



The medium of subversion : graphic literature and the hybrid/discrete debate
by Robert Christian Marvin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts In English
Montana State University

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Abstract:

Comics books represent a historically marginalized medium. In this thesis, I argue that the “in-between” nature of comics leads both to its marginalization and its reputation as a subversive art form. Comics’ reputation as a subversive medium results from historical factors rather than anything inherent in the form. Specifically, I address the question of whether comics should be considered a hybrid art form combining graphic art and literature, or whether it constitutes a unique “language,” arguing that this debate cannot be settled by examining formal qualities. I also call into question comics’ subversive status, showing how an equally convincing argument can be made that the medium supports the status quo.

I first consider the interaction of image and text in light of W. J. T. Mitchell’s image theory, which calls into question the division of image from text. I also consider Richard Sinatra’s cognitive processing theories, examining how both images and text are processed by the brain. My thesis provides a brief history of both the subversion and support of the status quo in comics throughout history, illustrating that the medium displays both tendencies.

I conclude that comic books cannot be classified as strictly subversive, but instead “problematic,” resisting classification, categorization, and definition. Their very “inbetweenness/” which has been the main cause of their marginalization, can also be seen as their greatest strength.

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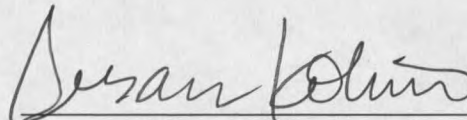
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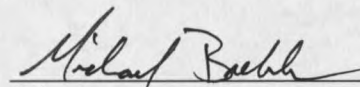
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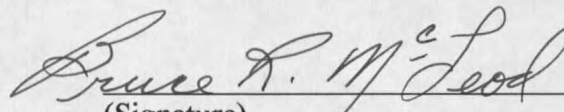
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. THE MARGINALIZATION OF COMICS.....	1
Notes on Quotation and Citation.....	9
Definitions and Notes on Usage	10
2. DISTINGUISHING TEXT FROM IMAGE	19
Functional and Formal Similarities.....	19
Arbitrary vs. Iconic Signs	21
Spatial vs. Temporal Organization	24
Continuous vs. Differentiated Signs	31
Fixed vs. Variable Meaning.....	36
3. THE HYBRID/DISCRETE DEBATE	43
Types of Text in Comics.....	43
Types of Image/Text Interaction in Comics	48
Image versus Text: The Question of Primacy.....	65
Image as Text/Text as Image	74
The Unique Signs of Comics: Panels, Balloons, & Visual Metaphors.....	82
The Language of Comics: Hybrid Art Form or Discrete Language?	89
Comics as a Discrete Language: The Bid for Power	97
4. COMICS AS A SUBVERSIVE MEDIUM.....	101
Warren Ellis's <u>Transmetropolitan</u> : A Close Reading	114
Conclusion: Comics as an "In-Between" Medium	124
5. REFERENCES CITED.....	128

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1.1 R. Crumb's "Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics"	12
2.1 Willian Alolphe Bouguereau's "Nymph and Satyr"	27
2.2 Terry Moore's <u>Strangers in Paradise</u> (1).....	32
2.3 Terry Moore's <u>Strangers in Paradise</u> (2).....	34
2.4 <u>Book of the SubGenius</u>	36
2.5 R. Crumb's <u>The Complete Crumb Comics Vol. 4</u>	38
2.6 Will Eisner's <u>Comics & Sequential Art</u> (1)	40
3.1 Dini & Timm's <u>Batman: Mad Love</u>	46
3.2 Scott McCloud's <u>Understanding Comics</u> (1).....	48
3.3 Warren Ellis's <u>Hellblazer: Haunted</u>	49
3.4 Scott McCloud's <u>Understanding Comics</u> (2)	51
3.5. Alan Moore's <u>Watchmen</u> (1)	53
3.6 Alan Moore's <u>Watchmen</u> (2)	55
3.7 Neil Gaiman's <u>The Sandman: The Kindly Ones</u>	56
3.8 Neil Gaiman's <u>The Sandman: Fables & Reflections</u>	58
3.9 Alan Moore's <u>Promethea Book 2</u>	60
3.10 Terry Moore's <u>Strangers In Paradise</u> (3)	61
3.11 Art Spiegelman's "The Malpractice Suite"	64
3.12 Chris Ware's <u>Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth</u>	67
3.13 Henrick Dorgathen's <u>Space Dog</u>	72

3.14 Robert C. Marvin's "Pictureless Comic Strip"	76
3.15 Chris Ware's "Quimby the Mouse"	79
3.16 Will Eisner's <u>Comics & Sequential Art</u> (2)	81
3.17 Scott McCloud's <u>Understanding Comics</u> (3)	85
3.18 Neil Gaiman's <u>The Sandman: Brief Lives</u>	88
3.19 Lawrence Abbott's "Likely Eye Movements"	91
3.20 Roy Lichtenstein's "Eddie Diptych"	92
4.1 Richard Outcault's "The Yellow Kid"	105
4.2 Jack Kirby's <u>Captain America</u>	109
4.3 Warren Ellis's <u>Transmetropolitan</u> (1)	117
4.4 Warren Ellis's <u>Transmetropolitan</u> (2)	120

ABSTRACT:

Comics books represent a historically marginalized medium. In this thesis, I argue that the “in-between” nature of comics leads both to its marginalization and its reputation as a subversive art form. Comics’ reputation as a subversive medium results from historical factors rather than anything inherent in the form. Specifically, I address the question of whether comics should be considered a hybrid art form combining graphic art and literature, or whether it constitutes a unique “language,” arguing that this debate cannot be settled by examining formal qualities. I also call into question comics’ subversive status, showing how an equally convincing argument can be made that the medium supports the status quo.

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I conclude that comic books cannot be classified as strictly subversive, but instead “problematic,” resisting classification, categorization, and definition. Their very “in-betweenness,” which has been the main cause of their marginalization, can also be seen as their greatest strength.

CHAPTER ONE THE MARGINALIZATION OF COMICS

Can coincidence account for the simultaneous decline in the popularity of comics and the medium's adoption as a subject for academic study? With a number of universities now offering courses in graphic literature, and the more frequent publication of scholarly work on comics, it would seem that the medium has finally become accepted as a valid literary form. In terms of the broader culture, however, comics sales are as low as they have ever been. Scott McCloud estimates the total North American audience for comics to number below 500,000 regular readers (Reinventing 97). By contrast, during World War II, sales reached upwards of 20 million copies per month, even in the midst of paper shortages (Gordon 139). Comics has long since ceased to be a "mass medium" compared to other popular forms of entertainment, and many consider it instead to be a "specialized medium" (Nyberg 61). Perhaps, then, this new academic interest in the form can be interpreted as a defensive maneuver, a last-ditch effort to imbue a moribund art form with a little institutional power. In some ways, all comics scholarship may be a bid for power for a traditionally marginalized art form.

Even at the height of its popularity, graphic literature has always been marginalized in main-stream American culture. Comic books have long been perceived as a disposable children's medium suited only for superhero stories and slapstick comedy. Certainly this stereotype held true for most comic books early in the development of the form, but such a limited view of the medium's potential fails to consider the changes of the past half century. Harvey Pekar, creator of American

Splendor, argues that, "Comics is as wide an area as prose [. . .] that fact that it's been used in such a limited way is totally crazy. It's some kind of historical aberration, I think" (qtd. in Witek, 154). Pekar's summation is quite correct. The marginalization of comics results not from any inherent inadequacy as an expressive form, but from the complex interplay of several historical factors.

Image theorist W. J. T. Mitchell reveals the root of the medium's low culture status, noting, "There is an ancient tradition, of course, which argues that language is the essential human attribute: 'man' is the 'speaking animal.' The image is the medium of the subhuman, that savage, the 'dumb' animal, the child, the woman, the masses" (Iconology 24). This statement reveals that the tendency to privilege the written word over the image stems from the same set of cultural biases that privilege humans over animals, men over women, and the elite class over the general public.

Before the invention of the printing press, books were a rare commodity, available only to the wealthy upper-crust of society. The technology of writing requires special training to decipher, which has historically limited literacy to an educated few. The ability to comprehend pictures, on the other hand, is acquired in early childhood much like spoken language, and until relatively recently, pictorial representation was not even recognized as a sign system. Pictures could be understood by virtually anyone, and thus merited no elite cultural status. The privileging of the written word over the image persisted even after the advent of the printing press and widespread literacy, and even today the reading of literature is a pastime associated with the educated class. Illustrations, even in books dominated by prose, are traditionally equated with juvenile or children's literature, and have no place in "serious" literary works.

Comics scholar Roger Sabin has shown that the earliest comics periodicals targeted a working-class adult audience, and it was not until publishers noticed a boost in sales of titles including children's sections that this paradigm began to shift (Comics 27). For the better half of the twentieth century, children's comics dominated the marketplace, and comic books for adults were virtually unheard of. This is not to say that no outstanding work was produced in this era, but the lengthy association of comics with children's literature would hinder the medium's acceptance as a valid art form for years to come. Indeed, this reputation persists to the present day, despite the best efforts of creators, fans, and scholars.

If comics of the past were, on the whole, less sophisticated than today's titles, it is hardly surprising given the economics of the business. In the early days of British and American comics, creators almost never owned the rights to their characters, were subjected to poor pay and substandard working conditions, and were rarely allowed to sign their work (Sabin Comics 78).¹ Publishers' lack of respect for creators, coupled with demanding deadlines, gave early comics artists little incentive to stray from formulaic storylines and simplistic artwork. Further, to maximize profits, comic books were printed on cheap paper using a simple four-color process that not only reinforced their status as disposable products, but limited artists to simple line work and garish color schemes (McCloud 187).

¹ One notable exception was EC Comics, a legendarily creator-friendly company which was virtually the only comic book publisher that allowed artists to sign their work. Despite the high quality of its products (which publisher William Gaines attributes to the company's working environment), EC was nearly forced out of business by the institution of America's Comics Code Authority, which specifically targeted horror comics, EC's specialty (Sabin Comics 67).

Another significant setback for comics' reputation occurred in 1954 with the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, which placed severe limitations on the allowable content of comic books. Perhaps the single most important factor in the institution of the comics code was the publication of Dr. Frederick Wertham's inflammatory 1954 study The Seduction of the Innocent, which blamed comics for all manner of social ills from juvenile delinquency to homosexuality. However, to lay the blame entirely on Wertham's book is to oversimplify, and comics historian John A. Lent has pointed out that public distrust of comics goes back much farther. In 1909, before America ever produced a comic book, Ladies Home Journal ran a story attacking newspaper comic strips entitled "Crime Against American Children: Comic Supplements of the Sunday Paper" (Lent 9).² Public criticism of comic books began almost as soon as the new format appeared on newsstands in the mid-1930's, and grew throughout the next two decades.

Comics historian Amy Kiste Nyberg identifies two major waves of anti-comic book sentiment in America. The first occurred in 1948 after the ABC radio program "America's Town Meetings of the Air" broadcast a debate on the question, "What's Wrong with Comics?" The second, and more significant, wave came in 1954, which saw the publication of Wertham's book, the Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency's hearings on comic books, and the subsequent adoption of the Comics Code Authority (Nyberg 44). The code included the following guidelines:

² Newspaper strips had been reprinted in book form since before the turn of the twentieth century, but the modern comic book, in magazine format and including original material, did not appear until 1935 (Lent 17-8).

Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such in way as to create disrespect for established authority [. . .] In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds [. . .] No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title [. . .] Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions or deformities shall be taken [. . .] wherever possible good grammar shall be employed [. . .] Nudity in any form is prohibited [. . .] Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities [. . .] The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage (qtd. in Lent 269-71).

In effect, these regulations “efficiently squelched the few postwar comic books that were groping toward a sophisticated audience, and in effect it decreed that all comic books would become the ill-crafted pap toward which most American comics tended anyway” (Witek 48-9).³ It is important to note that the comics code, being self-imposed by the industry, had no legal authority. However, publishers who neglected to abide by the code could not expect distributors to carry their titles for fear of further public protest.

The significance of the comics code, however, extends beyond its stunting effects on the medium’s growth. Its establishment reflected the deep distrust of comics in American society, a sentiment that cannot be entirely explained by the objectionable content of some comics. The controversy over the form began long before horror and crime comics tested the limits of public decency, and as Lent points out,

³ Joseph Witek notes that while the comics code caused significant damage to the artistic possibilities of the medium, “to blame only the Comics Code Authority for the lack of serious literature in comics form is badly to underestimate the puerility of the comic book publishers and of the mainstream comics audience (50).

Beginning at least in the mid-1930s, some teachers, librarians, and parents expressed their reservations about the comics, thinking that they retarded the development of adequate reading skills and set back educational standards. By the 1940s, they and other critics were lambasting the artistic, aesthetic, and literary qualities of comic books, saying that they were ugly and that they lowered aesthetic standards to a subnormal level and kept young readers away from literary classics (11).

Roger Sabin points out similar public reactions to the advent of comics in Britain, where publications were accused of being a threat to literacy, and harmful to eyesight (Comics 19). Clearly, the very form of comics, rather than the specific content, was viewed as a threat to the dominant social order.

It should be noted that the American outcry against comics was by no means unique. Lent shows that similar movements to censor comics occurred at roughly the same time period in Canada, England, Australia, Germany, The Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan (18-24), while Martin Barker asserts that such campaigns have occurred in "at least twenty countries on four continents" (Lent 9). What could account for such widespread condemnation of the medium, especially among countries with such diverse community standards of decency?

Art Critic David Carrier offers a compelling answer. He argues that as a medium that crosses the boundary between art and literature, comics upsets our traditional notions of order. He says,

We expect the world to fit our preconceived, stable categories, and so what falls in between is easily felt, depending upon our temperament and politics, to be

either exciting or menacing. Hence the fascination with, and fear of, cross-dressing, androgyny, people of 'mixed-race', comics, and other forms of in-betweenness" (70-1).

This "in-betweenness," I will argue, permeates comics on every level, and accounts for both the medium's marginalization and its reputation as a subversive art form.

Since its inception, the comics form has been defined in terms of its "in-betweenness." It first disrupted cultural norms by combining two traditionally distinct expressive forms, literature and graphic art, and defying all attempts to classify it as one or the other. Comics also began as an adult entertainment, was transformed into a children's medium, and now hovers somewhere between the two. The form now enjoys a modicum of respectability due to recent academic interest in the field, as well as other high-profile acknowledgments of the medium's worth, such as Art Spiegelman's winning the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for his graphic holocaust narrative, Maus. Yet its reputation as pop culture trash and as a venue for semi-literate, juvenile power-fantasies endures, preventing comics from fully ascending to the status of respectable culture. The medium's resistance to classification, categorization, and even definition, coupled with its historically troubled relationship with mainstream culture, characterizes comics as a truly subversive art form. However, as I will later illustrate, even the attempt to classify comics as "subversive" ultimately fails.

The "in-betweenness" of comics proves especially problematic for comics scholars as evidenced by the current academic debate over whether comics is properly understood as a hybrid art form, merely combining elements of graphic art and literature, or as a discrete "language," creating meaning in a wholly unique manner. In this thesis, I

will show that the truth lies, as it does in all aspects of comics, somewhere in between. Using a formal analysis, I will illustrate that comics sometimes functions as a discrete “language,” and sometimes as a hybrid art form. I will argue that this debate ultimately matters, not because of its theoretical importance, but because of how its perceived answer will affect comics on every level from production to critical reception. The debate also exemplifies the cultural resistance to the form’s “in-betweenness.”

In Chapter One, I lay the theoretical groundwork necessary to a formal discussion of comics. Using Mitchell’s image theory, I first complicate the distinction between image and text, showing that even left separate, each remains an “in-between” form, one always being bound up with the other. I also consider the work of Richard Sinatra, who demonstrates the similarities and differences in how the brain processes visual and verbal information.

In Chapter Two, I examine the various ways image and text interact within the medium of comics, again emphasizing the “in-between” nature of the form by showing how text can function as image, and vice versa. I also consider the unique signs of comics, which can be classified as neither text nor image. Chapter Two concludes with a discussion of why the hybrid/discrete question matters.

I shift focus in Chapter Three, calling into question the classification of comics as a subversive medium. I begin with a brief history of comics, highlighting the various ways the form either subverts or supports the status quo. Next, I demonstrate how a comics text can simultaneously subvert and support the dominant social order by performing a close reading of Warren Ellis’s Transmetropolitan. I then suggest a corrective to the generalization that comics, by nature, is a subversive form.

Finally, I conclude by asserting that comics' "in-between" status, while the cause of its marginalization and historical suppression, is simultaneously its greatest asset, allowing artists to express themselves in ways unavailable to any other form.

Notes on Quotation and Citation

In academic writing, comics once again displays its "In-Betweenness." While increasingly considered worthy of serious scholarship, comics has yet to be included in scholarly citation guides, such as the MLA Style Manual. The comics form, being antithetical to the conventions of academic writing, poses unique problems concerning quotation and citation. The words can be quoted, of course, but not the manner in which they are written. Imagery, on the other hand, can only be "quoted" through reproduction. Before image reproduction technologies became common and affordable, many writers resorted to describing the images verbally, obviously losing much information in the translation.

Without an official format for citation, I have elected to adapt MLA style citation for the conventions of comics. To simplify in-text citation, when a specific work is a collaboration between a writer and one or more artists, I have chosen to identify only the writer. Please note that I've included page numbers whenever possible, but a great number of comic books are not paginated. When quoting directly from comic books, I have followed Joseph Witek's lead not adhering to the convention of rendering letters in all capitals. Witek notes, "Comic-book artists use a variety of techniques in lettering dialogue to indicate stress and voice tone;" here again, I have followed his lead by

indicating only the main stresses in italics (xiii). In these quotes, no attempt has been made to indicate panel breaks, as it would only serve to inhibit the flow of the words.

Definitions and Notes on Usage

Any scholarly discussion of comics necessitates first answering the question: What is comics? The reader will notice that the phrasing of this question, at first glance, seems ungrammatical. One might argue that the correct phrasing would be: What are comics? However, the use of the singular verb is quite intentional, as “comics” refers not to a plural object (comic books), but instead to the medium of comics. Here I’ve conformed to Scott McCloud’s convention of using “comics” as a singular noun, since it seems to have become the generally accepted usage among comics scholars. However, I regard “comics” to be an unfortunate label, not only because it leads to awkward grammatical structures, but also because it adds the connotations of humor and frivolity. Will Eisner has suggested the term “sequential art” as a corrective, but unfortunately the label has not garnered widespread use.

No single definition of comics can fulfill everyone’s criteria, which necessitates considering a number of leading definitions. Scott McCloud provides the most precise definition of comics, calling it “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (Understanding Comics 9). McCloud’s definition, then, can be (and is) applied

to works of art not generally accepted as comics, such as Aztec picture manuscripts, the Bayeux Tapestry, and ancient Egyptian tomb paintings.⁴

Other definitions are not so inclusive. For instance, Roger Sabin asserts that the essential element that distinguishes comics from other juxtaposed pictorial media is that of a central continuing character (Comics 15). This distinction, however, excludes a good deal of what is conventionally considered comics. Under this definition, it could be said that half of Robert Crumb's work belongs to the comics medium because it involves recurring characters (Mr. Natural, Fritz the Cat, etc.), but the other half does not, even though the strips may have been published side by side in the same issue of Zap Comix.⁵ Mila Bongco insists that "comicbooks always consist of 'story situations,'" which "contain accounts of people and ideas with a logical, sequential progression in which 'reading' plays an important role" (53). This distinction holds true for the vast majority of comics, but it excludes works by some of the medium's most celebrated experimenters, notably Art Spiegelman and Robert Crumb, both of whom have deliberately undermined comics' narrative conventions to make statements about the form itself (see fig. 1.1).

For the purposes of this paper, such limiting definitions will not do. Even McCloud's version limits the form by asserting sequence as a key distinguishing feature, which excludes single panel cartoons, such as Gary Larsen's The Far Side and the celebrated visual/verbal humor of The New Yorker magazine. Robert C. Harvey takes

⁴ Egyptian hieroglyphics, however, are excluded from McCloud's definition because the symbols represent sounds rather than the objects they resemble (Understanding Comics 12-3).

⁵ Sabin's insistence on sequential art needing a recurring character to be considered "Comics" can be read as an attempt to declare England as the "birthplace" of comics, as the English periodical Ally Sloper's Half Holiday is the first publication to meet his requirements.

Fig. 1.1. Robert Crumb The Complete Crumb Comics Vol. 4. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1989) 111.

issue with McCloud's definition of comics, arguing that it is the interaction of image and text, and not sequence, that lies at the heart of the medium (75-6). He readily admits to the existence of "wordless comics," but asserts that they are the exception rather than the usual. Exceptional or not, "wordless comics" must be included in my definition, for although one major aim of this paper is to examine the interplay of text and image, it will also be necessary to consider what happens when one of these elements is missing.

However, one cannot say that comics neither have to be sequential nor do they need to include words, as this definition would render the term "comics" meaningless; every image could then be considered as "comics." Perhaps, then, it is best to adopt Martin Barker's view that "a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic'. One cannot answer the question 'What is a comic?' by formal qualities alone; a comic is what has been produced under that *controlling definition*" (qtd. in Bongco 51). While this definition bars the inclusion of similar forms, such as Aztec picture manuscripts and children's picture books, it also closes the door on decidedly non-comics media, such as printed advertisements, which might otherwise fit our definition by combining image and text. Notice also that my definition does not specify that comics is a printed form, which is important because a great many excellent comics appear not on paper, but are now found on the internet (including work by Scott McCloud himself).

In the end, this definition may be, in fact, a non-definition. Perhaps the only way to define comics is by addressing the areas of dispute. As a working definition, however, Martin Barker's will have to suffice.

Another key term to explain is that of "text". While a full definition won't be attempted here, I must distinguish my usage of the term from its broader uses. The field

of cultural studies often uses “text” to describe any object or event that can be analyzed or “decoded”. For my purposes, the term is too broad to be of any use; a book might be a “text,” but so would the act of shopping, or the event of the World Trade Center’s fall. Instead, I will use the term in a more limited sense. In this paper, “text” will refer specifically to written words. Thus, when I refer to the “text” of a comic book, I will be referring to the written portion of the page layout, rather than the comic book as a whole.

