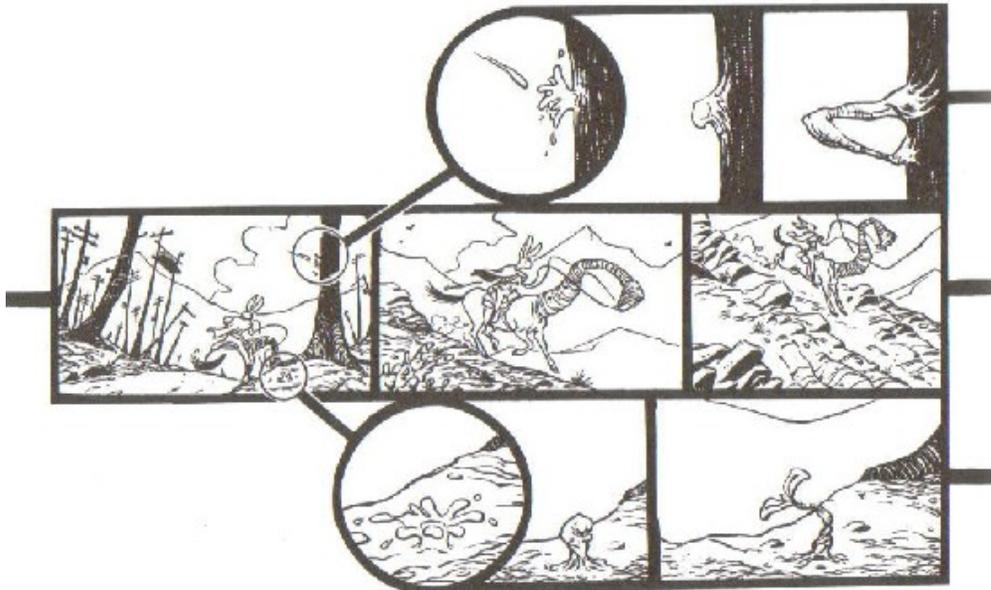


Figure 32: Rebecca Dart. “Rabbithead,” *The Best American Comics 2006*. (Houghton Mifflin: 2006 reprinted from *Alternative Comics*: 2004). pp.108

Trails are in fact so effective for synchronized narration that they have been adapted for print comics. Rebecca Dart's single issue story *Rabbithead* uses trails as her central narrative device (see fig. 32). Without using text, Dart tells one story that occupies a single tier that runs horizontally for 24 pages. About every 3 pages, an aspect of a panel is highlighted and then connected to its own linear parallel tier (see fig. 32) or threaded back into an older/longer tier. At the climax of *Rabbithead* Dart is asking the reader to juggle seven tiers in parallel. *Rabbithead* could be dismissed as an innovative twist on the traditional execution of trails as a narrative device. Without a doubt, the book

⁷⁹Robert C. Harvey. *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. (UP Mississippi: 1996). pp. 175

demonstrates a masterful visual storytelling, and the extensive use of trails is certainly demanding both for the composer and the reader. The question is, does it constitute a break from the narrative practices that preceded it? I want to argue that Dart is radically pushing narrative space. *Rabbithead* is held together primarily with action-to-action transitions. The primary tier following Rabbithead's journey has a fourfold linearity from one grave, across a valley to another grave. 1} Like most narratives, the events are linear in their sequential order of presentation (beginning, crises and conclusion). 2} The character's path is linear; Rabbithead is moving in a straight line and is almost always seen in profile moving left to right. Yet, the graves (origin and terminus) do look identical with similar headstones on the left of the open graves. 3} The use of so many action-to-action transitions is grounded on the linearity of relational causality. 4} Finally, the closing page (a map) underscores the linearity by locating all the narrative events in bottom to top order. In spite of this, Dart uses trails to complicate the tidy Aristotelian arch with its rudimentary Kantian causality. While, it is true that each of the other six tiers of action has its own narrative arch, their simultaneity challenges one pivotal assumption of narratives. The assumption is that the causality of a story is not just initiated by the hero but also confined to the hero's sphere of observation. Many storytellers in other mediums have challenged this assumption. Notably in film, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* accomplishes this by telling the same story over and over again by different observers and in Richard Linklater's *Slackers* the camera follows multiple characters around not settling on a single hero. As mentioned, this last technique is somewhat hard to capture as seamlessly in comics because of the high threshold for character recognition.

Chris Ware also uses trails in many of his print comics. Figure 33 is a page from his strip *Building Stories*. Although the *Building Stories'* pages are not one tier, they are strips in so far as they were serially published in non-comic periodicals like *The New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine*. This page

