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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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by

Robert Christian Marvin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

In

English

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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Date 12-05-03

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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 "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).

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[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 deliquency's hearings on comic books, and the subsequent adoption of the Comics Code Authority (Nyberg 44). The code included the following guidelines:

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[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,

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[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

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[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.

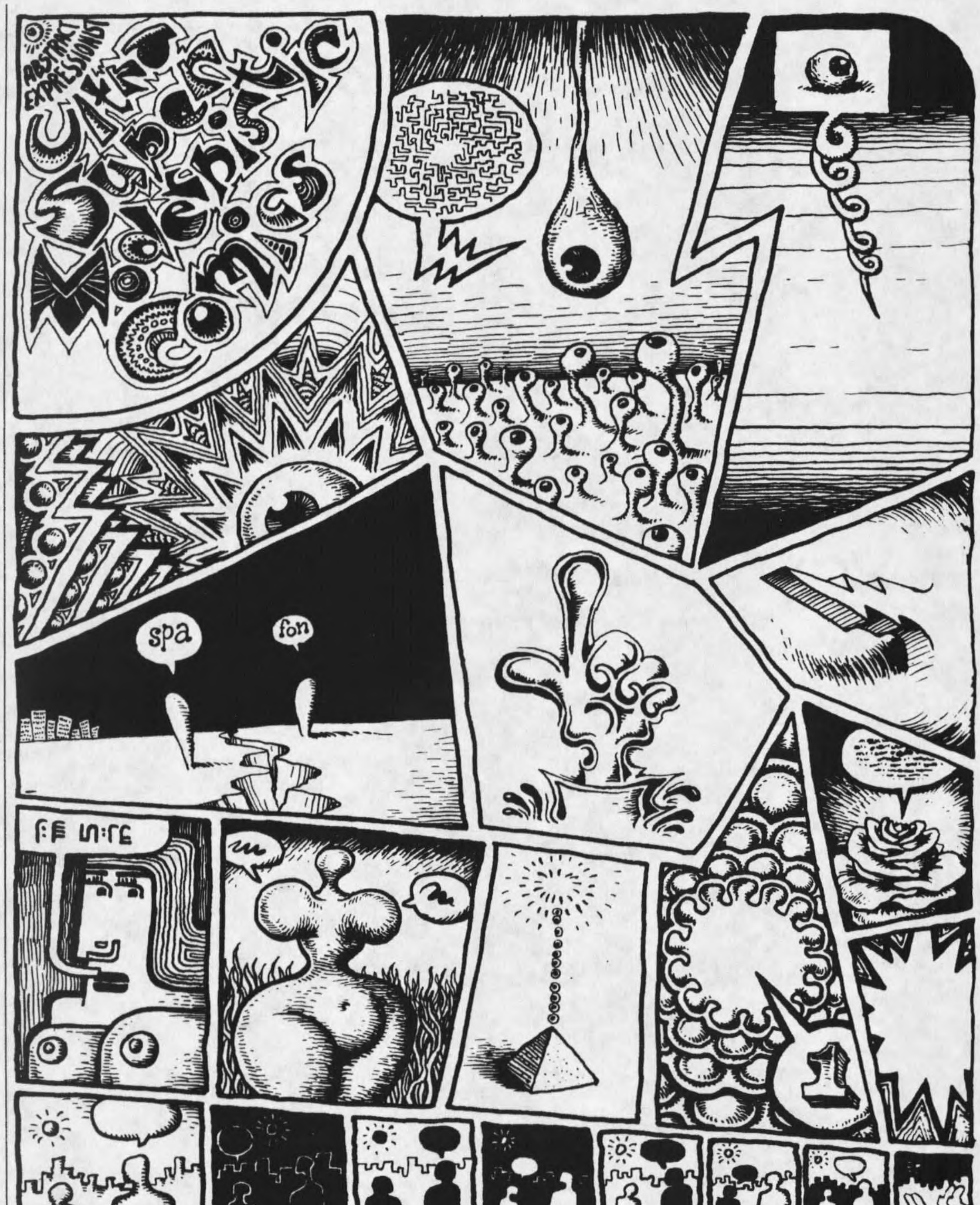
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST
ULTRA
Super-Modernistic
COMICS
spa
fon

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 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.

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

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"

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[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 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.

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[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 *similitude*) is to be understood, not as adding new information, but as preventing a possible confusion [. . .]" (Iconology 31).

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.