If defining “comics” proved problematic, unraveling the term “image” will be doubly so. W. J. T. Mitchell points out that “image” can refer to “pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas [. . .]” (*Iconology* 9). While it may seem obvious that the images that appear in comics would fall under the category of pictures, it is a mistake to make such a quick and easy distinction, because, as Mitchell asserts, even the pictorial image is influenced by and interconnected with other categories of images. Mitchell lists five major categories of images, three of which are worth considering here: Mental images (such as ideas, dreams, and memories), Verbal images (metaphors and descriptions), and Graphic images (pictures, sculpture, and maps) (*Iconology* 10).⁶

Mental images can be understood in two ways. In one sense of the term, a “mental image” refers to a kind of visual thought in which the physical characteristics of an object are recreated in the mind as a “mental picture” of that object. This sense reinforces the popular notion of visuality as being essential to the word “image.” However, Mitchell asserts that there is another type of mental image that has nothing to

⁶ The other two categories are Optical images (mirrors, projections) and Perceptual (sensory) images (Mitchell, *Iconology* 10).

do with visual properties. He states that such images can "be understood as lists of predicates enumerating the characteristics of a class of objects, such as: tree (1) tall, vertical object; (2) spreading green top; (3) rooted in ground" (*Iconology* 33). Mitchell suggests that this notion of image is in no way related to the pictorial sense of "image," although I would argue that even this list of properties is intimately tied to visuality, as it is difficult to read such a list without forming a mental picture, especially since the descriptive word "green" is meaningless without the sense of sight. Additionally, the creation of such a list implies an overlapping of the boundaries of "mental images," and "verbal images." The mind, in enumerating such properties, must resort to language, even if the words are not spoken aloud or inscribed on paper. If it is possible to create such a mental list without language, then the mind must resort to nonverbal thought, that is, thought related to the senses. In a sighted person, nonverbal thought usually defaults to the visual mode.⁷ Thus, a list such as the one Mitchell describes must resort to visual thought to be produced nonverbally. Thus, we can see that mental, verbal, and visual imagery are inextricably related, which is precisely Mitchell's point.

Perhaps the key to Mitchell's concept of mental imagery is the idea of image as "likeness." "Likeness" does not necessarily refer to physical resemblance, but to the quality of being similar. Mitchell explains that when the Bible speaks of man's being created "in the image and likeness" of God, the word that has been translated as "image"

⁷ Of course, other types of sensory thought could be used to create such a mental list of propositions, (although one would hesitate to classify a tree by taste), but my claim that the visual is the "default" mode of sensory thought is based upon the research of B. Randhawa, who asserts that input from the visual channel influences the mind more powerfully than input from the other four sensory channels combined (Sinatra 55).

(tselem in Hebrew, eikon in Greek, and imago in Latin) "is properly understood [. . .] not as any material picture, but as an abstract, general, spiritual 'likeness'" (Iconology 31).⁸ In the original sense of the word, claims Mitchell, "image" refers to a mental construction rather than a visual object. But again, the comparison of such 'likenesses,' when not applied to physical characteristics, depends on concepts available to the human mind only through language. To further illustrate the overlapping of the categories of images, let us also consider separately the categories of verbal and graphic images.

The idea of the "verbal image" refers to, in most cases, descriptive speech or writing. Mitchell blurs the boundaries between verbal and visual images by noting that "We don't have to say that a descriptive paragraph is exactly like a picture to see that they do have similar functions as public symbols that project states of affairs about which we can reach rough, provisional agreements" (Iconology 20). The important distinction here is between "literal" and "figurative" images, categories that Mitchell employs to distinguish between, respectively, images that resemble their referents and those that do not. A verbal description (figurative image) may refer to the same object as a picture (literal image), but each employs a different system of signification to do so. Mitchell admits that these sign systems do not function in precisely the same way, but his aim is to show that the gap between them is not as wide as is generally believed. He evokes Wittgenstein's claim that written language can be considered a "picture of our speech" (Mitchell, Iconology 20). In this sense, writing can be considered a "picture" because it is visual, and that it represents a real world phenomenon. Yet Mitchell is careful to point

⁸ Mitchell goes on to explain: "The regular addition, after 'image,' of the phrase 'and likeness' (the Hebrew *demuth*, the Greek *homoioos*, and the Latin *similitudo*) is to be understood, not as adding new information, but as preventing a possible confusion [. . .]" (Iconology 31).

out that this type of "picture" should not be confused with graphic imagery. The idea of writing as a "picture" becomes less troubling when considered in terms of Mitchell's proposition of "image" as likeness. In this sense, writing is similar to what it represents (speech) because we can read a sentence or hear it spoken and recreate the same meaning. Of course, the use of the word "picture" in this sense is roughly equivalent to the term "image," and differs greatly from the way it is generally used. "Picture" is commonly used to denote a sign that represents its referent through physical resemblance. However, this definition excludes artistic abstractions which represent ideas rather than objects, which are commonly understood as pictures. Given the complexity of producing a suitable definition of "picture," Wittgenstein's claim takes on a new credibility, because the only way to include both realistic and abstract art, but not written language, is to specifically define the term in opposition to the written word, which is an arbitrary distinction and of little use.

Although the graphic sense of the word "image" is the one most commonly connected with the term (thus Mitchell's use of "literal" to describe graphic images), it is no less problematic than the other categories of images. Mitchell claims that graphic images cannot be considered exclusively visual, as they "involve multisensory apprehension and interpretation" (Iconology 14). Put another way, in a graphic image, what cannot be seen is equally important as what is visible (Mitchell, Iconology 39). For instance, in a painting, we can see light and shadow, lines, shapes, colors, and shades, but a true understanding of the painting's message depends on what cannot be depicted: the texture and weight of the depicted object, physical sensations such as pain, emotional content suggested by expressions, the sounds and smells of the depicted environment, etc.

A visual image can be said to be multi-sensory in that its interpretation relies on the viewer's experience with similar objects and situations. The viewer always collaborates with the art object to create meaning, since meaning is projected onto the image as much as it comes from the image. Even abstract paintings cannot be considered strictly visual, as what is being conveyed is an idea, perhaps a theory of art, rather than an object. As such, the interpretation of an abstract painting is entirely dependent on language.

To Mitchell, all images are intertwined with language. Consciousness itself can be described (much like comics) as the interaction of visual and verbal thought. Thus, the defining question to ask of imagery is not What is an image? but What is the difference between image and text? This question will be discussed at length in Chapter One.

CHAPTER TWO

DISTINGUISHING TEXT FROM IMAGE

While it seems that the differences between text and image are blatantly obvious, when one tries to pinpoint these differences, they begin to slip away. Nevertheless, if we are to examine how image and text interact in comics, we must begin by unraveling these intertwined ideas. My purpose in this chapter is twofold: Firstly, I will continue my attempt to define the term “image” (particularly “graphic image”) by comparing and contrasting it with what is commonly considered its opposite: verbal imagery; secondly, I will address the question of whether images can properly be understood as a “language.” While it is now common to speak of “visual literacy,” and the “languages” of film, advertising, music, and so on, the question of whether there exists a “visual language” is by no means settled. This question that will prove fundamental to our discussion of whether comics constitutes a unique language, or should be considered a hybrid art form. If pictorial images cannot be considered a language, then comics certainly cannot. However, to say that pictures are a language does not automatically make comics one, but it leaves that possibility open.

Functional and Formal Similarities

If the differences between text and pictures seem, at first, obvious, certain of their similarities are equally obvious. For instance, both are systems of communication, and as such, both are human artifacts. Written words and pictures are both graphic signs which must be decoded visually (Varnum and Gibbons x-xi). Aside from these formal

similarities, the two systems possess a number of functional similarities; that is, they do the same sorts of things. Comics scholars Varnum and Gibbons have noted:

Both are used to represent reality to the understanding of an observer and mediate his or her experience of the world. Both words and images shape our perception, causing us to see some things and overlook others [. . .] Like words, pictures (especially simplified cartoon pictures) are abstractions. They suppress certain aspects of experience and foreground others. (x, xii)

Clearly, both words and pictures are systems of representation, but neither can represent reality directly; that is, the reality they communicate is transformed for the receiver by the very act of communication. It could be said that neither text nor images are “innocent” or “disinterested,” as the use of either system inevitably conveys some sort of value judgment upon the object signified. While this point may now seem obvious, images have a long history of being considered a “transparent” medium, one that provides a direct window on reality. Though long since dismissed by theorists, the idea of the “transparency” of images has had a surprisingly tenacious hold on the popular imagination, so much so that “common sense” seems to dictate that pictures are something fundamentally different from words. As Mitchell has remarked:

The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its “other,” the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world—time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation. (43)

Arbitrary vs. Iconic Signs

On the most obvious level, the primary difference between words and pictures is that pictures resemble that which they represent, while words do not. Pictures use a visual form to represent visual phenomena, while text uses a visual form to represent sound. This sensory shift makes written language seem all the more unnatural—a human construction twice-removed from reality, rather than a window on it (Mitchell Iconology 22). In truth, both systems are equally human constructions, relying on culturally-determined conventions and prior knowledge of those systems to convey meaning.

Cognitive researcher Richard Sinatra asserts that “oral and written messages do not in themselves carry meaning,” instead, they provide cues for listeners and readers to reconstruct meaning using their own extensive banks of stored memory, or schemata (23). Thus, the extraction of meaning from language depends entirely on a receiver’s prior knowledge of the verbal system of representation. However, the same can be said of visual systems of representation. For a diagram of a car’s engine to have meaning to a viewer, that viewer must have some familiarity with both the inner workings of cars, and with the conventions of diagrams. For instance, most diagrams have no shading, being composed entirely of lines which represent edges that would be distinguished, in the physical object, by variations of light, shadow, and color. A diagram of a car’s engine does not look like a car’s engine unless one is taught to see it in a certain way. A person with no prior knowledge of car engines, however, might see such a diagram and know it to be a picture of a machine. Thus, prior knowledge of the general category of machines

allows interpretation to occur, even though such a viewer's understanding of the diagram would be only partial.

On the other hand, the qualities of resemblance versus arbitrary representation may constitute a significant difference between the sign systems. What are we to make of the fact that many pictures can transcend language barriers and communicate cross-culturally, while written words cannot? For instance, I can peruse a French comic book and, more or less, extract a good deal of its meaning from visual cues, but an untranslated French novel is virtually meaningless to me. Does this point to a universal communicative quality in pictures that text does not possess? I answer this question, yes and no.

In some ways, pictures are universal because just about anyone can view them and extract some meaning, precisely because of the resemblance between sign and signified. However, the meaning that is conveyed cross-culturally is only the surface level of meaning, which Roland Barthes terms the "denoted message" (6). Depicted visible phenomena can be identified by anyone with a prior knowledge of such phenomena.⁹ However, a second layer of meaning, the "connoted message," is likely to be missed by a receiver with a different cultural background. Barthes explains that the "denoted" message is "the *analogon* itself," that is, the sign which resembles its signified; whereas the "connoted" message is "the way society represents [. . .] what it thinks of the analogon" (6). Thus, a photograph of Richard Nixon shaking hands with Elvis Presley

⁹ Since visual phenomena are similar across most cultures, this leads to the illusion that pictures are universal. However, it is important to note that knowledge of the medium of pictures is prerequisite for extracting information. Anthropologists have been thwarted in their attempts to communicate through pictures, because indigenous people were more interested in the paper a photograph was printed on than the image presented by the photo.

might be interpreted, by someone with no prior knowledge of these cultural icons, as a picture of two men shaking hands. Only a receiver with a background in American culture can see this photo as humorous. The humor results from the connoted message embodied by each of these American cultural figures.

Although a photograph seems to be "*a message without a code*," Barthes explains that there exists a "historical grammar" of connotation, that is, "a stock of stereotyped attitudes which constitute ready-made elements of signification [. . .]," which includes gesture, posture, and the cultural significance of objects depicted (5, 10, 11).¹⁰ This "historical grammar" draws its significance entirely from the culture in which a particular image is produced. When drawings and paintings are considered, the influence of cultural convention is even more apparent. While a camera mechanically reproduces an image of reality, an artistic rendering is always, by definition, filtered through the consciousness of the artist. Not only do the culturally determined meanings of gesture, posture, and objects add to a picture's connoted message, but elements such as the artist's knowledge of art history, exposure to different stylistic conventions, and culturally-conditioned ways of seeing will determine how the picture will be produced, and ultimately, read.

Another reason that graphic images are perceived as being natural is what Mitchell refers to as the "ease of acquisition" of the sign system (Iconology 85). The ability to perceive visual information precedes the ability to understand spoken language. Humans learn to interpret visual information before they can (generally) form long-term memories, which leads to the illusion that the process is automatic or "natural."

¹⁰ Barthes's example is the presence of a bookcase being equated with the quality of intellectuality (11).

However, developmental psychologists widely recognize that while vision is a physiological inevitability, seeing is a learned skill. To illustrate, an infant is equally likely to gaze at a ceiling fan as he is at a picture book (more likely, in fact, as the eye is attracted to motion), but through parental influence, the child will learn to ignore certain things, and to attend to others. Such training leads to the formation of a worldview which not only dictates what is worth looking at, but how an object will be perceived. While we acquire both the ability to perceive and to use language before we are aware we are learning it, the ability to read is learned much later. Most of us remember learning to read, which makes it seem cultural rather than “natural.” However, Mitchell argues that images could be considered the more “conventional” sign, “since their production requires specialized skills and training that not everyone is expected to master, whereas everyone is expected to speak the natural language of his or her community” (85).

Mitchell further asserts that “If vision itself is a product of experience and acculturation [. . .] then what we are matching against pictorial representations is not any sort of naked reality but a world already clothed in our systems of representation” (Iconology 38). In other words, humans can never see reality as it truly is, as the very act of seeing is culturally mediated. Thus, we have no true frame of reference for determining resemblance to reality, as we ourselves are cut off from it. We can only compare our representations to other representations.

Spatial vs. Temporal Organization

Another often cited difference between words and images is that language is said to be a temporal medium, whereas pictures are a spatial one. For language to have

meaning, words must be presented in a certain sequence. When we read, we always read in a certain order, and information presented first is processed first in our minds, preserving the chronology necessary to storytelling. Our writing is a representation of our speech, and just as it takes time to speak a sentence, it also takes time to decode a line of text. We cannot look at a page of text and extract meaning from the spatial pattern of the layout; we must decode each individual word, line by line until we've read them all, a process that often takes several minutes, depending on the print size and difficulty of the material.

Viewing a picture, on the other hand, can be nearly instantaneous. Richard Sinatra explains that when we view a visual scene, "all the essential features of the scene are captured in a single eye fixation and perceptually recorded in the brain based on that one intake" (90). He notes that although we may miss certain details, the overall meaning of the scene will be comprehended in a single instant, provided we possess to prior knowledge necessary for comprehension.

We are not impelled to view elements of a picture in any particular order. Meaning doesn't come from chronology in images, but from the placement and juxtaposition of pictorial elements. If Sinatra is correct, it is not even necessary to break down an image into such elements before we comprehend it. He says that comprehension occurs first, then comes the closer examination of component parts (Sinatra 97). The grammar of written language depends largely on word order to define relationships between words, whereas "visual grammar" depends on the spatial placement of elements to indicate relationships. It is interesting to note, however, that the Western convention of reading words from left to right and top to bottom, has affected

the way we read, and compose, images. Figures on the left hand side of a picture tend to be scrutinized first by a member of Western culture. While we may comprehend an image immediately as a whole, closer examination of a picture follows the conventions of reading.

The very notion of reading from left to right and top to bottom should indicate that the temporal/spatial dichotomy is not absolute. Since text and images are both decoded visually, it could easily be said that they are both spatial media. Indeed, sometimes, as in poetry, the spatial layout of the words is integral to their meaning. Further, it could be argued that images are equally temporal media, since even seemingly instantaneous recognition takes time, and closer scrutiny certainly does. If artists are aware that spatial elements will likely be “read” from left to right, and plan their compositions accordingly, we cannot say that the sequence of apprehension is unimportant or doesn’t contribute to meaning. While we can generalize that time is usually the more important element to language and space is most often the “proper” realm of graphic art, it is clear that each medium utilizes both. As Mitchell points out, “works of art, like all other objects of human experience, are structures in space-time [. . .] the interesting problem is to comprehend a particular spatial-temporal construction, not to label it as temporal or spatial” (*Iconology* 103).

Mitchell’s main argument against the spatial/temporal distinction in the arts is that it takes into account only one level of meaning: the surface level of “convenient relation” between sign and signified. He explains that there is a “second level of inference where representation occurs ‘indirectly’ [. . .] Painting expresses temporal action indirectly by means of bodies; poetry represents bodily forms indirectly by means of actions”

(Iconology 101). In other words, a painting depicting a single moment frozen in time cannot be said to be non-temporal, because time is implied in it. For instance, William Adolphe Bouguereau's Nymphs and Satyr implies time through the posture of the bodies (see fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1. "Nymphs and Satyr." William Adolphe Bouguereau. 1873. Oil on Canvas.

We can infer through the poses of the figures that the nymphs are in motion, and are about to pull the satyr, against his will, into the water. This action, of course, can only exist in time, and although we can't be absolutely sure of what is going to happen next, we can say, with some degree of confidence, that they are not to be understood as

defying the laws of gravity by hovering indefinitely in impossible positions, but rather as being in motion. Likewise, the proper understanding of a poem, even one spoken aloud rather than written, includes space as well as time. There may be, for instance, key words indicating space, such as: above, below, beside, atop, within, into, etc. An understanding of spatial relationships is essential to understanding any poem using concrete imagery, for a familiarity with the physical object (which exists in space) is assumed.

However, there may be some validity to the temporal/spatial dichotomy after all. Sinatra finds that the way the brain retrieves visual and verbal information seems to reinforce these distinctions. He explains:

[. . .] visual memory can be clearly distinguished from verbal memory because of the processing distinctions involved. While the visual system is characterized by its spatial properties, the auditory perception system is a system specialized for handling stimulus patterns organized in a temporal or serial way. Because of its linkage to the auditory-motor speech system and since the verbal system by its very nature is syntactical in nature, the verbal system is sequentially organized.

(Sinatra 104)

Sinatra also cites Ralph Haber's article, "How We Remember What We See," to show that pictures are stored in the memory in pictorial form, while printed words are first decoded for meaning, and stored and recalled not as a picture of the printed page, but the words themselves and the ideas associated with them (104). Thus, written words, although visual, are not stored in the mind as visual information, but as language and ideas. Memory for text is linked to speech memory, which is organized sequentially rather than spatially.

Though this information strengthens the case for the traditional temporal/spatial dichotomy, it does not negate Mitchell's claims. What Mitchell would have us understand is that language perception and visual perception always include an element of the other. One does not simply hear a verbal description spoken in time, but rather sees it in the mind's eye and feels the contours and textures of the objects described. Every act of communication is a multisensory experience. This idea is clear in Mitchell's conception of the term "image." To Mitchell, an image, even in the pictorial sense of the word, is never experienced as exclusively visual. Consciousness involves the interplay of both verbal and nonverbal thought processes. This idea is reiterated by Richard Sinatra's research in brain functioning during reading and visual comprehension.

At first, Sinatra's research seems to indicate an essential difference in brain processes during reading and viewing. He points out that the brain's left hemisphere "excels at perception of parts while the right hemisphere shows the reverse—good understanding of Gestalt but lacking in detail" (75). As might be expected, the left brain is thus associated with the activities of "talking, reading, writing, and mathematical calculation," while "the right brain was found to be the superior and dominant one for perceptual recognition of whole figures and patterns, for dealing with visuospatial relationships, [and] for nonverbal thinking [. . .]" (Sinatra 64). Sinatra also indicates that "differing brain operations" are required to "manipulate the features of each code," because one (images) is an "analog" system, while the other (words) is "digital" (99). He explains that digital systems function in terms of "discrete step intervals" and that "words are bound by context. In explaining meaning they are bound by what comes before and what comes after their particular position;" whereas, analogic forms convey meaning

holistically (99). In other words, the spatial/temporal division is integral to the way the different media are processed. Not only that, but verbal processing is handled by a different brain hemisphere than visual information is. This fact seems to indicate a definite, physiological basis for the separation of image and text.

However, things are not always as they seem, and Sinatra is careful to point out that it is a mistake to oversimplify brain processes by reducing them to the equation: verbal = left hemisphere, visual = right hemisphere. In reality, visual and verbal processes overlap and interact, one supplementing the other to create a more thorough understanding of whatever representational form they encounter. Much of the research that allowed scientists to identify brain functions by hemispheric designations involved patients whose corpus callosa (the structure which allows the hemispheres to communicate with one another) had been severed. In normal brains, assigning different functions to separate hemispheres proves much more difficult because of the amount of interaction that occurs between the two. Sinatra cites several other researchers who attest to the interconnectedness of visual and verbal thought:

Hellige (1980) suggests that it is more accurate at the present time in discussion of such global functions as "language processing," "verbal processing," and "visuospatial processing" to think of partial rather than absolute hemispheric specializations. [...] Glassner found that while writing presents itself as a product in a linear form, its processes incorporate nonlinear, nonverbal modes of thought (1980). (138)

Clearly, Mitchell's claim that images are never entirely visual is supported by scientific enquiry into brain processes. The very thesis of Sinatra's book is that schools should

devote more time to developing visual literacy skills in students, since visual and verbal processes are interconnected, and the development of one enriches the other. Although Sinatra argues that visual perception, since it precedes language comprehension, is fundamental to human thinking, he does not claim the superiority of one system over the other. Rather, he wishes to show that visual perception lays the foundation for symbolic thought, of which language (as well as graphics) is but an extension (6, 11). Essentially, both communicative systems originate from the same place: the realm of symbolic thought.

Continuous vs. Differentiated Signs

We've already identified that images are considered an "analog" sign system, while words are a "digital" one. However, the implications of this statement go beyond the spatial/temporal distinction. Consider the digital sign system of written language. The total meaning of any written artifact is always based on the relation of parts to the whole. Thus, every sentence is to be understood in terms of its relation to every other sentence (though most importantly on the sentences immediately surrounding it). The same can be said of the words that make up the sentence, as well as the letters that make up the word. However, any one of these elements in isolation still retains some meaning. A sentence out of context still communicates something, as does a word. The meaning of an isolated letter is the sound associated with it. But does this hold true with pictures? If we say that the pictorial equivalent of the sentence is the figure, then yes, a single figure in a picture can be isolated and retain some meaning. In Figure 2.2, the figures of the



Fig. 2.2. Terry Moore. The Collected Strangers in Paradise Vol. 1. (Houston: Abstract Studio, 1995) 16.

man, the woman, the statue, and any other object could be isolated from the rest and retain some meaning. However, we run into a problem when we try to isolate the elements any further. Do we isolate certain shapes? Certain lines? Even if it were possible to develop a system by which we could further break down the image into units, these constituent parts would not retain meaning. We can interpret the diagonal lines at the bottom left-hand corner of the page as meaning “shadow on the wall” only because their relation to one another, and to the other figures, allows us to “read” that part of the pictorial space as a wall. If we isolate a single one of the lines constituting the shadow, it no longer represents anything. While a single letter denotes a sound, a single line denotes nothing—it simply *is* a line and cannot be said to mean anything but “line.”