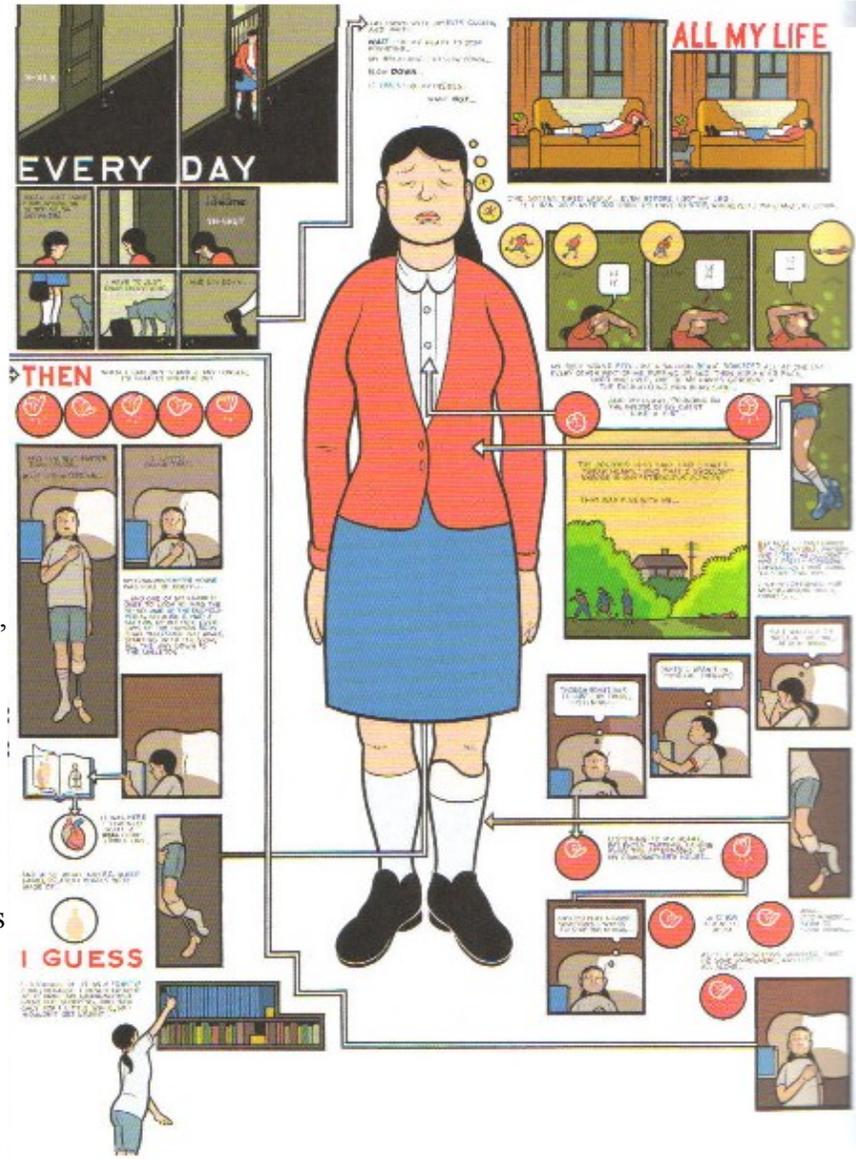
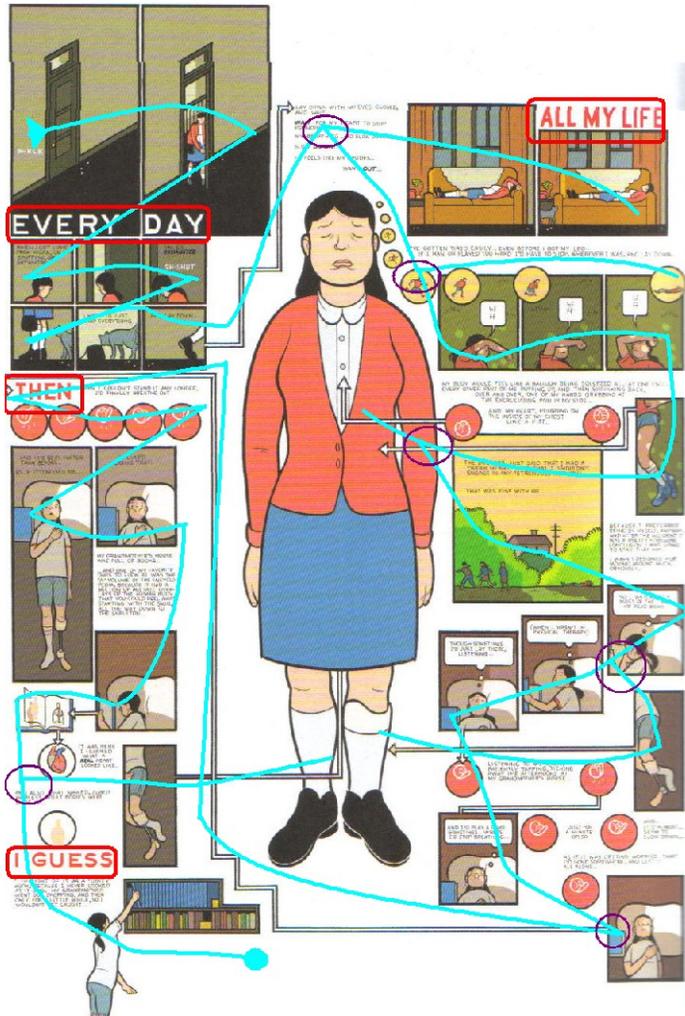


Figure 33: Chris Ware. Excerpts from “Building Stories,” *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, & True Stories*. pp. 370

is the first of three set around an encyclopedia anatomical transparency motif. Anatomical transparencies are discussed in the narrative itself in the panels in the bottom left of the page. Unlike anatomical transparencies that are pure Modular Information Structure, the three strips have an intended narrative arch that is facilitated by the uses of trails. Anatomical transparencies are read selectively; each caption is grounded in an illustration of an organ

within whatever is the appropriate layer. Ware typographically offsets some introductory words to stretch the comparison to anatomical transparencies even further (circled in red fig. 34). Nevertheless, each page has at least a partially linear narrative. The blue line in figure 7b approximates this intended narrative arch. The points where overlapping lines are circled in purple are apparently intentional narrative forks. The tension



Drawing 34: Ibid. pp. 370

between the modular and the linear reading is left open and another graphic narrative effect is permitted to come to the forefront. The prominence of the large and inactive image of the character implies that all the semantic content of the other panels is meant to be read as pertaining to the imaged character's subjectivity. Neal Adams* has some very famous early variations of this type of page (see fig. 35). He complicates the overdetermined identities of the characters he inherited (Batman, Green Lantern, etc.). Characters so steeped in the continuity of comic narratives that it is easy to read them as

*The genealogy goes as follows; Kirby studied under Eisner, Steranko studied under Kirby and Adams studied with Steranko.

part of the atheistic experiences of comic books than the atheistic experience of hung art, film, and sculpture. Comics as national phenomenon, developed with the advent of cheap disposable printing. The long history of disposability still has an effect on the medium, even though the stigma of poor quality four-color dot printing on newspaper grade paper is no longer representative. Part of comic culture has involved comics being rolled up, folded, mutilated, traded, and passed around with a casualness not generally associated with bound literature.

Many aspects of this mobility are no longer unique to comics. Private spectatorship was a major selling point for the 'Internet' and 'home theater.' Private spectatorship of comics was one of the major 'problems' identified by Wertham's McCarthy era anti-comic campaign and the subsequent sterilization and infantilization of the medium in the USA, Canada and Great Brittan. As this smear campaign continued the public image of comics started to parallel deviant structures that surround printed pornography. That is to say the spectatorship started to be coded in the idea of seeing without being seen to see. Unlike in Japan, adults reading comics in public space in the English-speaking world —like mass transits—is still extremely rare. Also of note is the interchangeability of the cliché image of a young person reading a comic/men's magazine spirited in the pages of a textbook. There is something subversive about the disposability of comics. Alan Moore and Chris Ware have both co-opted (faked) collage of ads and editorial notices for narrative devices. This semiotic detritus has accompanied this disposable medium from its inception. During the medium's boom, comics were aimed at the baby boomers who constituted a major youth market comprised entirely out of

disposable incomes. Comics were packaged as ready-made garbage, which in turn carried ads for other, straight to trash products like sea monkeys and X-ray-glasses. The combination of a youth culture that grew up with no exposure to pre-child labor laws, immersion in America's post WWII idealism, and this micro youth economy led to a medium that was extremely committed to idealism, wish fulfillment and power fantasies. Bradford Wright's book *Comic Book Nation* chronicles all of this with exception of any in depth analysis of the microeconomics of children. Alternatively, comics as high art have as much potential to challenge Kant's aesthetic criteria of 'disinterested liking', as surrealist food art. Also the tactile nature of comics offers a different form of modular information structure.

Modular Information Structures (MIS) and Multi Dimensional Layouts

One of the reasons the topic of disposable art is so important is that it partially contributes to how the comic page operates as a (MIS). Private spectatorship is basically a precondition for both computer and comic book (MIS). Although, one could easily look at the very public contribution structure of Wikipedia as (MIS). The materiality of comic books is a precondition for a unique aspect of comic book (MIS). Multi dimensional layouts, that is to say layouts that can be read from multiple points of view, are a method that is almost entirely limited



Drawing 36: Marc Rosenthal. "Joke Page," in *Strange Stories for Strange Kids: Little Lit, Book 2*. edd. Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman. (Joanna Cotler: 2001). pp. 54

to printed art (see figure 36). While the angle appears to change in films and video games the frame is itself stationary. Similarly, you cannot—alas—go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and rotate the paintings. The narrative potential of the physicality of twisting and turning a page is not that different from the narrative potential of two dimensionality of the left-right/top-bottom movement of traditional print. However it opens up new possibilities that have been largely overlooked in textual publications (see fig. 37). By no means has the potential of this physicality been fully represented in comics. A comic book could be a Maze (see fig. 38) or a chose your own narrative.* It could be folded and unfolded along all kinds of seams, even revealing panels that are not apparent in printing.* It could even be printed on a Mobius strip thereby having no set start or end

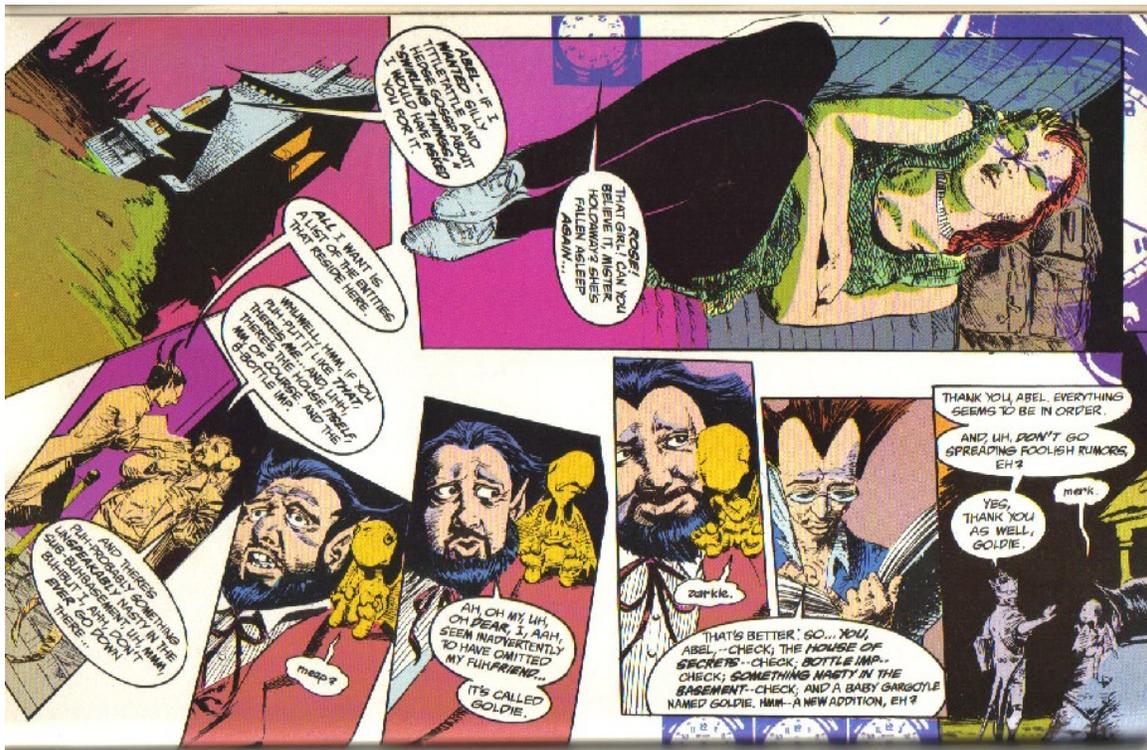


Figure 37: Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones and Neil Gaiman. “The Doll’s House,” in *The Sandman Linrary Vol. II: The Doll’s House*. (DC :1990/189). pp. 48

*See <http://scottmccloud.com/comics/carl/index.html> for the *Carl Comics* that do this.