The principle behind this idea can be stated as such: written language is a system of differentiated signs, while pictures are continuous signs. Mitchell explains that a differentiated symbolic system works on the assumption “that every character is

distinguishable from every other [. . .] An 'a' and a 'd' might be written to look almost indistinguishable, but the working of the system depends upon the possibility of their differentiation" (Iconology 68). A continuous symbolic system works on the opposite assumption: that each constituent part cannot be differentiated from the whole.

Furthermore, Mitchell notes that differentiated parts of a system also need to be "transferable" from one context to another. That is, "all inscriptions of 'a,' regardless of how they are written, count as the same letter" (Mitchell, Iconology 68). In drawings, on the other hand, the meaning of a line depends precisely on how it is rendered. Each line is unique in a continuous system, even if it looks exactly like another line.

Another key distinction between differentiated and continuous systems is that differentiated systems contain a finite number of characters with no "intermediate" symbols; whereas in a continuous system the possibilities for meaning are so infinite that they cannot even be reduced to characters (Mitchell, Iconology 68). In a picture, the shape and thickness of every line carries meaning, as do variations in shading and color, the placement of figures, and the enigmatic quality of style.

These differences, though significant, are not absolute. When applied to the medium of comics, we began to see how pictures can be considered partially differentiated, and words partially continuous. That is, in comics, an "a" is an "a" regardless of its rendering, yet its size, style, placement, etc. add another level of meaning, that of "connoted" meaning. Figure 2.3 illustrates how text can take on some of the properties of a continuous sign system.

The letter "G" appears in four of the six panels, and as a differentiated sign, the reader can identify the character as "G" each time, so it retains its denoted meaning as



Fig. 2.3. Terry Moore. *The Collected Strangers in Paradise Vol 1*. (Houston: Abstract Studio, 1995) 9.

sound. However, its connoted meaning changes with each different rendering. In panels 2 and 3, the broken lines connote the abrupt shattering of a peaceful sleep. The fuzziness of the character in panel 2 further suggests that the sleeper is aware of the sound, but not fully awake. Its placement behind other pictorial elements also suggests the sleeper's distance from the sound. The black lettering of panel 3, as well as the violence of its rendering and its placement directly above the sleeper, suggests that the sound has

penetrated her consciousness. The size of the lettering makes visible the relative volume of the sound. In panel 4, the thickness of the letters, as well as the lines used to render them indicates the clear, distinct, and loud sound of gunfire. In the final panel, the "G" is lettered in the conventional style of dialogue, indicating a normal, pleasant tone of voice which stands in stark contrast to the violence of the previous panels. The style of lettering, like the drawing style, has endless potential for meaning. In this sense, differentiated characters are also continuous.

Making the case for pictorial signs as partially differentiated is slightly more difficult. It has been suggested by several authors that the pictorial language has a stock "vocabulary" of signs. In figure 2.3, we can also identify several stock images: the pipe-smoking everyman à la Ward Cleaver on the clock, the clock itself, the pistol, and the arching eyebrow of the woman. We could say that no matter what the style a pistol is rendered in, it depicts not only a familiar object, but the idea of violence. The Ward Cleaver look-alike, on the other hand, brings to mind normalcy, stability, and wholesomeness. When we compare this image to figure 2.4, we see that this same stock symbol can be rendered in another style and not lose its symbolic meaning. Thus, it can be said that these continuous signs also contain certain properties of differentiated signs. However, they don't fit the definition in all respects: the number of possible signs is still infinite, and the capacity for intermediate "characters" is equally infinite.

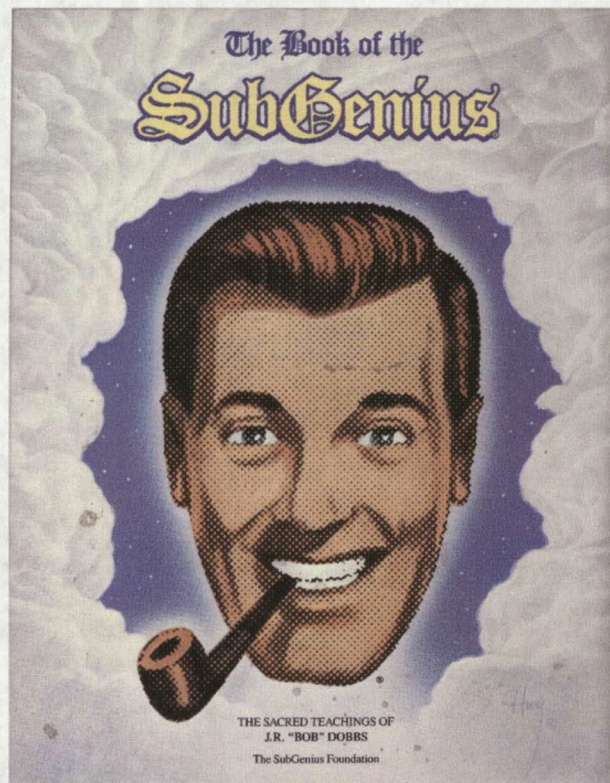


Fig. 2.4. Kenneth Huey. The Book of the Subgenius (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) cover.

Fixed vs. Variable Meaning

Scott McCloud makes the distinction that in non-pictorial icons (letters, numbers, ideograms), meanings are “fixed and absolute,” while in pictures, meaning is “fluid and variable” (Understanding Comics 28). But as we have seen, letters can function as pictorial elements, taking on a connoted meaning that is as variable and open to interpretation as pictures “proper.” However, this distinction is still a useful, and one that is widely evoked in discussions about the properties of images versus text. Words are often said to have precise meanings, while the meaning of pictures remains ambiguous. I would argue that these are not essential properties of each system, but are

entirely dependent upon context. For example, in assembly instructions, words may be employed to label parts, however, the precise meaning comes from the visual display of those parts. A written description of parts would be ineffective and clunky (the long part with a shorter piece jutting out at a right angle and a curved hook-like piece connected to the flat side of the elongated part), and may be of little use in identifying the physical object. Conversely, written text can be used enigmatically to intentionally obscure meaning, as in the word balloon reading: "Wow! Isthmus be like, where it's at!!" (see Figure 2.5). Even when words are used in a straightforward manner, meaning cannot said to be fixed or precise, as Jacques Derrida has gone to great lengths to demonstrate.

Despite the capacity for ambiguity in any sign system, such generalized distinctions prove useful in examining what each sign system is "best suited" to do. Will Eisner notes that graphic arts face a unique challenge when dealing with abstract concepts (140). Portraying inner conflict visually often means resorting to a stereotyped facial expression which may or may not have the desired effect, that is, the face of inner turmoil may look strikingly similar to the countenance of constipation. In comics, text is generally employed to clarify such situations, as words are generally considered the "proper sphere" of abstraction. Words can easily reveal thought processes, physical sensations, intangible concepts (love, justice, etc.), and spiritual matters. Pictures, by virtue of being a (primarily) visual medium, are best suited to depict vision phenomena. Semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen insist that "some things can be 'said' only visually, others only verbally. But even when something can be 'said' both visually and verbally the *way in which* it will be said is different" (2). While one wonders what sorts of things can only be expressed in one semiotic mode, their second point is

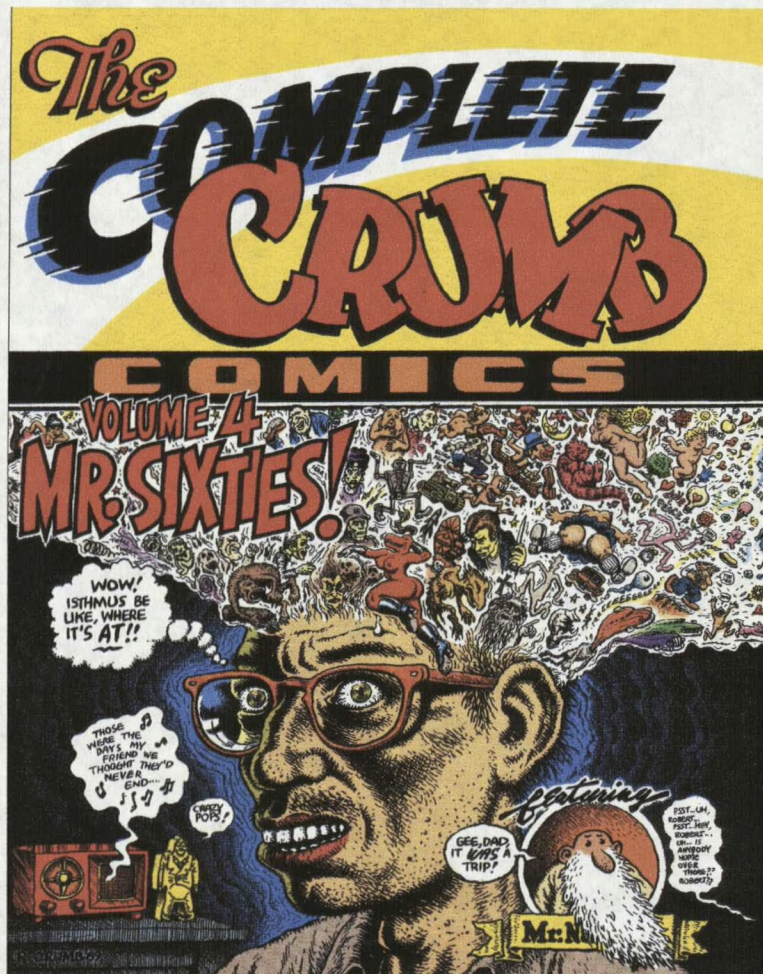


Fig. 2.5. Robert Crumb. The Complete Crumb Comics Vol. 4 (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1989) cover.

important, as it indicates what may be the essential distinction between words and images. In this chapter, I've shown how the distinctions between text and graphic imagery are not absolute: images are no more "natural" than words, the comprehension of either requires prior knowledge of that particular system, neither can be considered completely temporal or spatial, neither is restricted to one hemisphere of the brain, both can be used as differentiated or continuous signs, neither can be said to have a "fixed meaning," and the precision or ambiguity of each is not inherent, but dependent on the

context. Such qualities seem to bridge the gap between words and images as systems of representation. But whatever similarities we point out, the fact remains that both systems make meaning differently. Of course, this is only to be expected, as they can be considered similar systems, but not identical ones.

What conclusions are we to draw from this exploration of the similarities and differences between the written word and the graphic image? Firstly, we can conclude that each system serves the same purpose: to publicly communicate private thought. Secondly, we can see that the boundary lines separating one from the other are not so rigid as intuition has us believe. Indeed this chapter has not served to clarify what either system is, but rather to deny the possibility of clear-cut distinctions. Thirdly, we can say that decoding these different systems involve similar, and interconnected, processes. And lastly, we can conclude that despite many similarities, both systems make meaning differently. So where does this leave the question of whether pictorial representation can be considered a language?

Celebrated comics creator and theorist Will Eisner demonstrates, in Comics & Sequential Art, how images can be subjected to the model of linguistics by diagramming a comics panel like a sentence (see Figure 2.6):

The predicates of the gun-shooting and the wrestling belong to separate clauses.

The subject of “gun-shooting” is the crook, and Gerhard is the object direct. The many modifiers include the adverb “Bang, Bang” and the adjectives of visual language, such as posture, gesture, and grimace. (10)

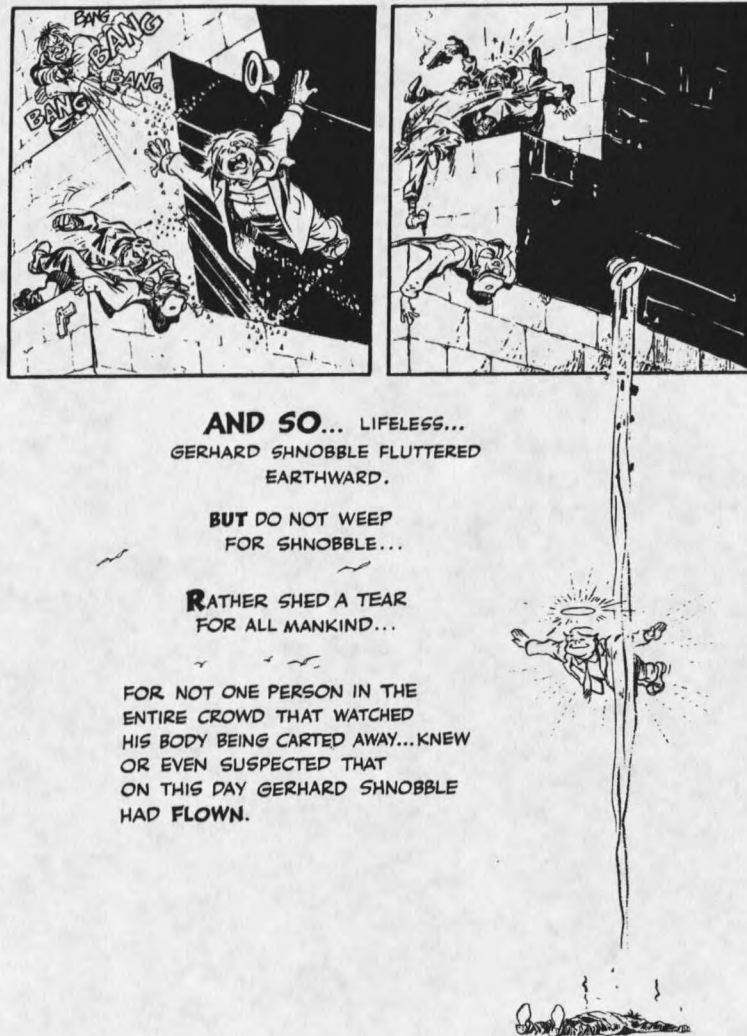


Fig. 2.6. Will Eisner. Comics & Sequential Art (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985) 9.

However, attempts to examine visual structures on the linguistic model require a stretch of the imagination and have only limited usefulness.

In Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen attempt to define the elements of a “visual grammar” using concepts from semiotics and visual design rather than linguistics. By “visual grammar,” they mean “the way in which [...] depicted people, places and things are combined into a meaningful

whole" (1). They admit that "The analogy with language does not imply, however, that visual structures are like linguistic structures. The relation is much more general" (2). It is clear that two different lexicons are needed to discuss images and words. In the strictest sense, the term "language" means communication using words. In this sense, only spoken, written, and sign language may be considered languages "proper."

However, the widespread use of terms such as "body language," "computer language," and even "visual language" indicates that the term "language" has a wider meaning, used to indicate any system of communication, but it should be kept in mind that when we speak of such systems as "languages," we are speaking metaphorically. These systems are like languages as far as they can be employed to express thought. It is merely a useful shorthand to refer to other sign systems as "languages."

The defining characteristic of a semiotic system, according to Michael Halliday, is the ability to perform the three "metafunctions". The "ideational metafunction" is the ability to represent "aspects of the material world outside its particular system of signs" (Kress & van Leeuwen 40). This, of course, excludes certain abstract paintings, the very purpose of which is to refer only to themselves. The "interpersonal metafunction" is the ability "to project a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented" (Kress & van Leeuwen 41). And the "textual metafunction" is the ability "to form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally and with the context in and for which they were produced" (Kress & van Leeuwen 41). Thus, there can be no question as to whether images can be considered a semiotic system. Indeed, one suspects that the field of semiotics was created specifically to deal with the "language" of images. Perhaps, then, a more accurate way to word the overall question

of this paper would be, "Can comics be considered a hybrid of two semiotic systems, or a unique 'representational semiotic' in its own right?" The very use of the term "language" can be interpreted as an attempt by those with a vested interest in the visual to appropriate some of the cultural power of the word. When Kress and van Leeuwen entitled their book Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, their intention was clearly to compare, and thus elevate, an under-theorized field to the systematic, rigorous discipline of linguistics. Despite the obvious ideological bent of the term, for the sake of convenience, I too will use the shorthand term of "language" to denote a full system of communication.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HYBRID/DISCRETE DEBATE

The previous chapter explored the properties of graphic images and written text, and laid the groundwork for this chapter's discussion of the ways image and text interact within the medium of comics. In this chapter I highlight the many ways that comics shows its "in-betweenness" in its very form. I argue that comics cannot be conclusively categorized as either hybrid or discrete by examining its formal qualities. I conclude by explaining why, if the hybrid/discrete debate cannot be resolved, it is still important to the future of comics and comics scholarship.

Types of Text in Comics

In comics, the written word appears in a variety of forms, serving different narrative functions. Lawrence V. Abbott identifies three basic types of text in comics: narration, dialogue, and sound effects (156). To these categories I would add inner monologue, environmental text, relational phrases, and non-sequitur text. These types of text can be classified into two groups: that which remains separate from the picture space, and that which is integral to the picture space.

Dialogue, the most common form of text in comics, represents spoken language. Dialogue is closely related to inner monologue, with one important distinction; dialogue indicates sound, while inner monologue conveys the silent phenomenon of thought. Both commonly appear in balloons, devices which set the text apart from the image.

Narration is conventionally enclosed in a box near the corner, or along the edge of the picture panel. Often this box is distinctly colored to set it apart from both the image and the dialogue. The function of the narration is to fill in any gaps in information that cannot be supplied by the image. Most often, narration sets the scene, indicating time and place when it is not possible to deduce such information from the image. Modern comics writers use narration sparingly, considering it a shortcut technique, and preferring to convey such information visually.

Relational phrases can be considered a subcategory of narration. The most familiar (to the point of cliché) use of a relational phrase is the ubiquitous “Meanwhile...” used to indicate a shift in scene, but not in the timeframe. What distinguishes this use of text from ordinary narration is that its primary purpose is not to fill in information gaps, but to indicate the relation of one panel to the next.

The common factor in dialogue, inner monologue, narration, and relational phrases is that they are what Abbott calls, “extra-visual phenomena that may share space in the panel plane with the drawing but are not part of the scene” (156). The conventions of balloons and text boxes clearly delineate a boundary between image and text which indicates that comics, at times, functions as a hybrid art form, combining image and text without achieving a true synthesis. Even when no balloon or text box appears, these textual forms are intended to be read as separate from the image. However, other types of comics text function as an integral part of the pictorial space.

On the most obvious level, environmental text functions as part of the image by depicting words which would naturally occur within the visual space of the scene. Environmental text includes signs, product labels, newspaper headlines, billboards,

marquees, T-shirt slogans, graffiti, post-it notes, and so on. This type of text is, in some instances, an unavoidable visual element that must be included to maintain the realism of the depicted environment; however, it can also serve as a narrative element. For instance, if a character in a comic book were to enter a library, we could assume that the name of the library would physically appear on the building since most libraries have such signs. The artist must include these words for realism's sake; however, they serve an additional narrative purpose: they identify the building for the reader, filling in an information gap and acting as narration. Alan Moore's Watchmen continually uses the device of a newsstand, in which the text of newspaper headlines and magazine covers act as thinly disguised narration, revealing the political climate of the comic's world.

While environmental text represents words that would be physically present in real life, sound effects, like dialogue, indicate sound. Unlike dialogue, sound effects are meant to be read as a part of the pictorial space. Generally, sound effects are superimposed directly on top the picture, in essence, becoming "an extension of the picture, a visual translation of sound rather than language" (Abbott 159). This is especially apparent in sound effects which do not use words from actual languages, but rather invented onomatopoeic transcriptions of sound. Figure 3.1 reproduces a page from The Batman Adventures: Mad Love by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm in which sound effects constitute most of the written text. Words such as "BRAKKA," "BEOW," "TZOW," "SPLAK," and "ZZIT," obviously do not occur in the English language (nor any other), nor are they meant to be read in any certain order, as is the dialogue. Rather, the placement of these words is meant to correspond with the sources of the sound they transcribe. In panel 3, the words "BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA" run in a single line,



Fig. 3.1. Paul Dini and Bruce Timm. Mad Love. (New York: DC Comics, 1994) No pagination.

presumably corresponding with the direction of the machine gun fire. The words also stretch from one end of the panel to the other, suggesting a continuous sound that both fills the physical space of the scene and lasts for the duration of the action. The figures of Batman and Harley Quinn partially cover the words, indicating that they are to be read as background noise. The words "VIP," "BEOW," and "TZOW," on the other hand, are placed at various points in the picture plane, superimposed on the lines indicating bullet impact. The superimposition of these words suggest that they are emanating out of the picture plane, toward the reader. These words also run at an angle opposite that of the gunfire, clearly indicating that they are to be read as sounds made by ricocheting bullets. The use of different onomatopoeic words further indicates that each ricochet makes a distinct noise, setting them in opposition to the regularity of the gunfire.

In panel 5, the word "SPLAK!" runs along the same trajectory as Batman's throwing weapon. Clearly, the placement of such words corresponds to a physical presence within the environment of the depicted scene. While not a visual phenomenon, sound certainly constitutes a physical presence, and by defying the textual convention of ordering words in a linear sequence, sound effects reinforce Abbott's assertion that they are properly read as an extension of the picture, rather than as text.

For lack of a better term, I will call the final category of comics text "Abstract text." Figure 3.2 from Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics serves as an example. Here, the words in the background of panel 2 function as an integral part of the picture, constituting the look of the panel. Both the narrator's face and his speech balloons hide many of the words, indicating that they are meant to be seen rather than read. Actually

reading them only reinforces this idea, as they have no logical relation to the image, except that they represent the idea of “words.”