**Mad* has been doing this with the last page of the magazine for years.

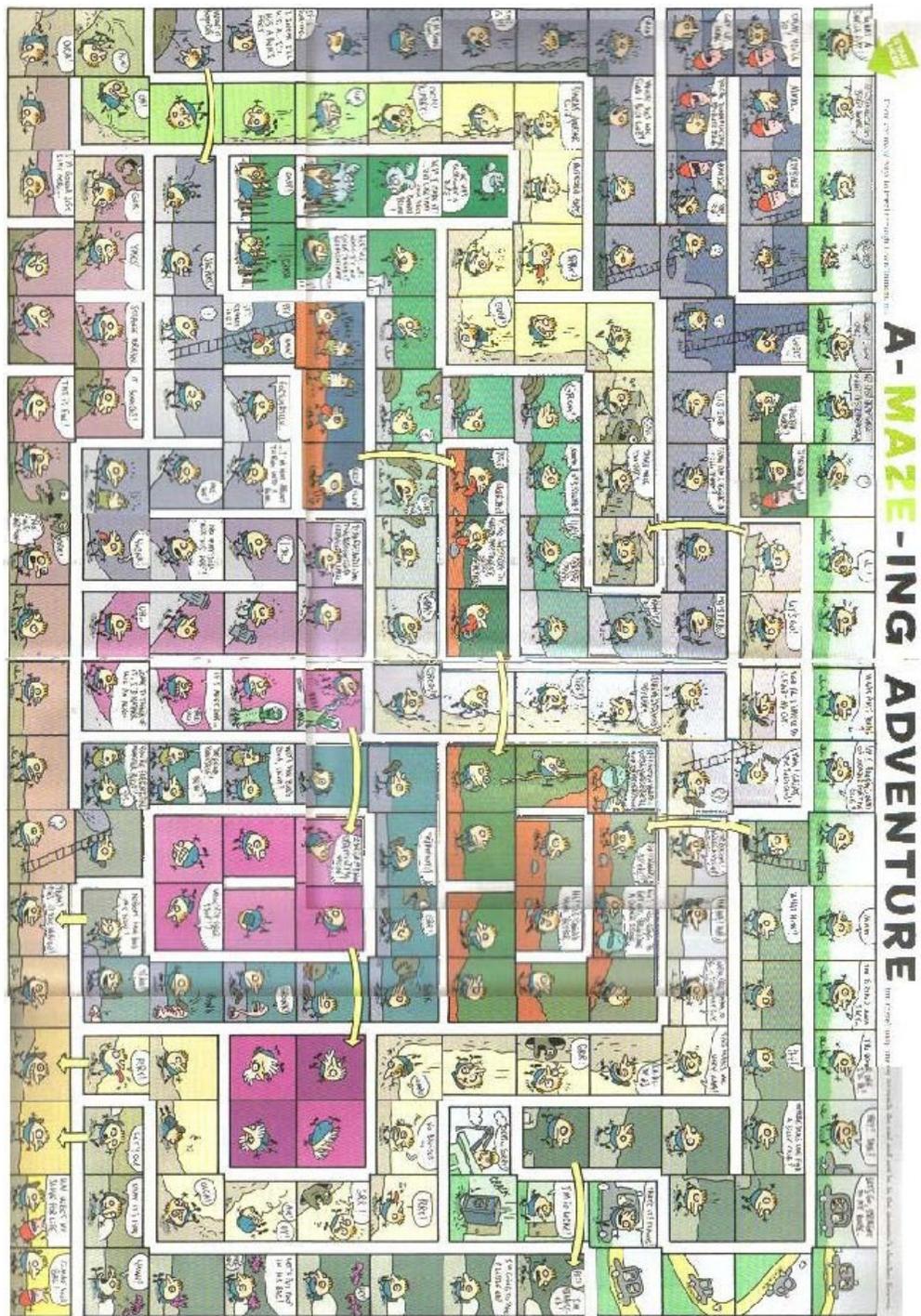


Figure 38: Trondheim, Lewis. "A-maze-ing Adventure" in *Strange Stories for Strange Kids: Little Lit, Book 2*. edd. Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman. (Joanna Cotler: 2001). pp 52-53

point. In my opinion comics as a high art form have not been well served by galleries. Framing a comic page or panel make it recognizable as art but in some sense it makes it less of a comic. For the most part I feel anthologies like those associated with poetry and short fiction is the best hope for the artistic appreciation of comics. Grants for a display would help advance the art form in the public view. One such space could allow sequential artists to put extended narratives in an uninterrupted strip on the walls in a format that is associated with the oldest graphic narratives.

Part III Time Signs Against Still Lives

McCloud observed that, “our eyes have been well-trained by the photograph and by representational art to see any single continuous image as a single instant in time.”⁸⁰

All of comic’s time-governing protocols are set up to break the reader of this habit. The ‘sound’ of dialogue extends the ‘time’ of the panel. Moore’s ratio is not the end all of panel time. For example the lines can have a temporal syntax of their own.



Drawing 39: *Making Comics*. pp. 32

Panel time is the synthesis between the static non-instant illustration and the non-instant dialogue. Further, every discretely framed piece of text in a panel not only reiterates this

⁸⁰*Understanding Comics*. pp. 96

synthesis but is itself synthesized with all synthesis that are dictated as prior by the protocol (see fig. 39). Yet, the situation is even more convoluted because spatial time is not limited to the word/picture dialectic. For example, McCloud offers the following

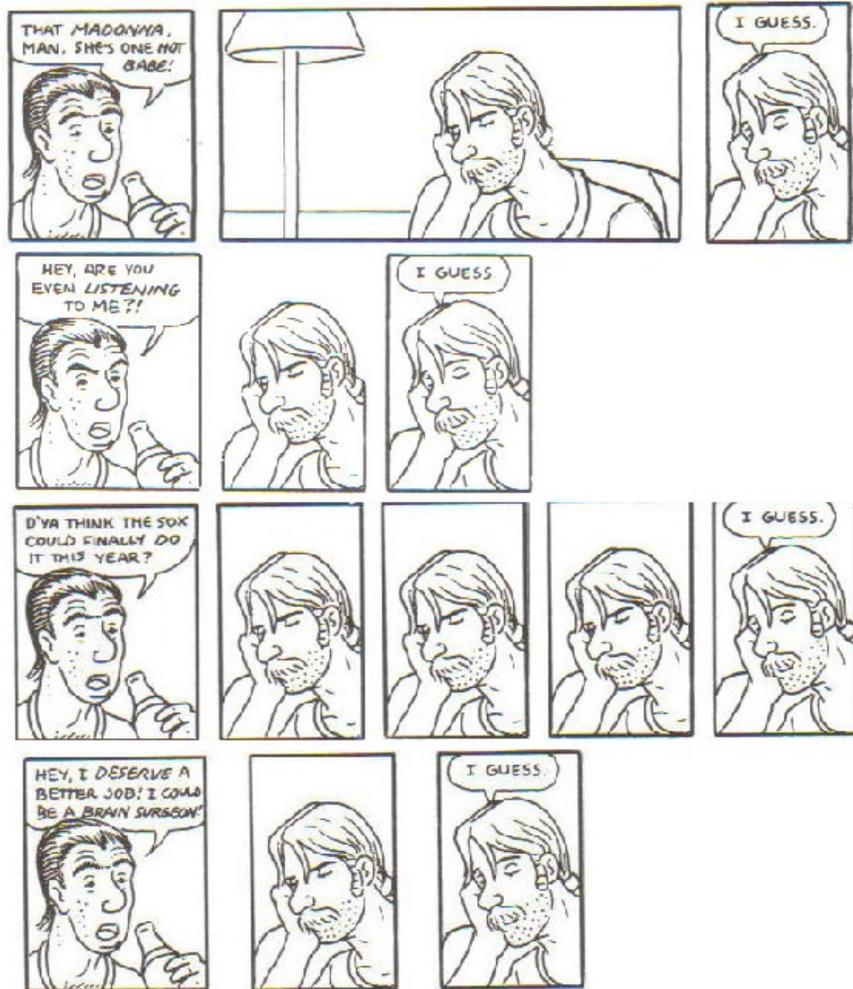


Figure 40: *Understanding Comics*. pp. 101-102

four suggestions for lengthening a pause in the narrative by altering the graphic layout; the lengthening of the panel, the removal of one or more borders, the addition of more panels or a wider gutter (see fig. 40).⁸¹ The important thing to underline is that for all of these contortions, the simple sequences of still panels deliver a continuous narrative for the comic literate individual.

⁸¹Ibid. pp. 101-102

Lines in Motion

In many senses the speed-line is the simplest convention for overcoming the readers 'photographic/still-life' impulses. But it is tied to more puzzling questions of the photographic origins of non-photographic art in the twentieth century. No sooner than McCloud mentions speed-lines, he ties them back to art movements of the early 1900s. He writes, "(h)ow do you show (the movement) aspect of time in an art where time stands still? ... Somewhere between the Futurists' dynamic movement and Duchamp's concept of movement lies comics' 'motion line'."⁸² McCloud lists four types of speed-line; conspicuous action lines, multiple images, streaking, and streaked background/subjective motion (see fig. 41).⁸³ Speed-lines are very much influenced by the perception of motion

by photographic exposure tricks or from moving vehicles. Conspicuous action lines (shown in panel 1) are very close to trails both as a parallel to light trails one see in photos and as inter-panel version of the on-line syntax. Streaking and multiple image