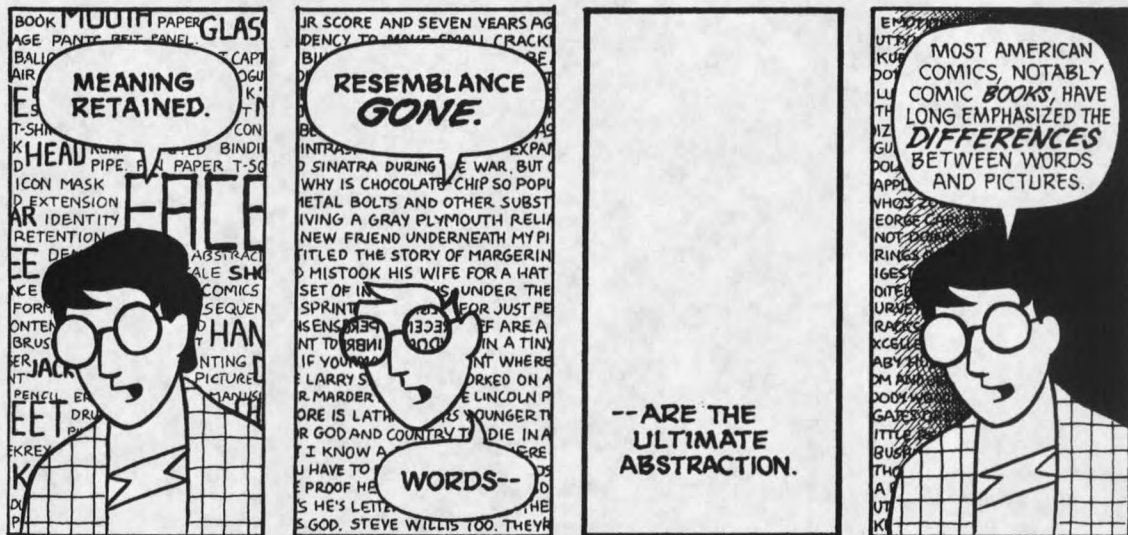


Fig. 3.2. Scott McCloud. Understanding Comics. (Nothampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993) 47.

Text that fulfills the functions of imagery supports the argument that comics should be classified as a discrete “language,” because this use of text achieves a synthesis of image and text. Other media, of course, also synthesize image and text, so this line of argument cannot support the idea of comics as a unique “language” per se, but instead the synthesis of words and pictures as a unique “language.”

Types of Image/Text Interaction in Comics

To identify the various ways image and text can interact in comics, I will once again turn first to Scott McCloud, who lists seven types of interaction: Word Specific,

Picture Specific, Duo-Specific, Additive, Parallel, Montage, and Inter-dependent (Understanding Comics 153-155). To these categories, Frank L. Cioffi adds Disjunction (a revision of McCloud's parallel interaction), suggesting four subcategories of Politicization, Pseudo-elaboration, Deconstruction, and Allegorization (99).

Word Specific interaction, as McCloud defines it, refers to combinations "where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text (Understanding Comics 153). Word specific combinations are largely avoided by comics writers because they reduce the artwork to illustration rather than taking advantage of the medium's full potential for meaning making. Figure 3.3, from Hellblazer: Haunted by Warren Ellis and John Higgins, exemplifies word specific interaction.

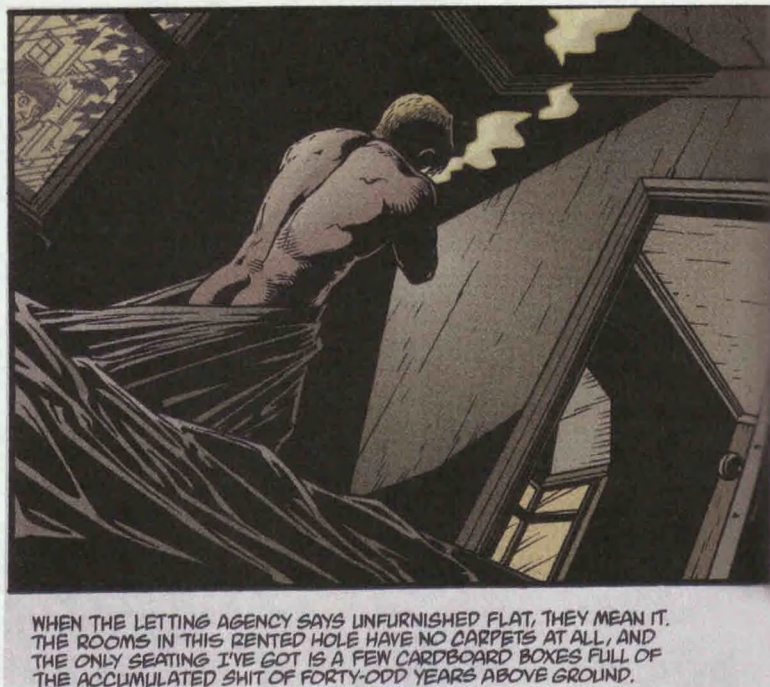


Fig. 3.3. Warren Ellis and John Higgins. Hellblazer: Haunted. (New York: DC Comics, 2003) 8.

The verbal description evokes a mental picture of the rented flat just as vivid, if not more so, than the accompanying picture. While the picture adds a bit of characterization, showing John Constantine to be a man with no sense of modesty, the image's central purpose is to show the bare walls, as suggested by the lighting. It is the highlight on the wall that catches the eye first, being the brightest and most centralized shape in the frame. Constantine's elbow breaks into this shape, leading the eye secondly to his figure, suggesting that he is of secondary importance to the panel's meaning, which is ultimately to reinforce the imagery described in the text.

McCloud explains that in Picture Specific combinations, "words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence" (Understanding Comics 153). For an example of this, refer back to figure 3.1.

Duo-Specific combinations of image and text are universally shunned by sophisticated storytellers in the comics medium. This is because duo-specific combinations are those in which image and text send the same message, often lending an unintentional humorous effect to a panel. However, McCloud's illustrations (see fig. 3.4) of this type of interaction should be read as intentionally humorous, as his aim is to mock the use of such combinations. Panel 2 is especially telling, because the action is triply narrated: once in the picture itself, once in the narration box, and again in the dialogue balloons. His use of stereotyped superhero and supervillain figures hearkens back to the minimal quality control of the medium's early years. Though he never says so explicitly, McCloud's message to aspiring comics writers is to avoid duo-specific combinations at all costs.

Word specific, picture specific, and duo-specific combinations reinforce the idea of comics as a hybrid art form. When either text or image dominates the panel's meaning, as in word and picture specific combinations, the other is rendered largely unnecessary. They do not create meaning together, but separately. Words and images also create meaning separately in duo-specific. Although the two elements are presented together, they do not work together.



Fig. 3.4. Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993) 153.

McCloud defines Parallel combinations as those in which “words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting” (154). For example, refer to Figure 3.5 from Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*. The sequence depicts the “costumed

adventurer,” Rorschach, covertly gaining entrance into a military research center. The narrative text (resembling torn off scraps of paper) come from Rorschach’s journal, indicating that the thoughts conveyed in them are not the thoughts the character is thinking during the moments depicted in the image. Thus, we can see that the text, initially, has little to do with the images; it is a personal rumination on the fate of the other “costumed adventurers,” but we cannot conclude that the story told verbally and the one told visually are totally unrelated. The last three panels of the page show the logical connection between the two: Rorschach is breaking into the military research center to inform the two remaining adventurers of the murder plot against them.

The main virtue in creating parallel storylines like this, is the economy with which one can convey information. Moore is able to communicate both stories simultaneously without interrupting the narrative flow with a long prose passage. One could argue that the image, in this case, serves only to cover for Moore’s wordy storytelling style, after all, the audience need not know all the details of his entering the facility. However, taking the entire book as context, this sequence is essential in setting up Rorschach as someone who can sneak into virtually anywhere unnoticed, and as a man without fear. Beyond its utility in providing characterization, this sequence is also necessary to the pacing of the story. Moore’s characters are inclined to ruminate about their situation, and as such, the focus of the story is not on fast-paced action, but rather a slower-paced verbal storytelling.

It would seem that in parallel combination, words and images do not create meaning together, and thus reinforce the hybrid art form argument. However, this is not always the case. In Figure 3.5, the words and pictures in each panel tell different stories,



Fig. 3.5. Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. (New York: DC Comics, 1986) 1.19.

but the sequence ultimately reveals the connection. Rorschach's recollection of the fate of the costumed adventurers leads up to the moment he encounters the last two. Taken as a whole, the words and pictures ultimately work together to create meaning.

As another example of parallel image/text combination, consider Figure 3.6, again from Alan Moore's Watchmen. This page contains two visual narratives and one textual narrative. Every other panel depicts the characters who are speaking the lines, while the others depict the subject of their discussion. Here, only panels 6 and 8 qualify as examples of parallel use of image and text. In these cases, the text acts as "voice-over" narration, in which the topic of conversation does not deal directly with the image, but rather provides an indirect commentary on it. The lines "somewhere normal," and "...and he doesn't care how people dress" do not literally refer to the strange dressing habits of Dr. Manhattan, but they certainly provide a commentary on them, accentuating the character's distance from human customs and affairs. Clearly, this is a borderline case of parallel combination, and could arguably be considered additive combination, as the text amplifies the meaning of the images. The panels could also be said to function as Interdependent combinations of image and text, as their combination suggests meaning that neither could accomplish on its own. In any case, this example illustrates that these categories are not totally exclusive and that the interaction of image and text in comics is a complex matter.

McCloud's category of Additive word/picture combination has also been called "Amplification,"¹¹ because the text is used to elaborate on and extend the message of the

¹¹ By Mila Bongco in Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books (56).



Fig. 3.6. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. (New York: DC Comics, 1986) 3.9.

image, or vice versa (Understanding Comics 154). In Figure 3.7, from Neil Gaiman's The Kindly Ones, it is the text that extends the message of the image. The image is complete in itself; we can recognize the setting as an airport from the presence of luggage, the dress of the employees, and the customs desk. "The Creep," can be identified from his presence in a previous panel (not pictured here), and we can recognize the girl's embarrassment and annoyance from her expression and posture, as well as the customs agent's holding up her panties as if displaying them. What the text does in this instance is to supplement the picture's message by letting the reader know that the girl has been to this airport before, by explaining the presence and purpose of the panties, and by clarifying the girl's emotional state.



Fig. 3.7. Neil Gaiman and Jill Thompson. The Kindly Ones. (New York: DC Comics, 1995) 3.1.

In this case, the function of the text could be considered "anchorage," a term used by Roland Barthes to refer to an image/text relationship in which "the text *directs* the

reader among the various signifieds of the image, causes him to avoid some and to accept others; through an often subtle dispatching, it teleguides him toward a meaning selected in advance. (29). That is, one might interpret the girl's look as a preoccupation with a lost love, so great a preoccupation that she fails to notice the customs agent fondling her undergarments. However, the presence of the text pins down the image's message to one possible interpretation (or at least a smaller number of possible meanings). Although Barthes warns that anchorage is most often ideological and gives the text a "repressive" value of control over the image, one must keep in mind that his main preoccupation with the image/text question concerns advertising (29). In the case of comics, anchorage should not be viewed as a wholly sinister function of text; rather it serves to move the story forward. When sequential images are presented without textual anchorage, the reading process becomes more difficult, and without considerable talent on the part of the artist, the sequence may be incomprehensible.

Figure 3.8 reveals the flip side of the Additive combination of word and image, that is, when the image acts as an extension of the text. In this panel, from Neil Gaiman's Fables & Reflections, the words and images tell the same story, but the combination should not be considered Duo-specific, since the illustration amplifies the meaning of the words. The text tells us that there are vast piles of jewels, but it is not until we see the human figure amidst these piles that we truly understand the scope of scene described. The impossibly large ruby in the background, in particular, demonstrates that the text does not tell the whole story. It says nothing of the immensity of the room, the height of the piles, and the size of the jewels; this information is supplied only by the picture.

However, the addition of the image does not change the meaning of the text; it merely expands on it.

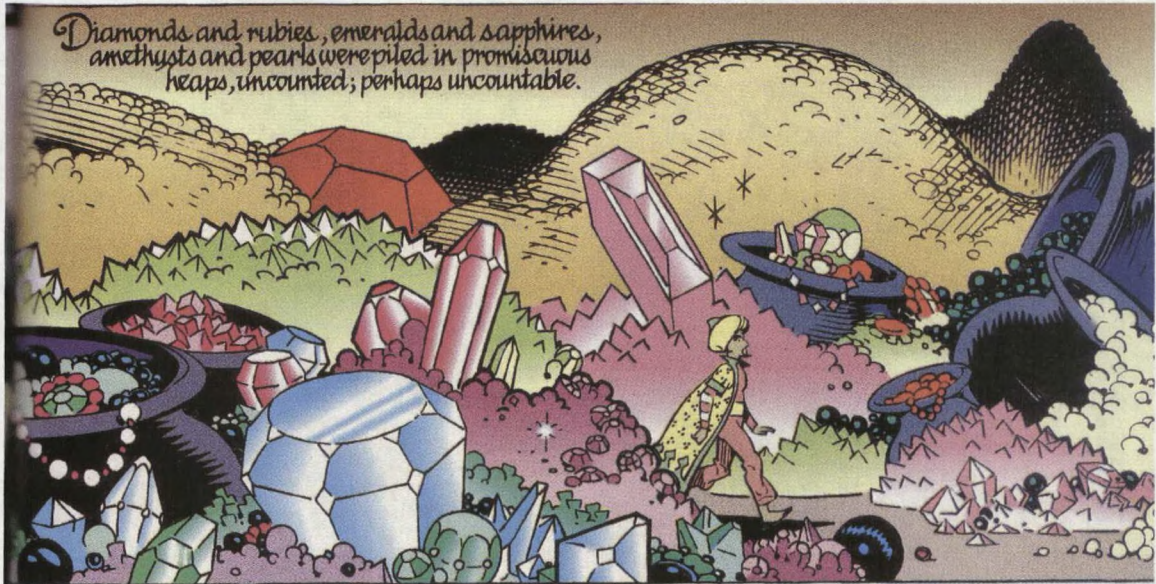


Fig. 3.8. Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell. *Fables & Reflections*. (New York: DC Comics, 1993) 239.

To explain the category of Montage, it is necessary to refer back to Figure 3.2. McCloud defines montage combination as an interaction “where words are treated as integral parts of the picture” (154). As previously mentioned, much of the text in panel 2 is used as a background element and is meant to be seen rather than read. The text illustrates the idea of words as “the ultimate abstraction;” that is, they can ultimately be considered a pictorial element which signifies without resembling. Montage combination is also frequently found on title pages, in which the text is highly stylized and incorporated into the overall design of the image. A second example of montage combination comes from Alan Moore’s *Promethea Book 2*. The storyline of the comic

concerns the heroine's education in the occult arts, with each page explaining the symbolism of one of the major arcana of the tarot as a parable for the history of human civilization. Further, each page contains a series of letter tiles (similar to the ones found in Scrabble), rearranged to form anagrams of the name "Promethea." Figure 3.9 deals with the trump card, "The Lovers," in which the letter tiles spell out "Me atop her." The presence of the floating tiles can be read as an attempt to connect the heroine to every level of human experience, as well as human history, by showing how her name can reflect each card in a symbol system intended to represent all levels of human experience. The presence of the letter tiles thus becomes an integral part of not only the story's overall theme, but of the layout of each page.

McCloud's final category of image/text interaction is the Interdependent combination. This interaction equally suggests that comics can be considered a discrete language, because in interdependent combinations, image and text combine to create meaning that neither sign system could create independently. McCloud states that this type of interaction is perhaps the most common type in the medium (Understanding Comics 155). While this claim is debatable, interdependent combination is certainly the type of interaction that most comics writers strive for, because it, more than any of the others, displays the medium's full potential for meaning-making. Consider Figure 3.10, from Strangers in Paradise.

This sequence, of course, would be incomprehensible without the pictures, but equally so without the words. The images reveal the voyeurism of the husband, and the alcoholism of the wife, but without the words, the reader would have no way of

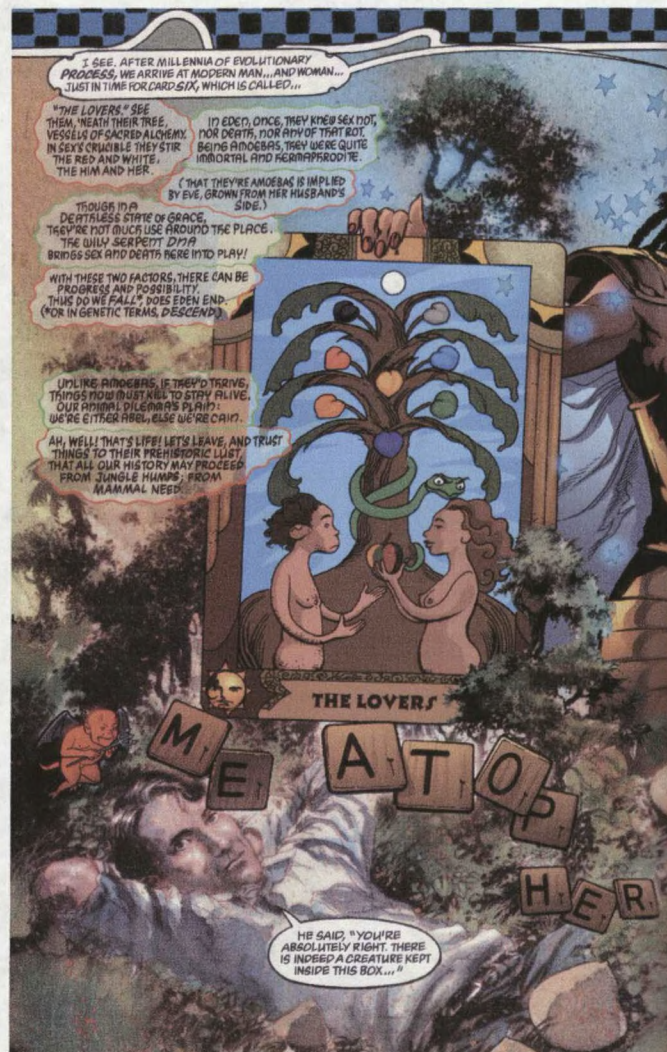


Fig. 3.9. Alan Moore and J. H. Williams III. Promethea Book 2. (La Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2001) No pagination.

discerning the relationship between the characters, nor any idea of their mutual dishonesty. The reader would also remain unaware of the husband's motivation for spying, as he appears to simply be watching a van drive away. His dialogue characterizes him as a pervert trying to catch a peek of female nudity. The image in Panel 6 reveals the wife's reason for asking her husband what he's doing, presumably, to ensure she is safe

to sneak a drink without him walking in on her. Furthermore, the environmental text (the label on the bottle) clues the reader in to the alcoholic contents of the bottle, and the fact that she is hiding her drinking from her husband. Thus, each system of signification depends on the other to convey the overall meaning of the sequence. Interdependent combination is the dominant mode in nearly all single panel “gag cartoons,” since the humor often stems from the reader’s making the connection of meaning between the image and text (Harvey 81-82).

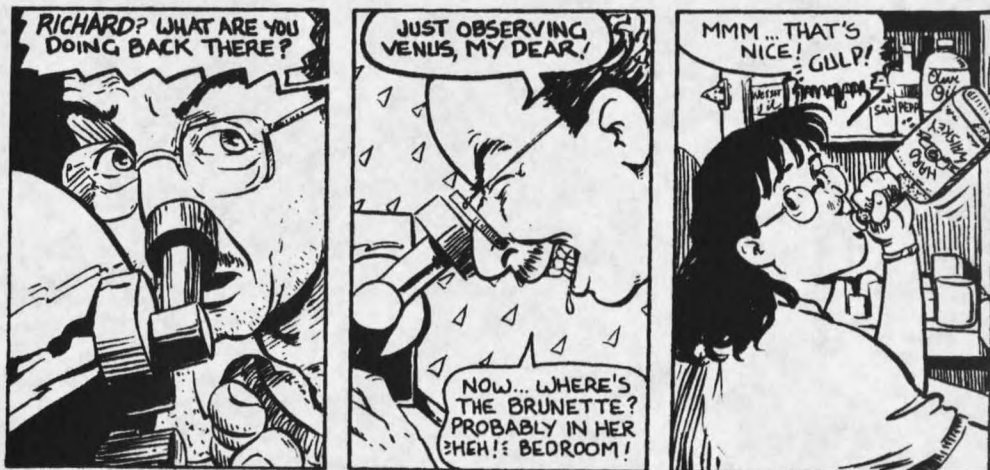


Fig. 3.10. Terry Moore. *The Collected Strangers in Paradise Vol. 1*. (Houston: Abstract Studio, 1995) No pagination.

Additive, montage, and interdependent combinations of image and text can all be cited to support the argument that comics is a discrete “language;” montage because it turns text into a pictorial element, achieving synthesis, and the others because image and text depend on each other to achieve total meaning.

Expanding on McCloud’s categories, Frank L. Cioffi identifies “disjunctive” interaction of image/text in comics. Perhaps rather than a discrete category, disjuncture

should be understood as a quality of interaction which can take place within several of the other categories. Cioffi defines disjunctive interaction as what happens when the image and text work at cross-purposes to disturb the reader's expectations and create a sort of dissonance in meaning (99). He explains, "word and image are not simultaneously grasped by the reader. Rather, a gap precedes the cognition of the written word, and in this gap, [. . .] artists find their field of play. (99) He goes on to identify four varieties of disjunction: politization, pseudo-elaboration, deconstruction, and allegorization. The first of these proves to be ill-defined, and seems to refer only to disjunction that occurs in political cartooning, specifically, in the cartoons of Andrzej Mleczko. His discussion of politicization does not explain the specific relationship between word and image in this type of disjunction, and thus merits no examination here.

Pseudo-elaboration, on the other hand, refers to the disjunction between word and image that occurs when the text seems to explain (or elaborate on) the image, but actually denies the possibility of making a logical connection (Cioffi 104-5). The text, in pseudo-elaboration, connects to the image, but in "only a remote tangential way" (108). Cioffi's categories suffer from being custom-tailored to explain the works of specific authors, and therefore have limited applicability. Cioffi uses pseudo-elaboration specifically to interpret the works of Ben Katchor, but the concept also seems to apply to Art Spiegelman's "The Malpractice Suite" from Arcade (see Fig. 3.11).

The dialogue balloons in this sequence seem to be a typical conversation among the characters in the scene; however, the reader will soon notice that the speakers don't seem to be engaged in the same conversation at all, and that identical lines of dialogue are repeated in several panels. Spiegelman thwarts the reader's expectation of a narrative

sequence by denying the possibility of making the dialogue connect logically (not to mention the constant, illogical changes in the imagery). Spiegelman's statement is that the comics form has no limits in terms of content. By working within the avant-garde tradition of art, he puts forward the idea of comics as a serious artistic medium, and challenges the notion that combining words and pictures primarily serves to make reading quicker and easier.