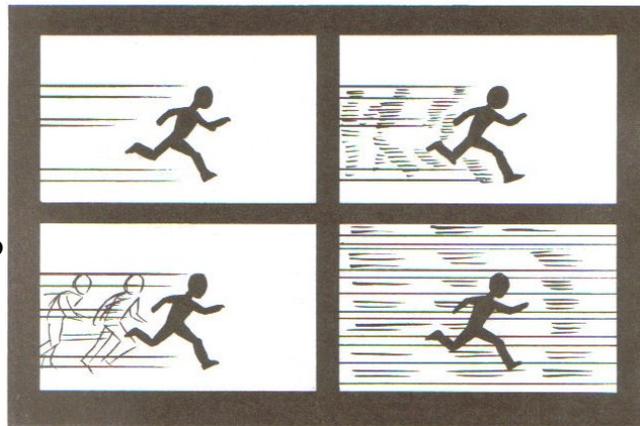


Figure 41: *Understanding Comics*. pp. 114

action lines (shown in panels 2 &3) are even closer to the effect one sees with slower shutter speed. Subjective motion action lines (shown in panel 4) are focused on the subjective vision from a vehicle or vehicles where objects moving at the same speed as the viewer are seen crisply and all slower objects appear blurred. An examination of how the

⁸²Ibid. pp. 110

⁸³Ibid. pp. 113-114

pre-photographic experienced static images would be a cross disciplinary thesis in itself. What can be said is that the photographic image is a classic example of a C.S. Peirce's concept of an indexical sign, in that it is a causal (chemical) relationship that signal the light that actually did hit the lenses of the camera. Art Spiegelman claims that a "photo is the equivalent to writing in the third person. [Thus] it has the voice of authority."⁸⁴ The comic illustration only indexically signs the intervention of the human hand and the crafts person's tools. Thus the human bias is part of the sign, and Spiegelman argues that this has an amazing, mostly unrealized, journalistic potential.

If one accepts that visual matter lies, you might as well know where your lie is coming from. And you can recognize a voice, a visual voice, in the artist's hand, and therefore allow that to become part of the information you're getting. And in that sense, it may sound glib to say so but if you know where the artist is coming from and what lies he's likely to make, you can distill more truth from the image that's not overtly in that sense objective.⁸⁵

He is proposing that uncritical reception of photojournalism sets up an aura of ontological authority and that comics can invite a more critical reception. There is a long tradition of autobiographic comics from Crumb, Pekar to Spiegelman himself. Comic journalism suffers from a long production lag that has been the one major obstacle. Nevertheless, Joe Sacco has had a very successful career as graphic journalist. So much so that his book *Palestine* had a forward written by Edward W. Said. One other success is Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang: A Journey In North Korea*. Delisle used the medium to report on one of the hardest parts of the world to document while he was working with a Korean animation studio.

⁸⁴David D'arcy's interview of Art Spiegelman. "Profile: Art Spiegelman's Comic Book Journalism" Linda Wertheimer. *Saturday Weekend Edition*. NPR. 6/7/03
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1290481>

⁸⁵Ibid.

Language of Motion

Eisner writes, “other natural phenomena, movement or transitory occurrences deployed within the perimeter of [panel] borders and depicted by recognizable symbols, become part of the vocabulary used in the expression of time.”⁸⁶ Eisner’s comment implies some questions that will be pivotal for this thesis. This spatial “vocabulary” is only the meter or tempo for a performance provided in the reading. While time and timing is often viewed as central to narrative construction, this “vocabulary” of comic book literacy may challenge the narrative role of the tautology ‘a temporal expression of time’.

Something in the Either

Smoke and odor lines (commonly referred as stink lines) are another simplistic convention for overcoming obstacles caused by the static nature of the medium.

Despite their superficial resemblance [between smoke and odor lines, they are] very different sets of lines. One represents a visible phenomenon, smoke, while the other represents an invisible one, our sense of smell...these lines are more a visual metaphor—a symbol...Taken out of their original context, they can now be applied anywhere and the reader will instantly know what they mean.⁸⁷

While smoke is a visible phenomenon it would be difficult to render realistically and to do so would usually be distracting to the overall composition. Even though smoke and odor lines are often geometrically identical, it is context that differentiates the two semantic messages (fig. 42). Odor lines are opposite to the graphically treated words.

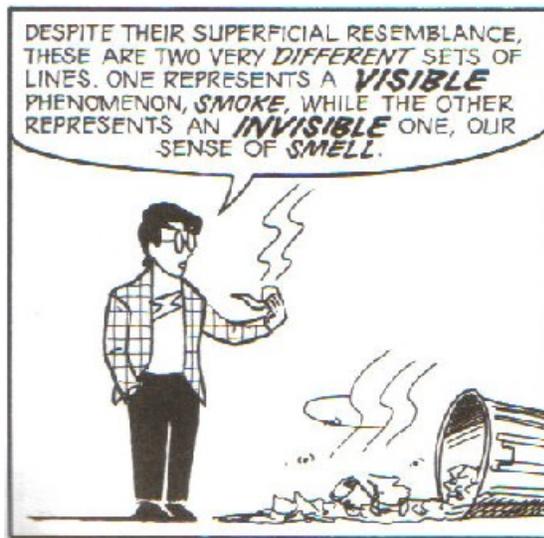


Figure 42: *Understanding Comics*. pp. 128

Where words have their graphic dimension, odor lines have their linguistic dimension.

The transportable qualities of odor lines act almost like a linguistic sign. They have more

⁸⁶*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 28

⁸⁷*Understanding Comics*. pp. 129

linguistic qualities than say a stop sign that always carry some automotive associations. The identical odor lines over an illustration of a pie and over another illustration of a mangy looking dog carry two different meanings (odors). Speed, smoke and odor lines all have their own temporal elements. Like the speech of word balloons that can also only happen in time, these lines refer to motion or causal relationships and are communicated through static images. What makes these signs of relational properties unique is that—like word balloons—they are autonomous medium specific signs (see fig. 43). Unlike word balloons, smoke and odor lines exist entirely on the graphic plane. Word balloons exist in the audio foreground. While word balloons act upon the graphic plane both as a framing device and a guide for composition they do not interact with the graphic plane. Smoke and odor lines are very much part of the graphic plane, but their hyper stylization makes their narrative function far more diegetic than mimetic.



Figure 43: *Understanding Comics*. pp. 129

Figure

It is not only ethereal elements like speech and smoke that take on linguistic functions; the body also becomes a sign with its own modifiable “vocabulary.” This will mainly be examined in the context of the dialectics of words and picture to avoid straying to far into the domain of cartooning. A theory examining the aesthetics of cartooning will have to wait for a different paper. Certainly, the near pathological power of cartooning's

distortion and deformation for the formation of empathy (*Peanuts & Hello Kitty*) and of prejudices (political & racial caricatures) merits study but it is tangential to the overall project of this paper. Alternatively, the way the figure is simplified and stylized to work as a unit of language is very relevant. Eisner gave one of the most effective summation of this linguistic use.

In comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words. They can by their relevance to the reader's own experience invoke a nuance of emotion and give auditory inflection to the voice of the speaker(see fig. 44).⁸⁸

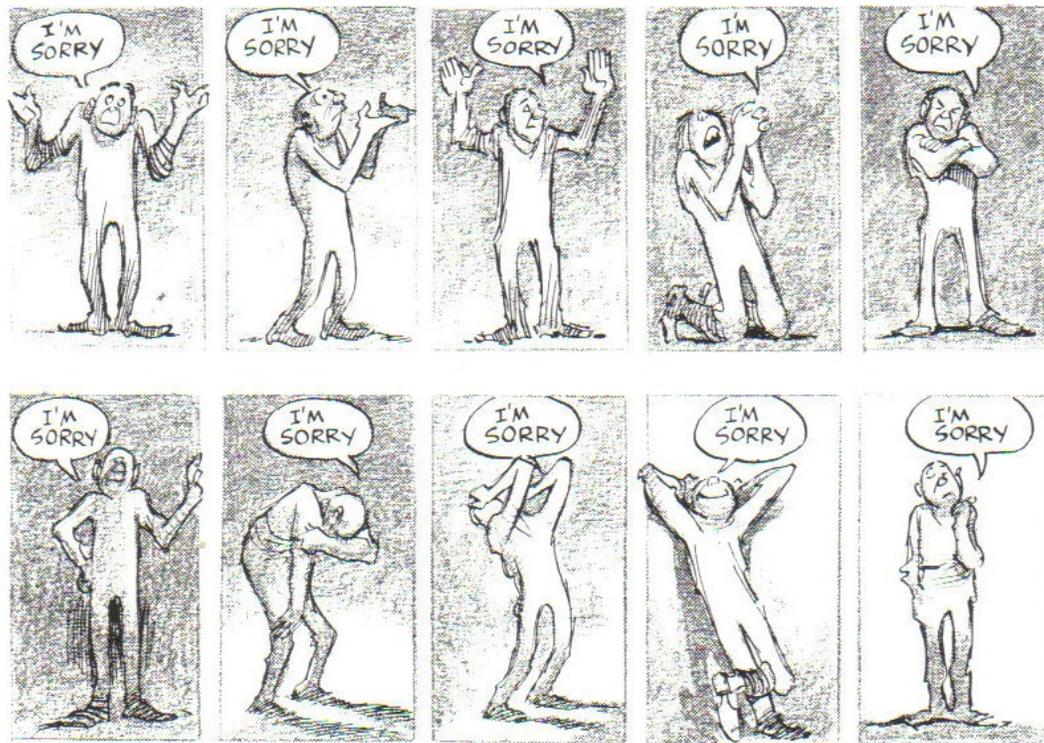


Figure 44: *Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 103

Everything that can be said of the illustrated body can also be said about the illustrated face. The face seems to have a more dramatic and resonant affect on the written word.

The face also, of course, provides meaning to the spoken word. Unlike the body, its gestures are more subtle but more readily understood. It is also the part of the body that is most individual.

⁸⁸*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 103



Figure 45: Comics and Sequential Art. pp. 110

From the reading of a face, people make daily judgments, entrust money, political future and their emotional relationship (see fig. 45).⁸⁹

With reference to figure 44, the linguistic weight of the illustrated body becomes apparent. It falls on both ends of the word/picture dialect. On the one hand, the illustrated body is a mark or graphê with linguistic potential. On the other, the marks of the written words lack their full meaning without a synthesized context. For example letters synthesized to form words, words to sentences, sentences to paragraphs, etc. The illustrated body can be a link in this chain of synthetic contextualization.



Figure 46: *Understanding Comics*. pp. 115

Polyptyches

Polyptych is a word that McCloud borrows from painting whose general use would cover triptychs. McCloud is referring to something completely different. While triptychs qualify as sequential art and possibly as comics they do not qualify comic polyptych. It is the most unusual piece of terminology for one of the many unusual graphic-narrative practices. “Polyptych [is] where a moving figure or figures is imposed

⁸⁹ Ibid. pp. 111

over a continuous background” (see figures 46 and 47).⁹⁰ Polyptych ties back to unique

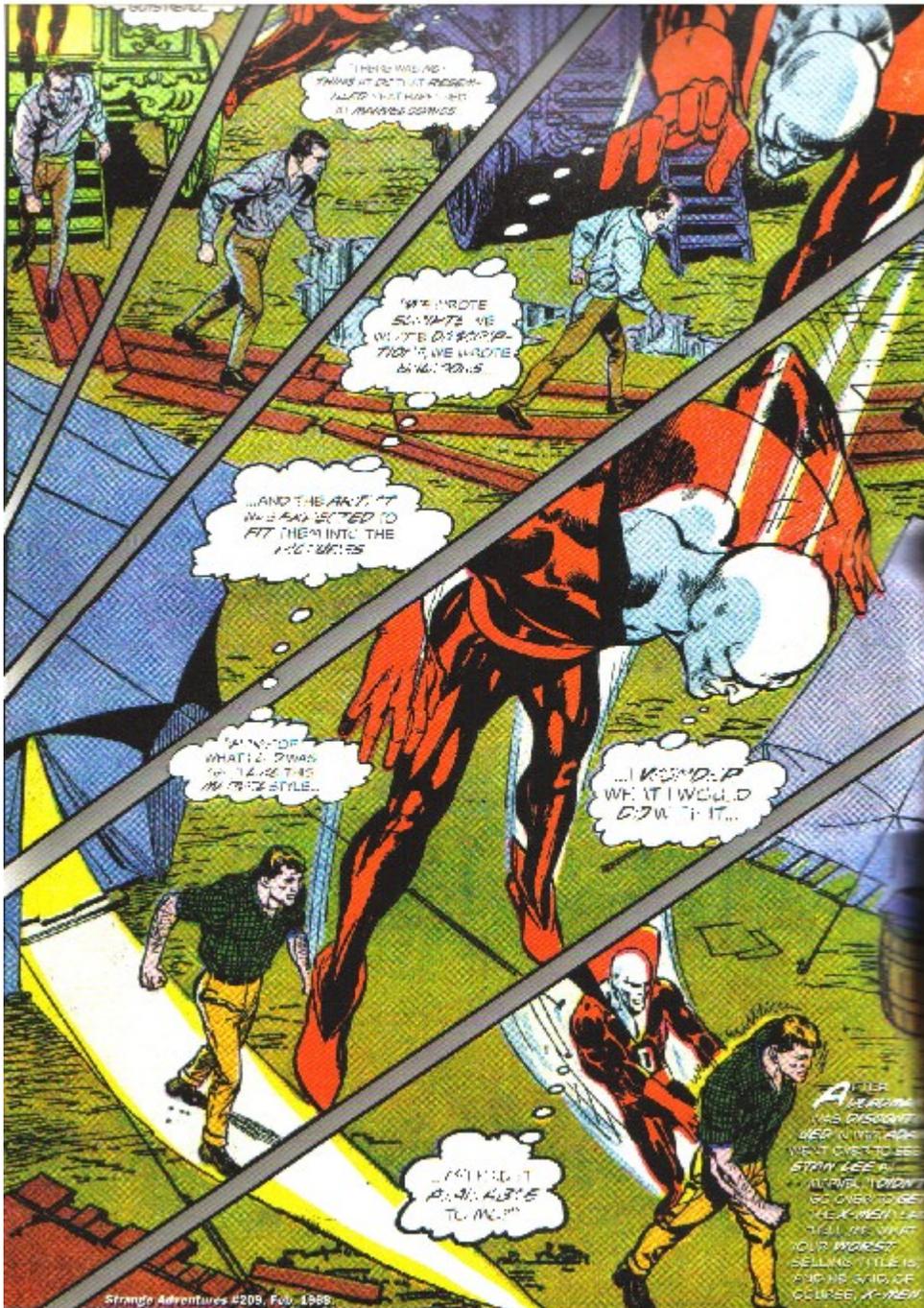


Figure 47: Illustration originally from Neal Adam's *Strange Adventures* #209 Feb, 1968 Reprinted in Arlen Shumer's *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art*. (Collectors Press: 2003). pp. 160