The concept of deconstruction also seems to have a wider applicability. Cioffi uses the term to refer to instances where the tone of the text is at odds with the images (112). Specifically, he uses the concept to examine the comics of Robert Crumb. He says, "One reason that his comics have such force is that their images and words often work at absolute cross-purposes, the images conveying, for example, very positive iconographic messages, and the words conveying quite negative ones, or vice versa" (112). For example, his strip "Those Cute Little Bearzy Wearzies" from Zap Comix #1 features a pair of teddy bear-like characters discussing the unhappiness of their present existences, and ends with one bear lamenting, "I wish I had a cigarette" (Crumb 49). Leaving aside Crumb for a moment, deconstruction can also be found in Alan Moore's Promethea #3, in which Little Red Riding Hood, when confronted by the Big Bad Wolf, begins cursing like a sailor. However, this example is not perfect. Word and image are not at absolute cross-purposes, since Little Red Riding Hood is also depicted smoking a cigarette and packing an uzi. This type of disjunction virtually constitutes a trademark of comics, especially in one panel "gag" cartoons. Although deconstructive disjuncture lends itself to the humor genre, but the same discrepancy between word and image that creates laughter can also be used to disturbing effect.



Fig. 3.11 Art Spiegelman. Arcade. (New York: The Print Mint, 1976); rpt. in Roger Sabin, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels (London: Phaidon, 1996) 98.

Cioffi's final category is Allegorical disjuncture, and refers specifically to Art Spiegelman's Maus. Cioffi's claim is that the subject matter (the holocaust), and its depiction (using cartoon animals) cause a "cognitive emotional dissonance", but it is a dissonance that diminishes as the reader becomes more involved with the narrative (116-7). This dissonance, then, is meant to be allegorical rather than disturbing. This category also brings to mind Alan Moore's work on Swamp Thing, which turns the horror comic genre on its head by turning the series into an environmental allegory. The title character, a swamp monster composed of moss, roots, and other organic matter, becomes the embodiment of all plant-life who (in certain issues) combats threats to the environment. The reader, at first put off by this admittedly rather absurd idea, eventually

grows accustomed to The Swamp Thing's appearance, and comes to accept it as allegorical. Although one can imagine more instances in which comics could achieve allegorical disjuncture, it is not a widely applicable category, and, more importantly, it doesn't necessarily relate to the relationship between word and image. It seems more appropriate to view this type of disjuncture as a dissonance between the story's overall theme and the manner of its presentation.

Though Cioffi's concept of disjunction portrays words and images working antagonistically, they are still working together to complete the total meaning. Thus, much like additive and interdependent combinations, they support the idea that the combination of words and images create meaning in a unique unavailable to either one separately. This survey of the different types of word/text interaction points us neither to comics as hybrid nor discrete, but as taking on the properties of either, depending on how they are used.

There is yet another way in which verbal and visual elements inform one another: by not interacting. However, I have elected to include my discussion of "wordless comics" in the next section, since it has great significance in the question of whether either image or text can be considered primary to the comics form.

Image versus Text: The Question of Primacy

Several claims have been made for the primacy of either text or image in comics. Varnum and Gibbons cite perceptual theorist Ann Marie Stewart Barry as claiming "it is images, not words, that communicate most deeply" (ix). She adds that visual information "is holistic, immediate, and experientially rooted [. . .] when an image is

combined with words as in a comic strip, the words become secondary but the language of images remains primary” (Barry qtd. in Varnum and Gibbons ix). This idea stems from the frequently suggested idea that words lack the immediate emotional impact of images. This idea is affirmed by the advertising industry, which has long known that a successful advertising campaign depends on eye-catching visuals. Roland Barthes notes, that the text in advertising serves to lead the viewer to a predetermined interpretation of that image. It would seem, then, that the advertising image provides this emotional impact, while the words merely supplement it. However, we will see that in comics, this is not always the case.

Take, for instance, figure 3.12 from Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan The Smartest Kid On Earth. This is arguably the single most emotionally devastating panel in the book, and as such, has been allowed to fill an entire page. Yet the image by itself has almost no emotional impact; one might admire the architecture of the pavilion, or even experience awe at the scale of what was, at the time, the world’s largest building, but the image remains distant and lifeless. It is the text that provides the emotional blow. To decipher the meaning of the text, one must have some context for it. The story involves young James’s father taking him to the World’s Fair in Chicago and abandoning him there. The preceding text reads: “he simply mumbled something dull to me and stepped aside... I wasn’t really paying attention. So I just stood there, watching the sky, and the people below, waiting for him to return” (no pagination). When the reader turns the page, the image yields no immediate emotional impact, but the text reads like a slap in the face: “Of course, he never did.” Obviously, in the full context of the story, the effect

is much greater than in my brief description here, but it should illustrate how an image can be cold and technical, while words can be heart-wrenching.

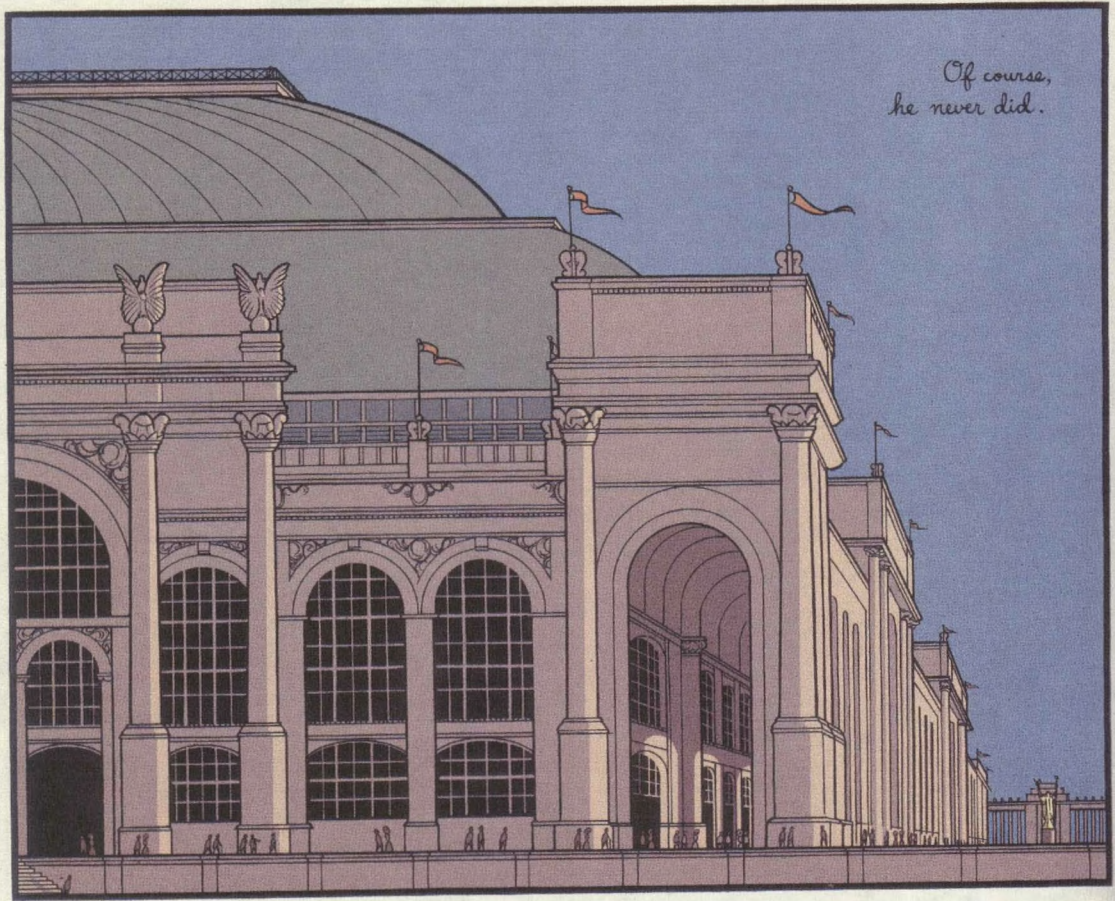


Fig. 3.12. Chris Ware. Jimmy Corrigan The Smartest Kid on Earth. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000) No pagination.

Make no mistake, the deadening quality of the image is purposeful; the figure of James, peeking out from the uppermost railing, is such a minor detail that he is virtually undetectable, which serves to accentuate his smallness in contrast not only to the building, but to the world at large. The smallness of the wording visually reinforces the

dwarfing of the narrator by the larger world. The picture does create an emotional impact, but one that is made possible only by first reading the text.

It goes without saying that a great many comic books rely heavily on text to tell the story. Alan Moore is widely considered one of the greatest living comics writers, and his stories are notoriously wordy. Watchmen, generally considered his finest work, relies on text so heavily that each chapter is followed by between two and six pages of prose.¹² This is not to say, of course, that text is primary to Watchmen, but should be understood as having equal narrative “weight” with the images.

Lawrence L. Abbott takes the opposite view of Barry, stating that “the medium is a narrative one, in which the pictorial is perhaps best thought of as para-literary” (176). It is important to note that while comics is predominantly a narrative medium, this is a historical development rather than an intrinsic quality of the form. If you’ll refer back to Figure 1.1, you will find an example of a comic that defies this convention by being decidedly non-narrative. This page from Robert Crumb’s Zap Comix #1, entitled “Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics,” can be read as an attempt to frustrate readers’ expectations by refusing to tell a story. The only text occurs in the title and the nonsense syllables “spa” and “fon.” In this instance, the pictures clearly seem to play the dominant role. However, it might be argued that the interpretation of the sequence is made possible only by its title. The title simultaneously anticipates and shapes the audience’s interpretation of the images. That is, Crumb knows that the terms “abstract,” “expressionist,” and “modernistic” will inevitably be used to describe his

¹² It should be noted that each of these sections is framed as a an excerpt from some other text. As such, each section contains some visual elements to add to the illusion, such as the file folder tab, the paper-clipped mug shot, and the institutional letterhead identifying one prose section as Rorschach’s psychological profile.

work, yet the addition of the words “ultra” and “super” lend a satirical tone that prevents the reader from looking too deeply for meaning. The label also serves to undermine its own quality of abstraction by explicitly telling the viewer how to interpret the piece, rather than conforming to the modernist ideal of art as pure image, endlessly open to interpretation. Thus, it can be seen that even in a piece where text is a minimal element of design, it can have a huge influence on the way the images are interpreted. As ever, Crumb’s work here is an anomaly; it purposely undermines the conventions of the comics form, forcing the reader to reconsider his preconceived notions of the medium. However, does Abbott’s assertion about the primacy of text apply to narrative comics?

Abbott recognizes that either words or pictures can alternately take the lead role in moving the story forward, but he warns that “the demands placed on drawings are quite stringent [. . .] the drawings must generate a ‘visual text’ that can be read without ambiguity” (166). To Abbott, pictures act as a mere extension of the text. However, this claim operates on the assumption that words, rather than images, are the “proper” medium of storytelling. To take the opposite view, one might say that when the text drives the story forward, it is merely acting as a “verbal image.” It seems that either argument depends on one’s preformed answer to the question of which sign system is primary to comics. That is, Abbott is essentially saying that text is primary to comics because text is primary to comics.

Abbott further argues that “the reader’s perception of the picture is ordered by the text; the text both creates and controls the illusion of running time, the ‘duration’ of every scene” (165). In other words, the time it takes to read lines of text is precisely what makes a panel seem to exist in time, rather than being perceived as a merely static image.

Thus, picture becomes subordinate to text. At the level of the single panel, Abbott's assertion seems to be sound, however, at the level of a sequence of panels, his argument falls apart. The illusion of time can be created entirely by the pictures in a sequence.

Firstly, the action depicted from one panel to the next has a significant role in determining the pace of a sequence. For instance, a two-panel sequence might depict a man running down a hallway, while the second panel shows him jumping through a plate-glass window at the end of the hall. This sequence signals that events are taking place very quickly. However, if the same subject were depicted in a five panel sequence with three additional panels of the man running inserted into the middle, it would stretch the time frame out, accentuating the time it took that character to run down this obviously lengthy hallway. This same sequence could achieve a slow motion effect by showing very little change in the positions of the man's limbs from one panel to the next (McCloud 101).

Secondly, the shape and size of a panel, in relation to its surrounding panels, can affect how the audience perceives a comic's time frame. A panel stretched horizontally can add to the duration of a scene, especially when the panels surrounding it are not as wide (McCloud 101). Vertically stretched panels suggest a more staccato rhythm, and are generally used during fast-paced action sequences. Admittedly, the time frame of any of these sequences will be altered by the addition of text, but the text's influence on pacing is hardly enough to justify the claim that it is primary to comics.

At this point, it is necessary to address comics in which the narrative is advanced solely through pictures. Obviously some sequences in traditional comics are rendered without any text whatsoever, but there also exist comics with no words at all. The very

existence of wordless comics suggests that it is the pictures that are primary to the form, since narratives without words can still be considered comics, whereas narratives without pictures are considered prose. David A. Berona's examination of "wordless" comics deals primarily with four works: Milt Gross's He Done Her Wrong, Hendrick Dorgathen's Space Dog, Eric Drooker's Flood, and Peter Kruper's Eye of the Beholder. While each of these works claims to be "wordless," Berona is careful to note that each of them contains some text, what I have referred to as environmental text.

Gross's He Done Her Wrong includes a movie theater marquee advertising a film entitled "Fate." This intention of the text, in this case, is not simply to render a realistic environment, but to comment on the story told in pictures. The sign itself comes between the protagonist and his love interest, preventing them from seeing each other passing on the street, and thus reuniting. The message here is that fate came between the two characters, a message that could have been achieved without the intervention of words, but their presence makes this meaning explicit (Berona 25). In Space Dog, environmental text, such as signs reading "dog shelter" and "NASA," provide anchorage for readers by labeling otherwise unidentifiable settings and institutions (Berona 28). Flood features a posting of job listings, all of which the protagonist is unqualified for (Berona 33). Without text identifying the paper as being a list of jobs, the reader would have no frame of reference for the character's despair. Finally, Eye of the Beholder contains environmental text in the form of newspaper headlines, posters, computer and ATM screens, and television, all of which prove indispensable in moving the story forward (Berona 36). As we can see, none of these "wordless" comics is truly wordless.

All of these artists set out to tell stories entirely in pictures, and the presence of text of any sort in each of them indicates the difficulty of achieving such a task.

In addition to environmental text, two of the four works examined (He Done Her Wrong and Space Dog), include “picture balloons” to indicate either speech or thought. Space Dog is an especially interesting experiment, because it attempts to tell the story of a dog who learns to speak, without using words. Speech proves to be so integral to the storyline, in fact, that the majority of the panels use picture balloons to represent speech. Figure 3.13 demonstrates a typical use of picture balloons in Space Dog.

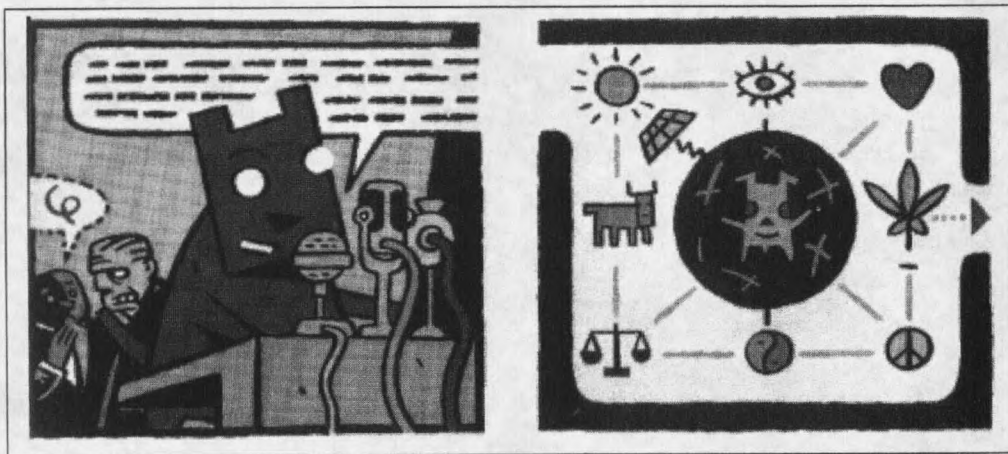


Fig. 3.13. Hendrick Dorgathen. Space Dog. (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993); rpt. in Robin Varnum & Christina T. Gibbons, The Language of Comics: Word and Image (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 31.

Notice that in the first panel, Space Dog's speech is represented only by lines of differing lengths, approximating the rhythm of spoken language, but not revealing the contents of the speech. This “speech” balloon is left open at the right of the panel to

indicate that it continues into a second panel, where the contents of the spoken message are revealed using symbols.

The meaning of these symbols is only fully realized in the context of the story, which concerns Space Dog's encounter with a race of dog-like aliens who teach him to speak, and relate to him the ways of their utopian planet. In the scene depicted in figure 3.13, Space Dog is holding a press conference at the United Nations, detailing a plan for Earth to emulate the ways of the aliens. The picture balloon's central image depicts one of the aliens superimposed on its planet. The surrounding ideograms relate the ideas of solar power, higher consciousness, love, the cultivation of hemp, peace, spirituality, justice, and an abundant food supply being central to the alien culture (Berona 30). While Dorgathen relates these ideas without using actual words, it is apparent that text plays an important role in the narrative, even though indirectly.

It should be clear from these examples that text informs the reading of even "wordless" comics. Though the words may be eliminated from such comics, the need for them is not. Thus, the artist of a wordless comic must resort to a kind of creative gymnastics to imply words without actually using them. If this can lead to a unique and interesting reading experience, it can also seem contrived and difficult. If I may offer a value judgment, wordless comics seem, to me, to be in opposition to the very spirit of comics. In life, our perception of reality depends on both visual and verbal stimuli. The main advantage of the comics medium is that it can, perhaps more than any other print medium, approximate reality as it is experienced by human beings. Our reality involves the constant interplay of the sights we see and the words we hear and read. By not taking

advantage of the full potential of the medium to represent reality, artists take away a good deal of its power.

Even if a comic contains no words of any sort, purging it of the influence of words remains an impossibility, since, as Mitchell has noted, every image is fraught with textuality. Human consciousness itself involves both verbal and visual thought, and the interpretation of a wordless narrative will doubtless involve words, if only mentally. In order to comprehend a story told through pictures, we will doubtless have to retell ourselves the story verbally just to comprehend it.

Here again, comics displays its "in-betweenness," as it can be classified as neither a primarily visual nor primarily verbal form. Nor is it a perfectly balanced combination of text and image. Ideally, each sign system would contribute equally to the telling of the story, but this perfect balance proves as elusive as the definition of comics. In a specific comic book or sequence, one system usually ends up dominating the other, with either words or images conveying the bulk of the meaning and moving the story forward. Different creators utilize the form differently, and the primacy of either system can only be determined on a case by case basis, not in the medium as a whole.

Image as Text/Text as Image

In this section I show how, in some instances, text can be considered a pictorial element, and conversely, how images can take on the properties of text. The previous chapter enumerating the types of text and the types of image/text interaction has already established some of these ways. Sound effects must be considered words, for instance, but they also act as pictorial elements by being integrated into the design of the image.

Montage combinations of image and text work similarly, as text is treated as an integral part of the image.

I made the assertion earlier that while wordless comics are possible, pictureless comics are not. Now I would like to call this assumption into question. Although I've never encountered a pictureless comic, this does not preclude the possibility of one's being produced, as I have demonstrated by creating one (see fig. 3.14). Leaving aside the question of whether panels can be considered a pictorial element (that will be considered in a later section), we can see that my comic is composed entirely of words. A prose version of the story would read like this: A person reaches for an apple, picks it up, and takes a bite out of it (panels 1-3). A worm emerges from the apple, grows to enormous size, forms a mouth, bites a chunk out of the person's head, and smiles (panels 4-8). I have refrained from writing the words in such a way as to suggest the shapes they represent, so as to prevent the argument that the words actually become a pictorial element. However, making such an argument is still entirely possible.

Firstly, the words are not arranged in sequential order as in prose. Instead, they are positioned to correspond to the placement of the objects that they replace. Their meaning derives not from their being read in any prescribed order, but by their spatial position in relation to the other words. Also note that in typical prose, words run horizontally in a continuous line. Here, the shift from horizontal to diagonal placement (as in the case of "Arm") conveys motion, mimicking the actual, physical shape and movement of the arm and its spatial relation to both body and head. In prose, all words are typically rendered in the same font size. Even when this is not the case, a word written in a larger typeface indicates that special emphasis should be placed on it, and

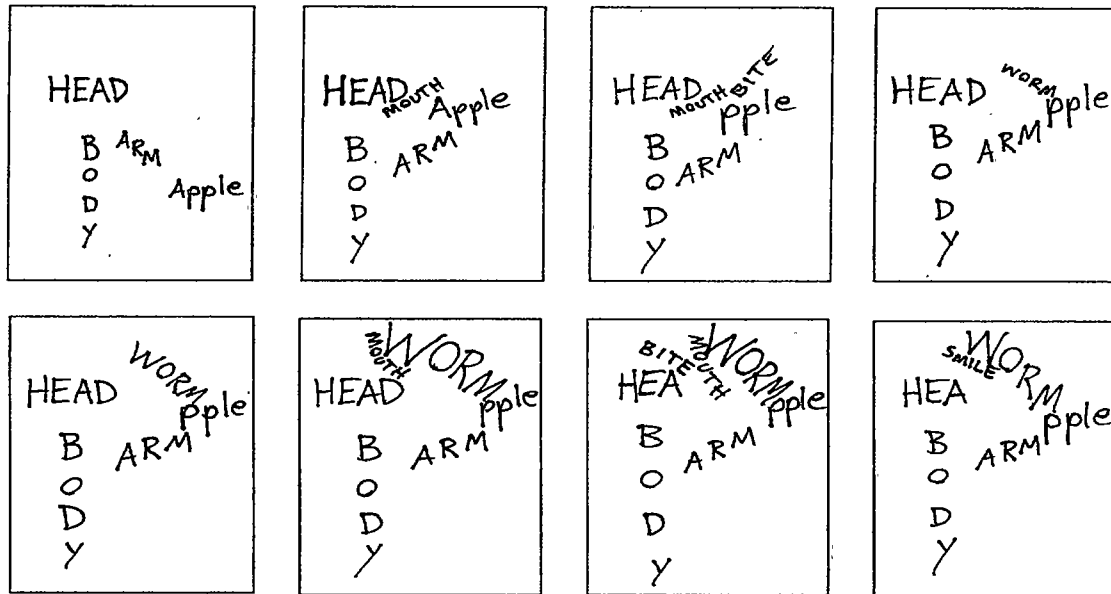


Fig. 3.14. Robert C. Marvin. 2003.

usually implies that it is to be spoken (aloud or mentally) at a higher volume. In this comic, the size of a word (particularly "Worm") corresponds to the physical size of the object it replaces. Lastly, the words "pple" and "Hea" have no meaning in themselves. Their meaning can be deduced only in the context of the sequence. The word "pple," of course, replaces "Apple" when the action word "Bite" comes between "Apple" and "Mouth." Thus we can deduce that "pple" refers to an apple with a bite taken out of it, and similarly, "Hea" refers to a head with a bite taken out of it.

It can be seen that even when only words are used in comics, they are not read as words; they are read as images. Hopefully this example has reinforced Mitchell's claim that the gap between words and images is not as wide as we'd like to believe, and has brought a new clarity to McCloud's phrase: "Meaning retained. Resemblance gone.

Words--are the ultimate abstraction" (Understanding Comics 47).

Chris Ware's "Quimby the Mouse," serves as a prime example of montage interaction, as the composition of the page is largely dependent on textual elements (see fig. 3.15). As Gene Kannenberg observes,

[. . .] text and image enlighten each other without one system dominating the other; the juxtaposition of disparate elements cannot be separated without fundamentally altering the piece; and text is used as a visual element every bit as illustrative as the images, allowing for an integration of verbal and visual narrative (178).

The entire top third of the page is dominated by large, boldly lettered words. The pictorial element is minimal, consisting of a few images of Quimby, actually smaller than the letters, interacting with the text. The first image of Quimby pictures him standing atop the word "I'm," tossing out a shower of money to reinforce the idea of his being "a Very Generous Person." In this case, the picture is subordinate to the words, elaborating them, but adding nothing new. The second picture of Quimby shows him affixing the letter "T" to the first statement by using the letter "T" in "but" as a nail, further demonstrating the interdependence of words and text in the page. After reading the words "I can't stand," the reader has a choice of directions in which to continue. If the eye follows the image of Quimby struggling for footing, the text follows downward, reading "I can't stand Being Alone." Thus, the slipping figure of Quimby suggests that this is the thought he would rather not think, and he has accidentally let his mind slip, betraying his subconscious fears. Alternately, if the eye follows the text instead, the sentence reads, "I can't stand Being Around You Anymore." Kannenberg points out that the backward lettering indicates Quimby's dishonesty, as revealed by the other backward

line “Yeah, I’m sort of Busy Right Now,” which reiterates his lie to Sparky (the character on the other end of the phone). The figure of Quimby accompanying “I can’t stand Being Around You Anymore” is on the verge of falling off the roof’s peak, a trajectory that would follow the next line of text “You Make Me happy Sometimes though... I Guess...” Again, the downward motion of the text represents the failure of Quimby’s resolve to distance himself from Sparky

Clearly, the use of text in this page is highly sophisticated, revealing that Ware puts at least as much effort into the presentation of text as he does image. Further, the text here invades the physical space of the image, actually becoming part of the physical space, as evidenced by Quimby’s interaction with it. The text is easily the most dynamic and eye-catching element of the page, thus serving a function normally reserved for the picture. The images, by contrast, are small and very simply rendered. Most of the panels depict Quimby sitting at a desk and talking on the telephone, with very little difference between one panel and the next—hardly a dynamic use of imagery. Quimby himself is little more than a stick figure, almost a pictograph. Ware himself admits that the simplicity of his drawing style is an attempt to make the pictures function more like text:

You’ve got a drawing of a car, you can’t make it too specific because then it becomes too much of a drawing and then it doesn’t work within a circumstance where you’re ‘reading’ the pictures. I try to balance that by making the pictures look cold and dead, like typography. (Kannenbergs 53)

The idea that comics illustration is best when simplified is echoed by C. C. Beck, former supervisor of the D.C. title, Captain Marvel. He says, “There was seldom, in Captain Marvel stories especially, any ‘beautiful artwork’ I believed that readers saw



Fig. 3.15. Chris Ware. Acme Novelty Library #4. (Tamarac: Fantagraphics Books, 1995); rpt. in Robin Varnum & Christina T. Gibbons, The Language of Comics: Word and Image (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 179.

our pictures only out of the corners of their eyes while reading the copy" (qtd. in Abbott 171). While this is only one school of thought on comics aesthetics, it is telling that Beck views pictures as a kind of visual shorthand, the main purpose of which was not to be scrutinized, but to speed the storytelling process. Beck sees comics images as a substitute for verbal descriptions, something to be "read."

Ware's Quimby emotes mainly through posture, resembling, to an extent, Will Eisner's "Micro-dictionary of gestures" (see fig. 3.16). Eisner explains, "In comic book art, the artist must draw upon personal observations and an inventory of gestures, common and comprehensible to the reader. In effect, the artist must work from a 'dictionary' of human gestures" (101). In this way, comics images can be said to take on a property of verbal language; that is, they become, to some extent, a differentiated system with a finite number of characters.¹³ Furthermore, it must be remembered that in reality, gestures involve movement. In a drawing, this movement must be implied using a single moment (Eisner 106). It is clear, then, that the gestures depicted in Eisner's "micro-dictionary" are products, not only of human convention (the gesture itself), but also pictorial convention (the signifying moment). Thus, they achieve the status of symbols. Ware's Quimby certainly operates in this way. He is perhaps even more simplified than the figures in Eisner's "micro-dictionary", and consequently has a limited number of recognizable postures to convey his emotional state. More detailed characters can emote not only through gesture and posture, but through facial expression, though this too can be considered something of a differentiated system with a limited number of

¹³ Of course, these characters retain their status as a continuous system, because these stock postures can be filled in with an infinite amount of variation.

recognizable signs. The style of rendering, of course, adds to the meaning of the facial expression, but in comics, the same can be said of the style of lettering.



Fig. 3.16. Will Eisner. Comics & Sequential Art. p. 102. 1985. Poorhouse Press.

The idea of a vocabulary of pictures can extend beyond the realm of gesture and facial expressions to depicted objects. As noted in Chapter One, certain objects carry symbolic meaning. Alan Moore uses this principle in his series, Promethea. Moore's knowledge of occult symbolic systems, such as the tarot and the Kabbalistic "Tree of

Life,” provides him with a ready-made system of pictorial symbols. For instance, the appearance of swords, wands, cups, or disks (or their corresponding elements: air, fire, water, and earth) indicates the ideas of rationality, spirituality, emotion, or material existence, respectively.

It can thus be seen that in comics, perhaps more than anywhere else, text can function as image and vice versa. One might pose the question, “Are there other media in which this happens?” The answer is, undoubtedly, yes. Poster art, for instance, often includes lettering that borders on image, as do magazine layouts, advertisements, film title sequences, album covers, etc.—in short, almost any medium in which image and text are combined. Certain forms of poetry also use words and letters as a pictorial element, such as ekphrastic and concrete poetry (Cluver 13). As for images that function as words, one need look no further than the nearest “pedestrian crossing” sign. The idea that these uses of text and image are not unique to the medium of comics seems to support the argument that it is simply a hybrid formed by crossing verbal and visual languages. However, there are certain signs that are unique to comics, ones which are not easily categorized as either text or image. These signs will be discussed in the next section.

The Unique Signs of Comics: Panels, Balloons, & Visual Metaphors

Comics is commonly classified as a medium that combines the two elements of image and text to create meaning. However, as Richard Saint-Gelais points out,

Any single page from a comic book presents, in fact, not only writing and illustrations [. . .], but also a plethora of signs bordering between icons and symbols (stars symbolizing a physical impact, horizontal lines indicating the speed of a movement, etc.), without considering the battery of metasemiotic indices such as the balloons ('attention, text!') or the panels ('attention, picture!').

(qtd in Khordoc 172)

Indeed, there exists a vocabulary of signs in comics that can neither be considered iconic, because they represent invisible phenomena which they cannot be said to resemble, nor fully symbolic, as they are not completely differentiated, that is, a convention such as motion lines is a continuous system, because every minute variation in thickness or contour carries semantic potential, making them operate as images.

Scott McCloud argues that such "visual metaphors" are more properly considered language than image. He uses the example of a set of wavy lines emanating from a pipe, and another hovering over a trash can. These very similar sets of markings are, in fact, quite different, because one represents a visual phenomenon (smoke) making it a picture, while the other represents an invisible phenomenon (smell), making it a symbol, and as McCloud tells us, "symbols are the basis of language" (Understanding Comics 128). One must also consider, however, that these lines gain their meaning only through interaction with other pictorial elements; the meaning of the wavy lines can only be determined by their spatial relation to other objects. Consider these same wavy lines placed above a character's head in a panel featuring a brightly shining sun. In this case, identical lines would indicate heat rather than smoke or smell, a meaning which can be determined only

through other objects depicted and the spatial relations between these signs. Thus, these markings can be said to fall somewhere in between image and language.

Also consider Figure 3.17, in which McCloud's cartoon alter-ego introduces a number of conventional "visual metaphors." With the exception of panel 4, the meaning of each of these "visual metaphors" depends on other objects in the picture plane. Panels 5, 6, and 7 each depend on facial expression to complete their meaning. The lightening shaped lines emanating from the hand would have very different meaning were the character grinning maniacally rather than wincing; we might instead determine that his hand had gained some sort of electrical super-power. Perhaps then, the sign consists not only of the arbitrary lines, but their use in conjunction with particular expressions or objects. If this is the case, such signs can still be considered as hovering somewhere between icon and symbol, the markings being symbolic (no resemblance), while the expressions or objects are iconic (resembling what they signify).

The other conventions of comics which are not easily classified as either icons or symbols are, of course, panels and balloons. Panels are, most often, rectangular boxes enclosing a scene, and usually its text as well. However, more creative uses of the convention shows that they can also add meaning to a sequence by utilizing different shapes, sizes, and line styles, by taking on the appearance of the scenes they contain, or by their absence. Will Eisner has made the claim for panel borders as a "language," by noting that differing appearances of panels take on certain conventionalized meaning. For instance, a straight-forward rectangular panel border, he says, generally indicates the present tense, while a wavy or scalloped border often denotes a flashback (44). He does note, however, that there is no "universally agreed upon convention for expressing tense



Fig. 3.17. Scott McCloud. Understanding Comics. (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993) 129.

through the outline of the frame” (44), which indicates it is a language in the same sense that images are; that is, they represent a variety of possible meanings rather than a single, definite message.

McCloud argues that the “meaning” of a panel is neither fixed, as it is in a symbol, nor “fluid and malleable” as it is in a picture; a panel should be instead understood as a “general indicator that time or space is being divided” (Understanding Comics 99). Further, he suggests that the shape of a panel cannot be said to have a

specific “meaning,” although it does affect the reading experience (Understanding Comics 99). This point is well taken, as the “meaning” of the panel is entirely dependent upon its contents. However, it could also be argued that the meaning of a scene can be altered by the shape, size, and line style of the panel. For instance, the contents of a panel might depict a character’s face and a word balloon reading, “Okay, I’ll do it.” If we assume the expression on the character’s face is somewhat neutral, the size of the panel can create different meanings for the text. If the panel is the same size as the preceding panels, it may indicate that the character has no strong feelings regarding his decision. However, if the panel is a great deal larger than the preceding ones, it will give the words special emphasis and might indicate that this decision is an especially poignant moment in the story, or it might indicate the character’s resolve. Conversely, if the panel is much smaller than the preceding ones, the effect will likely be to indicate that the character has some reservations regarding the decision, or that he feels diminished by being forced into a course of action he otherwise would not have chosen. A bold, straight panel border could also indicate the character’s resolve, while an irregular, broken border would indicate reluctance.

It could be argued that a panel operates as text, as it does not resemble its referent, but carries a specific meaning; it says, “this is a new division of time or space, a new unit of information.” It could likewise be argued that a panel border functions as a pictorial element, since it is a continuous system, able to generate infinite connotations based on the style, shape, and size of its rendering.¹⁴ At the same time, panels don’t operate

¹⁴ It is also important to note that a panel border can actually be part of the picture. A doorframe, or any type of barrier natural to the physical space of the scene, might be used as a panel border.

exactly like either system. Generally, a border can't be said to resemble anything, and it has no independent meaning; that is, no meaning that is not created in relation to other elements of the page.

Balloons operate in much the same way as panels, except that they serve as a boundary between the text and the picture plane, as well as the link between them (Khordoc 156-7). Catherine Khordoc states:

Even before reading the text in the balloon, the reader receives information from the position of the balloon in the panel, and even more immediately, from the simple presence of the balloon. It gives the signal that a character is speaking, and more specifically, in the first-person. (159).

It is this message, she says, that makes it function as a form of text, because "the balloon does not simply signal the presence of text, it actually implies the message, 'I'm speaking'" (160).

Like panels, balloons can also be considered a pictorial element. Just as in panels, the line style, the shape, and, to some extent, the size of the balloon each determine how the contained dialogue is to be interpreted. Additionally, color can play an important role in the interpretation of dialogue balloons, as demonstrated in figure 3.18, from Neil Gaiman's Sandman: Brief Lives.

One obvious function of color, in these balloons, is to differentiate one speaker from another. This becomes especially useful when a character is not pictured, but has dialogue in a scene. Additionally, both color and line style can indicate the tone and sound of the speaker's voice. In the first panel of figure 3.18, Dream's irregularly-shaped, black dialogue balloons indicate a speaking voice that is inhuman, one which is

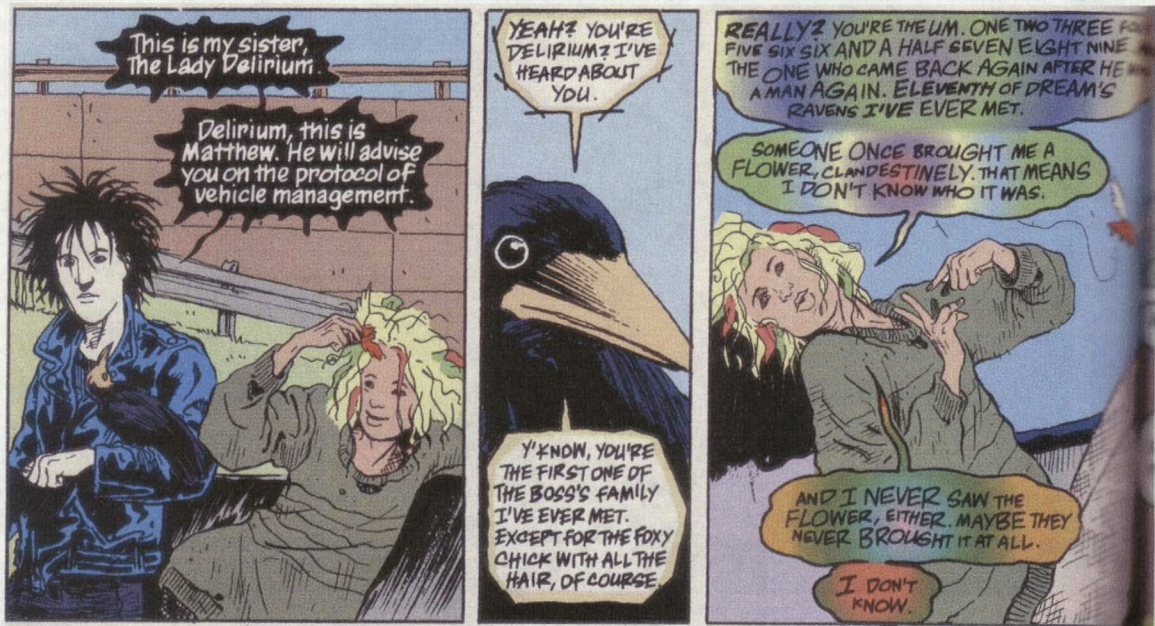


Fig. 3.18. Neil Gaiman and Jill Thompson. *Brief Lives* (New York: DC Comics, 1995)

5.6.

cold, distant, and unsettling. The balloons of Matthew the raven in panel 2 appear to be roughly pieced together and ugly, suggesting the quality of a raven's voice (if it spoke English). Panel 3 features the character Delirium, whose word balloons are cloud-like and erratically colored, suggesting her tone to be somewhat dreamy and subject to frequent changes. The appearance of these balloons not only indicates the sound of the speakers' voices, but also reflects their characters. Dream is unapproachable, Matthew is unrefined, and Delirium is, as might be guessed, unstable. It should be obvious from these examples that dialogue balloons can function as a part of the imagery. But, like panels, balloons take on some of the qualities of both text and image, but properly belong in neither category.

It is clear that the “metasemiotic indices” of panels and balloons do not constitute a full system of communication. A page filled only with panel borders or balloons stripped of both content and context cannot create a cohesive text, much less refer to the experiential world. Word balloons might be considered an extension of visual language, as they function similarly to “visual metaphors,” gaining their meaning from their relation to other pictorial elements. However, they can also be seen as an extension of verbal language, as their meaning both depends on the verbal messages they contain, and exert influence over the way those verbal messages are read.

To say that none of the unique signs of comics constitute a unique language in themselves, however, is not necessarily to say that the medium of comics does not. These signs do not appear by themselves in comics, but interact with both image and text to create a cohesive whole. Whether the combination of all the elements of comics constitutes a unique language, will be answered in the next section.

The Language of Comics: Hybrid Art Form or Discrete Language?

It is helpful, at this point, to include a summary of the various points made throughout this paper to provide a framework with which to address the question of whether comics can be considered a unique language, or a hybrid art form. In the first chapter, I drew mainly from the works of W. J. T. Mitchell and Richard Sinatra to examine the nature of the image and differentiate it from text. The important points to consider here are: (1) Image and text serve essentially the same function: to communicate thought and represent reality as it is experienced by human beings, (2) Both words and images not only communicate reality, but shape our perceptions of reality, as neither

system can be considered “transparent,” (3) Visual language cannot fully be explained using the linguistic model, because while both system can say the same sorts of things, they say them differently, (4) Although images resemble their signified and words do not, one system cannot be considered more “natural” than the other, as both are learned human artifacts (5) Images are continuous signs, while words are differentiated signs, (6) Reading relies on a different hemisphere of the brain than does viewing; however, there is considerable hemispheric cross-over in processing either system, (7) Every act of viewing involves language, and every act of reading involves mental imagery, and (8) The differences between image and text are not absolute, and the gap between them is not as wide as is commonly believed.

The important points from Chapter Two include: (1) Text does not serve one, but multiple functions in comics, (2) Text and Image do not interact in the same manner in every comics panel or sequence, (3) Sometimes text creates the bulk of the meaning in a comics panel or sequence, sometimes image does, and sometimes they work together to create meaning that neither could achieve on its own, and (4) Neither image nor text can claim primacy in comics as a medium; they can only do so on a case by case basis. (5) In comics, text can function as image, and vice versa, (6) There are certain signs in comics that can be classified neither as image nor text, and (7) These conventions unique to comics do not qualify as a unique language on their own, but only gain meaning in the context of comics.

Let us begin by asking, how does the brain process information when reading a work that is both verbal and visual? Sinatra offers no answers for us here, but I think we can formulate some basic principles. Since verbal and visual messages both depend on

vision in comics, it follows that one cannot read both simultaneously; one must follow the other (Cioffi 98). This claim is supported by Abbott's "schematic drawing of likely eye movements" (see fig. 3.19) when reading Roy Lichtenstein's Eddie Diptych, (see fig. 3.20) a painting that utilizes the conventions of comics (160-1).

As we can see, the eyes generally move first to the central image of the panel, then to the first line of text. The text is read according to Western conventions (left to right, top to bottom), and then the eyes move to the dialogue, and then to the image of the speaker, presumably to scrutinize and interpret her facial expression. The eyes then shift to the next dialogue balloon, take a final look at the image, and continue to the next panel (assuming that there is one). By shifting back and forth between image and text, the reader can grasp how the meaning of one informs the other. Because of the intricate relationships formed between image and text, one must constantly refer back and forth to make all the connections, rather than reading all of the text, then the image.



Fig. 3.19. Lawrence.L. Abbot. Journal of Popular Culture. 1998.



Fig. 3.20. Roy Lichtenstein. Eddie Diptych. 1962.

As Sinatra pointed out, reading and viewing are different brain processes. Though they are interconnected, a different hemisphere dominates during each. Thus, reading comics requires some mental gymnastics to negotiate between the two sign systems. The mind grasps the image holistically, while reading words takes time, causing a gap between the cognition of one and the next (Cioffi 98). It is because of this gap that humor, or disjunction, can occur (Harvey 81, Cioffi 98). Robert C. Harvey explains this process during the reading of a “gag cartoon”:

The picture sidles into a reader’s consciousness as a kind of visual puzzle, meaningless until reading the caption ‘explains’ it. The picture likewise ‘explains’ the caption [...] as comprehension dawns—in a flash of an instant—the humor is revealed, and the revelation, coming, as it does, suddenly, gives comic impact to the combined ‘meaning’ of the visual-verbal blend. In effect, the

joke's impact derives from the 'surprise' that is sprung upon the reader when he or she understands the full import of the picture or the caption. (81)

Though Harvey speaks specifically of humorous image-text combinations, I believe this principle applies to all of comics. The devastating effect of Chris Ware's panel from Jimmy Corrigan, works on this same principle (see Fig. 3.14). The 'surprise' revealed by reading the text brings a whole new meaning to picture, but instead of humor, the flash of understanding induces a kind of emotional shock. Likewise, Robert Crumb's comics depend on this gap in cognition by setting up one set of expectations with the image, then undermining them with the text (Cioffi 111). Indeed, the power and pleasure of comics comes from precisely this moment, when the mind connects the message of the image with the message of the words to form a complete meaning. This is the reason comics writers strive to achieve interdependent combinations of words and picture above all other types of image/text interaction, because it simply has the greatest impact on the reader.