⁹⁰ Ibid. pp. 115

ways of framing or panelization in the way it dices up pseudo-instances into temporal narrative. The fact that the polyptych has one dimension that is continuous and another dimension where pseudo-instances are tied into temporal narrative speaks to another form of agency. The temporal narrative is confined to the character that is the only figure with changing spatial relationships in the panels that make up the polyptych. The rationale for including polyptych under the category of the Language of Motion may seem a bit odd. Polyptyches are clearly a type of panel/page. What make this rarely used narrative device relevant to this thesis is that within the polyptych the figure becomes a kind of pronoun that resurfaces in a long run on sentence. Polyptychs are ultimately about space. The characters float through the space leaving marks of their presences and absences, rather than being the context for the panel. In a medium generally preoccupied by over identified characters, the polyptych is about atemporal subsistence of space.

The Emoting Page

There are abstract qualities that are dependent on time but are not recognizable in the way that smoke is.

Another challenge to the sequential art medium is the matter of dealing with *abstraction*. Obviously, when the comic artist selects a *single posture* out of chain of motions by a body—or an *arrested moment* in the animation of objects in movement—there is little time or space to deal with the *amorphics* of, say, the surge of pain or the glow of love or the turmoil of inner conflicts. When faced with this task, the demand on the innovativeness and creativity of the comic artist becomes enormous. Yet it is precisely in these areas where the opportunity for expansion of the application of comic book art lies. This is the prime and continuous confrontation which the comic book cartoonist must address. There are only two ways to deal with it: *to try, and risk failure, or not to do it at all—that is, to avoid any subject not easily expressed by the present state of the art or its existing clichés.*⁹¹

⁹¹*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 140. My Italics.

There are such amorphous temporal phenomena like alienation, dread, sorrow, etc. in the prose of someone like Kafka. I call them temporal because they rely mainly on tempo to grow and manifest. Eisner is challenging comic book artists to explore the limits of comics potential to capture such amorphous phenomenon. Such experimentation is a necessary precondition for comics' status as art form.

Part IV Beyond Conventions

In this final section I want to address the theoretical generalities of comics. McCloud writes,“(n)o matter how bizarre the workings of time in comics is the face presents to the reader is one of simple normality. Or the illusion of it, anyway.”⁹² This projection of “normality” stands as a necessary assumption for comics' potential as a medium for mass narrative in today's culture. But this normality is at least as illusory—if not more—than the temporal normality produced by the modern edited film. The complexity of the mechanics of closure in the comic medium shows why the medium deserves special attention.

[It's a] mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create.⁹³

Comics (are) a mono-sensory medium... within these panels we can only convey information visually. But between panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why all of our senses are engaged!⁹⁴

I have yet to explicitly talk about how comics differ from literature (the other “mono-sensory medium”). The first way they differ is when words and pictures are juxtaposed, pictures take on linguistic properties and the graphic quality of the written words become

⁹²Understanding Comics. pp. 117

⁹³Ibid. pp. 92

⁹⁴Ibid. pp. 89

more tangible. Next, while bad comics follow from bad writing, good writing does not insure good comics. For example there are many great plays that would not transplant well into comic book format. Like panelization, comic book writing is slaved to tempos that are unique to the medium. Finally, while comics do not ask for the same level of sensory commitment that literature does, they may make the request more tangible. While comics provide visual input that the readers of literature must provide for themselves, when comic readers are asked to sense something non-visual they may be more aware of the reader/writer interaction than when they read sentences that describe a sensation in the third person. This final point is by no means the strongest but it may be the strangest. The only evidences I have to back up this claim are the contrast between the journalistic tyranny of writing in the third person as opposed to comic book journalism.

The discussion that has occupied a lot of this paper was an examination of the conventions by which time is naturalized in comics leading to the question of what are the conditions for this naturalization?

[McCloud observes that when one learns] to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially. For in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same... [T]he word 'short' or 'long' can refer either to the first dimension or the fourth... In a medium where time and space merge so completely, the distinction often vanishes!⁹⁵

In the unreeled film there is a one-to-one correlation between the first and fourth dimensions. Alternatively, there is a more plastic correlation in literature if it is examined on terms of word count and page number vs. narrative time. It is more than the tangibility of this dimensional correlation in comic books that lead McCloud to make the claims above. In comics there is no other way to perceive time other than spatially.

⁹⁵Ibid. pp. 100, 102

Before we can explore why this is we must examine what comic book creators mean by perceiving time spatially.

Eisner was the first to really write about the question of perceiving time spatially from the standpoint of comic books.

*The phenomenon of duration and its experience—commonly referred to as ‘time’—is a dimension integral to sequential art. In the universe of human consciousness time combines with space and sound in a setting of interdependence wherein conceptions, actions, motions and movement have a meaning and are measured by our perception of their relationship to each other... Modern civilization has developed a mechanical device, the clock, to help us measure time visually. The importance of this to human beings cannot be underestimated. Not only does the measurement of time have an enormous psychological impact, but it enables us to deal with real business of living. In modern society one might even say that it is instrumental to survival. In comics it is an essential structural element.*⁹⁶

We perceive time through spatial relations on an analogue clock. This perception is governed by a simple size protocol and a clockwise protocol. In comic books, with the exception of the illustrated-watch, spatial relations are the only cohesive temporal elements. Even then they are only temporal when apprehended within an extremely complex protocol.

I want to go back to Legrady's case that modern forms of information synthesis follow modular and not linear patterns. If temporality is something that can be assigned or reassigned and one would need something like a grammar of time to account for this open-ended usage of the various narrative nodes. Hans-Christian Christiansen, co-editor of the most philosophically rigorous English language anthology of comic book studies, claims that comics challenge clearly defined space and omnipresent narration. His claim is based on the notion that comic book narratives are constructed out of the decoding of non-indexical time signs. He demonstrates this by making two connections that are not

⁹⁶*Comics and Sequential Art*. pp. 25

particularly original in content, but are extremely original and insightful in execution. He takes comics as a departure from a Peircian interpretation of film. He asserts that there is no comic parallel for cinematic transparency that “relies on the *movement* and the *index quality* of the cinematic image.”⁹⁷ Movement is just what it sounds like. The mechanical movement of cinematically transparent film is indistinguishable from the “perceptions of real movement in time.”⁹⁸ The index qualities of cinematic images are also straightforward and are no different than the index qualities of the photographic image. The relationship between the developed film and what is photographed is a Peircian index in that the sign is a physical sign of its referent like smoke is to fire.