What conclusions can we draw from this principle? Firstly, comics depends on the differing nature of its sign systems for its impact. Secondly, this impact depends not on keeping the sign systems separate, but fusing them mentally to create a larger whole. In terms of our overarching question, these two principles lead to different conclusions. On one hand, comics should be considered a hybrid form, because it depends on the separateness of its component parts. On the other hand, comics should be considered a unique language because the greater meaning depends on connecting its component parts. It is also important to note that not all panels or sequences use image/text interaction to its full potential. In word specific and picture specific combinations, remember, this

“greater meaning” is never achieved. These combinations deny the possibility of this sudden flash of understanding, because one sign system dominates, generating a largely complete meaning in itself. So while comics, at its best, depends equally on both systems to create meaning, this is not always the case. The implication of this idea is that when one system tends to dominate a comic, it acts more like a hybrid art form, and when image and text interdepend, it acts more as a discrete language.

Let us also consider instances where text functions as image, and vice versa. I propose that in the case of text as image, the reading process remains similar to when both image and text function in a straightforward manner. When text is highly stylized or incorporated into the overall design of the image, as it is in Chris Ware’s “Quimby the Mouse” (see Fig. 3.13), the imagistic qualities are grasped first. The reader sees the shape of the text design and its pictorial qualities first, then comprehends the message of the words, and finally relates the two. While this happens very quickly, it is not simultaneous. However, the process is somewhat different when image functions as text, because the reader does not have to process any words. Indeed, the reader is probably not even aware that the image comes from a stock of ready-made gestures or facial expressions. Even when image functions as text, it also retains its qualities as an image and is read as such. However, the very fact that each can function as the other blurs the line between the two sign systems. In comics, it is often difficult to separate the two, suggesting that the medium, in these cases, must be considered a discrete language, since the two differing systems fuse into a seamless whole. Once again, it must be noted, however, that this is not always the case; in fact, it is the exception. Generally, image and text in comics are easily distinguished from one another, and even when they are not,

it is possible to examine the textual and imagistic qualities of text or image separately.

One might argue that one cannot analyze image and text separately, because the total meaning is created by both. Yet, image and text are analyzed separately all the time, and while it is ill-advised to examine one without considering the other, it is often necessary for the analyst to consider each separately before bringing them back together to discuss total meaning. Thus, a comic that uses text as a pictorial element, or vice versa, seems to act as a discrete language, whereas a comic that keeps text and image largely separate functions as more of a hybrid form. The fact that text and image can be analyzed separately suggests that comics is a hybrid, while grasping the total meaning requires both to be considered indicates that it is a unique language.

The existence of signs unique to comics that, so to speak, bridge the gap between image and text by containing qualities of both, seems to be the strongest argument for comics as a discrete language. After all, one can know how to read a book and how to interpret an image, or even a series of images, but still not know how to read a comic book because of unfamiliarity with the form's unique conventions. Panels, balloons, and "visual metaphors" may be found in places other than comics (for instance, the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein), but these are cases of the language of comics being co-opted by other media. The existence of unique signs further indicates that comics cannot simply be defined as a medium that combines text and images, but one that combines words, images, and its own unique set of signs. Thus, it must be a language all its own. The weakness of this argument is that it does not take into account that the unique conventions of comics are just that, conventions. A comics creator can choose not to use them, and still create comics. Panels, balloons, and conventionalized "visual metaphors"

are certainly features of most comics, but they are in no way essential to the form. Some of the most celebrated early French comics artists¹⁵ did not use panels, balloons (or even words), or the “visual metaphors” common today. Rather than motion lines, they used representative moments to indicate a body in motion, as is common in paintings; instead of panels, they used repetitive sequences displayed without separation. Their comics, while they cannot be considered a unique language, cannot even be considered a hybrid form, as they are wordless. Yet, they are still considered comics, indicating that the very question this paper has undertaken to answer, does not apply to all works labeled as comics.

Furthermore, if we accept Mitchell’s assertion that there is a visual element to every act of reading, and a verbal one in every act of viewing, we might conclude that every form of expression is a hybrid form, or as Mitchell himself puts it, “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts [. . .]” (Picture Theory 5). When viewed from this angle, the question of whether comics is a hybrid or discrete language doesn’t even make sense. In Mitchell’s view, there are no unique languages, because each expressive mode interdepends on every other mode.

Clearly, comics cannot be classified as a strictly hybrid art form or an entirely discrete “language,” which leaves us in the position to question the debate itself. Why, we should ask, must we form a binary opposition between comics as a hybrid form or a discrete language? That it remains such a highly debated and unresolved issue indicates that the answer probably lies somewhere in between the opposing sides. Rather than

¹⁵ Specifically Adolphe Willette, Theophile-Alexandre Steinlen, and Emil Reinecke.

thinking in terms of binary oppositions, it may help to think of “hybrid form” and “discrete language” as opposite sides of a continuum. Comics as a medium does not necessarily fit into one box or the other, but certain panels and sequences, or even entire works, may fall under any point in the spectrum. A specific comic book might rely equally on image, text, and the signs unique to comics, and thus it would belong closer to the “discrete language” side of the spectrum. Conversely, a sequence might rely heavily on image, using words only as sound effects, and thus would be placed nearer the “hybrid form” end of this continuum. Clearly, the comics form subverts every attempt to pigeonhole it, and resists binary opposition, being a thoroughly “in-between” art form.

Comics as a Discrete Language: The Bid for Power

One might well ask, “Who cares whether comics is a hybrid form or a discrete language?” After all, declaring it one or the other does not increase the pleasure of reading comics, just as leaving the issue unresolved does not hinder the narrative from unfolding. Comics fans, and a good many creators, could frankly care less about this theoretical matter. Why, then, does the question come up in so many academic articles? In my introduction, I proposed that the increase in academic attention to graphic literature resulted directly from comics’ decreased popularity. While to say this is the only reason would be reductive, as the rise of cultural studies as a discipline, and postmodernism’s breaking down the barriers between high and low culture doubtless have a good deal to do with it. However, those scholars producing criticism of the medium are surely aware of the fragile state of the industry and have a vested interest in promoting it. The very fact that they are working with comic books, rather than simply reading them, indicates a

need to legitimize the form. Thus, all comics scholarship essentially functions as a bid for power. The hybrid/discrete debate, in particular, is no disinterested theoretical matter, but one with wide implication for comics both within the academy and without.

The long-held assumption has been that comics is a hybrid of graphic art and traditional literature, a label that accentuates the medium's "in-betweenness," which is the very quality that has made the form so troubling to mainstream American culture. The movement to classify comics as its own unique language, then, can be seen as an attempt earn the medium some respect. The label "discrete" implies unity, denying the form's problematic "in-between" nature, while calling it a "language" imbues the form with the respectability of prose and poetry. By declaring comics a new "language," scholars are effectively announcing the birth of an entirely new field, virtually uncharted territory in dire need of further academic scrutiny.

The reason, then, that the Hybrid-Discrete question matters, is that the way we answer it will, to some extent, determine comics' place in academia. If comics is considered a hybrid of literature and art, the medium will continue to be subsumed by both literature and art departments, where it must compete with the masterpieces of hundreds of years of literature and art history. There is not yet a "Shakespeare" or "Michelangelo" of the comics form, no central, canonized figure to lend the medium cultural power. The closest thing comics has to a central figure is Superman, whose iconic status speaks of pop culture, rather than intellectual currency.

On the other hand, if comics is determined to be a unique and discrete language, as many scholars would like, it would justify comics studies as a separate discipline altogether. While it is doubtful that many universities would create a new department to

house fledgling discipline, comics' status as a unique language might help to garner more respect within the establishment, and eventually lead to more employment opportunities for comics scholars

Both McCloud and Eisner note that scholarly attention to comics could have a profound effect on not only the public perception of comics, but on what type of comic books get published. Eisner states that "thoughtful pedagogical concern would provide a better climate for the production of more worthy subject content and the expansion of the medium as a whole," but notes that unless comics produces more highly literate work, it can't hope to earn such critical scrutiny (5). While academic attention alone will have only a limited impact on the actual creation of high quality work in the genre, it can help to change public perception of the medium, and perhaps win it a wider readership. With such a dismal estimated North American readership, comics needs all the help it can get. Because the current audience is so insignificant, the creation of a new, academically-oriented readership could have a major influence on the industry. If the sales of thoughtful, highly literate works increases, companies will respond by seeking out and publishing more innovative and challenging work.

If comics' status as a unique language can benefit both its position in academia and its public perception, and possibly improve the quality of titles offered, why, then, would some comics scholars choose to argue against comics being a unique language? To some extent, simply to open up the medium to closer institutional scrutiny. The more debates about the form, and the more academic articles published about it, the stronger the argument becomes that comics is a sophisticated art form and one worthy of scholarly attention. It might also be seen as a personal bid for power; that is, academics need to

identify areas of contention in order to publish articles on them. However, the reason may be as simple as genuinely disagreeing with the claim on theoretical grounds. I have argued that the debate itself cannot be resolved on formal grounds, and perhaps that is for the best. At the very least, the Hybrid/Discrete question is important if only because it perpetuates lively academic debate about comics.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMICS AS A SUBVERSIVE MEDIUM?

So far, I have argued that comics is a subversive medium which resists classification and defies binary thinking. To further demonstrate this idea, I'd like to demonstrate how the form evades even the attempt to classify it as subversive. First, I will enumerate historical examples of the medium's either subverting or supporting the status quo. Second, I will illustrate how a specific comic book, Warren Ellis's Transmetropolitan, can be used to support (or refute) both arguments.

To trace the history of comics subversion, proto-comics forms must first be considered. Roger Sabin points to British "broadsheets," dating back to at least the 17th century, as an early antecedent to modern comics. Broadsheets were single-page woodcut prints which were sold on the streets to a largely illiterate audience, although most broadsheets also contained words. The content of broadsheets usually involved religion or current affairs, and sheets commemorating public executions were especially popular (Sabin, Comics 11). While one might draw a connection between the gory beheadings depicted in broadsheets and similar scenes in early horror comics, societal standards dictate whether or not such content is subversive. In 1954, the cultural taboo against violence made horror comics a threat to the dominant social order. In fact, in that year, the image of a beheading from the cover of EC Comics Crime Suspense Stories proved particularly damning to the comics industry during the Kefauver hearings

(Nyberg 53).¹⁶ However, in 17th century England, though the execution broadsheets might have been judged distasteful, the content supported the current cultural ideal of social justice.

Broadsheets began to challenge the dominant order when producers discovered that the pictorial form lent itself to humorous content, and found an audience for political caricature and satire among the middle-class. Such cartoons were so subversive than they most often went unsigned for fear of retribution from the royalty and politicians they lampooned (Sabin Comics 12). Sabin notes that, "the history of this period is peppered with stories of cartoonists being imprisoned, attacked or even assassinated for going too far" (Comics 12).

Among the first comics periodicals, Punch continued the tradition of the broadsheets, focusing on political satire for a middle-class audience. Punch's imitators, on the other hand, focused on slapstick rather than political humor, often reprinting (without compensation) strips from foreign magazines to avoid paying local artists the meager wages such work merited. Ally Sloper's Half Holiday (1884), which Sabin identifies as the first "proper" comic book (a highly arguable assertion), introduced the first reoccurring character in comics: Alexander Sloper (Comics 15). Although the working-class Sloper may be read as a subversive figure, dodging rent collectors, drinking to excess, and being arrested for disorderly conduct, Sabin points out that "There was no implication of class war, or even the questioning of one's social superiors. The comic was thus not in the tradition of the radical broadsheets" (Comics 15). In the

¹⁶ Named for Senator Estes Kefauver, these hearings pitted the Senate subcommittee investigating juvenile delinquency against the comics industry, and were directly responsible for the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, which severely limited the allowable content in comics.

wake of Sloper's success, publishers launched a glut of titles on the same model. Known as the "Halfpenny Revolution," these new titles sold for half the price of existing comics papers, and corners were cut whenever possible. These periodicals, with their focus on unsophisticated slapstick humor, paved the way for, and in many cases became, children's comics, which took over the industry until roughly the 1970s (Sabin Comics 19).

Meanwhile, in America, political cartooning was largely confined to humor magazines until the mid-1880s, when Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, the World, began featuring front-page editorial cartoons on a regular basis. Although critical of politicians and government policies, these political cartoons were not necessarily subversive, as they were considered a legitimate means of social commentary (Gordon 13, 16). Pulitzer, along with his competitor, William Randolph Hearst, soon discovered that by increasing the illustrated contents of his newspapers, he could significantly increase circulation, to the tune of almost 100% growth from 1891 to 1895. (Gordon 14). Though political cartooning paved the way for cartoons in newspapers, it was the non-political humor strips that became the most popular. These strips rarely critiqued the social order, after all, they were intended for the widest possible audience and were included to increase sales, not to stir up trouble for Hearst and Pulitzer. However, Richard Felton Outcault's Hogan's Alley, later renamed The Yellow Kid after its most popular character, problematizes this generalization.¹⁷

¹⁷ While The Yellow Kid was not technically a "comic strip" but rather a single panel cartoon, it was very much in the tradition of the non-political humor strips pioneered in late 19th century humor magazines, and featured "the first comic strip character to enjoy widespread popularity" (Gordon 14).

Hogan's Alley depicted the lives of poverty-stricken children in a fictional inner-city slum. Although the strip was intended to be humorous, the humor was often created by the children's imitation of upper-class activities and mannerisms. Though Hogan's Alley has been read as a scathing social critique, Outcault's contemporaries criticized the strip for celebrating life in the slums (McAllister, Sewell & Gordon 1-2). In this way, the strip displays elements of both subversion and support of the status quo. Outcault often portrays his characters as being dirty and shabbily dressed, yet the kids, for the most part, seem to be having fun. The strip does not overtly criticize the social conditions responsible for poverty, and its often carnival-like atmosphere, coupled with The Yellow Kid's ever-present grin, suggests that slum life can be a thrilling adventure, rather than a pitiable state (see fig 4.1)

Considering its venue of publication (Pulitzer's World, and later, Hearst's New York Journal), it is hardly surprising that the strip treated poverty lightly (Gordon 14). If Outcault wanted to make a social critique, he did so in the guise of a comic strip, (in the original sense of the term), and if his original detractors thought his subject matter inappropriate, they were certainly not suggesting he make the strip more socially critical. Rather, they likely would have preferred he dealt with a subject more appropriate to a humorous medium.

If Hogan's Alley can be considered subversive, it was certainly the exception to the rule. The content of the vast majority of newspaper strips cannot be considered subversive, yet they still managed to attract criticism. Articles began appearing in popular magazines attacking the "vulgarity" of comic strips. Comics historian Ian Gordon notes that, "these articles, which appeared with some frequency between 1906



Fig. 4.1. Richard Outcault. "The Yellow Kid." New York World. 1896; rpt. in Roger Sabin Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels (London: Phaidon, 1996) 20.

and 1912, argued that comic strips eroded the moral fiber of the young by overstimulating their senses" (41). Gordon further asserts that such criticism displayed a certain discomfort with the development of a mass culture. As early as 1903, literary critic Annie Russell Marble was lamenting the popularity of comic strips and the overall proliferation of images in modern society (Gordon 42). One hundred years later, as images dominate nearly every sector of daily life, we may well wonder why images were perceived as such a threat. We can only imagine, but never fully reconstruct, the psychological impact of the cultural shift from a world where one encountered images

relatively infrequently, to one in which images were being produced and distributed by the millions. Perhaps this early criticism of comic strips is less indicative of the subversive nature of the medium, and more a result of the resistance to the sweeping cultural changes of the time, and a reaction to the newness of the form.

The question might be raised, "If the distrust of comics was caused by the form's newness, why did the greatest controversy come in 1954, more than sixty years after they began appearing regularly in newspapers?" However, this question presupposes that the initial criticisms and the 1954 controversy arose from the same concerns. While many of the earlier criticisms (mainly that comics damage reading skills and lower aesthetic standards) were also cited by later detractors, the two waves of criticism should be viewed as separate phenomena.

The controversy leading to the Comics Code in 1954 was directed specifically at comic books. As Joseph Witek observes,

While comic strips and comic books are both manifestations of the sequential art medium and both share a common narrative vocabulary and grammar, they diverge so fundamentally as to constitute different literary forms. They differ in their situations in the marketplace, in their cultural status, in their physical mode of presentation, and in the reading conventions they evoke (6).

By 1954, newspaper strips were considered something of a time-honored tradition so commonplace as to hardly merit notice. Comic books, on the other hand, were relatively newer, and directed at a specifically juvenile audience rather than the more general readership of newspaper strips. The first comic book, as we recognize them today, hit newsstands in 1934, and criticism followed almost immediately (Lent 11). The 1954

Senate subcommittee hearings resulted from the culmination of twenty years of criticism, and took place when comic books could truly be considered a "mass medium," with single issues selling in the millions. Also, these hearings dealt specifically with the content of comic books rather than the form. Nyberg states that, "Many of the criticisms leveled against the comics were echoes of earlier attacks on dime novels, film, and radio" (42). While the form of comics, relying heavily on pictorial storytelling, certainly contributed to the general distrust of the medium, the controversy clearly stemmed from the perceived threat of the content. Anti-comics crusaders railed against the depictions of violence, crime, and sexuality in comics, as reflected by the provisions of the Comics Code.

Historical factors of the anti-comics campaign must also be taken into account. Following World War II, juvenile delinquency became an area of acute public concern, and the popularity of comic books made them an attractive scapegoat. While experts blamed the war's disruption of family life for this increase, the American public preferred a different explanation, one that, as Nyberg puts it, "shifted blame from the family to outside influences and offered a simple solution" (43). While all mass media shared the blame, comic books proved especially easy to single out because they were marketed to children, were enormously popular, and were relatively free from regulation (Nyberg 43).

The Kefauver hearings targeted mainly crime and horror comics, which are more easily classified as being subversive, with their themes of disrespect for the established order and their breaking of cultural taboos. However, the best-selling comics remained superhero titles, which, at the time, were about as subversive as the Pledge of Allegiance. In fact, wartime issues of DC titles feature Superman endorsing the slogan, "Slap a Jap

with War Bonds and Stamps!” and Batman urging readers to “Keep Those Bullets Flying! Keep on Buying War Bonds & Stamps!” while firing a machine gun and grinning (Gordon 142). Wonder Woman’s origin story involves returning a downed fighter pilot to the U.S. by order of the goddess Athena, who states, “American liberty and freedom must be preserved! You must send with him your strongest and wisest Amazon—the finest of your wonder women—for America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women, needs your help!” (Marston, qtd. in Smith 134). Issue #1 of Captain America features the title character punching Hitler in the jaw (see fig 4.2). Superheroes were, by definition, defenders of the status quo and the embodiment of social order, and thus, few superhero titles were adversely effected by the Comics Code.

While the Comics Code undoubtedly solidified comics’ reputation as a children’s medium and sought to eliminate its more subversive elements, its ultimate result was to make comics more subversive than ever. The 1960s Underground Comix¹⁸ movement can be interpreted as a direct reaction against the code’s restrictions. Sabin points out that underground artists “were the very people who had been worst hit by the 1950s scare—sometimes having their own collections torn up by parents, or thrown on the playground fires” (Comics 92). Comix artists were able to dodge the Comics Code Authority by producing titles in limited quantities and selling them in counterculture “head shops” rather than through traditional distributors (Sabin Comics 94). The aim of many underground comix was simply to defy cultural norms by depicting explicit sex, graphic violence, and pervasive drug use—all prohibited by the Comics Code.

¹⁸ Underground artists adopted the alternate spelling of “comix” to set their work apart from the mainstream, and to denote the explicit content of their work (the “x” referring to the “X” rating of the Motion Picture Association of America) (Sabin Comics 92).

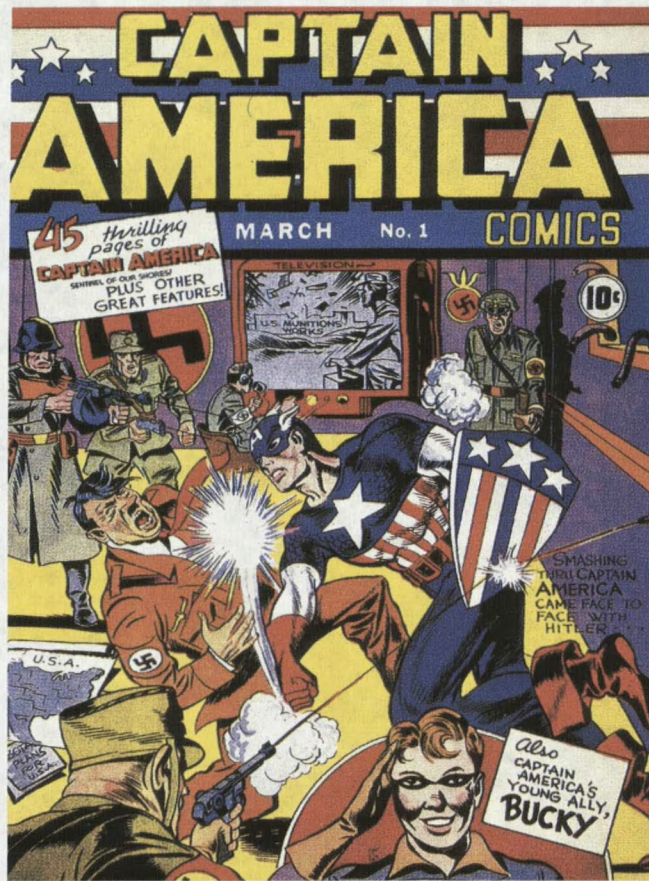


Fig. 4.2. Jack Kirby Captain America #1. Marvel Comics, 1941; rpt in Roger Sabin Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels (London: Phaidon, 1996) 63.

Not only did comix introduce previously unknown subject matter to the medium, it changed the look of the form. Freed from the constraints of corporate publishing, underground creators experimented with stylistically innovative artwork, expanding the possibilities of the medium. Underground comix's most influential experimenter, Robert Crumb, kicked the struggling scene into high gear in 1968, with the first issue of Zap Comics, which he initially sold out of a baby carriage on street corners in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. Within a few years, however, issues of Crumb's comix were

selling in the hundreds of thousands, and the scene had become an industry (Sabin Comics 94).

The underground movement also marked the revival of the horror comics. The “anything goes” attitude of the underground allowed titles such as Skull, Deviant Slice, and Death Rattle to take the genre to new extremes, and much of the gore that could only be suggested in the mainstream horror comics was now explicitly depicted (Sabin Comics 107). Though such taboo-breaking certainly characterized comix, the movement went beyond mindless violence and gratuitous sex. True to the era, comix challenged the status quo not only by delving into previously forbidden subject matter, but by introducing politically radical content.

Slow Death Funnies, among the first of the politically-oriented comix, used social satire side by side with fact sheets and statistics to make statements about subjects like nuclear power, Greenpeace, the “medical-industrial complex,” and the anti-war movement (Sabin Comics 125). The underground scene marked the rise of feminist comix as well. Historically, there had been only a handful of female comics artists, and even comics marketed to girls were, by and large, written and drawn by men¹⁹. The early 1970s brought a number of titles by and for women, such as It Ain’t Me Babe, All Girl Thrills, and Wimmen’s Comix. These titles brought to the forefront issues previously ignored in comics, including rape, abortion, working conditions, and female erotic fantasies (Sabin Comics 105). The gay liberation movement similarly found fertile ground for expression in the underground comix movement, with titles such as Harold

¹⁹ Unfortunately, comics remains a male-dominated art form. While the number of women in the industry has certainly risen since the 1950s, female comics artists and writers, as well as readers, remain a rare commodity.

Hedd, Barefootz, Dynamite Damsels, and Dyke Shorts appearing throughout the 1970s (Sabin Comics 124).

While most underground comix had very limited print runs, the industry, as a whole, was quite lucrative, and attracted enough attention to cause considerable backlash. While comix could evade the Comics Code Authority, new governmental legislation eventually led to the movement's decline. A 1973 Supreme Court ruling gave local communities the right to decide what constituted "obscene" material, which led to Robert Crumb's Zap Comix No. 4 being ruled obscene in New York and banned from sale. Anti-paraphernalia laws also closed down countless "head shops," comix's traditional sales venue. Following a rash of arrests, those shops that still carried comix grew more cautious and often refused to sell the more extreme titles because of the risk (Sabin Comics 117). Of course, to blame only these laws for the decline of underground comix is to ignore the decline of the whole counterculture from which the movement sprang. However, the criminal prosecution of shop owners for selling comic books testifies to the lingering distrust of the form, and the medium's perceived threat to the dominant social order.

The decline of the Comics Code occurred during the mid-1970s when, once again, publishers found alternatives to traditional newsstand distribution. This period saw the rise of shops specializing in comics and the decline of comics sales via traditional venues. In 1974 Phil Seuling founded the Seagate Distribution Company specifically to supply comics specialty shops. This allowed comics publishers to introduce more mature themes in their titles without worrying about whether or not the Comics Code Authority would approve. Though the Code had been revised in 1970 to reflect contemporary

cultural standards, the advent of direct distribution rendered it largely impotent (Nyberg 58-9). Specialty shops proliferated in the 1980s, as did comics produced for an adult audience.

The year 1985 marked the arrival of two titles which would forever change the medium's most enduringly popular genre: superhero comics. The first, Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, took an established DC character and placed him in a contemporary America, one rife with all the social and political tension of the era. Miller's take on the Batman mythos pitted the crime-fighter against both established authority and public perception. The story repeatedly returns to the news media's debates about Batman's activities. Public opinion is decidedly split between those who consider Batman a hero, and those who view him as merely a vigilante with fascist tendencies. With Police Commissioner Gordon retiring, Gotham City's new commissioner, Ellen Yindel, condemns Batman's activities, turning him into a political platform by which she can win public approval. Ultimately, Miller's Batman maintains his heroic status, although somewhat ambiguously.

The second title to change the face of superhero comics, Alan Moore's Watchmen, depicts a new set of "costumed adventurers," which allows Moore to question their heroism without worrying about destroying a long-established cultural icon. Watchmen poses the questions: How would superheroes function in the real world? What would motivate a person to dress up in a costume to fight crime? and Where is the line between heroism and fascism? Moore's "heroes" display anti-social sentiment, feelings of inadequacy, narcissism, fetishism, and a lack of conscience. The public turns

against them early on, pushing congress to pass an anti-vigilante act which outlaws their activities, unless, of course, they seek government sponsorship.

While highly critical of established institutions, these two works deliver the most scathing critique to their own genre, making them doubly subversive. Though celebrated by the comics community, the gritty realism of these works is also widely blamed for initiating a rash of imitators who latched onto the nihilism and the violence without achieving a comparable level of sophistication or substance. Although a second wave of "revisionist" superhero tales attempted to restore the heroic status of superheroes, after The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen, superhero comics writers would never again be able to take a simplistic approach to their characters (Klock 77). There could be no more unproblematic stories of good versus evil, and this new level of moral ambiguity remains in most comics to the present day.

The current comics scene is difficult to characterize. While superhero titles still dominate the marketplace, historical narratives, autobiography, science fiction, crime, social commentary, humor, horror, fantasy, avant-garde, martial arts, current events, erotica, queer fiction, general fiction, and other, harder to classify comics have all carved out niches for themselves. Comics censorship also continues, and the same state and community obscenity laws that plagued underground comix continue to be used to justify the arrest of retailers across the country. However, current censorship efforts have reached nowhere near the hysteria of the past. Nyberg suggests that the shift of comics from a mass medium to a specialized one can explain the "isolated and sporadic" nature of the current backlash (61). Simply put, the medium isn't popular enough to warrant a full-scale crusade against it. Still, those in the industry remain wary of censorship, going

so far as to establish the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund to help shop owners fight obscenity charges (Nyberg 61).

Rather than attempt to give a broad overview of the current state of comics, I'd like to perform a close reading of a single title, which I feel exemplifies today's general comics climate. One of the most popular comics books of recent years, Warren Ellis's Transmetropolitan bridges the gap between science fiction and social commentary, and serves as an interesting example of how comics can both subvert and support the dominant culture.

Warren Ellis's Transmetropolitan: A Close Reading

Transmetropolitan follows the exploits of renegade journalist, Spider Jerusalem (imagine Hunter S. Thompson to the tenth power), as he returns to the city to complete an unfulfilled book contract after five years of self-imposed isolation in a mountain hideout.²⁰ As the title of the series suggests, Spider acts as a transcendent figure, belonging wholly to neither the city (civilization) nor the mountain (nature). His return to the city marks a homecoming, yet the rapid rate of social and technological change makes him feel like something of a newcomer. As a journalist, he places himself above the common man in order to observe and comment upon society, yet he is not truly detached from humanity. He cares deeply about the rights of others, yet he scorns them for not standing up to those who try to take those rights away. As a celebrity renegade, Spider straddles the line between dangerous radical and respectable citizen. Many people

²⁰ The city is never actually given a name. Perhaps Ellis keeps the city nameless to avoid pinning it down geographically, suggesting that the world of the future is so homogenized that location no longer matters. Perhaps he simply wants to divide the world into two basic, oppositional categories: civilization vs. nature.

admire his work and recognize its importance, yet he is known to pack a pistol and occasionally put out his cigarette in someone's eye. It is his very in-betweenness that makes Spider an ideal narrator through whom Ellis can comment on society.

Spider's feelings about the city are similarly "in-between". As adamantly as he claims to despise the city, he also begrudgingly respects it. Upon his return, he characterizes the city as such:

This city never allowed itself to decay or degrade. It's wildly, intensely growing. It's a loud bright stinking mess. It takes strength from its thousands of cultures. And the thousands more that grow anew each day. It isn't perfect. It lies and cheats. It's no utopia and it ain't the mountain by a long shot—but it's alive. I can't argue that (Ellis Back 16).

The intermingling of disparate cultures, which causes much of the city's unrest, is simultaneously the source of its greatest asset: its variety. Spider praises the unique moments the city provides, like when a group of Tuvan throat-singers perform Steppes music on a city sidewalk just for fun. Although Spider appreciates this cultural diversity, he truly thrives on the constant adversity the city provides, the same adversity, in fact, that drove him to the mountains five years prior.

Faced with completing two books, Spider must leave his mountain refuge, knowing that he can't write outside of the city. The peace of the mountain proves antithetical to the hard-edged, in-your-face style of journalism that made him famous. He needs conflict to write the kind of stories that can initiate social change. Grumpy most of the time, Spider only smiles when he is defying authority, exposing corruption, or otherwise giving people hell. Transmetropolitan's first story arc, collected in Back on the

Street, begins with Spider's solemn resolution to return to the peace of the mountain after fulfilling his book contract. However, on the last page, Spider declares his intent to stay in the city, a decision he makes immediately after taking a severe beating by the police. Spider's dominant quality is clearly defiance, not only against authority figures, but the public's apathetic acceptance of dishonesty.

Transmetropolitan's city represents an imagined future in which all the social evils of modern life remain unresolved and have been amplified through years of neglect. The very look of the city suggests unchecked commercialism in which the ubiquitous advertisements blot out the cityscape. Blaringly colorful billboards and signs compete for public attention, but the multiplicity of garish colors only cancel each other out. No single sign stands out, and the cumulative effect is to turn the cityscape into a gaudy mish-mash. Figure 4.3 depicts a typical view of the city. Notice that even the trees, presumably planted as some sort of city beautification project, are blocked from clear view by ads. No part of this full-page panel stands out as a focal point. Instead, artist Darick Robertson creates a cacophony of images that simulate the sensory overload of city life. The picture space occupied by human figures is dwarfed by the advertising space, which acts as a visual critique of consumer culture's emphasis on objects rather than people. Only one human face is depicted head-on, and he is relegated to the very bottom right-hand corner, so far into the peripheral vision that he almost goes unnoticed. Although the man is making eye contact with the viewer, the point of view suggests that the reader is looking past him, and closer inspection reveals why: he's trying to sell something.



Fig. 4.3. Warren Ellis & Darrick Robertson. Transmetropolitan: Lust For Life (New York: DC Comics, 1997) No pagination.

Ellis's critique of capitalism's privileging business over humanity pervades the series from the beginning. In issue #1, Spider recalls a bike messenger who sold his skin as advertising space. Issue #5 ends with Spider becoming the victim of "Block Consumer Incentive Bursting" or "Buy-Bombs," a technology which allows compressed

advertisements to be loaded into the brain by flashing a certain pattern on a television screen. These ads then play back in the victim's dreams, the natural extension of intrusive advertising techniques such as telephone solicitation and mass junk E-mails. Given the technology, Ellis suggests, even the last truly private space, our minds, will be invaded by advertising (or perhaps they already have).

Transmetropolitan takes our culture's loosening of sexual taboos to its logical conclusion, featuring billboards that publicly display sexual imagery in advertisements for the city's thriving prostitution industry. This legal outlet for sexual release, however, seems to have done nothing to relieve the culture's sex obsession. Sexually explicit television shows dominate, most notoriously "Sex Puppets," advertised as "fun and games for children of all ages" (Ellis Lust 44). Ellis passes no judgment on the open display of sexuality, but he does suggest that such openness can also lead to perversion, particularly through the medium of advertisement. For instance, one sign advertises "New Sexual Horizons" with "Suck Dog" (tagline: "Give a Dog a Bone") (Ellis Lust 100). Perhaps the message here is that the media shapes, rather than reflects people's sexual appetites, and that the proliferation of sex in the media will not satisfy human sexuality, but only exacerbate it. This aspect of the comic book can be interpreted as a reaction, in part, to the influx of pornography occurring in the wake of the internet revolution. It is important to note that the sexuality portrayed in Transmetropolitan is pornography, which by definition reduces human beings to sex objects. This theme is made perfectly clear by the "Sex Puppets," a show which combines live performers with puppet-like characters, and makes one wonder which group the title refers to. This

treatment of sex utterly ignores the emotional, human factor and reduces it to a commodity.

Dehumanization is the single-most prevalent theme throughout Transmetro-politan. City-dwellers rarely appear without some sort of machinery wired to them; nearly everyone wears headsets, enhanced glasses, earpieces, clothing with built-in recording equipment, implanted wiring or any number of bizarre devices with unknown purposes. However, there is some tension over whether technology is responsible for dehumanization.

The story arc contained in Back on the Street finds the city in the midst of the “transient cessation.” The story goes that a decade or so prior, aliens migrated to Earth, settling in a colony that was eventually given sovereign rights. The aliens had little to trade, so they sold their genome to humans interested in changing their species. The “transients” are humans making this transition, and are, at the time of the story, somewhere in between human and alien (see Fig. 4.4). As could be expected, the transients are seen as freaks, and are discriminated against. They can’t get jobs, so they’ve settled into the cheapest, most run-down part of town, and following the breaking up of a transient rights demonstration, the transients declare that their district is seceding to the alien colony. Clearly, this is a case in which technology literally dehumanizes by allowing humans to change their species. Yet the change is completely voluntary, meaning the technology doesn’t necessarily dehumanize, the people who treat the transients as freaks do. Spider himself mocks the transients, calling them “pathetic fashion victims,” yet he feels compassion for them. When the “transient riots” break out and riot police brutalize the transient population, Spider, being the only reporter able to

get inside the district, types an eye-witness report which is fed live to the news media.

The power of Spider's words cause a public uproar, and within minutes, the civic center is overwhelmed with protest calls and has to pull the police out of the district.



Fig. 4.4. Warren Ellis & Darick Robertson. Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street (New York: DC Comics, 1997) No pagination.

In Transmetropolitan, the government, the police, religious institutions, editors, and basically anyone in a position of authority are the agents of dehumanization. In this way, Ellis's title could be considered highly subversive. The purpose of his sci-fi tale is to get us to take a fresh look at the ills of our own society and deal with them before they

grow out of hand. Ellis, then, calls for widespread social change, challenges the status quo, and comes off as a political radical. However, I'd like to offer an alternate reading of the title.

Transmetropolitan, in some ways, actually supports the status quo. Firstly, Ellis's distrust for established authority reflects, rather than defies, the general cultural attitude. Historically, we have seen too many cases of abused authority to blindly put our trust into governments and police forces. The dominant culture, having absorbed the revolutionary thinking of the 1960s, encourages questioning authority, even if the institutions questioned do not. Similarly, his distaste for ubiquitous advertising can hardly be seen as subversive, since most people share his view. Secondly, by making the protagonist a journalist with unwavering dedication to revealing the truth, Ellis asserts faith in one of our most cherished rights: freedom of the press. While Ellis critiques the mass media as a whole, the press functions just the way it's supposed to: it balances out the power of the central government by giving the populace the power to unite over certain issues. In Transmetropolitan, the press in general, and not just Spider Jerusalem, is portrayed as being reliable. Spider gets all his ideas for columns by listening to other news media. Thirdly, the distrust Spider displays for authority is justified in every case. The police *are* brutal, the politicians *are* corrupt, and the religious leaders *are* just shysters more interested in money than spiritual matters. While Spider shows a dissatisfaction with the state of these institutions, it is always because something has gone wrong with them, causing them to degenerate. The values that Spider promotes are very much traditional ones: honesty, integrity, compassion, understanding, diversity, and individualism. Brutality, corruption, bigotry, and greed are the sources of the social ills he rails against.

Spider is an idealist, albeit a realistic (even pessimistic) one; he conforms to traditional ideals, and he challenges the powers preventing the realization of these ideals. Thus, Transmetropolitan can be read as simultaneously subversive and supportive of traditional cultural values. Perhaps, then, subversion should be seen as relative. Ellis's critique of advertising could be considered subversive by advertisers and big business, but not by the public—although one could point to either group as representing the status quo.

Transmetropolitan both subverts and supports the status quo when it comes to literary standards as well. Ellis addresses serious social issues, acknowledges their complexities instead of reducing them to simple right and wrong, and injects his stories with a biting satirical edge. All of these attributes indicate that Transmetropolitan can be considered respectable literature. And yet, Ellis's vulgarity, his over-the-top characterization, and his penchant for the ridiculous mark this literature as unacceptable by traditional standards. By way of illustration, at the climactic riot scene in Back on the Street, just before Spider's harrowing description of the police brutality against the transients which turns public opinion against the police, he writes, "If anyone in this shithole city gave two tugs of a dead dog's cock about Truth, this wouldn't be happening" (62). Spider's pet is a two-faced mutant cat who smokes cigarettes urinates on visitors. Just before returning to the city, Spider gets his revenge on a local bar for poor service by blowing it up with a rocket launcher. All these examples send up big red flags marking the book as substandard, low-brow, juvenile literature. Like the character of Spider himself Transmetropolitan hangs somewhere in between high-brow and low-brow, between art and commodity, between adult and juvenile, and between respectable

and substandard literature. It is this "in-betweenness" which characterizes the whole medium of comics.

As this chapter has shown, the question of whether comics subverts or supports the status quo can only be answered in historical terms. Certainly comics has been used to promote radical politics, to break social taboos, and to question authority, but it has also been used to support U.S. war efforts, to inspire patriotism, and to confirm negative stereotypes. As an art form, comics is only as subversive as its content.

The early criticism of the medium on formal grounds must also be considered historically. Comics was considered a threat to literacy only because of the cultural tradition of privileging the written word over pictures as a communicative form. Furthermore, this was always a perceived, rather than an extant, threat. The literacy rate remains high despite a century of comic books and strips.

The long-standing division between literature and graphic arts created a cultural context in which the comics form could be seen as subversive. In the early days of comic strips, the coupling of words and images would have seemed unnatural or contrived. Today, however, the majority of our art forms are multi-media. Television and film combine moving images, spoken language, music, sound effects, and written words. While comics is a purely visual experience, film and television engage both the senses of sight and hearing. Websites use moving and static images, photographs and drawings, and spoken and written language. Even the traditional media of painting and prose have become mixed media (although Mitchell, of course, would argue that they always were). For example, the visual layout of text, and the placement of text in boxes integrally affect the meaning of the prose in both Irvine Welsh's short story, "The Acid House," and Mark

Z. Danielewski's novel House of Leaves. Today's media are so thoroughly mixed that the notion of comics being subversive for simply combining words and pictures seems ridiculous. Clearly, comics subversion depends on both content and context.

McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon, editors of Comics & Ideology argue that comics, by employing stereotypes as a visual shorthand, and by utilizing captions and thought balloons to make values explicit, can impose preferred meanings, creating a "closed ideological text." However they also assert that comics can easily change the visual point of view or present an ambiguous image/text relationship, which makes possible multiple interpretations, thus resisting any specific ideological stance (3). Like any other communicative form, the subversive quality of comics depends entirely upon how (and when) it is used. Perhaps the best summary of the form was stated by Harvey Pekar during his first appearance on Late Night with David Letterman. "It's words and pictures," he said, "and you can do anything you want with words and pictures" (qtd. in Witek 154).

Conclusion: Comics as an "In-Between" Medium

While I have resisted the notion that comics could be classified as a subversive medium, its troubled history suggests otherwise. Rather than labeling comics as an essentially subversive art form, perhaps the term "historically problematic," would be more accurate, meaning that whether or not it challenges the dominant social order, the medium, due to certain historical factors, has always been and continues to be a constant source of dispute. Like Transmètropolitan's transients, the comics form exists in an "In-

Between" state, which inevitably leads to discrimination whether or not it intentionally sets out to stir up trouble.

To review the argument for the medium's "in-betweenness," at the formal level, comics refuses to be classified as belonging properly to either the sphere of graphic art or the realm of literature. It cannot be considered a wholly hybrid form, nor does it constitute a totally new "language," as it displays properties of each, depending on how it is used. Comics defies even the attempt to define what it is, since most comics combine words and images, yet some do not; most comics juxtapose images in a sequence, while others do not; and some media do both, but cannot be considered comics.

At the cultural level, comics hovers somewhere between an adult and a children's form, owing to the discrepancy between popular perception and reality. In a time when the barriers between high and low culture are in dispute, comics asserts its worth in academia, while the public at large either disregards it or labels it trash, trying to censor the medium. Comics exists somewhere between a subversive and a conservative medium by sometimes challenging, sometimes supporting the status quo, and occasionally doing both.

Comics scholarship can also be said to straddle the line between being subversive and supporting the status quo. On the one hand, if we consider all comics scholarship as being essentially a bid for power, comics scholars seek to change the existing social order by working with a medium on the outskirts of respectability. On the other hand, they support the status quo by seeking to elevate the form to the status of traditional literature and art. They work within academia, accepting the authority of the institution. There are also those who would prefer to keep comics outside of respectable culture, proclaiming

that its low-culture status is its chief virtue, allowing creators to experiment and innovate without having to conform to the standards of other art forms. However, these people also simultaneously support and challenge the status quo. They would prefer the social order to remain as it is, because they reject the value of established institutions. Therein lies the paradox of comics: it simultaneously supports and resists the status quo, and this in-betweenness can be seen as both troubling and as the basis of its power as an expressive form.

Indeed, one could argue that comics' "in-betweenness," which has plagued the form from the beginning, is also its greatest asset. Its "in-betweenness" of form allows comics to utilize the possibilities of two sign systems (five in Japanese manga). Where words alone fail to fully describe a scene, image takes over; where a picture's meaning is imprecise or ambiguous, text can anchor it. And, of course, together, altogether new meanings are made possible. Will Eisner once drew instructional comics for the U.S. military, not to entertain the troops, but because the combination of words and pictures is simply the most efficient, precise (and portable) method of visual communication (Eisner 143-4).

The marginalization of comics that stems from its "in-betweenness" can also be considered a virtue. Roger Sabin, for one, makes such an argument:

[. . .] a marginal position is an attractive one for many creators and consumers.

The comic's exclusion from the art establishment enables it to eschew the dampening appraisal of art criticism. Moreover, its association with street culture gives it a certain edge, which many contemporary artists have vainly attempted to transfer to the gallery. Whereas fine art can only send shocks through the art

world, comics—available to a far broader audience—are still regarded as dangerous enough to be clamped down on intermittently (236).

Sabin reminds us that comics manifests its “in-betweenness” in yet another way: it is enough of a mass medium to affect a broad audience, yet it is enough of a specialized medium to fly under critical radar. In a way, all comics are now underground comics, which provides many fans with a sense of identity, a way to distinguish themselves from the culture at large. They have a secret treasure trove of story, art, philosophy, entertainment, personal confession, alternative history, escapism, and humor. Half of comics’ appeal, for both fans and scholars, is that its virtues are virtually unknown to mainstream culture, yet the other half comes from sharing opinions and critiques with a community of like-minded people.

As David Carrier notes, “what falls between [our preconceived, stable categories] is easily felt, depending upon our temper and politics, to be either exciting or menacing” (70-1). Those not inclined to reactionary fear understand the “in-between” nature of comics to be enthralling rather than troublesome. To us, it doesn’t matter whether comics constitutes a discrete “language” or remains a half-breed, bastard child of art and literature; it doesn’t matter if comics promotes revolutionary ideals or stands up to salute the flag; all that matters is comics.

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