Christiansen argues that comics have nothing that parallel cinematic movement and index quality. Instead of these cinematic properties, comics do not have “spatial continuity” as an essential category and they “foreground the presence of enunciator.”⁹⁹ The claim that “spatial continuity” is not essential to comics is demonstrated by how elliptical cuts are seamlessly synthesized by closure in comics but are more “disturbing” for film.¹⁰⁰ Because the art of crafting a comic book narrative is so subtractive it is almost nonsensical to talk about its elliptical cuts. It is the non-elliptical transitions (movement to movement) that stand out as irregular. The claim that comics not only have no index quality but have potential anti-indexical properties is stronger. While comic images have Peircian iconic and symbolic signs as well as what Barthes labels a ‘third meaning,’ comics

⁹⁷Hans-Christian Christiansen. “Comics and Film: A Narrative Perspective,” in *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*. ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. (Museum Tusulanum: 2000). pp. 114

⁹⁸Ibid. pp. 115

⁹⁹Ibid. pp. 117, 114

¹⁰⁰Ibid. pp. 117

unlike photo novels gain their anti-indexical properties by indexing the human intervention. “Comics foreground the presence of enunciator; this to a degree blocks the identification process in making it more difficult for that spectator to create an illusion of being in the locus and unique origin of all identification.”¹⁰¹

Christiansen is largely concerned with the cinematic locus identification, but there are also more general epistemological implications of his observation.

Classic cinematic narratives situate the spectator at the center of the diegetic space and presume a stable world that can be recorded. [...] Comics on the other hand are rooted in a parodic tradition, a mode that motivates extreme departures from canons of verisimilitude and makes them particularly rich as sites of multilayered dialogic meaning.¹⁰²

In another essay, Ole Frahm notes that the idea of the original as “something preceding ‘beyond the signs’” is challenged or “parodied” by comics.¹⁰³ This goes beyond the senses of how the mechanically reproducible art object challenges the original, although it would be interesting to compare Benjamin’s theory of the ‘film actor’ and Butler’s theory of ‘gender.’ Frahm’s analysis of Butler’s use of ‘parody’ in *Gender Trouble* is built around the quote highlighted within its original context.

The notion of gender parody defend here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, **the parody is of the very notion of an original**; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a “figure” in that double sense, so gender parody **{which} reveals that the original identity {is itself} after which gender fashions itself an imitation without an origin.**¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹Ibid. pp. 114

¹⁰²Ibid. pp. 118

¹⁰³Ole Frahm. *Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody*, in *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*. trans. Michael Hein, ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. (Museum Tusulanum: 2000). pp. 179

¹⁰⁴Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Routledge: 1999). pp.175

He concludes with the claim that “[p]arody, as Butler understands it, therefore is not a matter of content”.¹⁰⁵ This notion of parody comes out of the reading of gendering not as a re-inscription of archetypes but rather as structure that is an inscription of an inscription. Frahm writes...

In the case of comics, the structural parody reveals the contingency of the relationship between sign and reality. By what means? The constellations of signs of different kinds in comics does not only show that typographical and graphical signs are related. In their heterogeneous materiality the signs in constellation are already self-referential. We may even say that the signs, because of their self-referential, imitate each other in their claim to signify a thing beyond the signs.¹⁰⁶

There are only a handful of mediums where the ontological status of the character’s narrative existences and character’s material/medial existences can have this double reference. Frahm is referring to what I have labeled the tension arising out of the instantiation of a character through the repetitions of illustrations. It is the graphic spatial dimension—unique to the medium—that is granted this self-parodying ontological status.

Frahm examines Al Williamson's *The Aliens* from Weird Fantasy No. 17. He provides the final 3 pages of the story. The six-page story in brief is that aliens discover a copy of Weird Fantasy No. 17 as an artifact of a post-apocalyptic earth. The copy recounts their discovery of the magazine and concludes with a splash page of them examining their examination of their examination and so on. It is more than obvious how this is a parody on the claim to the original story; but it is less obvious how this is achieved using the means of the comics. As the aliens talk about themselves being depicted talking,

¹⁰⁵Ole Frahm. pp. 180

¹⁰⁶Ibid. pp. 180

the referential nature of comics is consequently denied. The reality of the strip becomes clearer with every panel, because the story is becoming more and more self-referential.¹⁰⁷ Once again, there is something unique about comics' materiality that interrogates the possibility of an original. This time it is the balloons. Other balloons confirm the reality of the text in the balloons. The reader's reading the aliens reading themselves confirms reader's reading.

¹⁰⁷Ibid. pp. 185

Conclusion:

What can be syllogistically concluded from this thesis is less interesting than the questions that it raises. What can be concluded is simply that very complex non-linear interpretative structures go into the semiosis that result in a perception of the narrative time and space of comics. Alternatively, I feel that the list of what is supported but not necessarily justified by this thesis merits both more study and more experimental works.

One hypothesis that can be drawn from the complex multi layered interpretative structures that allow someone to perceive narrative time in the comic book pages, is a challenge to C.S. Peirce's claim that “(t)he unity to which the understanding reduces impressions is the unity of a proposition.”¹⁰⁸ Narrative understanding seems to be neither drawn from an inherent unity nor from a straightforward unification of disparate elements. Certainly, in comics some synthesis (text to text, picture to picture, text to picture, etc.) must be differed in favor of others. The order in which these staggered unifications are synthesized does not have a fixed set of governing axioms nor does it seem to have a Hegelian process of self-generating and negating axioms. This latter claim would take an intensive survey of comics to prove.

¹⁰⁸C. S. Peirce. pp. 24

What is not hypothetical is that in order to answer the question of, whether closure is necessarily a product of the presentation of juxtaposed images, a stronger sense of narratology is needed than is presented in this thesis. This thesis' primary foray into something like narratology was the examination of the hero as locus of unification. The extra-narrative, ethical and phenomenological problems that arouse from this reduction were met with structural problems within the semiosis of comics themselves. The figure on the comic page resists unification by the very method that it is unified with its world of narrative space and time. This seems to indicate that one of the conditions of closure is a prior atemporal interpretative structures of space.

I would like to think that this thesis has justified the hypothesis that comics have a vast potential to become one of the high arts. Certainly the lack of a survey of comics has made this claim more speculative than it needs to be. For a quick review I would suggest the periodicals *Raw*, *Drawn and Quarterly*, *The Best American Comics* as well as *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction* and Issue 13 of *McSweeney's*. That said, the strongest justification that can be drawn from this thesis alone is the very complexity of its most common interpretative structures. The production of the most mundane comics involves the capturing of the tone and intonation of speech without sound as well as the capturing of narrative timing without motion. I believe that when comic creators rely more on innovation than convention, and employ the same level of deliberation to other anamorphic temporal phenomenons like alienation, joy, dread, love, sorrow, etc., the product can say more about aspects of the human condition than any other medium can.

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